

# WHAT IS AN AMERICAN? THE PROBLEM OF THE WEST

AN ESSAY

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Poor Christopher Columbus. He spent the fateful year of 1492 bouncing around the islands of the American archipelago, convinced that Japan, or the ruler of China, or the riches of Asia were right around the corner. His only encouragement came from mistranslation of the natives' directions, and from the miseducation he had received from the geography schools of Salamanca, Spain. When he grudgingly returned to Spain, he left behind a moniker for the islands, *Indias Occidentales*, or West Indies, that made it clear that he had not given up, and that a second and third voyage would prove that the islands he had just left behind were actually the western fringe of the Orient.

The Great Navigator of the Western hemisphere, it turns out, was really an Orientalist, so enraptured with the idea of the East that he could never become what he should have been—history's first Americanist (that honor would fall, of course, to another Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci). He too had drank deeply from the well of Marco Polo's Chinese adventures, and had hoped to bring back comparable treasure—the gold and spices that stood in the Western imagination for all the dizzying exotic riches of the Orient.<sup>1</sup> What he brought back to Europe instead was human cargo, the native peoples of the West Indies, whom he offered to his dubious sovereigns as their newly conquered subjects and slaves. Columbus thought that these "treasures" could compete with the riches of the Orient, but he ended up giving the Spanish monarchs who had sponsored his voyage much more than they had ever wanted. Without even trying, he had given the West the true gift of the Americas, the problem of the other.<sup>2</sup>

Poor King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. They did not want this problem, but they could not return the gift. Like Columbus, they were Orientalists, but in the worst of ways: they saw the East as the source of an aggressive Islamic invasion that had brought infidelity to the Holy Land and occupied the Iberian peninsula for hundreds of years. In that fateful year of 1492, they had joyfully accepted Christendom's "reconquest" of Europe, and the Moslems' surrender of their last Spanish redoubt. They knew, in other words, only too well how to turn a native people into an alien, unwanted race.

But the natives Columbus brought back were not the same as the Moslems, though they too were infidels. They were not the same as Christians or Europeans either, but they were just as emphatically not the "monstrosities"—the half-men and the man-eaters—that were supposed to lay at the far edge of the world. There were no just words to describe these new arrivals from the contemporary language of warfare or sci-

ence; nothing had prepared the West for the anthropological and ethnological problems it was about to confront. And yet the simple task of trying to decide just who these people were would help to resolve the still more momentous question that Columbus's return had imposed upon the West—the question of what to do with the other half of the planet.

In his letter to his royal patrons, Columbus had tried to present the native peoples of the Americas in languages they all could understand. They were, he said, just like the latest casualties of the "reconquest" of Moslem Europe, suitable for enslaving. He went on to excite the King and Queen with visions of a westward pointing Crusade that would leave behind Christendom's defeat in the Holy Land and continue the triumph it had achieved in Spain; European colonialism in the Americas would be an extension of the war with Islam.<sup>3</sup> But he had also presented these future subjects to his royal sponsors as pitiable and pliant and peace-loving—so much like unfallen people, in fact, that they seemed to step right from the pages of Genesis. He went so far with this description that the natives of the Indies could never become the slaves and abject subjects he meant them to be. Indeed, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella reversed their course, just four days after they had given him license to conquer and enslave the rest of the peoples of the West Indies in the name of Christendom. They had christened themselves the "Catholic monarchs," and something told them they should be listening to the other voice within their court, that of the Catholic priesthood. It was telling them that these new people could never be enslaved, that they had souls waiting to be filled with the Gospel and the right to apprehend the glory of God through relations of peace and charity. These new people were actually being imagined as wholly spiritual beings, endowed with a spiritual essence that placed them above and beyond the control of grubby temporal powers.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this was a power grab by liberal Catholicism for the right to administer and manage the immense colonial enterprise that stretched before the monarchs and sovereigns of Europe. But it was also the signal that the most noble acts of the modern age were on their way. The people on the other side of the earth were being given the dignity reserved for every human person; their fates were being placed in the hands of a universal moral philanthropy that valued their spiritual welfare above their military value as captives or social status as slaves. No European had ever had those things said about him or her: they were too grandiose, too liberal, too impossibly Christian to apply

to anyone in the known world. Just as soon as they were being imagined, the highest ideals of the West were being ceded to the other.

Sixty years later, the Catholic priesthood intervened again and closed the loopholes that had allowed freelancing Spanish conquistadores, the Blackwater of their day, to enslave the subjects of the Indian empires they subdued or destroyed. The overthrow of colonization itself, the emergence of self-government, the fall of the class system, and the abolition of slavery all inevitably followed, each of them bearing witness to the humanist ideals of the West, which everyone knew applied first and foremost to the peoples of the Americas. The abolition of Indian slavery in 1542 was in this sense just the first of many epochal declarations that would collectively define the hemisphere as the realm of liberty—as the part of the world specially reserved for morally motivated higher acts and self-determined subjects. Even the French Revolution, the pillar of fire on the European continent, was nurtured in the salons of Parisian thinkers who proudly called themselves Americanists. Rousseau, Voltaire, the great architects of the Enlightenment—they had smuggled the ideas of self-determination and political rights into the heart of European civilization by turning Las Casas's spiritual beings into the "noble savage," or natural man.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the West could truly be said to have found its higher calling, its better self, but it was found in the other hemisphere. The West would no longer define itself in military and ideological opposition to the East (well, at least not until recently). Instead, it would finally incorporate the gift Columbus had brought from the Americas into its self-definition and regard itself in a paradoxical relationship to the other. For the rest of its history, the manner in which non-Westerners were treated would indeed become the signature measure and benchmark of the West. A maddening cycle of colonial domination and humanist philanthropy lay before it.

Poor Bartoleme Las Casas. He was supremely qualified to become the most acclaimed Americanist of all, for he was the priest who convinced the Spanish monarchy to liberate the Indian slaves and thereby transform its conquered territories into a new world. He was prescient enough to hitch the future of the West's humanist ideals to the policies and objectives of colonial contact. But he had errantly suggested that Africans, who were already enslaved as prisoners of war on their own continent, could be shuttled across the Atlantic and take the place of the unfortunate natives who had fallen victim to the Spanish conquistadores' depredations. And so the defining act of the liberal

West gave birth to an equally greater tragedy that was compounded by the fact that the rationale for this new policy made these new African people permanent aliens, capable of being enslaved precisely because they were *not* Americans. By the same token, the descendants of these Africans who had been imported into the hemisphere could never be considered Americans because they were not free. The invention of transatlantic slavery, oddly enough, was supposed to keep the glory of the New World intact.

It would take almost three hundred more years for those native-born descendants of African slaves to escape this circular logic and to lay claim to the title of being American. Well into the 1830s, black people in the United States still gave their self-help organizations the title of "African." Apparently, Las Casas had not just placed African slaves and their American-born descendants beyond the moral safety net that liberal humanism had placed over the hemisphere, but essentially forbade the West from recognizing the validity or existence of an African America. (Yes, there is an Afro-Caribbean and now we talk of a Black Atlantic, but there is no black equivalent to a Latin America. The very idea of a "Latin" America was invented by French intellectuals in the early nineteenth century who were smarting over the loss of the country's prize colony, St. Domingue, to insurgent African slaves.)

As a result, the West would refuse to see its humanist ideals reflected in the enslaved Africans' struggles for self-liberation; it made the Haitian Revolution an isolated, disruptive act, divorced from the perfect symmetry of the American Revolution and the French Revolution. In defiance, the liberated slaves made themselves the protagonists of their own liberation narrative without the cooperation or approval of the liberal West. Their crowning act was the defeat of the British, Spanish, and French armies that had come to the island of St. Domingue to take back what they believed to be their native land. To add insult to injury, the victorious slaves chose a native American name, not an African one, for their republic, as if to assert their indigenoussness.<sup>5</sup>

For the liberal West, the preferred name for the African in the American hemisphere was, of course, "the slave"; it named Africans after a legal condition before it named them as a race. But with the rise of capitalism and contract law in the eighteenth century, legal conditions and labor patterns had become essential attributes of the human person, as spirituality once had been. They in turn helped to denominate the Africans as an oppressed other who had been deprived of the greatest human dignity of all: honest, freely chosen, remunerated labor. This was really the only way for the slave to be-



FIGURE 1: JOSIAH WEDGWOOD, "AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER," 1787 (COURTESY OF BRITISH MUSEUM)

come the concern of the liberal West, as its great moralists were now political economists like Montesquieu and Adam Smith, not Spanish priests. But like Las Casas, they looked to the Americas for inspiration about what the West should become, and they found slavery standing in the way of the newest liberal ideal: liberal capitalism.

By the 1780s, the African, frozen in time and condition as the slave, had become the literal icon of a liberal humanitarian movement that once again promised to make the Americas a new world. The British abolition movement ingrained the image of the kneeling slave on a porcelain stamp created by the merchant and manufacturer Thomas Wedgwood (see figure 1); the poem "The Slave," by Hannah More, helped to make the African a token of popular culture. We celebrate the bicentennial of this move-

ment's signature achievement, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, in 2007, but it is important to remember that its object was to block the stream of Africans into the hemisphere, not to liberate the enslaved; it left the slaves already there in Britain's North American and West Indian colonies to the care of humanitarian philanthropists. The West thus abolished the transatlantic slave trade for the same reason it created it: to cleanse the American hemisphere of its ill-fated connection with slavery so that it could once again serve as the symbol of what was right about the West.

This was almost too much for liberal Europe to bear. Everything that humanist philosophy could imagine was being enacted on the most grand of historical stages on the other side of the world. The movement to abolish the transatlantic slave trade was in this sense the last straw. By the mid-eighteenth century, America had just become too valuable to be "wasted" on Africans and natives, and certainly too valuable to denominate the other. The abolition of slavery had capitalized the term, so to speak, and made it such a signature commodity of the West that it could only represent the better, more moral, and above all, more free version of a European. America now specifically designated the lands under European control, and the situation of Europeans who lived there and maintained that control. To be an American was to be a Spaniard or Briton who lived within Spanish or British America, so named in order to represent them as political and administrative subsidiaries of their respective European nations. These were the colonies that would bring a new breed of European—the American colonist—into the world. America, for so long Europe's enchanted other, would now become its birthplace.

Poor Thomas Jefferson. As a plantation owner in colonial Virginia, he literally owned acres of slaves; but as one of the greatest thinkers of the liberal West, he also knew that the abolition of slavery was the intended destiny of the Americas. He seemed to care genuinely for the welfare of the enslaved and, over several decades, laid careful plans for the gradual extinction of slaveholding on the North American continent. But before he was an abolitionist, he was an Americanist who believed that the hemisphere had been so abused by European colonialism that the enslaved could not be liberated until their enslavers were. This was the genius of the argument that he made in *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, the rough draft for the "Declaration of Independence" he would write two years later: it made the situation of the British colonists, who had harassed Indians off their land and held native-born Africans in bondage, the latest in-

justice that the West had inflicted upon the American hemisphere. The situation of the colonists in North America was pitiable, insupportable, without precedent, he claimed in his *Summary View*. In order to make British colonists into Americans, he first had to make them slaves.

Jefferson was a master tactician of history in this regard. He realized that in order for the cause of anti-colonialism to go forward, it had to go backward in time and reclaim the moral dignity that Las Casas had given the enslaved natives of America. Directly before him lay decades worth of derogatory stereotypes and urban legends about British emigrants to the American colonies. They were all said to be convicts or ne'er do wells who had left their native country for lack of anything better. Once in America, they became privateers or black marketeers or conniving merchants who feasted off the spoils of the colonial trade. Worst of all were the sexually promiscuous, indolent slave owners who brought international scandal to the good people of Britain. No American colonist could have any place in an English civil society, let alone in the liberal humanist tradition of the West. Even the noblest claims for political equality and independence from a colonist could be dismissed, to use Samuel Johnson's famous phrase, as "yelps for liberty." And so when Jefferson argued in *Summary View of the Rights of British America* that American colonists were slaves to Britain, he actually was trying to move them up a notch and entitle them to the special moral consideration that the West had given the other.

But Jefferson should have been careful about what he asked for. Did he really want the American to be identified with the slave to the extent that the self was constituted by the other? Where then could he draw the line between the American and the slave? Ironically, tragically, and, above all, effectively, Jefferson became the spokesman for an American identity that was logically, legally, and genealogically distinct from the Indian or the African and ethnically connected to the European. In *Summary Rights of British America*, he made the spectacular argument that colonists in America were not colonists at all but descendants of liberty-loving Anglo-Saxon forebears who had originated in the "forests" of Germany, migrated to the British Isles, and continued their westward journey until they hit upon the shores of America, where they finally could enjoy their love of liberty. Colonialism had had nothing to do with it. In Jefferson's narrative, British colonists were Americans because they were actually Anglo-Saxons.<sup>6</sup>

No narrative would have more devastating consequences for race relations in the



United States or the geopolitics of the American hemisphere. In inventing a European descent for the American, Jefferson essentially shut off the British colonists' cause and their story of national origins from the larger historical events that would sweep through the hemisphere. He condemned the United States to stand alone among the other nations of the Americas, where it remains today. Jefferson had indeed sacrificed something American when he conceived the United States as a nation, or race, as it came to be called, of Anglo-Saxons. Every other American nation in the hemisphere had a creation myth, or "foundational fiction," as Doris Sommer has called it, that recognized and in fact enshrined the value of the other.

Poor Simon Bolivar. He was the great patriot of South American independence movements who found the words of Jefferson so inspiring that he imported the language and cause of anti-colonialism into the territories of the Spanish empire. As former Spanish colonies became the nations of Ecuador, Peru, Columbia, and of course Mexico, he had the brainstorm to create a pan-American conference in 1826 that would chart out the new destiny for a hemisphere once and for all liberated from the legacy of European colonialism. He had a chair reserved for the United States as the guest of honor—the first nation to liberate itself from colonialism had cheered on the liberation movements in Mexico and South and Central America. It had given them implied military cover with the Monroe Declaration of 1820, which warned Spain against any intervention in the hemisphere that might save its colonies. But the promised ambassador from the United States never arrived, and the chair remained empty. For the American patriots of the Southern hemisphere, the United States became an obstructionist, belligerent, and even invasive force—not even truly American.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Bolivar had erred when he articulated his "foundational fiction" for the nations of the Americas. It was so anathema to the story of nationality in the United States that no citizen or patriot of the United States could have taken part in it; it would never be their story. Bolivar, an American born of Spanish descent, was as proud of his European heritage as any Anglo-American, but he was just as determined to retell the story of racial mixture and interracial contact that had formed the civilization of the Americas. He would date the birth of the nation from the first encounter between the European colonists and the natives of the hemisphere, the encounter that produced a hybrid race. "It is impossible to correctly determine to which human family we belong," Simon Bolivar had said in his famous Angostura address, the South American



FIGURE 2: JOHANNES STRADANUS (JAN VAN DER STRAET), "AMERICA," 1575-1580 (COURTESY OF NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY)

equivalent to the "Declaration of Independence," christening the cause of South American patriotism; "Born of the same mother, our fathers are of different origins and blood."<sup>8</sup> In the name of this mother, he proceeded to expel Spain from most of South America with a motley army of black, white, and mixed-race soldiers.

Bolivar was an Americanist in the best and truest sense, for he recognized the importance of the discovery of America to the triumph and validity of liberal humanist ideals. He was wise enough to realize that this legacy did not involve Columbus at all—the story of discovery and first contact retold in Latin American nationalism featured instead the actual namesake for the continent, Amerigo Vespucci. For the new generation of anti-colonialists, this shift of Italian explorers gave their cause more credence,

for Vespucci, unlike Columbus, knew that he had discovered a new western continent, not the eastern islands of the Indies. More crucially, the continent that Vespucci discovered was named with the feminine form of Amerigo, altered not just to signify the natural bounty of the new world (as in Mother Nature) but to designate the new people of this world as the conjugal partners of the European visitor. Latin American nationalism, in other words, continued to live by the allegory told in the engraving by Theodore de Bry, which features Amerigo Vespucci accepting the hand and the companionship of a native American woman (see figure 2). The encounter seems courtly, consensual, and mutually beneficial: the liberal humanism which the West invented to assess and modulate its relations with the other was indeed inseparable from the morality and manners that were supposed to govern this sexual encounter.

In retrospect, the speed with which the Spanish state embraced and formalized this sexual commerce between the newly christened American and the fellow travelers of Vespucci is breathtaking. Within nine years of Columbus's landfall, the monarchy had not just legalized interracial marriage between Spaniards and Americans but adopted it as a method of conquest, assimilation, and conversion. The first generation of mixed-race offspring, called *mestizoes*, were recruited and named as Spaniards in order to support the invaders' claim to indigenesness, or native birth, in the hemisphere. Spanish civilization in the Americas subsequently took its name from interracial sexual contact, and called itself *mestizaje*, or miscegenation, the mixing of the races. Like the rest of the Spanish empire, interracial relations in the Americas were placed under the aegis of a universal Catholic church. "The service rendered to God in producing *mestizoes*," recalled one such Spanish conquistador, "is greater than the sin committed by the same act."<sup>9</sup>

So central was race mixing to the colonial politics and history of the Americas that it inspired a native art form. *Casta* paintings, a bricolage of panels that depict a seemingly infinite number of racial combinations, turn the story of race mixing in the Americas into a tableau of happy families (see figure 3). Although Spanish birth or descent would no doubt be recognized as first among equals, the panels do not form a pyramid shape that would signify whiteness as the end, or purpose, of colonial encounters. The rectangular shape is more in keeping with the social workings of the Latin American caste system that would rigorously divide and identify the races by breaking them down into their constituent, non-identical parts. Every caste was in this sense a combination



FIGURE 3: IGNACIO MARIA BARREDA, CASTA PAINTING, 1777 (COURTESY OF REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA)

of self and other; caste was a way of imagining this moral relation in generative, reproductive terms. The genesis story which Spanish colonialism told about America emphatically stipulated the racial incongruity of its Adam and Eve.

Of course, this was a pernicious myth that disguised the brutal history of rape and coercive sexual relations in Spanish America. But it also generated a moral language for adjudicating and assessing colonial relations—a language of heterosexual manners—that accorded nicely with the liberal humanist ideals of the West and in fact helped to give rise to the possibility of dignity and self-respect for the other, feminized as the American. This is why Bolivar claimed the native American as the “mother” of a race with any number of fathers—in the guise of a sexual partner, the other literally generated the moral subject of the Americas. One hundred years after his Angostura address, this offspring, the mestizo, had become not just the symbolic bearer of Latin American nationalism but the figure of the liberal humanism which the West had always seen in the Americas. Jose Vasconcelos, a Mexican revolutionary preparing for what he hoped would be a new epoch in American history, called the racially mixed people of his country “the cosmic race” who would usher in a “universal era of humanity.”

Sadly, the United States could have no part in this era; it had no foundational fiction. It only had Pocohontas and John Smith, a completely de-sexualized romance between an underage native and a British colonist that was invented whole cloth by Elizabethan poets (in Smith's own report of the event, Pocohontas's intervention was a staged affair in a larger ritual of trans-racial adoption). In place of the dizzying number of castes and interracial combinations was a binary racial classification system which functioned like a bludgeon and rendered the relation of self to other in black and white terms. The category of the mestizo, or the mulatto, mixed African and European, did not even exist in the British colonies or the United States. Well into the twentieth century in some parts of the United States, mixed race sexual unions were expressly prohibited. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, colonists could be expelled or excommunicated from their church if they chose a partner of non-white race. Any American colonist who actually wanted to do the right thing and recognize his mixed race offspring by giving him an inheritance actually had to go to court because, according to law, the mixed race person did not exist. (Jefferson actually made his name as a civil rights lawyer defending the claim of one such mulatto heir.)<sup>10</sup>

What made the British colonies and the United States exceptions to the story of

race mixing in America? One could just give up and say racism or point to the relatively high numbers of British women that traveled to America to make residential, endogamous colonial communities. But miscegenation occurred in British America as well as in the United States; in large portions of the country, it formed the social fabric and was an important index of economic productivity (mixed-race offspring born of slaves could be sold as slaves). Miscegenation was, in fact, essential to the formation of national identity and independence in the British American colonies, though in the opposite way that it functioned in Spanish America. What we know as democracy in the United States could not have been invented without it.

Poor Nathaniel Bacon. He was the American colonist who led the first revolt against British control in 1676; he was Jefferson's political ancestor but also his tool. He lived in a seventeenth-century Virginia, the future home of American independence, about to explode from pressures without and within. The administration of the colony from Great Britain was too heavy-handed for the colonists to accept, especially for the large landowners who saw the profits from the tobacco crop eroded by taxes and trade restrictions. To make matters worse, the legion of indentured servants who had been “imported” from the slums of London to work the fields of tobacco were chafing under the heavy-handed control of their social betters, the large landowners. These indentured servants were the poor of British cities that had been siphoned off from England in order to solve the problem of class conflict there. They made their own problems in America, however, when they would not be treated as slaves. The solution to this problem led to a still further problem, for the large landowners thought that the only way they could pacify this white underclass was by abolishing indentured servitude and replacing it with—African slavery. Now the lower class of America could claim freedom from oppression and equality with the upper class, as long as it remembered the one thing they had in common. The historic antagonists of Europe found common cause in the Americas by forging a common bond of whiteness and relegating enslavement to Africans.<sup>11</sup>

So Jefferson did not invent the American ideal of political equality. He just said it best when he declared, “All men are created equal.” Now we can see that this only applied to any white male colonist who did not have a black or Indian sexual partner. For the rest of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, the ideal of democracy played out like an endgame in which white people endangered their claim to freedom,



equality, and nationality by mixing socially, politically, or sexually with non-whites. Of course this was a losing battle because the United States was part of the Americas; it was still party to the history of race mixing that the first colonial encounter had begun. As the rest of the nations of the hemisphere faced economic upheavals and political transformations that reflected the competition between castes and classes, the United States found its revolution ossified and policed, "absurdly pacified," to use Eric Sundquist's phrase, and cut off from the interracial social dynamic that was driving the social and political revolutions of the continent. This was the cost of declaring all white men were created equal. For most of the nineteenth century, the United States had a tiger by the tail, constantly shrinking the stage for its political drama and expending its political capital in pacifying the minority and mixed races it would not let participate.

Unfortunately, Jefferson had laid down his own version of the Monroe Doctrine when he forbade the family and social history of race mixing from becoming part of the story of the new nation. There were many slaveholders in colonial Virginia who had extended "shadow families" born of informal but often lasting sexual unions between the white male master and the black female slave. So intimate were these relations that Jefferson himself took the brother of his father-in-law's "concubine," or common-law wife, to Paris with him as his protégé and personal slave; we are indebted to James Hemmings for the introduction of French cooking in the United States. But Jefferson could not let this family history get in the way of the larger cause of anti-colonialism. What was required for the success of this cause was for American colonists to declare their independence not just from Great Britain but from Spain, and the rest of the legacy of colonial race-mixing. And all that was required for that declaration of independence, as the historian Winthrop Jordan has said, was amnesia.

Poor Sally Hemmings. She was the sister of James Hemmings, and the half-sister of Jefferson's first wife; her father was Jefferson's father-in-law. According to the latest scholarly and genealogical research, she was also Jefferson's sexual partner, the mother of his children, and the living reproof to the higher calling he pursued on behalf of decolonization. It was only African-American oral culture that kept the life and memory of Sally Hemmings alive, and that inspired yet another product of race mixing, William Wells Brown, to immortalize her plight in the first African-American novel, *Clotel, or the Daughter of the President*. How else do we record the stories of the people of color whose very birth violates the principal condition for national independence—that Americans

descended from Germans and do not behave like mere colonists? The history of race-mixing in the Americas might have been a hard history for Jefferson and the cause of American independence to live down, but it was an even harder history for mixed-race people to live. Well into the twentieth century, the social practices and customs of race mixing in the United States were locked away in the private place called sexuality, or personal morality, where their scandal could be heightened and preserved.

Jefferson proudly showed off this storage device just as soon as the cause of American independence succeeded. He had been determined to subtract trace of interracial contact, every colonial encounter from the American colonist until he or she was not a colonist anymore. For Jefferson, the moral recognition of the liberal West of the cause of anti-colonialism required personal lifestyle choices and intimate relations that guaranteed the whiteness of the American colonist (he always was a devil for the details). So once he had enticed the most powerful nation on the European continent, France, to commit precious diplomatic, military, and intellectual support to the anti-colonial struggle against Great Britain, he felt he owed a select audience of French readers an explanation of the principles of liberty in America. In the Francophone *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he left no doubt that it lay in the brute matters of interracial cohabitation. The very physical proximity to a slave, he claimed, was an argument for the segregation of the races, so offensive was the black body to refined senses and sensibility. Slaves could not possibly enjoy the delicate sentiments of physical intimacy because, after all, their darker skin made it impossible for them to blush! After endowing laborers who worked all day with overactive sweat glands and endocrine systems, he came right out and said that the only way to preserve the liberty of the American republic was to remove slaves "beyond the threat of mixture." Eventually, he became a firm advocate of a project of "colonization" that would send newly liberated enslaved people to anywhere that was not the thirteen states. Surely, that was even better than amnesia.

But where would America be without its black people, asked W. E. B. Dubois? Jefferson would force the new American nation to soldier on, disconnected from the colonial project that had given Europe title to the American hemisphere but also divorced from a liberal West that had found its humanist ideals in the "discovery" or invention of the other. What was left for American identity were the narcissistic follies of self-identity that become quite unfunny when we are actually forced to confront the situation of the other or the moral consequences of the suffering we cause. Perhaps Jon



Stewart captured it best: it's not important whether we actually tortured those Iraqis in the prisons of Abu Ghraib. What's important is that we are not the kind of people who use torture.

Hooray for Jose Marti. He was the Cuban nationalist leading the call for the independence of the last Spanish-American colony from Spain in the 1890s. So concerned was the United States with the fate of Cuba that it waged a war called the "Spanish-American War," just to reinforce the point that Spanish was not American; "Remember the Maine" was not just propaganda but a mnemonic device to remind United States citizens just who and why they were fighting. For the advocates of the war, there was never any doubt: the United States was finally able to make good on its Monroe Doctrine and strip the remaining colonies of the Americas from Spain. An independent Cuba and Puerto Rico now fell under the protectorate of the United States.

But the victorious party could not have been pleased with one of the spoils of victory, which was the resurgent Latin American patriotism that allowed thinkers like Marti to posit a future for the hemisphere without the United States. The title of his famous essay "Our America" made it clear that he was not speaking of the United States of America, and that the previous century and a half dominated by the spectacle of the American Revolution had been one huge mistake. "The real man is being born to America, in these real times," he said, not in the misty past of 1776. Latin American patriots had been "swept up in the epic struggles" of that revolutionary era, but all they had gained from the glittering ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy were "Yankee—or French colored glasses" and even worse, an imaginary Anglo-Saxon ancestry. Those heady times had not made a real American.

Now it was time, said Marti, for the "sons of America" to take off their spectacles and see themselves as a "motley of Indian and criollo" (or creole, American born of European ancestry); they had to recognize themselves as mestizo, born of native American peoples. In doing so, they would have to own up to the sordid, gritty history of colonial conquests and interracial encounters in the Americas that the cleansing wave of democratic revolutions was supposed to have swept away. In exchange, they would be discovering their higher calling in the most fertile image of America which the West had produced, the moment of first contact between two distinct races. They would be born again as the descendants of the native woman who extended her hand to Amerigo Vespucci. Only then they would become truly other to the European, which is what

they were meant to be. "[America] must save herself through her Indians," he concluded, so that the discovery of America could begin all over again.

Even now, it is remarkable and perhaps even politically incorrect to think that Columbus's voyage could have such a modern legacy. Everything about the conceit screams European bias and ignorance: the Mexica, the Incas, the Algonquin, and the Caribs, the natives of the hemisphere who were supposed to have been "discovered," could just as easily be said to have encountered alien invaders; to add insult to injury, these invaders imposed a foreign name upon a continent it would take them centuries to know. But something permanent and forbidding was created by the conceit that is unique to America and therefore part of the West. Nowhere else do we encounter the collision of such ignorance and such knowledge, of such strangeness and familiarity, the fundamental problem of alienation and belonging. It is, and has been enough to revolutionize what we think and know of the self. Because of this discovery, we can have the truly disorienting experience of finding an inescapable truth of our lives in the words of the Spanish-speaking indigenous Mexican leader who translated these words from his native Zapotecan tongue: "To respect what belongs to others is sacred."<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

his account of Columbus's geographical and intellectual orientation is taken from Herman Arciniegas, *America in Europe: A History of the New World in Reverse* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 5-29; and Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (London: Methuen, 1986).

For this formulation, we all owe a lasting debt to Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1984), to whom this essay is respectfully dedicated.

His fascinating observation, with tragic implications for our present day, is made by, among others, Anthony Padgen, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

As Casas and the legacy of Catholic liberal humanism in the policies of Spanish colonialism are discussed in Arciniegas, *America in Europe*, 97-104; Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literature: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42-48; and Brian Lockey, *Law and Empire in English Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10-70. I am indebted to Dr. Lockey for many illuminating discussions on this topic.

The role of Africa and African liberations in the discursive construction of a Latin America is discussed in Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (London: Blackwell, 2005).

Jefferson's ill-fated foray into ethnological research at the moment of his invention of democracy is described in Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 15-42.

The story of the Pan-American conference is told in Anna Brickhouse, *Trans-American Literary Relations and the Nineteenth Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 2003), 1-14.

- 8 Bolivar quoted in Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 78.
- 9 Quoted in Magnus Morner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 25.
- 10 Among the many useful histories of interracial contact in the British colonies of North America are Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 101-178; and Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 295-337. Jefferson's short career as a civil rights litigator is recounted in Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2003), 30-32.
- 11 See Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*.
- 12 Benito Juarez, the first Indian president of Mexico, quoted in Arciniegas, *America in Europe*, 161.

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