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The New World Debate and the 18th-Century Images of America that Brought Europe Together

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Abstract

The New World Debate offers a privileged site to reconstruct and study Europe's self-image in the 18th century. Taking on Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*, Voltaire's *Alzire et les Américains*, and De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, this paper traces the process through which Europe elaborated a Eurocentric view of the world organization through a paternalistic, usually benevolent but always contemptuous, relation to America that would come to define Europe's colonial expansion of the 19th century and make colonialism an essential, yet uncomfortable, dimension of Europe's modern identity.

Résumé

Le débat sur le Nouveau Monde nous permet d'étudier ici l'image que l'Europe se faisait d'elle-même au XVIII^e siècle. En s'appuyant sur l'*Histoire naturelle* de Buffon, *Les Indes Galantes* de Rameau, *Alzire et les Américains* de Voltaire et les *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* de De Pauw, cet article retrace le processus par lequel l'Europe élaborait une vision eurocentrique de l'organisation du monde par le biais d'une relation paternaliste, généralement bienveillante mais toujours méprisante, qui allait définir l'expansion coloniale de l'Europe au XIX^e siècle et faire du colonialisme une dimension essentielle, mais inconfortable, de l'identité européenne moderne.

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Reflections and conversations on the construction of a European identity have tended to focus on the 19th century, somehow overlooking the 18th century. However, as Marie Matilde Benzoni noted: “Properly considered, it was in the eighteenth-century that relations between Europe and the rest of the World started being reshaped. This was against a background of the consolidation in Europe of a system of states that had by then started taking on continental dimensions and of the contextual strengthening of a regular ‘international society’, glued together by widespread circulation of people, goods, life styles and ideas.”¹ Even though Federico Chabod’s *Storia dell’idea d’Europa* (1961) covered a broad chronology, he saw Europe, as Benzoni pointed out, as a modern idea and regarded the 18th century as a turning point in its historical formation.²

If the 18th century marked the beginning of a Eurocentric reorganization of Europe’s relations with the rest of the world, Europe’s dealing with America must then have played a significant role in the construction of its collective consciousness, owing to the American continent’s growing economic and geopolitical importance throughout the century. Benzoni argues that the development of a European paradigm in the 18th century resulted from Europe’s self-referential confrontation with America in what Antonello Gerbi described as *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo* (1955). According to Gerbi, the dispute started with the publication in 1761 of the 9th volume of the Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*, in which the naturalist established the inferiority of the New World’s quadrupeds and, by extension, of the entire New World in comparison to the Old one. While it was not the first time Europe asserted America’s inferiority—a long-established cliché of European travelogs and Jesuit Relations—it was the first time it was presented as a scientific truth. As Gerbi discussed, Buffon’s scientific downgrading of America triggered a tense and complex debate that lasted until the 19th century. Although, in the

end, the debate said little about the reality of the American continent and its inhabitants, it revealed much about Europe, especially Europe’s image of itself and the world around it.³

Seen as such, the New World Debate offers a privileged site to reconstruct and study the image of Europe in the 18th century and, therefore, to answer the questions raised by this special issue on the images that made Europe. In the following pages, I thus propose to consider four 18th-century best-sellers that engaged with America, namely Rameau’s operaballet *Les Indes Galantes*, Voltaire’s play *Alzire et les Américains*, Buffon’s scientific study *Histoire Naturelle*, and finally, De Pauw’s pamphlet *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*. I selected these four works first because they enjoyed great success, which meant that they presented ideas that resonated with the public and, through their wide circulation, shaped the public’s views. Second, they spanned several decades, with Rameau’s operaballet first performed in 1735 and De Pauw’s pamphlet published in 1768. Still, while *Les Indes Galantes* and *Alzire et les Américains* premiered in the 1730s, they were performed throughout the following decades and were very much present on the European stages at the time Buffon and De Pauw published their texts and the New World Debate started. This specific chronology allows us to escape the influence of news events and the circumstantial climate to access a more profound and structural vision of Europe’s relations with America and itself. I also chose these works because they belonged to very different genres and tackled the American question from different angles and for different audiences, thereby constituting a diverse and representative corpus through which the construction of a European identity in the context of the New World Debate can be studied. Finally, these works have a strong visual component, directly through their set designs, costumes, and illustrations and indirectly through their authors’ vivid descriptions and pictorial language. These visual components, usually

¹ Maria Matilde Benzoni, “The Idea of Europe and the ‘Dispute of the New World’”, *History of European Ideas* 34, no. 4 (2008): 377, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2008.07.005>.

² On Chabod’s *Storia dell’idea d’Europa*, see Stuart Woolf, “Reading Federico Chabod’s *Storia dell’idea d’Europa* Half a Century Later,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002): 269-92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545710210138009>.

³ Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* was published in 38 volumes between 1749-1789. They are accessible on Gallica. See the notice of the BnF for access to the individual volumes: <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb301741843>

overlooked by historians, offer art historians material to renew and hopefully enrich our understanding of these works and their public receptions.

As we consider these four works, we can trace the process through which Europe elaborated its Eurocentric views of the world organization through a paternalistic, usually benevolent but always contemptuous, relation to America that would come to define Europe's colonial expansion of the 19th century and make colonialism an essential, yet uncomfortable, dimension of Europe's modern identity.

Rameau and the Europeans' Benevolent Superiority

Jean-Philippe Rameau's famous opera-ballet *Les Indes Galantes*, for which Louis Fuzelier wrote the libretto, staged a sophisticated vision of Europeans' superiority over the Native Americans by distinguishing different levels of development among them. A major success, the opera-ballet went through 320 full or partial representations in Paris between 1735 and 1775 and gave rise to at least seven parodies. Its definitive format consisted of a prologue and four entrees displaying love stories in the Eastern and Western Indies: Turkey, Peru, Persia, and North America. Of the four entrées, the American ones were the most original and most liked. The entrée devoted to North America, *Les sauvages*, was added in 1736 after the first performances received a lukewarm reception.⁴ Using a harpsichord piece he had composed in 1727 after attending a dance performance by Native Americans in Paris, Rameau created this new entrée, significantly contributing to its long-standing success.⁵

⁴ Please note that the early modern French term "sauvage," without being a highly positive term, did not carry the same negative connotation as the contemporary English "savage." It referred to people living in the forest, outside civilization. Following the examples of other scholars, I will use thus stick to the term "sauvage" and italicize it. For a discussion of the word, see Sophie Capmartin, "Dissonant Sauvages: Representations of Louisiana Natives in French Cultural Productions, 1683–1753" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2021), 17.

⁵ The bibliography on the *Indes Galantes* is extremely rich. For our purpose, I would recommend starting with Hélène Leclerc, "Les Indes Galantes (1735-1952). Les sources de l'Opéra ballet, l'exotisme orientalisant, les conditions matérielles du spectacle," *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre* 5, no. 4 (1953): 259-85. Other useful essays include, Nathalie Lecomte, "Les Divertissements exotiques dans les opéras de Rameau," in *Jean-Philippe Rameau : colloque international*, ed. Jérôme de La Gorce (Paris: Champion, 1987), 551-63; Roger Savage, "Rameau's American Dancers," *Early Music* 11, no. 4 (1983): 441-52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/earlyj/11.4.441>; Catherine Gallouët,

By staging different levels of civilization among Native Americans, from the *bons sauvages* of North America to the more sophisticated Incas of Peru, the *Indes Galantes* represented Native Americans' potential for progress.⁶ Enlightenment and assimilation to (European) civilization was indeed the dominant vision of what should happen to America and its inhabitants.⁷ The proponents of this civilizationist vision regarded Native Americans as a young population who needed to develop. The Incas, whom the French had discovered through Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, played an essential role in shaping this optimistic vision.⁸ If they had grown out of the state of nature to a state of semi-civilization, the reasoning went, other Americans could likewise progress over time.

The *Indes Galantes* made the distinction between the *bons sauvages* and the Incas visible in the entrées' settings. While the Incas entrée was anchored in the Spanish Conquest's history and the Inca Empire's destruction, the *sauvages* one was disconnected from history. The only information provided was that it took place in a North American forest in a disputed region between France and Spain. This difference was reinforced through the set designs: whereas the Incas set evoked a desert strewn with ruins and a mountain in the background, the set design of the *sauvages* represented a verdant forest.⁹ What we know of the costumes used in the 1750s and 1760s suggests that they only heightened this overall impression. For the *sauvages*,

"Transformation de l'autre exotique dans Les Indes galantes de Rameau et Fuzelier (1736), ou comment l'autre se construit sur la scène," *Le Monde français du dix-huitième siècle* 5, no. 1 (2020): 2-12, <https://doi.org/10.5206/mfids-ecfwv5i1.10548>.

⁶ For recent accounts of these two entries, see on the *Incas*, Alejandro J. García Morales, Rameau's *Les Incas du Pérou* as a French Reconstruction of the Conquest of Peru, 2015, https://www.academia.edu/12269766/Rameaus_Les_Incas_du_P%C3%A9rou_as_a_French_Reconstruction_of_the_Conquest_of_Peru. And on the *Sauvages*, Capmartin, "Dissonant Sauvages: Representations of Louisiana Natives in French Cultural Productions, 1683–1753", Chapter 4. Capmartin also discusses the coming to France of the delegation of Native Americans in 1725, whose dance performance inspired Rameau.

⁷ The men and women of the Lumières had an optimistic belief in progress and projected it onto America. See Daniel R. Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and his Legacy in the French Enlightenment*, Routledge Innovations in Political Theory ; 44, (New York: Routledge, 2012), Chapter 5.

⁸ Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616) was the son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess. He was first raised by his maternal family, speaking Quechua, before moving with his father's family. First published in 1609, the *Comentarios Reales de los Incas* was translated into French in 1633. It became influential in the 18th century when its positive account of the Inca culture contributed to creating the myth of the benevolent Incas.

⁹ See the abovementioned article on the costume and set design and costume, especially Leclerc, "Les Indes Galantes."



Figure 1. Louis-René Boquet, *Les Sauvages* [maquette de costume], 1766. Ink, 231 x 251 mm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France. ark:/12148/btv1b84548028

the extras wore costumes of fauns and dryads, i.e., wood nymphs. A drawing by Louis-René Boquet of a male *sauvage* for a 1766 performance shows that the actor was only partially dressed in an animal skin tunic adorned with a flesh-colored scarf and vegetal garlands and held a club (Fig. 1).¹⁰ Unlike the French and Spanish characters with their distinctive European clothes, the *sauvages* in their vegetal costumes blended with their environment. In contrast, the costumes of the Incas followed European shapes but featured vivid colors, heavy gold jewelry, and colorful feathers—the primary signifiers of their exoticism. Another drawing by Bouquet of the heroine of the Incas entrée, Phani Phallas, for a 1761 performance, shows her wearing a typical 18th-century dress in vivid colors, embellished

¹⁰ For an overview of the representations of Native Americans on stage, see Joellen A. Meglin, "Sauvages, Sex Roles, and Semiotics: Representations of Native Americans in the French Ballet, 1736-1837, Part one: The Eighteenth Century," *Dance chronicle* 23, no. 2 (2000): 87-132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472520008569379>.



Figure 2. Louis-René Boquet, *Mlle Dubois Phany Palla* [maquette de costume], 1761. Ink, 237 x 162 mm. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France. ark:/12148/btv1b8455408p

with a golden sun medallion on her chest and many colorful feathers (Fig. 2). While the bright, feathered Incas would have contrasted with the more subdued clothes of the European protagonists, they would have stood out as more civilized than the *sauvages* of the other entrée. A difference that would also have been heard in the music, with the *sauvages* entrée featuring some surprisingly novel sounds inspired, as we said, by authentic Native American music and dance.¹¹

The difference in the level of civilization between the two American groups finally played out in the stories. The *sauvages* plot is more straightforward and merrier. It revolves around Zima, a young Native American woman whose affection is disputed between a Frenchman, Damon, a Spaniard, Alvar,

¹¹ On the music, see Timothy D. Taylor, "Peopling the Stage: Opera, Otherness, and New Musical Representations in the Eighteenth Century," *Cultural Critique*, no. 36 (1997): 55-88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354500>.

and a Native American, Adorio. She rejects the Frenchman because he is unfaithful (he loves too little), the Spaniard because he is jealous (he loves too much), and so stays with the American. However, this should not be read as an American happy ending. While Adorio wins Zima's heart, he loses his land. The entrée is supposed to occur after a French victory over the native warriors. It thus opens to the sounds of triumphant brasses that come back to cover Adorio's lamentations over his defeat.¹² The main hero of the entrée is not Adorio but Damon, who was performed by the beloved tenor Pierre de Jélyotte, who played the other key male characters of the *Indes Galantes*.¹³ It is with this "habitant des bords de la Seine" that the 18th-century European audience would have identified. Like him, they would not have been distraught to lose Zima because they could never be serious about a *sauvage*, however pretty she was. The choice of the name Adorio, borrowed from the *Dialogues de M. le Baron de La Hontan et d'un sauvage dans l'Amérique* (1704) which was a widely read at the time, would have brought to many viewers' minds Lahontan's account of the Native Americans' surprising (to the Europeans) customs in matters of love—practices which like the sexual freedom of unmarried women were indeed enticing but ultimately incompatible with European society.¹⁴ Adorio can keep Zima, Damon gets his allegiance, and the entrée can conclude with a Peace Pipe Ceremony.

The plot of the Incas entrée is more complicated and dramatic, in brief, more in line with their perceived higher degree of civilization. The stake is no longer the allegiance of the American people but their assimilation. Again, the heroine is a Native woman, Phani Phalas, but this time, she is in love with an enlightened Spanish officer, Don Carlos,

whom Jélyotte also played. Their union and her conversion to Christianity are threatened by Huascar, an unenlightened Incas priest, who is in love with her. Huascar tries to convince Phani that she is betraying her country, people, and ancestors by loving Don Carlos. During the Sun ceremony, he goes as far as to trigger a volcanic eruption to convince her that the Gods are angry at her. As her willpower starts faltering, Don Carlos arrives to explain that the explosion is not the making of the gods but of Huascar, who, in response, throws himself into the volcano. The story thus marks the triumph of rationality over superstition, Christianity over paganism, and Europe over America. In her famous aria, "Viens Hymen," Phani sings about her accepting to be chained up by her love. While such a phrase is typical of 18th-century love discourses, in the context of the Incas entrée, it takes a more definite meaning as Phani is surrendering herself to Don Carlos and his Christian, European values, leaving behind all her worldviews. In one of the performances for which we have a detailed list of costumes, she is said to wear a "collier demi-esclavage de perles et diamants," that is to say, a type of necklace that was fashionable at the time and symbolized the submission of a wife to her husband as much as his wealth.¹⁵

In the end, Rameau's *Indes Galantes* presented its audience with a hierarchical vision of humanity, with, at the bottom, the American *bons sauvages* enjoying the simple and blissful life of the American forests and, at the top, the Europeans controlling the rest of the world from the "bords de la Seine" with paternalist goodwill. In the middle, the Incas struggled, unable to leave behind their old superstitions and reach true (European) Enlightenment without the Europeans pulling them up. As such, the opera-ballet invited Europeans to enlighten and assimilate the Americans.

¹² On this question, see Capmartin, "Dissonant Sauvages: Representations of Louisiana Natives in French Cultural Productions, 1683–1753", 187.

¹³ On Jélyotte, see Jean Kriff, "Un franc-ténor, Pierre Jélyotte (1713-1797)," *Humanisme*, no. 300 (2013/3): 105-09.

¹⁴ Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan (1666-1716) spent 10 years in Nouvelle France. After returning to Europe, he published *Nouveaux Voyages dans l'Amérique septentrionale* in 1703, which were supposed to be letters he had written to a French relative from Canada. In 1704, he published *Dialogues de M. le Baron de La Hontan et d'un sauvage dans l'Amérique*, which were supposed to be the transcription of his conversation with a Native American Chief, called Adario. Both books were best sellers. On Lahontan, see Gordon M. Sayre, *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 31-48.

¹⁵ The "collier en esclavage" should not be confused with the bondage necklace enslaved people wore. A wedding present from the groom to his bride, this necklace was made of several chains connected by medallions. Women would add a new medal each time they had a child. Since Phani was not married yet, she only wore a "demi-esclavage" necklace that showcased her partial "enslavement." Marie-Antoinette wore such a necklace at the end of her life—her last necklace. It is said that each medallion contained a lock of each of her children.

Voltaire and the European Enlightenment of America

This vision of the Incas' assimilation and belief in European responsibility in enlightening Americans and bringing them to their level was further developed in Voltaire's *Alzire ou les Américains*, which premiered at the Théâtre français in January 1736 to great acclaim and, as a measure of its success, resulted in several parodies.¹⁶ Taking place in Lima, *Alzire ou les Américains* brings together Don Gusman, the governor of Peru, who rules over the native population with an iron fist; his father, Don Alvarès, the former governor, who urges his son to win over the Americans through sympathy, not fear; Zamore, a ruler of the Potsi region, mythic in Europe for its silver mines, who resists Spanish domination; Montèze, another ruler of the Potsi region, who has surrendered to the Spanish rules and converted to Christianity; and finally Alzire, Montèze's daughter, likewise converted to Christianity. She is also the widow of Zamore, who is thought to be dead at the beginning of the play. To cement the Incas' alliance with the Spaniards, Alzire consents to marry Gusman, even though she dislikes him. When Zamore reappears, she refuses to follow him because she does not want to break her Christian marital vows and thereby trigger more revenge and more violence. In the end, Zamore fatally injures Gusman, who, as he dies, understands his father's call for leniency and thus forgives the American rebels and calls for reconciliation. Zamore, touched by such a generous example, converts to Christianity and embraces European values. The inflexible conquistador and the rebel American have been enlightened, making reconciliation, assimilation, and happiness possible.¹⁷

The little information we have regarding the costumes and set designs of *Alzire* suggests that they

were very similar to those of the Incas entrée, presenting them between the *sauvages* and the Europeans. A drawing of Zamore by Jean-Louis Fesch, who specialized in actor portraits to be sold as prints, shows him wearing an ample red coat lined with spotted fur, plenty of feathers, and sandals with high laces over his bare legs. In 1760, asked about the costumes he had in mind for the play, Voltaire responded: "une espèce d'habit à la romaine pour Zamore et ses suivants, le corselet orné d'un soleil, et des plumes pendants au lambrequins, un petit casque garni de plumes qui ne soit pas un casque ordinaire" [a kind of Roman-style outfit for Zamore and his followers, the corselet decorated with a sun, and feathers hanging from the mantling, a small helmet trimmed with feathers that is not an ordinary helmet].¹⁸ Hubert François Gravelot used this combination of classical costume, gold jewelry, and colorful feathers to illustrate the play for Voltaire's *Collection complète des Œuvres* (1768-1775).¹⁹ The illustration is captioned "Quoi donc, les vrais Chrétiens auraient tant de vertu! *Alzire*, act V, scene 7" shows Gusman dying, holding the hand of Alzire, who wears a classical tunic exoticized through feathers (Fig. 3). Zamore, dressed similarly, expresses his astonishment while Montèze kneels in gratitude. The joining hands of Gusman and Alzire are the focus of the image, the sign of their peoples' reconciliation, and the Incas' submission to European values.

While the play sent a powerful message to Europeans about being benevolent towards the Native Americans and seeking reconciliation, it concluded with the Americans accepting the European way of life, embracing Christianity, and giving up their old identity. As such, it ended in what Daniel Brunstetter describes as a cultural *othericide*. As Brunstetter explains, Voltaire sympathized with the plight of the colonized and rejected the violence to which they had been subjected. Still, he ultimately thought embracing European culture was in their

¹⁶ Voltaire finished writing the play in 1734 but waited for the right time to have it performed. It is possible that the *Indes Galantes*, which premiered six months earlier, prepared the public. See Jean-Pierre Sanchez, "Voltaire et sa tragédie américaine *Alzire* (1736)," *Caravelle* (1988) 58, no. 1 (1992): 17-37, <https://doi.org/10.3406/carav.1992.2484>. Isabelle Ligier-Degauque, "Lumières et colonisation : relecture d'*Alzire* ou les Américains de Voltaire," *Littératures*, no. 62 (2010): 23-44, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4000/litteratures.859>.

¹⁷ On Voltaire's Anthropology, see Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières* (1971) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 281-331. Although Duchet does not discuss this play, her analysis of Voltaire's views helps understand how it falls into his larger metaphysics and expands the discussion.

¹⁸ Letter of Voltaire to the Duchesse de Saxe-Gotha, dated January 15, 1760. Quoted in Ligier-Degauque, "Lumières et colonisation."

¹⁹ Voltaire's *Collection complète des Œuvres* published in 24 volumes in Genève between 1768 and 1775. Each volume was illustrated with prints after Hubert François Gravelot.



Figure 3. Antoine-Jean Duclos, after Hubert François Gravelot, *Quoi donc, les vrais Chrétiens auraient tant de vertu!* *Alzire*, act V, scène 7, ca. 1760s. Etching and engraving. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection.

best interest. He did not regard European culture as another culture imposed on the Americans but as a higher level of development they would and should attain. In Voltaire's own words, the play demonstrated, "combien le véritable esprit de religion l'emporte sur les vérités de la nature" [how the true spirit of religion prevails over the truths of nature].²⁰ In other words, it reflected and disseminated the belief that if the Europeans were to follow the benevolent principles set by Bartolomé de las Casas, who greatly influenced French thinkers at the time,²¹ and extend a benevolent hand, Native Americans could be enlightened and, as a result, leave behind their backward natural state to grow into civilization, where true happiness was.²²

Buffon and the Inferiority of America

With the publication of the 9th volume of his *Histoire Naturelle* in 1761, the Comte de Buffon started casting doubt on this optimistic vision of America. The reason for his more critical approach was two-fold. First was the historical context: the ongoing Seven Years' War had been triggered by skirmishes between the French and the English in America, leading many to shift their positive outlook on the American colonies. By the time Buffon wrote that volume, it was clear that the French Empire in America had collapsed: France was losing the war, the English had taken over Canada's major cities, and the French government was scrambling to limit its loss. Second was his desire for scientific truth. Even though the historical context might have made him more cautious vis-a-vis the New World, Buffon never consciously planned to denigrate America; he merely wanted to provide an encyclopedic and scientific overview of the natural world to which the American fauna and flora belonged.

²⁰ Voltaire, *Alzire, ou les Américains, tragédie de M. de Voltaire, représentée à Paris pour la première fois le 27 janvier 1736*. (Paris: Jean-Baptiste-Claude Bauche, 1736), discours préliminaire.

²¹ Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) was a Spanish Dominican, who served as chaplain of the conquistadors in Cuba. Having witnessed the atrocities of the Conquest, he took the defense of the Native Americans. He wrote *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, arguing that they were naturally free and good and could thus not be enslaved.

²² Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and his Legacy in the French Enlightenment*, 94-133.

In the mid-18th century, people in France knew little about the reality of the American environment. Although it is difficult to know precisely what Europeans had in mind when they thought about the American continent, the tapestries of the *Tenture des Indes* provide a good insight into the French collective image of America at the time.²³ Produced between 1687 and 1800, the *Tenture des Indes* was one of the greatest and longest successes of the Gobelins Factory. While the details of its design evolved, the fantastic image it displayed of what was then called the Indes Occidentales (West Indies) in opposition to the Indes Orientales (India and China) remained unchanged.²⁴ *Le cheval rayé*, the first tapestry of the set, presented, for instance, the impossible but beautiful encounter of a rhinoceros, a zebra, a leopard, and a gazelle in a landscape of citrus trees and sugar cans, inhabited by peacocks, pelicans, armadillos, parrots, and owls. The result was a marvelous image of breathtaking exoticism that had minimal relation to American reality, not to say reality in general. And, while it ravished the public, it could only annoy the scientists like Buffon.

So, the naturalist decided to rectify all this by finding the truth about the American fauna and flora. Unfortunately, his assessment did not bode well for the American environment, which was lacking on several levels, including quadrupeds. Buffon started his 9th volume with a chapter on the king of the quadrupeds, the lion, in which he asserted that there were no lions in America, or at least no actual lion, even though some American animals were called "lions." As he explained, it was a problem of terminology. When Europeans arrived in America, they gave European names to the animals they encountered because the indigenous words were often too difficult to pronounce:

²³ On the *Tenture des Indes*, see Michael Benisovich, "The History of the Tenture des Indes," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 83, no. 486 (1943): 216-10; Thomas Bodkin, "Les Nouvelles Tentures des Indes," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 84, no. 492 (1944): 65-68; Madeleine Jarry, "L'Exotisme au temps de Louis XIV: Tapisseries des Gobelins et de Beauvais," *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 11, no. 1/2 (1976): 52-71. Jarry repeats many of the ideas presented in Benisovich's text but adds some interesting elements. Charissa Bremer-David, "Le Cheval Rayé: A French Tapestry Portraying Dutch Brazil," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 22 (1994), provides an excellent presentation of the series while closely examining one of the tapestries.

²⁴ See Denis Diderot, "AMERIQUE, ou le Nouveau-monde, ou les Indes occidentales," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Diderot, D'Alembert, and Jaucourt (Paris: 1751-1772), 356; <http://enccre.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedie/article/v1-1574-0/>.

Lorsque les Européens en firent la découverte [de ce nouveau continent], ils trouvèrent en effet que tout y était nouveau, les animaux quadrupèdes, les oiseaux, les poissons, les insectes, les plantes, tout parut inconnu, tout se trouva différent de ce qu'on avait vu jusqu'alors. Il fallut cependant dénommer les principaux objets de cette nouvelle Nature ; les noms du pays étaient pour la plupart barbares, très difficiles à prononcer et encore plus à retenir : on emprunta donc des noms de nos langues d'Europe, et surtout de l'Espagnole et de la Portugaise. Dans cette disette de dénominations, un petit rapport dans la forme extérieure, une légère ressemblance de taille et de figure suffirent pour attribuer à ces objets inconnus les noms des choses connues ; de-là les incertitudes, l'équivoque, la confusion . . . [When the Europeans discovered [this new continent], they found that everything there was new: quadrupeds, birds, fish, insects, plants, everything seemed unknown, everything was different from what had been seen until then. The local names were mostly barbaric, complicated to pronounce, and even more difficult to remember: We, therefore, borrowed names from our European languages, especially Spanish and Portuguese. In this paucity of names, a small connection in the external form, a slight resemblance in size and figure were enough to attribute to these unknown objects the names of known things; hence the uncertainties, equivocation, and confusion . . .]²⁵

As a result, they called pumas “lions” even though they belonged to a different species. To make matters worse, animals were brought to America from Europe, so much so that it was difficult to know which animals were truly autochthones to America. His ambition was thus to clarify the situation and establish which animals were native to the New World, which were originally from the Old World, and which ones the two worlds shared.

Doing so, he realized that there were no truly large quadrupeds in America; the biggest one was the tapir, which was much smaller than the majestic

quadrupeds in Africa and Asia. He also noticed that, while similar species existed at the same latitudes in North America and Europe, the American animals were different and often smaller than their European relatives. He attributed the differences to degeneration.²⁶ The *Dégénération des animaux* was the subject of a chapter in the 14th volume of the *Histoire Naturelle*, published in 1766. For Buffon, the term degeneration did not have the strong negative connotation it has for us today; it implied more generally a transformation of the species. Talking about European animals, Buffon thus explained how they had degenerated through domestication, becoming smaller through human intervention. This degeneration was a positive transformation. As Michèle Duchet noted, Buffon organized the natural world through an order of decreasing dignity descending by degrees from the humans, unique and superior beings, to the domesticated animals, which derive their nobility from the humans who tamed them to the wild animals, which are subjects only to the laws of nature.²⁷ This led him to observe that, unlike the Europeans, the Native Americans had not domesticated animals. Only the Peruvians, whom he described as more civilized than the other Americans, had domesticated the lama.²⁸ The absence of domestication in the New World seemed to say as much about the American natural world as the Americans' inaptness.

What did abound in America were insects and reptiles. Not only did insects thrive in America, but they were enormous. Buffon explained the triumph of the insects, the weakness of the quadrupeds, and the humans' inability to domesticate them by the poor quality of the American environment, which he described as cold, wet, and carrying in it “quelque chose de contraire à l'agrandissement de la nature vivante” [something contrary to the enlargement of the living nature].²⁹ He postulated that the continent might have emerged from the original waters

²⁵ Georges-Louis Leclerc comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière. Avec la description du Cabinet du roy* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1749-1804), Vol. 9, 13-14.

²⁶ In contrast, the animals found in South America belonged to different species than the ones found at the same African latitudes. Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, Vol. 14, 372-74.

²⁷ Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières* (1971), 235. Duchet's chapter on Buffon's anthropology (pg. 229-280), in particular the section on “L'homme américain” (pg. 260-267), provides a helpful background to understand his views on the American continent, especially concerning the influence of climate.

²⁸ Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, Vol. 9, 84.

²⁹ Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, Vol. 9, 103.

later than the Old World and was consequently still wet and cold. It was a new world at an early stage of its development. And since Native Americans were so few and weak due to the contrary environment, they could not work the land, domesticate the animals, or control the waters, so nature had been left undeveloped.

As Buffon set to correct the fanciful image Europeans had of America and that the *Tenture des Indes* exemplified, he stripped the New World away from all its exotic beauty, leaving us with the image of a rather desolate place inhabited by a few weak humans, some meager tapirs, anteaters, and armadillos, but floats of crocodiles and swarms of insects. However, the situation was not hopeless. Buffon presented the American continent as merely young compared to the Old World, implying that it could be developed. In the *Histoire Naturelle*, Buffon advanced the idea that humans can transform nature, especially in the text on the degeneration of animals, where he talked of domestication. He wrote: “Dès que l’Homme a commencé à changer de ciel et qu’il s’est rependu de climats en climats, la nature a subi des altérations” [As soon as Man began to travel to different skies and spread from one climate to another, nature underwent alterations].³⁰ The American environment was cold and wet but could be warmed and dried through human work. The problem was thus less the land than its inhabitants, whose weakness and inability had prevented them from enhancing it.

Interestingly, the idea that the American environment could be transformed through agriculture was also represented in the *Tenture des Indes*, specifically in the tapestry of *Les Deux Taureaux*, which shows two bulls pulling a cart filled with fruits and sugar canes. Behind them, two enslaved Africans are carrying a hammock, through which we distinguish, in the background, a sugar plantation, with a precise rendering of the sugar mill, the oven where the sugar was set to dry, and the African slaves working there. Considered in parallel with Buffon’s comments, it seems to showcase a transformation

³⁰ Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*, Vol. 14, 311. Like most of his contemporaries, Buffon traced his views on the influence of climate to Hippocrates’s influential treatise, *On Airs, Waters, and Places*.

of the American landscape orchestrated by the Europeans through African slave labor. For one early set of the *Tenture des Indes*, the tapestry of the *Deux Taureaux* was combined with *Les pêcheurs*, whereby the representation of the slaves working on the plantation was associated with an image of Native Americans hunting and fishing (Fig. 4). As such, the tapestry contrasted two modes of relations to nature: Native Americans’ passive consumption of wildlife through hunting, fishing, and picking, and Europeans’ active management of nature through breeding, harvesting, and slavery.

Ultimately, then, the inferiority of America was less a matter of its natural world than of its inhabitants, who were incapable of controlling and transforming it. Accordingly, Europe’s superiority did not lie in its natural environment but in Europeans’ domesticating animals, farming the land, controlling waters, and even exploiting other humans. From this, one could conclude that it was the Europeans’ responsibility, one could even say, their calling to take over the management of the American land and, by extension, of any land that its original inhabitants could not grow to its full potential.

De Pauw and Europe’s Colonial Dream

In 1768, Cornelius de Pauw published *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, a two-volume essay in which he took on Buffon’s arguments on America’s inferiority, forcefully challenging the optimistic civilizational discourse and denouncing America as corrupting.³¹ De Pauw was a Dutch friar close to the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia, who, fearful of a European (or at least Prussian) emigration to America, encouraged de Pauw in his vehement and systematic attacks against what he regarded as delusional visions of America.³² Using, at times, the most outlandish rhetoric, he ridiculed the American myths, including that of the Americans’

³¹ See Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: the History of a Polemic, 1750-1900*, Rev. and enl. translated by Jeremy Moyle. ed. (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), Chapter 3, 52-79.

³² On de Pauw’s connection with the court of Frederick the Great, see Helen Piel, “Cornelius de Pauw and the Degenerate Americas,” in *Encountering the Other - Travel Books on North-America, Japan and China from the Maastricht Jesuit Library, 1500-1900*, 73-93.



Figure 4. Manufacture royale des gobelins, Paris, *Les deux taureaux and Les pêcheurs*, 1689-90, from the series *Tenture des Indes*, after cartoons designed by Albert Eckhout, c. 1644-52. Wool and silk, 470 x 740 cm. Paris, Collection du Mobilier National. Photo: Lawrence Perquis © Mobilier national, droits réservés.

assimilability. He concluded that Europeans should stay away from America for everyone's sake. While de Pauw's dismissive comments about the American continent and its people can seem outrageous to today's readers, we still ought to take it seriously, in no small part, because the book was a great success and, as Gerbi showed, extremely influential.

As said, De Pauw was on a mission to systematically sap the positive image people had of America, starting with the myth of the New Eden that Buffon had already undermined.³³ Echoing and amplifying the naturalist's unflattering observations regarding the American quadrupeds and the American climate, De Pauw declared: "Le Climat de l'Amérique était au moment de la découverte, très contraire à la plupart des animaux, qui s'y sont trouvés plus

petits d'un sixième que leurs analogues de l'ancien continent. Ce Climat était sur tout pernicieux aux hommes abrutis, énervés, et viciés dans toutes les parties de leur organisme d'une façon étonnante" [The climate of America was, at the time of the discovery, very contrary to most of the animals, which were found there to be one-sixth smaller than their analogues on the old continent. This Climate was above all pernicious to men, who were stultified, enervated, and vitiated in all parts of their organism in an astonishing way].³⁴

Taking on Buffon's observations with the verve of a polemist, De Pauw kept pushing them to the extreme. For instance, where Buffon had dryly noted the great number and great size of the American reptiles and insects, De Pauw, who as a writer

³³ On de Pauw's rhetoric and arguments, see Pierre Berthiaume, "Dégénérés et Monstrueux," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 19 (1994): 44-54.

³⁴ Cornélius De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, ou Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine* (Berlin: G. J. Decker, 1768-1769), Vol. 1, 4.

excelled at creating vivid images, painted a most repulsive picture of America:

La surface de la terre, frappée de putréfaction, y était inondée de Lézards, de Couleuvres, de Serpents, de Reptiles et d’Insectes monstrueux par la grandeur et l’activité de leurs poisons, qu’ils tiraient des sucres abondants de ce sol inculte, vicié, abandonné à lui-même, et où la sève nourricière s’aigrissait, comme le lait dans les seins des animaux qui n’exercent pas la puissance de se propager [The surface of the earth, stricken with putrefaction, was flooded with Lizards, Snakes, Reptiles and Insects monstrous in the size and activity of their poisons, which they drew from the abundant juices of this uncultivated, vitiated soil, abandoned to itself, and where the nourishing sap became sour, like the milk in the breasts of the animals that do not exercise the power to propagate themselves].³⁵

Furthermore, while Buffon had portrayed America as a young continent with the potential to be transformed by human work, de Pauw described it as corrupt beyond redemption. Agriculture, the source of life and civilization was impossible there because: “Dès qu’on y perçait la terre à la profondeur de dix à sept pouces, on la trouvait très froide, et même dans la Zone Torride. Les graines tendres qu’on y semait d’un doigt trop avant, se glaçaient et ne germaient pas” [As soon as the soil was drilled to a depth of ten to seven inches, it was found to be very cold, even in the Hot Zone. The tender seeds that were sown with a finger too far forward, froze and did not germinate].³⁶

Regarding the myth of the *bon sauvage* illustrated in Rameau’s *Indes Galantes*, De Pauw used the same strategy of taking Buffon’s comments a step further with uncanny verve. Whereas in Buffon, the Native Americans were few, weak, and consequently unable to do much with their natural environment, in de Pauw, they became debased and monstrous. He described the American men as dumb, impotent, and mainly attracted to other men.³⁷ American

women were said to have fewer children and less menstrual bleeding but more milk than other (i.e., European) women. According to De Pauw, American mothers often breastfed their children until they were ten years old, and it was not uncommon to see mothers nursing twelve-year-old boys.³⁸

Having destroyed the myths of the new Eden and the *bon sauvage*, De Pauw tackled the myth of the benevolent Incas. Again, he was attacking an image close to his contemporaries’ hearts. Wisely, de Pauw did not question the depictions of the Peruvians found in Voltaire and other European writers but attacked Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, on which they all relied for information on the Incas. De Pauw first discredited the book and its author by explaining that Garcilaso was not truly American as many thought; he was merely a Metis (the son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca woman). He then asserted that Garcilaso’s writing was so unintelligible that hardly a sentence of the original book was preserved in its French translation.³⁹ Finally, he explained that Garcilaso was not objective: he was an “exagérateur qui, par un fol amour pour sa malheureuse patrie n’a respecté aucune vérité: il n’y a aucun fait qu’il n’ait falsifié pour l’embellir” [exaggerator who, by an insane love for his unfortunate country did not respect any truth: there is no fact that he did not falsify to embellish it].⁴⁰ Having established that Garcilaso could not be trusted, De Pauw moved on to restore the truth about the Incas, demonstrating that they had no history (they could only recall twelve Emperors),⁴¹ no writing (the quipu was a very limited tool of communication),⁴² no urbanism (there was hardly one real town at the time of the Conquest), no diplomacy (they had no contact with the Mexican Empire),⁴³ etc.

De Pauw concluded that, here again, Europeans were gullible when it came to America. The Incas were as brutish and corrupt as all the other Americans. They

³⁵ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 7.

³⁶ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 9.

³⁷ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 62-63.

³⁸ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 53-56.

³⁹ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 2, 154-55.

⁴⁰ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 2, 177.

⁴¹ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 2, 176.

⁴² De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 2, 170.

⁴³ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 2, 204.

might be even more monstrous since, as de Pauw explained, they were often born deaf, deformed, and missing a limb.⁴⁴ With the stroke of a pen, de Pauw shattered the image of the benevolent Inca, carrying his quipu and golden sun medallion, and replaced it with that of a corrupt brute. This done, it was easy to finish toppling down the myth of the Native Americans' assimilability. De Pauw had only to point out that they had failed to assimilate over the past two hundred years. If they could assimilate, why hadn't they? Instead of progressing to civilization, the Incas had regressed, and whatever glory their Empire had reached once, it had disappeared entirely.

Throughout the book, de Pauw hammered the same message that Native Americans were incapable of progress, yet his conclusion was surprisingly benevolent towards them as he exhorted Europeans to leave them alone: "laissons végéter ces Sauvages en paix, plaignons-les, si leurs maux surpassent les nôtres, et si nous ne pouvons contribuer à leur bonheur, n'augmentons pas leurs misères" [let these Indians vegetate in peace, let us pity them, if their evils surpass ours, and if we cannot contribute to their happiness, let us not increase their miseries].⁴⁵ At the core of De Pauw's anti-American discourse, there was, in fact, a powerful anti-colonial sentiment that went against the implicitly colonialist conclusions of Rameau, Voltaire, and Buffon.⁴⁶

If one accepts to overlook for a minute his outrageous comments about the Native Americans and the Creoles, one realizes that his main ambition was to stir Europe away from its colonial pursuits. He regarded the discovery of America as a terrible mistake that had only brought misery to everyone: it had unleashed the scourge of smallpox (*la petite vérole*) onto the Native Americans, led to the deportation and enslavement of Africans, and brought syphilis (*le mal vénérien* or *la grande vérole*) to Europe.⁴⁷ He went

to great lengths to demonstrate that syphilis had come to Europe from America, concluding that "Ce qui prouve, sans réplique, que la peste vénérienne est née en Amérique, c'est la quantité de remèdes auxquels les peuples de ces contrées avaient eu recours pour en retarder les progrès extrêmes." [What proves beyond doubt that the venereal plague originated in America is the sheer number of remedies used by the people there to delay its extreme progress].⁴⁸ For him, syphilis was the proof and reason for America's corruption, American men's weakness, and American women's perversity.⁴⁹ The *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* were not illustrated, but one could imagine a painting such as Luca Giordano's *Youth Tempted by the Vices* (1664), also known as *Allegory of Syphilis*, serving as its frontispiece. The painting shows Minerva shielding a young man from the milk Venus squeezes from her breast to sprinkle on him while the shepherd Syphilis, recognizable by his baldness, lumps, and collapsed nose bridge, lies at his feet.⁵⁰ Knowing that, in the iconographic codes of the time, Venus's milk was used to represent venereal diseases endows De Pauw's vivid description of Native American women breastfeeding young men with some rather disturbing syphilitic connotations.⁵¹

While it is difficult to know precisely how many people suffered from syphilis in the 18th century, one estimates that about 20% of the London population aged 15-34 years were treated for syphilis.⁵² This figure gives us a sense of how prevalent syphilis was in Europe when de Pauw wrote his *Recherches*

⁴⁴ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 144.

⁴⁵ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, "discours préliminaire" a4.

⁴⁶ On De Pauw and globalization, see Ottmar Ette, "Archeologies of Globalization. European Reflections on Two Phases of Accelerated Globalization in Cornelius de Pauw, Georg Forster, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and Alexander von Humboldt," *Culture & History Digital Journal* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2012.003>.

⁴⁷ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 14-22. According to de Pauw, the disease was brought back to Europe by a friar named Buellio, who had accompanied Christopher Columbus to America. On the controversy regarding the origins of Syphilis and De Pauw's role in reviving the polemic in the 18th century, see

F. Guerra, "The Dispute over Syphilis. Europe versus America," *Clio Medica* 13, no. 1 (1978): 39-61, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004418257_004.

⁴⁸ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 22. For simplicity and clarity, I am using the term "syphilis," even though it was not the most prevalent then.

⁴⁹ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 18-20, 46-47, 56.

⁵⁰ The painting is housed at the Sädell Museum in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. See <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/youth-tempted-by-the-vices>. On the disease and its visual representations, see R. S. Morton, "Syphilis in Art: an Entertainment in Four Parts. Part 2," *Genitourinary Medicine* 66, no. 2 (1990): 112-23, <https://doi.org/10.1136/sti.66.2.112>; Margaret Healy, "Bronzino's London Allegory and the Art of Syphilis," *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (1997): 3-11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/20.1.3>; Christopher Pastore, "Fracastoro and the Holy Wood," *Confluence XXVII*, no. 2 (2021): <https://www.confluence-aglsp.org/xxvii2-cm7>.

⁵¹ Transmission of the disease through breastfeeding is documented in Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty, *Exposition anatomique des maux vénériens, sur les parties de l'homme et de la femme, et les remèdes les plus usités*. (Paris: J.-B. Brunet et Demonville, 1773), 2-3. I am grateful to the reviewer who provided me with this reference and many other interesting facts on the history of syphilis.

⁵² Simon Szreter and Kevin Siena, "The Pox in Boswell's London: an Estimate of the Extent of Syphilis Infection in the Metropolis in the 1770s," *The Economic History Review* 74, no. 2 (2021): 372-99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.13000>.



Figure 5. William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 3, The Inspection*. Ca. 1743. Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 90.8 cm. The National Gallery, London. Photo: Wikipedia.

philosophiques sur les Américains. Still, it does not allow us to grasp its visual impact on European society. Syphilis and its mercury treatment disfigured patients, giving them skin lesions and lumps and taking away their hair, teeth, and noses. Syphilitics used wigs, copper noses, velvet patches (*mouches*), masks, and make-up to hide the devastating effects of the disease, but these gimmicks fooled no one. William Hogarth's social satires give us a glimpse into the visual world of De Pauw's readers.⁵³ His 1743 *Marriage A-la-Mode* series illustrates how the disease spreads through society very well. As suggested by the black velvet patches on his neck and face, the young Vicomte brought syphilis as a wedding present to his bride. In the third tableau of the series, we see him take his young mistress and her

madame, whose face is covered with *mouches*, to *Docteur la pilule* to get some mercury since his pill box, placed without great subtlety between his legs, is empty (Fig. 5). While the sickness of the Vicomtesse is not part of the story, we know that she was also affected since their son suffers from congenital syphilis, as seen in the *mouche* on his face hiding a skin lesion, his sunken nasal bridge, and the braces used to support his legs, so we can imagine that she is also infected her lover.⁵⁴

Unsurprisingly, syphilis plays a more significant role in *A Harlot's Progress* (1731), which tells Moll's story from her arrival in London to her death from syphilis.⁵⁵ In the first plate, she is approached by

⁵³ R. S. Morton, "Syphilis in Art: an Entertainment in Four Parts. Part 3," *Genitourinary Medicine* 66, no. 3 (1990): 208-21, <https://doi.org/10.1136/sti.66.3.208>.

⁵⁴ On Hogarth's representation of congenital syphilis, see R. Bianucci and A. Perciacante, "The sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children': Congenital Syphilis and Leg Braces Pictorial Depiction in Eighteenth Century Britain," *European Journal of Internal Medicine* 35 (2016): e36-e37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejim.2016.06.036>.

⁵⁵ The original paintings, dating from 1731, were destroyed in a fire in 1755. The prints were engraved in 1732.



Figure 6. William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress*, plate 2, 1732. Engraving with etching, 31.8 x 39.1 cm (plate). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

a brothel keeper whose face is covered with black *mouches*. In the second plate, Moll is shown with a *mouche*, while her wealthy protector wears a wig, which might be as much a sign of his age as of his syphilis. As Moll descends into poverty and sickness, people around her show more and more visible symptoms of the disease, particularly her servant with her thick *mouches* and collapsed nose. Relying on Hogarth's depiction of 18th-century society, we can see how De Pauw's syphilitic vision of America would have resonated with his readers, many of whom might have suffered from the disease and would thus have been keen on blaming America for their misfortunes.

A Harlot's Progress is all the more interesting since it directly references the New World. In the first plate,

Hogarth represents a wagon of sick and aging prostitutes being deported to America, showing how Europe was shipping back its problems to America. In the second plate, which shows Moll's protector, the artist implied that the money allowing him to keep her as his mistress came from colonial trade with America by including colonial products, a monkey pet, and an enslaved black youth.⁵⁶ The image thus connects European moral and physical corruption with colonial trade and slavery (Fig. 6).

⁵⁶ Slavery was not allowed in England and France. Still, many colons brought back slaves from the Antillean colonies to serve them. Owing to their actual situation, it would be a euphemism to call them "servants." On the representation of Black people in Hogarth's work, see David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Catherine Molineux, "Hogarth's Fashionable Slaves: Moral Corruption in Eighteenth-Century London," *ELH* 72, no. 2 (2005): 495-520, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2005.0020>.

Like most of his contemporaries, De Pauw did not consider Africans highly. Still, in the same way as he believed that Europeans should leave the Native Americans alone, he thought they had no business enslaving Africans. He thus took aim at Las Casas, the beloved figure of the Enlightenment, for having masterminded the transfer of enslaved Africans to America to protect the Native Americans, scornfully showing how the missionaries' best intentions brought only more misery.⁵⁷ Laying the blame on the very principle of colonialism, which brought death to Americans, disease to Europeans, and slavery to Africans, he thus called to its end.⁵⁸ He concluded :

Les peuples lointains n'ont déjà que trop à se plaindre de l'Europe : elle a à leur égard, étrangement abusé de sa supériorité. Maintenant la prudence au défaut de l'équité, lui dit de laisser les Terres Australes en repos & de mieux cultiver les siennes. Si le génie de la désolation et des torrents de sang, précèdent toujours nos Conquérants, n'achetons pas l'éclaircissement de quelques points de Géographie par la destruction d'une partie du globe, ne massacrons pas les Papous, pour connaître au Thermomètre de Réaumur, le climat de la Nouvelle Guinée. [The distant peoples already have only too much to complain about Europe: it has strangely abused its superiority in their regard. Now prudence, in default of fairness, tells it to leave the Southern Lands at rest & to better cultivate its own. If the genius of desolation and torrents of blood always precede our Conquerors, let us not buy the clarification of a few points of Geography by the destruction of a part of the globe, let us not massacre the Papuans, in order to know, with Réaumur's Thermometer, the climate of New Guinea].⁵⁹

⁵⁷ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Vol. 1, 120-21. On these questions, see Brunstetter, *Tensions of Modernity: Las Casas and his Legacy in the French Enlightenment*, Chapter 5.

⁵⁸ On de Pauw as "one of the strictest anti-colonialists of his period," see Julian zur Lage, "An Armchair Scholar's World: Cornelius de Pauw and the Global Discourse of Historiography in the late Enlightenment," *Global Histories: A Student Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2015.37>.

⁵⁹ De Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, discours préliminaire a3-4.

Conclusion

While Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*, Voltaire's *Alzire et les Américains*, Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, and De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* concluded their engagement with America differently (happy ending, religious conversion, agricultural transformation, or global epidemics), these differences can be explained in great part by their different genres, storylines, and tones (entertaining, moralist, scientific, or polemical). Beyond these differences, however, they showcased a remarkably consistent vision of America's natural inferiority and Europe's colonial leadership. They all presented the Europeans as the only ones capable of fixing the different problems facing, in their eyes, America, be they its cultural backwardness, religious superstitions, or natural weakness. The only difference between Rameau, Voltaire, Buffon, and De Pauw is that the latter considered that the colonization and redemption of America were not worth the risk of being morally and physically corrupted by America and colonial commerce in general. However, his violent attacks against Europe's colonial enterprise demonstrate better than any possible praise of the system how much the idea of a colonial mission had become part of Europe's self-identity by the 1760s.

I would thus like to conclude this discussion of the construction of a European colonial identity within the context of the New World Debate with Nicolas Largillière's *Portrait du planteur* (18th century; Fig. 7), as it seems to encompass the different aspects of Europe's self-image our discussion uncovered and encapsulate them in one image. As Rameau's *Indes Galantes*, the painting presented its viewers with a hierarchical vision of humanity, with the *sauvages* of America lying half-naked in the dark background of history and the European master, dressed in white, sitting in its spotlight. As Voltaire's *Alzire et les Américains*, the painting could be read as calling on its European public to raise non-Europeans from their backwardness to the happiness of (European) civilization. As Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*, *Portrait du planteur* displayed a bipartite and asymmetric vision of the world,



Figure 7. Nicolas de Largillière, *Portrait du planteur*, early 18th century. Oil on canvas, 126 x 100 cm (with frame). Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine. Photo© Musée d'Aquitaine.

where Europe's superiority does not result from the superiority of its natural environment but from its inhabitants' ability to domesticate animals, farm the land, and exploit people's labor; hence Europeans' quasi-moral obligation to take charge of the American land and its people. Finally, as De Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, Largillière's painting could be seen as alerting viewers to the dark aspects of European colonization and

the corrupting consequences of a growingly global, colonial world.

As such, Largillière's *Portrait du planteur* appears as a truly European image, embodying a common European identity that emerged in the context of the New World debate and brought Europeans together around the conviction of their superiority over Americans and responsibility in civilizing America.