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INTRODUCTION

The Unsettlement of the World

In the early 1520s, a reader of a 1505 Latin edition of Amerigo Vespucci's famous letter "On the New World" added a handwritten note, also in Latin, with a spectacular new world update: the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés has lately conquered the capital of the Chinese empire. On May 30, 1521, the note reports, Cortés laid siege to Quinsay (the Southern Song capital Hangzhou, which had been effusively described by Marco Polo), "also known as Temixtitam or the City of Heaven, most famous trading capital of eastern Asia, also much esteemed by the Venetians, and finally subdued on the 13th of August after the siege had gone on 75 days."¹ Temixtitam was a common European spelling for the Mexica capital Tenochtitlan. Although Cortés himself never claimed it, the idea that Tenochtitlan was a Chinese capital and Moctezuma a Chinese emperor persisted for decades in authoritative European maps and publications (fig. 1.1).

Amerasia as a Meeting Place

This book studies the long record of a new world spanning Asia and America, in geographical conceptions, military campaigns, ethnographic inquiries, travel accounts, collecting practices, pictures and allegories, and the whole European imaginary produced and propagated by all these practices. We call this imaginary Amerasia, a neologism that serves as a meeting place for the consideration of a wide array of period sources that might otherwise remain disparate oddities or simply local phenomena. We also use it as an embankment against the extremely powerful view that from the time of Columbus's "discovery of America" Europe revealed the new world and thus led the whole world into the modern future. We present instead a protracted and unsettled process of European self-orientation that unfolded over two centuries after the explorations of Columbus and Vespucci. Europe in this account is emphatically not the center of the world and not yet in a commanding position in the world, but emerges as an unrelenting generator of a world imaginary, in

maps, travel accounts, epic poems, collecting practices, and images of all kinds. We propose that Amerasia was a major axis around which this world imaginary was configured, an unsettled zone where east meets west, modernity folds into antiquity, and otherness, whether conceived in strictly antipodal terms or not, is always self-implicating. Amerasia was above all a geographic construction in continual redefinition, and so served as a reflection of Europe's own unsettling as it went through its own process of identity formation, provoked in good part by the intensive awareness that its own position in the world and in history was being radically redefined. The meeting place of Amerasia gives some structure to this less familiar story, one that it is now possible to hear.

A round feather mosaic now in Vienna was brought from Mexico to Europe probably as early as 1520 (fig. 1.2). Now recognized as a Mexica shield made around 1500, its imagery is still in debate, the fierce animal in bright blue feathers identified by some scholars as an *ahuitzotl*, a legendary, spiny, dog-like beast that lures people to their death in the water, while other scholars point out that the furriness of this figure is at odds with the *ahuitzotl*'s traditional smoothness. Many believe it represents a fox, a symbol of war and an animal revered by Mexica warriors as well as by the *amantecas* or featherworkers who made these objects. In the earliest European inventories, however, from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the animal is described as a dragon. No inventory ventured to say where the work originated until 1788, when it was said to be a parasol from China, an origin story perhaps informed by the long-held view that it depicted a dragon. It is likely that the feather roundel was believed to be Chinese long before 1788. Over the nineteenth century, the origin of the piece was changed to "Indian" and then "Ancient Mexican."²

There are many other such examples. A Mexica obsidian mirror, also in Vienna, was described as Chinese as late as the nineteenth century.³ A Mixtec manuscript now in Vienna was given to Pope Clement VII sometime in the 1520s and was described not long after as being from "south India," *India Meridionalis*, which referred not to the southern tip of what today is called the subcontinent of India but rather to an imagined peninsula to the east even of the Malay peninsula — a new world so far to the east that it is shown in period maps to be not many degrees of longitude from America. In the 1679 catalogue of the Imperial Library of Vienna the Vienna Codex crowns the collection as the last item, concluding a list of the library's *Orientalia*.⁴ Another Mixtec manuscript now in Bologna was called a "book from India" in the 1530s, then by the middle of the seventeenth century became a "book from China," and then in 1677 was described as a book with "hieroglyphs from Mexico." Provenances could



1.2 Chinese, Indian, or Mexican? Chimalli (shield), 70 cm in diameter, feathers, gold leaf, cotton fibers, leather, and reed (ca. 1500). Vienna, Weltmuseum.

shift in the other direction, when what we identify as Asian objects were classed as American, as when a piece of Japanese armor was described as a “shield of Moctezuma,” or a Javanese *kris*, a figured sword handle, was taken as a Taíno household god or *zemi*.⁵

The Amerasian imaginary studied in this book yields a plethora of such cases of what appears to be geographical and cultural-historical confusion, over more than two centuries: Columbus identifying and naming cannibals on the basis of old tales of Asian human-eating races (chapter 1), the inclusion of east Asia in the cartography of the “new world” (chapter 2), Amerasian Magi (chapter 3), the island of Columbus’s first colony (Hispaniola, called Haiti by the locals) identified with Japan (chapter 4), representations of Asian populations arrayed in Brazilian Tupi feather gear

(chapters 5 and 12), Cuban crocodiles taken to be Asian snakes described by Polo (chapter 6), Mangi (Polo's name for southern China) identified with Mexico (chapter 7), islands of California rich in "Oriental pearls" (chapter 8), serious discussion about whether the female warrior tribes of Brazil were the same as the Scythian Amazons described in antiquity (chapter 9), and about whether the eastern biblical emporium Ophir was Peru (chapter 10), theories of the ancient discovery of America by the Chinese (chapter 11), the reuse of the very same images to represent cannibals of Java and cannibals of the Caribbean; or to represent Indians in colonial Jamestown and Indians of the Mughal empire (chapter 12); the presentation of evidence that American Indian tribes originated in the lost tribes of Israel, and that early Christians had found their way to the Americas (chapter 13), the discovery of an ancient Egyptian root system connecting Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican cultures (chapter 14), the investing of the allegorical figure of America with Asian attributes (chapters 15 and 16), and finally the very real transformation of Mexico and the material culture of New Spain by imports and immigration from Asia (chapter 17).

This collaborative project began a number of years ago as an informal and then ongoing exchange of examples of Amerasian thinking that cropped up here and there in the secondary literature and in primary sources. As the examples piled up, what at first seemed like glitches in knowledge or curious episodes began to look more like possible applications of shared premises. As patterns started to emerge in the evidence, we found ourselves letting go of the old idea, still routinely found in the literature, that Columbus's erroneous belief that he had reached the Indies was soon dispelled — that the confusion was cleared up by Vespucci's "new world" letter of 1502, or by Martin Waldseemüller's naming of America in 1507, or by the humanist Peter Martyr's collection of writings "on the new world" (*De orbe novo*), or by the circumnavigation of the globe by Ferdinand Magellan's crew in 1520–22, or by the regular crossing of the Pacific by the Manila merchant galleons after 1565, or by the depiction of America as a fourth (or fifth) part of the world from the later sixteenth century on. Digging into these episodes and their consequences, we found that each supposed turning point in fact generated more Amerasian speculation — theories about migration, biblical interpretation, geographical extrapolations, as well as the kind of speculation that funded expeditions in search of Asian riches. As the evidence grew, it became necessary to coordinate the information from different arenas — accounts of exploration, map-making, collecting practices, natural-historical treatises, historical accounts, poetic works, and visual representations in various media — so as to develop a sense of how the world came into view at specific times and places, and

eventually to trace basic arcs of development over decades and centuries, even while respecting the differences among locales.

The result is the present study, organized as a series of short chapters in roughly chronological sequence, each focused on a particular object or set of objects — maps, artifacts, images, books — that crystallize Amerasian thinking at particular junctures of European culture. The objects or cluster of objects bring into view the Amerasian imaginary as it took shape in specific settings ranging from Brazil and Portugal, Peru, Mexican New Spain, and Spain, various centers in Italy, German-speaking and Netherlandish publishing hubs, and the French and English realms. Given the range of materials and centers of production, this book cannot be much more than a preliminary cabinet display of the phenomenon, sketching the trajectory of a worldview while at the same time offering some sense of the texture of specific ventures in image-crafting, cartography, exploration, history-writing, collecting, and, generally, “worldmaking.” The chapters proceed from the initial reception of Columbus’s first journey through to the eighteenth century, with an Epilogue that considers the revival (or persistence?) of Amerasian ideas into the present time. An Afterword by Timothy Brook offers a brief analysis of corresponding views of the world from the Chinese side.

Beyond Exoticism

When dealing with a phenomenon as expansive and unwieldy as Amerasia, the skeptical questions continually arise: Was this not mostly negligence? Were they not just mixing up various things that seemed above all remote? Is this confusion not due, first, to empirical error (faulty geographical and cultural knowledge), and, second, to exoticist indifference about far-away places? This basic skepticism has become fairly standard in the field, gaining new strength in recent years as scholars aim to expose Eurocentrism and provincialize Europe. One is reminded of Saul Steinberg’s 1976 map-illustration “View of the World from Ninth Avenue,” where beyond Tenth Avenue is the Hudson river and a strip of New Jersey, beyond which is an undifferentiated expanse marked by places like Kansas, Nebraska, and Las Vegas in rough relation to each other, with Mexico and Canada to either side, beyond them the Pacific Ocean, and on the horizon in the distance low undifferentiated mounds labeled Japan, China, and Russia. If this is how early modern Europeans looked at the world from their parlors and studies and taverns and churches, then why should the Amerasian axis be singled out as particularly coherent or consequential?

Our answer is that Europe in the sixteenth century was in fact not much like Saul Steinberg’s 1970s New York. The inhabitants of Europe

were not yet certain of their centrality in the world, and at the same time they were deeply informed about the shape of the Asian old world, and deeply invested in stories about how the movements out of Asia had produced their own culture. Legends of different kinds insistently told them that their origins as humans lay in the earthly paradise at the eastern limit of the world, or in the Noachic repopulation of the world after the Flood. History was then reshaped by the birth and death of Jesus in the Levant and the sending of the Apostles over the surface of the world from there, bringing the Christian religion to the Latin West, where churches, images, and spiritual tracts in turn continually oriented Latin Christians back towards the Holy Land in the east. All understood that the Egyptian and Greek worlds grounded Roman civilization, which in turn embraced the eastern Christian religion. In an eastward return, the Roman capital was moved to a city named Constantinople after the first Christian emperor, and now the seat of a highly authoritative Christian Church with its own liturgies and hierarchy, an eastern Church that virtually every Latin Christian had to concede was closer to the original sources and forms of Christian life. On a more practical level, many of the things that gave flavor, color, and meaning to the lives of people living in the western peninsula known as Europe came from the east—spices, silks, jewels, some of the finest pigments, most technical and scientific knowledge, as well as many of the inherited stories. The medieval Latin West was on the margins of the known world and knew itself to be on the margins, looking across time and space towards various eastern centers. It came naturally to Latins (later known as Europeans) to see culture, religion, and history as the result of flows of people, materials, artifacts, and ideas.

Europeans brought to their encounters with what they called new worlds a robust ability to see human reality as a dynamic and ongoing layering of spatial and temporal relations. The encounter with territories and peoples that the ancient authorities knew only imperfectly or not at all brought the shape of the world and thus the meaning of history newly and urgently into question, an unsettling of knowledge that provoked significant efforts of reordering. Europeans did not give up on their tendency to organize global reality in meaningful terms, even if their efforts remained provisional and open-ended for decades and centuries. A number of basic cosmological paradigms—primary among them the zonal/climatic organization of the world by latitude and the robust and extensible idea of India beyond the Ganges (both explained in chapter 1)—came into effective use, with the result that Amerasia emerged as a salient cultural-geographical configuration, in fact a primary laboratory for studying how far cultures can travel and how similarity

can be articulated over a range of difference. This basic configuration was consistently sustained by the widespread cultural habit of applying the term “new world” to both east Asian and American territories (as explained in chapter 2).

The debate rages among historians over how important a role Europe played globally in the early modern period, but none doubt that Europeans played an extraordinarily active and influential part in the technology of *depicting* the world. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a veritable industry of map-making and global imagery arose in Europe, a world-picturing activity whose impact was soon felt around the world. Just as images of outer space — of the solar system and galaxies — have coalesced into a common if variable iconography over the last fifty years, Europe in the sixteenth century generated a constellation of images of “the world” in maps, in poems and narratives, and in works of visual art, making “worldmaking” a ubiquitous cultural practice in the early modern period.⁶

If viewed with modern maps and modern cultural-geographical categories in mind, Amerasian connections and mergings look like meaningless jumbles. It seems as if features or artifacts from one locale have been decontextualized and fairly arbitrarily thrown into association with things from other far away places. It looks like exoticism. According to Peter Mason, the free and highly variable use of features originally drawn from American life, such as feather garments, in European images of Asians and Africans reveals an exoticist taste for foreignness that was largely indifferent to provenance.⁷ We propose that there was no strict sense of American origin because the place America was not in focus in the modern sense; it was strongly and persistently associated with Asia, sometimes through Africa. According to Amerasian logic, there was every reason to imagine that feathers might be worn by a hunter in Brazil as well as by a fisherman in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the category of the “exotic” itself has a history; it was not a ready-made cultural predisposition, available at all times. Almost unknown in the sixteenth century, the word “exotic” came into more frequent use in the seventeenth century as a technical term to designate nonnative botanical species. Only at the very end of the seventeenth century and more commonly in the eighteenth century was it employed in the modern, cultural sense to mean “coming from far away and looking strange.”⁸

Rather than dating a European taste for exoticism from the period of Columbus and Bartolomeu Dias, or even from later decades, we propose a now largely forgotten “pre-exoticist” model that dominated European representational practices during the sixteenth and most of the

seventeenth centuries. In this phase, provenance was configured according to consistent early modern geographic and cosmological principles that organized multiple levels of cultural practice — from maps and globes (studied throughout this book), to representations of new world flora and fauna (chapters 5, 8, and 14), to biblical criticism (chapters 3, 7, and 13), to the narrative structure of travel accounts (chapter 6), to the figuring of the parts of the world (chapter 16), to the organization and inventorying of European collections (chapters 12 and 17). These principles and the institutions they underwrote sustained the Amerasian view. If one begins with preconceived ideas about place based on modern geographical models — where America is America and Asia is Asia — then it will certainly seem as if early modern people assigned objects to the wrong places, implying a culture of exoticism and an indifference to where things came from. Perhaps future research will demonstrate that Europeans gradually layered new routines of exoticism on top of Amerasian thinking, in the end burying the Amerasian idea altogether. When the exoticizing process happened, it did so unevenly; our final chapters explore how strains of Amerasian thought continued to shape ideas about global geography well into the eighteenth century. This is not to say that terms were never used loosely or that basic errors were not made (about geography, or about where a given object or cultural form or material originated), but rather than see them as the default setting we propose that errors or indifference were the exception, and that efforts to use terms and assign provenances in meaningful and reasoned ways were the norm.

Let us take a few examples of how the evidence can be read in period terms. On most sixteenth-century maps, the water on the far side of Mexico was designated not as the Pacific but as the traditional Southern Sea, *Mar de Sur*, which was known to border on China, a body of water sometimes represented as a gulf in a world that did not know the Bering Strait. In some important sixteenth-century maps and treatises, Mexico is in fact a province of China, meaning that it was not a laughable error to identify a Mixtec manuscript or a piece of Mexica featherwork as Chinese. If, alternatively, China is understood as “Upper India” (*India superior*) and America is understood as an eastern extension of the Indian sphere (whether as *India meridionalis*, *India orientalis*, *India nova*, or *India extra Gangem*), as we routinely find in geographical treatises and maps of the period, then it is not wild flailing to change the provenance of such an item from Chinese to Indian, but, rather, a prudent reassignment of the object from the subregion of China to larger India, the macro-geographical category. Later, in the seventeenth century, after a well-established transpacific trade had produced intensive cultural exchanges

between Asia and America and new interactivity within the subregions of Asia and America, and as objects from all these regions came back to Europe in merged streams, there were very good reasons for provenances to mingle in new ways in European collections and accounts.

The Tools We Hold

The set of relations we are bringing together under the term Amerasia are in fact highly various and unsystematic. We might think of them as a spectrum or range, though even that is too neat a model. In some cases, as when maps identify Haiti as Japan, we have a relation of *identity*: this place is in fact the Asian island described by Polo. In other cases, as when Columbus or Vespucci imagine themselves not far from the earthly paradise or when Bartolomé de Las Casas considers the Spanish Indies “the last part of what in antiquity was called India,” we are dealing with an idea of *extension*: this place, hitherto unknown, is an extension of lands described in the Bible or in other ancient sources. In other cases, as when Lorenzo Pignoria interprets both Japanese and Mexica culture as part of an ancient Egyptian diaspora, or José de Acosta understands the American Indians to be descendants of Asians, we have a relation of *derivation*: this place was settled long ago by Asian immigrants, who brought with them their wisdom traditions and language forms. In yet other cases, as when a Mexican painter imagines feathers on the inhabitants of India, or the inhabitants of the east and west Indies are typified above all by their nudity, we have a relation of *association*: these people inhabit climatically similar latitudes, with many shared flora and fauna, and thus are bound to exhibit strong similarities. At the farthest extreme of Amerasian thinking, as when Michel de Montaigne compares the “cannibals” of Brazil to the Scythian warriors of antiquity, we have relations of *analogy*: we know these are distant places and peoples, yet they are comparable in their habits, culture, and morals. In some cases, for example when Asian and American objects are presented side by side at the imperially sponsored convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, all of them labeled “Indian,” it is in fact difficult to know whether the relation was understood to be one of identity, or extension, or derivation, or mere association.

The point is not to try to refine or firm up this admittedly loose typology, as if it could be made to correspond, finally, with the ways people actually thought in the past. Even in the same location and at the same date, one person might see identity where another sees only association, and even a single individual could be inconsistent, sliding up or down the scale of possibilities without ever resolving the question in a given case. Insofar as they thought of it at all, the new-world phenomenon

was for Europeans most often an experience of this range of possibilities, with no resolution. To imagine such a range is above all a heuristic tool, for the benefit of present-day scholars and readers, helping us to see relations among period expressions that might otherwise fall apart into odd anecdotes.

Heuristic tools, like the neologism Amerasia or the typology of associations just outlined, are helpful because they are not so easily confused with period tools. However, in many areas of the study of early modern world-making confusion between our tools and theirs is rife. As we have already seen, the terms Mexico or America or India or new world, although exactly the same as the ones modern scholars use, were used in different contexts and with different meanings in the early modern period. The same goes for the term continent, so often used by modern historians of cartography. The early modern use of the word continent, a descriptive term referring to the geological fact of a landmass that is not an island, most certainly does not map onto the modern use of that term.⁹ Then there are all the terms that are no longer common, such as “torrid zone” or “part of the world” (*pars mundi*), and are essential to this story. As used in the period, all of these terms—both the ones we do and don’t use today—are foreign to modern geographical thinking yet fundamental to Amerasian views of the world. Metageographical concepts are highly effective, then and now; the main thing is to be clear about which are ours and which theirs.

Likewise, to plot Columbus’s or other explorers’ voyages on modern maps, so that we see travel lines that land in the Caribbean or Brazil, with Asia nowhere to be seen, is to reinforce an unhelpful historical telescoping according to which Columbus brought into being the world we now inhabit. The 1507 map by the Dutch cosmographer Johannes Ruysch (see fig. 4.12) offers a better guide to inhabiting the world we are trying to understand, as does the 1507 map by Waldseemüller (see fig. 2.7), the one that names America for the first time, if it is considered carefully as a whole. So long as the period accounts are set into the coordinates of modern geography, they will seem full of mistakes, confections, and confusions. To bring Amerasia into view, therefore, is to encounter resistance built into the modern methods and tools used to study it, a resistance that goes deeper than the question of toponymic description. The modern organization of historical study by field areas, themselves derived from modern metageographical models, is structurally predisposed to misrecognize Amerasian associations as confusions, often quaint or humorous, or just embarrassing glitches soon to be dispelled. Confusion implies that one thing has been mistaken for another; but what if we are dealing with a world before the separation that would make such confusions possible?

We propose that the confusion was not theirs, but between one set of models and tools and another.

Amerasia is hardly the only unwieldy geocultural formation created by the European imagination. Various large geocultural formations organize and shape perceptions of the world today, both in the popular imagination and in academic studies. Unlike ones still in use, such as Africa, Amerasia is simply a formation that has fallen out of use, remaining only in traces here and there. Despite its many subregions and widely varying linguistic and material cultures, Africa remains a powerfully unifying construct, a testament to the power of an ancient Greco-Roman metageographical concept enshrined by modern European colonial, administrative, and educational institutions. In the late medieval and early modern worlds, the regions along the arc of the Niger River, the heavily forested lands of the Congo Basin, and the Islamic commercial sultanates of the Swahili coast did not conceive of themselves as parts of a singular geographic entity; the modern conception of Africa arises from the era of European colonial partition of these territories in the second half of the nineteenth century. Metageographical thinking did not begin with the nineteenth-century categories. It was alive and well in the sixteenth century, but the categories were different. The emergent macro-category in that period was the “new world,” which stretched from the newly encountered territories in Asia to those across the Atlantic, a new world that was presented in many period publications as fully half of the world—180 degrees of the globe’s 360. The thirst for travel accounts and images of the newly encountered peoples, the new collections of artifacts from the Indies, the industry of cosmographies and world maps—all these new cultural expressions constituted the emergent sixteenth-century field of “new world studies.”

With the Amerasian macro-category in place as an organizing tool, apparent anomalies can be recast as applications of forms of knowledge. Rather than say that the Venetian mapmaker Giovanni Francesco Camocio “placed the American toponym of *Tuchiano* in Asia,” implying that Camocio needed to move it to do so, we say, “Camocio shows us that *Tuchiano* is in Asia.” Rather than describe the Pacific Ocean in the Amerasian world as “dramatically shrunken,” or even call it the Pacific, or even call it an ocean, to stay close to the historical sources is to allow, as the case suggests, that it was not an ocean but a sea, or perhaps the waters of an archipelago. Rather than fixing a body of water with the modern term such as the Caribbean, which places it on a modern map far from Asia, we allow it to be the South China Sea, or the Sea of the Indies, as the sources suggest. In these ways, rediscovering Amerasia demands a persistent recalibration of our perceptions, senses, and language.

If Amerasia suspends and exposes the modern myth of continents, therefore, it is not because it simply stitches together the continents of America and Asia as constituted by modern geography. Rather, it resolves the world into a thoroughly non-modern configuration, one that, for example, occasionally drew Africa into the Amerasian formation. As Europeans sought out new routes to Goa and Calicut in the wake of the voyage of Vasco da Gama, all European seaborne traffic to India moved along the African coast, pulling Africa into the relationship between Europe and India. The administrative affairs of Portuguese trade with Africa were managed by the Casa da Guiné, which was renamed Casa da Índia e da Guiné (and then often shortened to Casa da Índia) after the circumnavigation of Africa by Vasco da Gama in 1497 established a sea route to India. Ships returning to Lisbon were filled with items from a variety of ports in Portuguese nodes in Indian Ocean trade networks, yet the goods unloaded there, including goods from both India and Africa, that were sent on for sale throughout Europe were registered as having arrived generically from the Estado da Índia, an identifier that very likely colored their provenance from then onward.¹⁰

Apart from the administrative paper trail, there were cartographic and cosmographic reasons for occasionally associating Africa both with India and South America. On medieval *mappaemundi*, the Indian Ocean is minimized and Ethiopia and India are pressed together. Europeans alternatively located Prester John in both Ethiopia and India, and when in August of 1441 missions of the Patriarch of Alexandria came to Florence from the Ethiopian Convent of Jerusalem, these people were considered “Indians from Greater India sent by Prester John.”¹¹ Africa, metonymically represented by Ethiopia, was a hinge that could be associated with both Asia and America, an Ethiopian liability that goes back as far as Homer, who in the opening words of the *Odyssey* spoke of the Ethiopians who inhabited both the westernmost and the easternmost parts of the world.¹² Though we do not explore this phenomenon in depth here, we bring out African elements in Amerasian thinking wherever the sources make it evident, even as we acknowledge that the relations need to be understood better.

Amerasia is not the only instance of a geographic-cultural formation that is foreign to modern thinking. Pierre Schneider has explored the pervasive conflation of Ethiopia and India in ancient Greco-Roman thought.¹³ Similarly, the art historian Byron Hamann encourages us to see both sides of the early modern Atlantic as a “Mediterratlantic” space.¹⁴ Ricardo Padrón has explored an early modern “transpacific” space, the idea that the Spanish conceived of the coasts of Asia and America and the sea in between them as one continuous world. Padrón’s interests are

close to ours, with the difference that his study is focused on Spanish imperial ideology; we propose that Amerasian thinking developed broadly throughout Europe, in diverse ways and for a variety of reasons.

Interactivity and Unsettling

Amerasia is not merely a Western idea imposed on other realities. It is an emergent matrix for understanding the world that unfolded out of exchanges—verbal, material, artifactual—with the communities and lands encountered by Europeans during the period that began with the Portuguese voyages to Africa and Columbus’s voyages across the ocean. As the very first images of Columbus’s 1492–93 voyage make clear (see chapter 1), the islanders he encountered revealed, so it appeared to him, a world held together by water-based transportation and trade, in strong contrast to the primarily landmass-based trade of the traditional *oikoumene* and the Silk Road. The Portuguese encountered similarly connected maritime worlds in the Indian ocean and the Indonesian archipelago beyond Malacca. A new, water-based reality, made evident by the way Native inhabitants used and made sense of their environments, soon came to dominate Western conceptions of global expansion (in stark comparison to Ming China, as Brook’s Afterword explores in this volume), and this vision then transformed European understandings of antiquity. In the wake of the new world explorations European commentators reimagined an ancient world connected by water and thus extending into the new world. Even after crossing the body of water to the west of Mexico, and in part because they crossed it, Europeans could now imagine contacts spanning Asia and America that had occurred in the ancient past and that had already shaped the cultures they were encountering (see chapters 3, 5, and 14). Early modern navigation not only made certain discoveries possible; it introduced a conceptual shift away from the traditional Ptolemaic land-mass model of human habitation and migration.¹⁵

Amerasia could not have arisen without the constant interaction with Indigenous communities and voices. Although these communities were decimated and their voices were suppressed if not silenced, they had a significant role to play in shaping European ideas about specific territories and about the world altogether during this period.¹⁶ Their voices—literally the sounds they made—informed Amerasian thinking from the moment they responded to the inevitable questions the strange visitors asked on first encounter: What is the name of this place? What is the name of your ruler? Are there more powerful kingdoms farther on? Where does the metal you are wearing come from? What is the name of this fruit? The new arrivals would listen intently to what came out of the

mouths of the natives of the place, hoping and expecting to hear echoes of names contained in biblical, mythological, or ancient lore. As we will see in chapter 1, when the inhabitants of Haiti, renamed Hispaniola by Columbus, spoke of a place called Cibao that had gold, the navigator heard the word Cipangu, or Japan, an island off the coast of Asia that Polo had said was rich in gold.

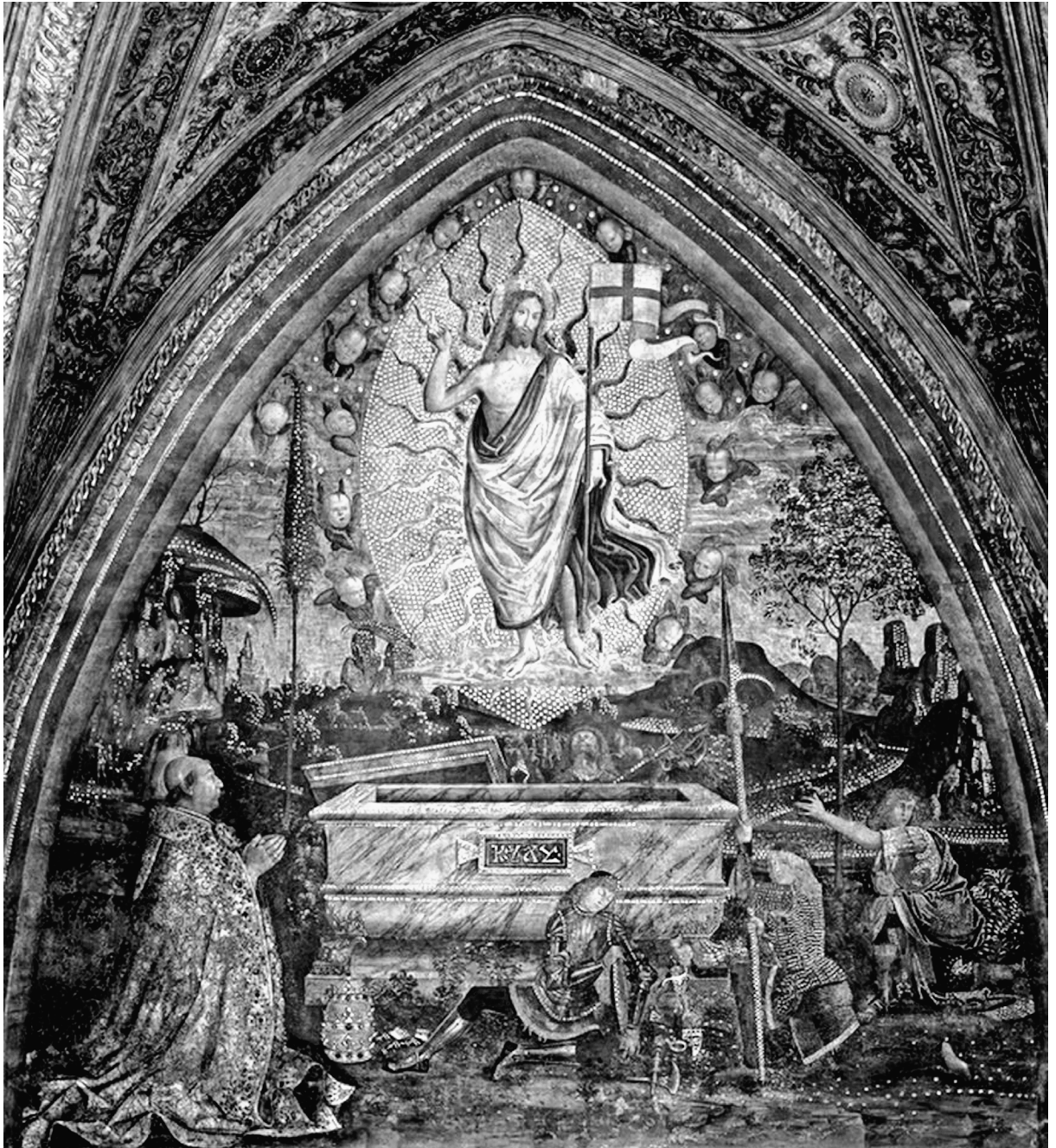
For these reasons, this book adopts Indigenous place names (insofar as they are known) when describing episodes of first contact, in an effort to gain some access to the “acoustemology” of first encounters.¹⁷ For further stages of interaction and colonization, we adopt the toponyms, sometimes more than one for the same place, used by period actors and mapmakers as territories entered a wider discourse, a discourse that registered Indigenous place names and terminology even as colonization progressed and European renamings piled up. As a result, readers of this book will occasionally be thrown off their modern global positioning systems, coming closer to the disorientation and unclarity felt by soldiers, missionaries, and settlers, as well as by the writers and compilers of accounts and by the readers they found both in Europe and in European colonies in different parts of the world.

To emphasize dialogue is not to claim that these early modern encounters produced understanding and harmonious exchange. The interactions that informed the Amerasian matrix began under conditions of invasion and then continued to unfold as Native communities faced persecution and institutionalized oppression. Pressed for information about the surrounding geography and resources, and about their beliefs and traditions, their responses jolted European frameworks of understanding, or evaded them, or in flashes of apparent understanding seemed to illuminate them.¹⁸ Nonetheless, these were multidirectional exchanges.¹⁹ The utterances, habitus, and lifeworld of Indigenous populations confronted Europeans in the sounds of their worldscape, in the astonishing products of their artisans, in their knowledge and use of their environment, in the pathways of their trade networks, in their aquatic imaginary, cosmovisions, and origin legends, in their radically different social structures, and in the survival strategies they elaborated in response to invasion. The invaders and settlers found themselves, in the words of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, confronted by the fact of possible other worlds, ones whose consequences were being drawn out in their own experience of them and the effect of these encounters on their own thinking.²⁰

This dialogue did not subside quickly, and Amerasia did not disappear within years or decades as telescoping modern narratives would have it. It was a major organizing paradigm of the world for two centuries, accompanying and possibly enabling the rise of Europe as an idea. The

eighteenth century did see a definitive shift to a modern understanding of global geography, in part as a result of the voyages of Vitus Bering and James Cook, in part due to advances in the European understanding of longitude, though the sense of a special relationship between America and Asia persisted well into the nineteenth century (see the Epilogue). Amerasia subsided as colonialism came into its modern form, as disciplines for the study of “Oriental” cultures and literatures and, later, of Native American cultures were established; as the European myth of continents came into resolution and as modern geography as taught by Europeans reshaped understandings of the earth; and as western museums organized the productions of world cultures according to European categories. J. Jorge Klor de Alva has warned against projecting these later colonialist models of geography and history onto the early modern period.²¹ Against the view that would present this period as an early stage of the colonialist era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hamann has proposed to see the earlier encounters, incursions, and colonizations in their alterity — “an alien, violent, connected world.”²²

Amerasia is an array of signs pointing to an unsettling, a field of unsettling. The various and wide-ranging applications of the idea of “new world” in the Amerasian centuries are repeated admissions that all of this — this land, these resources, these objects, these people — are part of something else: Asia is larger and even more various than we thought; or rather, this may be part of Asia, but only if we adapt our idea of Asia; or, it is just something else that needs to be understood in relation to what we thought we knew. The cohesive yet malleable Amerasian view allowed this shifting and unsettling to unfold. It held space for the thinking of margins and extremes: India beyond the Ganges, the new world, the torrid zone that turns out to be inhabited, the antipodes, the vicinity of paradise, utopia. The imaginary of Amerasia was populated but migratory; it was in play. It reflected Europe’s own unsettling, caused by having come to recognize that there are other worlds. Ultimately, Amerasia brought home the truth that the new world was not this or that newly encountered territory but in fact the whole world, now coming into a new configuration and a new interconnectedness, with unknown consequences for the understanding of both the past and the future. Amerasia was an index of the unsettling of the world.



1.1 In the distance, under the golden blaze of the resurrected Christ, one of the first European representations of the people encountered by Christopher Columbus. Pinturicchio, *Resurrection of Christ*, fresco (1494–95). Vatican City, Borgia Apartments.

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