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Politicizing Aesthetics

The Politics of Violence and Sexuality in Colonial and Revolutionary Representations of America as an Indian Woman

The aim of this paper is to explore the changing aesthetic and ideological connotations of the representation of America as an Indian woman in the sixteenth-century engravings of the discovery and conquest of the New World and the late-eighteenth-century political cartoons of America's national conflict and eventual secession from mother England. In both cases, the male enterprise of colonization and nation-making is aesthetically expressed in the fetishistic and symbolic representation of the female body as the simultaneously alluring and devouring female, seductively naked before the white male European, and as the victim of political violence and the national struggle for independence.

By looking into the 16th-century prints of America and the scene of its discovery and the political cartoons at the time of the American Revolution, it has been tempting to explore the changing iconographic and ideological patterns of the image of the American female Indian and how these patterns eventually become closely linked to the construction of a distinctly American national identity. In both cases, the transition into the New World order involves the symbolic substitution of a woman's body for the male national project. The figure of the female Indian, which is either "very definitely dis-covered"¹ by the European colonizers, or forcefully claimed by the American revolutionaries against the oppressive subjugation of mother England, stands for the New World, a point of mythical, "divine" and "privileged" origin, a site where a national narrative of discovery,

1. Peter Hulme, "Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality and Mobility in Early Colonial Discourse," in *Europe and Its Others*, eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, Diana Loxley (Colchester: U of Essex, 1985), Vol. 2, 17–32, p. 17.

expansion, and progress is to be inscribed.² Underlying this idea, however, is the essential discrepancy between myth and reality, between the myth of colonization and its supposed civilizational power and the reality of conquest and the cultural uncertainty it entails; and, in the case of the political cartoons, between the mythical patterns of the revolutionary rhetoric of republicanism and regeneration and the violence of social upheaval and disruption.

More specifically, in the first pictorial representations of America,³ the female Indian woman, both seductive in her nakedness and threatening in her savagery, embodies questions of power and violence, fantasy, desire, and difference. Drawing on a long tradition of male travel narrative and imagination, these images feature a feminized new land available for male exploration and possession.⁴ In the majority of the 16th-century European prints and paintings, the figure of America is shaped

2. I have borrowed the terms “divine” and “privileged” origin from Edward Said, who makes a most interesting distinction between beginning and origin. See Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p. xiii.

3. Stephen Greenblatt is essentially sceptical regarding a collective account of European representations of America and wonders whether we can “legitimately speak of ‘the European practice of representation’? There were profound differences among the national cultures and religious faiths of the various European voyagers, differences that decisively shaped both perceptions and representations” (Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992], p. 8). It seems to me, however, that all these differences Greenblatt is so rightly concerned about fade away before the striking massive cultural difference between “self” and “other,” “civilized” and “savage,” “colonizer” and “colonized.” And, as Anthony Pagden has argued, “throughout much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans had failed to make very much distinction between different types, and for their heuristic purposes, to speak as if all Amerindians lived in the same condition as the North American, Caribbean or Brazilian tribes” (Anthony Pagden, “Shifting Antinomies: European Representations of the American Indian Since Columbus,” in *Visions of America Since 1492*, ed. Deborah L. Madsen [New York: St. Martin’s, 1994], 23–34, p. 30). For colonial and early American texts, see Carla Mulford ed., *Early American Writings* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

4. From Sir Walter Raleigh’s famous description of Guiana as a country that “hath her maidenhead yet,” to the frontispiece of one of the greatest atlases of the 16th-century which described the figure of America as “the nymph in the embrace of gentle love,” the feminization of the land had been a dominant metaphor in the 16th and 17th-century writing, art, and cartography. For more information, see Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), and Louis Montrose, “The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery,” *Representations* 33 (1991) 1–41.

as much by the power of the imagination as by the multiple interpretations of the actual experience of the colonial encounter.⁵ In most cases, America is depicted as a recumbent woman completely nude with a feather headdress, a bow and arrows. This dominant image, which persisted until the mid-18th century, almost invariably accentuates the erotic qualities of the allegorical figure of America and projects a combination of as many, usually contradictory, characteristics of the new land.⁶ For example, Jan van der Straet's widely disseminated late-16th-century drawing (Fig. 1) of the discovery of America combines the most conventional narrative of European history – the great discovery of the New World – with the cultural anxiety and fear of the colonial encounter.⁷

5. As Denise Albanese has pointed out, “historical narratives are predicated equally on imagined relations and tactical silences. Specifically, they demand an ideological adjudication between what may be comprehended as familiar, and what must be suppressed, or investigated, as alien” (“Making it New: Humanism, Colonialism, and the Gendered Body in Early Modern Culture,” in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*, eds. Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan, Dymphna Callaghan [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996], 16–43, p. 16).

6. The Europeans quite early had been introduced to the strangeness of the new land as well as its immense riches through the descriptions of Marco Polo and the more vivid accounts of Sir John Mandreville whose “enormously popular mid-14th-century geographical fantasy abounded in islands in the Indian Ocean inhabited by men with no heads but eyes in their shoulders, people with ears so long that they hung down to their knees, with the heads of dogs or the feet of horses, and so on” (Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* [New York: Pantheon, 1975], p. 4). A number of woodcuts were originally created as elaborate illustrations in the publications of the letters written by Columbus and Vespucci regarding their first contact and impressions of the New World. Later in the 16th century, several artists issued prints of America recalling these illustrations. Phillippe Galle and Jan Sadeler made engravings of drawings of the New World and, when Theodor de Bry began publishing his *Great Voyages*, he had acquired a large number of drawings that talented artists had brought back from America.

7. Around the turn of the 16th century, Jan van der Straet, usually known as Stradanus, made a drawing of the European discovery of America, which was widely disseminated in print by means of Theodor Galle's engraving. This engraving was later included in Theodor de Bry's *Great Voyages*, a large folio of volumes illustrated by several hundred copperplate engravings, which, according to Bernadette Bucher, “offered a broad view of European conquests in America and the first contacts with the Amerindians” (Bucher, *Icon and Conquest: A Structural Analysis of the Illustrations of the de Bry's Great Voyages*, trans. Basia Miller Gulati [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981], p. 4). Stradanus' famous picture, like the majority of those that followed by other artists, is heavily influenced by Renaissance representations of women and underlines the contradiction between the attraction and fear of



Figure 1. *Vespucci Discovering America* (c. 1580). Engraving by Theodor Galle

As critics such as Anne McClintock and Shirley Samuels have argued, the personification of America as an Indian woman, who stands naked before the white male European, becomes a metaphor for the Western imperialistic processes and the male militarized invasion of the land. However, her ambiguous gesture of sexual invitation and implicit threat as she rises from her hammock and moves towards the static figure of Vespucci as well as the scene of cannibalism in the background disrupt male fantasies of possession and power. Vespucci stands there looking at a naked America, who represents a whole continent, while their “meeting enacts a colonial paradigm whereby the European subject achieves individuation precisely in opposition to colonized peoples who represent land or nature, ideas, or a group.”⁸

the new land through the “Europeanization” of the Indian woman’s characteristics. For more information on the 16th-century images of America, see Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land*.

8. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 76.



Figure 2.
America (early 18th century). De Launay

Vespucci's imperial power, that seeks to legitimize the conquest of the territory, colonial plunder, and sexual possession, is essentially disrupted by the female cannibals in the background who are roasting a human leg. Even in much later representations of America, the image of the naked, voluptuous Indian woman, that invites exploration and exploitation, is sharply undercut by the persistent allusions to violence, savagery, and cannibalism. For example, in De Launey's early-18th-century depiction of America as a young Indian girl (Fig. 2), whose innocence and purity are further enhanced by the presence of the two children and the virgin natural landscape in the background, the fear of dismemberment and death, though obviously played down, is not entirely omitted. The severed human head, that lies at the girl's feet and is pierced with an arrow, and the presence of the alligator, which poses as her pet animal, still reflect the colonial anxiety and fear of the new land and render the colonial encounter an incident of ambivalence. Both this image and the earlier depiction of Vespucci's allegorical meeting with America vividly

project the major contradictions in colonial discourse that extend from the male imperial fantasy of immense riches and sexual gratification to the opposite fantasy of dismemberment and engulfment. These contradictions are embodied in both the new land and the Indian woman's body. In terms of the land, the cannibal trope stands for the violent merging of European imperialism with pre-existing hierarchies of power, customs, traditions and peoples too alien to be reconciled to an absolute idea of "self" and "sameness." The insistence on cannibalism in the early representations of the New World reflects the colonial fear of the unknown at a time when European men boldly pushed the safe boundaries of their own world towards the margins in an attempt to

expand their knowledge along with their power.⁹ The fear that the vastness and “otherness” of the unknown might literally devour the colonizers was quickly translated into a justification of European militarized violence, atrocities, massacres and rapes. It was not long before the process of knowing and taming the unknown was turned into a metaphysics of violence that was sanctioned by the Enlightenment logic of private property and possessive individualism.

In terms of the Indian woman’s body, the cannibal trope projects the persistent gendering of the imperial unknown and the perennial metaphor of female sexuality as a “dark continent.”¹⁰ The representation of America as simultaneously seductive and sexually available, and as resistant, aggressive, and cannibalistic, on the one hand justified the sexual barbarity of the colonizers while, on the other, created a dark gap in colonial imagination and a split in male imperial subjectivity as it threatened the European conquerors with castration, emasculation, and death.¹¹ In almost all of these images, there is a peculiar blending of the emergent European colonialist discourse regarding the essential “otherness” of the inhabitants of the New World with a misogynistic conjunction of cannibalism and the feminine.¹² In one of the illus-

9. For the Europeans, a real knowledge of the “other” became a crucial component of self-understanding. One must remember that the development of Renaissance humanism coincided both with the discovery of the Americas and the beginning of European dominance over the rest of the world. Europe had discovered a world/culture outside its periphery. As Samir Amin explains, “If the period of the Renaissance marks a qualitative break in the history of humanity, it is precisely because, from that time on, Europeans become conscious of the idea that the conquest of the world by their civilization is henceforth a possible objective” (*Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore [New York: Monthly Review P, 1989], p. 72).

10. In his exploration of the ways in which images function in theories about culture, consciousness, and representation, W. J. T. Mitchell talks about the “pornographic beauty of the colonized women . . . whose beauty is mixed with danger” (*Picture Theory* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994], p. 310).

11. These images were inspired and sustained by a large body of Renaissance travellers’ tales which abounded in visions of the monstrous sexuality of the far-off lands, to such an extent that, as Anne McClintock has eloquently argued, “Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination” (*Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* [New York: Routledge, 1995], p. 22). And, as Shirley Samuels observes, “it seems necessary to imagine this threatening Indian woman’s body in order to justify slaughtering the bodies of those she represents” (*Romances of the Republic* [New York: Oxford UP, 1996], p. 3).

12. For example, Vespucci, who was much more imaginative and emphatic than Columbus in his descriptions, reports in his *Mundus Novus* that the women of the New World were so



Figure 3. Illustration to Vespucci's letter to Soderini, Strassburg, 1509

trations to Vespucci's letter to Soderini,¹³ a European man is apparently chatting with a group of native women, all completely naked, whose strong sexual appeal is reflected both in their poses and their long unruly hair (Fig. 3). While the man is obviously attracted to the women's sexual charms and is about to give in to their alluring promises of sexual gratification, another woman stealthily approaches him from behind and gets ready to knock him down with a club. The supposed sexual guile of the women of the new land, that enables them to deceive, kill, dismember, and eventually eat a European man, not only feeds the vivid collective imagination of the European world regarding alien cultures, but also becomes synonymous with the dangers inherent in a libidinally excessive and sexually uncontrolled female "other."

Suspended between the prospects of conquest and sexual possession and a dread of engulfment and emasculation, these images haunt male colonial imagination and intersperse European fantasies of the New World as a screen onto which Europe would project its forbidden sexual desires with images of monstrous sexuality. In Phillippe Galle's depiction of America as a stark naked, muscular Indian woman, who holds a spear in one hand and a severed human head in the other (Fig. 4), the peculiar fetishism of the new land is symbolically reflected in the contradiction between the woman's innocent, virgin-like, elusive look, and her threatening sexuality implied by her incongruously long pubic hair, supposedly the

lustful that they caused "the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear[ed] deformed and disgusting" (Giles Gunn ed., *Early American Writing* [New York: Penguin, 1994], p. 34). Vespucci appears preoccupied with the subject of cannibalism – which Columbus had merely alluded to – and rather exaggeratedly reports that he had known a man "who was reputed to have eaten more than three hundred human bodies" (Gunn, p. 35). All parenthesized references to source texts are to this edition.

13. *Lettera di Amerigo Vespucci delle Isole Nuovamente Trovate* – known as the Soderini letter – was first printed in Florence in 1505. It was promptly translated into German and provided a vivid account of life among the Indians.



Figure 4.
America (1581–1600). Philippe Galle

source of her unnatural power. Although the Indian woman's body appears essentially seductive, it evokes fears of castration through the woman's ability to behead her enemy and hold his head as a trophy, and through the strange mingling of the threat of cannibalism with the woman's exaggerated monstrous sexuality.

Linked symbolically to the land, it is the female Indian that gives iconic form to the major conflict in Europe's colonial ideology regarding its encounter with the New World: a conflict between fascination and fear, sameness and otherness, assimilation and destruction. The implicit identification of native female sexuality with cannibalism represents not only the European conquerors' fear of displacement onto the dangerous feminized space of the new land, but also, those rhetorical strategies of colonialist ideology employed in order to overcome this fear through the persistent textualization of the body of the woman as a realm beyond history, a blank page onto

which male projects and male national enterprises are to be written. The gendering of the New World as feminine and the sexualizing of its discovery and conquest are emblematic of a distinctively colonialist practice of historical and cultural possession. The male European projects of economic exploitation and geopolitical domination are inextricably integrated into a narrative framework of ideological configurations of gender, racial, religious, and national identities. Behind the essentialist binarism of such abstract terms as European and Indian, Culture and Nature, Self and Other, Male and Female, lies the male European tendency to maintain a privileged relation to origins through the rhetorical – and actual – effacement of the indigenous culture and the symbolic re-writing of European history onto the body of

the New World. As Giles Gunn has eloquently argued, “the world called ‘America,’ both North and South, would ever after be a world dominated and controlled by meanings as much as by facts; it would be a world where fantasy, fear, and fabrication would determine many of the contours of the real” (xviii).

Visibly claimed as male European property, either through naming or representation, the Indian woman, just like the new land, is marked as belonging to the European imperialistic processes of nation-making, passively awaiting, as Anne McClintock has observed, “the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason.”¹⁴ And, as van der Straet’s drawing illustrates, America “awakens to discover herself written into a story that is not of her own making, to find herself a figure in another’s dream.”¹⁵ For the Europeans, who had access to writing and representation, the crucial cultural difference between themselves and the native people was filtered through their communicative, symbolic and interpretive skills, and was registered as a new chapter in European history and knowledge.¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out that in possessing the ability to write and bringing into focus the “other,” the Europeans possessed an unmistakably superior “technology of symbolism.”¹⁷ Both the written word and the iconic representations of the New World set the foundations for a new (inter)national narrative invested with new political meanings and cultural definitions. In this process, the Indian woman was charged with the responsibility to carry a rather heavy ideological burden as her inherent contradictory qualities were appropriated to serve different purposes: the savage/alien aspect of her cultural identity was readily transformed into a justification for the destruction of her people and the “unmaking” of her culture, while her seductiveness and proximity to nature became the primary signifiers of a new beginning, a new national and cultural origin. It is precisely this idea of a new national origin that carried the image of the Indian woman onto a different ideological plane in the last part of the 18th century when the explosive tension between America and England eventually led to the American Revolution. In the political cartoons of the time, the oversexed Indian woman of the 16th-century engravings, whose body merged seduction and cannibal-

14. McClintock, p. 30.

15. Montrose, p. 6.

16. According to Hardt and Negri, the Europeans could not see beyond their own Eurocentric view of the Americas, in which the Amerindians were equal to Europeans in nature only in so far as they were potentially European or really potentially Christian. Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000), p. 116.

17. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 160.

ism, was turned into the image of the undersexed Native American woman, whose body was increasingly identified with the concerted American effort towards the creation of a distinctly American national identity.

The great majority of these cartoons were published anonymously as illustrations in colonial newspapers and were largely copied after British models.¹⁸ According to Ron Tyler, “few Americans had produced cartoons by 1776.”¹⁹ There were, however, qualified engravers in America, like the famous Paul Revere, who copied or adapted British prints. As cartoons became a widely-distributed graphic art, cartoonists readily created significant visual themes, which were soon turned into easily identifiable American icons. In this sense, the image of America as an Indian woman, which had in fact lingered in Europe since the 16th century with very few variations, became the most popular and frequent one in representing the British colonies in the New World. As Philip J. Deloria has pointed out, “between 1765 and 1783, the colonies appeared as an Indian in no fewer than sixty-five political cartoons – almost four times as frequently as the other main symbols of America, the snake and the child.”²⁰ Despite the fact that British prints were initially sympathetic in their treatment of the American colonies and scathingly criticized public officials of the British government for their destructive role in the conflict, their insistence on the depiction of America as a female Indian perpetuated the latent colonialist conception of the New World as both inferior and alien and concealed the vestiges of a colonialist discourse that equated the Indian woman’s body with the new land ready for exploitation. In the eyes of the British, the image of the half-naked Indian woman amplified the “otherness” of the Ameri-

18. According to Michael Wynn Jones, “the American War provided an enormous impetus to engravers and print-sellers of London, both artistically and politically. The inexorable decline of the country’s prestige, the wastefulness of the war, North’s edifice of power founded on privilege and royal patronage all combined, slowly but positively, to crystallize a Parliamentary Opposition more articulate and vehement than any since Walpole’s fall from office” (*The Cartoon History of the American Revolution* [New York: Putnam, 1975], p. 10).

19. Ron Tyler, *The Image of America in Caricature and Cartoon* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1975), p. 2.

20. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), p. 29. Although from 1765 to 1775, the years of growing discontent and political dissent between America and England, America was consistently represented as a young Indian woman, throughout the years of military conflict, America was also portrayed as an aggressive Indian man. This identification had been so internalised by Americans that in December 1773, Whigs dressed as Indians tossed the tea consignment to Boston overboard.

can colonies both through her race and sex.²¹ On the other hand, however, the representation of America as an Indian woman acquired new meaning as it was transported onto the American soil, where it was largely maintained and reproduced by American engravers for propaganda purposes. In the American context, the image of the Indian woman was largely defined by a nationalist/patriotic discourse that sought to minimize the provincial outlook of the Americans and project a new national identity distinct from England. Thus, the Indian woman in the political cartoons became part of the general ideological framework of a revolutionary discourse that aimed at mobilizing resistance and securing independence.

If the nation is an “imagined community,” as Benedict Anderson has declared, then that imagining, which appears to be profoundly gendered, is achieved through the explosive convergence of language, power, and representation. As a most effective form of propaganda, the revolutionary cartoons joined the literary and dramatic efforts of the American nation toward social rearrangement and national/cultural redefinition. Their power of persuasion lay in their easily accessible visual symbolism, their immediate impact and, occasionally, shrewd political insight. Like most propagandistic texts of the time, the political cartoons revolved around the conjunction of factual information and an emotional appeal to the people’s sense of right and wrong.²² During the revolutionary years, they constituted a most popular mode of address that sought not only to visually reproduce the political events of the time, but, more importantly, to prompt ordinary people, through their satire and allegory, to view themselves as full participants in the political life and changing ideology of America.

21. According to Olson, it was the “British illustrators who defined, refined, and amplified the pictorial representation of the Indian as the British colonies” (Lester C. Olson, *Emblems of American Community in the Revolutionary Era: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* [Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991], p. 77). However, as the colonists incorporated the image of the Indian into their political prints, they retained certain elements of inferiority, but they modified the image so as to reduce or eliminate insinuations that the colonies were alien to British culture. This was more obviously manifested in the American cartoonists’ tendency to cover the Indian woman’s nakedness and whiten her skin (Olson, p. 108).

22. After all, this was the essence of republican ideology: to cloak the American political revolt with the mantle of morality and the national struggle for liberty and virtue. See, Andrew Burstein, *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image* (New York: Hill, 1999), and Robert E. Shalhope, *The Roots of Democracy: American Thought and Culture, 1760–1800* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1990).

The image of America as an Indian woman became a national emblem, a political instrument in the emerging rhetoric of republicanism as it provided the necessary sense of connection between an Arcadian, pre-English past and an American future of progress and expansion. Despite the reality of the constant friction, violence, and overt hostility between the whites and the Indians on the American continent, revolutionary Americans, in their effort to project a new national identity distinct from England,²³ prepared the ground for a shift of focus from the historical reality of their relationship with the Indians to the “mythologization” of the Indian as representative of America’s pre-colonial past and the Edenic wilderness of the New World.²⁴ The latent fear of the “other” culture, already imagined and expressed in the contradictions and allegories of European colonialist ideology, was now carefully contained within the abstractions of the American emerging political rhetoric of republicanism. In the rapidly developing concept of American nationalism, a blurring of boundaries separating “self” and “other” became central to the formation of new cultural distinctions that provided a new and crucial framework through which the binary of a European “self” and an American “other” would be essentially redefined. The American colonists sought to articulate a revolutionary identity through the symbolic figure of the Indian that could be rhetorically incorporated into the new society and culture they hoped to inaugurate. In the national conflict between England and America, the line separating the “self”/civilization and the

23. This idea of distinction or difference, which was widely emphasized during the revolutionary years, drew extensively on various ideological sources that ranged from classical republicanism to the millennial aspect of Puritan philosophy and the thought of the Enlightenment. This combination of ideologies framed the political rhetoric of American nationality and marked the progress of America from theocracy to republic.

24. This idea might be regarded as the beginning of the creation of a larger ideological framework, which incorporated the Indian into a politically expedient mythic pattern of American society. By the end of the 18th century, the contradictory representation of the Indian, who somewhat facetiously came to be called “noble savage,” was readily incorporated into the American nation’s political mythology and actually aimed to reconcile the two distinct and sharply contrasted discourses surrounding the presence of the Native Americans. On the one hand, the Indian’s “savagery” was celebrated as a return to America’s Arcadian landscape, while, at the same time, seen as obstacle to progress and civilization. It was the Indian as symbol – the mythologized Indian – that served the political and ideological exigencies of the American nation. The real Indian was already beginning to lose his own cultural identity. For the exclusionary practices of the American political ideology, see Timothy Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000).

“other”/savagery was no longer fixed but shifting and, with it, national self-definition, for the sake of an alternative political discourse that eluded racial identifications and aimed at creating a sense of national unity through the celebration of the new land’s purity, naturalness, and freedom.



Figure 5. *Companion* (1768). Anonymous

In this sense, the Indian woman’s dominant presence in the revolutionary cartoons and the emerging national consciousness of the Americans bridged the liminal space of cultural difference between a colonialist “self” (white) and a colonized “other” (Indian). At once “self” and “other,” the Native American woman functioned as both sign and spectacle in the national imagination of social and moral regeneration. By elaborating on the image of America as a virgin land, a “New Eden” and a

“New Canaan,” the political theorists of the revolution underscored the universal role of the new nation as arbiter of liberty, justice and morality, while they successfully played up the distinction between a freedom-loving, virtuous people and a tyrannical, corrupted European political system. This notion is consistently reflected in the revolutionary cartoons as the moral energy that lies in the subtext of their visual rhetoric justifies the American revolution on the basis of a great contrast between a decadent, European civilization and a natural, uncorrupted America whose domestic values of simplicity, virtue and liberty are at stake. For example, one of the earliest cartoons, which was published anonymously in 1768 as “Companion” to the “Colonies Reduced” (Fig. 5),²⁵ juxtaposes an innocent America with the cunning and manipulative political forces of Europe. This cartoon shows a sinister amalgamation of aggressive acts that revolve around the feminized representations of America and England. More specifically, Lord Bute exposes Britain by holding up her skirt while stabbing her at the back of her neck and inviting Spain to “strike home.” At the same time, Britain has grabbed America by one of her feathers and is about to attack and impale her with her raised spear. The innocent America runs apprehensively into the arms of France, who has only been waiting for this opportunity to become “de grande Monarque indeed.” In the foreground, a snake, symbolic of America after Benjamin Franklin’s famous 1765 “Join or Die” cartoon, tries to bite Britain.²⁶ This explicit iconography of violence may be traced to the cartoon’s obvious aim to propagandize as well as interpret political scenarios.²⁷ As we focus on the allegorical codes of the cartoon’s political meaning, the physical violence directed against the female

25. “The Colonies Reduced” was published in *Political Register* in August 1768. It is not clear, though often asserted, that Benjamin Franklin designed the cartoon himself. It presents England lying on the ground with her severed arms and legs – all named after American states – around her. The political message contained in the cartoon is that in the long run it would be Britain herself who would suffer from alienating her colonies. She would “slip from her perch on top of the world and reduced to beggary” (Jones, p. 32).

26. B. Franklin’s best-known print was designed as a warning to the colonies to stand united both in the struggles against the Indians and in the political conflict against England. This idea was imitated by a number of cartoonists. For example, in 1782, Thomas Gillray created “The American Rattle Snake,” which shows a snake coiled around British soldiers.

27. As has already been argued, these images correlate political issues with threatened sexual violence. Political theorist Anne Norton explores the concept of sexuality as political in nature and argues that the source of those passions, appetites, and institutions that bind the individual to politics is sexuality. Cf. Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), p. 38.

body becomes the aesthetic representation of precisely this political meaning. For example, the violated body of Britain stands for the national vulnerability of England and her political fate if she wages a war against her colonies. On the other hand, the bewildered America, who seeks the protection of France and Spain in her attempt to avoid the fury of Britain, jeopardizes her own future as an independent nation as she unconsciously yields to eventual victimization and exploitation by European forces.



Figure 6. *The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draft* (1774). Anonymous

The persistent representation of the Native American woman as the victim of physical violence in the majority of the political cartoons of the time, substantially ameliorated her 16th-century image as a threatening, cannibalistic “other,” and largely justified the Americans’ decision to rebel. Here, the violence and coercion that characterized the colonial invasion of the new land takes on nationalist connotations and a new political meaning. Still representing the major conflict between Europe and the New World, the Indian woman is increasingly becoming closely identified with an American “self” that struggles for national independence from the tyranny of an English/European “other,” while her body is no longer regarded as the source of both fascination and fear but as the living incubator of the uniquely Ameri-

can values of innocence, virtue and liberty. In the American imagination, the Indian woman is transformed not only into the symbolic register of national conflict but also into the site where the American changing political ideology would be inscribed. For example, in one of the most popular cartoons of the revolutionary period, *The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draft* (1774), the figure of the Indian woman presents the essential conflict between America and England not only in political terms but also in terms of right and wrong, virtue and vice (Fig. 6). The ethical connotations are obvious as a decadent, over-civilized Europe surrounds and victimizes the innocent, uncorrupted America. In this cartoon, which was inspired by the Parliamentary passage of the Tea Act (1773), America, as an Indian woman, lies helpless on the ground, her arms held and her legs restrained, while Lord North, who has grabbed her by the neck, forces tea down her throat. The prospect of impending political/military violence, conveyed through the image of Boston being cannonaded in the background and the torn Boston petition for the removal of Hutchinson in the foreground, merges with the explicit physical/sexual violence against the body of the Indian woman in a scene that resembles a gang rape. As America is immobilized on the ground, the man who holds her feet lifts her skirt and appears to be peeking at her genitals. The kings of France and Spain look on with interest, while Lord Bute wields his sword, a phallic object that suggests a conjoining of military and sexual violence.

The symbolic violence and sexuality that accompany America's national image become the primary means of signifying power relations and competing ideologies. From her position as the prostrate victim of violence and voyeurism, as the silenced object of exchange – not so much between colonizer and colonized, but between Europe/England and a more abstract concept of “Americanness” – the Indian woman enacts elements of the emerging republican thought of the Americans in terms of ideological commitment and ethical conduct. As an increasingly domesticated “noble savage” image, the Indian woman becomes the bond that ties the Americans to the potential of the new land and unites them in their search for a new beginning, a new national and cultural identity.

This is probably the reason why, with the outbreak of the military conflict with England, America began to be portrayed as essentially assertive and unyielding. As the nation moved toward the longed-for independence, the image of the Native American woman gained both physical power and speech. In the anonymous *The Female Combatants* (Fig. 7), one of the first major military events of the revolution, the battle of Bunker-Hill, is symbolically transferred onto the powerful conflict between the female figures of America and England. The iconography of

this cartoon conjoins political and familial tensions in the stressful business of national violence.²⁸ America as an Indian woman punches her mother in the face, thus showing her growing power and asserting her independence, while vehemently declaring “Liberty Liberty for ever Mother while I exist.” England, on the other hand, appears more static and on the defensive, though verbally abusive: “I’ll force you to Obedience you rebellious Slut.”

America is the daughter who has grown insolent and disobedient, and Britain the mother who tries to discipline and control her. In the British context, the representation of the national conflict as a family quarrel falls within the colonial paradigm of parent-and-child relationship. Moreover, the use of the word “slut,” to indicate the daughter’s increasing boldness and impudence, has a direct reference to the sexual licentiousness and loose morals of a female “other.” The sexuality of the Native American woman is closely linked to a colonial scenario of political or revolutionary license. For the British, the racial and sexual connotations of this cartoon underscore the essential “otherness” of the Native American woman and, by inference, the continent itself. On the other hand, for the Americans, rebellion becomes more readily justifiable within the context of this powerful mother-daughter conflict as England has proved an oppressive mother who repeatedly tyrannized her child. The symbolic violence and the sexuality of the female Indian are screened through an understanding of the Americans’ undisputed family bond to England in terms of heritage and civilization, as well as an acknowledgement of their right to filial disobedience against an abusive mother. As England increasingly becomes the “other,” America, as an Indian woman, becomes the “self,” an image that absorbs race, gender, and sexuality into the emerging concept of a distinct national identity.



Figure 7. *The Female Combatants* (1776). Anonymous

28. By figuring the national bodies through those of a Native American woman and her European (m)other, the cartoonists successfully combined politics with domesticity, apparently aiming at enhancing emotionalism and bounding up domestic concerns with the national project.

Unlike her 16th-century counterpart, the female Indian in the revolutionary mentality of the Americans is turned into a figure that cannot be easily subdued by the thrust of European power and culture, but appears determined to resist the inequitable imperialistic schemes of Europe/England. Her increasing power and aggression no longer stem from her threatening cannibalistic nature, but are the result of a painful process of development and national awareness. It is the Indian woman's struggle for the higher ideals of freedom and independence from European oppression and victimization that transforms her image and, with it, the Americans' identity from colony to nation. It is within this context that the Americans managed to work toward an expiation of any vestiges of guilt for the colonial invasion of the New World as they increasingly considered themselves an integral part of their natural environment. In the American national mythology, the image of the Indian woman began to serve as a critique of European social and moral decadence, as a celebration of the innocence and purity of the new land and the triumph of the ideals and values of the new nation.

List of Illustrations

- Figure 1. *Vespucci Discovering America* (c. 1580). Engraving by Theodor Galle. Cf. Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), p. 88.
- Figure 2. *America* (early 18th century). De Launay. See Honour, p. 111.
- Figure 3. Illustration to Vespucci's letter to Soderini (Strassburg, 1509). Cf. Honour, p. 10.
- Figure 4. *America* (1581–1600). Philippe Galle. Cf. Honour, p. 87.
- Figure 5. *Companion* (1768). Anonymous. Cf. Michael Wynn Jones, *The Cartoon History of the American Revolution* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p. 33.
- Figure 6. *The Able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draft* (1774). Anonymous. Cf. Lester C. Olson, *Emblems of American Community in the Revolutionary Era* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), illustration 16.
- Figure 7. *The Female Combatants* (1776). Anonymous. Cf. Olson, illustration 34.