

**THE BEGINNING OF AMERICA AS A DISCURSIVE INVENTION: PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES IN THE WORKS OF RICHARD HAKLUYT, THOMAS HARIOT, JOHN SMITH AND DANIEL DENTON**

*Începutul Americii, o descoperire în discurs: strategii de promovare în scrierile lui Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot, John Smith and Daniel Denton*

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*Abstract: Labeled by many scholars as a discursive invention, the concept of America and of its external reception includes a history of misrepresentations and idealizations performed for different marketing purposes. The works of Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot, John Smith and Daniel Denton are among the first attempts to give discursive shape to the new land across the Atlantic Ocean and by so doing, to begin a tradition of perpetuating an image of America which is significantly different from reality.*

*Keywords: discursive invention, history of misrepresentations, idealizations, tradition*

The present study starts from some premises which have been conceptualized by many scholars directing their research interests into the field of American studies. These premises may be summed up by the assumption that, in the line of the exceptionalist discourses which lie at the foundation of Americanism, “the reality of America is selective, optional, fantastic: there is an America for each of us” (Conrad 1980: 4).

Among the first scholars to give a theoretical shape to the idea of the American space as an intentional construct made of discursive strategies is Edmundo o’Gorman who, in *The Invention of America* (1961), defines America as an intellectual construct. In terms of the formation of the New World, O’Gorman favors the term ‘invention’ rather than ‘discovery’, thus shading new light on Columbus’s exploits in the new continent. He differentiates between ‘discovery’, which implies a previous knowledge of the object and ‘invention’, whose area of interpretation implies something unheard of and unexpected. ‘Discovery’, the term generally used when speaking about the way the American continent entered the sphere of European knowledge, “implies that the nature of the thing found was previously known to the finder, i.e. that he knows

that objects such as the one he has found can and do exist, although the existence of that particular one was wholly unknown.” (O’Gorman 10). O’Gorman’s theory, based on the writings of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci and other explorers, argues that they had no previous knowledge or idea about the land they were on the point of finding. Columbus’s purpose was to reach Asia, so the theory that he ‘discovered’ America cannot stand since he did not actually discover anything. He stumbled across a previously unforeseen continent, which was interpreted by the Western world as a discovery. The difference between knowing what to expect from the thing you intentionally pursue - discovery - and imagining it as long as the confinement of your world allows – invention - is significant.

This opens the way to modern cultural theories about America arguing that the country was invented, rather than discovered, as a discursive entity. O’Gorman’s concept of “invention” is summed up and explained by Clara Bartocci, who observes that “it was necessary to devise an invention, in a scientific sense, to define that which had never been conceived of in the past”(103). Myra Jehlen further explains the idea of the invention of America as a necessity coming from the fact that such an entity had never been conceived before: “The New World was a future so far from being already imagined, it had to be invented: conquered, settled, and also enjoined, urged, promoted and written into being” (13).

The mechanism of inventing the American space is a provider of infinite interpretations; the opportunities are practically boundless, as the traditional constraints commonly known to the European mind are absent. Time and space acquire new characteristics due to American emptiness: “In American emptiness, there are truths to sustain any fiction” (Conrad 5), they are flexible tools which can be maneuvered in such a way as to serve each individual’s imaginative workings.

The historical conditions which assisted and facilitated the idea of the invention of the American space are very important, as they are the key to understanding its mechanism. Inventing the space, contrasted with the classical idea of discovering it, adds a significant imaginative input which brings the image of America closer to the realms of illusion. At the same time, it constitutes an innovation in individuals’ way of relating to the world, by completely changing this perspective. The voluntary creation of a new, personal, self-imagined universe, by means of the application of a general set of principles, is a clear mark of modernity. By conferring the individual the liberty to choose the shape of the world he wants to imagine, by the

flexibility incorporated in this process, the mechanism of inventing America is a deeply modern one. Peter Conrad observes: “Because America offers an incarnation of your most recondite and specialized fantasies, in discovering America you are discovering yourself. Europe equips you with a hereditary, natal self. America allows you to invent a self better adjusted to the individual you have become since outgrowing the impositions of birth”(5). Similarly, Tzvetan Todorov notes that “the conquest of America heralds and establishes our present identity. Even if every date that permits us to separate any two periods is arbitrary, none is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492. We are all direct descendants of Columbus”(5).

Starting from this theoretical background which accounts for the flexibility of the American reality, and from the premises that there is a long history of misrepresentations of America (up to the present-day media reflections) due to its perception mediated by myths, this study is an attempt to address the beginnings of this long record of constructed images of America. For this purpose, the study analyses a selection of the first written materials which popularized what was going to be American mythology and which initiated a long-lasting tradition in perpetuating an image of the American space based on false hopes and desires rather than on direct and lucid perception.

Written in 16<sup>th</sup> century England, these texts are part of a literary trend which may be called “promotional literature” (Scouten) and which, by being “both inventive and imaginative” (Scouten 28) contributed to the dissemination of the main myths of the American spirit among the future American colonists. Being written with the purpose of attracting prospective colonists into the new world, these pieces of writing were marked by the authors’ perceived needs of the audience. This is where imagination intervenes, to mediate between a reality which most of the addressees of the texts had no way of conceiving and a horizon of expectations that they had created. This leads Scouten to assert that “as often as not, English promotional writing about America better reflect the wants of the English citizenry than they do any particular reality about America itself.” (Scouten 27). By so doing, these texts initiated and maintained a dual image of the country, one in which reality and imagination are intermingled.

The purpose of these texts was to promote New World exploration and colonization. They were meant to present the potentiality of the new territories to the readers, to describe the land and the opportunities that it had in store and to try to convince people of the benefits of settling

down in those territories. As disseminators of a myth based on the promise of material gain, these texts presented the image of a country where material abundance was within everyone's reach.

There is a dual motivation for this trend of misrepresenting American reality and exaggerating its bounty. On the one hand many texts on America were sponsored or written by the patent holder of the colonies, whose purpose was to attract capital in the colonies. Therefore, the image of the texts had to be persuasive enough so that the potential investors are convinced of the enormous possibilities, the great riches and the safety of such an investment in the New World.

On the other hand, the presentation of an ideal image is justified by the prospect of selling the books. The more attractive the manner in which a place is depicted, the better chances the book has to make a profit. Apart from convincing the audience of the rightfulness of endeavoring into an enterprise in the newly discovered continent, the need for entertainment led to a style which combined the sense of thrill and adventure with the most practical details. (Scouten 14-15). The result of this financial motivation is the creation of texts promoting the new American colonies which are mid-way between reality and utopia. Being mainly addressed to European colonizers, and being the main way by which Europe became acquainted to America, they contributed to the creation of an imagined version of a country endowed with special attributes.

Although these promotional tracts were destined to create a realistic picture of the new found land across the Pacific in the minds of the prospective colonists, it would be deceptive to argue that these writings had purely informative purposes. The reality is that many authors of promotional materials about America had never actually been to the new continent (such as the case of Richard Hakluyt, who is nevertheless considered the initiator of the English writings on America promoting the further exploration and colonization of the continent). Imagination had to fill up the spaces left empty by the lack of direct experience.

Additionally, one should keep in mind that the period which assisted the emergence of the promotional materials about America, mainly the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a time when the popularity of the novel as a genre had not appeared yet and that of the theatre was slowly but surely declining. This is how writing about the discovery of a new world combined the realism of a travel report with the thrill and adventure that the European audience was seeking. The inevitable result of these circumstances was a prose in which the reality portrayed had to be veiled in fictive exaggerations. Had it not been the case, America as a myth would probably not have exerted the

same attraction on European future adventurers. Taking into account that at that time few people had actually been to the new world, so that they could send first-hand information to those in old Europe, these promotional materials consisted the main means by which Europeans started to create images of America. Fatally, these images were modeled by the input material of these initial texts: however exaggerated, plagiarized, sometimes flagrantly untrue, they spread the artificially constructed image of the New World to a frustrated, obsolete Old World who was dying for something new to feed its illusions of a better life.

**Richard Hakluyt** (1552 - 1616) is considered to be the initiator and the main representative of the promotional writing about America. His main work on the topic: *Divers Voyages touching the Discovery of America and the Islands Adjacent* (1582) marks the beginning of a period in which “English writings about colonies were more common than attempts at colonization” (Scouten 74). In this highly propagandistic brochure he explicitly argues in favor of the English advancement in America and of colonizing it, in virtue of the presupposed “right” that the English had to do such a thing: “If there were in vs that desire to aduance the honor of our countrie which ought to bee in euery good man, wee woulde not all this while haue foreslowne the possessing of those landes whiche of equitie and right appertaine vnto vs” (Hakluyt 8).

Written for specific propaganda purposes, Hakluyt’s work offers three main arguments for the colonization of America. The first of them is national pride. By appealing to his countrymen’s patriotism he expresses his beliefs that England’s prestige would greatly benefit from the settlement of America. England would be justified in its endeavor into America by a significant enhancement of its international prestige, given that the state of facts at the time were more favorable to other nations, mainly Spain and Portugal: “after so great conquests and plantings of the Spaniardes and Portingales there, [...] wee of Englande could neuer haue the grace to set fast footing in such fertill and temperate places as are left as yet vnpossessed of them” (Hakluyt 8).

A significant part of England’s domestic problems would also be addressed by its rightful involvement in the new continent. On the one hand, forming colonies would solve the population increase with its subsequent consequences: “[we should] hasten and further euery man to his power the deducting of some Colonies of our superfluous people into those temperate and fertile partes of America which, being within sixe weekes sailing of England, are yet vnpossessed by any Christians: and seeme to offer themselues vnto vs, stretching neerer vnto her Maiesties

Dominions than to any other part of Europe” (Hakluyt 9). The lands which, for geographical reasons, are closer to England than to other parts of the continent appear as an additional argument of the rightfulness of colonization. It is inscribed in the natural order of things and the Englishmen could do nothing but obey, since the lands practically “offer themselves unto us.”

A final argument that Hakluyt makes, one which was supposed to be extremely powerful given the historical conjuncture of the time, is religious, presenting the colonization of America in the form of religious obligation and destiny. The English not only have God’s blessing to embark on the task of colonizing the New World and converting the savages to the good ways of Christianity, but they also have the moral and religious duty to do so. They are not the only beneficiaries of settling into the new continent; the converted pagans whose souls would be saved should be equally grateful. The goal whose expression given by Hakluyt is “to conuert Infidelles to our most holy faith” (14) is of primary importance. Without the religious mission, any attempt to colonization is doomed to fail: “Certes, if hetherto in our owne discoueries we had not beene led by a preposterous desire of seeking rather gaine than Gods glorie, I assure my self that our labours had taken farre better effecte” (13).

The image that the prospective investor into America was offered by Hakluyt’s work is that of a region in which financial success is combined with a religious quest and destiny, as a sine-qua-non condition, a “marriage of Capitalism and Christianity” (Scouten 64). The apotheosis envisaged by Hakluyt requires that the English “shall gather the most noble merchandise of all the worlde, and shall make the name of Christ to bee knowne vnto many idolatrous and Heathen people” (13). Religious zeal and material prosperity go hand in hand: “Godlinesse is great riches, [...] if we first seeke the kingdome of God all other thinges will be giuen vnto vs, [...] as the light accompanieth the Sunne, and the heate the fire, so lasting riches do waite vpon them that are zealous for the aduancement of the kingdome of Christe and the enlargement of his glorious Gospell” (13-4).

Presenting the new continent in such a light as to appeal to the English both from a material perspective and from a religious one contributed to the consolidation of a cultural representation of America in which seeking prosperity became a loftier purpose than the one traditionally assumed, being situated under the auspices of God.

This form of discursive strategy was continued by **Thomas Hariot** (1560 - 1621). His text, *A Brief and True Report on the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), which Myra Jehlen

defines as a genuine “advertising brochure” (Jehlen 59) introduces Europe to an image of America which is the embodiment of abundance and plenitude and is meant to counteract the negative reports which had become manifest regarding the colonization of Virginia and to convince the Queen of England not to forsake the efforts to form this colony.

**Captain John Smith** (1580 -1631) is another major representative of promotional writings and, according to J. A. Leo Lemay, he is “the earliest major version of the American dream” (quoted in Scouten:156), because the image that he created about America “provided the opportunity for an individual’s standing in society to be determined by hard work and achievement rather than social position” (quoted in Scouten:156).

His personal experience is a proof of his conviction of America: from an inferior state and modest condition he rose to fame and became a figure of authority due to his exploits in America which served him as inspiration for his most famous works, *A Description of New England* (1616) and *The Generall History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* (1624). He sees America as the space which allows individuals to discover their true self and vocation, a vision which has persisted in time and became incorporated in the myth: America is “the space in which his identity was to be forged and defended” (Franklin 21). He is among the initiators of a line of thought later embraced by all those who aspire to American values, according to which status and wealth is obtained through ability, perseverance and hard work and not by birthright. While presenting himself as a true epic hero who is beyond everybody else in term of skills and virtues he also implies that America is a world based on meritocracy where everybody who has sufficient determination can and will succeed. He makes the portrait of the potential successful colonists in America, whose characteristics, though altered by the passing of time, have maintained their essence to the present day: “Who can desire more content that hath small meanes or but onely his merit to advance his fortunes, then to tread and plant that ground he hath purchased by the hazard of his life; if hee have but taste of vertue and magnamity, what to such a mind can be more pleasant than planting and building a foundation for his posterity, got from the rude earth by Gods blessing and his owne industry without prejudice to any” (Smith 42). The image created in the minds of prospective colonists was a totally revolutionary one for that age. Living in a traditional society with a very rigid hierarchical structure which granted success on the basis of hereditary inheritance, where lines between social strata were very clearly drawn, the English were presented with a world in which all of these suddenly did not matter anymore. To be

promised success and material fulfillment simply as a consequence of pursuing it was quite an innovating vision, and undoubtedly an extremely appealing one.

**Daniel Denton** (1626 - 1703) continues this trend of exaggerated representations in his main work, *A Brief Description of New York* (1670): “Here, those which Fortune hath frown’d upon in England, to deny them an inheritance amongst their Brethren or such as by ther utmost labor can scarcely procure a living, I say such may procure here inheritances of land” (18).

The chance of a new life under the auspices of the blessed benevolence of nature and of God is promised to these people: “[...] if there be any terrestrial happiness to be had by people of all ranks, especially of an inferior rank, it must certainly be here: here anyone may furnish himself with land, and live rent-free, yes, with such a quantity of land, that he may weary himself with walking over his fields of Corn, and all sorts of Grain: and let his flock of Cattel amount to some hundreds , he needs not fear their want of pasture in the Summer or Fodder in the winter, the woods affording sufficient supply” (Denton17-18).

Such images of abundance and the perspective of boundless prosperity awaiting people could only attract them into colonizing a world which, had it not been presented in such bright light, would probably have exerted a lesser appeal. People faced an image which was created in such a way as to address their most intimate and ardent wishes of success. The fact that it looked like a constructed image and not an accurate reflection of reality is due to the specificity of the process of constructing such an appealing image. The image of America contained, apart from the sum of veridical, provable elements, a lot of blank spaces. These blank spaces appeared under the form of promise and they were meant to be filled by each person’s subjective input, by multiple variants of reality subjected to personal interpretations.

Perceiving America as Denton described it, as a place of “terrestrial happiness” available to all people created a paradisiacal image which led to the emergence of an image of America imbued with symbols of abundance and opportunity.

The role of such writings is equivalent to that of a successful promotional campaign: what was being “sold” was the New World, wrapped up in glossy façade. The attractive narratives about the enormous possibilities that America had to offer had a substantial contribution to the emergence and viability of the colonies that were going to be created. Being more than travel literature, these texts assisted and supported the creation of the essential myths of America.



Simultaneously, the ambivalence inherent in the concept of America also gained shape together with these promotional materials. The difference between the image presented in these texts and the reality that America had to offer was significant. Despite all these promises of immense riches and despite the true potentiality of the land, the English colonies in America would not yield any profit before the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There was a pronounced contrast between the representations of America and the reality that the colonists had to confront. The inherent difficulties of settling into new land, the ceaseless problems with the native populations emerging from a total disregard of their cultural heritage, the problems encountered by a harsh climate and natural background: this was the reality that the colonists had to face. This comes in flagrant opposition with the picture which initially lured them, one which promised enormous wealth with the least of effort.

However, we dare assert that it is the constructed image of America which made history to the detriment of reality. The constructed image contained, promoted and supported the dissemination of the essential myths linked to the spirit of America: opportunity, entrepreneurialism, democracy, success, exceptionalism. All these myths used for the identification of the American nation are still promoted among people and ‘marketed’ as reality. The duality of the idea of America has persisted throughout the century, finding its different ways of manifestation.

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