

Cultural Colonization in Poems by Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

The reason for Wallace Stevens' scepticism regarding cultural colonies is clear. Most of the people in America are descendents of immigrants who bring with them their own cultural ideas to a colony. That is the reality of the American situation, and it is also Stevens' modest understanding of the reality of an America that was still in the process of trying to express its cultural relationship to the vast continent of North America. Tacit in that choice, however, is a rejection of a political solution that would preserve out-of-date cultural ideals such as that contained in the example of General Andrew Jackson, a figure who appears several times in Stevens' poetry and prose and who was famous both for waging brutal wars against the Seminole Indians in Florida and for being a champion of a populist form of political democracy. Stevens' emphasis on failure and division in his poems about American colonization, then, can be understood as a way to defamiliarize a political understanding of who Americans are as a people in order to create a basis for a new modernist cultural understanding of an American place. Of the many characters and motifs that typify Stevens' imaginary colonists in exile, I will focus on Stevens' hidalgo figure as a unifying concept to cover all figures who fail at cultural colonization in Stevens' poems. The term hidalgo, meaning a Spanish country gentleman, only appears five times in the corpus of Stevens' poetry, but it can be deployed usefully to describe a colonist from a traditional as opposed to a modern culture. As the term is used here, hidalgo refers to the inhabitants of a place who have acquired "tenure in the land" through generations of habits and customs cultivated in tandem with the particulars of a homeland's culture, climate and landscape.

According to Edward Said, modernist writers try to rewrite their Western homelands “in a personal idiom” that is tempered with a self-critique of imperialist “triumphalist” cultural passions that nevertheless remain open to the prospect of further imperialist conquests (186). Deploying Said’s concept of “contrapuntal” cultural relationships with Western political hegemony, Rachel du Plessis, an influential post-colonial poetry critic, reads politically sanctioned racial and sexual anxieties in some of Stevens’ literary works and letters (56). Accurate as such readings of Stevens’ unconscious motives may be, what are omitted are considerations of failed poetic colonization as calls to distinguish such politically motivated themes from purely cultural ones. In my readings of poems by Wallace Stevens, I want to challenge the post-colonial theoretical notion that cultural colonization should be linked to political colonization. Granted, this overly simplified idea of a link is not exactly what Edward Said theorized, but it has become the default way for many students to read all literature. This paper contends that Wallace Stevens puts an emphasis on failure and division in American colonization which can create a basis for a new modernist cultural understanding of an American place. In order to typify the idea of cultural colonization of America, this paper focuses on Stevens’ ‘hidalgo’ figure as a unifying concept to cover all colonial figures in Stevens’ poems. In this way, this paper attempts to understand Stevens not as a political imperialist, but as a cultural colonist.

Political imperialists directly or indirectly justify political domination of places, whereas cultural colonists self-consciously justify a people’s cultural relationship to a place-or lack thereof. The post-colonial Stevens critic Edward Marx links cultural colonies and “poetic cities” to a new American primitivism, which he defines as,

...the nativist aesthetic associated with the Mayans: the almost mystical idea that a culture is rooted to and in some sense emanates from a place, an idea that will become important later in the poem when Crispin attempts to establish his own poetic colony. (*Wallace Stevens Journal* 183).

However, Stevens does suggest a difference between political and cultural colonies in his poem “The Men that are Falling.” The speaker in this poem takes counsel from the imaginary soldier, “thick lipped from riot and rebellion...[who] loved earth not heaven, enough to die,” and probably not from the “...demagogues and pay-men!” (*Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* 188). It is for the love of a place that rebels die, not for the political stratagems of the politicians and” paymen.” The post-colonial theoretical notion that cultural colonization should be linked to political conquests removes the pathos from such lines and renders the poetic effort to particularize such pathos to be just another political act imposed from above.

Stevens and other American modernist poets such as Gertrude Stein, T.S. Elliot, Ezra Pound and H.D. are known having felt more allegiance to European cultural ideals than to what they thought to be comparatively shallow American political ideals. In several of Stevens’ poems, it can be argued, such a notion of political shallowness is embodied in the inadequacy of cultural products such as statues of General Andrew Jackson that represent hastily concocted democratic political goals. Paradoxically, as will be seen in the readings below, a more authentic relationship with a place is closely aligned with the recognition of a lack of an authentic relationship with American places. Nevertheless, given Stevens’ perceived sense of rootlessness in America, it is not surprising that Stevens made many attempts to discover his

European heritage through extensive genealogical research. Also indicative of Stevens as a kind of cultural exile is the fact that he writes in his manifesto poem, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” that “from this the poem springs: that we live in a place that is not our own” (*CP* 383).

Of the many characters and motifs that typify Stevens’ imaginary colonists in exile, I will focus on Stevens’ *hidalgo* figure as a unifying concept to cover all figures who fail at cultural colonization in Stevens’ poems. The term *hidalgo*, meaning a Spanish country gentleman, only appears five times in the corpus of Stevens’ poetry, but it can be deployed usefully to describe a colonist from a traditional as opposed to a modern culture. As the term is used here, *hidalgo* refers to the inhabitants (landed elites and feudal peasants alike) of a place who have acquired “tenure in the land” through generations of habits and customs cultivated in tandem with the particulars of a homeland’s culture, climate and landscape. The Old World *hidalgo* is an ironic figure, who does not offer anything convincing in the way of earnest identification with places. He serves to highlight the shortcomings of cultural colonization.

The Hidalgo and the Plantation

Americans can postulate the idea of a colonized home in a new world because somewhere their forbears have done the same. As a modern urban dweller, however, Stevens does not live the agrarian feudal lifestyle of his presumed forbears in Holland and Germany (or the feudalism associated with the Latin American haciendas and Southern plantations of the New World aristocracy). Some of the difficulties of poetically conceiving a New World colonist in the mould of an Old World plantation dweller, the *hidalgo*, are seen in Stevens’ plantation and rural colonization poems—such poems as “In a Clear Season of Grapes,” “Two at Norfolk,” “The Comedian as the Letter C,” “Ploughing on Sunday,” “Anecdote of the Jar, and “American Sublime.” As for “In a Clear Season of Grapes,” the imagery in the poem suggests the link between culture and ancestral lands:

When I think of our lands I think of the house
And the table that holds the platter of pears,
Vermillion smeared over green, arranged to show. (*CP* 110)

Here, the picture of a European home and European land in a still-life painting almost satisfies the narrator. A few lines later, the poem moves from still-life painting to the real house and lands:

But this gross blue under rolling bronzes
Belittles those carefully chosen daubs.
Flashier fruits! A flip for the sun and moon,

If they mean no more than that. But they do.
And mountains and the sea do. And our lands.
And the welter of frost and the fox cries do.

Much more than that. Autumnal passages
Are overhung by the shadows of the rocks
And the nostrils blow out salt around each man. (110)

The poem alludes to the wine grower who has become accustomed to ancestral lands after many generations of fox hunts and grape harvests. Fox hunts and wine grapes, which do not grow in New England, and were not cultivated extensively in the Southern colonies, make this a European still-life painting (“smeared” “daubs”) of “vermilioned pears” on a table. The poem’s title, “In a Clear Season of Grapes” refers to that cardinal point on the wine grower’s calendar when the grapes are ripe. For Stevens’s narrator, the season of grapes marks a private symbol for the time when poetry can be harvested—the time when mind and matter seem to cohere in an imagined scene that lies far beyond the local spirits (the *genii loci*) of New England. Perhaps, the narrator misses his imagined ancestral lands, so abstractions in a European cultural product have to serve as substitutes for a real relationship with a landscape and place.

The next “plantation” poem, “Two at Norfolk” shows an ironical tragedy in which European born parents grieve the loss of their two American-born children whom the parents only distantly know and understand in the way that children of immigrants can seem foreign to their parents. In the poem, European immigrants and their children come together only in death, and “never in the air so full of summer” (111). The Scandinavian father in the poem whose “moon was always in Scandinavia” and had “little to speak of” to his children, and the African Americans in the poem also have little to say and even less incentive to “study the symbols and the resquiets” in order to commemorate a tragic love affair of people they did not know and probably did not like. Thus, the darkly comic strategy of the poem is to point to the absence of a coherent cultural identity of the “two” in Norfolk, Virginia.

Another sardonic portrayal of a failed colonization process occurs in “The Comedian as the Letter C” (1921). This poem is the longest and most ambitious poem in *Harmonium*, Stevens’ first major book-length publication. It is also the one that directly treats the difficulties of being a cultural colonist. The solution is “The idea of a colony,” as opposed to an actual cultural colony. The colonist in this Odyssey-like quest poem attempts to write the epic of the New World, but due to the immensity of the task gives up. As colonist-comedian, Crispin tries to find the local reality in the jungles and plantations of the New World, but due to the immense scale of the task he settles for middle-class comfort. He, like the immigrants in “Two at Norfolk,” choose a democratic compromise between two climactic zones of the New World, the Mexican Yucatán with its volcano gods and the severe asceticism of the “green palmettos of crepuscular ice” of the arctic north (34). The overall geographical range of the Crispins’ cultural reference points—Europe, the arctic, tropical Mayan jungles and an American middle point makes the task as a whole seem too much for the powers of one hapless adventurer. When Crispin is in the Mayan Yucatan, his European sensibilities lead him to expect that he may meet “Mayan sonneteers,” but becomes destitute when confronted with the foreign presence of volcano gods instead. Crispin does not discover his European heart of darkness in the sing-song jingles of this poem. Such an analogy must overlook the poem’s humour and over-the-top over-luxurious poetic diction, which already seems to dismiss Crispin’s project from the outset.

On what strange froth does the gross Indian dote,
What Eden sapling gum, what honeyed gore,
What pulpy dram distilled of innocence

That streaking gold should speak in him,
Or bask within his images and words? (38)

Crispin's expectations of hearing the baroque richness of Edenic language in the Yucatan guide his perceptions to the extent that any real contact could never happen.

Further north, the Quixotic Crispin attempts to demonstrate that he can channel his own cultural energies to discover the intelligence of local soil in the Carolinas, a notion he brings along with him from having been a planter in France. The important point is that the plantation cultures of America and Europe cannot easily be reconciled. However, as overreaching comedic figure, Crispin retains hope even as he shifts his poetic colonization project from that of being the regional representative "man in his soil" as the Old World *hidalgo* would have been, to a disembodied voice of abstractions: "his soil is man's intelligence" (36). An alternative way to define the 'hidalgo' could be "Man [as] the intelligence of his soil" — which suggests domination or dominion over places. The difference between these definitions is the difference between domination and habitation. Stevens' colonist leaves the Old World for the New World to experience a new type of relationship with the land and climate. Crispin hopes to inhabit the place rather than to rule over it. Failing this, Crispin accepts provisional abstract relationships with his new home. Thus, by the end of the poem, the New World man is no longer "pine-spokesman" as natives of this new place become conceptual elements: "the natives of the rain are rainy men" (37).

In other early poems, Stevens even caricatures the modern way of settling the New World as a sort of comedic con job. From the point of view of shoring up a home in the midst of cultural exile, Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919) honors the absurdity in believing in a noble fiction about a noble jar ("Tall and of a port in air") that takes "dominion everywhere" simply because it was placed on a wooded hill in Tennessee (76). The particular product of modern people, the factory-produced Dominion Jar, does not really tame the American "slovenly wilderness," even if it is intentionally placed there; the anecdote of its dominating presence also serves to betray the false perception that the wilderness was "slovenly" before the jar brought order to the place.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion every where.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee. ("Anecdote of the Jar")

This jar is a cultural product, but it's not eternal art. It's not a Grecian Urn. It's made quickly, used in practical ways to can fruits, vegetables, and, according to Camille Paglia, to make moonshine alcohol in the Pennsylvania branch of the Appalachians, mountains and hills through which Stevens hiked as a young man (126). A jar is just a jar, but if used in a surprising way it can become much more, depending on one's subjective perspective. For example, this jar with the biblical name, Dominion Jar, can be the center point in a poetic city with the Native American name of Tennessee. If that sounds unlikely, that's because it's just an anecdote, a short amusing story somewhere between fiction and fact. It's not reliable. However, from the reader's subjective point of view, intentionally placing junk on the middle of a hill becomes itself cultural art that takes dominion over a place in a slightly comical and unexpected way. Glen Macleod believes that Marcel Duchamp influenced Stevens through his famous conceptual art piece "The fountain," the urinal that Duchamp intentionally placed in an art exhibit in New York City in 1917. Similar to the jar placed on a hill in Tennessee, determining its significance depends on one's subjective appreciation of the intentional act.

In a later poem, "American Sublime" (1935), this theme of false connections is seen when the speaker in the poem asks with "what bread" and "what wine" the "mickey [mouse] mockers" of that poem should spiritually nourish themselves if the posing political figure of General Jackson is an insufficient mythological projection to effectively transubstantiate the natural products of the land into an enduring cultural—as opposed to a mere political—colonization (130). Adding some insight to this spiritual issue of the historical concept of the American sublime, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes that "everything has two handles. Beware the wrong one." Stevens' "American Sublime," the poem, is one of those things with two handles. In the non-romantic sense, the American sublime is just the sublime of the landscape, not the subjective experience of the landscape. The General Andrew Jackson depicted as a man posing for a statue seems to lack the subjective power that would allow him to behold "the dominion jar" on the hill in Tennessee, and fail to see that it is not a flag marking political territory. In America, Andrew Jackson is emblematic of populist democracy, and he is known as a frontiersman and a fighter. He fought against the Seminole tribes and the Spanish in Florida and thereby delivered Spanish Florida to the United States. Stevens writes other statue poems containing generals on horseback. The overall point of Stevens' statue poems like these, taken as a whole, seems to be that political figures don't inspire people in a cultural or spiritual way. In fact, they give people the wrong idea about what cultural products really are.

Urban Hidalgo

More realistically, but no less fruitfully, in the title poem of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, the aristocratic hidalgo of plantations takes the form of an everyman in one of America's Northern industrial centers. Out of the "sounds that are false," the speaker in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" will "evolve a man" whose essence is that of a puppet ("fantoche") "like something on the stage, puffed out," but he is a puppet whose stage is the "banal suburb" of "Oxidia"—a far cry from pastoral colonial ideals. Visually, the word Oxidia¹ suggests the oxidation in metallic objects such as cables, industrial smokestacks, machinery, and foundries:

⁷ In a letter Stevens writes, "Oxidia (from oxide) is a typical urban suburb, stained and grim"(L 791).

...heavy cables, slung
Through Oxidia, banal suburb,
One half of its installments paid.
Dew-dapper clapper-traps, blazing
From crusty stacks above machines.
Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,
Oxidia is the soot of fire,
Oxidia is Olympia. (181-82)

A hero or “man number one” (166) that was the resident of the Old World’s mythical Olympia² is replaced by guitar-playing everyman in Oxidia who must forge / found his own European Olympia in an industrial setting. In the exercises of the imagination, the modern urban hidalgos can recreate ties to the world by playing with the meanings and identities of everyday objects. In doing so, they break with the definitions of the past and begin to manufacture a return to the poetic garden from a humanist eye-level perspective rather than through the models of an elevated central authority.

Hidalgo as Abstraction

The following poem in the book, “The Men that Are Falling,” was inspired by news of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.⁹ It laments that the natives of Spain must die for the political and ideological causes that are imposed on them by “demagogues and pay-men!” (188). These authentic Spanish hidalgos die for their ancestral lands in the war because they “loved earth, not heaven, enough to die” (188). In contrast, the less geographically bound New World hidalgo, from the book’s third poem “A Thought Revolved,” represents the imaginary figure who can lead a people out of American cultural exile. But as the poem’s title and its discordant assortment of poetic structures and modes of thought make clear, this leader personifies just one phase of thought, not a permanent hero. Or to put it another way, this is just a poetic exercise. Combinations of contrasting elements in this poem, such as the woman’s “lesser dithyrambs” and the hidalgo-scholar’s “severe ... book” in a single thought or concept characterizes one of Stevens’ contributions to poetry. Like a symbolist poet, he allows the reader to experience rather than deduce correspondences in a poem, and like a high-modernist poet, he allows the reader to experience the way the mind works in constructing reality. Stevens’ poetry may offer readers a view of how he or she imagines ideals and worldviews (which are embedded in one’s interpretations), but at the same time, these ideals point to the modern person’s existential distance to his land and cultural surroundings.

² In another letter, he writes, “Olympia is like Olympus, home of the classical gods” (L 789). He also writes, “The necessity is to evolve a man from modern life—from Oxidia not Olympia, since Oxidia is our Olympia” (Qtd in Cook 128).

⁹ Alan Filreis makes a convincing case that Stevens has been grossly misread and skewered as a conservative poet whose poems are solely autotelic objects d’art that have nothing to do with current events in Stevens’s time. This poem, “The Men that are Falling,” for instance won a prize given by the leftist *Nation* magazine for best poem about the Spanish Civil War. See Filreis. *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 31.

In terms of cultural colonization, a question that arises may be, how does the modern reader of a Stevens poem become reconciled to a particular place and the idea of home? The answer is that Stevens' modern poetry does not grant anyone the authority to claim Manhattan, Connecticut or Spain as a poetic home; the imagination itself must supply a provisionally satisfactory idea of home. The importance of the imagination in creating poetic cities is seen above in the differing responses depicted in "Anecdote of the Jar" and "American Sublime." In the first poem, subjectivity and humor are required and in the second poem humor and a strong subjective response are wanting.

More importantly, though, the vast difference between the particular place and cultural projections onto that place is not something that a political union of diverse peoples can poetically and authentically gloss over. This is exactly what Stevens depicts in his offensively titled poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (1935). In this poem, after a series of forty-nine cantos of seemingly disconnected meditations on death and mutability, a "city in snow" is built, which is to say a poetic city is built that recognizes the limits of cultural colonization in the New World.

To that end, Stevens rejects political solutions that would act as expedient substitute for an authentic cultural homeland. In "Like Decorations..." Stevens also seems to reject the unifying heroism and broad optimism of a "Walt Whitman," whose influence is "passing" in America (150). In the poem's final section, Stevens appears to question the efficacy of a Whitmanesque political "Union of the weakest" that "develops strength / Not wisdom" (158).

....Can all men, together, avenge
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?
But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow. (158)

Stevens also appears to renounce the possibility of a unifying national poem sung by a political chorus of America's diverse national and ethnic groups. "Like Decorations" offers no incentive for any representative immigrant group, especially blacks, to raise a more resounding chorus of unification. As for unity, the poem's fifty sections may indeed represent a union of 48 disconnected states in 1935 (which *is* a possibility in a poem which begins and ends with sections that reference Walt Whitman, the poet who celebrates the Union cause), but, ironically, no American place names are mentioned, and moreover, what does connect these American states are the graveyard "decorations" of America's most politically disadvantaged ethnic minority. Perhaps it is this recognition of the disharmonious reality of America's political union that turns Stevens' "wise man" in the poem away from political solutions and toward a cultural solution that at its core rejects the pathetic fallacy: a city built in snow recalls Stevens' Snow Man, which is the ultimate example of such a rejection.

It is important to emphasize here that Stevens rejection of politics is not a rejection of cultural ties to America. When he was asked why he did not escape to Paris as many other American poets and novelists (also would-be hidalgos) had, Stevens replied, "My job is not now with those poets from Paris. It is to keep the fire-place burning..." here in America (*Secretaries of the Moon* 20). If he had believed that the American hearth was incapable of heating a real home, he might have traveled to his beloved

France. And Stevens does not appear to accept, as his later critics insist, a poetic with language as its only goal; he really believed in the possibility of “the great poem of the earth” that would lead to the founding of a real poetic city as great poems of past eras have. Yet given the representative nature of his democratic society, Stevens seems to understand that neither he nor anyone else can (as tempting as it can be in a chaotic world at war) impose a cultural colony onto all of America’s constituents, and as his many poems of failed colonization attest, this project would begin in acknowledging the cultural poverty of the time in which he lives.

Intimations of new beginnings that would overcome such poverty occur across Stevens’ poetic career. In the section titled “The Westwardness of Everything” from the poem “Our Stars Come From Ireland,” written six years before his death in 1955, Stevens reiterates the failure of having established a poetic home, but there is also the suggestion of a continuing process of cultural colonization, which is itself a solution for modern cultural homelessness. The “Westwardness of Everything” is the promise that just as every day begins in the East and ends in the West, so too is the process of discovering fictional transparencies between the mind and matter a never-ending one. In a local particular sense, however, the memories of an Irish homeland to someone living in America become “beautiful and abandoned refugees” (*CP* 455). Notions of at-homedness passing westward from Ireland are,

Themselves an issue as at an end, as if
There was an end at which in a final change,
When the whole habit of the mind was changed,
The ocean breathed out morning in one breath. (455)

The hidalgo’s memories of home become a universalizing “one breath” of both morning and exilic mourning in the whole of North America.

To conclude, division and failure may itself be the basis for an American cultural colony that insists on separation between topical political issues and the poetic power of authentic cultural encounters with a landscape. While it is true that any survey of historical colonizations will show that politics, economics, gender, or sexuality cannot be separated out from culture, and that therefore Stevens’ hidalgo figure cannot be an exact proof that Stevens is a cultural colonist who is not also a political imperialist, it is also true that Stevens’ poems about colonies and colonists are testaments to the importance of separating the cultural ideal of home from the blind imposition of the same on an alien American territory.

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