Cultural Encounters

*by Joyce Chaplin*

Some 40,000 years from now, give or take a few millennia, someone, somewhere in the universe may find and listen to the Golden Record, NASA’s attempt to describe Earth and its peoples to anyone out there who might be interested. There are actually two copies of the Golden Record, each on its own spacecraft, *Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2*, which were launched out into the cosmos in 1977, one year after the Bicentennial of the United States and almost five centuries after the first sustained encounters between the peoples of the Americas and the peoples of Europe.

It is interesting that the Golden Record resembles the earlier encounter—especially in its use of language, music, science and technology, and pictures—and equally interesting that it does not (and perhaps cannot) repeat other aspects of that encounter: food, sex, and violence. A comparison between the earlier encounter and a possible future one is not only interesting, but can help explain the history of how people have thought about interacting with complete strangers, with the post-Columbian encounter, between 1492 and 1607, as one of the most important examples of cultural encounter ever to have occurred.

Of course, the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans had precedents, unlike a hypothetical encounter with extraterrestrial beings. Even before Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492, Europeans had several centuries’ worth of experience in dealing with people beyond their cultural boundaries, including populations in Africa, the Near East, central Asia, and the East Indies. Medieval legends of the monstrous races (monopods with one giant foot apiece, or dog-headed folk, or people with no heads at all and their faces in their chests) faded away in light of testimony about the real people to be found outside Europe. After 1500, when the Spanish moved into the Caribbean and eventually onto the Mesoamerican mainland, their narratives of discovery told subsequent voyagers a range of things that they might expect: abundant gold, human sacrifice, and trees that were green all year round.

Experience with non-European populations shaped expectations about America, as when Europeans described certain Native American customs as resembling practices to be found elsewhere—Indians who practiced polygamy resembled Muslim “Turks”; Indians who lived in “clans” with “chiefs” resembled the Irish or Highland Scots; Indians who wore little or no clothing resembled the “Blackamoors” of sub-Saharan Africa. It went both ways. Indians who had first encountered Catholic Europeans sometimes assumed that Protestants too would be inclined to revere saints and repeat prayers in Latin.

But after the initial approach, what next? What did two sets of people, mostly if not entirely foreign to each other, tend to do once they drew together?

First of all, they spoke to each other. No specific language is universal among humans, but the general use of language is—to speak a language is to demonstrate humanity. So, when initial encounters between Europeans and Indians occurred, everyone talked. Repeating things, with greater volume and emphasis, was a common tactic, however useless. Close study of a new people’s language was a better tactic, as when Thomas Harriot made a vocabulary of Roanoke Indian words and phrases during his sojourn at England’s Roanoke colony in 1585. And American Indians learned European languages, sometimes to a level of proficiency that astonished the newcomers. In 1602, English sailors in New England found that the native people could “pronounce our language with great facilitie.” One American Indian man even teased the Englishmen for smoking a native product: “How now (sirah) are you so saucie with my Tabacco?”

Language was also the medium of official notification, whenever one side felt that it had to declare something to the other. The famous Spanish *Requerimiento*, a 1513 Spanish declaration of sovereignty over American territory and people, was meant to be read to Indians, whether they understood, let alone agreed with it, or not. When Francis Drake visited Native Americans in California in 1579, he and his men listened to many long ceremonial speeches or “orations,” whose meaning they could only guess based on how the Indians who also listened reacted to them.

When language failed, music helped. A surprising number of European ships carried musical instruments. When Martin Frobisher went to the Canadian Arctic in 1578, one of the Englishmen in his crew noted that the Inuit “delight in music above measure, and will keep time and stroke to any tune which you shall sing.” Europeans also used trumpets and drums to signal military efforts—surely American Indians learned what these strange sounds meant. They too signaled war with music. Before an attack on the English settlement at Roanoke, some Native men sang a warning. Most of the time, Europeans disliked Indian music so much that they believed it was all part of warfare. The Jamestown settlers described Powhatan songs that used twenty to thirty male singers plus percussive instruments; the English were frightened, not entertained.

The Europeans put great faith in their science and technology to communicate to American Indians what they thought were universal truths, and to proclaim their technical superiority. Thomas Harriot used compasses and telescopes to astonish Roanoke on-lookers. In 1607, when he was taken captive by the Powhatan Indians in Virginia, John Smith tried to impress them by showing them how his pocket-sized portable sundial worked. Jesuit missionaries consulted almanacs to find out when eclipses might occur, and then predicted those events to potential converts to demonstrate Christian knowledge of the natural world. Indians also used their knowledge of nature to impress Europeans, as when they identified native plants of medicinal value. In that way, the Spanish learned that cinchona bark from Peru could cure the symptoms of malaria.

When all else failed, pictures could convey information and even perceptions. Catholic missionaries learned to carry images of saints and angels to impart religious lessons. When they painted their versions of angels, Peruvian artists gave them the wings they had seen in European illustrations, but added fine Spanish clothing and firearms, just to make it clear how they compared the angels, spiritual conquerors, with the real conquerors, the well-dressed and heavily armed members of the Spanish elite. Others provided maps—meaning drawn, painted, sketched, or embroidered images that presented different American places in geographic relation to each other. Europeans welcomed these maps, and showed Indians their own versions to make clear where they were from, and what they thought the rest of the world (and cosmos) looked like.

Closer contact brought domestic and even intimate encounters. Sharing food was a common ritual. In his wonderful series of watercolors depicting the Native Americans and land around the Roanoke settlement, John White paid a great deal of attention to food. In various illustrations, Indians hunt and fish animals, grow corn, cook stew, and sit together to eat. The details make apparent—as do the other surviving records of the colony—that the food was shared with the newcomers. Europeans also gave Indians samples of their food. Ship’s biscuit and distilled alcohol were popular, though some Indians recoiled at wine, thinking it was blood, and wrinkled their noses at hot mustard.

Shared meals, and alcohol, could lead to sex. When Ferdinand Magellan stopped in Brazil before heading around the world, his crewmen chose sexual partners and made the most of their shore leave. Some Indian leaders encouraged sexual encounters that might lead to marriage and peaceful alliance with the newcomers. John Smith was alarmed, during his captivity among Virginia’s Powhatan Indians, to be caressed by several young women who asked: “Love you not me?” He did not, but other European men did. French hunters in Canada, the fabled *coureurs de bois*, liked to marry into the native groups on which they depended for their trade. But most of the time, European authorities discouraged the alliances, unless they could verify that both parties were Christian and underwent Christian marriage ceremonies.

If many of these encounters were peaceful, fear and uncertainty could undermine them—and violence was a common outcome. One Inuit man had his ribs broken during what was supposed to be a friendly boxing match with an Englishman. A group of sailors in New England set their two large mastiff dogs on Indians whenever they felt threatened. When fighting broke out, Indians gave as good as they got. Some Inuit shot an arrow into Frobisher’s buttocks, a serious wound, and an undignified one. Later, when the Pilgrims settled at Plymouth in New England in 1620, they found the grave of a European partly dressed in sailor’s garb. They could not shake the suspicion that the Indians had enslaved and perhaps killed him. In many ways, these deadly outcomes were not solved by food and sex, but created by them. Indians were angry when newcomers demanded food from scarce supplies and insulted when the foreign men assumed that wives and not just unmarried women were potential sexual partners.

In the end, the encounters identified an irreconcilable difference: the Europeans were there to stay, but the Native Americans did not want large, permanent settlements of them. The invaders used language and images to get useful information about the land they wished to possess and they asked for food to see what the land might produce. The Indians used music as part of military defense and they learned European language to find out what the strangers were up to. Many of the individual moments of encounter were peaceful, even productive. But put together, they established a foundation of distrust and unease that would permeate the colonial societies that were later established.

To a surprising extent, NASA’s Golden Record repeats all of the major elements of cultural encounter in early America. The record has spoken greetings in fifty-five languages, including one from the Americas, Peruvian Quechua. It has official declarations of peace from then-US President Jimmy Carter and then-UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. “This is a present from a small, distant world,” Carter explains, “a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts, and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours.” The sounds include recordings of nature (bird song and whale song, volcanic eruptions, and thunder) and of human brainwaves. The science is represented in the technology of the record itself, plus an ultra-pure sample of the isotope uranium-238 electroplated onto the cover of the Golden Record. With a half-life of 4.51 billion years, the uranium sample’s ratio between pure and daughter elements should give whoever receives it some sense of the time that has passed since *Voyager*’s launch. The images, 155 of them, include a photograph of primatologist Jane Goodall with some of her chimpanzees, a diagram of continental drift, images of the Taj Mahal and the Sydney Opera House, a music score, and a portrait of children with a globe. The music takes up ninety minutes of the record and samples everything from Indonesian gamelan music, to Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” to Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode.”

The food, sex, and violence that were recurring incidents in early American encounters do not have clear counterparts on the Golden Record. True, the 155 images include illustrations of human anatomy, conception, birth, and breastfeeding. And that last bit of inter-human nourishment is accompanied by other images of humans who are cooking, eating, and drinking. So food and sex are represented, if not exactly shared with the eventual observer.

But in what may be the most misleading aspect of the Golden Record, there is no representation of any of humanity’s numerous instances of warfare, invasion, imperialism, or exploitation. Violence is invisible, not part of our history. Perhaps that omission shows something about our better intentions, compared to people in earlier ages. Maybe 40,000 years from now, earthlings will live in peace, and all traces of war and empire will have long since faded away.