GEOGRAPHY UNBOUND
BOUNDARIES AND THE EXOTIC WORLD IN THE
EARLY ENLIGHTENMENT*

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INTRODUCTION: BOUNDARIES AND GLOBAL GEOGRAPHY

The early modern world (and, arguably, the modern as well) experienced boundaries largely as textual and graphic affairs. To see the world and cross its borders, to move among newly encountered landscapes and peoples and to explore the exotic scenery and mores of the expanding globe, was to read about or otherwise glance at mimetic representations of distant space. This occurred most commonly in two dimensions—on paper or perhaps canvas and tapestry—or through more tactile engagement with those three-dimensional replications of the world that circulated in the form of globes, decorative arts, and exotic artifacts, the latter collected from scattered overseas lands and then re-assembled in early modern European cabinets of curiosities. Geography was, if not quite sedentary, a stay-at-home pastime. If all the world was a stage and the men and women of early modern Europe merely players, the experience of the staged world in this period took place in manageable, tangible, portable forms, which had the synthesizing and distilling effect of a well crafted playbill.

By the later decades of the seventeenth century and into the early decades of the eighteenth, the authors of these European-designed

* This essay expands on themes originally explored in an article on exoticism in the Enlightenment: “Mapping an Exotic World: The Global Project of Dutch Geography, circa 1700,” in The Global Eighteenth Century, ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 19–37. While the earlier study focused on dramatic texts and literary mappings (in the work of John Dryden, especially), the current contribution, in keeping with the themes of this volume, pays particular attention to processes of boundary-making and the place of the Dutch Republic in the project of early modern geography. For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, I would like to thank Benjamin Kaplan and Louise D. Townsend. I am also grateful for the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the W.M. Keck Foundation, the Huntington Library, and the Royalty Research Fund of the University of Washington.
playbills were, to a remarkable degree, from the Netherlands. Circa 1700, the Dutch role in making geography was extraordinary. They were the preeminent producers of geographic wares and thus the leading boundary-makers for European consumers: the principle authors of the myriad representations of the non-European world that circulated throughout Europe during the decades leading up to, and following, the year 1700. As a consequence, the Dutch played a pivotal role in shaping the world, as perceived by Europe, during the critical, formative, colonial moment of global history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The advantages of this privileged position were considerable. When Europeans looked at the world and imagined its boundaries circa 1700—when they contemplated the world’s varied inhabitants and the exotic customs and religions of distant lands; when they pictured the globe’s sundry flora, fauna, and curiosities; when they perceived the rich and enticing commodities available to enterprising merchants abroad—they did so more often than not through Dutch eyes. When they quite literally gazed at the world—in its various textual iterations, in mass-produced topographic engravings and city views, in lavishly crafted landscape and still-life paintings, in scholarly atlases and globes, in delftware, tapestry, and other decorative arts that incorporated exotic motifs—it more than likely would be in a form of Dutch creation, Dutch translation, Dutch design, or Dutch provenance. This meant that the boundaries of the Netherlands circa 1700, in a certain discursive sense, were utterly boundless.

So were the benefits for the Netherlands, and this raises important questions pertaining to the nature of geography and the culture of colonialism at the dawn of Europe’s great age of empire. The power to make boundaries, be they real or imagined, indubitably imparts a power of another sort, which has long been identified with imperial expansion and colonial control. Boundary-making, even if rhetorical, implies agenda-setting prerogatives. Geography, that is to say, is not merely an exercise of descriptive engagement with the world, but also a process of strategic representation that, broadly speaking, relates directly to issues of political and economic hegemony. The postcolonial summation of this relationship adduces that substantial control over colonial geography translates into demonstrable influence over imperial authority. Those who describe have a hegemonic interest in those whom they describe, according to the fundamental formulation of Edward Said, famously argued in *Orientalism*; “knowledge is power” is Michel