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Published in *The Semiotic Review of Books* 5:3 (1994). Copyright © 1994 by *The Semiotic Review of Books*. Used by permission. Online @ http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/srb/colonization.html

The Semiotic Economy of Colonization

By J. Agustin Pastén

Inventing A-m e-r-i-c a; Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism. By José Rabasa. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, 281 pages. ISBN 0-8061-2495-4.

In *Inventing A-m-e-r-i-c-a: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism,* José Rabasa explores both the process of the creation of America via language and the gradual emergence of a European subjectivity key to the colonial enterprise of Europe. Although the author is on the side of those who believe that the New World was not discovered but invented, he disagrees with the notion of invention espoused by Edmundo O'Gorman in his classic *La invención de América* (1957; 1977). In the end, he states in his introductory essay ("The Critique of Colonial Discourse: An Introduction") that O'Gorman still erects an "authentic" version of America against which all writings of and about the New World have to be measured. Following closely Foucault's concept of "discursive formations," the author contends that America is ultimately the product of the discourse of power. Hence, he is not interested in the veracity of representations of the New World found in chronicles, *relaciones* and sundry other colonial documents, but in the "production of America as something 'new.'" Rabasa's is a semiotic and deconstructive endeavour in which are traced the rhetorical and epistemological tools employed in the appropriation of a new territory by a European consciousness. In official accounts, personal letters, world atlases and encyclopedic histories,

the author locates the birth of a "thesaurus of New World motifs" such as the noble savage, exotic fauna and flora, cannibalism, and others. Rabasa conceives of historiography as the "writing of the real" and frames his study within the poststructuralist theories germane to an overall critique of "colonial discourse" first marked out by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Thanks to these theories, as well as to the theoretical studies of Hayden White, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, among others, the author hints at the possibility of rescuing from the interstices of colonial texts the inscription of indigenous voices forgotten until now by historians; as he reminds us, the invention of America also meant the conscious subjugation of indigenous knowledges.

Chapter I, "The Nakedness of America?," sets the stage for what the author perceives as four paramount moments in the invention of America. In this chapter he carries out an in-depth semiotic analysis of Jan van der Straet's engraving representing Amerigo Vespucci and "America." The gist of his argument lies in the contrast he establishes between a seventeenth-century "paradoxical reading" of this allegory and "contemporary reductive factual captions and commentaries." The problem with these captions, he argues, is that they 'transform the allegory into a repository of true statements about the discovery." In the engraving itself, Rabasa detects a number of key oppositions. Vespucci, the discoverer, represents history and culture; America, the "discovered," symbolizes nature; the latter is nude, the former dressed. The emblems pertaining to Vespucci (his attire, the ship, the flag) are clear and well-defined: those that surround America are somewhat out of focus and convey the idea of a state of enervation from which it has just been awakened by the discoverer. Moreover, if Vespucci, the "historical actor," the "protoscientist" represents the very essence of a rapidly advancing European civilization the American continent appears dislocated, fragmented into a series of meaningless entities. In the end, the very birth of America signals also its loss of identity; America "becomes merely a 'naked body' for the inscriptions and longings of a European imagination." For Rabasa, the image of the "awakening" of America is analogous to interpretations of voyages of discovery wherein the territories that are found are not

just discovered but created. At the same time, however, he warns the reader not to construe the colonizing process as a mere "blank page" where Western desire is inscribed, as did Michel de Certeau in *L'écriture de l'histoire* (1975). Colonization, after all, meant the appropriation of indigenous texts.

In chapter II, "Columbus and the New Scriptural Economy of the Renaissance," Rabasa delineates the first moment of the invention of America by tracing the production of a *new man, a new world,* and, following de Certeau, a *new scriptural possibility* in Christopher Columbus' *Diario,* letters, and nautical charts. He underscores a shift from orality to writing as "labour" in the Renaissance whereby historical records no longer register exemplary lives or natural phenomena but are used instead "for" the appropriation of new territories and the transformation of social realities. The author depicts Columbus as a walking semiotician who, more than attempting to accommodate medieval motifs about the Far East to the new reality, is forced to "write" the new; Rabasa denominates this effort a "semiotic of errancy." He criticizes Tzvetan Todorov for presupposing the external reality of the New World in his *La Conquête de l'Amérique* (1982). Columbus's two-pronged task of interpreting as well as producing the new through the reading of the old, harbours two implications: the construction of a text and the imposition of an "order on the world". The new scriptural economy of the Renaissance is ultimately a capitalistic enterprise; via writing the past is accumulated and the new colonized. As the author asserts, Columbus's *Diario* "alters cartographical paradigms as it systematically maps uncharted waters with Spanish or hispanicized terminology." Furthermore, there is an attempt in the *Diario* to test the fabulous in the real, with the concomitant result that the new alters the old; for example, when Columbus converts "Caniva" into "Gran Can" and "Civao" into "Cipango." Rabasa's interest is to evaluate the influence that passages from Marco Polo and other medieval sources exerted upon Columbus's narratives. In the writings of Columbus the "inscriber," native inhabitants are metaphorized into noble savages and nature is invented as a literary topic comparable only to the *locus amoenus* of classical literature. In the end, Columbus's *new world* appears as a land of plenty, a

prophesied promised land ready to be exploited by Europe; the *new man,* for his part, is constructed as a helpless Adamic figure.

The second moment of the invention of America is analyzed in chapter III, "Dialogue as Conquest in the Cortés-Charles V Correspondence." Rabasa takes issue here with some of the most salient features of orthodox anthropology. He looks at how Cortés, viewed both as a "protoanthropologist" and a "protoethnographer," objectifies Mexican civilization; he examines, moreover, the role dialogue and knowledge played in the conquest of Mexico. In the last section of the chapter, the author studies the process by means of which Mesoamerica is transformed into an ideal New Spain in Cortés's letters. Rabasa likens the ideal government visualized in these letters, i.e.,Moctezuma as master of his own people but subject to Charles V's dictums, to what the British would later call indirect rule. The dialogue between Cortés and Moctezuma constitutes the first model for disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, according to the author. He believes, however, that this dialogue puts into question anthropology's and ethnography's claim to objectivity and neutrality. For even when a dialogical model is employed, one where the truth about a given culture is derived from a seemingly disinterested exchange between a field worker and an informant, "who is the master puppeteer in the interview,?" Rabasa asks (91). In the case of the conquest of Mexico by Cortés, dialogue and communication served as the very tools of conquest.

An integral aspect of the conquest was the territorialization of the city of Tenochtitlan. Cortés was not so interested in the faithful representation of the native text as in the appropriation of native codes for the purpose of colonization. Building a colonial entrepôt in the native city, moreover, implied not only the inscription of utopian signs upon the land but also the erasure and ultimately the alteration of available stock information. Rabasa calls this the "spatialization of native history" and likens it to a palimpsest where the text of the conquered continues to be present in the text of the conqueror. Cortés's ultimate desire was to transform Mexican urban centres, and especially Tenochtitlan, into European-style cities; to accomplish his task, it was nec-

essary to convert the Indians to Christianity and exploit their labour power for the benefit of the European market.

Chapter IV of Rabasa's book, "The Time of the Encyclopedia," deals with the third moment of invention, "the accumulation of data under the rubric *New World* from which particular encyclopedic compendia eventually take form toward the middle of the sixteenth century." He focuses his attention on the writings of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the early Franciscan ethnographers, and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. As Rabasa states at the beginning of the chapter, his interest lies in "outlining a disjuncture between what is available for observation and the particular inventions of an ever-present New World." He starts developing this idea by briefly alluding to Fray Diego de Durán's *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme* (1582) and Bernardo de Balbuena's poem *La grandeza mexicana* (1604). In the former Rabasa perceives the extirpation of indigenous knowledge through the task of ethnographic identification. In the latter a new image of Tenochtitlan emerges; not the fantastic city of Cortés but a colonial metropolis replete with glorious buildings and exuberant gardens devoid of native traces.

In the section dealing with Oviedo, the crown's official chronicler of the "Indies" from 1532 on, Rabasa concentrates on the former's monumental *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535-1549). He describes Oviedo's historiographic achievement as an effort to "recuperate indigenous nomenclatures and correct disfigurations." Foremost, Oviedo's *Historia* is an "exotica Americana" in which its author, beyond exploring the limits of representation at every juncture, allows exoticism to colour every aspect of New World phenomena. What emerge, ultimately, are a "nature full of wonders and a New World where the unexpected constantly erupts." If in the *Historia* the exotic stands as the primary ingredient in the invention of America, the millenarian predominates in the works of the Franciscan ethnographers. In Fray Toribio de Benavente, alias Motolinia, for example, the conquest of the Amerindians is justified on evangelical grounds and the New World is portrayed as the propitious garden on which to build the New Jerusalem. Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, for his part, characterizes Cortés as a sort of Moses for the New World in his *Historia eclesiástica indiana* (1596). In *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España,* Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, indubitably the best known of Franciscan ethnographers, sought to reconstruct Nahuatl culture as it existed before the Spaniards arrived in the New World. For Rabasa there is more than meets the eye in this seemingly laudable feat. In Sahagún's apparently benign and objective intention to rescue indigenous knowledge from oblivion, there lies the desire to codify the past in order to better control the present. The author writes: "The modernity, 'scientificity,' of Sahagún's objectification of Nahua culture has less to do with an intention to be value-free than with the task of reconstructing a native text that would enable missionaries to decipher public behaviour." The chapter closes with an examination of Las Casas's writings. In his writings the image of the noble savage is the most predominant. Of all the writers of the period, claims Rabasa, Las Casas was the only one to invent a species of "utopian discourse." His depiction of the New World as a paradisiacal place and of its inhabitants as innocent creatures, however, increased, paradoxically, the violent intrusion of the Europeans."

The fourth and final moment of invention is outlined in the last chapter of the book, "Allegories of the Atlas." Here Rabasa performs an allegorical reading of Gerhard Mercator's *Atlas.* Rejecting Paul de Man's circumscription of the literary to literature and criticism, he conceptualizes the *Atlas* as a palimpsest wherein geographical demarcations are seen as "a series of erasures and overwritings that have transformed the world." Having drawn from Spanish texts and encyclopedias, Mercator manages to inscribe in the *Atlas* a plurality of semiotic systems as both memory and forgetfulness lie hidden behind an apparent objective world. In the final analysis, the very structure of the *Atlas* calls for an active translation of its codes. Rabasa stresses the indissolubility of the historical from the geographical in Mercator's map. "History," he argues, "naturalizes particular national formations and institutionalizes forgetfulness of earlier territorializations in the perception of the world." A direct consequence of making space historical are a virtual disappearance of the particular point view and a total enthronement of European subjectivity: "... the world revealed by Mercator's *Atlas* is a transhistorical and transnational

theatre where imperialist configurations take form by means of particular national appropriations."

Jose Rabasa's *Inventing America* falls within the parameters of what Bruno Bosteels, drawing from Felix Guattari's proposition of a diagrammatic or semiotic encoding, has recently called a shift from "text to diagram" in his article "From Text to Diagram: Towards a Semiotics of Cultural Cartography." While the shift from textual to cultural studies has been predominant in the United States and Europe for some time, it has received less attention in Latin America and Spain. When theory is used at all, it is often used to analyze literary texts only. For the most part, criticism remains secluded in the text, be it a novel, a poem or a short story. There seems to be nothing that bridges the gap between the literary text, on the one hand, and the cultural and epistemological presuppositions lying behind it on the other; or between the literary text and other cultural artifacts. The closest critics get to establishing a relationship between writing and society, are sociological approaches to literature. This could partially explain the scant attention given to the genre of the essay in departments of Spanish-American literature. The essay would seem to inhabit an empty space where neither the literary nor the cultural resides. In the preponderance of studies devoted exclusively to fictional texts, in fact, there is manifested a kind of fear of the intellectual, a fear of the theoretical machinery which produces the textual.

In light of the scarcity of both cultural and discourse theory in Latin American studies, Rabasa's book is a welcome arrival. The value of his study resides in his laying the foundation for what could become a very comprehensive theoretical mapping of the making of America in Spain's image; *Inventing America* represents only the first step in this direction. After all, Spanish historiography does not end in the sixteenth century; a good number of historiographical texts, many of them written in Latin, and not readily accessible, remain to be studied. Especially important to an understanding of contemporary Latin-American culture, particularly in areas where indigenous groups constitute a significant majority of the population, is a delineation of the discursive formations prevalent in the imagined communities prior to independence from Spain. Among other things,

such a delineation would help clarify the formation of what Angel Rama called "La ciudad letrada" in 1984. At what point in the history of the construction of the New World does a Latin-American intelligentsia arise, or does it ever? In what way does the available knowledge of Spanish historiography help shape the mind set of the forerunners of independent movements such as Francisco Javier Clavijero, Francisco Eugenio Javier de Espejo y Santa Cruz, Francisco de Miranda, Simón Bolivar, among others?

Rabasa's book opens the way for an overall study of cultural practices in the Latin American continent. Except for Nelly Richard in Chile, Beatriz Sarlo in Argentina, and a handful of other critics, Latin-American literature still relies heavily on textual exegesis. The value of the diagram as a paradigm for the study of culture would permit not only the inclusion of the literary within the cultural but also the serious study of discursive formations in the fields of art, politics, communications, and culture in general. Moreover, Rabasa's metaphor of the palimpsest would be an appropriate tool for reconstructing native texts in countries such as Chile and Argentina where indigenous communities have been systematically silenced throughout the years. The task of defining a Spanish-American identity pursued with so much alacrity by Marti, Dario and Rodó, continues to be relevant for Latin America, especially as it is gradually consumed by the toys of capitalism.

The originality of *Inventing America* does not reside in the themes its author chooses, themes such as the invention of America, the noble savage, the New World as paradise, etc. What is original about Rabasa's book is its method, i.e. his having concentrated his attention on "how" America was constructed by Europe. In this sense, the previous studies on Spanish historiography by Walter Mignolo have proven immensely fruitful; also those by Rolena Adorno on *Nueva crónica ve buen gobierno,* written by the Peruvian Guaman Poma de Ayala. But no doubt one of the most significant studies for *Inventing America* was Said's *Orientalism.* To some degree, but not in the same manner. Rabasa's deconstructive effort is tantamount to Said's. But since the Orient was primarily built by England and France and to some extent Germany, one would have to pose the following ques-

tions as regards the colonization of America by Spain -- as Mignolo might put it, one is confronted here with two very different "colonial situations." Is colonial discourse different as it applies to the Middle East, India, Africa, the Caribbean, and America? What role have the variegated indigenous texts played in the formation of the colonial discourse of the Orient and America? In light of these questions, it must be remembered that the European did not mix with the natives. Three hundred years of English presence in India, for example, did not alter one iota the physical appearance of its inhabitants. The Spanish, on the contrary, did mix with the natives. This fact alone might cast a shadow on those who apply postcolonial theory to Spanish American cultural practices.

A few comments remain to be said about Rabasa's book. First of all, it might have been good to include a few words about the coining process of the term "America" to refer to the Spanish speaking nations Lying south of the Rio Grande, especially if one keeps in mind that the book was published by a university press and, most importantly, since some individuals still call the United States "America." Moreover, although *Inventing America* leaves no doubt as to the semiotic construction of the *new world,* one cannot overlook the very palpable consequences of that construction. If the New World is the product of language, it is also the produce of violence, the invention of the new world and new man ran parallel with the savage killing of people and the pillaging of their land; these are tangible signs which must also be taken into account by semiotics. At the same time, even though at the beginning of the book Rabasa alludes to the possibility of finding the indigenous text in the very midst of Spanish historiography (for example in Sahagún's *Historia),* by the end of it the native voice continues to be absent, is this effort possible anyway? And, what type of indigenous knowledge was subjugated by Spanish ethnographers and chroniclers? Furthermore, if it is viable to speak of the territorialization of Tenochtitlan, the same does not hold for the rest of the New World. In other words, territorialization of Tenochtitlan, the same does not hold for the rest of the New World. In other words, territorialization understood as the simultaneous appropriation and erasure of the native code, does not apply to cities like Buenos Aires, Santiago or La Paz, for these had to be built *ab ovo* by the colonizers.

Fittingly, on the cover of his book Rabasa includes the engraving of Vespucci as he seems to awaken America from slumber. This image, and Rabassa's overall conclusion, have the following implications for the future of cultural studies as they pertain to Spanish America. On the positive side, a closer link should be established between the theoretical groundings of magic realism and the chronicler's first reactions to marvels they had never seen before. The study of literary historiography as regards Spanish-American literature should be thoroughly examined; up until now, serious analyses of the literary historiography of most countries are minimum. Most importantly, departments of Spanish, especially at the graduate level, should combine the study of literature with that of culture. This is not easily done when being far away from the daily political and cultural realities of Spanish America; but it is not impossible either. On the negative side, it would seem as if America continues to be "awakened." Two phenomena could prove to be its pernicious enemies in the future: Rampant foreign investment and Protestant missionary incursions. As the Soviet Union fell to pieces, and since free enterprise seems to reign free these days, many Spanish-American nations -- and the rest of the world for that matter -- are encouraging foreign investments without taking into account the economical or cultural impact on their citizens. What's more, except for Cuba, books are prohibitively expensive in most Spanish-American countries. With the increasing consumption of technological goods, moreover, the cultural spaces which were once so abundant in Spanish America, are beginning to gradually disappear, or semiotically to be occupied by systematic invasion of various Protestant groups coming mainly from the United States. Rabasa was right in adopting "inventing" as opposed to "invention" for the title of his book. The process is not over.

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