

1492: EUROPE IN AMERICA AND AMERICA IN EUROPE:  
OR, TRAVELING METAPHORS IN THE DISCOVERIES OF  
AMERICA

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Christopher Columbus may be the forerunner of our (post)modern condition: in his first accounts of the encounter with that land which is about to become America are contained all the tensions and contradictions of our contemporary world. Columbus is animated by faith, but he is greedy; he looks for a new world, but behaves like a tourist; he tries to decipher the unknown, but repeats the clichés of his own culture. Yet from all this a new world unexpectedly appears. This essay explores the cultural and rhetorical conditions that led to the emergence of 'America' by focusing on some moments when material reality and metaphor coalesced to produce unforeseeable and unforgettable effects.

Key words : Columbus; cultures in contact; invention of America; traveling metaphors

I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it  
yielded without a wheelbarrow.  
With respect to landscapes,  
“I am monarch of all I survey,  
My right there is none to dispute”.  
— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

The moment we try to look at Europe in America — *Europa en las Américas* — or, as we should say, probably, *Europa en las Indias*, we are lost: we all know that these are *not* the Indies; we all know that these people on the beach are not *Indians*. But what good does that do to you? What is a man to do? What shall we call it, or call them? So we may turn to that place beyond the European Western horizon and try to see what there may have been to see more than five hundred years ago, when it was not, seen from the European shores, a nation, nor a continent, not a even a place, just space, nothing to look at but something to see — a landscape.

A landscape may seem to be a place all have in common, a place where nobody would be an illegal alien, a place that would be a pre-linguistic place where no

hermeneutic activity would be required to be admitted there. The law of the landscape — unlike the *jus soli* or the *jus sanguinis* — would be an unwritten and unspoken law, for it would precede language and the law. The landscape would then be the motherly face of the world, the presence to which we could be present, a place that would require no knowledge and a place out of which no decree could ban us. The landscape would always be home to us; as Mary has it in Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man", "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in" (1969: 38).

A close reading of the narratives of the early American moments, that is the early moments of the encounters between Europe-to-be and America-to-be, suggests that far from being a pre-semantic and pre-linguistic place, the American landscape encountered by the first European explorers has always already been a European text. Europe has always been in America, and in a mirroring performative effect Europe only became Europe when the name *America* could be read and pronounced in European languages. Thus, 'America' appears as the result of a paradigmatic act of reading — an act of reading with unique, unpredictable and non-repeatable consequences. The American landscape and the complex phenomenon we have come to call *America* results from what Hayden White calls the "narrativization of [a] real event" (1981: 793). 'America' but also 'Europe' have come down to us as the result of a metaphorical transformation "that is productive of meaning by its imposition of a certain formal coherence on a virtual chaos of 'events', which in themselves cannot be said to have any particular form at all" (White 1981: 795).

Christopher Columbus, the first European-to-be in America-to-be, and the first American in Europe, presents us with "something that may be true or false", and that something we have come to call 'America' "is nothing other than the meaning or ultimate nature of reality shared by the average members of [a] given culture" (White 1981: 797). It is of course necessary to use very carefully these commonplaces where the central tropes of our metaphysics transport us. It would be absurd, indeed, to consider Columbus as the 'father' of 'America' or the American nation. Columbus can only be a father in a highly paradoxical sense, only in the sense that his tropes engendered a place that kept escaping him, even as it is escaping us.

This escaping sense of America begins with Columbus himself. We are not even certain that the remains of the body which were sent back to Spain in 1898 and buried in Seville Cathedral are really his. However, as Felipe Armesto points out, if these are not the bones of the Admiral, "the relics of his mind . . . are [in Seville] in the form of the surviving books from his library and the notes he scrawled in their margins" (1996: 184).<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I wish to concentrate on a few of these relics that contain, in *our*

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<sup>1</sup> One of the best contemporary expositions of Columbus's life and historical circumstances is certainly Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus*. Armesto examines the "[t]he early controversy [which] was dominated by the legal wrangle between Columbus's heirs and the monarchs of Spain over the non-fulfillment of the royal promises of 1492" (185). He then verifies the different competing theories regarding the 'discovery' of America, such as the theory of the "unknown pilot", the Chinese route or the Norse route. He concludes that "Columbus was the first in a continuous tradition of transatlantic navigation which has continued to our time: he is therefore

Western sense of the word, the first American metaphors. This is what the log of the *Almirante de las mares oceanas* reads on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1492:

*A las dos horas después de media noche pareció la tierra, de la cual estarían dos leguas. Amaynaron todas las velas, . . . temporizando hasta el día viernes que llegaron a una isleta de los Lucayos, que se llamaba en lengua de los Indios Guanahaní. Luego vieron gente desnuda. . . .*<sup>2</sup> (Colón 1985: 89-90)

We need to heed not only the “wonder of that first encounter [that] still survives” (Fiedler 1968: 38) and what is fascinating in this inscription of the place in Western tropology, i.e. reading of tropes, but also what is so trite and banal in it.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the most banal and apparently commonsensical manner ‘the people’, *la gente*, immediately become ‘Indians’, and the archipelago of the *Lucayos* is readily reminiscent of the Floridian ‘Keys’ that derive their name from it.

A few months later, as he was sailing back to Spain, Columbus wrote in his famous letter to Luis de Santángel:

*Porque sé que habréis placer de la gran victoria que Nuestro Señor me ha dado en mi viaje, vos escribo esta, por la cual sabréis cómo en 33 días pasé a las Indias con la armada que los ilustrísimos Rey y Reina, nuestros señores, me dieron donde yo hallé muchas islas pobladas con gente sin número, y dellas todas he tomado posesión por sus Altezas con pregón y bandera real extendida, y no me fue contradicho.*<sup>4</sup> (Colón 1985: 221-22)

We can only be struck, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, how ignorant and helpless Columbus is before the spectacle of the world he encounters, and how in “the early

*our discoverer of America*” (189; emphasis added). Indeed, whether we like it or not, Columbus started to shape America as the land that we the people of the global Judeo-Christian world inhabit.

<sup>2</sup> “Two hours after midnight, land appeared; they were probably about two leagues of it. They took in the sails, . . . and biding their time until morning on Friday, when they reached a small island of the Lucayos called Guanahaní in the language of the Indians. Soon they saw naked people. . . .” (Colón 1960: 47)

<sup>3</sup> Thus, Washington Irving simply states: “As Columbus supposed . . . to have landed . . . in the extremity of India, he called the natives by the general appellation of Indians, which was generally adopted, before the true nature of the discovery was known, and since has been extended to all the aboriginals of the new world” (1981: 94). Irving’s casual remark ignores the *performative* nature of language, but it also shows that there is no going back on performative speech acts. Felipe Armesto points out that when the geographer Martin Waldseemüller, who had proposed to name the new continent *America* after Amerigo Vespucci, realized what an essential role Columbus had played, he “retracted and restored Columbus to the honor of the discovery”. However, as in the case of the ‘Indians’, “the name had begun to stick” (1996: 187).

<sup>4</sup> ‘As I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days, I passed to the Indies with the fleet that the most illustrious king and queen our sovereigns gave to me. And there I found very many islands filled with people innumerable and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me’. (Colón 1960: 191)

discourse of the New World, the reassuring signs of administrative order—bureaucratic formulas already well established in a large number of earlier . . . encounters in Europe and Africa are deceptive; consciously and unconsciously they draw us away from a sense of all that is unsettling, unique, and terrible in the first European contacts with the peoples of the Americas” (1991 :54). For the first time, but also definitively, in the very moment he sees them, the land becomes *las Indias* and its inhabitants ‘Indians’. In that very second the land and the people are *informed* by European culture and both the land and the people start to follow a new line, the only line Western history and Western stories know: the written line.<sup>5</sup>

Columbus describes the landscapes he sees as an uncannily familiar topography and toponymy that erases its strangeness and cloaks it in Eurocentric tropes of the Renaissance aesthetics of the *locus amoenus*. As he describes the islands, it may seem that he “[l]iterally does not see anything new at all” (Debray 1991: 11):

*A la primera qu yo hallé puse nombre San Salvador, a comemoración de Su alta Magestad, el cual maravillosamente todo esto ha dado; los Indios la llaman Guanahani. A la segunda puse nombre la isla de Santa María de Concepción; a la tercera, Fernandina; a la cuarta, la Isabela; a la quinta, la Isla Juana, y así a cada una puse nombre nuevo.*<sup>6</sup> (Colón 1985: 222)

*He tomado posesión; puse nombre* ‘I took possession; I gave a name’, writes Columbus about the lands he encounters, implicitly claiming a great victory in tones reminiscent of the Christian chronicles of the *gran victoria* over the Moors in Spain. But does Columbus really believe he is in India and that he can take possession of the territories of the greatest world power of his time with a fistful of men? This mystery is part of the complex personality of the Admiral, but we need to resist the normalizing administrative discourse and realize that instead of the chronicle of a battle, we get “an account of a series of speech acts” (Greenblatt 1991: 54). Indeed, Columbus’s fleet has no priest on board, but there is an *escrivano*, a ‘scrivener’ or a ‘secretary’, who establishes the legal documents through which Columbus takes possession of the land through “writing that invades space and capitalizes time” (de Certeau 1975: 225; my translation).

America passes under the European scriptural law — the landscapes themselves are subjected to the metaphors of Columbus’s writing:

<sup>5</sup> Information is often understood as ‘news’ nowadays, that is, as the transmission of data by (mass) media. I use the verb *inform* in its now obsolete though by no means absent sense which is to “To put into (material) form or shape; to form, shape, frame, mould, fashion” (OED). In a world of global information and data circulation we may tend to forget the transitive and performative qualities of the verb *inform*, which spring to the eye when we look at its etymology: “*informare* to give form to, shape, fashion, form an idea of, describe, f. *in-* (in) + *forma* (form)” (OED).

<sup>6</sup> “To the first island that I found I gave the name *San Salvador*, in remembrance of the Divine Majesty, Who has marvellously bestowed all this; the Indians call it “Guanahani”. To the second I gave the name *Isla de Santa María de Concepción*; to the third, *Fernandina*; to the fourth, *Isabella*; to the fifth, *Isla Juana*, and so to each one I gave a new name’. (Colón 1960: 191)

*Juana . . . y todas las otras [islas] son fertilísimas en demasiado grado, y esta en extremo; en ella hay muchos puertos en la costa de la mar sin comparación de otro que yo sepa en cristianos, y harto ríos buenos y grandes que es maravilla. Las tierras dellas son altas y en ellas muy muchas sierras y montañas altísimas, sin comparación de la isla de Tenerife de mil hechuras, y todas andables y llenas de árboles de mil maneras y altas, y parecen que lleguen al cielo; y tengo dicho que jamás pierden la hoja, según lo pude comprender, que los ví tan verdes y tan floridos, dellos con fruto, de dellos en otro término, según es su calidad; y cantaban el ruiseñor y otros pajaritos de mil maneras en el mes de noviembre por allí donde yo andaba.*<sup>7</sup> (Colón 1985: 223)

In these lines appears for the first time Columbus's conviction that he has found the route to Paradise; the inaugural moment of Columbian writing offers a teleology to the newly-encountered land, which is both a projection into the future of a paradise regained and a return to an affective and mystical past.

But this is not only about a mystic vision of the world, and Columbus's metaphors are also coldly economic. The man he is writing to, Luis de Santángel, is *escrivano de ración*, that is, one of the ministers of treasury of the sovereigns, and one of his most important sponsors: in this inaugural moment of global capitalism, America is already a question of big business. When Columbus describes *las Indias* as paradisiacal, it is almost impossible to discern what belongs to empirical experience and what comes from his voracious bookishness, for, as Armesto points out, "At almost every discernible stage of his career . . . practical experience and book-learning seem to have reinforced one another, with neither monopolizing the process of his intellectual formation or mental development" (1996: 25). Although "There is no evidence that [he] ever read any of the chivalric literature of the sea, . . . he moved in a world steeped in it; his life was, in a sense, an embodiment of it" (1996: 4-5). Thus, veracity or simply verisimilitude is not the attempted effect of Columbus's metaphors. When he assures his reader that the "mountains are incomparably higher than those of Tenerife", his hyperbole really shows that he is looking for a point of comparison that his reader may know — indeed, with its 3,718 meters, the Teide, the culminating point of Spain, is indeed "incomparably" higher than any of the low Bahamas hills that Columbus may have seen.

It is again the "banality of the hyperboles" (Debray 1991: 14; my translation) that must arrest us and we must wonder where it comes from and what effects it produces. When he addresses his letters to the sovereigns and bestows them with the fantasy title of *King and Queen of the Islands of the Ocean*, Columbus makes a reality of fiction and

<sup>7</sup> '[Española] and all the other [islands] are very fertile to a limitless degree, and this island is extremely so. In it are many harbors and the coast of the sea, beyond comparison with others which I know in the Christendom, and many rivers, good and large, which is marvelous. Its lands are high, and there are in it many sierras and very lofty mountains, beyond comparison with the Island of Tenerife. All are most beautiful, and of a thousand shapes, and all are accessible and filled with trees of a thousand kinds and tall, and they seem to touch the sky. And I am told that they never lose their foliage, as I can understand, for I saw them as green and lovely as they are in Spain in May, and some of them were flowering, some bearing fruit, and some in another stage, according to their nature. And the nightingale was singing and other birds of a thousand kinds in the month of November there where I went'. (Colón 1960: 192)

plays on a tradition that made of the “erection of an island-kingdom . . . a common dénouement of the chivalric romance” (Armesto 1996: 4). One can read Columbus’s “bookish taste” (Armesto 1996: 23) in his descriptions of *las Indias* that he represents as a cornucopia where all is honey and good grass and plants and fruit. Columbus sees but a landscape, and “Men interest [him] much less than trees and birds” [Debray 1991: 14; my translation]. He insists that “the nightingale . . . sing[s] and other birds of a thousand kinds in the month of November”. It is *not* nightingales, he hears, for though there are birds that resemble the nightingale (*ruiseñor*) in the islands of the Caribbean Sea, the poetic bird of Columbus’s letter is only indigenous in Europe and Asia. Not unlike Keats who would invoke the ‘immortal bird’ to write about the condition of a forlorn humanity, Columbus’s describes a nightingale that has crossed the Atlantic on the ‘wings of poesy’. The bird of love and of the good garden of medieval romance lends its song to *las Indias* and makes them resound in recognizable tones.

Columbus may not know *exactly* where he is from a geographical point of view, but he knows that this is *not* Catayo;<sup>8</sup> on the other hand, he has a metaphysical interpretation of his discovery, an interpretation that America will have to live with from then on. The French historian Michel Lequenne shows that in his copy of the Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi* Columbus wrote in the margin of the text: “Avicenna teaches us that beyond the equator lies a very temperate zone, because that’s where Paradise on earth is’. And further, the marginalia of the same book reads, like a pointed finger toward the horizon: ‘that’s where paradise is!’” (1991: 21; my translation).

By the same token, in a famous letter to the sovereigns known as the *carta rarísima* and relating his third voyage, Columbus writes:

[C]reo que allí [debajo de la línea equinoçial] es el Paraíso Terrenal, adonde no puede llegar nadie salvo por voluntad divina. . . . Yo no tomo qu’el Paraíso Terrenal sea en forma de montaña áspera, . . . salvo qu’él sea en el colmo, allí donde dixere la figura del peçón de la pera, y que poco a poco andando hazia allí desde muy lexos se va subiendo a él. . . . Grandes indicios son estos del Paraíso Terrenal, porqu’el sitio es conforme a la opinión d’estos sanctos e sacros theólogos.<sup>9</sup> (Colón 1982: 218)

Further in that letter, as is often the case, “[D]isparate authorities are lumped together without sorting, like compacted waste”—Aristotle, Pliny, Averroes, the Cardinal Pierre d’Ailly, but also St Augustine and Ptolemy all comfort Columbus in his physical and metaphysical reading of the world, while “Some delicious irrelevancies are indulged in to add to the species of learning” (Armesto 1996: 121).

<sup>8</sup> Armesto notes that “In none of his initial impressions of the New World — neither of the land nor of its people — did [Columbus] claim to detect any evidence that he was in Asia” (1996: 84).

<sup>9</sup> ‘I believe that there [below the equator] lies Paradise on Earth, where nobody can go except Divine Providence. . . . I do not believe that Paradise on earth has the shape of an abrupt mountain, . . . but much rather that it is on top of what resembles a nipple on a pear, and to which one ascends, little by little, by an incline taken from very far away. . . . These are precious indications that this is Paradise on earth, for it is in conformity with the opinion of holy theologians’ (translation bv).

At the same time, the proselytism and the mystico-religious vocabulary are sustained by economic metaphors, and *Cristoforo* — who has now changed his name to *Cristóbal* — is not only the bearer of Christ, but also the purveyor of metaphors of investment. The Virgilian landscapes of the new world are not just marvelous; they are also worth investing in:

*La Española es maravilla: las sierras y las montañas y las vegas y las campiñas y las tierras tan hermosas y gruesas para plantar y sembrar, para criar ganado de todas suertes, para edificios de villas y lugares.*<sup>10</sup> (Colón 1985: 223)

Central to this description of *Española* is the Spanish word *ganado* meaning ‘cattle’. The word comes from *ganar* and resounds with the furor of battle as it means ‘to win’, ‘to vanquish’ or ‘to conquer’. But here the past participle of the verb has to do with economics and investment. *Ganado* is used here in the sense of increasing one’s capital by commerce, industry or work. Thus metonymically, in Spanish, the *ganado* (‘cattle’) is that which a man has earned for himself. The verb *ganar* (in the sense of ‘gaining’ or ‘earning’) is also central to the contract Columbus signed with the Kings, a contract, known as the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fé*, of 17 April 1492:

*Otro sí, que Vuestras Altezas hacen al dicho D. Cristóbal Colón su visorrey [virrey] y gobernador general en las dichas islas y tierras firmes, que, como es dicho, él descubriere o ganare en las dichas mares. . . .*<sup>11</sup> (Gil; emphasis added)

By the same token, the term recurs in the contract, the so-called *Mandamiento de los Reyes*, signed by the Kings and Columbus on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1492, a few days before his departure for his first voyage:

Por cuanto vos Cristóbal Colón vades por nuestro mandado á descubrir é *ganar* . . . ciertas Islas, é Tierra-firme en la dicha mar Océana . . . después que hayades descubierto, é *ganáredes*. . . .<sup>12</sup> (*Mandamiento de los Reyes*, 30 April 1492; quoted in Pagán 1995 :12; emphasis added)

The economic metaphors that confer coherence to Columbus’s mission are also the tropes that instantaneously transform *Guanahani* into *San Salvador*. Even as Columbus is *invested* with the symbolic and semiotic powers of the Sovereigns who invest their money into the enterprise, his “promotional literature” (Armesto 1996: 79) is to induce the capitalists of the already old world to *invest* into the new economical paradise he has

<sup>10</sup> ‘*Española* is a marvel: the hills and the mountains, the plains and the valleys, and this earth so rich and good for sowing and planting, and for raising cattle, and for building towns and cities’ (translation bv).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Also, that your Highnesses make the aforesaid Don Christopher Columbus their Viceroy and General Governor of the aforesaid islands and mainland, which he may, as mentioned above, discover and *gain*. . . .’ (translation bv; emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> ‘You, Christopher Columbus, whose mandate it will be to discover and *gain* . . . certain islands and mainland in the Ocean Sea . . . after you have discovered and *gained* them. . . .’ (translation bv).

discovered. It is striking that no indication whatsoever is given as to *how* Columbus is to 'gain' those newly discovered territories with barely a hundred men and a fleet of three ships that are not designed for warfare. Columbus is the bearer of credentials for the Great Khan — can he hope to win (*ganar*) against an army that the old world has dreaded at least since its description of it by Marco Polo? The 'great victory' (*gran victoria*) which he announces is not a military victory, and the sense of the verb *ganar* has to be sought in the economic field.

It may be forever impossible to fathom the real sense of Columbus's plans and intentions which have fed over the centuries many myths and legends contributing to obscure the sense of the 'discovery of America', but it is essential to note that this investment into Columbian metaphors by the "Renaissance Europe of merchants . . . produced America, which has, in turn, produced modern mercantile Europe" (Debray 1991: 63; my translation). By combining the quest for gold with the quest for Paradise, Columbus triggered our modern condition.<sup>13</sup>

It is tempting to see Columbus today either as a zealot carried away by his faith or a greedy adventurer obsessed with money, recognition and fame. Certainly, "Columbus [never was] a man to do anything for modesty's sake", and there is serious evidence that points to his obsession with "social respectability" and "lineage" (Armesto 1996: 3, 17, 117), and Columbus consciously casts himself in his writings as a "divinely elected protagonist". He worshipped the Holy Trinity and dreamed of a Jerusalem crusade, but despite his piousness "his attitude to the Indians was religious without being humane" (Armesto 1996: 16, 138).

But Columbus's contradictory intentions and desires do not explain everything. Thus, Tzvetan Todorov points out in Columbus's writings moments when the very purpose of exploration — the purpose of *ganar* either in the military or the economic sense — seem to be of secondary importance. Columbus reports in a letter that he has found "profitable things without number", but that "[he] tarried not in any harbor,

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<sup>13</sup> The constitution of the 'West' and much of what has happened as its teleo-theological development is contained in these inaugural moments of contact. The discovery, or the invention of America, changed the Judeo-Christian world by adding the West to its geographical and mental maps, even as it started "the systematic investigation of the *other* man, the *other* culture" (Fiedler 1968: 41). 1492 can be seen as the symbolic beginning of "the westward displacement of the center of gravity of ['Western society']"; "the Mediterranean 'frog-pond' has been replaced by an Atlantic 'lake' across which we traffic in goods and ideas and around which we [Westerners] huddle for our defence" (Armesto 1996: 193). Even today, 1492 determines a globalized world that has been developing under the aegis of what Debray calls the "unfair trade" started by the discoveries (1991: 33). Indeed, Debray adds, "we have not fundamentally changed"; he further proposes that we have just modified the Renaissance model of the trinity of the "the soldier-the merchant-the missionary". . . . "In 1492, the plundering West was to 'attract all the peoples to real religion' (Las Casas). In 1892, it was to attract them to Progress via the railroad. In 1992, it was to bestow on them the benefits of Democracy through free elections" (1991: 33; my translation). In 2009, our post-modern trinity is the arm merchant-the international financier-the humanitarian NGO; we are as obsessed by profit and as full of generous feelings as the men of the Renaissance. As Debray concludes, "Columbus is our paradigm; he is our grand-father" (1991: 35). On this subject, see also Walter Mignolo (1995) and José Rabasa (1993).



because [he] sought to see the most countries that [he] could, to give the story of them [*hacer relación*] to [their] highnesses” (quoted in Todorov 1999: 13). It appears that immediate interest is not the only thing that guides Columbus and that “for [him] ‘to discover’ is an *intransitive action*” (Todorov 1999: 13; emphasis added). Discovery justifies itself by itself, “just as”, Todorov further proposes, “for modern man a thing, an action, or a being is beautiful only if it finds its justification in itself” (1999: 13).

One must be careful not to interpret this as some sort of idealism on Columbus’s part. On the other hand, Columbus’s encounter with the American new world and his wish to ‘give the story’ (*hacer relación*) suggests that there may be something *intransitive* in acts of reading and writing. For Westerners born under the regime of reading and writing, reading takes place, it happens, even when there is, apparently, nothing to read. When Columbus reaches the other side of the Ocean Sea, reading happens; it happens — just as we say *it* is raining — and as reading happens, it starts to conquer and subject new territories.

And that territory is ‘fertile to a limitless degree’; *Las Indias* are a virginal and Edenic land even as they are a cultivated garden where Columbus’s Adamic land-surveying and sowing of semes can take place. The territory is also propitious for the edification of *villas y lugares* (‘towns and cities’), and Columbus’s ordering of the American garden evokes the opposition between sedentary culture and nomadic culture, an opposition that would particularly affect the relations between the newcomers and the indigenous populations. Columbus starts to define America in terms of the Biblical opposition between Cain the shepherd and Abel, the sedentary cultivator. As we read in Genesis, after he has slain his brother, Cain is “mark[ed]” by God who drives him out “from the face of the earth”; Cain becomes “a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth”. Only after he has “builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son Enoch” (Gen. 4.14, 4.17 [King James]), does Cain’s escape and stray life come to an end.

This central opposition role in the Judeo-Christian world between sedentary and nomadic cultures is also essential for Columbus’s self-definition. In the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fé*, Columbus managed to obtain from the Sovereigns that his titles of Viceroy and Governor General be hereditary and therefore pass on to his sons. Columbus invests with his signs of power territories which should at least indirectly bear his name. For the first time, Columbus evokes an American urban landscape, the precursor of the future ‘New Jerusalem’ that would be supposed to put an end to the wandering of fallen mankind on earth. And Columbus himself — Italian born, Portuguese by marriage, Catalan by alliance and family, Spanish by allegiance — Columbus the European wanderer, seeks to put an end to his own vagrancy by founding his new city.<sup>14</sup>

The opposition between Cain and Abel, between a sedentary and nomadic culture, but also between a benevolent and a dangerous ‘other’ appears in Columbus’s early relation of the ‘Indians’:

*La gente desta isla . . . andan todos desnudos, hombres y mugeres, así como sus madres los paren. . . . Ellos no tienen hierro ni acero ni armas ni son para ello; no porque no sea gente*

<sup>14</sup> On Columbus’s vagrant life and his desire to ‘establish’ himself, see Armesto (1996: 1-65, 157).

*bien dispuesta y de hermosa estatura, salvo que son muy temerosos a maravilla.*<sup>15</sup> (Colón 1985: 224)

The nakedness of the Indians is a sign of innocence that coincides with the virginity of the land that offers itself without resistance. Later, that same nakedness will become disquieting or threatening, but here Columbus sees all the people as children and mothers; as Columbus notes in his log: “*Son gente ... muy sin mal ni de guerra, desnudos todos, hombres y mujeres, como su madre los parió*” (Colón 1985: 119). These naked people know no harm, and, unlike the descendants of Cain, whose grandson Tubal-Cain is “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron” (Gen. 4.22), these child-like people are fearful and are ignorant of the metal that makes the strength of armies in Columbus’s world.

Again, the materiality of geography, military force and economics cannot be detached from religious and metaphysical semantics. Of course, those who want to exploit *las Indias* can only be struck by the advantage of having as an opponent a people fearing to wage war. But that is not, at least ostensibly, the sense of Columbus’s remark. He emphasizes rather that in this childlike world everything seems united in its original simplicity, a simplicity in which what is and what seems to be is united in the same thing. The land is feminine and childlike — it is a land and a people in its infancy, that is, as the Latin root *infans* suggests, ‘incapable of speech’, ‘without language’. Columbus endows these infant people and lands with language — with the metaphoric language of a lettered European. This gift of language makes the land speak a language he, and we with him, can understand. Columbus speaks and dictates his text and none of the children dares to contradict him — “*y no me fue contradicho*” (Colón 1985: 222).

‘America’ (*our America*) comes into existence when Columbus makes it speak. Columbus resorts to similes to describe landscapes ‘similar to Castile’; he repeatedly hears nightingales that do not fly in that part of the world; his hyperboles transform the hills of the West Indies into the ‘highest mountains of the world’ and the rivulets running down those hills into ‘large rivers laden with gold’. One may rightly object that there is nothing special in all this: Columbus explores the unknown with the known, which is, after all, the very principle of metaphor. Metaphors say that which cannot otherwise be said and give a language to that which is incapable of speech or expression. However, we need to ponder further the banality of this tropological operation which is not innocent at all.

As Wayne Franklin notes, “from the start language and event in America have been linked almost preternaturally to each other” (1979: xi). Columbus’s encounter with the lands lying west of Europe developed in a narrative that began to reshape Europe even as it started to shape “what finally [and always provisionally] emerged as an identifiable American culture” (1979: xi). It is a *fact* that on Friday 12 October 1492 a man, Cristoforo Colombo — for he was not Don Cristóbal yet — landed on the beach of a

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and of which I have information, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them. . . . They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them. This is not because they are not well built of handsome nature, but because they are marvellously timorous’. (Colón 1960 : 194)

small island (probably in the Bahamas). But “what was fact became metaphor” (Franklin 1979: xii) and that metaphor traveled and started to do things and it started telling the narrative (*hacer relación*) of Europe and of America and America in Europe. The America we know could not have existed without Columbus. There may have been, there would have been, something else, but Columbus’s act of reading of the land, was like all acts of reading unique and unforeseeable. It was an act whose consequences, dramatic or felicitous, can only be read and reconstructed a posteriori through other acts of reading. Columbus encountered a *new* world, but he read it in terms of his own cultural past, in terms of a world that became old as he encountered the new one. The *Indias* that Columbus claims to bring back with him to Europe spring from the Europe he brought to America; it was Europe in America for the first time and forever.

When he writes to his European sponsors, Columbus resorts to Biblical parables and tropes to authenticate what he has seen, but he cannot convey his sense of marvel and wonder lest this should be incomprehensible for the people to whom he writes. Indeed, Cristoforo Colombo changes his name to Spanish Cristóbal Colón, making thus resound in that language the meaning of his name, ‘bearer of Christ’. His mysticism appears in many aspects of his life; he has visions, hears a voice of “celestial origin” or compares himself to Moses or Noah (Armesto 1996: 91-92). In his Letter to Santángel, he counts the days of his first crossing of the Atlantic so that a banal thirty-five-day voyage may become a more significant thirty-three day voyage — thus alluding to the supposed age of Christ when he died on the cross.<sup>16</sup> Once it has been touched by ‘America’, it becomes increasingly difficult not to read the metaphors of the Admiral’s name. It is *Colombo* in Italian, the (traveling) ‘pigeon’ but also the ‘dove’ (of peace), the symbol of the covenant between man and God; it is *Colón*, in Spanish, with a suggestion of *colonia* (‘colony’); it becomes Columbus in English, a language in which the highfalutin Latinate inflexion resonates with antiquated, official and religious echoes. We do not have to believe any of this and we may discard all this as mere coincidence and pure anecdote, but in the unstoppable metaphorical chains started by Columbus his name itself speaks in metaphors. When he writes to his sponsors, Columbus resorts to metaphors, lest his readers “seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand” (Mark 4.12). “*No me fue contradicho*”

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<sup>16</sup> Columbus left La Gomera in the Canary Islands on 6 September 1492; the log on Thursday 11 October reads he sighted land “on the second hour after midnight”, that is, on Friday 12 October. The actual crossing from the Canary Islands lasted therefore 35 or 36 days — “The admiral departed that day [6 September] from the port of Gomera and took the direction to begin his voyage” (Colón 1960: 39). Counting from 6 September would be better arithmetic but inferior poetry, but factuality is probably less important than the metaphorical impact of Columbus’s words. As Las Casas himself notes, all this is only reliable *si no está mentirosa la letra* (Colón 1982: 28) — ‘if the words are exact’, or, more literally, ‘if the words do not lie’. In the Letter to Santángel — often called ‘letter announcing the discovery’, Columbus writes, “vos escribo esta [carta], por la cual sabréis cómo en 33 días pasé a las Indias” (Colón 1982: 221). This is not the only inconsistency and contradiction in a document often presented (in school books and anthologies, for instance) as the bona fide birth certificate of America. On the controversies surrounding that letter, see Margarita Zamora’s (1993) ‘Christopher Columbus’s “Letter to the Sovereigns”’. See also Felipe Armesto’s response to Zamora’s argument (1996: 197, fn 14).

(Colón 1985: 221-22), Columbus writes, and yet his traveling metaphors inscribe 'America-to-be' in a resistance to European language and discourse. 'America' would never be available as what it is, but only as that which it is *not*, that is, as the produce of a European trope.

It may be true (as Wallace Stevens noted) that only in the land of metaphor can one be a poet, but it is certainly true that only through metaphor can one apprehend, now and then, 'America'. The first images of America received in Europe result from Columbus's tropes, and his exploration of America-to-be shows that "the territory does not precede the map; and it does not survive the mapping". In Columbus's relation of travel "the map precedes the territory . . . [and] engenders the territory" (Baudrillard 1981: 10; my translation). This does not mean that without Columbus there would be nothing on the other side of the Atlantic, but it means that the physical and material nature of what is out there would have been surveyed, mapped and organized differently, forming an 'empire of signs' different from the one we know. As Greenblatt puts it:

For if microbes lie altogether beyond the grasp of Renaissance discourse, the other forces that we have cited as brute facts should under no circumstances be naturalized. The possession of weapons and the will to use them on defenseless people are cultural matters that are intimately bound up with discourse: with the stories that a culture tells itself. . . . And if gold is a natural phenomenon, the all-consuming craving for gold most assuredly is not. (Greenblatt 1991 : 63-64)

One of the most surprising aspects of the Admiral's adventure is that, far from being limited to a set of past events, his evocation of 'America' opens the doors of our (post)modernity. Columbus's empire of signs starts to build a global empire of which Charles the Fifth (*Carlos Primero*) would say that the sun never sets on it. Columbus's imperial tropes and the imperial language of the Renaissance trigger globalization by defining Europe's central identity, even as it announces the decline of that centrality.

We know today that Columbus would never see the rivers laden with gold, that much of the cinnamon and aloe he brought back turned out to be worthless, that he misunderstood the 'Indians' and that his geography was confused. Today, in our new globalized age, we may be tempted to be ironic about the Admiral's naïveté, or maybe feel bitter that such a tremendous upheaval in the course of human events should have been caused by a blundering geographer, a poor naturalist, a self-taught theologian and a rather stultifying writer.

Todorov has pointed out that Columbus had a "naïve conception of language" and that he "perceive[d] the name of things as confounded with the thing itself" (1999: 64), but Armesto even as essentially points out that "Columbus was fertile even in error" (1996: 131) and indeed his semantic fertility stops nowhere. In his desire to authenticate his discovery, to distinguish America-to-be from Europe, Columbus piles up hyperboles, similes and parables that make 'America' both European *and* other.

It may seem absurd to us today that Columbus should rename the places he encounters with the full awareness that they already have a name. One must recall that he is not a *conquistador* in the military sense of the word; he is not a Cortés nor a Pizarro. It never occurs to Marco Polo, who Columbus has read, to rename the places

he visits. The Adam-like gesture of Columbus — “*a cada una le puse un nombre Nuevo*” (Colón 1985:222) — is the gesture of paradise remembered. ‘America-to-be’ is the infancy of the world, a world before the fall, a world in which there is no divorce between the word and world.

By renaming the place, Columbus seeks to inscribe the land in its original authenticity. *Guanahani* means nothing to Columbus. It means nothing because it is as meaningless as the gurgling of an infant in an adults’ world. Columbus wants to teach the land to speak so it may tell its true and authentic story. This narrative project consisting in making the land speak emerges maieutically and preternaturally *as soon as* Columbus starts reading *las Indias*. On 11 October 1492 he sights the land; that same day, Columbus logs the (speech) acts by which he takes possession of the land, and the entry ends:

*Yo plaziendo a nuestro Señor levaré de aquí al tiempo de mi partida seis [Indios] a vuestras Altezas para que dependan hablar. Ninguna bestia de ninguna manera vide, salvo papagayos en esta isla.* (Colón 1985: 56)

Received translations into English of the passage generally render (somewhat euphemistically) Columbus’s project to kidnap Indians as ‘so they may learn our language’. Though this sounds sensible, I agree with Todorov who suggests that the words need to be taken literally: *para que dependan hablar*, that is, ‘so they may learn how to speak’ (see Todorov 1999: 30). For Columbus, America-to-be is a child or a woman deprived of language and his attitude is characteristic of his “failure of attention to the other’s language” (Todorov 1999: 31). The Admiral listens and listens, but does not hear the other; he looks and looks, but does not see. It is therefore significant that he closes the entry on the day of the discovery with a note on parrots, those birds notorious for their repetitive and inauthentic language. “I saw no animal of any sort on this island except parrots” (Colón 1960: 48); and Las Casas comments — maybe a bit bewilderedly? — that these are ‘the very words of the Admiral’ (“*Todas son palabras del Almirante*” [Colón 1982: 31]).

The authentic language of America-to-be speak is the language of a European male writer. His writing surveys and maps the territory of the other while making it impossible for the voice of the other to be heard. It is therefore unsurprising that the land Columbus discovers is not only child-like but also feminine. It is a femininity that is not threatening yet, but promises on the contrary the comfort of a motherly presence and easy satisfaction. Hence Columbus’s geography which makes the earth ‘pear-shaped’ like a woman’s breast:

*[Fallé] que [el mundo] no era redondo en la forma qu’escriven, salvo que de la forma de una pera que sea toda muy redonda, . . . o como quien tiene una pelota muy redonda y en un lugar d’ella fuesse como una teta de muger allí puesta, y qu’esta parte d’este peçón sea la más alta e más propicia al cielo. . . .*<sup>17</sup> (Colón 1982: 215)

<sup>17</sup> ‘I Found that the earth was not round as we have been told, but in the shape of a very round pear. . . . Or it could be like a very round ball with a nipple on it, and this woman’s nipple would be its highest point and also closest to heaven. . . .’ (translation bv).

Columbus initiates a tropology that has since then confounded femininity, America and otherness. Accordingly, “America, depicted as a naked or semi naked woman with bow and arrow and sometimes with a decapitated head in her arms,” became part of the “iconology accounting for the fourth part of the world” (Mignolo 1995: 274) and this otherness would be expressed in terms of possession and rape or in terms of bewitching and castration. For Columbus, the land and its inhabitants have not lost their innocence yet. America, for Columbus, is an intransitive object of reading as well as a white page on which he writes with his pen and his sword. Unlike, Ulysses — another beautiful stray traveler and liar — Columbus would never see America as his submissive and devout Penelope, and America would be possessed by much more violent suitors. In that, he may be the first American tragic hero facing an American destiny he does not completely comprehend, a hero who can never put an end to the wandering to which America condemns those who try to possess her.

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