Colonial Assemblages: Objects, Territories, and Racialized Subjects in Pre-independence Latin America (1492–1810)

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Abstract
This dissertation examines the centrality of objects and material culture in the invention of the New World. Paying heed to understudied connections between historically contingent texts and their transatlantic contexts, it excavates the role of colonial objects in shaping colonial discourse during the first three centuries of Spain's rule in Mexico, Peru, and the Hispanic Caribbean (1492–1810). In order to uncover the “makedness” of colonial racializing schemas, “Colonial Assemblages” traces the emergence of a material discourse invested in the Indian as a trope and a figure that masks the multiple tensions operating simultaneously in colonial representations since at least the 1500s, but that reached new heights during the Hispanic Enlightenment. Chapter 1 studies the emergence of a dialectic, multistable concept and material entity, the New World object, in Christopher Columbus's Diario del primer viaje (c. 1493). The second chapter analyzes representations of colonial gold as a fetish of early modern imperialism and as a foundational materiality of colonial Latin American discourse in texts by Columbus, Hernán Cortés, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and engravings by Theodor De Bry. Chapter 3 argues that the cartographic grid and the space of the traza foreground a discourse of abstraction enacted by colonial objects and commodities that serve to exclude the “ugly Indian” in Bernardo de Balbuena’s Grandeza mexicana (1604). The fourth chapter demonstrates how certain objects were linked to Andean and transatlantic notions of space and territoriality, and to the definition of indio and mestizo identities, in the works of Guaman Poma de Ayala and Inca Garcilaso de la Vega respectively. Finally, chapter 5 studies the racial portraits of New Spain as well as historical accounts and treatises by Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora and Antonio de León y Gama to illustrate how material culture becomes a contested site of representation for criollismo. This new focus on the textual and social life of objects charts an alternative path to present critiques of coloniality presuming the homogeneous expansion of lettered culture by further underscoring the conceptual value of material culture as a powerful agent in the dynamic assemblage of colonialism in the New World.

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COLONIAL ASSEMBLAGES: OBJECTS, TERRITORIES, AND RACIALIZED SUBJECTS IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE LATIN AMERICA (1492–1810)

Raquel Albarrán

A DISSERTATION in Hispanic Studies

For the Graduate Group in Romance Languages

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2016

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A Batatita
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ABSTRACT

COLONIAL ASSEMBLAGES:
OBJECTS, TERRITORIES, AND RACIALIZED SUBJECTS
IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE LATIN AMERICA (1492–1810)

Raquel Albarrán
Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel

This dissertation examines the centrality of objects and material culture in the invention of the New World. Paying heed to understudied connections between historically contingent texts and their transatlantic contexts, it excavates the role of colonial objects in shaping colonial discourse during the first three centuries of Spain’s rule in Mexico, Peru, and the Hispanic Caribbean (1492–1810). In order to uncover the “makedness” of colonial racializing schemas, “Colonial Assemblages” traces the emergence of a material discourse invested in the Indian as a trope and a figure that masks the multiple tensions operating simultaneously in colonial representations since at least the 1500s, but that reached new heights during the Hispanic Enlightenment. Chapter 1 studies the emergence of a dialectic, multistable concept and material entity, the New World object, in Christopher Columbus’s Diario del primer viaje (c. 1493). The second chapter analyzes representations of colonial gold as a fetish of early modern imperialism and as a foundational materiality of colonial Latin American discourse in texts by Columbus, Hernán Cortés, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and engravings by Theodor De Bry. Chapter 3 argues that the cartographic grid and the space of the traza foreground a discourse of
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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART ONE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ship–Seaweed–Island–Gold</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. “Y dize que aquellas fueron señales ciertas de tierra”:</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus and the New World Object</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Golden Empires: Founding Matter in Latin American</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial Discourse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART TWO</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Grids</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ugly Abstraction</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART THREE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Indian–Mestizo–Creole–Object</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Revolt of the Objects in the “mundo al rreués”</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Surface and Visibility: <em>Casta</em> Painting, Creole Discourse, Materiality</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables

1.1 Inventory of islands and objects mentioned in Columbus’s ship log 70
Illustrations

1.1 Christopher Columbus, Chart of the island of Hispaniola 69
1.2 Inventory of early sixteenth century Spanish beads 74
1.3 Sample of early sixteenth century hawk bells 75
1.4 Theodor De Bry, Plate IX of Part IV of America 78
2.1 Theodor De Bry, plate XXI of Part IV of America 121
2.2 Theodor De Bry, plate X of Part VI of America 122
2.3 Theodor De Bry, plate I of Part V of America 127
2.4 Theodor De Bry, frontispiece to Part V of America 128
2.5 Theodor De Bry, plate XX of Part VI of America 131
3.1 Battista Agnese, Map of the World 143
3.2 Anonymous artist, Mapa de Cuauhtinchan #4 (detail) 144
3.3 Pieter van den Keere, Hispaniae, Rome, with Mexicana (detail) 151
3.4 Urban grid models 153
3.5 Urban damero of the first plan of Lima, Peru 154
3.6 Hernán Cortés, Map of Temixtitan and the Gulf Coast (detail) 156
3.7 “Prometheus,” Nuremberg Chronicle 181
3.8 Gregor Van der Schart, Willibald Imhoff, the elder 181
4.1 Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Pobre de los indios, de seis animales que comen” 223
4.2 Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Fraile agustino, muy Bravo y colérico, soberbioso, que da de palos a los indios en este reino” 225
4.3 Rolled-out versions of Moche pottery depicting the painted myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” 226
4.4 Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Conquista, Guayna Capac, Candía” 231
4.5 Guaman Poma de Ayala, Khipus in the drawings of Guaman Poma 236
4.6 Tahuantinsuyu, or the four corners of the world in the Inca empire 236
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Artist/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Mapamundi del reino de las Indias”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Anonymous artist, <em>De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Anonymous artist, <em>De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Diego Velázquez, <em>Las Meninas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Anonymous artist, <em>De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td><em>The Virgin of Guadalupe</em> in Extremadura, Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td><em>Portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe</em> in Mexico City, Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Anonymous artist, <em>Move of the Image of Guadalupe to its New Basilica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Luis de Mena, <em>Guadalupan Scene of Castas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Antonio de León y Gama, <em>Coatlicue</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>Antonio de León y Gama, <em>Sun Stone</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>Antonio Pérez de Aguilar, <em>Alacena del pintor</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>Francisco Clapera, <em>De chino e india, genizara</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>José de Páez, <em>De español y morisca, albina</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>José de Alcibar, <em>De español y negra, mulato</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>Ignacio María Barreda, <em>De castizo y española, español criollo</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 5.16    | Anonymous artist, *Expresiõ de las Castas de Gentes de que se compone este Reyno de Mexico; los motivos porque resul
ta la diversidad; y los nombres con que se distinguen todas las calidades: Hecha en la Puebla delos Angeles* (detail) |
| 5.17    | Miguel Cabrera, *De español y de india, mestiza* (detail) |
Introduction

In the early 1600s the Peruvian soldier, writer, translator, and historian Inca Garcilaso de la Vega compared his fragmented condition as a mixed-race Spanish and indigenous colonial subject, a *mestizo*, to a bizarre treasure: an “impossibly harmonious” stone aggregate. The stone may be examined closely by a curious researcher, in which case she would probably note its size, color, weight, and texture (details that Inca Garcilaso for the most part provides); the region of provenance of this geological specimen; and its age using the layers of sediment in which it was found (or perhaps more sophisticated methods). She may jot down in the field notes specific details about the stone’s appearance. That it is prickled with sharp tips covered in gold, for instance. And also that it exhibits irregular holes around its circumference. Another scholar may be more interested in these unusual and distinctive qualities and may consider the stone any number of things: remarkable (“admirable cosa”), odd (“joya extraña”), ugly (“fea”), grotesque, beautiful even; or may try to figure out what a stone of this nature (*huaca*) may have meant for the people who encountered it and their social predecessors. However unfortunately, Inca Garcilaso tells us this stone was lost with the rest of the valuable cargo (“otra mucha riqueza”) of a fleet that succumbed during its Atlantic voyage en route to Spain and to the court of King Philip II. Thus the only record of its existence resides in
the author’s personal description, whose interpretation underlined the stone’s premature geological history in relation to the prime deposits of gold and silver that were also located in the viceroyalty of Peru. In the form of metals, these precious minerals may have made rich men out of common Europeans. But extraction of the region’s abundant reserves, Inca Garcilaso laments, actually caused the misery of the “naturales,” the native and otherwise local Andean communities that by the seventeenth century, after seven decades of Spanish colonial rule, had become dispossessed of their own land and its bounty. The intensive qualifier above—impossibly harmonious—is taken from the interpretive statements of Antonio Cornejo-Polar, the Inca’s diachronic compatriot, interlocutor, and eminent Latin American critic. Transversely across the print history of this earlier testimony, close to 400 years after its issue, Cornejo-Polar found in Inca Garcilaso’s irregular stone a crucial entry point to the mestizo intellectual’s foundational colonial discourse.¹

The memorable encounter in question, the Inca narrates in the Comentarios reales de los incas (1609), occurred over half a century prior, in 1556, on a visit to a mine in Callahuaya, a province of the Incan empire located over 500 kilometers southeast from Cuzco in modern-day Bolivia. Even if belated news are dubious grounds for discovery, it should come as no surprise that Inca Garcilaso, being ever the seasoned wordsmith, employs a perplexing allusion (not to speak of his choice of object) to reinstate a position that surfaces in numerous occasions across the pages of his voluminous chronicle. That is, his rich cultural experience and personal ordeals as an informant outsider from the viceroyalty of Peru—a mestizo of letters. During Inca Garcilaso’s childhood in Cuzco and

¹ See “Las suturas homogeneizadoras: Los discursos de la armonía imposible,” the second chapter of Escribir en el aire (81–144).
² Cornejo-Polar is the main proponent of the theory of heterogeneity, which is first developed in Sobre literatura y crítica latinoamericana.
by way of his maternal lineage, he became knowledgeable of his ancestors’ practices, rituals, and traditions, a process that contributed to affirming the author’s indigenous roots in the face of genealogical illegitimacy. While he came to reject his given name and his Spanish father’s *apellido* (surname), the Inca’s consciousness was marked by a sense of immersion in Western textual culture. As a viceregal author, Inca Garcilaso was deeply aware of his own status as one of the most lucid commentators of early modern poetry and historiography in the New World.

His first discursive foray into the study of his Incan heritage is recorded in the *Comentarios*, a text that is part-history, part-memoir, and part-ethnographic account. This influential testimony is often regarded as the earliest literary and historiographical manifestation of cultural and ethno-racial *mestizaje* (miscegenation) of the Latin American colonial period (Pastor; Zamora, *Language, Authority*; Cornejo-Polar, *Escribir*; Mazzotti, *Coros mestizos*; Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack*). Yet as the Inca’s historiographical account makes explicit and centuries of colonial transformations continue to reveal, the very arrangements that structure the ethno-racial discourses of colonialism demand, exploit, and actively recruit material supports far beyond the alphabetical technologies of the cultures in contact to further reproduce particular forms of power. Indeed, often its most tangible effects can be felt in the ways in which natural resources, physical spaces, and all types of mobile formations are turned into material agents of colonization. During the transition from conquest to colonial settlement that took place in the Andes, this was the case with the mines from the viceroyalty of Peru. Copious amounts of silver were discovered in Potosí in 1545, a little over a decade after the capture of the Inca ruler
Atahualpa in Cajamarca. It was not long before Potosí became synonymous with exorbitant wealth, and the region consecrated as the most productive mining site in the New World. It is well known then that by the seventeenth century the extraction of silver, gold, and other metals from American territories transformed the global impact of colonial capital. The mestizo scholar’s narrative, intentionally or not, brings this complex history into stark relief. Viewed in this light, Inca Garcilaso becomes not just an intellectual for and within the confines of early modern textual culture. His sharp observations on the often uncanny, fetish-like realities of colonialism are an invitation to pay close attention to the material world he and his contemporaries may have inhabited. In this sense, Inca Garcilaso’s untimely golden stone, also known as huaca (sacred object, person, or place), is laden with meanings that are as much traditionally Andean as they are a direct response to the Spanish presence in the New World.

The analogical materialism assumed by Inca Garcilaso is one important testimony among many in which colonized subjects utilize objects to define their ethnic and racial identity and to express sentiments of territorial belonging. His use of this discursive technology, however, is by no means unique. Centuries later, we encounter a comparable approach to materiality in Black Skin, White Masks, an influential exposé of black racialization and colonial racism published in 1952 by Martinique-born psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. In it, Fanon reminds us that the “white mask” of the colonizer is the embodied and deceptive material integument that “invisibilizes” black skins—or, conversely, hyper visibilizes their exclusion from whiteness. Fanon’s use of the white mask is not just a metaphor but the white mask is an object situated within and against the
explosion of African masks in European collectors’ markets of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. Referencing the specific case of imperial France and its colonies in the insular Caribbean, Fanon articulates a relationship between the Negro body and the objects that surround it, thus implicitly coupling the ethnic provenance of colonial objects with the pervasive racializing dynamics that fragment and further invisibilize by concealment the bodies of colonized people. In the chapter titled “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon gives us a probing account of this moral entreaty. For the reader—spectator of his arguments, Fanon suggests, his physical blackness is sublated by a relational ontology of “nonbeing,” and thus becomes excluded from the concept of Self—or more appropriately, Human—that began to unfold in nineteenth-century Western Europe. Suggestively, his disputation of this genealogy of exclusion gives an account of the black body that is freighted with the language of material embodiment and objecthood.

Furthermore, the two examples above intimate that objects like bodies are key in the constitution of racial meanings and, through their migration, these are also constitutive of colonial spaces. Literary and cultural studies scholars, especially of Latin America, have yet to fully explore the labor materiality performs in colonial racial formations. For instance, cultural and colonial studies owe a great deal to the notion of “contact zone” developed by Mary Louise Pratt. For Pratt, a contact zone is a particular kind of human interaction that characterizes “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical
inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). This definition, Pratt continues, explicitly foregrounds “the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (6–7). Yet it seems as if considering additional variables would further enhance our understanding of such framework. That is, we must take into account that the teleology of contact is productively complicated by the travel and circulation of material culture; and more importantly, as Fanon understands it, its violence resides in the colonial subject’s conflation with objects in the racial schematization used to validate the colonial condition. In light of these examples, we can begin to see how to interrogate colonial materialities, by themselves and through their repeated presence in textual accounts, is to aim for an understanding of the role colonial objects have in shaping complex processes of objectification after which human and non-human manifestations of coloniality are forged.

If there is one ontology that can consistently be accessed through colonial racialization it is that of the object. An exclusive focus on resistance negates that it is the object, and the wider agentive field of material culture in general, that which is often invoked to give expression to emergent forms of colonial subjectification. Aware that this transition is fraught with fractures and continuities that are not fully apprehended by either rejection or complicity with animistic paradigms of subject formation, nor by the degrading framework in racialized contexts of studying objects as people, in this dissertation I have chosen to stand in the gap of multiple colonial forms to create what is hopefully a number of assemblages—as composite view, multi-vectorial narrative, and
fruitful excavation of discrete objects of study and disciplinary formations—that bring into view the work that remains to be done in order for us to truly begin a decolonial praxis within the field of Latin American colonial studies. “Colonial Assemblages: Objects, Territories, and Racialized Subjects in Pre-Independence Latin America (1492–1810)” examines the colonial life of objects and the way in which histories of race are closely intertwined with the assemblage and circulation of material culture. Across a variety of media, including but not limited to the written word, colonial and imperial subjects increasingly reflected upon the transcultural function of material objects to negotiate evolving conceptions of race and territorial belonging. The politicized impact of these alternative cultural productions dramatizes anxieties over miscegenation and racial purity, culminating in the pervasive ideology of continental creoles toward the castas, the offspring of Europeans, Africans, and indigenous actors.

Especially attentive to the global aspect of colonial modernity, I further supplement lettered and material sources with a critical commentary of New World and European artists who documented the reception in metropolitan and peripheral centers of indigenous art and artifacts. Native and transatlantic “materialities” such as gold, beads, *khipus*, mirrors, combs, paintings, scissors, and monoliths—in relation to the traditional written accounts of the crónicas and cartas de relación, the maps, and other testimonies produced by diverse colonial actors posit particular challenges concerning the risks and limits of European literacy in spaces of colonial domination. This project is in conversation with and builds upon the work of many other scholars invested in delineating an ethno-racial paradigm that better accounts for the heterogeneity of views
and the cardinal presence of material culture in colonial textual and visual media. Inspired by these efforts, and by my in-depth exploration of the fraught and limited dichotomy that we have built around the notions of objecthood and subjectivity, I propose to reconsider “the colonial” as a multitude of assemblages, that is, a particular gathering of ethno-racial human and non-human agencies in constant state of friction and impossible harmonization. My study focuses on the often-neglected complicity between joint modes of representation, discourse and material culture. In doing so, it examines discrete moments of the Hispanic-European enterprise in the Spanish Americas, from 1492 through the uneven baroque, mannerist, and enlightened projects that waywardly carry on and implode in the first two lustra of the nineteenth century. With this conceptual framework we are better able to comprehend the configurations and coexistence of asymmetrical forms of being and knowing produced in contexts of colonial domination as viewed and apprehended from the particular geo-political formation known as Latin America.

AFTER THE 1980S: A SERIES OF PARADIGM SHIFTS

The field of colonial Latin America has witnessed multiple debates over the nature of its object of study. Concern with how critical practices have obliterated the voices and views of traditionally marginalized groups has led to the restructuring of the types of studies coming out of our discipline since at least the 1980s, and many would argue that even before. Taking the momentous transition that emerged at this particular historical

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2 Cornejo-Polar is the main proponent of the theory of heterogeneity, which is first developed in Sobre literatura y crítica latinoamericana.
juncture, it is well known that during this time historians and literary critics such as Patricia Seed, Rolena Adorno, and Walter Mignolo participated in a series of debates questioning the then prevalent aesthetic approach to colonial sources, which previously viewed colonial documents and texts as Peninsular literary works.\(^3\) This long debate has been diagnosed, revisited, and expanded by many, including Adorno, Cornejo-Polar, Mignolo, and Hernán Vidal. However, it is important to note that the outcome resulted in a paradigm shift that, propelled by Michel Foucault’s particular brand of poststructuralism, embraced “discourse”—and more specifically, “colonial discourse”—as an illuminative concept for the study of colonial sources.\(^4\)

In her 1988 article “Nuevas perspectivas en los estudios literarios coloniales latinoamericanos,” Rolena Adorno suggests that, under the notion of discourse, colonial texts (including historical and archival documents) should no longer be treated simply as literature.\(^5\) But beside the aforementioned discourse-as-power approach, two interrelated aspects gain prominence in her account: first, the category of the “Other” our discipline

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\(^4\) In this sense, early- and mid-career Foucault proved more useful as a grounding point for critiques emerging from the field of colonial Latin American studies; see especially *The Order of Things*. Other influential works included “The Discourse of Language,” *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” and *The History of Sexuality*.

\(^5\) As Adorno writes in her groundbreaking piece, “el discurso abre el terreno del dominio de la palabra y de muchas voces no escuchadas” (“Nuevas perspectivas” 11). For Adorno, this marked a disciplinary renovation—“el umbral de la emergencia de un paradigma nuevo”—that fundamentally restructured the nature of the field: “los objetos de análisis cambian de tal manera que la categoría reservada al sujeto se abre para incluir no solo el europeo o criollo letrado sino los sujetos cuyas identificaciones étnicas o de género no reproducen las de la ideología patriarcal e imperial dominante” (“Nuevas perspectivas” 11). The richness of Adorno’s insight during the aforementioned 1980s crisis of colonial studies is due to the fact that she incorporates many elements to her analysis—including a critical appraisal of her peer’s work, from Peter Hulme’s then recent definition of “discourse” in *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* to the invaluable contribution of colleagues such as Ángel Rama, Beatriz Pastor, Mignolo, and Frank Salomon.
has afforded, since Tzvetan Todorov,⁶ to “el nativo americano—conquistado o indomable—[que] siempre está en el centro de todos los escritos coloniales, aun cuando no se lo mencione” (“Nuevas perspectivas” 18) and which, according to Adorno, can be recuperated through attention to indigenous oralities; and, second, the possibility of articulating a colonial critique that expands beyond traditional nationalistic and disciplinary boundaries to encompass the multiplicity of “posiciones del sujeto” emerging in colonial contexts (“Nuevas perspectivas” 14). In many ways Adorno’s minute and sharp insight has contributed to re-aligning a field grappling with internal contradictions concerning the nature of its sources and with the problematic exclusion, at the time, of indigenous groups from its object of study. Yet the most important development—as she considered several years later—was that this new perspective resulted in a consensus that “no clear dichotomy exists between document and text insofar as they both require the same kinds of analysis and scrutiny.” Furthermore, this statement immediately led her to sustain that “not all texts are written” (“Reconsidering” 138). In my view, the trajectory conducive to these words (written in 1993), the context in which they are embedded, and the direction they take are as important as the point Adorno makes.

Rolena Adorno’s last set of reflections is part of yet another animated debate taking place during the 1990s in which Adorno herself, Jorge Klor de Alva, and Fernando Coronil start to question the use of the terms “colonial” and “postcolonial” to refer to the body of works produced in pre-independence Latin America.⁷ This debate, too, has been vastly covered and in general resulted in more nuanced claims about the socio-political

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⁷ See Adorno (“Nuevas perspectivas”), Klor de Alva, and Coronil (“Can Postcoloniality”).
structures and discourses extracted from colonial sources and in the sustained self-reflexive theorization of the role of the intellectual in the constitution of the discipline.\(^8\)

Let me outline briefly each critic’s point of view.

For instance, Klor de Alva is critical of postcolonial theory because he considers that the significant reduction of the indigenous populations, coupled with the rapid ascendance of the criollo elite, does not provide for an understanding of colonialism in the context of twentieth-century liberation movements. Similarly to Klor de Alva, Adorno resists these terms because they rest primarily on findings concerning the British colonial context (“Reconsidering” 141). On the other hand, Coronil defends these critical paradigms for their usefulness in facilitating comparative work across colonial and imperial matrixes. Of notable interest as well is that Adorno, who had until then accepted the notion of colonial discourse with enthusiasm, “reconsiders” the applicability of this term, partly due to her skepticism of Patricia Seed’s suggestion that “colonial discourse” had become a field of study—in contrast to a method (as Adorno would have it). The difference between the two seems to be that the former aligns itself almost exclusively with (European) poststructuralist thought and at the risk of lumping together modern and early modern subjectivities, when it is clear for Adorno that both sensibilities significantly differ from one another (“Reconsidering” 143). Taken as a method, she suggested, colonial discourse rather opened up the field to other forms of textuality, “a critical category that implies a set of operations to be performed on the account being examined rather than a configuration of elements that characterize the account itself. Seen as text, however, any

\(^8\) Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel provides a useful review of this debate in the first chapter of *From Lack to Excess: “Minor” Readings of Latin American Colonial Discourse*. 
stable configuration of semiotic signs is less a thing than part of the process of signification”

(“Reconsidering” 139, my emphasis). It is my contention that to produce a more complete picture of colonial dynamics we must be willing to complicate linguistic models of colonial interaction—on which Adorno’s notion of textuality seems to rest—and which were conceived, in the first place, to account for signification practices that are supposed to crystallize in alphabetical writing.

Throughout these debates, it is evident that literary critics have struggled with what to do with indigenous materialities and objects. This leads me to an aspect that was left unaddressed in my previous account. As part of a greater notion of textuality, Adorno also proposed to include in the study of colonial sources “ciertos sistemas de representación y de comunicación (los catecismos testerianos, los códices mesoamericanos coloniales, los kerukuna [vasos ceremoniales de madera] del Perú, el arte de la iglesia colonial, etc.)” (“Nuevas perspectivas” 22). However, Adorno’s inclusion (in parenthetical form) of indigenous representational systems fails to realize that some of these “systems” are not only discourses or texts. Furthermore, the insistence on reading agency and subjectivity in colonial sources, if absolutely necessary as part of a decolonizing critical practice, runs the risk of flattening out the differences between the ambivalent “subject positions”—to use Adorno’s phrase—the colonized gain (or lose) as their materialities and imaginaries go in and out of imperial and colonial realms. In addition, Adorno’s notion of textuality does not consider how colonial subjectivities might be concealed (or further occluded) in the very things that come out of colonial milieus and through the nefarious mechanisms of objectification that make colonial domination a reality. And even though
if, to Adorno’s credit, her work has at times hinted at the possibility of opening up the field to the study of ethnic materialities, printed and codicological sources have continued to gain primacy in the proceedings of our discipline.

In his meditation about the problem of written texts in relation to non-alphabetic indigenous sources, Walter Mignolo has forged the concept of “colonial semiosis” to describe an ample set of dynamics particular to colonial contexts. The concept is capacious and ambiguous, sometimes prescribing a method and at others signaling a field of study. For instance, in a 1989 essay, Mignolo uses colonial semiosis to speak of “a context of cross-cultural [human] interactions” (“Colonial Situations” 94). In “Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism?” (1993) the term stands for “the dialectic between a plurality of signs from different cultures as well as the dialectic between official stories and suppressed voices” (129). In The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization (1995), colonial semiosis refers to “the coexistence of interaction among and cultural production by members of radically different cultural traditions” (9); to “a field of study parallel to other well-established ones” (8); while in a previous article, it referred to “a network of semiotic practices characterized by the encounter of writing systems from different cultural traditions through the spread of Western literacy” (“The Darker Side” 813). All these inflexions of Mignolo’s concept of colonial semiosis demonstrate his careful consideration of the cross-cultural context. However, he does not recognize that even if ethnic or indigenous signs can be interpreted, that does not mean they are inherently analogous to writing. This is not to say that we should cease to pay attention to the textuality, discourse, and/or semiosis of
(written) sources that would best benefit from these reading strategies. I want to suggest, on the contrary, that a critical grouping of strategies beyond, but not exclusive of, traditional reading practices is required to interpret colonial artifacts, indigenous or otherwise, in a more comprehensive way.

When I first began to think about this dissertation I was struck by the very basic observation that colonial Latin American texts were loaded with objects. I first imagined a textual critique that would pay closer attention to how objects and materialities are portrayed in colonial discourse, for these could point to important leads concerning the context of production of these accounts. Secondly, I was moved by the need to recognize the space these objects occupied in any given place and time; and considered that their often tactile nature required—like the knotted memories of Andean khipus—that we bring more than just our sense of vision to the intellective methods with which we scrutinize these kinds of colonial representational systems. But as my project progressed an urgent question emerged out of the politicized presence of material culture in textual and visual accounts: What have been the epistemic conditions that repeatedly bury racialized colonial others and other non-modern subjects in our investigation of the material objects that circulate in empire and its critical discourse? I do not intend for “Colonial Assemblages” to generate all the answers for this question, but I do wish to open up a space where we can begin to address this problematic in our collective efforts to continue to dismantle the pervasive legacies of colonialism. In the following pages, I offer a reflection on the work of scholars and colleagues that have been fundamental in pursuing a research path that is attentive to the ways in which materiality is constitutive to the
forging of racial meaning and colonial space, and offer my own ideas on what is at stake with this critical intervention.

TOWARD A THEORY OF MATERIALITY AND ETHNO-RACIAL MAKING IN COLONIAL LATIN AMERICA

Most studies of Latin America on the roughly three centuries between post-conquest and the wars of independence from Spain have yet to give serious consideration to colonial representational systems as physical entities deeply involved in processes of colonial contact. It is surprising that if studies in early modernity have so readily examined the properties of “the book” as a material entity, scholars of the colonial underpinnings of the literary and cultural wealth exhibited during the Renaissance and the so-called Age of Exploration have not considered that objects could be read and historicized as we have done with books. Yet this simple inversion would still be inaccurate because it runs the risk of re-inscribing writing as the dominant mode of expression. To state the obvious, within the social sciences and the humanities, the disciplines of archaeology and to great extent, art history, are devoted to the interpretation of the material object as primary source. For the experts in any number of these disciplinary fields there is no doubt that a Mexican turquoise shield or a Caribbean duho (wooden stool), for instance, possess the level of signification and complexity we have been able to confer to books, without their

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9 The analysis put forth by historians Steven Bunker and Victor Macías-González traces the development of material economic patterns from pre-Hispanic to postcolonial Latin America beyond an exclusive focus on market dynamics. I echo their statements: “The material aspects of the conquest have received, until recently, limited historical analysis. While other studies have focused on ‘spiritual conquests,’ biological pathogens, ecological transferences, or on the chaotic nature of Spaniards’ dispersion over the Americas requiring royal creation of institutions to mitigate the power of those adventurers–entrepreneurs, few have focused on the material conquest. This is clearly an oversight. In addition to bringing their animals, fruits, grains, diseases, Christianity, and slaves to the Americas, Spaniards and other Europeans (as well as Africans and Asians) also brought their material objects and their attitudes toward the tangible” (56).
technologies being as easily reducible to alphabetical writing.

That is not to say that innovative approaches in colonial studies that truly problematize our attachment to literary models have not been introduced in the past fifteen years or so. Although their work might seem very different, scholars such as Gustavo Verdesio, Galen Brokaw, Orlando Bentancor, Ivonne del Valle, Anna More, Daniel Nemser, Allison Bigelow, and also Sylvia Spitta have articulated a preoccupation with the marginal place afforded to ethnic materialities in the dominant critical paradigms of the discipline.\textsuperscript{10} Taken in conjunction, the leading contributions of Verdesio and Spitta make it clear that it is necessary to open up the possibility of introducing a complimentary perspective to the approaches that have constituted an already multifaceted object of study.

In his landmark piece “Forgotten Territorialities: The Materiality of Indigenous Pasts” (2001), Verdesio makes a call for the use of interdisciplinary tools with the purpose of incorporating to our studies more than just a handful of ethnic groups that have systematically been excluded by the different structures of domination existing in former (or present) colonial contexts. He identifies a problem in the lack of ethnic diversity within our discipline, which only seems to focus on indigenous empires subjugated by Spain

\textsuperscript{10} Many of these works have appeared in articles and are in progress. I list here some of their most salient contributions. Brokaw provides a historico-linguistic assessment of Andean technologies and signifying practices (“Khipu Numeracy”; “Indigenous American”). Bentancor’s work especially connects the study of colonial material culture to philosophy and phenomenology, implying that the material substratum for continental thought was in many ways the colonization of the Americas (“Decolonizing”). Del Valle’s research offers valuable insights on the politics of water management in colonial Mexico (“On Shaky”). Also at the intersection of science and technology, on the one hand, and literary and cultural analysis, on the other, is Bigelow’s work on colonial mining and agriculture. Baroque Sovereignty: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and the Creole Archive of Colonial Mexico, by More, also makes important contributions to the study of materiality in the context of seventeenth-century Mexican criolloismo. Focusing on the questions of mixing, purity, and colonial infrastructure, Nemser’s articles anticipate new and exciting directions for this research (“To Avoid”; “Archaeology”; “Primitive Accumulation”). Spitta’s is one of the first studies by a literary scholar to conduct a diachronic examination of object culture in the Latin and Latino Americas.
(Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas) and whose social development and state organization has been deemed comparable to those of Europe (87).\textsuperscript{11} Verdesio also engages in an archaeological analysis to advance a broad notion of “materiality,” which encompasses, “besides sign carriers, all kinds of objects” (94)—including the territorial layouts of indigenous groups that produced neither books nor maps. As such, his work on the colonial indigenous cerritos, or ritual mounds, located in what is today Uruguay primarily builds upon the work of Argentine philosopher Rodolfo Kusch to propose a decolonizing critique that significantly expands the limited paradigm of colonial semiosis. By treating as material culture these spatial formations, and noticing their points of connectivity with indigenous subaltern ways of knowing and being in the world as well as with the objects produced by these “forgotten” groups, Verdesio helps us reconstruct not just an excavation of the lost trace, the fragment, or of a supposed human absence. He faces us, instead, with the challenge of “an actual archaeology of living that focuses on the study of human life as a series of conceptions and practices” (96, my emphasis). If taken the challenge, the impact of this gesture may have tremendous implications for the study of Latin American colonial sources by providing an appropriate complement to other types of object-centered analyses.

Silvia Spitta’s *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas* (2009) helps showcase some of the epistemic conditions that have led scholars to re-invest in the languages of materiality, material objects, cultural materiality, and the

\textsuperscript{11} The conditions denounced by Verdesio still very much apply to the developments of the field after he issued these statements, more than a decade ago. Presently, a welcome departure that investigates the production of native epistemologies by straddling the colonial and postcolonial contexts and various forms of indigenous knowledge in Mexico appears in the work of Kelly McDonough, *The Learned Ones: Nahua Intellectuals in Postconquest Mexico*. 
different promises embodied by the object in the face of further dematerialization of the role of the intellectual in the academy. Rachel Price has most recently articulated a productive reflection on these issues. Her book, *The Object of the Atlantic: Concrete Aesthetics in Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, 1868–1968* (2014) traces the aesthetic conditions of possibility of such discourses as a multi-stage process: as an extension of the geo-political reorganization that took place in the nineteenth century with the dismantling of the Spanish empire; the subsequent rise of the US as a global imperial formation with special investments in Latin America and the Caribbean; and the differentiated discourses of development and modernization that became constitutive of Latin America’s national metropolises, particularly Brazil and Cuba.12 Price’s research does not ignore either the dehumanizing conditions imposed by slavery nor the objectification of black bodies, conditions to which post-emancipation artists and intellectuals in the two countries were especially attuned to, in myriad and complex ways. The impulse to center objects and material culture as part of the critical work of Latin Americanism might point to the need to further interrogate discursive, textual, and semiotic notions by providing further proof of what has now become common knowledge, that is, the complicity between aesthetics and empire. In tandem with positivistic disciplinary formations, as Brazilian sociologist

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12 Price also traces the critical discourses of objects in the Atlantic in general, a contextualization that I reproduce here for the sake of readability: “Objects and material culture are today of renewed interest across a number of fields. Scholars of literature and art history have explored, for example, things and property in Victorian England; ‘a sense of things’ in U.S. modernism; the ‘socialist objects’ of Russian Constructivism; the legacy of surrealist objects in Latin American literature; and ‘thing theory’ in general. Scholars in the fields of philosophy and the history of science have reconsidered objectivity and have rejected the integrity of either objects or subjects; indeed the binary itself. The recent philosophical movement of speculative realism, also known as ‘object-oriented ontology,’ claims to be interested in the ontology of objects themselves, beyond human agency. Recent ecocriticism, on the other hand, insists on the incoherence of either subjects or objects, given the teeming, messy porousness of both ‘humans’ (seen now not as singular entities but as massive containers of microbes and other beings) and ‘things’—in Jane Bennett’s coinage, ‘vibrant matter’” (7).
Denise Ferreira da Silva has identified in the twin disciplines of History and Philosophy as they developed in the nineteenth century, discourses about expression and the autonomous sphere of art have actively participated in outlining the limits and contours of the human. In this sense, Spitta’s observations are a welcome contribution to this discussion:

Concepts such as hybridity, métissage, creolization, syncretism, colonial semiosis, coloniality, etc., all, in one way or another, attempt to theorize the multifaceted ways in which first indigenous communities and then emergent nations reacted to and subverted colonial impositions. However, these concepts run the danger of simply proliferating further, since they reiterate essentialist notions of racial and ethnic identity. More importantly, their focus on identities circumvents the crucial role played by objects in delimiting them. (9)

Spitta, like Cornejo-Polar earlier, perceptively names the fraught relationship between colonialism and the emergent nation form in Latin America, as well as the problems that indigeneity posed for these particular formations. In this context, it is still necessary to remember that the pressures that shaped this particular juncture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not exclusive to the discourse of mestizaje in its strictest sense.

Many of the concepts Spitta brings to the fore have been particularly invested in theorizing this phenomenon. Yet different from what she seems to be suggesting here, I believe that new perspectives in this arena must remain in dialogue with both the earlier theories that Spitta mentions, as well as the ones that are not the main focus of her investigation (transculturation, heterogeneity, contact zones, etc.), for their individual and collective re-deployments have been instrumental to the work of colonial Latin American studies as discipline, field, and method.

13 See Ferreira da Silva’s powerful meditation in Toward a Global Idea of Race.
In particular, Fernando Ortiz’s insights from the field of anthropology in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), which studies consumable goods like tobacco and sugar as cultural objects, could be seen as one of the foundational examples on how to conduct a sustained theorization of cultural and material contact and exchange from the colony to the present. In order to theorize transculturation, or the process by which cultures in contact transform one another (86), Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo* discusses the ways in which cultural exchange in the colony took place in a bi-directional flow of objects and their meanings—artifacts, commodities, and their symbolic values—through the economies of the body and the market. In a moment of incalculable insight, he likens the value of the aforementioned consumable goods to the objects that signaled class and social status in early modern and contemporary Europe and Africa:

Los polvos de tabaco fueron para los cortesanos, señorones, y clérigos de antaño, en Europa, un hábito de gran distinción social, como el de llevar en el séquito sendos negros esclavos, monos, loros y guacamayos. Los elegantes enriquecieron las tabaqueras del rapé con miniaturas, camafeos, y piedras preciosas, convirtiéndolas en joyas finísimas . . . . Con el mismo criterio de aristocracia que los cortesanos del Rey Sol, los negros bantú del África del Sur adornaban sus diminutas polveras, de tomas individuales de rapé, forrándolas a costa de gran paciencia con abalorios multicolores. Las vitrinas de los museos de arte y de costumbres lucen ahora esas tabaqueras lujosas de los magnates de Europa y de los de África, como bellas crísmeras del diabólico culto. Tal ocurre también, con las colecciones de pipas, boquillas, cigarreras, petacas, tenacillas, fosforeras, encendedores, ceniceros y demás accesorios del fumar, que abarcan a los pueblos del mundo entero. (192)

In his account of the uses and pleasures associated with the consumption of tobacco, Ortiz is already offering a theory of the object that, alongside that of critics of colonialism such as Fanon, helps us recover how material culture conceals colonial systems of domination and how it participates in larger structural constructions of objectified
colonial spaces and subjectivities. In a passage reminiscent of the discursive referents of the *sociedad de castas* (terms such as *mulato, albino, negro torna-atrás*, among others) that make an appearance in chapter 5 of this dissertation, Ortiz discusses how these material economies produce a problematic slippage from the quality and the purity of the commodities of tobacco and sugar to the language of gendered racial epithets and class divisions:

Solamente por sus colores la nomenclatura cubana del tabaco para la fuma es tan abundosa como la de los antropólogos para las razas humanas. . . . Así como el cubano distingue en las mujeres desde la negra retinta hasta la blanca dorada, con una larga serie de pigmentaciones intermedias y entremezcladas, y las clasifica a la vez según sus colores, atractivos y rangos sociales, así conoce también los tipos de los tabacos claros, colorado-claros, colorados, colorado-maduros, maduros, ligeros, secos, mediostiempos, finos, amarillos, manchados, quebrados, sentidos, bronceos, puntillas y otros más hasta los botes y colas, ya en la inferior “clase social” de los tabacos, que van solamente a las masas humildes de la picadura. (162)

Although specific to Cuba, Ortiz’s project has been made to speak about how space is constructed in different colonial and postcolonial enclaves across the geographical regions of Latin America (the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, and the Andes, among others).\(^\text{14}\)

Furthermore, by taking into consideration the role played by the agrarian monopoly of sugar and tobacco in the physical landscape of Cuba, he allows for an investigation on how the nature of the territory factors into our perceptions of these consumable objects; that is, of how objects and processes of objectification of spaces and peoples are ensembled into a network of cultural productions.

As I already anticipated at the beginning of this introduction, the process of

\(^{14}\) For a productive resignification of Ortiz’s model of transculturation, see Ángel Rama’s *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*. 
unveiling the objectified violence that is concealed in colonial systems of domination is crucial to the Fanonian theory of the object. No other scholar has been able to capture the relationship between colonial oppression, subjectivity, and the materiality of objects with such clarity and vision. Key moments in *Black Skin, White Masks* can thus be read as powerful meditations on the complicity of the object in the architecture of race, and especially in the production of colonial blackness:

> I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into this crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others . . . . I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self. (109)

Fanon’s description articulates the daunting process by which the racialized body of the colonial “I” re-assembles itself from the devastating position of a subjectivity mediated and thus distorted by its status of “object in the midst of other objects.” For Fanon this is a multi-part process: a pervasive state of unity amidst fragmentation—described as a “crushing objecthood”—extends beyond the sexualizing dynamics of the colonial fetish (the reification of colonial bodies that makes them desirable to an imperial gaze), yet still passes through the (fractured) body to create meaning out of colonial subjectivities. Instead of dynamism and wholeness of the self, the defining features of this state are lack of independence, fixity, and dismemberment. For Fanon, the object stands in opposition to the category of “human.” Thus the exclusion of blackness from the latter category constitutes the black body—a colonial body—as an assemblage of parts straddling the line between subjectivity and objectification, inasmuch objects frequently stand in for or in
close connection with the symbolic representations of the colonized.

Furthermore, the symbolic masks referred to by Fanon point to its material reverse; that is, to the commodification of African masks that, as a result of theft and imperial plunder, introduced them to modern European markets and global art worlds. If we consider once again Fanon’s “white masks” in direct relation to their contrapuntal materiality, the term “black masks” emerges both as a metonym for the commodification of black bodies and as the negative of a picture of whiteness which effectively conceals a cultural slippage from ethnic provenance (who makes the artifacts and where do they come from?) to racial indexicality (the peoples they are supposed to be representing). Once converted into desirable ethnic objects, these masks of/about blackness readily become part of museums and private collections, possibly next to other autochthonous goods coming from (post)colonial and otherwise “ethnic” worlds from all over the Americas, the Caribbean, India, and Eastern Asia.

Prior to the explosion of African masks in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European collections, recent scholarship reminds us, however, that early modernity witnessed “the placement of black faces on furniture, flasks, signs, lights, and other artifacts” (Hall 212). By that same token, “dark-skinned Africans were objects of symbolic importance and cultural exchange long before they became a numerically significant group in the English population” (Hall 212). In contrast, Spain’s long history of contact with Northern Africa provides a more challenging example, as Moorish presence in the region pre-dates systems of colonial traffic of African peoples and objects and, more importantly, extends to the foundational experience of Old and New World contact in
colonial Latin America. Yet the point remains to be that, more often than not, aesthetic and material representations of otherness enter social and lived space prior to the establishment of human interactions among groups, even long before cohabitation and acceptance can exist in the context of any particular territorial matrix.

It is crucial to keep in mind that Fanon’s statements about blackness are also statements about the persistence of coloniality, the diachronic racial “schema” of colonialism that his work aims to disentangle. In line with Fanon’s analysis, it is my contention that by extending Fanon’s reflections to consider earlier histories of subjugation we stand to gain a more complete picture of the founding discourses of what we may call today the fact of colonialism. In close examination of this objective—and, may we add, artifactual reality—, this dissertation investigates multiple parts in the structure of colonial domination as framed by colonial Latin American and early modern textual, visual, and material accounts. It employs analytical strategies and boundary-crossing disciplinary frameworks that model for a textual analyst such as myself productive avenues of inquiry that emerge by centering discussions about objects, material culture, and materiality. In pre-independence Latin America, the development of the sociedad de castas (at the height of enlightened material and conceptual classificatory systems) and the obsessive portrayal of the intermingling of colonial bodies (alongside everyday objects) in pictorial genres such as casta paintings are one of the most paradigmatic examples of such processes of racialization coupled with objectification.

Moving beyond these considerations, it is appropriate to note how seemingly innocuous action verbs and markers of territoriality—such as descubrir (discover), fundar
(found), and organizar (organize), among others—have acquired a markedly colonial inflection for their inherently palimpsestic nature. Most foundational acts in the New World, whether symbolic or physical, have rested on the archaeological occlusion of the natives’ physical experiences, be it in the form of material objects such as the Andean geometric textiles known as unkus (which often encompass signifying practices akin to but also completely distinct from writing), territorial layouts, or indigenous landmarks. That is, more often than not ethnic objects and territories become buried by imperial apparatuses of control and order. The exclusion of ethnic materialities from our agendas could be read, as many have in fact done, as a symptom of the presence of Eurocentrism in even the staunchest colonial and postcolonial critiques. As philosopher Enrique Dussel has sustained, the systematic eclipsing (“en-cubrimiento”) of the colonized Other and its violent inclusion into Europe’s progress toward History (a term he takes to task in Friedrich Hegel’s philosophy) is at the origins of the “myth of modernity.” The paradigmatic example in this case is, perhaps, the en-cubrimiento of Mesoamerican pyramids by ornate Baroque churches that continue to mesmerize visitors from all over the globe. As Herman Bennett has noted, the same occlusion, although in a different

15 Dussel’s ideas have become foundational, in their own right, of a Latin American decolonial discourse. See The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity.

16 A similar hermeneutics of erasure taking place in colonial Peru is explained in great detail by Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn: “The single most important structure was the Qorikancha, the Inka’s ‘Golden Enclosure’. It was the religious heart of the empire, in which many of the state’s most sacred objects were billeted. After the Spanish conquest of the Inka, Cuzco was ‘founded’ as a Spanish city and its lands were divided into house lots and distributed to conquerors. Many of the precious contents of the Qorikancha were apportioned as well. The architectural complex that was the Golden Enclosure was eventually awarded to the Dominican Order and the church and cloister of Santo Domingo were erected there. Rather than tearing down all of the Inka masonry—a difficult job considering the size and solidity of Inka stonework—the Spanish edifice was constructed on top of and around the Qorikancha. The Golden Enclosure was itself enclosed by the walls of Santo Domingo. Parts of the Qorikancha’s base remain visible from the exterior. Most striking is the curved wall of the Qorikancha which enshrined the place where Cuzco was founded. The curved wall serves as the base for the apse of the Dominican church; this holy
respect, has haunted the presence of Africans, blacks, and Afro-diasporic subjects in Latin American studies of the colonial past.\textsuperscript{17} These dangerous concealments, paradoxically, make themselves invisible. Yet they are often reified as well by the circulation of objects, artifacts, and commodities and the exploitation of subjects behind each object (as Karl Marx reminds us). Concealment is masked, similarly, by the colonialist urbanizer’s dream of a virgin land, a clean slate in which imperial cartographies would come to life. Given these sets of problems, a re-assembling of critical horizons—and ultimately of how the discipline of colonial studies has rested on a problematic relationship to the “materialities of the Other”—will help to foreground new readings of the colonial past. The duty remains to further reveal the ways in which human groups have experienced colonialism, as well as how our critical agendas might continue to be complicit—although wrongly so—with the colonial (and perhaps postcolonial) asymmetries we have so readily denounced.

\textbf{COLONIAL ASSEMBLAGES}

This dissertation stages a reading of colonial texts and materialities, and the objects that clutter those texts in order to generate new understandings of the ways in which colonial subjects are viewed and categorized increasingly within the sociedad de castas (the ideological matrix used to classify the mixed embodiments of Europeans, Africans, and Indians). The analyses herein proposed emerge out of the polemics and debates that shaped the field of colonial Latin American studies during the last thirty years or so.

\footnote{Inka place provides both literal and figurative support for the Dominican altar. Its hybridity speaks directly of conquest and domination, for it is a visibly composited structure whose Inka and Spanish parts are readily identifiable” (15).}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{17} This argument is convincingly made in \textit{Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico}.}
Arguing for a reassessment of present critiques of colonality presuming the homogeneous expansion of lettered culture, my readings of the colonial Latin American discursive archive conditionally reorient the question of subjectivity across the imperial/colonial divide toward the potentiality of the material object in the creation of textual and lived colonial space. This research studies how colonial objects such as gold, mirrors, combs, and scissors constitute a fruitful site for articulating understudied connections between historically contingent texts and their transatlantic contexts during the first three centuries of Spain’s rule in Mexico, Peru, and the Hispanic Caribbean (1492–1810). The resulting investigation develops a hermeneutics of engagement with a vast corpus of colonial Latin American and early modern European sources that centers objects and objectifying dynamics in the creation of a racialized social and physical field of territorial control and possession at the zenith of Spain’s rule in Latin America. “Colonial Assemblages” is not a study of indigenous and black epistemologies, embodiments, and forms of being. Or at least it is not in the traditional sense. It is, instead, a negative investigation of the “makedness” of distinct colonial ethno-racial formations within the colonial regimes of signification that overlap in the cultural landscape of the New World.

In order to uncover the artifactuality of the colonial regimes of signification that took root in the New World since the early period of discovery, conquest, and colonization, I trace the emergence of a material discourse invested in the object of ethno-raciality—particularly the Indian—as a trope and a figure that masks the multiple tensions operating simultaneously in the colonial scene of representation. At different moments in the history of colonial Latin America, material indigeneity is articulated as a
strategic foundational discourse against which the competing interests of diverse colonial and imperial actors operate, always within patriarchal social structures and ideologies. The material focus on colonial indigeneity is a calibrated measure. Why I privilege the long history of colonialism in Latin America as opposed to other pre- and postcolonial moments is explained by the genealogical, physical, and territorial excavations of continental creoles that took place in the region since at least the 1600s, but that reached new heights during the Hispanic Enlightenment. Late-colonial criollos were more readily admitting of social, cultural, linguistic, and figurative ties to a mythical indigenous past, while continuing to reject the full humanity and political subjectivity of natives, blacks, and other mixed embodiments.

Like the teeming archipelagic cartographies of the Antilles, the spectacular wealth of the silver and gold mines of the Andes, the swimming excess of Oriental goods in seventeenth century Mexico City, the rows of laborer after laborer (African, Indian, Asian, in-between) that builds from the ground up and across the sea the infrastructure of colonial worlds is an ubiquitous present absence in these pages. Fragments of their embodiment, ways of knowing, and their resilient performances of memory and belonging clash, collide, synergistically combine, and separate at different points in time from the colonialist mass—of human and technological agents—out to conquer, appropriate, reproduce, commodify, abstract, exchange, consume, mutilate, attempt to silence, annihilate, inter, impersonate, and discard—in sum, represent the colonial subject, indigenous or otherwise. The “objects,” “territories,” and “racialized subjects” in the
dissertation’s subtitle could be, have been, narrated as collections of discrete entities. But in this study the limits and contours of each inevitably blend into the others, and include things, objects, artifacts, and commodities as well as maps, visual art, physical signifying practices, and voices of colonial/early modern Latin America: indeed, the transformation in the horizon of ever-rapid material obsolescence into “an actual archaeology of living that focuses on the study of human life” amidst it all.

The theoretical link between corporealized materiality and my use of the term “assemblage” can be distilled from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1980):

We may draw some conclusions of the nature of Assemblages from this. On a first, horizontal axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand, it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then, on the vertical axis, the assemblages has both territorial sides, or reterritorialization sides, which stabilize it, and cutting edges of deterritorialization, which carry it away. (88)

In Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of assemblages, enunciation (or discourse) and incorporeal materiality are not opposed, but rather intersect in a plane of relationalities that is akin to the image of coordinate points plotted on a grid—which is,

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18 See, among numerous other studies, Carlos Fuentes, El espejo enterrado, and Rolena Adorno, The Polemics of Possession in Spanish American Narrative. See also the robust dialogue taking place in the field of early modern Hispanic history of collecting, collectors, and collectionism, including José Miguel Morán and Fernando Checa, El Coleccionismo en España: De la cámara de maravillas a la galería de pinturas; Paz Cabello Carro, Coleccionismo americano indígena en la España del siglo XVIII; and the edited volumes by María Luisa Sabau García, México en el mundo de las colecciones de arte; Mar Rey Bueno and Miguel López-Pérez, The Gentleman, the Virtuoso, the Inquirer: Vincencio Juan de Lastanosa and the Art of Collecting in Early Modern Spain; and Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World. The literature on early modern collecting is tremendously vast. See Horst Bredekamp, The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine; Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750; John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, The Cultures of Collecting; Paula Findlen, Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy; and Krzysztof Pomian, Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800.
however, not flat but multidimensional and topographically rich. My own understanding of the term considers assemblages as a productive theory for a spatial and material analysis of colonial dynamics that are, nevertheless, populated with interactions between textualized and concrete objects and subjects; and, on the other hand, with processes of objectification that either make visible or eclipse the inherent asymmetries present in contexts of colonial domination. Moved by the spatial assemblage that is the Latin American territory, my notion of colonial assemblages calls for the re-assembling of the fragments of colonial dynamics and subjectivities with the purpose of re-inserting material objects and materiality into the critical way we with think about colonial spaces and interactions.

Though theoretically fruitful, the different assemblages (in Spanish, ensamblajes) proposed in this study gain inspiration from but are not wedded to the particular history of the term as it has been theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, or by subsequent mobilizations and revisions of their generative concepts.\textsuperscript{19} I would prefer to align its meaning, instead, with the summarily important role of a particular type of agent whose labor and material contributions already figure as part of the vocabulary of the colonial Latin American discursive archive: the ensamblador or joiner. Ensambladores were a key part of the local and imported workforce of the Spanish viceroyalties. By the second half of the sixteenth century members of their guild were responsible for building the retablos (altarpieces, tableaus) of colonial churches, from reading and interpreting the architectural plan and translating the forms and designs of said plan to clients and other

\textsuperscript{19} The theory of assemblages has gained influence across the humanities and social sciences. See, for instance, Jasbir Puar and the recent study by Alexander Weheliye. In Latin American studies, Mabel Moraña has recently deployed the term in Arguedas/Vargas Llosa: dilemas y ensamblajes.
craftsmen, to gathering the materials, transporting them to the workshop, and, during the final stage of construction, assembling “the pieces of the giant puzzle together by pin, peg, nail, and glue” (Giffords 311).

The situation of joiners in New Spain during the second half of the seventeenth century was particularly unusual. The growing disorganization of the painter’s guild—a highly selective organism in terms of merit, quality (both class and racial background), and talent—fomented new social practices. No longer did the precious concerns of painters and visual artists in the viceroyalty dictate with such force the “structures of production, and the mechanisms for the distribution of artworks” (Deans-Smith, “Dishonor” 58). The painters were especially zealous of disallowing indigenous artists and craftsmen from making sacred images, whose bad imitations of the true painter’s work debased the latter’s position in the colony, and created both market and spiritual chaos (both preconditions for secularization). Susan Deans-Smith’s reconstruction of the tensions between ensambladores and pintores (painters) tells us that

by the late seventeenth century, there is evidence that prominent sculptors and joiners (ensambladores) began to subcontract with unlicensed painters and gilders, many of whom were Indian craftsmen, for the fabrication of retablos (altar ensembles). The elaboration of a retablo theoretically was the product of a complex interdependence among several different craftsmen and their assistants. They generally included a carpenter, a woodcarver, a joiner, a gilder, and a painter. Contracts were often given to one master craftsman who was the responsible for contracting masters from each related craft in accordance with the respective guild specifications. The new (and illegal) practices of the ensambladores, however, bypassed the master painters and created increased competition. (“Dishonor” 58)

As a model of interdisciplinary collaboration and epistemic solidarity, throughout the writing stages of this project the aptitude and dexterity of these ensambladores has served as
constant reminder that the knowledge that builds is not qualitatively different from the knowledge that cuts, from the knowledge that takes apart, dismantles, and destroys, nor fundamentally separate even from the knowledge that re-enlivens the discarded fragment into novel, creative material forms.

The interpretive training and methods of literary, textual, and cultural studies limit this project, in the sense that my “reading” of objects and material culture has been shaped by these very disciplinary formations. In other words, I do not claim or intend to do the work of entire disciplines generally structured around objects other than alphabetical discourse, as is the case with art history and archaeology and their rich interdisciplinary traditions. I have, however, whenever possible, gestured toward including these perspectives into my analysis as a way to inform the interpretive methods that impose strictures on the epistemic possibilities of textuality and written discourse, and as an effort to signpost future dialogues and highlight the collaborative potential that exists across scholarship in each of these disciplines.

DESCRIPTION OF CHAPTERS

This dissertation is divided into three main units, each comprising an assemblage of critical strategies, materialities, and colonial/imperial actors. The tripartite structure of the project follows, in the first place, a chronological focus. My story launches with the inauguration of colonial modernity since the paradigmatic year of 1492, and ends in the aftermath of the Bourbon Reforms, a few decades prior to the wars of independence that erupted in the Spanish American viceroyalties around 1810. A second yet equally important organizing gesture of the dissertation responds to its thematic scope, which
defines the contours of discrete objects and material formations—their agency and
dynamism—as they link the colonial architecture of ethno-racial discourses and identity
practices with evolving notions of indigeneity. Each interdisciplinary assemblage
examines how these simultaneously affix and attempt to decouple the figure of the Indian,
and the mixed embodiments resulting from this ancestry, from the physical conditions of
the territory at different moments during the conquest and colonization of the New
World. Part One, “Ship–Seaweed–Island–Gold” charts a trajectory from the relative
deterritorialization of European technological agents, like the ship or the compass, to the
reification and fetishization, respectively, of the insular geographies of the Caribbean and
the materiality of colonial gold. My first chapter begins with an analysis of Christopher
Columbus’s discursive construction of the Indies as a plastic topographical index
encompassing both innumerable islands and riches. Here I trace the emergence of a
dialectic, multistable concept and material entity, which I term the New World object, in
response to scholars’ frequent observation that the *Diario del primer viaje* exhibits the
rudiments of an “objective” or proto-scientific language. I then show how in addition to
being modeled after the classical and medieval concept of matter (*silva*), defined by Isidore
de Seville as an originary chaos that is always already open for transformation, the
language of material objectivity in Columbus’s ship log was used to grapple with the
internal contradictions that resulted from the clash of different representational systems,
the Europeans’ and the natives’.

The symbolic and textual economy of the New World object in Columbus’s
account most clearly manifests in the figure of colonial gold that for the Admiral becomes
synonymous with island as a geographical space defined its ability to produce treasures. This correspondence is amplified in my second chapter, which considers the centrality of colonial gold to sixteenth century textual and visual culture. As a direct result of the conquest and colonization of the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, and the Andes (pacified after a forty-year resistance in 1572), during this period Spain would become the object of frequent interest, scrutiny, and attacks by a number of influential personages. I analyze the frictions and points of connectivity that emerge in the works of three authors (Columbus, Hernán Cortés, and Bartolomé de Las Casas) and one artist (Theodor De Bry), all of whom helped shaped in direct and important ways the European public’s perceptions of the Crown’s administrative policies in the Indies. Employing a transatlantic framework, I show how their discursive interventions helped constitute colonial gold, on the one hand, as a fetish of early modern imperialism and, on the other, as a foundational materiality of colonial Latin American discourse. I conclude the study by reflecting on the limits of this paradigm for the Hispanic Caribbean, where the discourse of colonial gold is destabilized by both the indigenous demographic crisis and the natural depletion of its reserves a few decades after the conquest.

Part Two, “Grids,” turns attention to the obliterating abstractions that are the product of early modern colonialism. The main concern of the chapter contained herein is thus to develop an analytical framework for understanding the objectification of colonial spaces and bodies, taking as example the textual production of New Spain during the seventeenth century. In chapter 3, my reading of Bernardo de Balbuena’s 1604 paean to early modern capital, *Grandeza mexicana*, studies the conditions of intelligibility
generated by the local and global manifestations of the grid. In particular, the chapter establishes connections between the cartographic grid and the space of the *traza*—the urban grid that organized the layout of Spanish colonial cities across the New World—to show how repeated uses of these visual idioms as a metaphor for colonial order and concert attempt to erase the body of the “ugly Indian” from the ideal viceregal city outlined in Balbuena’s poem. By following the textual circulation of material objects and commodities in the text, this discussion sets the stage for my argument in Part Three of the dissertation, “Indian–Mestizo–Creole–Object,” which demonstrates the ways in which the theoretical construct of the *grid of coloniality* becomes a discursive assemblage aimed at containing the aesthetic, cultural, and ethno-racial ramifications of *mestizaje* in the New World.

Extending the analytical coordinates of this dissertation to the Andes, chapter 4 investigates how Inca Garcilaso’s *Comentarios reales* (1609) and Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615?) utilize transatlantic objects and physical spaces to negotiate the ethno-racial categories of *mestizo* and *indio* (Indian). A reassessment of the pre-Hispanic myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” reveals how new narratives of this traditional myth resurface in both of these texts in response to the changing ethno-racial landscape of post-conquest Peru. Consistent with the methodological approach exhibited in previous chapters, the second part of my analysis draws heavily from archaeological and art historical research to demonstrate the ways in which Andean material culture becomes a dominant presence in these accounts. I argue that this material strategy is a previously neglected component of the rhetorical language these seventeenth-century
authors deploy to legitimize their prose before a Spanish metropolitan audience.

Chapter 5 turns back to the viceroyalty of New Spain to examine the cultural narratives of creoles during the eighteenth century. Close examination of a number of cultural productions—from the viceregal genre of racial portraiture known as *casta* painting to the objects and images that tied the cult of Guadalupe to the cult-like fixation with indigenous antiquities—allows us to reconstruct a set of material strategies by which continental creoles distanced themselves from indigenous and mixed embodiments. The historical backdrop for these fraught negotiations of ethno-racial identity manifests in the ideology of the *sociedad de castas*, which classified human groups in the colony according to perceived degrees of proximity to Spanishness (i.e., whiteness), and in the impact of the Bourbon Reforms in the Spanish American territories. The chapter considers paintings by Miguel Cabrera, Francisco Clapera, and Antonio Pérez de Aguilar, among others, as well as historical accounts and treatises by Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora and Antonio de León y Gama to illustrate how material culture becomes a contested site of representation for *criollismo*. This consideration closes the broad thematic sweep of the dissertation by showing how, for New Spanish creoles, the taxonomy of racialized colonial subjects was inseparable from the material world they inhabited and aimed to master.

In sum, this dissertation focuses attention on the physical nature of cultural processes as they inform the traditional “matters of concerns” (to use anthropologist Bruno Latour’s phrase) (231) of textual studies. Material objects occupy a space in the social assemblages that delimit and classify identities, particularly when people, things, and territories become disputable matter as part of the experience of colonialism. As it is
true for other entities in the material world, colonial objects constantly acquire new meanings, losing old ones in order to carve out new spaces for the different actors who use, exchange, collect, display, and admire them; they may be unearthed from ancient caves or urban locations, fall into oblivion in a drawer, become neglected in a dusty basement, or perhaps remain stored in the back room of a national or state museum; they are bound as well to become virtually represented by language and money before experiencing further dematerialization. Yet objects (alongside words and physical spaces) are often the only recoverable trace the past leaves behind when people are no longer around to speak it. Ready to imbue objects with utilitarian or evidentiary value, we sometimes forget that their materiality often transforms our perception of the world and the people who inhabit it. Colonialism thrives on objects; but objects, also, give shape to the ethno-racial vocabulary developed by colonialism. As this research aims to show, this simple corollary becomes a guiding principle for a renewed, materially based Latin Americanism if we consider that rationalist and scientific paradigms rooted in the epistemic claims of colonial modernity have often attempted to categorize people, not unlike the way in which they have categorized objects.
Las cosas suplicadas e que Vuestras Altezas dan e otorgan a don Cristóval de Colón, en alguna satisfacion de lo que ha descubierto en las Mares Oceanas y del viaje que agora, con el ayuda de Dios, ha de fazer por ellas en servicio de Vuestras Altezas, son las que se siguen:

Primeramente, que Vuestras Altezas como Señores que son de las dichas Mares Oceanas fazen dende agora al dicho don Cristóval Colón su Almirante en todas aquellas islas y tierras firmes que por su mano o industria se descubriran o ganaran en las dichas Mares Oceanas para durante su vida, y después del muerto, a sus herederos e successores de uno en otro perpetuamente con todas aquellas preheminencias e prerrogativas pertenecientes al tal officio, e segund que don Alfonso Enríquez, quondam, Almirante Mayor de Castilla, e los otros sus predecesores en el dicho officio, lo tenian en sus districtos. Plaze a Sus Altezas, Johan de Coloma. . . .

Item, que de todas e qualesquier mercadurias, siquiere sean perlas, piedras preciosas, oro, plata, specieria, e otras qualesquier cosas e mercadurias de qualquier specie, nombre e manera que sean, que se compraren, trocaren, fallaren, ganaren e hovieren dentro en los limites de dicho Almirantazgo, que dende agora Vuestras Altezas dazen merced al dicho don Christoval e quieren que haya e lieve para sí la dezena parte de todo ello quitadas las costas todas que se fizieren en ello por manera que de lo que quedare limpio e libre, haya e tome la dicha décima parte para si mismo, e faga dello a su voluntad, quedando las otras nueve partes para Vuestras Altezas. Plaze a Sus Altezas, Johan de Coloma.

—Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II of Aragon, “Capitulaciones de Santa Fe”

On the shores of an encounter, where does the pleasure of “aquellas islas y tierras firmes” meet the limit of the Columbian object? Is it in the language that describes the act of
possession, or is it purely a matter of spatial extension, transference, and substitution?

Does the performance of this zone of indistinction require that a human subject set the terms of this partition? Or can the territory and its excitable units, the tactile ground projections of the world, forever blend into one another like the assemblage of ocean and sand that is at the boundary of place, as if taking turns in writing and erasing the whole?

Unity, totality, fullness—no less, it turns out—are the demands articulated by the Castilian Highnesses on April 17, 1492 in the pen of Juan de Coloma, businessman extraordinaire and political strategist from the kingdom of Aragon. The “Capitulaciones de Santa Fe,” as this legal document would be known, is mostly a template of incommensurability: every-thing that shall be “discovered” or “gained” in blind foresight will replicate all that has already been imagined, desired, purchased, exchanged, found, and seen. A pretext emerges at sea: the undesignated lands abraded by the tautological equivocation of “Mares Oceanas.” Rendered in the secret language of a message adrift is a tactical move as much an outcome of the generative linguistic power and legal

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20 Although grounded in the realm of aesthetic experience, W.J.T. Mitchell’s definition of “empire” comes to mind here: “The art of empire has to be seen, then, in its relations to a larger world of objects and objecthood. For one thing, the notion of art itself, in its traditional sense as comprising the ‘arts and sciences’—all the crafts, skills, and technologies that make imperialism possible—makes art a synecdoche for a much wider range of things—not just works of art proper but weapons, bodies, architecture, instruments, ships, commodities, raw materials, animals, monuments, mechanisms, paintings, statues, uniforms, fossils—the whole Borgesian archive of empire, which (as you will recall) begins with ‘things owned by the emperor’—that is to say, with absolutely everything. For that is what the concept of empire is really about. It is a name for the total domination of material things and people, linked (potentially) with totalitarianism, with ‘absolute domination,’ the utopian unification of the human species and the world it inhabits; or the dystopian spectacle of total domination, the oppression and suffering of vast populations, the reduction of human life to ‘bare life’ for the great masses of people. Empire is thus an object of radical ambivalence, perfecting the art of mass death and destruction, conquest, and enslavement of whole populations while also producing the great monuments of civilization along with notions of universal law, human rights, and global harmony” (What Do Pictures 154). My own inquiry into the materials of colonialism focuses on one aspect of this complex web of interactions by looking at representations of Columbus’s objects as material and symbolic antecedents to the discursive articulation of a later corpus of colonial and imperial narratives. For a transcription of the “Capitulaciones,” see Antonio Rumeu de Armas.
capaciousness of late-medieval political thought. Over the next one hundred years or so such suppleness and flow would metaphorically desiccate, or perhaps reify, into a new wave of contiguity—affirmed, this time, by the promise of continental subjugation. If islands titillated the topography of human imagination, greater extensions birthed facts. What follows is an attempt to describe the fruit if not by its seeds, at least by a number of elements (among them beliefs, practices, and artifacts) that went into creating the fertilizer.

Cultivated the virgin lands, smelted the precious metals, and undermined its peoples, the reproduction of form would become the privileged ontological frontier of colonial presence. My reading of the semantic associations used to represent the insular Caribbean locates in colonial texts a pervasive link between island and objecthood, as this chapter’s epigraph suggests. In this study I take as point of departure Simone Pinet’s outline of the etymological history of “island” (insula), which reminds us of the term’s connotations as both an index of geographical space and a structural object. Pinet identifies three primary meanings of the term insula that were in circulation from late Antiquity to early modernity: “a fragment of land surrounded by water, the idea of architecture implied in insula as a block of buildings, and the connection to a religious practice or to a divinity in the meaning of insula as temple” (xxvii). Of these I retain the first two. Their combined etymological histories allow me to analyze how the lost diary account of Christopher Columbus’s 1492 search for a new trade route to Asia transcribed, edited, and commented by Bartolomé de Las Casas some sixty years after the original, known today as the Diario del primer viaje, represents the islands of the Antilles as
spatial objects surrounded by water, on the one hand, and as building blocks of the Spanish authority overseas, on the other. In the totalizing cartography of the *Diario* these associations are furthermore extended to the objects that are read by Columbus as signs of land. *Pars pro toto* of the geography of the New Indies, the commodities and riches overflowing the exotic islands of the Genoese’s “Orient” ("mercadurias, . . . perlas, piedras preciosas, oro, plata, specieria, e otras qualesquiere cosas") provide a consistent thread between the pre- and post-discovery phases of Columbus’s narrative, suturing the crisis of meaning that is generated at the limit of Western notions of intelligibility.

The other *clave de lectura* for this chapter I take from Peter Hulme’s foregrounding of the question of materiality in *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (1992). He writes:

> Underlying the idea of colonial discourse, in other words, is the presumption that during the colonial period large parts of the non-European world were *produced* for Europe through a discourse that imbricated sets of questions and assumptions, methods of procedure and analysis, and kinds of writing and imagery, normally separated out into the discrete areas of military strategy, political order, social reform, imaginative literature, personal memoir and so on. (2, emphasis in the original)

By suggesting that the New World emerged as a conceptual object as understood within a “Marxist framework” (5), Hulme’s approach highlights the processes and methods that helped transform the idea of the Indies into a discursive category. As we know, and as Hulme concedes elsewhere in his study, ideologies operate within physical realities, particularly in contexts fraught with land struggles, threats of dispossession, and the promise of colonial trade. The concerted strategies of governance and technologies of representation of Columbus’s *Diario* and other accounts of the period are thus intimately
associated with the language of material experience that yielded “large parts of the non-European world.”

Several other studies have placed critical valence on the points of contact between the material and the objective in the Admiral’s testimony. Beatriz Pastor, for instance, observes that in the context of a providentialist framework Columbus does not hesitate to construe “cualquier interpretación personal . . . como verdad objetiva” (21–2). Similarly, Margarita Zamora in *Reading Columbus* (1993) outlines two discursive poles that are in tension throughout the narration, the material and spiritual justifications of the voyage. In the former she includes “the human and physical landscapes described by Columbus,” which Zamora describes as belonging to “an objective, practical, materialistic geography—Çipango, Zaitón, Quinsay; lands of ‘grandíssima suma de oro’” (139).

Following the logic of this argument, a few lines below she proceeds to label the mercantile geography of the *Diario* as “‘scientific’” (140). In deploying this term I find Zamora’s use of scare quotes judicious and appropriate, as it aims to prevent an easy slippage from a discourse of commerce and navigation to one of subjective obliteration, where narrative detail and precision serve as counterbalance to the fictive, symbolic, spiritual, and anagogical components of the account. Yet I also find it important to point out that both discourses—the material-commercial and the immaterial-anagogical—alternate in relation to Columbus’s capacity to make sense of his surroundings and, later on, displace the glaring absence of Oriental gold and riches with a reformed purpose of conversion, piety, and spiritual salvation. What I find symptomatic in these readings of the *Diario* is the resistance to locate on the surfaces of Columbus’s text an interpretive key
which allows us to untangle the Gordian knot of objectivity, materiality, and geography that constitutes one of the least attended aspects of the narration.

My argument is organized around two moments. The first recuperates the discursive edge of objects and other forms of matter during Columbus’s Atlantic crossing, from September to October. During this period, the distance between Europe and the Orient is populated by the presence of fragmented and amorphous materialities that defy Columbus’s ability to “read” the sea. Columbus’s sea is populated with islands (and island fragments), which in turn, I argue, are an extension of the medieval forest originating in classical and Neo-Platonic theorizations of matter (silva). Through close reading of several passages where precarious forms of objecthood become the only stabilizing presence of the account, I locate performative elements in the pre-discovery phase that allow Columbus—through the systematic gathering of shards of European material culture, marine debris, and live specimens—to claim preemptive possession of the Indies. The second moment is constituted by the shift in the hierarchy of materialities in Columbus’s Diario, beginning on the day of the mistaken landfall in the island of Guanahani. I interpret the Admiral’s multiple and repeated confluences of the insular geographies of the Caribbean with the objects contained in them as a critical move from Columbus’s part to position islands—and by extension, the Indies—as the Ur-objects of his discoveries. Here I offer a precise inventory of the first contact in direct correlation with the islands that become symbol of infinite wealth, riches, and natural resources. Deploying an interdisciplinary toolkit that takes insights from the fields of textual studies, archaeology, and art history, this chapter assigns a central role to the materialities of the Diario, and
argues that islands and objects conform a bipartite semantic unit continuously mobilized in Columbus’s narrative of exchange.

SIGNS OF LAND

The first-time reader of Columbus’s ship log is often tempted to skim through the first seventeen pages or so of the account, period during which the Genoese captain and his crew spend close to five weeks ploddingly and uneventfully mired in confusion as they sail across the Atlantic. Except perhaps for the petit drama of the two conflicting reckonings Columbus keeps of the distance traveled (from which he subtracts a good number of leagues in the daily reports to his crew), there is something utterly formulaic—even monotonous—in the string of non-events that precede the “discovery” of the New World on October 11, 1492. From September to October the sailors traveled westward day and night, seeing little beyond open water, sky, and heavenly bodies. When they did, however, the repertoire of their sightings was rather limited. It included various species of birds traveling alone or in flocks; marine wildlife such as fishes, crustaceans, and dolphins; countless patches of free-floating seaweed approaching the Spanish vessels; and the occasional object, usually garbage or refuse, spotted off in the distance. No matter how random or insignificant, the Admiral interprets all of these things as unequivocal signs of land.

During this period the narrative transitions, as the Columbian experience transforms, from a natural order of classification and intelligibility to an increased sense of uncertainty that “mirrors the actual error of the sailing course” in search of referents for the trade centers of eastern Asia (Vilches, “Columbus’s Gift” 208). The first recognizable
signifier—the ship—is obvious and expected, even if things get off to a rocky start on September 6 when they depart from the last port of call in La Gomera. Upon crossing paths with a friendly caravel the Admiral learns that the king of Portugal, Dom João II, had sent a group of envoys to capture him in punishment for his association with the Castilian monarchs (45). This contextual reality, affirmed by the technologies, artifacts, and provisions available to the expedition, becomes increasingly precarious as the narrative progresses. Five days later Columbus’s projected image of the ship as a sign of power and economic advantage begins a slow process of erosion that over the coming weeks of the voyage would conclude in shipwreck.

The opening event in the narrative demise of this signifier takes place on September 11 when the crew identifies a fragment of the mast of a medium-sized vessel: “Aquel día navegaron a su vía, que era el Güeste, y anduvieron 20 leguas y más, y vieron un gran troço de mástel de nao de ciento y veinte toneles, y no lo pudieron tomar” (46). This brief entry does not contain further details that would help situate the mast within its proper navigational framework. Thus it is doubly dislodged, as a fragment of a fragment, from its structural place in the main body of the phantom vessel, and by extension, from the Western narrative of economic gain and cultural expansion of which the ship is symbol. The mast fragment, coupled with its failure to apprehend it, marks a liminal stage in the transition from the Old World to an unknown order—or rather a state of disarray and uncertainty that references an even bigger possibility of failure looming in the horizon. Made of wood reminiscent of Jesus’s cross, the mast initiates the chain of materialities of the Diario. In a fateful coincidence that defies the generic conventions of
the travel log, the mast fragment prefigures the eventual shipwreck on December 25 that would lead to the establishment of Villa de Navidad, a fort constructed in Hispaniola from the salvaged lumber of the *Santa María* (145–7).21

The mast fragment also alerts us to the fact that the category of European material culture experiences a crisis of deterritorialization in the space of the sea. This crisis signals a state of vulnerability for European civilization that would be equated with nudity and chaos in the later textual corpus of the conquest, as José Rabasa aptly points out in his commentary to the two editions of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios* (first published in 1542) (*Writing Violence* 79–82). Roland Greene has read the ship and its constitutive parts in the *Diario* as erotic topoi—titillated by the wind are, of course, the ship’s sails, which do not figure in the engineering of indigenous canoes made of a single log of wood. “More than a paradigmatic encounter within the American enterprise,” he argues, “this is perhaps one of the formative episodes in which a nascent European humanism confronts the natural world from which it is now partly estranged, but on which it is partly dependent for reflections of humanity, enacting symbolic structures with which to manage the new conceptual protocol it has brought about” (Greene 61–2).

Moreover, the fragmentation of European materialities across the representational arc of the *Diario* reflects deep transformations on the baseline structure and subjective perception of the physical world. Informed, hitherto, by Aristotelian tradition and

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21 Following the shipwreck, Columbus’s immediate reaction, however, was to try to repair the Spanish vessel: “Cuando el Almirante vido que se huían y que era su gente, y las aguas menguavan y estava ya la nao la mar de través, no viendo otro remedio, mandó cortar el mastel y alijar de la nao todo cuando pudieron par aver si podían sacarla; y como todavía las aguas menguassen, no se pudo remediar, y tomó lado hazia la mar traviesa, puesto que la mar era poca o nada, y entonçes se abrieron los conventos y no la nao” (146). In this passage the mast appears, once again, as referent for the crisis of meaning experienced by Columbus and his crew.
medieval theories of hylomorphism (the term derives from the Greek for matter, *hylē*, and shape, *morphē*), Western material ontologies were conceived as agents of becoming not unlike the mast and repurposed timber in Columbus’s narrative.22 The historian Carolyn Walker Bynum reminds us that for medieval scholars such as Isidore the Seville matter, above all, was “the capacity to be something else that, standing between A and not-A, made true change possible” (*Christian Materiality* 230). In the origin of the Latin term *lignum*, wood, the author of the much-copied *Etymologies* found the God-given root of the term *māteria*, matter (in Spanish this transformation yields the linguistic doubling *māteria*>*madera*). Bynum further summarizes the thinking behind this process of reasoning:

Isidore’s definition of matter, which is itself derived from much earlier texts, occurs in his discussion of wood and woodworkers. He says: “All wood is called matter because from it something is made, so if you refer to a door or a statue, it will be matter.” Matter is “always accepting [semper accipienda] with regard to something”; hence, we say “the elements are the matter of things that are made from them.” The elements are called *silva*.

(231)

Mirroring the aforementioned relationship between wood as singular matter and its plurality (captured in the Latin noun for forest, *silva*), six days after seeing the mast, on September 17, Columbus and his crew unexpectedly encounter something like a forest in the open sea:

22 There are two principal traditions of matter in the Middle Ages. The philosophical-metaphysical tradition is derived from Aristotle, and studies “matter” (that which can be transformed) and “form” (this substance and not another). In its Thomistic adaptation, matter as potency formed the basis for medieval notions of magic, marvel, and miracle. The three differed in their degrees of proximity to nature and natural processes, and in how well these processes could be understood using simple, traditional logic. The second tradition could be termed scientific, for lack of a better word, and concerns an understanding of matter “as a kind of substratum, indeed, as material substance itself” (Bynum 230). Recently, historians of science have located in this tradition, particularly since its fourteenth-century incarnation, a precursor to modern scientific conceptions of mass. For an account of the theoretical and theological evolution of these interdependent traditions, see Carolyn Bynum’s fourth chapter of *Christian Materiality* (217–264).
Vieron muchas yerbas y muy a menudo y era yerva de peñas y venían las yerbas de hacia Poniente. Juzgaban estar cerca de tierra. Tomaron los pilotos del Norte, marcándolo, y hallaron que las agujas noroesteavan una gran cuarta, y temían los marineros y estaban penados y no decían de qué. Cognosciólo el Almirante, mandó que tornasen a marcar el Norte en amaneciendo, y hallaron que estaban buenas las agujas. La causa fue porque la estrella que parece hace movimiento y no las agujas. En amaneciendo aquel lunes vieron muchas más yerbas y que parecían yerbas de ríos, en las cuales hallaron un cangrejo bibo, el cual guardó el Almirante. Y dize que aquellas fueron señales ciertas de tierra, porque no se hallan ochenta leguas de tierra. El agua de la mar hallavan menos salada desde que salieron de las Canarias, los aires siempre más suaves. Ivan muy alegres todos, y los navíos, quien más podía andar andava por ver primero tierra. Vieron muchas toninas y los de la Niña mataron una. Dize aquí el Almirante que aquellas señales eran el Poniente “donde espero en aquel Alto Dios, en cuyas manos están todas las victorias, que muy presto nos dará tierra”. En aquella mañana dize que vido una ave blanca que se llama rabo de junco que no suele dormir en la mar. (48)

It is worth examining this long passage in some detail. A pair of clearly defined narrative sequences structures this journal entry, together forming a compendium of adversities embedded within a providentialist framework. The first narrative sequence is bracketed by the sighting, on two separate occasions, of different kinds of weed, an indexical manifestation of the natural world that appears at a moment of epistemological crisis, and which is interpreted by all parts of the crew as proof of a measurable distance from land. The Admiral presumes, incorrectly, that the swarms of nest-like bundles floating toward their ships are made of endemic species of weed that grow, respectively, in stones and rivers of the East Indies (“y era yerva de peñas” and “vieron muchas más yerbas y que parecían yerbas de ríos”). In truth, Columbus is likely to have encountered the vast

23 In Reading Columbus, Margarita Zamora contextualizes Columbus’s voyage as a spiritual narrative in which Columbus usurps the place of Christ: “The journey became an imitatio Christi, carried out not only in the name of Christ but in the same evangelical manner of traveling undertaken by the Savior himself. It was a pious offering to Christ and the figurative first step in a millenarian journey to carry the World beyond the borders of Christendom to the farthest pagan realms ... Christoferen, the name with which Columbus signed his writings from 1501, on is the emblem of a journey undertaken not just on behalf of Christ but in the ‘manner of Christ’” (97).
deposits of seaweed and refuse carried into the Sargasso Sea, a massive oceanic region in the north Atlantic named and charted by Portuguese seafarers in the fifteenth century. The speculative geography of this passage is, however, not a choice at random. Capitalizing on both the semiotics of forest and treasure, the lattice filigree of yellow ochre and green algae enclosing the Spanish ships washes away uncertainty by conjuring instead remote images of possibility, of unclaimed swaths of precious stones and riches such as emeralds and gold (both of which are harvested and extracted from mature stones and bodies of water). Adumbrating such faint promise is the language of amorphous thingness, at once nature and accident, coordinate and symbol.

If the spates of buoyant seaweed are taken to confirm at first the proximity of land, as it occurs with almost everything the Genoese sailor sees during this part of the voyage, this hope diminishes when, not long after, the crew struggles to produce a correct reading of their navigational instruments. Under the pointillist glow of a starry firmament, the pilot’s compasses angle toward the North Star, but their needles decline to the northwest instead. Oblivious to variations of the earth’s magnetic forces across navigational lines and meridians, a phenomenon observed by Chinese cosmographers as early as 720 D.C. and first described in Europe around 1450, the dispirited sailors resolve not to deliver the bad news to their captain. Columbus had experienced, of course, such irregular readings for a few days himself (starting on September 8), but in typical fashion, had chosen to hide this information from his pilots so as to not induce additional fears and mistrust from an already homesick crew. He instructs them to delay taking additional measurement until early morning, time by which the declination of the needles has
returned to normal. Together with his systematic maneuverings around reporting the precise number of leagues traveled each day, in the first narrative sequence of this diary entry we see Columbus, the Captain General, establish himself not just as a shrewd and pragmatic leader (perhaps in the spirit of Renaissance political thinkers such as Machiavelli) but, significantly, as a sort of paterfamilias within the fleet’s social unit. By withholding specifics, influencing direct perception, and strategizing what and how much information was passed from his flagship, the Santa María, to the other two caravels, the Pinta and the Niña, Columbus is able to maintain a close rein on the men’s loyalty and, ultimately, on the outcome of his expedition. Despite Columbus’s best efforts to quiet the mariners’ anxieties, threats of insubordination and disaster intensify with each passing day of the journey. Sentiments of this nature run amok especially after sundown, when restricted visibility due to darkness and fog, colder temperatures, exhaustion, and disappointment fall upon the men. At less than two weeks after departing from La Gomera, they appear short of convinced their vessels are in the middle of nowhere, en route to an ever-distant Orient that fails to materialize.

Therefore, the coming of a new day represents a moment of paramount spatio-temporal and symbolic importance in Columbus’s narrative. Theories of medieval vision conceived the rising and setting of the sun as moments of enhanced visual acuity and epistemological clarity. Columbus likely had some knowledge of these theories, for on

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Greene makes a similar observation: “[Columbus] is always the interpreter who makes symbol and experience connect, who tells his people how to see themselves in the natural phenomena around them and how to feel about what they see” (Unrequited Conquests 59). In more practical terms, Columbus controls the day-to-day logistics of his journey because soon he begins to distrust Martín Alonso Pinzón, who had extensive sailing experience and who advised the Admiral on his westward sail; therefore, Columbus is trying to control the real information about the route.
October 7 he commands his crew to gather at these specific times in order to scout for land: “Tenía también ordenado que al salir del sol y al ponerse se juntasen todos los navíos con él, porque estos dos tiempos son más propios para que los humores den más lugar a ver más lexos” (56). In the events of September 17 referenced above, however, sunrise not only marks an interruption in the story of the voyagers’ misfortunes, experienced over the course of a restless night, but also serves as a return to a natural order of things where manifest destiny, more than technology, predetermines the expedition’s success. Or does it? With the term “en amaneçiendo” befalls a much-needed resolution to the technological shortcomings experienced by the pilots; this adverbial construction is reiterated twice, midway through the closing sentence of the first narrative sequence (“mandó que tornasen a marcar el Norte en amaneçiendo, y hallaron qu’estavan buenas las agujas”), and a few lines below, in the opening segment of the second narrative sequence, which is also punctuated by the Admiral’s detection of floating bundles of weed (“En amaneçiendo aquel lunes vieron muchas más yervas y que pareçian yervas de ríos”). As such, this temporal marker functions as a hinge between direct experience and a projected return—or ultimate arrival—to “firm” epistemological ground, a desire that, given the numerous risks of the navigational craft, intensifies day after day in open sea. Both instances connect the break of dawn to a semiotics of materiality used to affirm an increasingly elusive sense of continuity from a world left behind to the disruptiveness of transit. Any direct correspondence ends here, however, for it is clear that artifacts such as compasses and needles are in possession of material attributes that make them quite distinct from certain natural objects. In the spirit of a
cosmopolitan repertoire developed by centuries of seafarers’ experiences prior to the first wave of European discoveries, the former (the tools of navigation) are used to harness an interpretive edge that, even in its precarity, emphasizes human agency and power over natural phenomena.

Surprisingly, it does not take much for Columbus and his crew to shift from near-failure to an illusion of total mastery over their environment. During the second narrative sequence of the seaweed episode under consideration, a live crab is found nestled in one of the many parcels of algae surrounding the Castilian vessels. Although it is wholly unclear what the Admiral’s plans for the specimen are, we are told that he saves it for a future occasion—perhaps to stave off a prospective famine aboard ship, to display as a natural curiosity, or to sell upon returning to Europe. If anything, the crab seems to affirm Columbus’s idea that the bundles of weed are fragments of islands—conglomerates of land or territorial simulacra approaching the expedition.

The account escalates following this event into a succession of declarative statements in which, following Pastor’s analysis, direct comparison, superlatives, and repetition become key rhetorical strategies in the narrative discourse of the *Diario* (35). Ocean waters grow in douceur, marine winds become decidedly gentler, almost breezy. A pod of dolphins catches the sailors’ attention, and similar to the marine flora and fauna previously encountered, these creatures too allow Columbus to extrapolate conclusions based on vague preconceptions. With each new development what were once timid hopes becomes an undisputable certainty: land must be near. Incongruences are quickly

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25 Daston and Park remind us of an obvious fact, that “wonders were also commodities: to be bartered, bought, sold, collected, and sometimes literally consumed” (67).
26 José Rabasa discusses Columbus’s use of the term *dulzura* in the first chapter of *Inventing America* (68).
dismissed. Major setbacks are reframed in such a way that they appear to fade into the
day-to-day paltriness of the narrative, and vice versa. The whirlpool of blood left by the
killing of a dolphin, for instance, is replaced by the image of a white seabird with
elongated tail feathers overflying three forlorn Castilian ships. As we have seen, the
corrective reading of the compass is simply regarded as abnormal behavior from the part
of the guiding star (“La causa fue porque la estrella que parece haze movimiento y no las
agujas”), and by September 30 the needles have become artifactual bearers of truth—that
is, material facts: “También en anocheçiendo las agujas noruestean una cuarta en
amaneçiendo están con la estrella justo, por lo cual parece que la estrella haze
movimiento como las otras estrellas, y las agujas piden siempre la verdad” (53–4, my emphasis).
Problematic events are therefore registered as nature’s blunders rather than as
hermeneutic failures—or, in what becomes a less likely realization, as colossal blind spots
in the navigational knowledge of the Spanish unit.

Amid the sailors’ confusion, some clarity emerges from these episodes, particularly
around the question of materiality and the way in which European material culture is
held as a stabilizing presence in the narrative of the Diario. The natural objects and
artifacts that make an appearance during the intermediary stage of Columbus’s narrative
generate a chain of interdependent signifiers, at each turn leading back to the promise of
newfound land that is powerfully captured by the locution “señales ciertas de tierra.”
Returning to Pastor’s observations, it becomes necessary to add, however, that these signs
are emphatically framed as part of a complex set of cultural and epistemic renegotiations
involving diverse properties of the physical world. In this sense, we can speak of a material
narrative discourse taking precedence over Columbus’s account, one in which nature and materiality become coextensive within the flat ontology created by the mirages of colonial objectivity. Like the free-flowing, capacious bundles of seaweed and other organic matter interspersed throughout the Admiral’s narrative, the assemblage of land, ocean, and non-human life demarcates, at first, this ontological formation, but as the voyage progresses other elements will become incorporated into this general structure.

When land is finally reached, it is the proliferation of material objects, both natural and human-made, which alerts Columbus and his retinue of the success of the expedition. Furthermore, their mention gives substance to the first “objective” descriptions of the New World, at that point still classified as the Indies of Marco Polo and the Grand Khan. Parading before their eyes above and below they see birds, a cane, several sticks (one of which is covered with crustaceans), a board, and some vegetation:

Vieron pardelas y un junco verde junto a la nao. Vieron los de la caravela Pinta una caña y un palo, y tomaron otro palillo labrado a lo que parecía con hierro, y un pedaço de caña y otra yerva que nace en tierra y una tabilla. Los de la caravela Niña también vieron otras señales de tierra y un palillo cargado d’escaramojos. Con estas señales respiraron y alegraronse todos. (58)

The practical applications of Columbus’s skillful and yet greatly intuitive system of navigation should not steer us away from noticing that in the cosmology of the Diario “sea” objects become confirming portents or signs. Following the prophetic key of this account, they index Columbus’s ability to bring glory and prosperity to the kingdom of Castile and to his family lineage, and act as divine favors of Columbus’s enterprise. In this sense, it can be said that the structure of Columbus’s encounters with materiality to some
extent follows the logic of the Christian miracle. It is however an emphasis on these signs as matter, and not just as visions, which provides the framework for this experience.

MALLEABLE WAX

Columbus’s narration of the Atlantic crossing rehearses a logic of symbolic and material accumulation as a discursive counterpoint between two actions: hallar and tomar. To find and to take assume a metaphorical dimension: all that Columbus has to offer is the promise of paradox, of things yet to be seen and possessed. The concerted attempts of Columbus and his crew to pick up a large fragment of the mast of a vessel and a small stick discussed above, attempts which end in failure and success respectively, mobilize size and scale to chart a progression from dispossession to mastery, on the one hand, and from civilization to wilderness, on the other. It should be noted that animals, too, were included in this scheme. Las Casas’s editorial voice documents that during the course of the five-week journey the men collected a crab (September 17), different types of birds (September 20 and October 8), and dorado fish (September 28). Thus, the discourse of possession, not yet linked to the category of mirabilia (wonder), but in fact to the new-but-ordinary natural world is efficiently deployed in the latter entry of Columbus’s ship log: “Navegó a su camino al Güeste. Anduvieron día y noche con calmas 14 leguas. Contó treze. Hallaron poca yerva. Tomaron dos peçes dorados, y en los otros navíos más” (53, my emphasis).

Paying attention to the agency of and exerted over the physical world during the pre-discovery stage of the Columbian narrative allows us to see how the things and animals that Columbus and his crew take in their voyage serve to claim putative
ownership of a newfound physical domain, and of the symbolic worlds associated with it, even before the former acquired a definitive value and place in the taxonomy of early Western modernity. My point is that when Columbus declares his mistaken landfall as the Indies, the fragments of still and organic life that had been brought into the Spanish vessels already served to justify, through a simple exercise of symbolic approximation, the preemptive possession of the islands and territories encountered. Not unlike the way in which medieval relics worked, affecting and transforming the materials and the individuals they came in contact with, this early dynamic of possession takes place as an exercise of transference. Adapting Bynum’s argument about the symbolic operations effected by miraculous relics, the sea objects of the New World transfer their power to Columbus through physical contact, bestowing something akin to legitimacy or rightful ownership to the individual who possessed them. Hallar and tomar, however, guarantee neither ownership, nor legitimacy, nor value. Nor is it the singular wooden stick or live specimen bearer of power. It is the deposition and accumulation of their sheer materiality as physical figures and agents of becoming that allows the unstable presence of the lone object to be fixed “through further physical objects that participate in its power” (Bynum 112).

There is indeed a double pull between similitude and fragmentation, between likeness and disjunction (a paradoxical relationship between part and whole), which structures the account of the things encountered at sea. The experience of miracle gradually metamorphoses into a narrative of possession that instrumentalizes affects such as wonder, curiosity, uncertainty, and fear into productive narrative instances and
confirmations of the power of matter at the contact zone. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park indicate in *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750* (1998), the spatiality of wonder is highly suspect: “[w]onders tended to cluster at the margins rather than at the center of the known world, and they constituted a distinct ontological category, the preternatural, suspended between the mundane and the miraculous” (14). The notion that there exists an intimate relationship between wonder and miracle is hardly controversial. An exception can be found perhaps in the work of Stephen Greenblatt, whose pioneering study of Columbus’s account in *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991) cautions against a critical story of progression in favor of one of displacement. Greenblatt writes:

> In effect, the marvelous takes the place of the miraculous, absorbing some of its force but avoiding the theological and evidentiary problems inherent in directly asserting a miracle. Instead of a theological claim, the term *maravilla* as Columbus uses it makes a different kind of claim, one that combines religious and erotic longings in a vision of surpassing beauty. (79)

If Greenblatt’s point about the subjective nature of wonder is well taken, I find that it does not account for the language of property and providential destiny that manifests in instances in which Columbus does not use the term *maravilla*, but uses matter as proxy for conveying his overwhelming response to the geography and materiality of the Indies. I invoke here Daston and Park’s concept of “topographical wonder,” fundamentally an evidentiary paradigm requiring “verification through personal experience and oral

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27 For Daston and Park, the Germanic and Romance vernaculars of wonder “all blurred the sacred and the secular objects of wonder—the miraculous and the marvelous. This suggests the impossibility of wholly divorcing these two kinds of wonder in the dominant Christian culture, although theologians and philosophers upheld an analytic distinction between them” (16). For a critique of Daston and Park’s theorization of wonder that is rooted in the Spanish archive, see the introductory chapter of Simone Pinet’s study (7–8).
report” (24) because it places equal emphasis on the subject’s affective responses as well as on the objects that provoked curiosity, investigation, pleasure, contempt, fear, or adoration (16–7). Columbus’s objects are on the border, so to speak, between novelty and ordinariness: the animal specimens and refuse collected by Columbus are proof of a trajectory, signs of providential destiny and hardship. Yet contrary to the stories of medieval miracles, the objects of the New World do not imprint on Columbus their likeness but the legitimacy of being owned, held, and possessed by those who come in contact with them. In this sense, materiality is tied to governance. Contact with the materialities of the New World incorporated these forms into the transatlantic administrative sphere of the newly formed Spanish empire. Vilches observes that “[i]n Columbus’s writings . . . the language of property and that of benefit are integrated within a discourse of providential grace” that extends individual acts of possession into a large-scale administrative structure where, at the top, reigns the supreme authority of the Spanish monarchs and, not too far below, figures the Admiral as harbinger of their worldly power (“Columbus’s Gift” 202).

This language of property and providentialist grace takes shape as localized, concrete land on the night of October 11 when the skein of sea objects leads Columbus to an island in the Bahamas, later named San Salvador-Guanahani:

\[ Esta \ tierra \ vido \ primero \ un \ marinero \ que \ se \ dezía \ Rodrigo \ de \ Triana, \ puesto \ que \ el \ Almirante, \ a \ las \ diez \ de \ la \ noche, \ estando \ en \ el \ castillo \ de \ popa, \ vido \ lumbre; \ aunque \ fue \ cosa \ tan \ cerrada \ que \ no \ quiso \ afirmar \ que \ fuese \ tierra, \ pero \ llamó \ a \ Pero \ Gutiérrez \ repostero \ d'estrados \ del \ Rey \ y \ dixole \ que \ parecía \ lumbre, \ que \ mirasse \ él, \ y \ así \ lo \ hizo, \ y \ vioda. \ Dixoło \ también \ a \ Rodrigo \ Sánchez \ de \ Segovia, \ qu’el \ Rey \ y \ la \ Reina \ embiavan \ en \ el \ armada \ por \ veedor, \ el \ cual \ no \ vido \ nada \ porque \ no \ estava \ en \ el \ lugar \ do \ la \ pudiese \ ver. \ Después \ qu’el \ Almirante \ lo \ dixo, \ se \ vido \ una \ vez \ o \ dos, \ y \ era \ como \ una \ candelilla \ de \ cera \ que \ se \ alçava \ y \ levantava, \ lo \ cual \ a \ pocos \]
On first reading, the image of land as a vision of light seems highly unusual. It is thus surprising that not very many critics have paid close attention to the language of this passage, focusing instead on the events that immediately follow, in which the first contact between Spaniards and natives takes place. Greene, for example, relates this episode to Petrarchan amorous poetics, specifically to the notion of the desiring subject as an ardent lover: “Burning with the compulsion to see his object, Columbus turns his sailors into a cohort of gazers who keep each other afire without engaging the object at all” (Unrequited Conquests 60).

In this passage, however, I am interested in the way in which topographical wonder shifts from the visual to the material register. From the offset the New World is linked to a complex network of textual references, chiefly spiritual and philosophical. The presence of a millenarian discourse evocative of the holy sacraments is undeniable, even if one suspects this framework has begun to lose ground in the face of a secular logic of mercantile exchange and global political authority. In this sense, Columbus’s metaphorical description of land, first as “lumbre” (fire) and then as a “candelilla de cera” (wax candle), becomes not just an unusual turn of phrase to represent a spatial object—an island—ostensibly doted with animacy, but moreover gives us an early example of what Hulme has called “the flickering light of European reason” (20). In Columbus’s rehearsal
of an emergent language of rationality matter becomes the foundation of epistemology. The land-as-wax-candle metaphor thus suggests a transformative epistemological shift taking place at the encounter with a new physical reality, a type of difference activated by temporal and geographic disjunctions. Elsewhereness and remoteness acquire definitive contours as places formerly unavailable to the human eye acquire shape and cogency. The material of wax possesses connotations similar to concepts of likeness and Resurrection, though its deployment as symbol constitutes something of an aporia. In its evocation of amorphous materiality, it is conceptually related to the seaweeds that make an appearance in the pre-discovery phase of Columbus’s voyage across the Atlantic, yet as a medium and carrier of brilliance, the burning wax and wick invite associations with the prospective gold that, a fortiori, takes over the second half of the Admiral’s ship log as rendered by Las Casas. Furthermore, this referent, intentionally or not evoked by Columbus, underscores the malleability of the New World and its ability to receive imprint, transform, and mutate in the hands, eyes, and minds of the Spanish cohort. In the visual imagination of Columbus and his crew, as well as in works by medieval and early modern scholars who employ a similar metaphor, the gleaming, scintillating, and often blazing fire articulates geographies of risk, as well as anxieties over the nature of consumption, possession, and objective experience.

There is good reason to consider Columbus’s response to the first land sighting alongside a longer interpretive tradition with roots in classical philosophy and medieval theology. The link between the corpus of colonial writings produced in the New World
and scholasticism is well established. The textual transmission of critical works belonging to this canon suggests that early explorers and conquistadors such as Columbus and Cortés may have been familiar with debates on the earthly and divine creation of matter. In *De Civitate Dei* (Book XXI) we find an important antecedent to Columbus’s Fire Island, Guanahani, when St. Augustine speaks of a category of objects that are aflame but remain intact (Daston and Park 39). Columbus constructs the land encountered into an example of *mirabilia*, establishing further connections that remind us of Augustine’s account of Mt. Etna (Book III and Book IV), a sacred peak—a volcano—that upon burning caused the ocean to bubble over without putting out the original flame. Augustine’s commentary on the topos of fire conjoins miracle, mystery, and fact; but it also offers a powerful meditation on the all-encompassing cycle of desire and consumption that, to cite Michael Gaudio’s reading of smoke in early modern engravings of the New World, encapsulates the key problematic underlying the colonial trope of incineration: “the translation of vision into knowledge” (60). More concretely: the translation of knowledge into mastery.

One might do well to further consider the cultural history of this trope in order to look for continuities and ruptures in Columbus’s version. In the vein of Isidore’s reflection on matter previously discussed, it is well known that Neo-Platonic materialism borrowed heavily from the ideas of an earlier interpreter, a contemporary of Augustine. This is no

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28 Venancio D. Carro explicitly addresses this connection. More recently, students of José de Acosta, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and Francisco de Vitoria have honed in on the impact of medieval scholasticism on the documents, letters, treatises, and testimonies of the colonial period. For a good grasp of this tradition in Acosta’s thought, see the volume edited by Anthony Grafton, April Shelford, and Nancy G. Siraisi. For a comparative approach that takes into account Columbus, Las Casas, and Vitoria, see David M. Traboulay’s study, especially chapters 2, 5, and 6.
other than Chalcidius, who in the fourth century translated to Latin the *Timaeus* and produced an extensive commentary. Chalcidius’s influence on the Platonic hylomorphic tradition was transformative. He replaced the Greek term *hylē* for the less specific term *substantia* in the translation, and offered the polysemous term *silva* as an alternative in the commentary. As we saw above, the latter term was used to reference primordial matter, acquiring metaphorical connotations as woodland, timber, and leaves of trees or foliage. What this polyvalent association retained was its original link to chaos, disorder, and transformation. For Plato, only in these conditions could order arise out of incohesive matter. As subsequent interpretations developed, chiefly by Aristotle and later by Neo-Platonic thinkers, *silva*, the arboreal principle of transcendence, acquired more concrete and moral significations (Saunders, *The Forest* 20). It could be said that the concept of *silva* was grafted, so to speak, in medieval thought by Chalcidius’s scriptural hand alone. Chalcidius can be credited with expanding the meaning of the term *silva* in the original *Timaeus*, inaugurating a critical tradition that would be influential for centuries to come. In particular, I locate in Columbus’s image of the island ablaze resonances of a scriptural tradition that links the tempestuous sea and ductile wax with the Latin term for matter, *silva* (Pinet 16; Saunders, *The Forest* 20; van Winden 46). For Chalcidius, *silva* thus

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In the Western philosophical canon, the cultural history of wax as metaphor for perception and knowledge begins with Plato. Through Chalcidius’s commentary we can trace how medieval scholars interpreted the former’s contributions to this tradition: “Plato has also spoken of wax in the *Thaetetus*, when discussing the causes of the different strengths of memory in men, namely the stronger and weaker memories. He said that in the minds of men there is a faculty very much like wax, which makes some people keen of comprehension and quick of learning but soon forgetful; it makes others slow of learning but of good memory, and others, again, so gifted that they are both quick to learn and slow to forget” (qtd. in van Winden 188). Chalcidius’s gloss is followed by further explications of the Platonic typology for wax as a material symbol of human intellectual faculties. Liquid and thin wax, Chalcidius notes, makes of men quick but forgetful learners. If the wax substance is too solid, on the other hand, it does not lend itself to effortless learning, but once this is achieved, forms (or thoughts) are retained for a long time. “The third case,”
became recipient and agent of providential intervention, pliable to the sight and touch of the divine *artifex*. In its infinite power of becoming, *silva* was the part and the whole, plurality and singularity, consummate shape or divine mush. Yet *silva* can also be understood as raw material, animate and inanimate, from which Creation springs forth. In the words of Chalcidius, “[t]he first element of universal matter is *silva* unformed and without differentiation, in which intelligible forms are molded, so that the world might exist” (Plato, *Timaeus a Calcidio Translatus*, qtd. and trans. in Weinryb 126). By this account, *silva* is limitless and open, constantly unfolding in space and time as pure potentiality.

Ittai Weinryb, citing the foundational work of Jacques Le Goff, comments on the long-lasting impact of the Chalcidian translation of the *Timaeus*, the definitive source of Platonic knowledge “for well over a thousand years,” as key to understanding *silva*’s gradual development as a precise spatio-temporal entity. For Europeans in the Middle Ages, “the entire signification of the primordial matter of Creation might have been associated with the vast, unsettled territories of the European forests” (125). Weinryb unpacks this interpretation to argue that Neo-Platonic thinkers increasingly understood *silva* as a concrete place in the spatial extension of the West. From the fourth century onward, “[w]hat emerged, I suggest, is a dense type of linguistic signification in which the term for the philosophical concept of incohesive matter at the same time represented an

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Chalcidius continues, “is one of divine blessing” and is characterized by ambivalence toward receiving the impression of intellectual forms, which results in “impressions that are vague and invisible” (qtd. in van Winden 188). This brief overview of the figure of wax in the early history of Western rationality allows me to suggest how for Columbus the wax candle signifies perception and a notion of reality under siege—that is, open to the impression of Western forms.
actual topographical locality. Thus, the term *silva* refers to an atemporal instant before the world was created, but it also designates a geographic and even spatial location” (125).

Building upon Weinryb’s compelling analysis, it is not difficult to see how for Columbus the concept of *silva*, in its material incarnation as malleable wax, could be adapted, quite literally, to represent an arcane topography flickering (and thus partially obscured) before his eyes: the islands of the so-called West Indies. In the following section, I examine the island’s material geography as a privileged kind of spatial object in Columbus’s *Diario*.

**ISLAND–OBJECT**

In her recent book *Archipelagoes: Insular Fictions from Chivalric Romance to the Novel* (2011), Simone Pinet argues that the medieval and early modern concepts of island correlate with anxieties regarding the ontologies of the human in space that paved the way for the rise of modern fictional genres. What she calls the “insular turn” of the late fifteenth century enabled the rise of new literary models, which searched for adventure and sources of marvel no longer in the proximity of European forests, but in the unknown shorelines and eventually islands that emerged as nodes in the vast yet conquerable seascape.30 In their life as discursive constructs, she declares, “[i]slands figure in [cartography and chivalric literature] as particularly malleable” (xxxiv). The first chapter, “Forest to Island,” traces the progression of this shift by emphasizing the many semantic bundles associated with insularity. Citing Leonardo Olschki, among other critics, Pinet reminds us that islands

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30 I owe this point to Daniel Nemser’s contextualization of Pinet’s study within the field of Latin American colonial studies (“Archipelagoes”).
were spaces of isolation (in Spanish, the very word *aislar* captures the link between boundedness and solitude), further associated with deserts, contrition, combats, magic, paradise, utopia, monsters, riches, wonders, romance, etc. Of these generalizations, the nexus between insular topographies and wealth became a recurring theme in the European discourse of the fantastic, from *The Odyssey* to Marco Polo’s *Marvels*. The mythical island of Cipango in Japan was thought by the latter to be fabulously rich in precious metals and other treasures: “Japan is imagined as a large island, located near the sea of China in which another seven thousand, four hundred and fifty islands are laid out, all rich in spices, pearls, precious stones, and gold, so abundant that it could not be valued” (Olschki, *Storia letteraria* 39, qtd. and trans. in Pinet 174). Yet, as the previous historical synthesis brings into evidence, the island was seldom envisioned as a singular topography. The cartographic genre known as *isolario* collected multiple islands in a single bound volume and placed them in close physical and visual relation to each other. Thanks to the technological and navigational developments that increased the popularity of other cartographic genres, notably portolan maps, the depiction of “real” archipelagos such as the Canary Islands, the Azores, and Cape Verde allowed audiences to situate themselves contextually and physically in relation to a transformed landscape of the globe (39). Archipelagos, like fictions, include within them a “set of possible itineraries” of displacement and travel—what Pinet calls a “probable constellation” constituted by relation among parts “that might emphasize ontology, politics, or ethics” (155).

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31 Among these examples, the Spanish experience in the Canary Islands had the most direct influence on the American enterprise. See the studies by Eyda Merediz, Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, and David Wallace.
Moreover, primitive accumulation was perhaps first spatialized and subsequently mapped in islands strung together by the promise of wealth. Archipelagic geographies enabled the imaginative work of nascent forms of capital by offering an effective spatial network of material exchange. With the notion of the archipelago the treasures of island upon island could be accrued into a worldly storehouse of raw materials and riches.

According to José Rabasa, the very notion of the “Far East,” a repetition of insular topographies from Cathay to Cipango, emerges as an object of possession referenced by the allusion to gold “(to be taken here as a shorthand for pearls, spices, lignaloe, brazil-wood, etc.)” that consumes the discovery phase of the *Diario* and other colonial documents (*Inventing America* 65). Rabasa’s analysis allows us to plot the invention of the New World as a single, productive assemblage—the exotic commodity—from a fabulous collection of islands and semiotic signs molded in the likeness of the “Far East”:

Columbus’s imagination transmutes natural phenomena, linguistic expressions, and cultural traits observed in the New World into Oriental motifs well stocked in European registers of Eastern things. For Columbus and for the European imagination in general, the descriptions of Marco Polo are a primary authoritative source. As far as Columbus is concerned, the object under survey, the content of his descriptions, corresponds to the Orient of Marco Polo; the product, however, is a new India (*Inventing America* 61, emphasis in the original).

A similar claim, anchored by the figure of the commodity and its capacity to merge multiple geographic, material, and subjective forms, is made by Beatriz Pastor in her now classic monograph *Discursos narrativos de la conquista: mitificación y emergencia* (1988). Especially useful is Pastor’s notion of the “botín americano,” advanced in the opening chapter of her study, which elicits not just the ransack and despoliation of particular regions of the New World and its peoples, but also the region’s symbolic articulation as
colonial booty (or everyone’s treasure). Connoting exoticism and possession, the “botín americano” takes the unwieldy shape of “las tierras descubiertas y las riquezas que albergan” (16). This vast catalogue of spatial and material referents becomes effectively abbreviated in the logic of the inventory: “Para cada isla, un pequeño inventario: tierra fértil, gente desnuda, grado de civilización, indicios de metales preciosos” (23). With this string of associations Pastor demonstrates how nature’s potential to yield fully-formed commodities is a central aspect of Columbus’s understanding of the reality that surrounds him, which can be extended to consider how the very idea of the Indies emerges as a commodity in Columbus’s account:

Por debajo de su fascinación, sigue siempre alerta la actitud analítica y pragmática del mercader—actitud de la que encontraremos numerosos ejemplos en el propio Colón. Leídos desde esta perspectiva, sus relatos constituyen la más completa guía de las posibilidades comerciales que ofrecen los reinos fantásticos que describe para la Europa de la época. En cada lugar por el que pasa hace un inventario cuidadoso de materias primas, artesanías o productos de interés comercial. (11)

What Pastor does not explicitly state, but can be gleaned from her analysis, is the specific form of power bestowed to Columbus as keeper and go-between of the “botín americano.” It resides in his capacity to rule over land and matter, and decide what things—alive or inert, material or immaterial—are to be inserted in its colonial logic of commodification, reification, production, appropriation, exchange, and circulation, etc., and which turn everything into a rentable good. And that he does. Columbus’s ritual of territorial possession begins, ceremoniously, on the day of his mistaken landfall:

Sacó el Almirante la vandera real y los capitanes con dos vanderas de la Cruz Verde, que llevava el Almirante en todos los navíos por seña, con una F y una I, encima de cada letra su corona, una de un cabo de la + y otra de otro. Puestos en tierra vieron árboles muy verdes y aguas muchas y
frutas de diversas maneras. El Almirante llamó a los dos capitanes y a los demás que saltaron en tierra, y a Rodrigo d’Escobedo escrivano de toda el armada, y a Rodrigo Sánches de Segovia, y dixo que le diesen por fe y testimonio cómo él por ante todos tomava, como de hecho tomó, posesión de la dicha isla por el Rey e por la Reina sus señores, haziendo las protestaciones que se requirían, como más largo se contiene en los testimonies que allí se hizieron por escripto. (59)

But by October 15 this juridical performance, which renders land as both spatial object and uncontested property of the Spanish monarchs, conflates the search for riches with the geographic extension of the new Indies, now an operational archipelagic unit:

Y como d’esta isla vide otra mayor al Güeste, cargué las velas por andar todo aquel día fasta la noche, porque aún no pudiera aver andado al cabo del Güeste, a la cual puse nombre la isla de Sancta María de la Conçepçión; y cuasi al poner del sol sorgi açerca del dicho cabo por saber si avía allí oro, porque estos que yo avía hecho tomar en la isla de San Salvador me dezían que ai traian manillas de oro muy grandes a las piernas y a los braços. Yo bien creí que todo lo que dezían era burla para se fugir. Con todo, mi voluntad era de no passar por ninguna isla de que no tomase posesión, puesto que, tomado de una, se puede decir de todas. (64, my emphasis)

The use of the word tomar here is significant. It inserts the islands (sometimes summarily identified from aboard the Spanish ships) in the chain of materialities that the Admiral “finds” and proceeds to confiscate, as we saw in the previous sections, and connects the acts of preemptive possession taking place during the thirty-five day journey across the Atlantic with the discourse of property that undergirds the post-discovery account of the Diario. From this incipient collection of spatial and material objects (islands and “manillas

32 The acts of possession performed by Columbus anticipate the juridical logic of the Requerimiento. In the context of this document, Patricia Seed studies the “ceremonies of possession” that provided the rationale for “just war” or conquest. Beyond its discursive aspects, J. H. Elliot and Diana de Armas Wilson give us insight into how conquistadors behaved on the ground, so to speak. Many improvised and original practices surfaced in the performance of possession, from planting a cross, flowing banners, and naming, as does Columbus, to cutting trees, meeting with indigenous chiefs, and erecting Spanish camps (Elliot 31; Wilson 155). Nemser’s article connects the experience of the discovery of the New World with the literature of the Spanish Golden Age, especially focusing on the figure of Sancho Panza (an awkward referent for conspicuous consumption) and his insular aspirations in Miguel de Cervantes’s El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha (1606, 1615) (“Governor Sancho”).
Figure 1.1. Christopher Columbus, *Chart of the island of Hispaniola*, 1493. Newberry Library, Chicago (Rabasa, *Inventing America* 164).

de oro” or gold bracelets, respectively) we can begin to reconstruct a precise inventory of the Columbian stock transacted in the rituals of possession that take place between October of 1492 and January of the subsequent year, when the Spanish expedition made its return trip back to the old continent (Table 1.1). The coastal lines of fugue that captured Columbus’s attention, as evidenced in a 1493 map of Hispaniola (Fig. 1.1), plot an insular cartography in which the region of Cibao acquires prominence as the site where New World gold lives: “... entre los otros lugares que nombravan donde se cogía el oro, dixerón de Çipango, al cual ellos llaman Çibao, y allí affirman que ay gran cantidad de oro y qu’el caçique trae las vanderas de oro de martillo, salvo que está muy lejos, al Leste” (December 24) (143–4). In Columbus’s imaginative map of the Indies islands are spatial objects that whet Spanish desires for the precious mineral.33 Starting on

33 José Piedra makes a similar argument with regards to Columbus’s fascination with the island of Cuba: “Upon Columbus’s arrival, Cuba becomes a thing, which provides an object of verification for Columbus’s being There” (59, emphasis in the original). As the voyage progresses, insular space and materiality are conflated in the Admiral’s discourse, and each object added to the New World inventory helps to build the region’s profile as an Ur-object in the hierarchy of Spanish possessions.
Table 1.1. Inventory of islands and objects mentioned in Columbus’s ship log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Island(s)</th>
<th>Date(s)</th>
<th>Objects*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guanahání (Guanahání)</td>
<td>11–13 Oct 1492</td>
<td>Canes (1 whole, 1 fragment), wooden sticks (3), small board, <em>silk doublet</em>, banners, red caps, glass beads, canoes, balls of cotton thread, spears, hawk bells, gold jewelry, <em>precious stones</em>, broken crockery and glass cups, other trifles (“cosas muchas de poco valor”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Salvador</td>
<td>14–15 Oct</td>
<td>Gold jewelry (bracelets, anklets, and other bodily ornaments), canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa María de la Concepción (Concepción)</td>
<td>15 Oct</td>
<td><em>Gold jewelry (bracelets and anklets)</em>, ball of cotton, red cap, green glass beads, hawk bells (2), canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernandina (Ferrandina)</td>
<td>15–16 Oct</td>
<td>Canoes, basket, glass beads, copper coins (2), strings of 10–12 glass beads, brass clappers, leather tags, barrels, <em>gold</em>, canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoet</td>
<td>16–17 Oct</td>
<td>Canoes, <em>gold</em>, other trifles, shawls, cotton, spears, loincloths, broken glass bowls, hammocks, gold jewelry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabela</td>
<td>19–22 Oct</td>
<td><em>Gold</em>, hawk bells, small glass beads, spears, balls of cotton, shards of glass, broken cups and bowls, gold jewelry, little bells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islas de Arena</td>
<td>27 Oct</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba (Colba)</td>
<td>28 Oct–6 Nov</td>
<td>Fishing implements (palm tree nets, hooks, fish spears), canoes, <em>gold, pearls</em>, statues of women, carved heads, <em>gold jewelry</em>, silver nose ring, beads, strings of beads, cotton thread, hammocks, chairs (2), lace point, loincloths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Items descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baveque (Baneque)</td>
<td>12–23 Nov</td>
<td>Gold, hammer, gold jewelry (earrings, bracelets, and anklets), precious stones, pearls, canoe, cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llana</td>
<td>24 Nov–4 Dec</td>
<td>Gold nuggets, spears, some trifles (“algunas cosillas de aquellos resgates”), canoe, wax, male heads (2), baskets (2), hawk bells, brass rings, green and yellow glass beads, stick, feather headdresses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juana</td>
<td>5 Dec</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tortuga</td>
<td>6–8 Dec</td>
<td>Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispaniola (Española)</td>
<td>9–16, 18 Dec</td>
<td>Cross, Spanish garb, glass beads, hawk bells, brass rings, canoe, gold jewelry, weapons, belt, gold, tapestry, red shoes, glass carafe, rags, amber beads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>17 Dec</td>
<td>Arrows, glass beads, gold jewelry, large gold pieces, canoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sancto Thomás</td>
<td>19–23 Dec</td>
<td>Clay pitchers, spears, sticks and weapons, loincloths, canoes, glass beads, brass rings, hawk bells, gold, belt, gold head, lace point, glass fragments, pottery, cotton balls, water bowl, loincloths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amiga</td>
<td>24 Dec–5 Jan</td>
<td>Gold, hawk bells, copper aglets, Turkish arch, spears, copper, gold head, washbowl, jar, platform, chairs, crown, necklace of “alaqueques” or carnelian beads, red hood, laced boots, silver ring, canoes, gold statues, artillery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioana</td>
<td>6–12 Jan 1493</td>
<td>Gold, copper aglet, barrel, pipes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matininó</td>
<td>13 Jan</td>
<td>Arches (2), arrows, parrot feathers, hairnet, gold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
November 12 with Baveque or Baneque (first named on November 12), subsequent insular territories were associated with large quantities of gold, to such degree of amalgamation that as the narrative progresses, each particular entity (the island and the mineral) become indistinguishable from the other: “... supo del Almirante de un hombre Viejo que había muchas islas comarcanas a cien leguas y más, según pudo entender, en las cuales nasce mucho oro, hasta dezirle que avía isla que era toda de oro, y en las otras que ay tanta cantidad que lo cogen y ciernen como con çedaço y lo funden y hazen vergas y mill labores” (December 18) (132–3). While in the beginning these two signifiers are emphasized in their singularity, by the point that Columbus reaches Hispaniola “island” and “gold” are intertwined in the capacious ontology of the New World colonial object.

**Rescates and the Material Culture of the First Contact**

Let us return, once again, to the events of October 11. The first contact between the Spanish and the natives takes place, as we mentioned, in the island of Guanahani. This
encounter is immediately defined by the exchange of *rescates*, bartered objects such as red caps, beads, cotton thread, and spears that served to consolidate social and economic bonds between the two groups (Fig. 1.2):

“Yo”, dize él, “porque nos tuviesen mucha amistad, porque cognocí que era gente que mejor se libraría y convertiría a nuestra sancta fe con amor que no por fuerça, les di a algunos d’ellos unos bonetos colorados y unas cuentas de vidrio que se ponían al pescueço, y otras cosas muchas de poco valor, con que ovieron mucho plazer y quedaron tanto nuestros que era maravilla. Los cuales después venían a las barcas de los navíos adonde nos estávamos, nadando, y nos traían papagayos y hilo de algodón en ovillos y azagayas y otras cosas muchas, y nos las trocavan por otras cosas que nos les dávamos, como cuentezillas de vidrio y cascaveles. En fin, todo tomavan y daban de aquello que tenían de buena voluntad, mas me pareció que era gente muy pobre de todo . . . .” (59)

Through the practice known as *rescatar*, translated by Alessandra Russo as “to salvage” or “to recover,” trifles were exchanged for gold and land. The benefits of this mode of material and symbolic exchange were thus conceived as twofold. On the one hand, it helped Columbus and his Spanish cohort win the natives’ trust and, on the other, it aimed to “recoup what had been invested in the expedition by bartering objects in an openly unequal exchange” (Russo, “Cortés’s Objects” 4). In many instances, the natives approached the Spanish vessels in their canoes in order to get more trifles. Among the *rescates* offered by the Spaniards were also hawk bells, broken crockery, shards of glass, leather tags, and lace points (Fig. 1.3). In very rare occasions, usually when interacting with a principal figure such as Guacanári, the cacique of Hispaniola, this stock included objects of greater value such as a carnelian necklace, an ornate tapestry, and pieces of clothing. The objects offered by the natives followed an equally predictable logic. Cotton balls, spears (*azagayas*), and foodstuffs were more commonly bartered, though to the
Figure 1.2. Inventory of early sixteenth century Spanish beads. Items #105 (green) and 106 (yellow) are purportedly similar to the beads described by Columbus (Smith and Good 43).
delight of the Admiral nucay, the Arawak word for “gold,” and gold jewelry were occasionally part of the exchange as well. As several commentators have remarked, following Las Casas’s notes on the margins of Columbus’s manuscript, much of what was believed to be gold was in fact tumbaga or guanín, an alloy of gold, silver, and up to 60% copper that was imported from the South American mainland (the Taino did not know the technique of melting metals) and magasita or fool’s gold (Gužauskytė 97; Saunders, “Biographies” 246).

Fake gold and other objective incongruities, mirroring the misconception of the Antilles as the East Indies, reveal that exchange creates a fictive equivalence between worlds. The narrative of exchange is thus marked by elisions and silences concerning the criteria that Columbus and his retinue employ to determine which indigenous objects
beyond gold are valuable to the expedition. To varying degrees, the value of individual objects is first emptied of meaning and significance only to be subsequently resignified amid a transformed material domain. As José Piedra indicates, the natives also “read” Columbus’s material desires and are critical agents in the interpretive processes that reorganize each group’s systems of value: “The [ship log] presents a vocabulary of material transactions—to present, to give, to give in exchange, to exchange, to barter, to bargain—which suggests a progression in the awareness of each other’s values and valuables” (52). If for Piedra the objects that serve as basis for cultural transactions provide the “missing link” between language and “the subjects whose values and voices they attempt to impersonate” (52), Pastor attributes these inconsistencies to the problem of “un contenido semántico que nunca se nombró explícitamente” in the Diario (20). In my view, that which never gets named in Columbus’s account is the cruel alchemy that transforms everything discovered into a material object; or, to put it another way, into a building block of a nascent global empire.

Thus, this process of objectification cannot be divorced from Columbus’s explorations as a means to a mercantile end. The European expansion of the late-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was fueled by the proliferation of trading centers in Asia, Africa, and the New World, period during which many types of resources and commodities (gold, precious stones, pearls, fabrics, tapestries, art objects, foodstuffs, spices, exotic animals, tobacco, woods) began to circulate in an increasingly global economy. This mercantile rubric would be extended as well to the territories and peoples that were intimately associated with the vast array of commercial goods transacted. As
Carlos Jáuregui observes, “[e]l Nuevo Mundo es objeto y mercancía del consumo europeo y como tal es representado” (104). Shape shifting and freighted with both economic and symbolic values, the New World object is equally linked to market practices as it is to gift exchange.

According to Vilches, the economy of the gift bridges Columbian notions of difference and value which stand in for “the wealth that Columbus promises but is not able to produce” (“Columbus’s Gift” 205). Prior to Vilches’s observations, Hulme’s study traced the network of referents associated with Columbus’s failure to locate the wealth and riches of the Indies. According to Hulme, gold is the material signifier that links the discourses of oriental mercantilism and American otherness that structure the post-discovery account of Columbus’s ship log (33–41). As the trade centers of the Orient are not found gold is associated to savagery and cannibalism. The vast deposits of the mineral always point south of the current sailing course of the expedition (Hulme 24–5), where the Caribs, enemies of Columbus and his indigenous allies, the Taino, protect them ferociously from the Spaniards.

The proliferating trinkets and absent gold thus offer readers of the Diario a powerful index for tracing the collapse of Columbus’s narrative of merit and achievement. The “Genoese dream of an Oriental trade,” as Hulme terms it, is unsustainable by the few trinkets that Columbus collects, and which he repeatedly states are not worth more than a penny (Hulme 39). The performative externalizations of the rudimentary exchange that takes place between Spaniards and Indians become simulacra of the indefinite and the unquantifiable. It is thus not a problem for Columbus that the
objects the Indians have to barter, for the most part, do not interest him in the least bit. For with each glass bead and bell is established a bond of reciprocity that can only be fulfilled with open access to the lands of the New World and their seemingly infinite amounts of gold and natural resources. Early modern European illustrators of Columbus’s discovery depicted the New World as an assemblage of objects, territories, and natives, thereby suggesting that a new “gathering” (to use Clifford Geertz’s term) of hierarchies of presence, accumulation, and exclusion was inaugurated with the events of the first contact (218) (Fig. 1.4). In De Bry’s engraving the nakedness of the Indians is only rivaled by the eagerness with which they give all of which they possess. Various pieces of
jewelry, an urn, a coffer, and what seems like a cornucopia with the figure of Neptune are dangled and aggressively offered to the Spanish conquistadors. The shore as a space of liminality links the island of Guanahani with the objects that mediate the interaction between the two camps. This scene of material submission is further punctuated by the ceremony of possession taking place to the left of the image. From the slanted cross irradiates a visual motif of *crossing* that includes the masts of the Spanish fleet and the tall standard in Columbus’s left hand that asserts his central status in the hierarchy of subjects.

Here the narrative of willing and open bidirectional exchange typified by De Bry, whom we will return to in the next chapter, is interrupted at various times throughout the course of Columbus’s narration. A paradigmatic moment occurs when Columbus is made aware of the expediency with which the Indians traded the Spanish trifles among themselves, and across different islands.34 A mere four days after Columbus’s mistaken landfall, traces of European material culture penetrate the Antilles more rapidly than the Spanish expedition (Russo, “Cortés’s Objects” 20; Gruzinski, *Images at War* 7–18). On his way to the island of Fernandina, Columbus comes across a man in a canoe who carries a basket with what Columbus presumes are indigenous valuables (a piece of their bread, red earth, and tobacco leaves). To his surprise, this basket also carries glass beads and two Spanish coins (*blancas*). At other moments, Columbus himself breaks the protocol of reciprocal exchange, but keeps up with the practice of giving the Indians something of

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34 Among some of the anthropologists that study pre-Hispanic trade and hierarchies of value in the Antilles are Mary Helms and Roberto Cassá. From an archaeological standpoint, important research has shed light on the trade networks and societal structures established by native groups in the Caribbean Basin. See the works of Ann K. Cody, John G. Crock and James B. Petersen, and Kathleen Deagan and José M. Cruxent.
little to no value in order to appear friendly. Like a savvy public relations executive,

Columbus knows that in order to claim everything, he has to pretend not to take anything
(or give very little back, as if handing out coupons for steals or gangas). On October 15 an
Indian approaches the Spanish ships in order to barter a ball of cotton. When the man
refuses to come inside, Columbus captures him and proceeds to give him a red cap, green
glass beads, and a pair of hawk bells:

In reading this passage, the question that begs to be asked is why does Columbus reject
the indigenous ball of cotton? A speculative answer to this question can begin to note that
by refusing reciprocity Columbus asserts his superiority and fashions himself as a
benefactor toward the Indians. In failing to receive the object that the Indian has come to
trade, he turns the Spanish rescatés into gifts.

In his groundbreaking work *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic
Societies* (1966), Marcel Mauss has theorized the gift as a powerful commodity and a social
interaction that establishes hierarchies between peoples and objects. Mauss observes that
with the gift there comes a promise of another gift to be given or returned at a later date
(9–16). Columbus does not accept the cotton ball, but this does not mean that he does not
take, symbolically and materially, so much more. It is interesting to note that here the
typical dyad of the gift, the giver and the receiver, is expanded to include a third agent in
the dynamic of exchange: the Spanish Monarchs. One-way exchange establishes a bond of promise, servitude, or debt that can only be repaid with a monumental offering. In refusing to accept the native *rescate* Columbus effectively appropriates everything that surrounds it in the name of the monarchs, which are expected to claim, in person or by proxy, “the gift” that the Indians will give them: the full totality of the New World and everything it contains. This is explicitly stated a mere half a page later when another Indian comes into the presence of the Spaniards bringing tobacco leaves and other *rescates*. Once more, Columbus instructs his crew not to accept them, stating that the intention behind this action is so that the Indians may give everything to the Spaniards at a future date—“cuando Vuestras Altezas enbíen acá, que aquellos que vinieren resçiban honra y nos den de todo lo que oviere” (66).

**BEYOND INSULARITY**

Between March and April 1493, about ten Taíno Indians were paraded from Seville to Barcelona wearing golden masks with precious stones and carrying tropical birds and other exotic items. They were the primary attraction during the procession of Palm Sunday in the capital of Andalusia, where people thronged the roads to admire Columbus and his Indian court (Deagan and Cruxent 15; Ferguson 247; Vilches, “Columbus’s Gift” 209). The response of the crowds was so overwhelming that Columbus had to add more stops than anticipated to his cross-country tour (Vilches, “Columbus’s Gift” 209). News of Columbus’s success in the Indies spread rapidly. By the time Ferdinand and Isabella received the Admiral with great pomp and celebration, in April, several officials, entrepreneurs, artists, and collectors had plans to cash in on the recent
discoveries. More Indians could be imported to work in theater, for instance, to portray exotic versions of themselves onstage; or they could make nonpareil additions to curiosity cabinets where their presence would provide context and enhance the visual appeal of the displays. Indians also seemed to confirm the viability of launching an ambitious mercantile project overseas, and as such elicited desires to undertake future ventures.

The duke of Medinaceli, who was an influential patron of the expedition, was among those most impressed by Columbus’s accomplishments. A few weeks after the Admiral’s return he wrote to Cardinal Pedro de Mendoza to share news of the voyage and to request the court’s favor to pursue independent trade with the newly-discovered regions: “Colón ha hallado todo lo que buscava y muy cumplidamente, lo cual yo luego supe: y por fazer saber tan buena nueva a Su Alteza, gelo escrito con Xuárez y le enbio a suplicar me haga merced que yo pueda embiar en cada año allá algunas caravelas más” (Gil and Varela, Cartas de particulares 145, qtd. in Vilches, “Columbus’s Gift” 209). In this petition of favors we see reanimated the verb hallar that appeared in this chapter as part of a privileged rhetorical formula that allowed Columbus to justify numerous acts of appropriation in and of the New World. In both Columbus and Medinaceli, todo is a discursive island and object in itself, for it encapsulates and elides the region’s geography, flora, fauna, things, and peoples. This indefinite pronoun, in its conclusiveness and vagueness, registers Medinaceli’s legal correctness, empirical reliability, and dispassionate interest, all characteristics of an objective discourse as analyzed by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in the “The Image of Objectivity” (1992).
As if describing some of the invisible assemblages of modernity, Daston and Galison write that “[m]odern objectivity mixes rather than integrates disparate components, which are historically and conceptually distinct. Each of these components has its own history, in addition to the collective history that explains how all of them came to be amalgamated into a single, if layered, concept” (82). In the case of the Genoese sailor, who has been identified with the emergence of colonial Western modernity, the “disparate components” are visible in the delicate balance between island and objects that seek, on one hand, to *acopiari* (collate—enclose—swell) the Indies in order to render them Christian–Spanish and consequently a spatial object of appropriation; and, on the other, to produce and exploit their unintelligibility in the form of material excess that facilitates Columbus’s attempt to claim discursive and physical possession of this new geographic space (Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack* 45–7). Mieke Bal has observed that “[t]hings, called objects for good reason, appear to be the most ‘pure’ form of objectivity” (99). Columbian objectivity is an assemblage of power that is achieved through the hyper-visibilization of the material, which then becomes a form of subordination, ownership, dehumanization. In Columbus’s account the epiphenomenal experience of the New World—at first amorphous like seaweed, malleable like wax, and polysemous like forest-cum-island—charts a gradual progression toward materialization or, worse still, reification, becoming unhinged after October 11 when the economy of exchange takes over Columbus’s narration.

Moreover, the Indians, animal specimens, and pieces of gold that were taken as evidence of the boundless wealth and riches held in the islands of the first contact provide
the original shape and structure of the “colonial object,” understood by Hommi Bhabha as a founding object of representation and presence from which the ontology of “colonized” emerges (126). Unlike Bhabha, however, in this chapter I have sidestepped issues of mimicry and subjectivity by recourse to a topographical and materially situated understanding of the colonial object in Columbus’s *Diario*. Several multiplicities converge in this signifier and, as I have shown, their gradual deposition as building blocks and, eventually, as structural framework (or infrastructure) is what gives shape to the Columbian/colonial project. On a micro-strategic level, this project is multiplied by the objects (artifacts, commodities, gold, precious stones, etc.) that provide continuity between the different islands that Columbus “discovers” but, by his own admission, cannot count. The editorial voice of Las Casas comes across particularly strongly when documenting Columbus’s navigational maneuverings and shortcomings:

> Después de aver andado así 64 millas halló una entrada muy honda, ancha un cuarto de milla, y buen puerto y río, donde entró y puso la proa al Sursudueste y después al Sur hasta llegar al Sueste, todo de buena anchura y muy fondo, *donde vido tantas islas que no las pudo contar todas*, de buena grandeza, y muy altas tierras llenas de diversos árboles de mill maneras e infinitas palmas. Maravillóse en gran manera ver tantas islas y tan altas y certifica a los Reyes que desde las montañas que desde antier a visto por estas costas y las d’estas islas, que le parece que no las ay más altas en el mundo ni tan hermosas y claras, sin niebla ni nieve, y al pie d’ellas grandísimo fondo; *y dize que cree que estas islas son aquellas innumerables que en los mapamundos en fin de Oriente se ponen*. Y dixo que creía que avía grandísimas riquezas y piedras preciosas y especería en ellas, y que duran muy mucho al Sur y se ensanchan a toda parte. (95, my emphasis)

What is interesting about this description is that Columbus oscillates between the need to measure and quantify and the temptation to fictionalize his experience. Abandoning an established protocol of verification he effectively reduces and summarizes “innumerable”
islands in his field of vision by listing instead the riches and commodities that he hopes to find. This process has been termed by Pastor as “materializar la verdad,” and it takes place whenever the Admiral fails to represent with veracity the landscape of the New World.

In Columbus’s colonial ritual of transubstantiation, matter and providential destiny fused, as did land and object, object and desire, object and otherness. There remains, however, the elusive presence of gold, unquantifiable and unbridled, which toward the end of the Diario threatens to spill over the physical boundary imposed by insularity: “En amanececiendo, dio las velas para ir a su camino a buscar las islas que los indios le dezían que tenían mucho oro, y de alguna que tenían más oro que tierra” (139). Here “island” and “gold” have become coextensive referents, even if the terms have been reversed and the latter surpasses the former in reach and extension. The conflation of island and gold facilitates the transitive application of the ontology of the object to the concept of island and, consequently, to the peoples and natural resources that are contained inside them. How colonial gold mediates the conversion between insular and material signs has been an underlying theme of this study; that it developed a social life of its own is the thrust of my second chapter’s argument.
CHAPTER TWO

Golden Empires

*Founding Matter in Latin American Colonial Discourse*

A preemptive equivalence between gold and the islands of the “Mares Oceanas” emerged in the *Diario del primer viaje* (c. 1493). Among the multiple sources we may use to expand our study of colonial gold as material leitmotif, two immediately come to mind. The first is a well-known late sixteenth century engraving by the Flemish artist Theodor De Bry. As we will see, De Bry’s engraving of a Spanish conquistador held in captivity by a tribe of bald Indians who pour down his throat gold in liquid form subverts the potential teleology of molten gold, a metal which baseline status as a commodity in the West is greatly determined by its ability to form currency. Together with several other scenes from De Bry’s monumental *America or India Occidentalis* (1590–1634), this engraving remakes Spain into a degraded empire, a vanishing order to be superseded by rivaling European powers. Starting with Charles V, similar criticism reverberated across the domains of the Spanish crown. A little over twenty years after De Bry in the viceroyalty of Peru, the indigenous author of the *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615?), Don Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, condemned the conquistadors’ insatiable appetite for gold in his also monumental (although unpublished) address to King Philip III.

The second reference proposes an inverse scenario predicated upon the erasure of imperial violence. For a younger contemporary of Guaman Poma, the *mestizo* Inca
Garcilaso de la Vega, gold provided continuity between the Spanish and Inca empires. More than the object of colonialist greed, it represented the material symbol of the Inca sun god, Inti, and his last royal descendant, Manco Capac. So from the dedication to the *Comentarios reales de los incas* (1609) Inca Garcilaso does not hesitate to make this connection apparent by transposition, that is to say, by metaphorically polishing the dark patina off the figure of the Spanish monarch (whose graces Inca Garcilaso ostensibly failed to receive). He turns instead to the figure of Princess Catherine, granddaughter of King Emmanuel, citing the illustrious lineage and magnanimous virtues of the increasingly prominent and ambitious Portuguese family as reasons for soliciting her patronage:

> Cuán alta sea la generosidad de Vuestra Alteza consta a todos, pues es hija y descendiente de los esclarecidos reyes y Príncipes de Portugal, que, aunque no es esto de lo que Vuestra Alteza hace mucho caso, cuando sobre el oro de tanta alteza cae el esmalte de tan heroicas virtudes se debe estimar mucho. Pues ya si miramos el ser de la gracia con que Dios Nuestro Señor ha enriquecido el alma de Vuestra Alteza, hallaremos ser mejor que el de la naturaleza (aunque Vuestra Alteza más se encubra), de cuya santidad y virtud todo el mundo habla con admiración, y yo dijera algo de lo mucho que hay, sin nota de lisonjero, si Vuestra Alteza no aborreciera tanto sus alabanzas como apetece el silencio de ellas. (3)

Here we are witnesses to a game of mirrors. The princess’s silences are also Inca Garcilaso’s silences, whereas gold welds the gap between the Inca’s written utterance and the ineffable “structures of feeling” (to use Raymond William’s notion) that determine the account’s conditions of production. Moreover, her regal aura, characterized as a natural treasury of serene and gracious attributes, becomes an emblematic double of the author’s mother Isabel Chimpu Ocllo, a Cuzcan noblewoman (*palla*) directly descended from the Inca royal family. Yet by extension, even if by omission, the shiny gold enamel of the

35 See the homonymously titled chapter 9 of *Marxism and Literature.*
writer’s prose recasts the Spanish monarch as a weak reflective surface, a quasi-
Flaubertian gilded idol easily tarnished by touch and close inspection.

With these starting points illustrating the scope of my argument, in this chapter I
will study colonial representations of gold and their indigenous counterparts in the long
sixteenth century (between 1492 and 1650, approximately). Next to key fragments of
Christopher Columbus’s diaries, I will read Cortés’s first and second Cartas de relación (July
10, 1519 and October 30, 1520, respectively) and the latter’s corresponding inventory as
foundational New Spanish texts about the colonial possibilities of gold as both aesthetic
and tributary material. Following this reading, I will place two of Las Casas’s principal
texts, the Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias (1552) and the Historia de las Indias
(concluded in 1561), in conversation with the early modern discourse of the fetish. In the
last section, I will look to parts IV, V, and VI of America, De Bry’s best selling collection of
copperplate engravings. The images created by De Bry, many of which were conceived as
adaptations of Historia del Mondo Nuovo (1565) by the Milanese Girolamo Benzoni,
reproduce an imperial gaze that derived its power, in part, from the advancement of early
modern visual technologies. Finally, I will conclude by opening up this analysis to the
challenge of thinking with literary and cultural critics as well as archaeologists about what
a discourse of “absence” of colonial gold might look like if we quietly let go of the stark
chromatic contrast that is embedded in our disciplinary metaphors for imperial/colonial
loss and grandeur.36

36 In many ways, the discursive locus of this chapter works to extend a series of meditations initiated by
Antonio Cornejo-Polar in a short essay that has been formative for generations of Latin Americanists,
“Mestizaje e hibridez: el riesgo de las metáforas. Apuntes.” In this essay Cornejo-Polar draws attention to
the existing relationship between “epistemología crítica y producción estética” as one that is
Examined in conjunction, the work of these authors and artists enables us to triangulate a transatlantic reading about the role of textualized material culture in contexts of domination beyond the binomial metropolis/colony. I will read in productive dialogue and tension next to these sources some key fragments of the diaries, letters, and the early historiography of the New World, including accounts by English and Spanish authors. To this end, the concept of *imperium* proposed by Barbara Fuchs becomes useful because it takes into consideration “the continuity and interdependence between the formation of early modern nations and their imperial aspirations,” stimulating a multisited, comparative, and transatlantic reading of this phenomenon (“Imperium” 73).  

This allows me to sustain my two primary hypotheses, which I preview here: the first is that there exists a significant corpus of symbolic representations of *imperium* that hinge on the figure of gold to either recast Spain as a “good” or “bad” imperial formation. The second hypothesis concerns what we may call the “raw materials” of empire—a phrase

"inevitamente metafórica" (“Mestizaje” 342). In reading this essay as gesture or performance, we see a Cornejo-Polar in the act of pulling the veil (or removing the mask) from the concepts of *mestizaje* or miscegenation—a term that is descriptive of the general phenomenon of race mixing, particularly of Spanish and indigenous bodies and cultural practices—and *híbridez*, also known as hybridity or hybridization—a cluster of terms that stands out for its links to non-productivity, understood in terms of “esterilidad”(341). Mabel Moraña has remarked on the importance of Cornejo-Polar’s gesture as one that according to his detractors fundamentally emerges out of the discursive locus of an “inteligentsia criolla,” in the best case, and perhaps also of a “‘latinoamericanismo vernáculo’ o ‘neorregionalista’” (“De metáforas” 221)—but that Moraña centers as a corpus with an indelible theoretical dimension. This is true, she insists, even when Cornejo-Polar’s positions on the relationship between literature and the Latin American heterogeneous social field (as viewed primarily from the Andes, and later on from the US, where he lived in exile during his five years as professor at the University of California, Berkeley) forced him to assume what could be construed as an anti-theoretical stance, a statement Moraña refutes (“De metáforas” 222–3).

37 The notion of *Empire* proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri has obvious resonances with Fuchs’s concept. Although the way in which Negri and Hardt position themselves in relation to Marxism may seem appropriate here, their post-national grounding of power across the seemingly absolutizing conditions of postmodern markets speak to a different geo-political formation of capital and global empire than the one foregrounded in this study. In this sense, Negri and Hardt’s concept of Empire appears less useful to explain the ways in which early modern projects of global empire vied for control over interlocking narratives of colonization and imperial power that fundamentally were conducive to the modern nation form, even if those states had not assumed the definitive geo-political shape that they eventually developed in modernity.
employed by the literary critic and art historian W.J.T. Mitchell—that, I sustain, takes gold as point of departure to articulate this object as motor of the colonial American project. By adapting Mitchell’s definition, this chapter addresses the ways in which colonial gold as a *fetish* that attempts to displace non-Western colonial others becomes a foundational materiality of colonial Latin American discourse, and of Latin American culture at large.

**Hunger for Treasures**

Early discoverers conceived of the Indies as a place of marvels and riches within the spiritual economy and geo-political organization of medieval Europe. If Christopher Columbus’s first voyage traded the myth of Oriental gold for the distant promise of *colonial* gold within a material-commercial narrative of discovery, as we saw in the previous chapter, by the last of his voyages colonial gold appears reabsorbed by an immaterial-anagogical interpretive framework. In the *Diario del cuarto viaje* (1503), Columbus writes about the transcendent properties of gold, and its capacity to cross both territorial and spiritual boundaries: “Genoveses, venecianos y toda la gente que tenga perlas, piedras preciosas y otras cosas de valor, todos las llevan hasta el cabo del mundo para las trocar, convertir en oro. El oro es excelentísimo; del oro se hace tesoro, y con él, quien lo tiene, hace cuanto quiere en el mundo, y llega a que echa las almas al Paraíso” (288). As Elvira Vilches argues in *New World Gold: Cultural Anxiety and Monetary Disorder in Early Modern Spain* (2010), gold’s pervasive presence in early colonial sources such as

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38 In the first chapter I traced some of the main currents of the medieval worldview that was disrupted with the “discovery” of the New World from Chalcidius to Marco Polo and the Gran Khan. Within this network of references, islands materialized a special connection to wealth—and gold, in particular.
Columbus’s account is best understood as an expression of the unfulfilled promise of instant wealth that motivated early expeditions (92). Yet if Columbus renders colonial gold largely as an immaterial presence outside the geospatial boundaries of the Spanish empire proper (although both Genoa and Venice fulfilled banking and trading capacities for Spain in the sixteenth century), it is mainly because the actual gold that the Admiral found and sent back to the monarchs was minimal. The global lust that, according to Columbus this metal generates recalls Robert Young’s notion of “colonialism and the desiring machine,” for whom the question of desire is inextricable from the question of race. Colonial gold’s ever-changing materiality—to paraphrase the conditions addressed by Young’s critique of racial capitalism, which borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972)—transforms from an individual fixation to a point of connectivity in the grid of early modern capital. Note the desubjectification that takes place in Columbus’s passage where colonial gold produces more gold (in the form of treasures) and even, as Young writes of the relationship of colonialism to capitalism, “a geospatial model of the inscription of the flows of desire upon the surface or body of the earth” (160).39

Toward the end of his diaries Columbus’s appreciation for colonial gold continues to turn, precisely, on the semantic connotations of the word tesoro, which is tied to the economy of extraction and appropriation that marks the Spanish presence in the Indies.40

39 I will return to this point not here but in the following chapter with my theorization of the grid in Bernardo de Balbuena’s celebration of colonial mercantilism/capital.
40 For a discussion of treasures in colonial texts that is attentive to their economic, aesthetic, and discursive potentials, see the third chapter of Vilches’s extensive study (New World 131–8). Vilches also provides approximate economic values and general descriptions of some of these treasures, including “the biggest treasure ever captured” which came from Atahualpa’s ransom in Peru (New World 135).
Orlando Bentancort's doctoral dissertation—a study of José de Acosta and the rich corpus of mining literature of colonial Peru—examines the close relationship between treasure and tribute, which “introduces debt/creditor relationships by distributing signs that refer to other signs according to the lack and excess law” (59). “The strong interdependence between treasure and tribute,” he adds, is also rooted in the classic and medieval philosophical reflections on metals. Isidore of Seville thought that the word “tesoro” had its origins in the Greek word that meant “position,” something that was placed apart from other things. Isidore observes that the word “auraria” (mine of gold) derives from the word “aurum,” which can also mean “tribute paid in merchandise.” There is a strong amalgamation between the location of metals that are separated and buried, and the debtor/creditor system that balances the overabundance of metals in favor of the Spanish crown. (“The Life” 59–60)

In Columbus's account gold as mythical treasure and unreliable tribute becomes a supplement to be attained prospectively by performance and desire. Given that colonial gold is imagined as external to—yet within the reach of—the Spanish monarchy, the anxiety over the status of colonial gold in Columbus's account makes visible the unstable and thus insufficient thrust of an imperial project struggling to manage an ever-expanding collection of territories, resources, and people.

During the Middle Ages, gold came to Castile from Muslim tribute and from the conquest of thirteenth century Al-Andalus (Vilches, New World 53). Another important source of the metal in the Iberian Peninsula, and across Europe, was the serpentine trade.

41 In Of Grammatology, Derrida envisages the supplement as both substitution and emptiness, that is, as “sign and proxy”: “But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [suppléant] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]” (145). The supplement denotes the precarious relationship between any two binaries, such as “speech” and “writing.” These do not form part of a hierarchy, but rather aid one another by replacing a lack thought to be present in the “original.” In Columbus's case, writing acts as a supplement of nature in its most primordial state.
route that connected gold outposts in the coast of Guinea, inland through the Niger region, and Sudan through the Sahara—with important trading routes that branched into Morocco, Temclen, and Mali—to its first European destination in Venice (Vilches, New World 53; Kindleberger 2). With the great scarcity of gold that hit the old continent toward the end of the thirteenth century, Portuguese explorers (later joined by Genoese and Castilians) searched for direct maritime access to Africa’s gold sources (Vilches, New World 53). “According to one estimate, the gold arriving annually amounted to 700 kilograms at the beginning of the sixteenth century” (Kindleberger 2). This includes new sources of gold that were coming from Portuguese trading posts in the West African coast, the islands of the Atlantic Basin, and, gradually, from the continental Indies. The monetary use of gold plummeted between 1450 and the second half of the sixteenth century, as reflected in the tax collections, bequests, and gold hoards that were characteristic of the period (Kindleberger 2). In tandem with this sharp decline in gold, overall mining production rose, however, and “more and more silver was sent to the Spanish Netherlands, along with copper and brass, to pay for woolens and Portuguese spices brought from the Far East and to purchase gold from Spanish America” (Kindleberger 2–3). Between 1492 and 1550, it is estimated that sixty tons of gold from the New World was funneled in the form of booty (not production) from the Spanish and Portuguese “to Bruges, Antwerp, and Florence, where the mints switched over from silver to gold” (Kindleberger 3). Some thirty to fifty years later imports to Seville of gold and silver (from the mine of Potosí discovered in 1545) reached peak numbers, consolidating the central role of the House of Trade for the Spanish Habsburgs.
Mediating between economies of trade and colonial embodiment, in the *Diario del primer viaje* Columbus established a persistent link between gold and corporeality that would persist across the visual and textual life of the object: “Porque sin duda es en estas tierras grandísimas suma de oro, que no sin causa dizien estos indios que yo traigo que ha estas islas lugares adonde cavan el oro y lo traen al pescueço, a las orejas y a los braços e a las piernas, y son manillas muy gruessas” (91). Also in Columbus we can see the contrast between mystical gold and a more terrestrial, incorporeal view of the imperial practices associated with this material. In addition to becoming an operative category in the descriptions of Indians and other racialized subjects, embodiment (especially when it transgressed the internal/external boundary of flesh) would be used to express criticism against the Spaniards.

Some of the most important studies on this topic have stressed the connection between gold and cannibalism, a thesis proposed in the works of Carlos Jáuregui and Peter Hulme. As we saw in chapter 1, for Hulme the virtual absence of colonial gold marks the rise of the figure of the cannibal. Modeled after the viciously savage Caribs who terrorized the Taíno, for the Columbus of the early discoveries cannibals were in charge of protecting colonial gold. Their fierce behavior and violent nature made it impossible for Spaniards even to find colonial gold in the quantities they imagined and were supposedly promised by the other natives. Carlos A. Jáuregui’s monograph *Canibalía: Canibalismo, calibanismo y antropofagia cultural y consumo en América Latina* (2008) is one in a long list of studies by Latin American scholars that have excavated representations of cannibalism as conflated sites of racialization, colonial violence, and
anxieties about consumptive practices rooted in despoliation. Jáuregui studies the inherent connection between the cannibal and gold to argue for the centrality of this figure in Columbus’s writings. For later commentators the greed and desire for gold will similarly acquire quite physical connotations. Certain Indians, Spanish critics, and European rivals of the Crown associated gold to conspicuous consumption, as exemplified by the tropes of rapacious hunger and insatiable thirst that appear in some of their texts. Others will associate it with illness, catastrophe, and widespread destruction, and will use gold as a way to denounce the injustices of the Spanish empire in the New World.

Throughout Richard Eden’s English translation of the Second Decade of *Decades of the New World* (published for the first time in 1516), the Italian historian of the Spanish empire Peter Martyr d’Anghiera associates gold with hunger, both a bodily and metaphorical affliction that corrupted the ends of the Spanish presence in the Indies. According to David Read, who studies the thematic correspondences between d’Anghiera and the poet Edmund Spenser, the most striking instance in which this formula appears in the former’s writing occurs in a seemingly amicable exchange between Vasco Nuñez de Balboa’s soldiers and the tribal chief Comogrus:

Here as brabbling and contention arose among our men about the dividing of gold, this eldest son of King Comogrus being present, whom we praised for his wisdom, coming some what with an angry countenance toward him which held the balances, he struck them with his fist, and scattered all the gold that was therein, about the porch, sharply rebuking them with words in this effect. What is the matter you Christian men, that you so greatly esteem so little a portion of gold more than your own quietness, which nevertheless you intended to deface from these fair ouches and to melt the same into a rude mass. If your hunger of gold be so insatiable that only for the desire you have thereto, you disquiet so many nations, and you your selves also sustain so many calamities and incommodities, living like banished men out of your own country, I will
show you a Region flowing with gold, where you may satisfy your ravenous appetites. But you must attempt the thing with a greater power: For it standeth you in hand by force of arms to overcome kings of great puissance, and rigorous defenders of their dominions. . . . or ever you can come thither, you must pass over the mountains inhabited by the cruel Cannibals a fierce kind of men, devourers of mans flesh, living without laws, wandering, and without empire. For they also, being desirous of gold, have subdued them under their dominion which before inhabited the gold mines of the mountains, and use them like bondmen, using their labor in digging and working their gold in plates and sundry images like unto these which you see here. (qtd. in Read 70–1, italics in the original)

The hunger for gold or *auri sacra fames*, a classical motif dating back to Virgil’s poetry, frequently appears in early modern texts as a way to renegotiate the sudden surplus of wealth coming from the Indies since the first half of the sixteenth century, and the prominent role played by Spain in these economic changes.\(^\text{42}\) As we can see from the previous passage, this theme is mobilized by the *cacique* (chief) to reproach Spaniards for their greed. Later in the passage, however, the practice of cannibalism is clearly linked to the conquistador’s excessively desirous nature. To paraphrase Read’s observation, the anxiety concerning the intake of gold—and perhaps flesh—is punctuated by the anecdote’s concluding remarks: as the two camps prepare to part ways, the hungry Spaniards are portrayed as swallowing down their saliva, ostensibly readying themselves for the feast that awaits them (qtd. in Read 70–1). As a radical case of bodily intake, the motif of *auri sacra fames* marks a step in the *assimilation* of colonial gold at an imperial scale, and thus subverts the global early modern’s symbolic economy of desire—built upon the eroticization of exotic others, landscapes, fauna, flora, and natural resources—by means of an equivalence between bodies and the material objects that mediate cross-cultural

\(^{42}\) For a detailed study of this motif and the topic of greed from classical antiquity to the seventeenth century, see Schwartz Lerner.
exchanges. The problem of incorporation is especially disruptive of the idea of an imperial subject that is imagined to take preeminence over the precarious, incomplete humanity of the Indians and other non-Europeans (in the analysis of De Bry’s engravings that takes place during the second half of this chapter I locate these racial subjects in relation to Spain’s perceived vulnerability).

The link between eating and adoration comes from the Latin verb *adōrāre*, a conjunction of *ad*–, meaning “to or toward” and –ōrāre, meaning to appeal to, implore, to beg, pray to, worship (*OED*). The latter verb in turn comes from ēs and ēris, the singular and plural forms of “mouth.” It is often assumed that ērāre and its derivative *adōrāre* were used first in reference to the sole act of the mouth in speaking solemn words, later developing into both a hand-kissing gesture and the deferential salutation of bringing one or both hands to the mouth, *ad ēs*, an action that eventually became part of the ritual of prayer. A parallel definition by Isidore—previously encountered in our analysis of Columbus’s late-medieval insular discourse—points out that a certain kind of hulled wheat received the name of *adōreum*, from *ador*, which Latin etymon ēdere signifies “to eat.” “Emmer wheat’ (*adoreum*),” states the author of the *Etymologies* (c. 600 AD), “is a species of wheat that is commonly called seed (*semen*). It was formerly called *ador* from ‘eating’ (*edere*), because it was what people first used, or because in a sacrifice, bread of that kind was offered ‘at altars’ (*ad aras*)—whence furthermore sacrifices are called *adorea* (i.e. an honorary gift of grain)” (338). Even if Isidore’s definition seems convincing, it must be noted that neither ancient nor modern grammarians can tell us with any certainty the
etymological history of adōrāre.43 While grammatically unjustified, the metaphorical associations between the color of wheat and gold may have provided another point of contact in the development of the motif of auri sacra famæ. Furthermore, the influence of folk etymology or possibly bastardization in the rise of medieval Castilian, although difficult to trace, may very well explain the dubious conflation of the noun for “gold” in this language, oro, with the verb oro, the first person singular of orar in early modern representations where adorar is taken to signify, quite literally, to eat gold.

In accounts of the New World, we cannot discard the possibility that this trope may not just take after European models. The archaeologist José Oliver notes that among the Taíno gold was used in representations of deities called cemíes and in sculpted wooden seats often exhibiting anthropo- or zoomorphical features called duhos where the eyes, the mouth, and the articulations were covered in hammered gold, signifying the portal between heaven and earth, between the numinous realm and a graspable reality (“Gold Symbolism” 198–205). For the Aztecs the word for “gold,” teocuitlatl, meant both excessive eating and defecation, and as such was related to the orifices of the mouth and the anus in a ritual cycle of transformation that connected the sacred with the mundane (Klein 20–2). While it would be inappropriate to postulate a pan-indigenous framework as the context for these symbolic practices, it is important to keep in mind that the early translation and circulation of indigenous myths and oral histories by figures such as Fray

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43 The scholar of classical Latin Berthe M. Marti has discussed this confusion in illuminating detail by tracing its use in Pliny, Jerome as well as in the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae. She concludes that it is “fairly certain” that adōrāre was not etymologically related to the noun ēs and had originally nothing to do with a hand-kissing gesture (279). Marti further clarifies that ērāre “more probably belongs to the group of words meaning to pronounce words of a solemn character, like discere, fārit”; and that the prefix ad did not imply motion but was used as an intensive (280).
Ramón Pané in the Caribbean and Fray Toribio de Benaventés (also known as Motolinía) in Mexico may have impacted how these tropes converged with the European discourse of colonial gold, particularly as it related to critiques of avarice and consumption.

A few years after the publication of Eden’s *Decades*, Hernán Cortés arrived to the coast of Mexico. In the “Primera carta de relación” (July 10, 1519), to justify his decision to flee to Yucatán from his post in the Antilles, Cortés opposes the methods of conquest employed by Diego Velázquez. Velázquez’s “hunger” for gold led him, according to Cortés, to focus solely on the exchange of *rescatés* or bartered objects without leading comparable efforts to properly conquer the lands: “Pues como llegase a la dicha tierra llamada Yucatán, habiendo conocimiento de la riqueza y grandeza de ella, *determinó de hacer, no lo que Diego Velázquez quería, que era rescatar oro, sino conquistar la tierra y ganarla y sujetarla a la corona Real de Vuestra Alteza*” (19, my emphasis). While the assemblage of gold and land that we saw in Columbus’s first voyage seems to reappear in this passage, the terms of association have taken a surprising turn. In Cortés the conditions of possibility and ownership associated to land as a signifier rest on the temporary rejection or disavowal of gold as a legitimate motive for Velázquez’s expedition. I say temporary because by the end of the “Primera carta,” however, the allure of the artisanal object made with colonial gold is much cause for emotional investments such as curiosity, fear, and rapture, as we will come to appreciate below.
MONSTROUS TRIBUTE

In Cortés’s letter, the natives of the newly established town of Veracruz, the Totonacs, soon become experts at interpreting not only Cortés’s desires but also his aesthetic triggers. Not unlike the native inhabitants Columbus encountered decades prior in the Antilles, they bring Cortés and his retinue a number of gold artifacts to persuade them from occupying indigenous lands:

Y a otro día siguiente, vinieron a hora de vísperas dos indios de parte de los caciques y trajeron ciertas joyas de oro muy delgadas y de poco valor, y dijeron al capitán que ellos le traían aquello por que se fuese y les dejase su tierra como antes solían estar, y que no les hiciese mal ni daño; y el dicho capitán les respondió diciendo: que a lo que pedían de no les hacer mal ni daño que él era contento, y a lo de dejarles la tierra dijo que supiesen que de allí adelante habían de tener por señores a los mayores principes del mundo, y que habían de ser sus vasallos y les habían de servir, y que haciendo esto vuestras majestades les harían muchas mercedes, y los favorecerían y ampararían y defenderían de sus enemigos. Y ellos respondieron que eran contentos de lo hacer así, pero todavía le requerían que les dejase su tierra, y así quedamos todos amigos. (30)

Following this disagreement about what constitutes a valuable object, which uses beauty to mediate between different forms of colonial violence (land expropriation, political submission, etc.), the Totonacs seemingly get better at impressing Cortés; while Cortés, in turn, begins to acquire a taste for indigenous goldwork, feather art, and other indigenous artifacts. In the inventory of July 6, 1519 that the conquistador compiled a few months after taking settlement in the central coastlands of Mexico, known as the “Memorial” (appended to the “Carta de Cabildo”), Cortés makes reference to the spectacular, marvelous, but also monstrous nature of about 180 indigenous objects to be sent to the royal family. The art historian Alessandra Russo has pointed out that the content of this shipment included a substantial quantity of gold, silver, jewels, shields, and
garments that were to be received in addition to the Royal Fifth (quinto real) that by law reserved to the Crown the corresponding percentage of all the confiscated, found, or extracted metals and commodities coming from overseas. But the object chosen to fulfill the requirement of the Royal Fifth is in itself curious. It consisted of a large gold wheel of great worth, fashioned according to indigenous custom:

Una rueda de oro grande con una figura de monstruos en medio y labrada toda de follajes, la cual pesó tres mil ochocientos pesos de oro y en esta rueda, porque era la mejor pieza que acá se ha habido y de mejor oro, se tomó el quinto para sus reales altezas que fueron dos mil castellanos que le perteneció a sus majestades de su quinto y derecho real. (Cortés, “Memorial” qtd. in Pagden 40)

Not only does the object seem to be unusual, but the fact that Cortés intended for a specific effect to be produced upon viewing it is important, for his resolution goes against at least two conventions: honoring payment of the Royal Fifth in standard metal form and, more distinctively, melting the soon-to-be-minted materials prior to sending them to the House of Trade in Seville. In Russo’s terms, “Cortés’s offerings sent from Veracruz to Queen Juana and Prince Charles demonstrate the potentialities of a new political space that is metonymically and metaphorically represented through them and their lists. These objects form part of a territory that belongs to the Crown and yet the objects exceeding the Royal Fifth are offered by Cortés to the Crown” (6), thus demonstrating proof of a new geographical distance made visible (and tangible) as fact and artifact (8). Yet the same way this artifact and other objects serve as “proof” of a distance, they yoke together seemingly incommensurable worlds. Cortés’s preservationist approach and his fixation with the singular quality of this monstrous wheel reveal its powerful status as an indigenous

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44 This tax was a special kind of tribute imposed on February 5, 1504 stipulating that one-fifth of the metals extracted or bartered had to be sent to the Spanish monarch (Russo 5).
materiality turned, quite literally, royal treasure. For Cortés, “aesthetic unity” (between
 treasure and tribute) is achieved at the level of the viewing subject, in the wheel’s capacity
to assemble disparate human elements (the Indians and the monarchs).

Gold thus represented an ambivalent materiality. The reckless pursuit of the metal
and other bartered items in the early stages of the Spanish expansionist project
threatened to destroy the seized lands, an ill effect of Velázquez’s model of conquest that,
Cortés warns, directly contradicted the Crown’s imperative of “poblar y fundar.” Then
again, in the hands of skilled indigenous craftsmen, gold could take the form of other-
worldly objects which aesthetic value seemed to rival their material one—at least to be
looked at momentarily prior to being melted or, if perceived as evil (quite often), violently
expunged. Many others survived either because they created publics that appreciated
them or gave them new uses; or simply by chance, because they remained undiscovered.

Following the trail of gilt objects left behind by some of the earliest accounts of the
Indies we begin to notice how the conquistadors’ fascination with colonial gold starts to
develop into a material language about the limits and possibilities of empire. Seemingly
less violent than the act of intake (a parody of conspicuous consumption), Cortés’s
inventory, through recourse to exoticism, appears to respect the “proper” or “original”
value of the object, while at the same time reinserting it in a new system of meaning that
thrives on the appropriation, repurposing, and subsequent institutionalization of colonial
objects to an imperial advantage.
GOLD, FETISH, DESIRE

What are the material and (if you will) nonmaterial “objects” of empire? What kinds of objects do empires produce, depend on, and desire? What kinds of objects do they abhor and attempt to destroy or neutralize? What happened to objects when they undergo a “worlding” in their circulation... and are there other forms of animism in imperial objects? What would it mean to think of empire in terms of a broad range of objects and object types?

—W.J.T. Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?

On the basis of our previous examples, it would probably not be very difficult to convince someone that colonial gold figures as a key object in the catalogue of objects early modern empires “produce, depend on, and desire” (Mitchell 146). To Mitchell’s provocative questions about the primacy of objecthood to empire, we can add a host of new ones. What forms of reflexivity do the objects of empire arouse? How may we be able to interrogate the deceptive multiplicity of imperial (and colonial) objects, for instance, if we harness gold’s reflective capacity (instead of its objective metaphoricity)? What sort of figure appears when an emergent imperial formation such as the Spanish empire in the sixteenth century catches a glimpse of itself in the mirror of the gilt object? For reasons that hopefully will become evident in the pages that follow, I believe this figure takes the form of the fetish, a heterogeneous object imbued with powerful energies that stands at the center of overlapping economic, religious, and cultural discourses. As a probable antecedent to the modern commodity fetish, both inside critics and imperial rivals invoke colonial gold in early modernity as proof, on the one hand, of Spain’s excessively desirous empire and, on the other, of its backwardness and instability.
Gestalt of an Interdisciplinary Object

At this stage it becomes necessary to situate the fetish within its appropriate disciplinary contexts. The term “fetish” finds its Latin root in *facticius*, which signifies “made by art.” It comes to us via its Portuguese etymon *feitiço*, which describes objects and actions that are deemed “artificial, or skillfully contrived” (*OED*). The dual connotations of this signifier, the material referent and process that binds matter to outcome, are also captured in the Spanish word *afeitar* (“to make up, adorn”) and in a number of plausible translations: in French, *maquiller*, and in German, *maken* or “to make,” meaning both “to make up” with facial paint or another type of corrective relation and “to disguise, mask.” Though some of these semantic clusters define the fetish effectively as manufacture, a running theme across the Romance and Germanic etymologies is the anxiety of multiplicity experienced as deception, stratagem, or artifice; of an original presence that is concealed or transformed through the occlusion of difference.

Anthropological debates on the fetish postulate its involvement in the unequal exchange that developed between Europe and its others. The fetish was the name given by the Portuguese to the “primitive” objects West Africans venerated, whereby the European subject’s ability to reject the sensuous qualities of the object along with the evils of idolatry and witchcraft (*feitiçeria*) represented a position of moral superiority. In 1757, Charles de Brosses coined the word *fétichisme* in reference to the cult of material, terrestrial bodies as opposed to the reverence that might be exhibited to an idol as a numinous.

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45 For the purposes of this study, the periodization offered in this section—from the early modern history of the term to the present-day work of Anne McClintock—will follow the synthesis outlined by Ishita Sinha Roy’s study on the fetish as a productive category for postcolonial analysis. See Roy, “Nation, Native, Narrative: The Fetish and Imagined Community in India” (7–10).

46 For this etymological history and a detailed discussion on fetishism, see the studies by Emily Apter and Charles Bemheimer.
expression of the divine (Pietz 7). Under the guise of religious piety, the clash between opposing systems of value was conceived as a natural justification for imperialism.

We owe to the theory of psychoanalysis an expanded concept of definition regarding its ties to sexuality. In 1887, the Paris psychologist Alfred Binet used the term “fetish” to refer to the “sexual adoration” of inanimate objects (qtd. in McClintock 189). Viewed as a perversion, fetishism came to signify an extreme form of obsession with objects and body parts which erotic magnetism gradually displaced or transformed their religious value. In the model proposed by Sigmund Freud, when the male child discovers the lack of the “maternal phallus,” he is overcome with fear of castration. He therefore appoints the fetish object as replacement for the missing phallus to compensate for his loss, and as a way to nullify the “trauma” of a possible emasculation.\(^\text{47}\) The fetishist’s desire to retain the maternal phallus is what leads Jacques Lacan to assert that “fetishism must be absent in women” (Lacan qtd. in McClintock 194, emphasis in the original).\(^\text{48}\)

According to Lacanian theory, the perversion of lesbianism could indeed produce female fetishism as a result of a “disappointed heterosexuality,” but only the male subject’s perversion (the fetish) can be “normal” within the drama of normative sexuality. Judith Butler, Teresa De Lauretis, and Elizabeth Grosz, among others in the fields of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies have redressed the issue of both heterosexual femininity and female homosexuality in the psychoanalytic script of female fetishism.

\(^\text{47}\) In this version of the fetish it is not so much the act of substitution of the maternal phallus but the spectacular gaze that becomes the site of identification for the fetishist. The reader may want to consult Freud's seminal essay, “Fetishism.”

The question of the sexual fetish has been as well a critical point for interventions in colonial and ethnic studies and in black critical thought after Frantz Fanon’s meditation on the dialectics of blackness. In its sharp commentary against the sexual objectification of colonial Africans and their descendants—in Fanon’s coinage, “the fact of blackness” (109)—, his theory offers a supplement to many of the issues that were focally marginal to earlier theories of the fetish. As we have seen, the European school of thought that Fanon in part interrogates sustained that a person’s behavior was shaped by individual and relational erotic pressures, and that schematized archetypically these could be used to define the contours of the (Western) human psyche. However multi-layered, the psychoanalytic and anthropological concepts of the fetish (mainly of French origin) never intended to be descriptive of the problems that arose when the seduction of the mass-made object threatened to cast its magic on the citizens of the modern world. Partly in response to this challenge, we find in the German intellectual tradition a distinctive macro-historical form of analysis grounded in the fields of sociology and political economy, disciplines that later formed the basis of what is known today as Marxist theory.

In the nineteenth century, Europe’s accelerated process of industrialization represented a challenge for Marx, who found in the fetish a way to explain modern cultures of consumption. Within the framework of Marxism, the skewed grasp of a commodity’s actual value resulted, through an arbitrary system of exchange, in the accumulation of surplus value; that is, in the production of a commodity fetish. Because the surface of a commodity masks the labor power that produces it, the value of a commodity can only be determined through the process of exchange. In the chain of
substitutions between different notions of value, which Marx likens to the operational logic of metaphor, money emerges as the most abstract form of the commodity fetish. Money displaces the question of the commodity and its primary source of value—labor—into the realm of abstraction. As an agreement upon the value of a symbol, money becomes the central agent in the logic of commodity fetishism, which substitutes the real thing for a specter of the desire/value imprinted upon the commodity fetish.\footnote{There are quite a number of studies on Marxism and the fetish, but I will limit myself here to the ones that I have found most useful. See the analyses by Laura Mulvey, William Pietz (“Fetishism”), Thomas Keenan, Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari, and Michael Taussig.}

Postcolonial critics, remarking on the dangers of abstraction as a site where multiple discourses of exclusion intersect, have taken the analytics of the fetish as a concept that speaks less about the “Other” than about Europe and its hegemonic place in the West. The Kenyan scholar Abdul R. JanMohamed rereads the drama of fetishism as a constitutive force in the construction of alterity, what he calls the West’s “fetishization of the Other” (86). For Anne McClintock, on the other hand, the fetish as a form of disavowal of the “Self” sutures distinctions between personal and historical memory, signaling a “crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution” (184). Thinking about form on a worldly scale, Fernando Coronil argues that the idea of “the West” captures abstract “historical relations among peoples” by means of “the material, thinglike, tangible form of geographical entities” (77). In Coronil’s words, “the West is constituted as an imperial fetish, the imagined home of history’s victors, the embodiment of their power” (78). Finally, Neil Lazarus stretches Coronil’s concept of the imperial fetish to contend that Eurocentrism’s reliance on the idea of “the West” as mobilized in postcolonial theory “has no coherent or credible referent” (44). The “fetish
of ‘the West’,” writes Lazarus, “is an ideological category masquerading as a geographic one, just as—in the context of modern Orientalist discourse—‘Islam’ is an ideological category masquerading as a religious one” (44). Lazarus argues that instead of seeing Eurocentrism as the very grounds of domination for imperial and colonial power, it must be understood as a mode of representation or an ideology—albeit one with global implications reproduced by the dynamics of capital. What Lazarus and other postcolonial critics have properly understood is that no matter their specific disciplinary contexts, all theories of the fetish and fetishism index a resistance to otherness intrinsic to the process of Westernization. Already in the second half of the nineteenth century, as we have seen, Marx cautioned against this totalizing process in his systematic critiques to the social conditions imposed by world markets.

At the same time, scholars of the fetish have disputed such modern-leaning periodizations. Marxist theory, once again, has been correct to locate in Calvinist iconoclasm the direct precursor to the commodity fetish. Although this thesis has had many proponents, I reference here Ann Kibbey’s position on the “theory of the image” in the context of corporate capital with roots in medieval and early modern formations. For this critic the sacrament of transubstantiation is mapped onto the capitalist chain of production, distribution, and consumption because these operations are based on the performative logic of metonymy. Unlike metaphor, the former allows for the joining of

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50 A long intellectual tradition from Immanuel Wallerstein (The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century) to Fernand Braudel (Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800 and The Wheels of Commerce) and Jean Favier (Gold and Spices: The Rise of Commerce in the Middle Ages) has linked medieval capitalism in the West to later iterations of this economic system that developed in early modernity and continued to deepen and expand with the modern formation of nation states in the nineteenth century. See Vilches for a synthesis of these arguments, and a contextual approach that privileges the Spanish case and its colonies, especially in the introduction to her book (New World 3–4).
signs and referents, establishing an “implied interchangeability of people and objects” without recourse to displacement (14).  

While the word itself would not be coined until the second half of the eighteenth century, Peter Stallybrass has proved that Marx’s concept of fetishism was fundamentally not foreign to the early modern period. This is a point that he makes quite nicely in “Worn Worlds: Clothes and Identity on the Renaissance Stage” (1996), where he draws a distinction between the object and the commodity that illuminates the hermeneutics of the Marxist (modern) fetish:

For Marx, the triumph of the commodity betokens the death of the object. What, then, is Marx’s critique of the object within capitalism? Not that it is fetishized. On the contrary, Marx argues that it is the commodity that is fetishized. . . . Capitalism could thus be defined as the mode of production which, in fetishizing the commodity, fails to fetishize the object. (290)

In another influential article, Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones investigate the problem of the early modern fetish to argue that in Renaissance textual and visual representations the fetishized glove acts as a hypostasis of power by remitting to the figures of the sovereign and the lover, who are both guilty of receiving (or giving) immoderate adoration (118–26). The emphasis on clothing of these studies, of course, is representative of Marx’s own engagement with the struggles of nineteenth century textile industry workers, but in no way should be taken as the only examples of the fetish and the dynamics of fetishization in early modern European empires and their territories.  

31 Kibbey positions her argument against Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, Roland Barthes’s on visual reification, and Lacan’s theory of desire, which she finds both iconoclastic and a semiotic of incorporation into capitalist economy (37).
32 Although not explicitly speaking back to Marxist critique, in her study of the French Renaissance Zorach has noted that it is indeed customary for gold to be represented “as the originary idol and as the paradigmatic commodity fetish” (Blood 194). Zorach traces its antecedents to the biblical narrative of the
Moreover, on a number of these points it may be necessary to stretch Marxist theory even further beyond its usual Anglo- and Eurocentered scope to uncover, as Stallybrass acknowledges, “the true magic by which tribes other than our own inhabit and are inhabited by the objects upon which they work” (290)—by which he means not an essence but rightful fetishism, i.e., that of the object as opposed to the commodity.

Considering the fetish in a New World context, Gonzalo Lamana argues that “magical” thinking is, contrary to common belief, internal to European consciousness (87). In “What Makes a Story Amusing: Magic, Occidentalism and Overfetishization in a Colonial Setting” (2010) Lamana offers an interpretation that is appropriately more discursive than material of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s Historia general y natural de las Indias (1520–1550). His commentary on the Indians’ alleged confusion regarding the communicative function of alphabetical writing dialogues directly with Antonio Cornejo-Polar and a number of other Andeanists’ work on post-contact literacy. Lamana’s reading, in contrast, emphasizes the untranslatability of a letter or missive as an object of written correspondence. According to Fernández de Oviedo’s story, natives seemed to believe that the letter in question could reveal to its addressee, the Spanish captain Gonzalo de Badajoz, what took place in its presence. Read from the point of view of Badajoz, the story becomes an example of Spanish superiority, “and of the fetishes

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Golden Calf; but in the New World this trope finds a new articulation, exemplified by the New World myth of El Dorado and other narratives about colonial gold’s centrality to the Spanish empire and its rivals.

53 This line of criticism, famously spearheaded by Cornejo-Polar, has studied the Indian’s mis-handling of the Bible during the Spanish-Inca contact scene in Cajamarca, who treated it as talking matter rather than as God’s scripture. In chapter 4 I return to this scene in the context of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s material and discursive legitimation of his mestizo positionality vis-à-vis a Spanish and larger European audience.
[Spaniards] considered to embody this superiority” (90). But by flipping the narrative, the story reveals what Lamana understands as an act of “overfetishization”:

If fetishization characterizes the act of attributing animate power to an object (in this case to a letter and more generally to writing), overfetishization is the opposite of trying to establish the truth by lifting the veil. . . . [T]he strategy is to play along with the assignment of value to the object, in order to overcome the power relation behind it—like saying: “Ooooooh, how amazing...!,” instead of “I do not buy it”. (91)

In other words, “the cacique yields not to the Spaniards’ power, . . . but to the power that Spaniards thought that Indians thought Spaniards had” (91). As theorized, it seems that Lamana’s notion of “overfetishization” attempts to break with Martin Lienhard’s thesis of “el fetichismo de la escritura” in La voz y su huella: Escritura y conflicto étnico-social en América Latina, 1492–1988 (1990). In my view, however, Lienhard’s study is worthy of mention precisely because it illuminates how in the clash between Spanish and indigenous systems of representation, alphabetical writing acquired quasi-magical properties (45–52). Taking the fetish as our primary category of analysis, we will now move to consider the place of colonial gold in critiques of the Spanish empire. Some of the most influential critiques came, unsurprisingly, from Spanish religious officials and missionaries in the New World. As we shall see, starting in the sixteenth century their testimonies lay the groundwork for Europe’s imagination of Spain as an ambivalent internal frontier in a much larger assemblage—what, following Lazarus, we have called “the fetish of the West.”

Drowning Fetishes: Las Casas’s Brevísima relación and the Historia de las Indias

In resituating the fetish as an interdisciplinary concept within the social life of gold in early modern textual accounts, I am interested in the material conditions that prefigure the fetish of the West from a colonial perspective. A classic example of a colonial text that
furnishes the possibility of such exploration is the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* penned by Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1542 (published ten years later). While for Las Casas colonial gold (as a metonymy for wealth and riches) is not the sole culprit of the general devastation and misery that has befallen the Indies (the Spaniards are), the Dominican friar does affirm that it is the cause—the object—of colonial violence:

La causa porque han muerto y destruido tantas y tales y tan infinito número de ánimas los cristianos, ha sido solamente por tener por su fin último el oro y henchirse de riquezas en muy breves días, y subir a estados muy altos y sin proporción de sus personas, conviene a saber, por la insaciable cudicia y ambición que han tenido, que ha sido mayor que en el mundo ser pudo . . . . (78–9)

Prior to its appearance in colonial epic poetry, particularly in Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga’s *La Araucana* (1569, 1578 and 1589), the “insaciable cudicia” for the metal in the *Brevísima* advances a scathing critique of Spanish materialism. This exact phrase will be repeated at least twice more in Las Casas’s text, but its effects reverberate with each successive condemnation of the bloody massacre of the Indians, of the pillage and plunder of their territories at the hands of the conquistadors. Its use by Las Casas, of course, is a play on the trope of cannibalism that had been used since Columbus’s first voyage to identify the descendants of a supposedly fierce tribe in the Antilles, the Caribs. In Columbus’s first account of navigation through the Indies, as we noted earlier, they were the ruthless innkeepers of colonial gold; but by the sixteenth century the figure of the cannibal would take a life of its own in the historiography, letters, chronicles, written testimonies, and

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54 Drawing from both the exemplary genre and the epic, Ercilla tells the moralizing tale of the death of Pedro de Valdivia, a conquistador who died looking for a gold mine. See the opening octave in Canto III of *La Araucana*.

55 It surfaces again in reference to the kingdom of Venezuela (152) and, importantly, in the last paragraph of the full account, which closes the section on the demise of the kingdom of New Granada (176).
visual cultures of and about the New World. For Las Casas specifically, the abomination of eating human flesh, drinking blood, and sucking bones dry of which certain Indians were accused barely compared to the barbaric acts committed by the Spanish conquistadors—who were not quite like cannibals, but worse.

In 1511, Las Casas writes, the cacique Hatuey and his people arrived to the island of Cuba after fleeing the native holocaust of Hispaniola, where Velázquez had his camps. As leader of a guerrilla resistance against the Spaniards, Hatuey gathered his nobles to plot a defense tactic that would protect them, at least temporarily, from prosecution. In the dialogue that follows gold appears at the center of the natives’ preoccupations, who see it not just as the economic rationale for conquest but also as the god behind the invader’s discourse of religious conversion; a fateful deity, nonetheless, under whose aegis the conquistadors carried out all series of atrocities:

“¿Sabéis quizá por qué lo hacen?” Dijeron: “No, sino porque son de su natura crueldes y malos.” Dice él: “No lo hacen por sólo eso, sino porque tienen un dios a quien ellos adoran y quieren mucho y por habello de nosotros para lo adorar, nos trabajan de sojuzgar y nos matan.” Tenía cabe sí una cestilla llena de oro en joyas y dijo: “Ves aquí el dios de los cristianos: hagámosle si os parece areitos (que son bailes y danzas) y quizá le agradaremos y les mandará que no nos haga mal.” (91)

When dancing concludes the Indians realize that if they continue to keep the gold jewelry no amount of ceremonial reverence can save them from a death inflicted by the Spaniards. The Indians immediately decide to cast off the pieces into a nearby river, in which bed they would lay quite possibly next to deposits of the same mineral awaiting rediscovery. The text is unclear about what happens to the gold jewelry after it is

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56 It must be noted that the terms Indian and Indies refer to the Indus River in Asia. In the seventeenth century Sebastián de Covarrubias defined India as such: “Región oriental, término de la Asia, contiene casi gran tierra
thrown into the river, but Las Casas does report that Hatuey was eventually captured and burned by the Spanish invaders who wanted to discourage revolt among the natives.

As Luis Rivera Pagán has pointed out, “[t]he view that mammon was the true god of the Christian conquistadors” had been previously expressed by Fray Tomás Ortíz in the Antilles and Motolinía in Mexico (260). For Rivera Pagán “the conquest revealed gold as the true god, the idol that motivated the treatment given the inhabitants of the New World by the conquistadors” (260). While this observation is largely correct, it is important to add that in this passage Las Casas is purposeful in his avoidance of the word idolo, a term he generally reserves for objects of indigenous cult. The distinction is subtle but crucial. Isidore defines idolum (idol) as “a likeness made in the form of a human and consecrated,” and more generally as “‘replica,’ i.e. an image made in a mold” (184).

Technically speaking, however, in the context of the conquest and colonization of the New World the Spaniards could not be idolaters. As Carmen Bernard and Serge Gruziniski observe, in the sixteenth century the terms idol and idolatry applied exclusively to indigenous “religious” practices, “concebidas como el espejo deformado del catolicismo romano,” that were reflected in every aspect of their daily routines, no matter how trivial (209–10). The fact that it is like Spanish Catholic doctrine—a cultish replica, so to speak,

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57 Following the work of these scholars, in her recent dissertation Laura León Llerena argues that “la imposición del concepto de idolatría sobre la cultura indígena en términos de imitación e inversión...”
that for all intents and purposes predates and coexists with their presence in the New World—makes idolatry a phenomenon that is, for Las Casas, definitively not-Spanish.

In light of this distinction, it is pertinent to bring into relief a point of discrepancy between scholars about the boundaries that separate the fetish and the idol. As we saw, for critics such as Stallybrass and Jones the early modern fetish as a precursor to the Marxist commodity fetish could be traced back to at least the beginning of the sixteenth century—if not earlier, to the fifteenth century, with the Portuguese colonization of West Africa. These critics thus separate the diachronic practice of fetishization from its language and concept, as the latter two became operative in eighteenth century anthropological discourse. Offering a contrasting view, Bernard and Gruzinski contend that in the Spanish Americas the concept of idolatry held primacy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, leading to a wide range of resistances to acculturation or syncretism among New World inhabitants (189). According to their thesis, “la idolatría es la civilización más el diablo, o la civilización sin el verdadero Dios y con el culto diabólica, implicaba una evaluación y consecuente marginación de una estructura social profunda—la indígena—, revelando la importancia del concepto de idolatría como instrumento en el reordenamiento religioso, político y social, esferas insepáramas en el contexto colonial” (27). For more on the theological, religious, and cultural overlaps between demonology and idolatry in the New World, see Laura de Mello e Souza. On the prosecution of indigenous idolatry in general by the part of the Spaniards, see the edited volume by Gabriela Ramos and Henrique Urbano and the work of Peter Dressendorfer. The suppression and survival of indigenous ritual practices despite the Inquisition has been well documented in the study of Mexican sources. See for instance the pioneering works of Charles S. Braden and, notably, Miguel León Portilla. Enrique Florescano’s *Memoria indígena* especially focuses on the persistence of pre-Hispanic memory, particularly chapter 7. Louise Burkhart emphasizes the points of contact between the Indians and the Spanish friars and missionaries in *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. More recently, the issue of native resistance in Nahua and Zapotec texts has been taken up by David E. Tavárez. Given the historical processes that consolidated the campaign against idolaters in the viceroyalty of Peru in the seventeenth century, the scholarship on this case tends to focus on later developments than the period addressed in this chapter. For a summary and analysis of the debates see Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640–1750*, and León Llerena, especially chapters 1 and 2.

It is never explicit if such an assessment includes the practices of uprooted Africans and blacks in the colonies. However, Bernard and Gruzinski’s main contention is that the discourse of idolatry was gradually losing its hold for the Hispanic eighteenth century, a period they see as marked by the analytics of fetishism.
(desviado) de las imágenes, mientras que el fetiche debía designar lo arcaico, lo preidolátrico, las prácticas y los objetos elegidos por la imaginación errante de los salvajes al azar de los encuentros” (190). What seems most productive from this interpretation is that Bernard and Gruzinski decouple idolatry from the idol, and in doing so extend this distancing to the relationship between the idol and the object; whereas in its over-the-top materialism the fetish comes to life in the objects that forms the basis for a range of impassioned acts of religious, cultural, sexual, or economic worship.

If in the dance ritual or areyto of Las Casas’s account gold is equated with the god of the conquistadors, it is tempting to envision the Indians practicing some sort of reverse idolatry by purportedly venerating the Spaniard’s deity. If mimesis does take place, be that as it may, it is strictly contingent on the materiality of colonial gold. The material embodiment of this god, far from being the figure of Christ, was recognized to exist in the gold pieces that are eventually reabsorbed into the body of water, and more generally by the physical geography of the island. In other words, through their sacred dance, chants, and reunification of the human-made object with nature, the Indians turn the gold pieces into fetishes for the Spaniards. Such an oxymoron quickly loses its contradiction in Las Casas’s narrative. The Indians revere in them not the gold of the conquistadors but the numinous properties that linked pre-Hispanic gold with caona—gold belonging to the realm of divine graspable experience—and guanín as both esoteric and remote and the

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59 I am inclined to say that it does not, at least not in the sense understood by Homi Bhabha and Fuchs. In chapter 4, I reference Bhabha’s rerouting of mimesis through the question of ambivalence. Fuchs’s theorization stands apart from Bhabha and other theories of the concept in her understanding of mimesis as the copy that takes a life of its own: “[T]he fun-house mirror, the reflection that dazzles, the impersonator, the sneaky copy, the double agent—mimesis, that is, as a deliberate performance of sameness that necessarily threatens, or at least modifies, the original” (Mimesis 5). Different from Fuchs, my emphasis lies on the objects that facilitate subversion.
physical insignia of Hatuey (Oliver, “Gold Symbolism” 198–205)—who in this episode stands for the figure of the cacique in general (more on this later). Therefore, the rhetorical splitting that takes place in the story turns the tables against the Spaniards, who are indirectly portrayed not just as bad Christians but scandalously as fetishists. As a materiality shaped by both epistemological and physical violence, colonial gold’s meaning, however, remains consistent from the mediated perspective of the Indians; it is always a catastrophic disruption, an obliterating materiality, a famished and thirsty “god” that is never quite satisfied.

It is interesting to point out that the version of this story that appears in Las Casas’s Historia de las Indias (composed between 1523 and 1561, but first published in 1875) includes several key variations. Notably, in the later text the gold in the basket does not appear as “oro en joyas” or gold jewelry but simply as gold. The loss of specificity in the generally more detailed Historia is relevant to the extent that there are, for Indians in the Antilles and to some degree for Spaniards, different properties and scales of value associated with indigenous goldwork (possibly in alloy form) versus the naturally occurring form of gold (caona). The second version of Hatuey’s monologue is also more visceral—in a quite literal sense—and provides details about specific strategies the Indians used to hide their gold from the Spaniards. These ranged from ingesting the metal to “drowning” it under water: “Mirad, con todo esto que he dicho, no guardemos a este señor de los cristianos en ninguna parte porque, aunque lo tengamos en las tripas, nos lo han de sacar; por eso, echémoslo en este río, debajo del agua, y no sabrán dónde está.’ Y
así lo hicieron, que allí lo ahogaron o echaron. Esto fue por los indios dicho, y entre nosotros publicado” (Volume II, Book III, Chapter XXI, 202).

Evidently, Las Casas’s final remarks are meant to recall in his audience the events leading to the Taíno Rebellion of 1511 that occurred in the neighboring Spanish enclave. According to the oral history reports that later served as the basis for popular legend, the Spanish soldier Diego Salcedo suffered the unfortunate fate of being drowned in the Guaorabo River, in the eastern part of the island of San Juan (today Puerto Rico), by the cacique Urayoán. In this same island the cacique Agüeybana II executed a simultaneous attack against Cristóbal de Sotomayor and his men. In the traditional version of this episode of native resistance the Indians are ostensibly carrying out a test of mortality, and after witnessing the decomposition of the conquistador’s body learn that the Spaniards are not gods, but in fact mere mortals (Oliver, Caciques 208). While these examples seem to be unmotivated by colonial gold specifically, they highlight the Spanish body as a site of indigenous agency. It is thus unsurprising that in this episode Las Casas circumvents details of these indigenous “experiments” to determine the humanity of the Spaniards, for in Hatuey’s narrative the gold jewels are meant to represent something beyond the Spaniards’ god. In Las Casas’s vindication of indigenous insurrection they become a cipher of the Spaniard’s body.

Furthermore, water lends a connective arc to these narratives. Both the rivers and the surface topography of water draw attention to the concept of liquidation understood in its Latin sense, from the verbs liquefacere and liquidare—as physical transformation from solid to liquid (“to liquefy, melt”), on the one hand, and as irrevocable dissolution,
meaning “to destroy,” “to put an end to, kill,” on the other (OED). Metaphorical liquidation, as in drowning, and actual liquidation as a result of armed conquest link Las Casas’s accounts with the legends that circulated in popular form. The trope of liquidation and its related semantic clusters (liquidity, (over)flow, to melt, to drink, to choke or drown, to fill up or swell, etc.) may be further connected to indigenous and non-indigenous critiques of Spanish conspicuous consumption, represented as thirst (or hunger), and to an early modern visual repertoire in which gold is commonly portrayed in liquid form. In the next section we turn to the anti-Spanish visual propaganda created by De Bry to further anchor some of these considerations.

**DE BRY’S LIQUID VISIONS**

Born in 1528 in Liège, Belgium, Theodor De Bry is best known for his visual depictions of the New World, engraved images which appear in six out of the thirteen volumes of the work better known as *America* (1590–1634). Few others have enjoyed the fame and

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60 I will take up this point later in my analysis of De Bry’s engravings—many of which, among other sources, borrow from episodes of the *Brevísima*. The main exception to this iconographic trope appears in the work of Guaman Poma, which we will see in the fourth chapter of this study.

61 In our limited understanding of De Bry’s life history, one aspect seems to be routinely taken for granted; that is, the artist’s “natural” progression from goldsmith to engraver. De Bry apparently transitioned into his final career around 1584, toward the end of his stay in Antwerp, when Spanish troops were about to recapture the city from Protestant occupation. Until then he had been working for the goldsmith Hans van Balen, and had trained his son Johan Theodor, who was sure to follow his father’s footsteps in the skilled manipulation of precious metals. If, as various accounts seem to indicate, De Bry was enjoying what could be deemed as a relatively successful career as a goldsmith, why would he abandon the trade upon arriving to London and, eventually, to the Imperial Free City of Frankfurt? How did local conditions and, to an extent, the situation of goldsmiths in sixteenth-century Europe contribute to De Bry’s subsequent development as an engraver? Whereas Antwerp occupied a privileged position in the craft and trade of metals, hosting over one hundred skilled gold- and silversmiths in 1566, some ten or fifteen years later the story had changed. According to Michiel van Groesen, “[t]he Spanish Fury of 1576, when royal soldiers sacked the town, severely damaged the guild’s prosperity, and by 1580 its members were competing for an ever smaller number of assignments. The fact that no new apprentices registered in De Bry’s workshop after 1582, while De Bry himself was employed by another goldsmith in and before 1584 indicates that he may have been among the artisans to suffer from the economic decline” (59). It is partially in response to these
recognition that this sixteenth-century Protestant artist and goldsmith achieved (both in life and posthumously) with his copperplate engravings of the New World. This type of inscription on a copper matrix yielded highly defined and precise visual narratives. It gradually became a definitive departure from other visual forms in the late fifteenth century, in particular the popular woodcuts used to illustrate the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493), or the already classical work of medieval cartography that had become Ptolemy’s Geographia. De Bry’s America is a complex interface of written and visual texts—many in adaptation—characterized by transnational production and reception. Part I’s simultaneous publication in Latin, German, English, and French in 1590 is evidence of the global ambitions and projected reach of De Bry’s collection; subsequent volumes were published only in German and in Latin, although borrowing from a variety of sources from all of the aforementioned linguistic traditions. As an influential ideologue of the Reformation, De Bry’s artistic interventions thus seem to play a definitive role—whether intentionally or not—in the visual imagery of not one, but several European empires.

In plate XXI of Part IV of America we gaze upon three iconic moments in the aggravating circumstances that De Bry must have started to make figurative prints his primary source of income. His distinctive style, inspired by the Netherlandish tradition, paid attention not only to the main scene either in the center or in the corners of the image, but rendered with exquisite detail progressive depictions of supplemental narratives, thus increasing considerably the visual interest of his works.

The most recent and most complete source in English on the publication history of America (also known as India Occidentalis and the Great Voyages) and on De Bry’s life is that of van Groesen, The Representation of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages (1590–1634) (2008). Over the course of several chapters (51–103), the critic provides a biographical sketch that has been useful for my own reconstruction of the life and historical context of the artist.

In fact, editions of America were subjected to relatively minimal censorship from the Index Librorum Expurgatorum during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Van Groesen shows how this is due to De Bry’s editorial and publication strategy, which conceived different forms of the books for different readerships; see introduction and chapters 6 and 9. See also Chester M. Cate.

I am making reference to the relationship between the printed image and the book. For a detailed analysis of the history of print, see the already canonical two-volume work by Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe.
history of the encounter: on the upper left corner the cacique Panquiaco and Vasco Núñez de Balboa sight the South Sea from a promontory (Fig. 2.1). On the right, a priest carries out the chieftain’s baptism. Foregrounding the image is a scene of the spoils seemingly acquired through peaceful means. The small pile of gold objects, which occupies the central and most prominent position, and the diminutive stature of the

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65 The full text of America can be consulted through several electronic databases, including: <http://international.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbdk/d031/inanalytics_americ.html>.
Indian make the conqueror’s greed an important theme in the visual narrative. In all four of the plates addressing this issue that are found in De Bry’s adaptation of Girolamo Benzoni’s *La Historia del Mondo Nuovo*—published as Parts IV–VI of *America* about thirty years later, between 1594 and 1596—gold appears at the forefront of the image, as if to suggest that the Spaniard’s primary set of concerns in the New World revolved around the location, extraction, and accumulation of this precious metal, both for the private enjoyment of the conquistadors and for the economic benefit of the Crown.
In another instance of Spanish greed, vessels, statues, and chests made of gold and its kin metal, silver, accumulate at the walls of the Peruvian city of Cajamarca as Indians offer these artifacts to pay for Atahualpa’s ransom (Fig. 2.2). Not only is the treasure more copious this time around, but also the objects appear massive in relation to the natives.\textsuperscript{66} In spite of their magnificence and beauty, the more pieces the Indians delivered, we are told, the more the Spanish melted down. This was indeed a common practice in the process of converting metals into currency, but the demand for gold in all of its forms attained new heights during the imperial contest of the sixteenth century.

During the second half of the century the demand for gold reached monumental proportions, resulting in the melting and repurposing of a great variety of European objects to produce domestic currency (Zorach, Blood 190). In other cases, the process of melting gold and silver started in the Indies; the bullion then traveled to the mainland, where it acquired the currency status that attempted to fix its value on both a domestic and an international level (Vilches, New World 29).\textsuperscript{67} Authors such as the English poet Edmund Spenser parodied the fast and urgent method Spain used to obtain wealth in the New World. During the episode of the Cave of Mammon in The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596), Spenser, a contemporary of De Bry whose work also had a huge impact on

\textsuperscript{66} The similarity between these two images (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2) and others appearing in De Bry’s 1598 edition of Las Casas’s Brevisima is evident, particularly in the depiction of Indians offering precious objects to satisfy the greed of the Spaniards. See for instance the frontispiece and plates VII and XIV of De Bry’s Las Casas. References to cannibalism in the visual narratives produced by De Bry for both Benzoni’s and Las Casas’s accounts share certain correspondences as well.

\textsuperscript{67} Vilches demonstrates how achieving economic stability by regulating the value of New World metals was of course both a complex process and a great challenge for Spain. She summarizes the conceptual tensions arising from the need to fix the value of gold in the following terms: “As Marx puts it, gold is exchange-value itself. If, as Foucault explains, gold was chosen as a standard, used as a means of exchange, and had the highest price, that was because it had an absolute price higher than that of any other object” (New World 33). For greater historical insight into the role of gold in the different world economic systems, see Pierre Vilar. Concerning the practices of the House of Trade (Casa de Contratación), see Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada.
European audiences, expresses criticism at Spain’s alleged lust for worldly wealth. Mammon’s reference to an “ample flood” of wealth is anything but a gratuitous metaphor, for the riches in fact flowed from the New World as the Spanish melted or rather “liquidated” all the gold they could find.

Spenser’s poetic account—which is reminiscent of Bernardo de Balbuena’s description of the trades or oficios practiced in early seventeenth century Mexico City (see chapter 4 herein)—leads us to the artisanal practices of early modern metal craftsmen in Europe. In particular the goldsmith’s profession, while generally lucrative, came to be viewed with suspicion by theologians, social reformers, and courtiers alike. Goldsmiths in London, France, and Germany, for instance, were accused of inflating the cost of labor, and thus of charging too much for the making of objects (Zorach, “Everything” 131).

According to Zorach, “[t]he surplus value, or waste, that workmanship might introduce became, in the later part of the sixteenth century, cause for alarm” (Blood 204). Thus, one common objection to the practices of goldsmiths sustained that the separation of the cost of the skilled laborer’s work from that of the actual materials resulted in the distortion of the value produced by the design and form of the finished artifact. In addition, it was not uncommon for goldsmiths to alter the purity of metals such as gold, and sell pieces below

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68 See Canto VII, Book Two of the text. Read reminds us that when Spenser wrote his famed epic poem the House of Trade in Seville was the main European institution responsible for handling massive amounts of wealth and converting gold into money: “Gold from Peru and silver from Bolivia (from the great mine at Potosí, discovered in 1545), entering new markets in—to borrow Mammon’s expression—an ‘ample flood’ of Spanish currency, had begun to alter irrevocably the economies of the Old World” (66).

69 As we saw with Cortés’s inventory, not all objects suffered this fate. Thomas Cummins further underscores the links between this process, which even early on was cast in terms of idolatry, and the Spanish involvement in military contests back in the old continent: “Some [idols] were sent back to Spain as proof of idolatry: although a few were admired by some such as Dürer, they were almost immediately melted down for bullion to finance other religious wars, such as Charles V’s campaign against Barbarossa and the sack of Tunis, which was paid for by the fabulous ransom of Atahualpa at Cajamarca” (“The Golden Calf” 89). In many cases, Cummins continues, this same gold coming from the New World was turned into Christian images, many of which were made by the Indians themselves (“The Golden Calf” 90).
the carat-mark disposed by law, a practice that drew criticism from all sectors of society (Zorach, “Everything” 131). France, for instance, passed an ordinance in March 1554 against the “abuse” by goldsmiths, who were believed to steal value and raw materials from currency, manipulate metallic alloys to produce lower-quality mixtures, and pay a higher price for metals than was allowed by the Crown.

During the age of overseas expansion to the Indies, however, melting became a molecular process with much greater implications for the social and cultural life of objects. Melting, or the transition from a rigid to a less-ordered state of a substance, is also a process that sequesters form from matter, and the latter from its original context and meaning. Objects that melt change shape and thus become new and different objects. As a former goldsmith, De Bry had practical knowledge of gold’s “affordances,” that is, the actual and perceived possibilities for action embedded in the material. First-hand experience of such possibilities made De Bry keenly aware of the plasticity of gold as both aesthetic and ideological agent. Through the evacuation of form, melted gold is infused with a certain element of what Friedrich Nietzsche described as creative forgetting (120); by changing shape its materiality is liberated from the past. Which is to say that it is willfully destructured into a (temporary) state of lesser organization, and thus forever disembedded from the old object’s immediate conditions of production, display, and use. This Dionysian process of invention may very well be applicable to the history of all

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70 I draw the term “affordances” from James J. Gibson’s The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception. See especially the eight chapter, “The Theory of Affordance” (127–46). I thank Marina Bilbija for bringing this concept to my attention.

71 Appadurai suggests that these distinctions are part of the life of a thing (of which the commodity stage is one in many possible social stages) and that things, regardless of their actual function at any given time, carry with them the properties associated with many social potentials, as established by their “total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption” (13, emphasis in the original).
art, but all art in the West is also the signature of empire (Mitchell 145). Such is the case with the objects that in De Bry’s engraving seem to overflow the New World landscape. Throughout America, the “liquidation” of colonial gold reveals something beyond the capacity of empire to reproduce aesthetic visions of its power and wealth. In this imperial version of the transubstantiation of matter (a topic of much controversy among Protestants such as De Bry), the old conquistador’s motto “Gold, Glory, and God” fails to conceal the ugly underbelly of the Spanish religious and economic project in the New World. If anything, it is an unholy reminder of the countless Indians who were “baptized by blood” at the hands of the invaders.

Across his three-volume interpretation of Benzoni’s account, De Bry renders different stages of the colonial life of gold: from ornamental pieces virtually indistinguishable from those fashioned by goldsmiths back in Europe, to the raw material as extracted from mines, to its liquid, adaptable form. The polymorphous materiality of gold in America is perhaps best captured in what is also one of the earliest depictions of the enslavement of Africans in the New World, a representation of black slaves that were introduced to Hispaniola by Nicolás de Ovando in the early 1500s (Fig. 2.3). Against the backdrop of African slaves working in the mines of the Caribbean island, the spectator gazes upon a group of Spaniards absorbed by the masses of ore that are literally being poured at their feet. With the exception of the clearly demarcated lines that give shape to the Spanish dwelling to the left, the spatial order that rules through the rest of the engraving (cave, treetops, irregular land, etc.) is dramatically rendered in the

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72 Popular knowledge tells us that in colonial Brazil and in the Caribbean, and at least until the nineteenth-century, references to African slaves as “black gold” were not uncommon.
ornamental appearance of the amorphous piles of ore laying on a platform close to the ground. These repeated formations descend not just toward the bottom of the engraving—as if they were melting—but also down the scale of value afforded to gold in its present state. The slaves’ hair, the only human element bearing this visual effect, makes clear the connection between the “rude mass” of gold ore—if we recall d’Anghiera’s reference to the smelted metal—and the black slaves holding the baskets. In considering this image in the context of a transnational notion of imperium—or competing

Figure 2.3. Theodor De Bry, plate I of Part V of America, 1595, ink on paper, 15.9 x 19.5 cm. Kraus Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
projects of global empire, as theorized by Barbara Fuchs—one gets the sense, however, that the real focus of the engraving is neither the object nor the subject (both delimited by strict parameters of perception and intelligibility), but the very materials that empire conspicuously depends upon and proliferates. That is, the libidinal economy that disassembles specific categories of persons and things into raw matter, as Mitchell’s theory of the objects of empire suggests. In De Bry’s images the Spanish body conceived of as a mechanized assemblage becomes a multiplicity fueled by colonial desire, which takes the form of a social product that redraws the geospatial boundaries between the imperial West and the New World (Young 159–60). Its function or meaning no longer depends on an interior truth or identity, such as the boundaries demarcating “Spanish” from “African,” but on the non-linear associations it forms with other bodies and things. Put differently, I suggest that the fabric of imperium is continually disrupted by the very raw materials it consumes; that is, by the objects that threaten to take the place of the Spanish subject.

The contiguity of black bodies and gold ore further underscores the denigration of the Spanish conquistadors (and thus of Spain), a topic also illustrated in the

Figure 2.4. Theodor De Bry, frontispiece to Part V of America, 1595, ink on paper, 21.3 x 30.2 cm. Kraus Collection, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
frontispiece of Part V of *America* (Fig. 2.4). As Margaret Greer, Walter Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan write, in this engraving the Spaniards are seen to become indistinguishable from their Negro slaves as they all toil, with bulging buttocks, up the left side of the engraving. Perhaps even more pertinently than the shared toil, the Africanized features, including the flattened nose of one of the Spanish conquistadors scrambling down the right side of the mountain, differs markedly from the Spanish noblemen at the base of the engraving, where the pope divides up the New World between Portugal and Spain. So too, the cross being planted on top of the mountain, seen slanted backward as if in perspective, radically distorts the Christian symbolism of the Catholic civilizing process as seen by the hostile Protestant eye. (9)

For these scholars the idea of backwardness at the core of the anti-Spanish discourse of the Black Legend is marked by the recurrent topoi of excessive greed and human brutality, as well as by long-held debates that in the minds of Europeans further equated Spaniards with the atrocities of the Atlantic slave trade—and, consequently, with blackness. On the basis of this ideology and using gold as symbolic currency, De Bry’s viewers were encouraged to visualize potential alternatives to the old story of Spanish supremacy in the New World.

Well beyond De Bry’s influence, the grounds of this supremacy were repeatedly challenged by Spain’s own political and economic practices. As we have seen, a troubled history of genocide and mass-scale human violations coupled with the shakiness of its economic system positioned Spain as both a “Self” and an “Other” of early modern Eurocentrism. Of this fact seventeenth century Spanish intellectuals were painfully aware. This lead to the development of a whole bureaucratic and economic field based on the School of Salamanca whose members, invested in preventing imperial decline, were called *arbirstistas* or reformers, and to a literary aesthetics that also reflected upon the
growing economic crisis. The idea that Spain was being economically drained by its imperial rivals and that European foreigners in the Peninsula were becoming rich during the Spanish inflation by divesting resources to their respective countries of origin was echoed by many writers, including Francisco de Quevedo in *La hora de todos y la Fortuna con seso* (1645) and Baltasar Gracián in *El Criticón* (1651–1657). Beyond the widely influential realm of imaginative discourse, both Protestant and Catholic concerns over the manufacture of luxury objects were tied to the general climate of economic instability following the European inflation. Jean Bodin, in France, and Tomás de Mercado, in Spain, are among the numerous critics of the Atlantic trade who believed that the excessive flow of precious metals from the New World was the primary cause of the economic chaos facing the old continent. In the case of colonial gold’s transformation into bullion and coins, its voyage across the Atlantic—in addition to mirroring the transatlantic route of the slave trade—seemingly empties out its previous meanings plus

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73 See “Los tres franceses y el español,” chapter XXXI of Quevedo’s treatise. Similarly, in the episode titled “La Carecel de oro, y Calabozos de plata” of Gracián’s text, Fortune instructs a Frenchman on the trajectory of Spanish riches: “¿Qué Indias para Francia como la misma España? Venid acá: lo que los españoles ejecutan con los indios, ¿no lo desquitáis vosotros con los españoles? Si ellos los engañan con espejillos, cascabeles y alfileres, sacándoles con cuentas los tesoros sin cuenta, vosotros con lo mismo, con peines, con estuchitos y con trompas de París, ¿no les volvéis a chupar a los españoles toda la plata y todo el oro? Y esto sin gastos de flotas, sin disparar una bala, sin derramar una gota de sangre, sin labrar minas, sin penetrar abismos, sin despoblar vuestros reinos, sin atravesar mares. . . . Creedme que los españoles son vuestros indios, y aún más desatentos . . . .” (Part II, Crisi III, 87, my emphasis). In Fortune’s retort, Spain’s marginal position within early modern Europe lowers the colonizers to the category of Indians. The trinkets exchanged by all parties in this episode, by virtue of the objects themselves (“espejillos, cascabeles y alfileres”; “peines, . . . estuchitos y . . . trompas de París”), very much read like discursive riffs and mirror-like images of Columbus’s bartering system (as we saw in chapter 1). The debt of Gracián to other colonial texts, particularly *Grandeza mexicana* (1604), is blatantly obvious. In chapter 4 I will study Bernardo de Balbuena’s earlier theory of mercantile capitalism, where the author proposes a network of exchange that decenters the flow of colonial and oriental riches to Spain, and redirects them instead to Mexico City.

74 Consult the erudite account by Vilches and also Rebecca Zorach in *Blood, Ink, Milk, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (2005). I have found that these texts address from complimentary perspectives (cultural studies and art history, respectively) some of the issues summarized above.
the Indian and African labor accumulated through the process of extraction in order to render it properly “Spanish.”

Consider now plate XX of Part IV of *America*, the popular image described in the introductory section of this chapter (Fig. 2.5). Along the coast of Darien in present-day Panama, three Indian men hold hostage a Spanish conquistador who, tied up from his arms and legs, lies passively on the ground. One of them pours molten gold down the European’s throat. Unlike in Las Casas’s account, where the *cacique* Hatuey and his
nobles “liquidate” colonial gold by casting it in a river, conquistador and gold are manifestly conjoined in De Bry’s vision. The conquistador’s body foregrounds the visual narrative and occupies the space where gold used to be in the previously discussed engravings. Two additional figures seemingly engaged in speech with the other three flank the Indian in charge of punishing the conquistador. Suggesting a leap forward in time, a second scene to the right depicts Indians dismembering the captive. His semi-naked body could easily be confused with the Indians’ if it were not for the abundant head of hair and beard that distinguish his facial features. While one of them excises the right arm with a flint knife (designed, notwithstanding, to look as any other old knife coming from Europe), another measures where to cut the left leg.\textsuperscript{75} The limbs are subsequently roasted and devoured by cannibals dancing round the fire. Thomas Cummins relates the opposition between Catholics and Protestants in this image with the trope of cannibalism. For the latter, Catholic communion was similar to the native’s “idolatry” (“The Golden Calf” 89). Yet as Bucher points out, these and other acts of violence against Spaniards taking place in De Bry’s images do not necessarily imply cruelty in the natives’ behavior; nor are they examples, I add, of colonial gold as fetish. “[I]f they pour melted gold down the throat of a conquistador, it is, as the legend explains, to punish him for ‘avarice,’ and . . . to satisfy his thirst for gold” (Bucher 68–9).

In reading De Bry’s engravings I would like to extend the figuration of liquidity/liquidation that we began to see in Las Casas’s representation of the Indians

\textsuperscript{75} The presence of the weapon becomes particularly curious in light of Thomas Harriot’s statement in his 1590 Virginia report, which De Bry adapts in Part I of America, attesting to the supposed absence of metallic tools in many native societies: “[H]auing no edge tooles or weapons of yron or steele to offend vs withall, neither know they how to make any” (Harriot 24). For a discussion of the meaning of weapons from the point of view of the Indians, see my commentary on Inca Garcilaso de la Vega in chapter 4 herein.
“drowning” (solid) colonial gold. Within this network of textual references, liquidity, or more specifically the formlessness of liquid matter, acts as a form of nostalgia for a grade-zero state in which objects and spaces await organization by a new, successive system of empire. As we have seen, for Fuchs the dynamics of imperium are coeval to the development of multiple imperial projects within early modern Europe (“Imperium” 73). Specifically adapting her argument to De Bry’s images, however, one could argue that the affordances of gold point to a teleological narrative of progression from seemingly retrograde imperial practices to a more effective management of colonial resources and people. Precisely, liquid gold’s double status as shapeless mass and über-commodity (not to mention its ability to form money) makes it both a site of Spanish loss and of imperium potentiality for another, Protestant empire.

Lía Schwartz Lerner identifies a possible antecedent to this scene in the work of French Renaissance scholar Jean Tixier de Ravisi (Ravisius Texor, in Latin). In his 1503 Officina vel naturae historia per locos, Tixier reproduces a classical anecdote in which the Parthians, the inhabitants of present-day Iran, punish the general Marcus Licinius Crassus for his cupiditous inclinations—the penance requires, of course, that he swallows liquid gold (59). Another association, this time of biblical origin, links this image’s liquid aspect to fetishism. As Mitchell points out, “[t]he biblical reference to the golden calf as a ‘molten calf’” underscores the materiality of the fetish as a “molten conglomerate,” a

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76 In addition to the image, Schwartz Lerner sees a correspondence in De Bry’s caption (“Indi Hispanis aurum sitientibus, aurum liquefactum infundunt”) with another of Tixier’s statements: “Non satis fuerunt Crasso numerosae illae divitiae, nisi et aurum Parthorum esuriert.” She notes that this motif appears as well in Fray Luis de León’s poetry: “Paradójicamente, pues, este motivo con el que se castigará satíricamente desde España a los codiciosos, y por antonomasia, a quienes cayeron bajo el influjo nefasto del oro de las Indias, funcionó, fuera de España, como arma de propaganda religiosa y política” (60).
“fluid, multistable image” (189, emphasis in original). This engraving is rich, however, in symbolic and cultural allusions beyond gold’s presence in classical antiquity and religious doctrine. The curious punishment of the Spaniard’s greed by forcing the conquistador to drink (colonial) liquid gold is passed off as historical fact in Benzoni’s Historia: “Because of [their] unlimited cruelty and tyranny, as well as the greed of these men, they [the Indians] poured molten gold into the mouths of however many they could trap, but above all into [the mouths of] the captains . . . pronouncing these words: Eat gold, eat gold, insatiable Christian” (177, qtd. in Jáuregui, The Conquest 41–2).

The scene could be further read, to use Lamana’s term, as an example of “overfetishization,” not of the power of liquid gold as a material object, nor of the physical body of the conquistador (so much as it may seem), but of the vulnerability that Europeans like De Bry thought that Indians thought Spaniards had. Similarly to Peter Martyr’s fascination in the face of cannibals, De Bry’s engraving “established flesh as a symbolic representation of gold” (Vilches, New World 85). In De Bry’s visual narrative it is very difficult to tease out where the Spanish body as material signifier and emblem begins and where it ends as we trace the contours of its desubjectification in moving from reification (as it becomes amalgamated with gold) to simultaneous animalization and “thingification” (of body parts and leftover bones after it is butchered and eaten), to nourishment for the cannibals, and finally to its ultimate dematerialization into mere exhaust and particulate matter. In De Bry, liquid gold thus becomes a simulacrum of an

77 This depiction of idolatry appears for the first time in Exodus 32:4 of the Jewish canon.
imperial power that expresses itself erratically in the pursuit of excessive wealth.\textsuperscript{28} Marx may have said it better in his critique of capital with the oft-quoted aphorism “All that is solid melts into air” (10), but De Bry created the striking image that served as its early modern antecedent, and with it one of the most powerful visual currencies that helped congeal crisscrossing projects of global empire in the Americas and elsewhere.

Two additional aspects—fluidity and bodily nakedness—are central to this image’s economy of meaning, productively illuminating the way in which De Bry’s aesthetic choices reproduced Protestant critiques against the Spanish empire. Art historian Rebecca Zorach argues that liquid imagery in Renaissance art expresses period anxieties over economic inflation, excess, desire, value, and religious authority—this final concern evident in “Erasmus’s golden river, or Jean Calvin’s notion of swimming excess” (Blood 18). In Protestant doctrine, formlessness was viewed with suspicion. For instance, the old Calvinist dictum stating that infinity cannot be restrained by the finite suggests a pleasure of the bounded or the self-contained; in this view, \textit{form} becomes essentially a respite from the perpetual effluence of chaos. As it is well known, the division between matter and spirit—the quintessential boundary of the self in the Renaissance—was a topic that stirred many debates in Protestant circles. In order to protect this boundary the Reformation launched severe attacks against conspicuous consumption, a quality often

\textsuperscript{28} As already noted, this is at stake in another pictorial variation of the theme of the conquistador’s greed, in this case in an image by Guaman Poma where Spaniards are asked if they eat gold nuggets. The link between De Bry and Guaman Poma has been explored by several authors, including Cummins (“The Golden Cal” 100), although not necessarily from an indigenous perspective. In chapter 4 of this dissertation I return to these associations to examine the Andean author’s seemingly more “solid”—if a bit less hardcore—portrayal of Spanish imperial greed.
attributed to Catholic “ethics.” To add to Zorach’s chain of associations between liquid imagery and the desires it codes (Blood 18–20), we must remark on potentiality as an act of becoming not what the thing properly is, but what it could be. Gold in its liquid state throughout America—not entirely unlike the “gold islands” as malleable wax that we saw in Columbus’s Diario del primer viaje—underscores the very indeterminacy of the New World, and its ability of being “stampt” (to use Spenser’s term) or marked as property of Spain’s rivals.

LISTENING FOR “ABSENCE”

The discourse of colonial gold seems inexhaustible, but the reserves of the metal in the New World were not. This fact of colonialism—to adapt Fanon’s notion of factual blackness—was nowhere more evident than in the islands of the Greater Antilles (present-day Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hispaniola). In these colonial settlements the horrors of war, famine, environmental devastation, and illness resulted in the exhaustion of gold reserves, and, more critically, in the large-scale decimation of the region’s indigenous populations (denominated as Arawaks, Taínos, and Caribs, among others). During the sixteenth

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79 As many others before her, Zorach stresses the links between Protestantism and capitalism, and the former’s critical stance against excessive materialism: “this issue may be stated in terms of capital: surplus production should be converted into capital, kept working, in motion (liquid), rather than fixed, displayed, wasted as luxury (as in the luxury of courts or of Catholic churches)” (15). Preventing, however, hasty conclusions about the exceptionality of capital, she adds: “This suggests that the ‘commodity fetish’ is a version of something more general—what we might call material desires. Thus, the tension between persons and things is not simply the invention of capitalism. In the sixteenth century, in a moment of social and economic friction, worries abounded of people becoming thing-like and things becoming person-like, of art transforming into nature and nature into art. And when the idol or fashion elicits excessive desire or investment, its madness is part of what causes alarm. Another part is desire, and its ‘dis-formulating effects’—the fact that it causes proper boundaries to fail” (24–5).

80 Shona N. Jackson and more recently Melanie J. Newton independently argue against the myth of total extermination of indigeneity in the region. The socio-historical circumstances that led to the survival of the region’s native populations in the Hispanic Caribbean, particularly for the case of Puerto Rico, have been studied by Gabriel Haslip-Viera, Arlene Dávila, Jorge Duany, and others. See their essays in the edited
century, the mining and searching for gold in the Antilles was sustained by Arawak and Taíno Indian slave labor. By the seventeenth century, however, this disposable workforce was significantly reduced to catastrophic levels—a problem with far wider repercussions that solidified the carnage of the systems of indigenous tribute such as the encomienda and the “saltwater slavery” of black Africans via the transatlantic human trade.81

Thus, I argue, it is almost impossible to separate the extractivist economy of gold—from its already modest natural supplies in the Hispanic Caribbean—and its terminal depletion several decades after the conquest from the myth of indigenous “absence” that has since marked the history and culture of the region. Readers of colonial texts will be quick to notice that such nostalgia for a primordial ethno-racial origin is in many senses foregrounded by Columbus’s quest for (absent) colonial gold in the Caribbean. In this way, another layer is added to the “materialization” (a portmanteau of *metonymy* and *materialization*) of island–colonial gold that we began to see in chapter 1, and that throughout the present analysis has moved beyond the territorial frontiers of the Indies to the fetish of gold across the national and imperial fields of representation delimited by *imperium*. The full-scale ideological impact of such gestures will be felt in the ethno-racial imaginaries of continental creoles in the New World, who turned to distant objects and archaeological remains to posit unmediated access to the physical conditions

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81 The phrase is borrowed from the title of historian Stephanie Smallwood’s book, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. Within the framework of the racial hierarchy of the sociedad de castas, in chapter 5 I explore recent debates on the epistemological connection between racialization and material culture, citing examples from historians and archaeologists of colonial Latin America of ways we can extend this critical orientation beyond indigenous, black, and mixed embodiments.
of possibility granted by material and territorial indigeneity (but not necessarily genealogy) as the ground-zero for the articulation of a whitewashed creole sovereignty.

Simply put, the discourse of “absent” gold is, in principle, identical to that of an “absent” origin. In the case of the Hispanic Caribbean, that substratum may be indigenous in nature, but in texts such as Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios* (1542) the trope of going native (now rooted in the Anglo-American southwest) finds a particular gathering of Spain as a geo-political form and a bodily performance of global empire that trades failure as the specter of colonial gold for yet a new fetish, the fetish of indigeneity. In the texts, images, aesthetic artifacts, and curatorial practices examined above the discursive amalgamation between islands, colonial gold, and indigeneity attempts (and mostly succeeds) at erasing the multiple meanings of gold among the Indians. This process is also predicated on melting and liquidation, and thus in forms of absence projected at the level of abstraction—which privileged form in the Latin American colonial archive we will see in the following chapter.

As opposed to colonial gold, “absent” gold from the Caribbean opens up a material repertoire that is uneven and precarious. Yet precisely for that reason it becomes a site where alternative narratives and meanings for the metal can be crafted. The resilient story, which may have originated from the Black Legend, narrates the greed of the Spaniard for gold while the native appears oblivious to the wealth they possessed. That is to say, even when fetishizing or “overfetishizing” colonial gold, the European is imagined to be completely engrossed in the economic realm while the native subject

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82 Sylvia Molloy has intelligently studied the substitution of colonial gold for corn (*maíz*) in Cabeza de Vaca’s account.
appears to be outside of it. On the other hand, the not-quite sumptuous, the insufficient, the limited presence of “absent” gold endows us with the possibility of recovering forms of pastness or potentiality that have yet to be tapped into.

I conclude with a call for interdisciplinarity—by linking, in this case, literary and cultural studies, on the one hand, with historical archaeology, on the other. Addressed earlier as part of this dissertation’s introduction, the vibrant and productive dialogue to which I return in the final lines of this chapter has been made possible by the pioneering studies of Gustavo Verdesio and other scholars of colonial Latin America. Their works collectively attempt to dismantle (or at the very least redraw) traditional disciplinary boundaries that have been complicit in the articulation of colonial reason. With this move, I believe, one is better equipped to listen for “absences” in both indigeneity in the Hispanic Caribbean and the material life of gold across indigenous and non-indigenous socialities. This stance allows us not just to read but to listen closely for ways in which scholars, particularly those of us who engage in the textual study of colonial sources, can continue to undo one of the primary operative frameworks of our discipline, that of positioning indigenous communities and Spanish conquerors in stark difference.

83 In an unpublished article, titled “Transdisciplinariedad y decolonialidad,” the Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres suggests that this transformation is taking place at a much larger scale. According to Maldonado-Torres, we are witnessing a paradigm shift of great emancipatory potential—which he terms transdisciplinarity—that developed out of the interdisciplinary debates sustained in American Ethnic Studies departments and related academic units since the 1960s and early 1970s.

84 My notion of “listening closely” or with has several origins. Formally, it is an adaptation of Trinh Minh-ha’s critical practice of “speaking nearby” as “a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition . . . .” (87); and also an echo of the closing formulation submitted by Moraña in “De metáforas y metonimias: Antonio Cornejo Polar en la encrucijada del latinoamericanismo internacional.” Moraña’s invitation reads as follows: “Quizá, en este sentido, como advierte Cornejo Polar, no sea la pregunta de Spivak la que cuenta—si el subalterno puede, en efecto, hablar—sino si el otro, desde sus lugares de privilegio lingüístico,
Especially because many of our primary sources are—implicitly or explicitly—overburdened by this contradiction, this may be a case where departure from the usual archives and their pervasive terms of coercion may benefit from a conditional alignment with a materially based critical praxis.

My final example comes from the articulation of a colonial nationalism in Colombia, which coastal and continental expressions of coloniality occupy an uneasy frontier between the epistemic claims made possible by a continental locus of enunciation as condition of possibility for the field of colonial Latin American studies and the rest of Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. Archaeologist Felipe Gaitán-Ammann, in

interpretativo, representacional, puede, realmente, aprender a escuchar” (“De metáforas” 228, emphasis in the original). Indeed, this very question seems inescapable for Latin Americanism, which has seen it reframed by Arturo Arias a propos the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, suggesting how the racialization of natives and other non-modern humans works within the biopolitics of state governance. In relatively proximal terms, listening closely has also been informed by and through critical dialogues with members of Women Investigating Race, Ethnicity, and Difference (WIRED) at the University of Washington. These include the types of cross-disciplinary conversations sponsored by this research cluster, for example the “WIRED Speaks with Stuart Hall” Fall 2014 symposium co-organized by Sonal Khullar or the intellectual, productive correspondence sustained with individual members, particularly Ileana Rodriguez-Silva, Sara Gonzalez, Stephanie Smallwood, Angela Ginorio, Michelle Habell-Pallán, Maya Smith, and Ariana Ochoa Camacho. It especially resonates with the premises of Ileana Rodriguez-Silva’s book, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico*, which, though far afield from the material discussed in this chapter, becomes especially relevant in the context of an embodied, situated critique. On the concept of “situated knowledge,” see Donna Haraway. Listening (or dialogical exchange) as a practice that not only unsettles the “unfinished projects” of modernity but also “the unfinished project of de-colonization” surfaces as an ethical encampment in the work of Maldonado-Torres (235). In *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, Maldonado-Torres intimates that the modern script of the warrior and the conqueror necessitates new interlocutors that are “able to listen to what has been silenced” (234).

Finally, “listening closely” recalls Fernando Ortiz’s notion of “contrapunteo” or counterpoint (from his 1940 monograph *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*) as a musical term that is useful for talking about transcultural practices grounded in concrete material relations.

A welcome critical intervention that thinks beyond this disciplinary challenge is the dissertation recently written by Larissa Brewer-García. Brewer-García not only connects the viceroyalties of Peru and New Granada with the Hispanic Caribbean, but also center the figures of mulatto, black, Afro-descended, and African translators as organic intellectuals doubly silenced: within the texts they mediate and in the colonial Latin American archive contemporary scholars have poured themselves over. At least until the late 1990s, when a number of strategic collaborations between Colombian intellectuals and scholars of colonial Latin America in South and North America began to formalize, different regions of the Colombian case shared with the colonial/early modern/postcolonial insular Hispanic Caribbean a similar state of “constant isolation [of] the Caribbean colonial experience vis-à-vis the rest of Latin America” (Martínez-San Miguel, “Taino Warriors?” 210).
his critical reading of an important site of exhibit of the pre-colonial Americas, the Gold Museum in Bogotá, has alerted us about the dangers of excluding indigenous practices and voices from the discourse of gold’s multiple values—economic, aesthetic, ideological, religious, spiritual, etc. He notes that the curatorial project organizing institutionalized indigenous artifacts, once again, severs gold from the mundanity of pre-Hispanic everyday life and instead places its value in the spiritual, sacred realm. Thus pre-Hispanic treasures from the Americas collected under the roof of this national archive become another instantiation of an obsession particularly but not exclusively present in archaeological literature that seems to understand the pre-Hispanic world as one essentially uneconomic and in direct opposition to a Western tradition that attaches monetary value to precious metals. These are of course utter misconceptions, and yet they continue to influence, whether we want to admit it or not, our ideas of a time before Europe in the New World. How are we to recognize the multiple meanings embedded in gold, meanings which have made it into a powerful materiality and symbolic formation while also moving away from fictitious dichotomies? Gaitán-Amman suggests a possible approach: we should “address gold as an empowering materiality that can encompass past and present and connect indigenous and Western worlds” (“Golden” 239–40). For Gaitán-Ammann, gold’s cross-cultural and trans-historical central presence certainly reveals the metal as a magnet for meaning, possibly because of its “unsurpassable ability to reify human desires” (“Golden” 240). This magnetism resides in gold’s material quality as an incorruptible but also exceedingly malleable metal, quality that also suffuses its symbolic production. As such, Gaitán-Ammann remarks, “[t]he material power of gold
pre-exists its birth as a meaningful piece of goldwork but it is only through goldwork that gold gets to live its social life as a conveyor of the unruly cultural force of objects” (“Golden” 240).

In dialogue with Gaitán-Ammann and others, we have seen how the social life of gold in the early modern trans-imperial field of representation constitutes something of a foundational materiality for colonial discourses, past and present. The alphabetical and visual sources that have served as the fulcrum of this chapter, from Columbus and Cortés, to Las Casas and De Bry, demonstrate that the colonialist fetishization of gold may have been the product of varied contingent processes but all taking place within an ample, dynamic, and uneven socio-cultural field in which gold and goldwork had a salient and multidimensional presence. Further interdisciplinary studies are critically important to determine how this view may have survived the postcolonial and national conditions of intelligibility of colonial gold for contemporary publics.
CHAPTER THREE

Ugly Abstraction

Colonial representations from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries offset the clash between local cosmologies and European notions of ordered space. The conceptual feature unifying Euclidian geometry, early modern Ptolemaic cartography, Vitruvian anatomy, and Albertian aesthetics, *the grid*, dominated as well the urban distribution of Spain’s possessions in the Indies (Fig. 3.1). Native observers negotiated this shift in a number of ways. In viceroyal Mexico, between 1530 and 1630, expert painters and mapmakers (*tlacuilos*) recorded in hundreds of maps the physical attributes of each town and nearby lands. Dana Leibsohn has argued that the grid appearing in a small fraction of these maps acted “not as proper cartographic ‘ground,’” but as yet another figure” (“Colony” 277)—namely, a bound signifier such as a spatial glyph or a rare object embedded

Figure 3.2. Anonymous artist, *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan* #4 (detail), c. 1560-1563, color on indigenous paper. Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City (Leibsohn 266).
in the landscape (Fig. 3.2). Leibsohn’s study underscores, from the perspective of an art historian, the readaptation of this visual idiom as part of an ambivalent New Spanish discourse of territorial control and indigenous resistance. Embracing a different set of methodological questions, the cultural analyses proposed by Santa Arias, Mariselle Meléndez, Walter Mignolo, and Ricardo Padrón, among others, have deepened our understanding of how geography, history, and literature worked together to shape early modern Iberian and colonial spatial designs. In this chapter, I connect both lines of argumentation by reading the grid as a complex geo-cultural inscription that cuts across colonial discursive productions. That both cartographic accounts and urban layouts from this period became increasingly compliant with the geometric rationality of the spatializing grid-system might seem now like an undisputable truism; however, literary cultures from both sides of the Atlantic, too, engaged in a number of ways with this regime of signification. The present discussion of Bernardo de Balbuena’s Grandeza mexicana (1604) brings into view a particular moment within the numerous tactical redeployments of the grid in colonial written accounts. Notwithstanding, this techno-representational feature of early modern universality will come into full view as both a structural foundation and a privileged form of colonial assemblages upon further dismantling of their individual parts (chapters 4 and 5 herein return to the visual legacy of the grid in debates about indigeneity and racialization).

The aforementioned cases, although pertaining to distinct artistic and textual traditions, illuminate the challenges facing the study of a discursive form that has served to organize, classify, unite, and parcel the fields of early modern and colonial
representation in at least three fundamental ways: 1) geographically, at the worldly and regional scales with the respective layouts of cartographic grid and the urban "traza"; 2) biologically, as an ethno-racial paradigm of human exclusion and "normalization" used to justify the West’s steady ascent to power (Ferreira da Silva; Mignolo, "Coloniality"; Quijano; Traub, "Mapping"); and 3) epistemologically, as a play between the cultural perceptions of spatial emptiness and discovery reactivating the foundational gestures of Eurocentrism (Dussel; Gruzinski; Harley; O’Gorman, La invención; Ortiz; Subirats), as a locus of enunciation for lettered culture (Rama), as a technology of intelligibility (Foucault), and as a sociopolitical logic of surveillance and concealment (Castro-Gómez).

While each of the aforementioned positions advances a unique set of perspectives, critics have come together in decrying how these material and conceptual variations of the grid share complicity in the proliferation of an objectifying pattern of abstraction that developed largely out of the Spanish model of conquest and colonization. Grids, as serializing technologies of power, can radically arrest our notions of individual personhood and political subjectivity; imperial grids, in particular, are often in tension with or attempt to erase other forms of being, while propagating confinement in the zones where colonial representation meets lived experience.86 To demonstrate the inner workings of this form, this chapter considers, specifically, how the Spanish author Bernardo de Balbuena deploys the urban grid as a rhetorical structure about the

86 This argument is powerfully made by David Woodward. For a useful assessment of the impact of Marxist and poststructuralist theories, from Henri Lefèbvre to J. Brian Harley, in the study of space and critical cartography, see Ricardo Padrón (“Mapping Plus”). From a complementary theoretical perspective, I also find that Deleuze’s distinction between "striated" and "smooth" spaces captures many of the tension at play in the reproduction of metric regularity. I depart from Deleuze, however, in the periodization the French philosopher assigns to these spaces, as they become less useful in understanding the transhistorical aspects of colonial dynamics.
imperial/colonial order in *Grandeza mexicana*, a move that takes place within the overarching assemblage of the *grid of coloniality*. As practices and discursive strategies in the continual re-adaptation of intersectional or geometric scaffoldings into material and symbolic agents of empire, the grid of coloniality allows Balbuena to evacuate otherness from the space of Mexico City. He does so by overwriting its presence with the proliferation of commodities and additional objects of aesthetic, architectural, and historical value.

Within this interpretive horizon, I view geo-politics and materiality as complementary spatial discourses in *Grandeza mexicana*. The geo-political component of the text is twofold. It manifests in the poet’s portrayal of Mexico City as an exceptional hub of mercantile activity built upon the strategic occlusion, containment, and exclusion of indigenous agents and, relatedly, of the Spanish crown as an empire of global proportions. I close read the former in the poem’s acclamation of an ideal structure of reconstructed calzadas, blocks, and monumental squares in the former Aztec capital, successfully reshaped by the seventeenth century into the viceregal traza. The latter chiefly manifests in the treatment of the myth of Atlas appearing in one of the many prefaces to the homonymous urban display that is “Grandeza mexicana.” The “exterior” structure of the text, I argue, resembles the drama of expansion and containment that played out in the concentric zones constituting both the city and its limits as a developing unit. These zones, in turn, conform the “internal” landscapes of the poem: the pulsating, gridded spaces of the Spanish town (*república de españoles*) where “Grandeza mexicana” takes place.

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87 Henceforth, I will use italics (*Grandeza mexicana*) for the full book and quotation marks (“Grandeza mexicana” or, simply, “Grandeza”) when referring to the poem of the same title.
(Íñigo Madrigal 34; Sabat de Rivers “Géneros poéticos” 65); beyond the walled districts of the city proper, the belatedly ordered native quarters that hosted the majority of the “pacified” or reduced native population of the city (república de indios), for which a separate traza was built in 1570; and the frontier—uncharted, unruly, deregulated—where, according to anthropologist Anna Tsing, “the expansive nature of extraction comes into its own” (26).

Given that colonial Mexico’s geo-political centrality was in many ways not an exclusive development, I focus on the dynamics of enclosure and expansion that substantiate the reproducible quality of “the local.” In light of the trade routes that crisscrossed the Spanish viceroyalties such as the silver fleets of Potosí and the galleons of Manila, this category can be effectively reframed in terms of a colonial expression of global particularity. Tracing the intricate textual connections between two seemingly disparate spaces, I contend that Grandeza mexicana acts as a diagram or blueprint of the Spanish empire, one in which both global particularity and “the global” coalesce around an object-oriented geography of power. If the former refers to an interconnected notion of “the local,” the latter captures a productive enclosure of the colonial/early modern world-system.88 These considerations return to the question of spatiality via the fate of material objects in the text.

Understood as generative spatial enclosures rather than exclusively as commodities, the dizzying proliferation of objects in the poem offers the reader a link between differing scales of colonial agency. By plotting the circulation of colonial objects

88 I echo here a similar point by Daniel Nemser: “Colonialism complicates easy distinctions between local and global, mapping them over or embedding them in each other” (“‘To Avoid’” 99).
in its field of representation, the grid of coloniality allows Balbuena, first and foremost, to reshape Mexico City as a point and an object of the West. Finally, my analysis of the “indio feo” as a figure that connects proscribed violence with materiality posits that *Grandeza mexicana* rewrites foundational discourses on the domestication of native space. Yet the text’s turn to objects, materiality, and aesthetics renders Balbuena’s conquest a disembodied act—a violent struggle effected not by subjects, but enacted by the things from around the globe that clutter the textualized urban landscape of the New Spanish capital. By constantly rehearsing the foundational gesture, the grid of coloniality sets the stage for the cultural “re-conquest” performed by material objects, which ultimately carry to term, across time and space, the “civilizing” mission of empire.

**DEFINING THE GRID OF COLONIALITY**

There are many disciplines and methodological approaches that rely on grids to construct their objects of study. Some of them use the grid as a universal framework of comparison. Others focus on the effects produced by its adaptation, whether that be for statistic or aesthetic purposes, or for creating standard practices of excavation that facilitate planning, as is the case with archaeology.89 There are feminist and legal theories on the

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89 I can list here several examples from the studies I have reviewed. Rosalind Krauss, an art historian, wrote a surprising article on grids in modern and contemporary aesthetic practices that is called just that, “Grids.” I thank Micol Seigel for reminding me of this article during a panel of the Tepoztlan Institute for the Transnational History of the Americas annual conference in 2012. In a comprehensive history of the grid from antiquity to the present, Hannah B. Higgins links this form to the invention of writing technologies in ancient Mesopotamia, the development of musical notation in medieval times, and the rise of the printing press in early modernity. To my knowledge, the only study that specifically addresses the literary impact of the grid in early modernity is Valerie Traub’s “The Nature of Norms in Early Modern England: Anatomy, Cartography, *King Lear*.” Quite outside the literary realm, in archaeological sciences, the Wheeler-Kenyon method, a method of archaeological distribution adapted from the work of Mortimer Wheeler and Tessa Wheeler by Kathleen Kenyon, involves using grids to designate/organize large-scale operations in the field. I am grateful to Sara Gonzalez for sharing her knowledge on this last point.
intersection of different categories of identity that use the tools of the grid to resist its
totalizing power. There is not, however, a colonial theory of the grid. I attempt here to
sketch a brief genealogy that concentrates on its articulations through the fields of
geography, biology, and epistemology with the goal of recasting its cultural importance
for the study of Latin American colonial discourse today.

At the nexus and interstices between geography and biology, scholars such as
Denis Cosgrove, Samuel Edgerton, Valerie Traub, and David Woodward have focused
on the grid as a cartographic expression of the early modern concept of totality and as a
global framework for imperial expansion. The geographical, universal, and abstract
properties of this sign began to appear in maps from the late Middle Ages onward, when
the Christian concept of civitas dei was gradually replaced with a secular order ruled by
human intervention (dominium regale et politicum) (Rivera-Ayala 253). Studies of classical
antiquity, on the other hand, have contributed valuable evidence for understanding how
Greco–Roman societies adapted orthogonal and reticular arrangements from earlier
civilizations in the Indus Valley and other parts of Asia. Some four hundred years apart
in the Spanish kingdoms, the towns of Jaca in Aragon (1076) and Santa Fe in Granada
(1491) were configured around a central orthogonal layout (Mier y Terán Rocha 80;
Bielsa de Ory passim). Formed just a few months prior to Columbus’s “discovery,” the

Kimberlé Crenshaw is known for developing the notion of intersectionality to address multiple axes of
difference operating simultaneously. See especially Crenshaw’s “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race
and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist
Politics” and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of
Color.” For a critique of the model of intersectionality grounded in assemblage theory, refer to Jasbir Puar
(“I Would Rather”).

For a useful review of the ancient history of the grid, see Spiro Kostof and also James E. Vance, Jr. From
an archaeological standpoint, see Marc Van de Mieroop’s study of urbanism in Mesopotamia.
latter stands out for being where many conquistadors went to battle before setting foot in the New World. It was with the Spanish enterprise in the Americas, however, that the ideology of the grid launched into full effect what Woodward calls “a powerful framework for political expansion and control” spanning global proportions (87). Compellingly studied by Traub, its early modern visual representation accompanied by peripheral depictions of human difference reframed the grid into an “incipiently racial” model (“Mapping” 46) (Fig. 3.3). Hierarchical, geographical, and somatic classification are some of the principles behind Traub’s early history of intersectionality, in which race is not seen “as a stable category of biological difference, but only as one concept among parallel and overlapping concerns of lineage, civility, religion, and nation” (“Mapping” 44). Gender, Traub notes, also becomes an important jurisdiction for the global grid. In Traub’s view, the grid centers bodies chiefly as epistemological objects in a system of classification.
“which would prove to be a significant precondition for Enlightenment schemes of scientific racism” (“Mapping” 83).

During the sixteenth century, this “new” model seemed to literally jump off the pages of world maps and city views onto Europe’s territorial margins. The numerous changes to the built environments and natural landscapes of the colonial Americas dramatize the grid’s spatio-discursive progression from a pictographic idealization, a substantially abstract universal, to an embodied geo-politics of colonialism. This progression is nowhere as evident as in the rectangular quadrature with which the Spanish traza imposed a predictable order to colonial outposts—starting with Santo Domingo in 1502, Santiago de Cuba in 1511, Mexico in 1523, and Veracruz in 1525, and hence after extending to Mesoamerica, most of New Spain, and the rest of the viceroyalties. The 1573 city-planning laws issues by Philip II attest to the marriage between colonial ideology and urbanism. The gridded layouts implemented “a cordel y regla” would vary according to wind direction, proximity to water, and climate (articles 111, 112, and 116). But they would be consistent in possessing a defensive infrastructure (116 and 117), promoting the health of the population, and offering adequate sanitary conditions (121 and 122). Above all, each grid should arouse feelings of wonder and permanence, all while being flexible enough to accommodate the impending growth of the city: “que aunque la población venga en mucho crecimiento no venga a dar en algun inconveniente que sea causa de afear lo que se hubiere reedificado, o perjudique su defensa y comodidad” (de Solano 211).
The Spanish crown’s ordinances merely formalized a plan that had been spreading like wildfire since the first decades of the sixteenth century. While prescriptive, their language was flexible enough to allow for adaptive variation. Consistently throughout the periods preceding and following the new legislation, and in fact almost uninterrupted, three basic types of grids extended horizontally in alternative fashion: the *retícula*, the *cuadrícula*, and the *damero* (Figs. 3.4 and 3.5). Although conceived under a shared rubric of isomorphism, they manifested certain structural discrepancies. A brief word about each is in order. The first two appeared, respectively, in Santiago de Cuba and Santo Domingo (López Moreno 29; Mier y Terán Rocha 66). The *retícula* refers, more generally, to a group of linear intersections. Initially, this was the pattern that prevailed as well in the territorial configuration of Mexico City. If the intersecting lines form straight angles, the resulting organizational principles behind each New World *traza* shape is called an orthogonal reticule. A *cuadrícula* or square grid develops, on the other hand, when intersecting points are equidistant from each other. Finally, the *damero*—a term which Ángel Rama mistakenly uses to denote a single, unified spatial model mapped across the Americas—consists of a more “rigid” arrangement like the one implemented
Figure 3.5. Urban *damero* of the first plan of Lima, Peru (1535) (Morgado Maúrtua 2).
in Puebla in 1534 and in Lima a year after (Mier Terán y Rocha 66). It is important to note, however, that these terms are often used interchangeably in primary and secondary sources. I take this confusion as symptomatic of the ambivalent “logic of the grid.”

While acting as a mechanism of distinction, this logic simultaneously flattens out specificity by promoting the creation of standard types.

The critical body of scholarship on the physical, social, and geographical developments of the New Spanish traza is richly vast and complex, and includes important research conducted by archaeologists, geographers, and historians of art, architecture, and urbanism. Fittingly measured and executed by the master surveyor (alarife) Alonso García Bravo just a few years after the capture of Tenochtitlan in 1519, it drew heavily on the grid pattern of the Mexica altepetl or city-state. The colonial traza incorporated features of the local environment such as the disposition of preexisting roads and canals, as well as the properties of buildings that were still in place after the downfall of the pre-Hispanic city. Upon this motley assemblage, the church, the plaza—and later, the university—became additional building blocks in colonial practices of

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92 I borrow this term from Traub’s literary analysis of the grid referenced above. Traub argues that “[t]his spatial logic creates not only a uniform model, but a serviceable ratio, a standard for comparison” (“The Nature” 57). In this sense, the grid becomes a “lateral system of signification which enables us to identify, classify and compare diverse phenomena of the natural world”—in other words, a sort of exchange system between bodies, spaces, and their abstract idealizations (“The Nature” 66).

93 For detailed historical analyses of archival material and other primary sources, the standard sources are George Kubler and Manuel Toussaint, et al. See also the more recent study by Federico Fernández Christlieb.

94 A similar conclusion is foregrounded in Nemser’s dissertation, “Toward a Genealogy of Mestizaje: Rethinking Race in Colonial Mexico”; see especially chapter 2. The scholar of architecture José Ángel Campos Salgado reminds us that García Bravo did not work alone, but was assisted by Bernardino Vázquez de Tapia and two Indians (152).

95 However, Kubler offers a different account. Citing Manuel Toussaint’s work, he states that the traza “was not established in 1523” and that it “was only a record of titles, rather than a manuscript plan regulating the future growth of the city” (73). Kubler concludes that it was indeed a physical plan and that Alonso García Bravo did not invent it between 1523 and 1524, but that it was adapted from the original Aztec
domination (Leibsohn, “Colony” 266). One of the earliest depictions of this composite layout appears in the map of Mexico City published in 1524 (Fig. 3.6). Indigenous elements inside the rectangular area labeled “TEMIX TITAN”—such as the face of the sun appearing between two temples and the reversed eastern orientation of the walled inner precinct—make the early traza an ambiguous space (Mundy 44). George Kubler’s observation that during the early occupation of the island of Mexico “[t]he European traza recorded the nucleus of European settlement” captures, nonetheless, an important sentiment about the implied “Europeanness” of the grid (74). Despite the existence of similar models of spatial organization in pre-Hispanic societies, the naturalization of

layout. For a contrasting opinion that posits the grid plan as a model of acculturation, see Dan Stanislawski’s thesis in “The Origin and Spread of the Grid-Pattern Town.”
Eurocentric perspectivalism in the West’s peripheries hyperlinks the physical architecture of the traza to the conceptual armature of global cartography.\textsuperscript{96}

Whether tacit or explicitly stated, the epistemological arguments of this genealogy rehearse two fundamental gestures: 1) a sustained critique of Eurocentrism and of colonial geometric perspective, of which the grid becomes an enduring feature; and 2) a deployment of the grid as a conceptual model for understanding colonial hierarchies and axes of difference. Most analyses, however, seem to conflate these two theses. Since Edmundo O’Gorman’s \textit{La invención de América} (1958), the impulse to deconstruct the global matrix that developed from the conquest and colonization of the New World has run through a host of influential studies, from the works of Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, and other scholars loosely affiliated with the Colectivo Modernidad/Colonialidad,\textsuperscript{97} to key contributions by Serge Gruzinski, Renato Ortiz, and Eduardo Subirats, among others.\textsuperscript{98} Some twenty years after O’Gorman, Dussel’s “Geo-Politics and Philosophy” (the

\textsuperscript{96} Kubler is equally dismissive of the relevance of the gridiron plan, which he regards as a simply pragmatic, “generic,” and “almost spontaneous” solution to the territorial economies that had been used on both continents hundreds of years prior (94).

\textsuperscript{97} Contributions to this momentous intellectual initiative include or have included, among others, the works of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, Venezuelan sociologist Edgardo Lander, Argentinean cultural semiotician Walter Mignolo, Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel, and the anthropologists from Colombia and Venezuela Arturo Escobar and Fernando Coronil, respectively. Other scholars who have espoused important critiques of coloniality, sometimes in direct conversation with the aforementioned members of the Modernity/Coloniality Collective Project, have been Chela Sandoval and María Lugones from Binghamton, the research cluster from the University of California, Berkeley, and networks of scholars in the South, particularly in Bogotá, Colombia (through the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana) and in Quito, Ecuador (through Catherine Walsh from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar). During the early stages of these collaborations, the concept of “decolonial mapping” was used in a joint statement issued by the collective, titled “De-Colonial Thinking.” However, I have been unable to locate further references to this concept in the scholarly literature. Until recently the aforementioned document could be viewed here: \textless \url{http://cpic.binghamton.edu/decolonial.html} \textgreater, but the page was inactive as of March 25, 2015. An archived version can be accessed here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120312233836/http://cpic.binghamton.edu/decolonial.html>.

\textsuperscript{98} Using the grid as a spatial and conceptual form already in place by the 1500s, in the first chapter of \textit{The Spatio\-us Word}, Ricardo Padrón takes issue with O’Gorman’s claim that the invention of America brought about geographical innovation at the global scale (38).
first chapter of *Philosophy of Liberation* reflected on the “spatial, worldly setting” of territories, in contrast with the “abstract idealization of empty space” always radiating from a fixed imperial center (*Philosophy* 1–2). Similarly, Foucault’s concept of the “grid of intelligibility” has been useful in the articulation of a “geo-politics” (to use Dussel’s term) that is at once distinct but complimentary to the fraught and contested notion of a subject that is carved out of its assumed or prescribed locus of enunciation (*The History* 93). Sara Castro-Klarén summarizes well the major challenges facing this critical stream of inquiry when she notes that “[t]he dismantling of the legacy of coloniality will first require the recognition of a shared location in the vast intersections of the power-knowledge machine” (“The Recognition” 104).

Ángel Rama’s *La ciudad letrada* (1984) and Aníbal Quijano’s “coloniality of power” provide additional anchoring points for these discussions. Rama’s brilliant assessment of the *damero* or urban grid—“una razón ordenadora que se revela en un orden social jerárquico traspuesto a un orden distributivo geométrico”—illuminates the ways in which the default ideogram for the baroque city also served as the topographic template for the diachronic reproduction of lettered knowledge in Latin America (4). Rama’s analysis of colonial cultures of writing allows us to extrapolate the extent to which the *traza* greatly predetermined—at least ideologically—the distribution of social roles and the juridical identities of different types of urban actors; the commercial flow, personal occupations, and the amount and type of labor extracted from Indians and their descendants, slaves, and Spanish immigrants, for instance; as well as degrees of individual and collective
access to privilege and social mobility, and so on.\textsuperscript{99} In this sense, the structural embodiment of the traza links the figure of the grid to key aspects of the racial model deployed in Quijano’s notion of coloniality of power. His thesis, initially developed in collaboration with Immanuel Wallerstein, locates in the sixteenth century the crisscrossing and convergences of the early modern colonial machine and the myth of modernity—with this infamous coupling persisting even beyond the independence and decolonial stages of late capitalism. The primary cornerstones of his definition of coloniality are: the idea of race inaugurated by colonialism and a new articulation of “all historically known previous structures of control of labor,” which include “slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production and reciprocity, together around and upon the basis of capital and the world market” (“Coloniality” 534).\textsuperscript{100} Quijano and Wallerstein’s sustained attention to locality and geohistory makes a compelling case for a transhistorical understanding of the ways in which the colonial Americas became “the pattern, the model, of the entire world-system” (“Americanity” 550). The coloniality of power recognizes race as a pivotal cog in the technology of European colonialism and ushers in a dismantling of its spatial analytics, which extend well beyond notions of

\textsuperscript{99} According to Rama, language acts as the key principle behind this form’s cultural expansion: “De lo anterior se deduce que mucho más importante que la forma damero, que ha motivado amplia discusión, es el principio rector que tras ella funciona y asegura un régimen de transmisiones: de lo alto a lo bajo, de España a América, de la cabeza del poder—a través de la estructura social que él impone—a la conformación física de la ciudad, para que la distribución del espacio urbano asegure y conserve la forma social. Pero aún más importante es el principio postulado en las palabras del Rey: con anterioridad a toda realización, se debe pensar la ciudad, lo que permitiría evitar las irrupciones circunstanciales ajenas a las normas establecidas, entorpeciéndolas o destruyéndolas. El orden debe quedar estatuido antes de que la ciudad exista, para así impedir todo futuro desorden, lo que alude a la peculiar virtud de los signos de permanecer inalterables en el tiempo y seguir rigiendo la cambiante vida de las cosas dentro de rígidos encuadres. Es así que se fijan las operaciones fundadoras que se fueron repitiendo a través de una extensa geografía y un extenso tiempo” (\textit{La ciudad} 8).

\textsuperscript{100} In his recent assessment of the connections between coloniality and subalternity, Mignolo proceeds to split the two aforementioned categories—the colonial idea of race and the genealogy of labor—into two additional components, ethnicity and coloniality itself (Mignolo, “Coloniality” 433).
biological difference to reproduce and map social exclusion onto a global sphere constituted by mirror-like, interdependent market economies.

Doubtless important for their impressive scope, the relative oversight of these contributions around issues of material agency and representation offers critics an invitation for further analysis. The clue for the kind of interpretive move I propose is articulated in Ricardo Padrón’s *The Spacious Word: Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain* (2004), where he re-centers the grid as a fundamental idiom of the legacy of colonialism:

Modernity naturalizes geometric, optical, isotropic space as a fundamental epistemological category and thereby gives undue authority to the abstractions of the mapmaker, the surveyor, the planner, the architect, and the like. Traditional “representational spaces”—spaces as they are perceived—such as the hearth or the geography of the sacred are correspondingly stripped of their authority. In the order of abstraction, everything comes to be understood as either a location or an object within this space, and thereby becomes amenable to systematic understanding, commodification, appropriation, or subordination by the viewing subject. (39)

Against its own logic of concealment, erasure, and substitution, the abstract grid reveals itself in history as a material and symbolic blueprint of the asymmetrical rationality that solidified between Europe and its transatlantic new orders. Undergirding the processes of “systematic understanding, commodification, appropriation, or subordination” outlined by Padrón is what I term the *grid of coloniality*. In this sense the “grid of coloniality” refers to the physical and material scaffoldings that congeal into discrete points of connectivity between different moments in the history of colonialism; and it refers as well to their discursive transformations across colonial worlds. These discourses include but in many ways exceed the corpus of textual and visual representations that engage the diagrammatic idiom of the grid to frame issues of power, agency, and spatial governance,
particularly as they relate to the constitution of ethnic and racial hierarchies. This conceptual paradigm aims to reframe how serial iterations of a material geo-politics are actively recruited in colonialism’s seemingly boundless capacity for reproduction. Furthermore, the extent to which the geographical, biological, and epistemological ramifications of the grid of coloniality seem to connect local formations with early modern notions of globality become dangerously elusive without its proper understanding as a representational genre widely deployed in Latin American colonial discourse.101

An enduring feature of built environments across the Americas, the grid of coloniality imparted a shape and a structure to the global field of representation that emerged out of the early modern contest for imperial domination. The success of its spatial economy stems from trans-imperial collaborations aiming to crack latitude and longitude at sea over the developments that followed early Portuguese explorations in the fifteenth century. Its surrogate form, the cartographic grid, mapped the providential rise and expansion of the West among the world’s others. With the coexistence of multiple centers and, within each, of compounded local grids or trazas, the grid of coloniality hypostasizes the res extensa by exporting a model based on the enclosure of particulars and the naturalization of Western norms. The simple fact that ethnic and geometric centers

101 In a very interesting article on Simón Bolívar’s emancipatory project, Sara Castro-Klarén is, as far as I know, the first scholar to use the phrase “the grid of coloniality” to link Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the “coloniality of power” to the idea of “culture” as a grid that classifies and creates hierarchies of difference (“Framing Pan-Americanism” 31–4, 50–1). She intimates that this concept is embedded in what she calls “the grid of capitalism,” which ties knowledge production to practices of displacement and coercion that operate within the global market (“Framing Pan-Americanism” 50–1). My use of the concept situates this concretizing abstraction (a serviceable oxymoron) in the colonial scene of writing with Grandeza mexicana. This is not because Ballhuena’s colonialist poetics are the first or only to recruit the figure of the grid to stake claims of aesthetic, economic, political, and ethno-racial legitimacy in the colonial representational field (in Spain or Latin America), but because he does so unabashedly in a highly coded and synthetic language that—perhaps without much difficulty—could be included in longer histories of concretism in the Iberian world.
are able to shift, move, and transform with relative periodicity, a point that critics of objective positionality would concede, is a powerful argument in favor of the trans-historical conceptualization of geometric abstraction, or what I term the grid of coloniality. This hermeneutical strategy brings to view how texts such as *Grandeza mexicana* become literary performances, foundational gestures to be celebrated and reproduced at the level of cultural materiality. In the following section, I take the material history of Balbuena’s memory as a productive entry point for a spatial reading of his work that considers the two sides of the grid of coloniality.

**EXTERIORITY**

Balbuena’s name is an undisputed common space of Mexican culture. An artistic forefather of the national imaginary, his work famously inspired Salvador Novo’s urban chronicle *Nueva grandeza mexicana* (1946). Parallel to this literary homage, the Spanish bard’s monumental influence literally extended across the oriental flatlands of the former colonial *traza* as its design engorged and fractured to fit the territorial demands of a republican modernity. The region known, perhaps unbecomingly, as Llanos de Balbuena hastily developed with the further segmentation of the area’s western strip in 1948, when it earned the designation of Colonia Jardín Balbuena. Between 1915 and 1969, its civilian and military airfields, local hospital, and eventual teeming metro station also acquired his onomastic. Today the fan-shaped palm trees and pyramidal Italian cypresses lined across Fray Servando Teresa de Mier Avenue, a major neighborhood arterial, lend Jardín Balbuena an air of urbane distinction. Despite flaunting ornamental flora reminiscent of the region’s spectacular past, a pell-mell clump of working-class housing, technical
schools, and sports and fitness centers—the enduring Deportivo Venustiano Carranza and the more recent Bushin Dojo Balbuena among them—accumulates next to local mega chains and multinationals—including Home Depot, Pemex, Sanborn’s, and Walmart. However jarring, these contemporary urban developments collapse early modern and postcolonial histories of empire, and continue to shape the mixed material assemblage of overwritten past histories that, centuries earlier, marveled baroque eyes.102

The constant hustle and buoyant spiritedness of a colonial Venice emerging from Aztec ruins animated desires for a clean slate. Certainly, the author of Grandeza mexicana was not an exception. Born in Valdepeñas in the province of Ciudad Real, La Mancha, Bernardo de Balbuena (1562–1627) fits many of the stereotypes associated with metropolitan emigrants. Together with Spaniards born in American soil (creoles), these “foreigners who had put down roots in the New World” (radicados) molded colonial ideologies almost consistently in opposition to the local and imported sectors that shouldered the heavy labor of the city (Merrim 4). An estranged father with an established status as a trail-blazing radicado and certain degree of political influence in the colonial ranks paved the way for his son’s circuitous exile. Within a year of his arrival in 1584, Balbuena prevailed in a prestigious literary contest—one of the many manifestations of a flourishing lettered society in New Spain—and was awarded the privilege of welcoming the new viceroy. The recently transplanted author was particularly strategic about future vocational choices. He began ecclesiastical studies in Guadalajara in 1586, where he served as Chaplain of the Royal Audiencia until 1593. Once again, Balbuena received literary accolades for his poetry, this time on the occasion of the 1590 viceroyal visit to

102 This continuity is also highlighted in Jorge Terukina’s dissertation.
New Spain. In 1592 he began work on his famed epic, *El Bernardo* (1624); a year later he started *Grandeza mexicana* (1604). With a solid literary career under his belt, Balbuena obtained a Doctorate in Theology at the University of Sigüenza in 1607. He proceeded to publish the pastoral novel *Siglo de Oro en las selvas de Erífile* in 1608, year in which he was also appointed as Major Abbot to Jamaica—certainly, a doubtful promotion for an intellectual of his caliber. After living in the Caribbean for close to a decade, he served duty in Santo Domingo between 1621 and 1623. He spent his final years as a viceregal exile in the neighboring island of Puerto Rico, a location that further isolated the author from the metropolitan centers that had roused and rewarded his artistic effluence. To complicate matters for Balbuena, his personal library caught fire during the Dutch attack on San Juan in 1625. As a result of this misfortune, students of his oeuvre have permanently lost access to his unpublished manuscripts—and, it is safe to speculate, to a uniquely dual perspective on the intricate connections between the continental and insular fields of the Spanish empire.103

As if anticipating the eventual threats that obliterated his late literary efforts, Balbuena’s first publication presents itself as heavy blocks of text, with thick roundabout preambles and unpredictable metrics made up of endless locutions—the manuscript equivalent of military bastions or citadels upon grid cities. Following the generic typology provided by Stephanie Merrim, the “meaningful, if extremely ungainly” discursive repertoire of *Grandeza mexicana* consists of preface after preface ensuing anxious

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103 Balbuena’s biographic portrait is complicated by conflicting information on his year of birth, the years he spent in Spain and the dates of his travels to New Spain and the Caribbean. I have followed the details offered by Luis Adolfo Domínguez in the preliminary commentary to his edition of the *Grandeza mexicana*. Additional information can be found in the studies of José Rojas Garcidueñas, Georgina Sabat de Rivers (“Balbuena”), and John Van Horne.
dedications to the archbishop and archdeacon of New Galicia; a long-winded prose commentary of the minor poem dedicated to the archbishop; the actual poem titled “Grandeza mexicana,” with its corresponding epilogue; and a daring treatise on New World poetry titled “Compendio apologético en alabanza de la poesía” (96–7). With such a textual bag of tricks Balbuena makes glaringly evident his intention to move up the ranks of the colonial ecclesiastical hierarchy (González Boixo 23, qtd. in Merrim 97; Terukina 23). The preliminary materials of Grandeza mexicana run to about 50 pages, and are almost equally as substantive as the main poem. Preeminent, “Grandeza,” the poetic core of the matter, began as a missive addressed to the writer’s love interest, the Spanish aristocrat Isabel de Tobar from Culiacán. Soon to enter a convent in Mexico City due to the untimely passing of both her husband and son, she requested a verbal composition of the colonial capital: “Al fin, un perfectísimo retrato / pides de la grandeza mexicana, / ahora cueste caro, ahora barato” (63). The resulting textual portrait contains an opening octet and nine corresponding chapters glorifying the beauty and riches of Mexico City. Each chapter expands upon the lines of this introductory verse, offering a dynamic picture of the New Spanish capital—the exception being, of course, line seven, which Balbuena divides into Chapters VII and VIII, ‘Gobierno ilustre’ and ‘Religión y Estado,’ respectively.

The formal and economic aspects of the poem have garnered the most attention from critics. If earlier scholars such as Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, Octavio Paz, Ángel Rama, and John Van Horne were primarily concerned with the role of “Grandeza” in the constitution of a New World poetics, contemporary critics have focused on its
subversion of ancient motifs and of classical and early modern genres such as the epic and
the pastoral novel to signpost the regenerative capacity of centuries-old Western
ideologies (Fuchs and Martínez-San Miguel 676; Ryjik 594). Others have carefully
discussed the ways in which Balbuena complicates and upends various traditions of city
descriptions to convey the rhetorical ideal of a bountiful colonial *urbs* offering seemingly
inexhaustible material and financial resources to Spain and the rest of Europe (Lafaye 52;
Sabat de Rivers “El Barroco” 33; Terukina *passim*). The commercial implications of
Balbuena’s concept of abundance have been brought home by Luis Íñigo Madrigal. In
“*Grandeza mexicana* de Bernardo de Balbuena o ‘El interés, señor de las naciones’” (1992),
he offers a formidable interpretation of “interés,” disentagling the ways in which
conceptions of religious and secular wealth evidenced in the themes of usury, *cudicia*, and
material gain provide a connective thread throughout the discursive matrix of Balbuena’s
poem. A similar concern belies John Beverly’s reading, which hinges on the figure of the
*cornucopia*, the accumulation of linguistic excess and fictive market capital deployed in the
colonial recourse to *gongorismo*, an exercise of indoctrination “para mantener la hegemonía
española en América” (“Sobre Góngora” 43). Beverly continues:

> En la imaginación del barroco la posibilidad de sublimación no puede
separarse de una conciencia agudizada de la imperfección y la mortalidad,
creando así una oscilación perpetua entre monumentalización y entropía:
el “vuelo atrevido” acaba en “desvanecimiento”, la cornucopia revela el
esqueleto constituido por su propia elaboración lingüística, la figura
poética completada es una “tumba”, la afinidad estética más profunda se
siente no con el palacio, sino con la belleza mediatizada de la ruina, en
donde la naturaleza ha “deshecho” una ilusión humana de poder y
permanencia. (44)

One gets the sense, however, that the overwhelming proliferation of subordinate parts in
*Grandeza mexicana* is not just due to aesthetic pageantry—of an awkward textuality caught
in the gaps between the monstrous baroque and the seemingly more demure mannerist ideology that preceded it. Despite the powerful subterfuges of gongorismo, Balbuena’s discursive machine clicks and clacks audibly: from the jumble of prefaces and textual commentaries to lines, stanzas, and chapters of irregular structure, to a ciphered language hell-bent on capturing in depersonalized, blurry clusters the peoples, festivals, horses, streets, and buildings of Mexico City (Gómez 543; del Valle, “Grandeza” 41; Ryjik 593). But however enticing this novel urban context, it is somehow still insufficient.

Unfulfilled material desire might help explain why, as the primary supplier of natural resources for early modern Europe, the hinterlands of colonial capital gain prominence in the final chapter of “Grandeza mexicana”:

¿En qué guarismo hallará unidades al rigor, los trabajos, asperezas,
calmas, tormentas, hambre, mortandades,

tierras fragosas, riscos y malezas,
profundos ríos, desiertos intratables,
bárbaras gentes, llenas de fiezas,

que en estos nuevos mundos espantables
pasaron tus católicas banderas,

hasta volverlos a su trato afables? (123, my emphasis)

Here the uncharted frontier constitutes a realm of infinite possibility. It acts as an appendage to the city by signaling precisely the direction of its growth, past the geometric order and concert of the Spanish town yet still closer in proximity to the surrounding ring of Indian reductions. Mediating these spaces, the beyond and the unknown, is Balbuena’s “indio feo.” One can well envision this figure as a textual antecedent to the savage

104 The Indian as urban outlier is also supported by Ryjik, who studies its proscriptive position in the hierarchy of the verses: “[La aparición del ‘indio feo’ al final de la obra no parece nada casual. El contraste
Indian that proliferated in circum-Enlightenment visual narratives, from Albert Eckhout’s full-length ethnographic portraits to *casta* painting (chapter 5 of this dissertation specifically engages with the latter visual genre). As an aestheticized, yet not fully-containable poetic signifier, the final “indio feo” becomes counterpart to the “bárbaras gentes” featured in the previous citation, which elaborates upon the textual depiction of the fierce, savage Indians of the introduction. 105 Both entities, the singular and plural constructions of the Indian are, like bookends, inseparable from one another. Their appearance in the introduction and epilogue completes the arc of desire that charts the Baroque’s elusive mastery of art over nature. This is not to say, however, that their guise is cut from the same cloth. Contrary to what commentators have suggested (Merrim 123), the final treatment of the native, the “indio feo,” must be set apart from the plural Indian that exists as one with nature for it constitutes a productive reproduction (that is, a product and a reduction) of the faceless indigenous masses that pose an incommensurable threat to the colonial civilizing project. Toward the end of this chapter, I will return to the

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105 “Ahí, en los más remotos confines destas Indias occidentales, a la parte de su Poniente, casi en aquellos mismos linderos que siendo limite y raya al trato y comercio humano parece que la naturaleza, cansada de dilatarse en tierras tan fragosas y destempladas, no quiso hacer más mundo, sino que alzándose con aquel pedazo de suelo lo dejó ocioso y vacio de gente, dispuesto a solas las inclemencias del cielo y a la jurisdicción de unas yermas y espantosas soledades, en cuyas desiertas costas y abrasados arenales a sus solas resurta y quiebre con melancólicas intercadencias la resaca y tumbos de mar, que sin oírse otro aliento y voz humana por aquellas sordas playas y carcomidas rocas suena: o quando mucho se ve coronar el peinado risco de un monte con la temerosa imagen y espantosa figura de algún indio salvaje, que en suelta y negra cabellera con presto arco y ligera flechas, a quien él en velocidad excede, sale a caza de alguna fiera menos intractable y feroz que el ánimo que la sigue: al fin en estos acabos de mundo, remates de lo descubierto y últimas extremidades deste gran cuerpo de la tierra, lo que la naturaleza no pudo, que fue hacerlos dispuestos y apetecibles al trato y comodidades de la vida humana, la hambre del oro y golosina del interés tuvo maña y presunción de hacer, plantando en aquellos baldíos y ociosos campos una famosa población de españoles, cuyas reliquías, aunque sin la florida grandeza de sus principios, duran todavía . . .” (55).
materialization of this New World oddity, the ugly Indian, in relation to the “sublimation” of violence in the text, but first I want to connect the figurative aspect of this passage (“¿En qué guarismo hallará unidades al rigor . . . ?”), which attributes numerical quantities to a plane in space, to the local or global particular projection of the grid of coloniality in “Grandeza.”

I have already mentioned that Balbuena’s poem transcurs, for the most part, inside the gridiron of the Spanish republic:

De sus soberbias calles la realeza,  
a las del ajedrez bien comparadas,  
cuadra a cuadra, y aun cuadra pieza a pieza;

porque si al juego fuesen entabladas,  
tantos negros habría como blancos,  
sin las otras colores deslavadas. (70–1)

These stanzas celebrate the orderly system of streets, blocks, buildings, and plazas that give shape to Mexico City’s distinctive checkerboard pattern. In a classical expression of empire’s sweeping gaze, each plot of land and physical structure (“cuadra a cuadra”), each activity carried out by its peoples (“y aun cuadra pieza a pieza”) is, in deed and in discourse, contained within the rigid frames of the traza. Restating Merrim’s comments on the Spanish Jesuit Baltasar de Gracián and his definition of concepto (which enlists both artistic wit and verbal play), Balbuena “relocates difference into the miniature, manageable world of poetics” (44). In a referential game of mirrors and metonyms the mathematical abstraction of the checkerboard spins off into the city traza, which
ultimately abbreviates the vast, insurmountable coordinates of the Spanish colonial world.\footnote{In a short piece on Balbuena’s redeployment of mannerist tropes published in 1983, a year prior to \textit{La ciudad letrada}, Rama already suggests a link between the Spanish author’s formal manipulation of size and scale and the Latin American grid or damero: “Es más fácil verlo en la \textit{Grandeza Mexicana}, cuya proposición estructural responde a un designio que sólo parece posible en el siglo que vio el avance de la óptica y se planteó por primera vez de un modo técnico la concepción del modelo reducido y proporcional. . . . En la pasión por el emblema y el concetto, por el jeroglífico y el apólogo, por la empresa y la metáfora, encontramos un mismo principio rector que tanto se aplica al diseño gráfico como al verbal, y que consiste en el reconocimiento de las virtudes del modelo reducido, el cual ya no es la realidad sino la invención cultural y, mediante un cambio en las dimensiones, es capaz de absorber una totalidad que sería inabarcable en sus medidas naturales” (“Fundación” 18). Despite the glaring similarities behind both structural principles, to my knowledge, no critic has pointed out this connection.}

Between 1525 and 1571 several municipalities at the heart of New Spain conformed the geo-political landscape of what Stephanie Merrim calls the “Renaissance Ordered City” (14), “an exclusively New World phenomenon” that took place during the sixteenth century (63). Yet with each municipality that was added came a new order, and quickly a new \textit{traza} ensued. These local grids related dynamically to each other. Their relationship developed in subsequent stages of expansion and growth. First came the “período formativo de la organización espacial” of the urban center (1524–1535) (Mier y Terán Rocha \textit{passim}); then the accelerated metropolitan expansion into the disorderly array of huts and shelters that took place in 1541; followed by the resettlement, thirty years later, of the community of indigenous artisans located between San Francisco and Tacuba, when by mandate of the viceroy a separate \textit{traza} for the Indians was established (Kubler 74). A structural feature shared by the two republics, the ascriptive geometry of the urban grid determined the bipartite layout of subsequent towns in the political unity of the \textit{pueblo de españoles} and the \textit{pueblo de indios}.\footnote{As Nemser also points out, the scholarly literature is divided on the degree of enforcement applied to the separation between the \textit{pueblos de indios} and the \textit{pueblos de españoles} (“Toward a Genealogy” 44). See Edmundo O’Gorman (“Reflexiones”). Some regard it as a spatial solution to the governance challenges facing the} Moreover, it effectively consolidated the
symbolic and administrative life of the city in a few architectural landmarks—a central plaza surrounded by a church and the city council (ayuntamiento). Coeval to the territorial administration of Mexico, toward the second half of the sixteenth century and increasingly thereafter, the city was engaged in ongoing deliberations about the drainage complex that transformed the surrounding lacustrine environments into usable ground. Though adding a considerable surface area to the developing urban landmass, the internal expansion of its territorial grid of intelligibility did not forestall the perception that both water and natives posed an obstacle to the productive capabilities of the region (del Valle, “Grandeza” 39). Juridically and in principle, the traza of the república de españoles remained exclusively reserved for the nucleus of Spanish activity; however, in reality the different human groups or castas interacted and intermingled in public spaces such as the market and in the range of sexual practices, from the coercive to the consensual, that managed to evade the quasi-panoptical surveillance of this inner perimeter of regulation.

Consider now Balbuena’s deployment of a chromatic metaphor—“porque si al juego fuesen entablados, / tantos negros habría como blancos”—to reference the various game “pieces” set against the traditional chess tableau. The sure mention of the castas and “otras colores deslavadas” alludes to the concept of calidad or personal quality and merit associated with the color of one’s skin (Carrera, Imagining 6; Martínez 262). However, somatic valorization is closely connected to other markers of distinction and legitimacy appearing throughout the text. The use of the term traza in the following lines contains a capital of New Spain. Magnus Mörner adopts the term “segregation” (“La política”). See also Mörner and Charles Gibson.
telling slippage between the social position, mobility, and physical qualities of its inhabitants, on the one hand, and the ordered design of the city, on the other:

De varia traza y varios movimientos
varias figuras, rostros y semblantes,
de hombres varios, de varios pensamientos;

arrieros, oficiales, contratantes,
cachopines, soldados, mercaderes,
galanes, caballeros, pleiteantes;

clérgicos, frailes, hombres y mujeres,
de diversa color y profesiones,
de vario estado y varios pareceres;

diferentes en lenguas y naciones,
en propósitos, fines y deseos,
y aun a veces en leyes y opiniones;

y todos por atajos y rodeos
en esta gran ciudad desaparecen
de gigantes volviéndose pigmeos. (64–5, my emphasis)

Taking Balbuena’s cue, this passage serves as an “atajo” or shortcut to my next point.

Which is that the expansion of the urban traza can be attributed in many ways not just to the practical exigencies of measuring, organizing, and parceling New World territories, as many have correctly argued, but also to the fundamental impulse to control and contain the colonial body. In its full range of difference and variability, this body can only be properly accounted for in the order of abstraction. As the contours of bodies disappear, the reader is left contemplating the rows and squares of Mexico City’s grid from a detached bird’s-eye perspective.

To illustrate the global visage of the grid of coloniality in Grandeza mexicana, I turn attention to the figure of Atlas in the auto-gloss to the poetic composition in honor of
Ávila y Cadena, the prelate of New Galicia. In his commentary to the lines “Así también, oh padre soberano, / Atlante firme a nuestras justas leyes, / si no eres Dios, en su lugar veniste” (15), Balbuena offers an unconvincing declaration of piety and religious governance riddled with the customary Latinate aphorism:

Atlante fue rey de Mauritania a quien Perseo, mostrándole la cabeza de Medusa, convirtió en monte, y los poetas fingieron que sustentaba el cielo, porque habiendo sido el inventor de la esfera material, de ordinario la traía en la mano, y así sustentaba el cielo en su figura. Es nombre que admirablemente cuadra al Prelado, que ha de ser una firme columna y puntal de las leyes que son cielo de la república. Porque así como el cielo con sus influencias conserva y rige y vivifica las cosas y les es superior y sin quien el mundo y cuando en él hay perecería, así las leyes en la república son amparo, conservación y defensa suya. A cuya causa dijo Cícero (3. De leg): Nihil est tam aptum ad usum conditionemque, naturae quam lex sine qua nec domus ulla, nec civitas, nec gens, nec hominum universum genus stare, nec rerum natura omnis, nec ipse mundus potest: es la ley como si dijera un cielo conservador trazado tan a medida y tamaño de la naturaleza humana y sus condiciones, que sin él ni la casa ni la república, ni la ciudad, ni sus gentes, ni el universal linaje de los hombres, ni toda la naturaleza de las cosas, ni el mismo mundo puede permanecer y durar. (italics in the original, 27)

The profusion of classical referents gives this passage an anachronistic bent, and like much of the discursive craftwork of *Grandeza mexicana*, several layers of meaning superimpose on this foundation. Most evidently, on the first level, we have the myth of Atlas and its differing contexts of reinterpretation, from Plato and Herodotus to the European Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and so on. Following its voyage across the northern sea (also known as the Atlantic), this narrative eventually made its way into viceregal celebrations and street performances. For example, let us consider the journal of the Spanish soldier Josephe de Mugaburu, who reports that an effigy of the Greco–Roman Titan took part in a 1659 festival in Lima: “There was a parade of floats . . . [with] figures of all the viceroys who had governed this kingdom; then eight costumed
Incas; followed by a very large figure carrying the world on his shoulders and with veins of silver and gold, offering it all to the prince” (qtd. in Merrim 27). The colonial Atlas surrounded by Indians in costume exposes the performatic aspects of the politics of appropriation that marked the Spanish enterprise in the New World, a contentious and continuing history aptly rendered, slightly over three centuries later, by Eduardo Galeano’s poignant title-phrase, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971).

On the second level, we must consider the use of architectural referents. By far the most pervasive allusion of this nature is the column or atlantes. Without further embellishments, this fixture often stands as a symbol of the religious and political governance “que hoy sirve de columna / al gran peso del mundo y su concierto” (62); or, in the case of the glass columns that support the shifting soil of Mexico City, as the invisible hand of *techné* which calibrates the delicate balance between land and water that was necessary for the survival of the city (del Valle, “*Grandeza*” 46). Perhaps in reference to these efforts, a running theme of Balbuena’s full discursive apparatus is the reconstruction and beautification of the city, which the lyrical voice discusses in terms of the region’s aqueous origins:

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                                 sobre una delicada costra blanda,
                                 que en dos claras lagunas se sustenta,
                                 circada de olas por cualquier banda.

                                 labrada en grande proporción y cuenta
                                 de torres, chapiteles, ventanajes
                                 su máquina soberbia se presenta. (63)
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The use of the term “labrada” renders Mexico City as a baroque artifact, and expresses a tension between the impulse to both miniaturize and monumentalize the greatness of the
city. This architectural trope reappears in the *dubitatio* following the initial description of the former Aztec capital that opens Chapter I, titled ‘De la famosa México el asiento’:

“¿Qué Atlante habrá, qué Alcides que sustente / peso de cielo, y baste a tan gran carga, / si tú no das la fuerza suficiente?” (61). If, on the one hand, stressing the organicity of part and whole as well as the geo-political centrality of Mexico City are of supreme importance for Balbuena, so is depicting the colonial capital as a watershed moment in the universal monarchy of the seventeenth century. To this end, Balbuena plots worldly cartographic mensuration as an enterprise internal to the Spanish empire. Consistent with Balbuena’s play on scale and proportion, at the local level this enterprise attains its expression in the many ongoing campaigns to reorganize and rebuild the city. In Chapter II, ‘Origen y grandeza de edificios,’ for instance, we see less of the architectural properties of buildings, as promised, and more of the burgeoning relationship between Mexico City and the new Atlantic order. This chapter opens with a timely consideration of the geo-political coordinates of the Spanish empire:

*El Bravo brío español que rompe y mide,*
a pesar de Neptuno y sus espantos,
*los golfos en que un mundo en dos divide,*

*y aquellos nobles estandartes santos,*
que con su sombra dieron luz divina
a las tinieblas en que estaban tantos

......

dando a su imperio y ley gentes extrañas
que le obedezcan; y añadiendo al mundo
una española isla y dos Españas. (68, my emphasis)
Balbuena oscillates between a global and a transatlantic framework to explicate the emergence of Mexico City, and centers (if he does not really do it in other parts of the text) the Spanish experience within this division of the world. The italicized parts above emphasize how for Balbuena the New Spanish order emerges from the instrumental partitioning of the world in two basic units, to which all other orders are subordinated.

The final level of meaning previously alluded to in my reading of the colonial Atlas can be found in the period’s cartographic knowledge. In this sense, Mugaburu’s description offers an ideological fold to the aforementioned lines: “y los poetas fingieron que sustentaba el cielo, porque habiendo sido el inventor de la esfera material, de ordinario la traía en la mano, y así sustentaba el cielo en su figura.” The dictionary of Spanish by Sebastián de Covarrubias (1611) defines *fingir* as “hacer alguna cosa de barro, de do se llamó *figulo* el alfaharero, o ollero, que hace vasos de tierra. Esto es en rigor, pero extiéndese a todo aquello que se forma y forja, o con el entendimiento o con la mano” (547). This notion of “fingimiento,” although attributed primarily to classical poets in *Grandeza mexicana*, also extends to the self-fashioning of its author as maker and artisan of Mexico’s “greatness.” If clay cups and maps are products of a kind of world-making that takes the earth, literally and symbolically, as primary material and object to be shaped, molded, and manipulated, so does painting, another skill associated with the cosmographer’s trade. Throughout “Grandeza,” Balbuena likens his composition to a visual portrait or *retrato*, a revealing but often overlooked aspect of the poem that underscores its importance as a spatial description. Following the visual historian Jessica Maier, the romance origins of *retrato*, the dizzying city portrait Balbuena offers the subject
of his unrequited affection, doña Isabel, also serves to unlock the machine compartment of a minutely calibrated artifactextuality: “In Renaissance Italy the term *ritratto* or portrait was applied to a wide range of subjects, but most consistently to images of people and of cities. It tended to be used as an equivalent for the Latin terms *imago*, *simulacrum*, and especially *effigies*” (711). Furthermore, “*ritrarre*, as indicated by the Latin prefix signaling repetition, implied a mechanical operation of copying [. . .] necessary to elevate the subject to an ideal plane” (Maier 713). In conjunction with these ideological developments, the unprecedented reproduction of city portraiture in northern Renaissance print culture from the fifteenth century onward, along with the mimetic specificity of recycled woodcuts from international bestsellers such as Münster’s *Cosmographia* (1544) (Maier 717–22), paved the way for the rise and convergence of other, uniquely groundbreaking forms of reproductive media—particularly, the strategic assemblage conformed by the grid of coloniality, a describable end product of historical and discursive forces evoked throughout Balbuena’s poetic composition.

The cartographic undertones of “Grandeza” did not escape its early audience, either. In a sonnet composed to honor its author’s literary achievements, the lawyer Miguel de Zaldierna de Mariaca asks Balbuena to expand the manuscript and turn it into a “universal Cosmografía” (10). While Mercator was the first to coin the term *atlas* in 1578 to refer to a collection of maps, concomitant early modern Western traditions associated this figure with Ptolemy—whose *Almagest* plotted earthly locations within a grid and included instructions for making a celestial globe—and rarely, although significantly, with the King of Spain (Lippincott). For the tastes of a courtly audience intoxicated by the
early modern explosion of wonder-inducing maps and city views, the Spanish author is both tactful and strategic when referencing, in Chapter III, their shared visual language: “México al mundo por igual divide, / y como un sol la tierra se le inclina / y en toda ella parece que preside” (79). In this statement Balbuena traces an imaginary line that crosses the globe and, in the same stroke, positions the “colonial metropolis” at its center (Fuchs and Martínez San Miguel 681). Casting Mexico as a kind of global capital, the figure of Atlas reorients the interior frontiers of the early modern grid of coloniality by assigning the former a privileged location in the seventeenth-century “esfera material.” Reading this phrase against the grain of the famous last line of the argument and title of the epilogue of “Grandeza”—“Todo en este discurso está cifrado” (113)—, we suspect that Balbuena really does intend to englobe everything that crosses his path; or, as Sabat de Rivers succinctly puts it, “todas las cosas de este otro lado del mar” (“Géneros poéticos” 65). And he would be remiss not to do so in order to acquire the favors with which New Spanish viceregal poets were rewarded. As Íñigo Madrigal points out, the oddly-split Chapters VII and VIII—stemming from a single line of the argument, ‘Gobierno ilustre, religión y estado’—“extreman el sobrepujamiento hasta grados curiosos: el Virrey merecería ser dueño del mundo entero; el Arzobispo de México, Papa y el elogio de la religiosidad se convierte, sobre todo, en la ponderación de los aspectos materiales de iglesias, conventos e instituciones pías” (33). Beyond this local sphere of influence, the notion of imperio et dominium that emerged and “solidified” during the Hapsburgs was powered by the multidirectional ebb and flow of goods, information, and peoples from the four corners of the world, generating or repurposing technologies of enclosure such as
the commodity and the map as its primary mode of reproduction. Both are virtually indistinct from each other throughout the poem, but especially in the passages that Balbuena reroutes Mexico City through the irruptive exoticism of the East:

La India marfil, la Arabia olores cría,  
Hierro Vizcaya, las Dalmacias oro,  
Plata el Pirú, el Maluco especiería,  
Seda el Japón, el mar del Sur tesoro  
de ricas perlas, nácares la China,  
Púrpura Tiro, y dátils el moro,

México hermosura peregrina,  
y altísimos ingenios de gran vuelo,  
Por fuerza de astros o virtud divina;  
Al fin, si es la beldad parte de cielo,  
México puede ser cielo del mundo,  
Pues cría la mayor que goza el suelo. (90–1)

Materiality thus becomes a decisive cartographic index and a phenomenological manual about the conscious experience of early modern space. Merrim has attributed this strategy to Balbuena’s effacement of indigenous exotica (121–2). In addition, one must relate this epistemic suppression to Quijano’s meditation on the intractable pact that exists between coloniality and the “Orient,” in his view “the only category with the honor of being recognized as the other of Europe and the West” (“Coloniality” 542). By some poetic alchemy, however, the ivories, silks, and treasures of the Orient transform in “Grandeza” from objects of the “Other” into objects of the “Self.” Unlike Columbus, for whom the East Indies represents a strange but knowable proximity with which to channel the experiences of the ineffable and the out-of-this-world, the peripatetic commodities that adorn the pages of Balbuena’s text approximate the Orient to the domestic scene. In
doing so, they hint at the refined aesthetic taste and purchasing power of a colonial elite that, by the seventeenth century, had firmly begun to align itself with a long history of European dominance.

The commodity objects consumed by colonial cosmopolitan elites in many cases were not very different from the aspirational goods of the common people. In the colonial period these most likely arrived from Europe, China, Japan, India and the Philippines to Acapulco or Port Vallarta in Mexico via the fleets of Manila.108 Between 1565 and 1815 (that is, roughly from the year Bartolomé de Las Casas finished the Historia de las Indias that we encountered in chapter 2 to the dissolution of the genre of casta painting that we will study in chapter 5) as many as four “Manila galleons” or naos de china per year made their annual round circuit. The bi-local ports dispatched prized goods between the central market or parián in Spain’s colonial metropolis in the Pacific and the capital’s main tianguis (from the Nahuatl word for market) or plaza del mercado in Mexico City (rebaptized parián after non-compliant mobs burned down the viceroy’s palace in 1692). In one direction, “gold, silver, gems, textiles, indigenous crafts, cochineal, sisal, chocolate, vanilla, corn, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, peanuts, and squash” bled out from the colonies, crossed vast oceans, and entered circulation into European capitals; in the other, “spices, silk, ivory, textiles, carpets, ceramics, sculpture, and furniture” performed a world-altering transfusion to the American Indies (Bunker and Macías-González 60). Economists calculate that the amount of silver alone that was mobilized, for instance, ranged “between two and three million pesos a year by 1590 and as much as 12 million pesos in

108 See the foundational study by William Schurz, The Manila Galleon.
Figure 3.7. “Prometheus,” Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493, woodcut engraving on paper (Bredekamp 22).

Figure 3.8. Gregor Van der Schart, Willibald Imhoff, the elder, 1570, clay sculpture. Skulpturengalerie der Staatlichen, Berlin (Bredekamp 22).
1597” (Kindleberger 3). The cargo transported in each fleet through the official trade route (not counting contraband) “was probably sold for at least two million or more pesos” in Acapulco (Fish 438).

Returning to the scene of Atlas, the image of a newly conjured colonial demi-god carrying all this wealth leaves behind a profound impression that takes us back—if not precisely to the origins of Western humanity, as Balbuena would eagerly hope—to a relatively proximate history of conquest and colonization. In choosing to depict Atlas with world in hand (as opposed to shouldering the burden of the terrestrial sphere, one of its most common representations), Balbuena evokes an iconographic tradition delighted in the creative powers of the collector, an increasingly important figure of early modernity that brings together the emergent capitalist values of entrepreneurship and aestheticism (Figs. 3.7 and 3.8). In these portraits, which were either painted or sculpted, the collector often appears regarding rings and other spherical objects. I want to suggest that this tradition is recast in a particular language of dominance in Grandeza mexicana, and even appeals to a supreme imperial rational order termed by Dussel as the ego conquiro.109 As “inventor de la esfera material” and a kind of inanimate counterpart to the Pope and the King of Spain, this figure resonates with what, in another context, German historian of art Horst Bredekamp identifies as “a monument-like personification of the new conception of mechanics” (26). This new conception arose during the sixteenth and

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109 According to Dussel, this subject position emerges prior to Descartes’s ego cogito. “Lo más grave es que el Otro, el otro hombre como otro (el indio, el africano, el asiático, la mujer, etc.) queda reducido a ser una idea, un objeto, el sentido constituido desde un ‘yo constituyente originario’: el Otro es entificado, cosificado, alienado a un mero cogitatum” (211). See Dussel, “Dominación–Liberación. Un discurso teológico distinto,” Concilium 96 (1974): 328–52. A version of the original article can be accessed here: <http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/otros/20120131103035/8apen.pdf>.
seventeenth centuries aided in great part by the basic tools of geometry—“such as a compass, a square, a ruler, and books” (Bredekamp 26)—as well as by baroque perspectivalism, which cultivated multiple disembodied, God-like points of view (geometric centers) fraught with considerable recourse to subterfuge, deception, and dissimulation (Mayers 10; Mignolo, The Darker Side passim). Held in relation to the Western relics and consumer goods that dominate the pages of “Grandeza,” the colonial scene of Atlas gives the supreme ruler(s) an air of Promethean collector admiring the triumph of artifice and craft over “nature’s hardest and most valuable materials—metals and precious gems” (Bredekamp 21). The profound textual consequences of this discursive strategy can be further appreciated if we consider that, from the offset, Balbuena primes Mexico City to become a privileged point and object of the West. Equally significantly, however, is that the courtly author makes this point of view attainable to his readers, arguably the lettered class of Spanish cultural in-betweens like himself that, next to creoles, conformed the high and middle echelons of a new form of colonial governmentality.

Tracing the uses of the term posesión in early modern Spanish cultural productions, Rolena Adorno builds upon Las Casas’s use of the familiar imperative “to have and to possess”—which refers “to Amerindian societies’ actual and legal (de facto and de jure) possession over their ‘princedoms, kingdoms, states, high offices, territorial jurisdictions, and domains’”—and examines it alongside early modern and contemporary grammars. Adorno extends its applicability “beyond concepts of sovereignty and the ownership of lands to include those of the practice of governance and self-governance, the enjoyment
of the full exercise of human intellect and reason, and the actual or perceived holding of authority, be it political, historical, or literary” (The Polemics vii–viii). In Balbuena’s text, this possession is part politics, part poetics, and part performance. On the one hand, the colonial script of the figure of Atlas renders the entire orbs an object amenable to (New) Spanish control and religious civility. Following a related line of reasoning by Merrim, it equates the Old World with the New World by both “projecting the colony onto a global framework” (40) and by presenting the image of a “single, somehow united world rather than as a universe riven into two” (39). On the other, the colonial life of Atlas suggests that despite (or precisely because of) its pivotal role in the new mercantile order, the island–object of Mexico is still, in the seventeenth century, up for grabs—that is, not only claimed by but also intrinsically and naturally offered to the Crown—and, for that matter, the rest of the world. As both Balbuena and Mugaburu remind us, this picture of worldly ownership is fundamentally incomplete without the shadow of the native becoming complicit in the colonial scene of evacuation.

The polemics of possession Balbuena reintroduces in “Grandeza”’s retrato begets an emblazoned sense of ownership authorized through the public display of surface detail. Thus, the reader is forced to look closely at the textural brocade of the poem, richly woven from the militant tools and trifles to the wondrous treasures that perform the technological work of empire. Beyond the pleasurable guise of a spell-binding surface, what the grid plan and these myriad objects have in common can be summarized in the following bipartite logic: adaptable reproducibility and spatial enclosure. These two dynamics undergird the analytic construct that I have called the grid of coloniality, which
highlights the joint development of discourses of space and material agency in colonial physical contexts and signifying practices. In each case, adaptable reproducibility owes much to several interrelated processes contributing to the early modern rise of print culture (with writing and engraving as its favorite modes of inscription). We could also add the combination of older forms of representation with emergent technologies made possible by the advent of Western colonialisms, such as the development of a mimetic cartographic imagination that emphasizes “likeness” and “life-like” representation, as well as the intensification of what Balbuena calls the “tráfago y concurso” (82) between early modern nations and their colonial enclaves.

OBJECTS EVERYWHERE

In making a transition between the grid of coloniality and objects I turn to The Art of Allegiance: Visual Culture and Imperial Power in Baroque New Spain (2007) by Michael J. Schreffler, where the art historian offers a productive link between objects and space. Schreffler argues that because they enclose spatiality, objects “can be seen as components of the ‘production’ or ‘colonization’ of space” (Schreffler 132). I turn to the concept of enclosure as a way of thinking about materiality as rendered by an ambivalent colonial poetic form that, contrary to the art objects studied by Schreffler, does “attempt to transform” inasmuch as it appears “to reproduce and maintain a spatial order that referred in multiple ways to the crown and the court of the Spanish Habsburgs” (133). In this section I will discuss the ways in which Balbuena fundamentally refocuses New Spain in the cartography of the Spanish empire by showing dominance over a host of objects that not only fulfill but also exceed the logic of the commodity.
To fully grasp the extent to which Balbuena transforms Mexico City into a
conscripted object of empire, one needs to just take a look at the sheer vastness of
“Grandeza mexicana”’s material universe. Like flashing billboards affixed to the
coordinates of the territory, the hundreds of objects that circulate through its streets
appear in constant mobility, refusing to adopt any given shape or meaning for more than
a few moments. Again in Chapter III (which by now fully and unabashedly disappoints as
the bottom-up description it advertises itself to be), the spectacular parade of objects
erupts, line after line, almost mechanistically, and with each passing object a new bundle
of histories, locations, and temporalities comes into view.

Es la ciudad más rica y opulenta
de más contratación y más tesoro,
que el norte enfriá, ni que el sol calienta.

La plata del Pirú, de Chile el oro
viene a parar aquí y de Terrenate
clavo fino y canela de Tidoró.

De Cambray telas, de Quinsay rescate,
de Sicilia coral, de Siría nardo,
de Arabia incienso, y de Ormuz granate;
diamantes de la India, y del gallardo
Scita balajes y esmeraldas finas,
de Goa marfil, de Siam ébano pardo;
de España lo mejor, de Filipinas
la nata, de Macón lo más precioso,
de ambas Javas riquezas peregrinas;
la fina loza del Sangleý medroso,
las ricas martas de los scitios Caspes,
del Troglodita el cínamo oloroso;
ámbar del Malabar, perlas de Idaspes,
drogas de Egipto, de Pancaya olores,
de Persia alfombras, y de Etoia jaspes;

de la gran China sedas de colores,
piedra bezar de los incultos Andes,
de Roma estampas, de Milán primores;

cuántos relojes ha inventado Flandes,
cuantas telas Italia, y cuántos dijes
labra Venecia en sutilezas grandes;

cuántas Quimeras, Briareos, Giges,
Ambers en bronce y láminas retrata,
de mil colores, hábitos y embijes;

al fin, del mundo lo mejor, la nata
de cuanto se conoce y se practica,
aquí se bulle, vende y se barata. (77–8)

One suspects, however, that it is not the many but a singular entity, Mexico City, that palpitates and flourishes at the center of Balbuena’s mercantile pastoral. The greatness of this Object, the island–city itself, is bolstered by the conglomeration of miniature, gigantic, and collectible parts: luxurious commodities; gifts, ornaments, and treasures; instruments and raw materials; and, through and between them, numerous carriers vectoring, by land and water, the goods that go in and out of the city. Since the opening chapter, the reader is made aware of the ease with which these objects transition from a territorial to a maritime economy, also serving as a bridge between them:

Cruzan sus anchas calles mil hermosas
acequias que cual sierpes cristalinas
dan vueltas y revueltas deleitosas,

libenas de estrechos barcos, ricas minas
de provisión, sustento y materiales
a sus fábricas y obras peregrinas.

We could probably add an additional analytic category to include the foods mentioned throughout the poem, but I feel this category deserves a separate analysis from the one proposed here.
Anchos caminos, puertos principales
por tierra y agua a cuanto el gusto pide
y pueden alcanzar deseos mortales.

Entra una flota y otra se despide,
de regalos cargada la que viene,
la que se va del precio que los mide;

su sordo ruido y tráfago entretiene,
el contratar y aquel bullirse todo,
que nadie un punto de sosiego tiene. (65)

As we began to see in chapter 2 with Columbus’s use of the term, free-range wealth animates the biunivocal relation between the Spanish meaning of *thesaurus* (*tesoro*) as “dinero o joyas de un príncipe que está en custodia” (Covarrubias 918) and its present use as “a collection of concepts or words arranged according to sense” (*OED*). Thus, material surplus snowballs into discursive excess compounded of synonyms, *amplificati*os, and metonymic connectors highlighting Mexico City as the storehouse of wealth of the New World.

In recent years, scholars have begun to pay attention to the presence of material objects in “Grandeza mexicana.” In her book *The Spectacular City, Mexico, and Colonial Hispanic Literary Culture* (2010), Stephanie Merrim discusses Balbuena’s New World materialism, which “situates his poem squarely in an empire of things” straddling aesthetic and mercantile ideological claims (110, emphasis in the original). To enlist the fierce potential of objects in crafting an early capitalist imperial history, Merrim argues, the Spanish author relies on the narrative modes of the list and the collection. Moreover, he evokes the figures of the marketplace and the cabinet of curiosity or *Wunderkammer* to abridge and “inventorialize” a model of political exemplarity and civic virtue that is
encapsulated in the things from all over the world “that populate Balbuena’s literary Mexico City more palpably and conspicuously than people” (101). The burgeoning metropolis thus becomes a transnational window display fit for a colonial Atlas.

Merrim’s analysis constitutes an important first step for the study of materiality in “Grandeza,” but her approach frequently underplays the well-established pact between commodity fetishism and ideology. In the same stroke, Merrim splits objecthood from subjectivity, denying agency to textualized objects beyond their fixed position as passive, obdurate, and ultimately innocuous consumer goods:

As it breaks the containers that previously held the New World in careful check and redistributes textual energies, “Grandeza” releases the marketplace from its old job of merchandising and marketing otherness. In the mercantile wonder cabinet overflowing with delights edible or otherwise consumable that is “Grandeza”’s Spectacular Mexico City, things, for once, are richly, self-importantly, and militantly just things. (125, emphasis in the original)

On the other hand, Ivonne del Valle’s recent analysis of water in “Grandeza” is careful of not losing track of the connections between materiality and subjectivity. Although like Merrim she points out that objects far outnumber people, del Valle observes that commercial dealings are, in fact, the only activity shared by Mexico City’s inhabitants. This results, according to del Valle, in an ontological conflation between subjects and objects that reinforces the fetishistic gaze of the poem:

[H]uman beings . . . are transformed by Balbuena into the things they produce or the tools they use (“telas,” “vasos,” “esculturas,” “pincel,” “buril,” “moldes”) (cloths, vessels, sculptures, paint brush, engraver’s chisel, molds) or else reduced to, or contained in, the name of the labor they perform (“hilanderos,” “plateros,” “lapidarios”) (spinners, silversmiths, jewelers). (“Grandeza” 41)

“The hustle and bustle of objects,” del Valle continues, “gave the city its character and
not the other way around; Mexico City is blurred in order to become the neutral scene of a commercial epic” (“Grandeza” 42). For del Valle, the relative autonomy of objects in “Grandeza” is indicative of a temporal crisis in which objects perform a cultural and social emptying that paves the way for a new kind of history, “History in the form of an economy that obliterated the cultural and historical currents that preceded it and gave it origin” (42, emphasis in the original).

Both Merrim and del Valle stabilize their discussion of the encounter of colonial discourse and material poetics by recourse to the category of the commodity, which they intimate describes Balbuena’s response to the competitive market economy of the seventeenth century. The risk of such analysis is that it distracts from the polyvalent meanings of objects in the global colonial project described or at the very least forestalled by Balbuena. The repetitious mention of the “same” objects throughout the text, for instance, quite often serves different rhetorical purposes (I will return to this point in my reading of one very specific object, the irregular pearl, in the final section of this chapter). And it is precisely their lack of semantic fixity, which could feel at once like presence and absence, that makes these objects effective agents of empire. Even when produced in New Spain, Balbuena’s objects seem to belong to an elsewhere. Provincial objects, while created and constructed by different sectors of the city’s artisans, are never fully and properly “Mexican”; there is nothing that sets them apart from their ideal projection. Instead, they become virtually indistinguishable from any other object imported from Europe, Africa, or Asia. Conspicuous for their absence are the pre-Hispanic relics or indigenous objects that W.J.T. Mitchell calls the “objects of the Other,” objects that cause
ambivalence and polarity because they do not fit easily into imperial categories of use, value, and beauty (158). It is important to distinguish that Balbuena overloads Mexico City not just with any object, but with highly politicized objects of empire. In this capacity, the proliferation of material referents in the text becomes the crowning glory of the grid of coloniality. As generative spatial enclosures, objects are active instruments of the grid’s reproducibility, carry to term the objectives of empire, and mediate the different scales of agency negotiated throughout the text.

In general, the geo-politics of materiality in “Grandeza mexicana” is relatively straightforward. European and Oriental commodities, dutifully transformed into objects of the self, serve as explosive artifacts undermining the Mexican object’s particular form of value:

Los ricos vasos de bruñida plata,
vajillas de oro que el precioso cinto
del cielo en sus vislumbres se retrata;

no los vio tales Dodone y Corinto,
ni a su buril llegó el que alaba Grecia
del famoso escultor del laberinto;

do el arte a la materia menosprecia,
añadiendo valor fuerte y quilates
a lo que el mundo más estima y precia. (82)

Not precisely the product of fine craftsmanship and artisanal labor, which impart superior value to gold and silver-plated artifacts over the things “que el mundo más estima y precia,” the debased work of nature includes precious stones and metals that are reared locally and flow in and toward Mexico City, only to end their journey in Europe. In Chapter IV, ‘Letras, virtudes y variedad de oficios,’ the figure of the artisan draws
together, in a feat of utilitarian aestheticism, the transcultural pairing of instruments of European invention and American raw materials. Concerning the pervasive multiplicity of tools in the fourth chapter, I would like to amplify del Valle’s claim by reconsidering their centrality—not just textually in the succession of chapters, but also in the discursive apparatus of the poem.

We have seen thus far how Balbuena deftly manipulates the classical and geographical epistemes of his age, molding, adapting, and reshaping them to produce a textual artifact unlike any other produced in Mexico City in the seventeenth century. This can be attributed to the fact that Balbuena is a writer who aspires to achieve with poetry a level of iconicity and referentiality that is typical of the fine arts. In many ways, Balbuena’s artistic alter-ego brings him closer to the hordes of painters, sculptors, engravers, jewelers, and silversmiths his poem extolls, and whose skilled labor is suggested or represented by the tools of their trade. If brushes, gouges, chisels, forges, needles, etc., suddenly burst into the commercial scene of “Grandeza,” it is to highlight, the material suppleness of the former Tenochtitlan. Not unlike the Theodor De Bry’s role as goldsmith turned engraver, in Balbuena the figure of the New World artisan becomes freighted with ever-increasing cultural significance due to his power to transform physical substance—Mexico City included—into a perfect expression of imperial poiesis. The realization of an ideal colonial metropolis, however, is predicated on the spectral erasure of indigeneity and of a conflictive history of the conquest (weapons and other technologies of war included), all of which become conflated in the rarest artifact of Balbuena’s poem, the
ugly Indian. To speak of this figure, allow me to return once more to the poem’s beginnings.

THE SHAPE OF VIOLENCE

As if waging a representational war against the barbarous nations, in the prologue to the archdeacon Antonio de Ávila y Cadena, Balbuena imagines Mexico’s expansion as a metaphorical process taking place in the world of letters: “Quiero contar una grandeza digna de ser admirada: que ha habido justa literaria en esta ciudad donde han entrado trescientos aventureros, todos en la facultad poética ingenios delicadísimos y que pudieran competir con los más floridos del mundo” (36). This “pacifying” gesture is consistently sustained throughout the poem. In Chapter III (“Caballo, calles, trato, cumplimiento”), for instance, militant poets are replaced with ornament-laden horses parading through the city: “Ricos jaeces de libres costosas / de aljófar, perlas, oro y pedrería, / son en sus plazas ordinarias cosas” (75, my emphasis). One cannot help to question how such excess can become, indeed, so commonplace. In Ryjik’s terms, Balbuena “borra casi por completo cualquier huella de la labor humana (‘el indio feo’) que hace posible la riqueza y la armonía del mundo de la Grandeza” (613).111 From a slightly different perspective, Barbara Fuchs and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel argue that the staged presence of horses in Balbuena’s poetic address to Isabel de Tobar manifests the complexity of colonial racial ideologies, and obliquely expresses emergent tensions between the Spanish settlers and other mixed-blooded castas (690). Thus, wondrous horses

111 Along with Ryjik, I echo Beverly’s observation that “la riqueza aparece como un producto automático de la providencia divina y natural manejada por el sistema imperial, y no como producto de una elaboración humana realizada, en el caso de la economía americana, bajo relaciones de producción sumamente brutales” (Beverly, qtd. in Ryjik 613).
without horsemen and the blinding ornaments that adorn them seem to distract readers from a continuing history of strife and conflict that led to racial uprisings as late as in 1692 when—as recorded by creole polymath Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora in *Alboroto y motín de los indios de México*—widespread hunger and discontent threatened the shaky foundations of urban civility in the colonial capital (see chapter 5 herein). Nonetheless, poetic language is revealed to be the greatest weapon in Balbuena’s garden of post-conquest delights:

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Y esto sin más caudal que atrevimientos
de ánimo belicoso, a cuya espada
por su interés le dará el cielo alientos,
y así gente sin armas, destrozada,
que nunca tuvo juntos mil soldados,
vitoriosa salió con tal jornada. (123)
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Recent analyses—often following Balbuena’s lead—have offered a predominantly aesthetic reading of the text’s “non-violence,” flattening or simply glossing over the disarmingly “passive” character of his rhetoric and the ways in which external (by which I mean both historical and extramural) conflict is neutralized or kept at bay in the textual marketplace of the surface erected in place of a “real” description of Mexico City.¹¹² Precisely for this reason, the irregular pearl or *aljófar* that is ostentatiously set on the equine’s harness lingers in sight and memory; short of shifting shape, one sees that it quickly acquires a surrogate function beyond its market and aesthetic values. By tracing the contours of materiality in the previous stanzas, I would like to propose an alternative way to go about this predicament. This pearl is made to absorb, instead, the symbolic

¹¹² See, primarily, Terukina’s reading of weapons and war in “Grandeza mexicana” (110–11), but also Merrim (125).
weight of the semantic chain *horse-war—*“*indio feo,*” and as such condenses the extractive ideology that positioned the New World, and indigenous territorialities in particular, at the graspable limits of Western civilization:

Y pues ya al cetro general te ensayas,
con que dichosamente el cielo ordena
que en triunfál carro de oro por él vayas,

*entre el menudo aljófar que a su arena*
y a tu gusto entresaca el indio feo,
*yor por tributo del tus flotas llena,*

de mi pobre caudal el corto empleo
recibe en este amago, do presente
conozcas tu grandeza, o mi deseo
de celebrarla al mundo eternamente. (124, my emphasis)

Here, the *aljófar* rematerializes, this time to mark the discursive limits of the text at the ontological limit of indigenous surface—devoid, evidently, of agency and ultimately denied subjectivity—onto which the raw of imperial desire is projected. Reigning in the frontier (of text, land, and possibility) is the all-encompassing grid that resignifies subject-others and spaces constituted in radical exteriority such as the plaza or the untamed jungle as objects of appropriation. The structuring geometry or “guarismo” of its “*unidades al rigor*” is cracked open like the shell or female signifier that is elided in the final lines of the poem, its sharp edges pushing against the confines of urban artifice to exchange colonial wildness into forms of renewable debt and insatiable profit.

**RE-MAPPING THE FIELD**

My analysis of *Grandeza mexicana* has shown that the early modern shift toward spatiality recasts marginal others as particular (ethno-racial) extensions of a colonial materiality that
appealed to different elite sectors of the Spanish viceroyalties. From the vantage point of literature, we can appreciate the ways in which this shift is signaled by the repositioning and secularization of a global gaze located above and beyond the “tráfico y concurso” of the geographic center of the city. We have also seen the ways in which “Grandeza”的 objects of empire are intimately bound to overlapping geo-political notions, thus acquiring an essential role in the geometric formation that I have called the grid of coloniality. Balbuena is clear in conveying that the production of colonial value demands an ambitious summative order that is, by definition, as expansive as it is perennially lacking and incomplete. Much like Cartesian intersecting axes multiplicated ad infinitum, the grid of coloniality does not disallow for the coexistence of different conceptual models—notions of linearity and circularity, for instance—alongside a host of other formations—including asymmetrical intrinsic properties or relations, pre-attentive features, boundless traces, and virtual intensities—all interacting multidimensionally. The tense interrelation of these elements does not weaken the overall foundational effect of the imperial matrix; in fact, these elements become effectively incorporated into the grid of coloniality as a particular state of exteriority required for the constant actualization of the imperial republic. In Grandeza mexicana, such alternative yet complimentary formations allow the likeness of the plan or ideogram (a miniaturized, portable abstraction) to acquire life-like and monumental properties that effectively translate the work of conceptual, imaginative poiesis into the landscape of daily life. We can see the effects of the “peaceful coexistence” of the two in the aesthetization of the figure of ugly Indian, who is a ubiquitous present absence in the text (though in its productivity, the figure of the ugly
Indian is quite different from that of “absent” gold that we saw in chapter 2). Thus, in my reading I have attempted to highlight the ways in which the Indian or native body is buried by the overpopulation of things in the changing imperial field of Mexico City.

In this chapter, I have also tried to demonstrate how objects upset binary oppositions between ethnic and geometric centers in the sense that they either erase or render potable ideas of ethnicity and origin. To be sure, I am suggesting a revision of Mignolo’s earlier thesis, advanced from the observations made by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) during his mission in Asia:

> the power of the center does not depend necessarily on geometric rationalization but, on the contrary, . . . geometric rationalizations are enacted around the power of the ethnic center. Once the ethnic perspective [the locus of enunciation] is detached from the geometric one [the locus of observation], the authoritative center becomes a matter of political power rather than of ethnic subjectivity. (*The Darker Side* 223)

What seems to me most remarkable from a text as short and synthetic as “Grandeza” is that Balbuena is able to rewrite the scene of imperial domination to lay down a system of rule that opens up to a wider exteriority and the concretization of the abstract. On the grounds of the New World, so to speak, Balbuena’s poem animates the spatialization of exclusion, thus showing how raciality works and becomes reproduced. I am using the term “exclusion” in the sense advanced by Denise Ferreira da Silva in *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007), who references its logic to explain how racial difference becomes a function of locality in which “the others of Europe remain outside the scope of its governing principles” (155). For Ferreira da Silva, the logic of exclusion condenses the race relations that emerge after the total war that defined contemporary conceptions of the West and the Rest:
What my reading uncovers, however, is that, even though the logic of exclusion would guide deployments of the arsenal of race relations, it remains subordinated to the logic of obliteration. More important, it shows that the prevailing sociohistorical logic of exclusion—which, as I show elsewhere, emerged in post-World War II versions of race relations—fails to capture racial subjection precisely because, by incorporating the effects of previous moments of the analytics of raciality as an “empirical” given, they necessarily (re)produce the logic of obliteration postulated in the narrative of transcendental poesis and proved in the deployments of productive nomos that compose the analytics of raciality. Therefore, it also constitutes another weapon in the arsenal of the analytics of raciality, one that not only reproduces the affectability of the others of Europe but presupposes the failure of the logic of obliteration, the defining statement of race relations. For this reason, the critical accounts of racial subjection it sustains rewrite the racial itself as foreign—because of an excessive, unbecoming strategy of power—to modern social configurations. (155)

I have attempted to show, on the other hand, how colonial literary discourse anticipated this fraught account of raciality, and to some extent lent it a visual and discursive vocabulary that would become naturalized in modernity.

Due, primarily, to its bewildering monumental proportions, the reticular layout of Mexico City holds in many ways a paramount place in the arsenal of forms of the grid of coloniality. In close to 500 years of “nonlinear history,” to use Manuel De Landa’s suggestive phrase, its ever-expanding gridiron evinces the continuities and ruptures between the mental map of Cortés, the historical actualizations of its plan, and the social life of its form, from discursive representations such as Grandeza mexicana to the embodied experiences of city-dwellers in present-day Jardín Balbuena. But as we know, the grid plan is hardly exclusive to the former Iberian colonies. It became central to the urban history of the United States as well, for instance. Precisely for this shared history, when compared to other spatial formations around the globe the grid plan offers one of the earliest paradigms of transnational comparison available to scholars of colonialism. When
considering the mutual interdependence of the local and the global in the figure of the *traza*, I do not mean to suggest that representation forecloses or is somewhat disconnected from daily life. I merely aim to hint at the feedback loop that avows the two—a bond so foundational that it constitutes, in many ways, the archaeohistory of modernity.

In what follows I delve deeper into the role objects occupy in colonial discourse by focusing on the relationship between materiality and indigeneity. If Balbuena’s objects primarily exist as a function of a colonial imperialism enacted from the margins to suppress forms of otherness, what sorts of subversive potential might objects manifest in texts that contest, or at the very least demonstrate ambivalence, toward the Spanish colonial project in the New World? Can the ugly Indian speak back to the conditions of its own objectification? Migrating to the viceroyalty of Peru, I continue my reflection by examining the extent to which Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and the native scribe Don Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala pose a certain primordial unity between text and territory in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their European counterparts. As usual, objects pave the way between language and embodiment, giving shape to the analytic construct of the grid of coloniality. As we will see in the next chapter, indigenous cartographies complicate the notion of the imperial grid as an ideogram of objective, universal space.
CHAPTER FOUR

Revolt of the Objects in the “mundo al rreués”

In Mesoamerican and Andean mythologies, indigenous weapons, domestic objects, and other accouterments imbued with humanoid properties invariably turn against people at the end of an age, when there is general chaos in the world. This “Revolt of the Objects” theme is known from a number of visual depictions and written narratives. In Moche art, it appears on a painted mural in temple Huaca de la Luna and on two painted ceramic vessels, both now in museums and private collections (Allen “When Utensils”; Quilter; Trever et al.). It is recorded as well in the suspiciously laconic fourth chapter of the account of Huarochirí, a text composed around 1608 at the behest of the Jesuit priest Francisco de Ávila to identify persistent idolatrous practices for the purpose of extirpation. In the Huarochirí version of the myth of the revolt, animals, rocks, and artifacts such as mortars and grinding stones attack their human foes during the warring years preceding Inca unification (Salomon and Urioste). The Mayan Popol Vuh documents a more comprehensive variation, compared to its previously described Andean counterparts by Jeffrey Quilter, in which animals, sticks, stones, ceramic jars, plates, and other artifacts verbally address and physically assault the wooden men and women who abused them.
A certain degree of formal and structural unity among competing versions of the “Revolt of the Objects” makes this myth a necessary point of departure in discussions of materiality in pre- and post-conquest settings. Animated entities displaying properties typically reserved to subjects in the frameworks of Cartesian and Counter-Reformation dualism give us valuable insight into the complexity of material ontologies and subject-formation in the Andean world, where “all matter is animate” (Allen, “When Utensils” 25) and distinctions between human/non-human, alive/inert, mind/matter, and subject/object are often blurry and elusive. These ancient histories reveal, among other things, that the reversal of subject–object relations is one central theme in foundational narratives of the catastrophic “mundo al rreués” (the world turned upside down), a trope that persists across time in a wide variety of iconographic and alphabetical media. Yet despite the prominent role objects occupy in these narrative sequences, students of these later sources have only marginally addressed their presence and agentive properties in colonial texts.

At least in the studies I have reviewed, this relative oversight is due perhaps to the healthy resistance toward a unified theory of materiality in the Andes, a geographic extension which encompasses widely divergent polities across 200 kilometers of mountainous, rainforest, and coastal areas, some of which settled into relatively small kinship structures while others, like the Incas, consolidated with time into highly organized empires. As a result of this diversity along both spatial and temporal axes, critical approaches often distinguish between highland and lowland expressions, archaeological periods, and artistic conventions. Yet despite the obvious difficulties of
conducting work across different languages (Quechua, Aymara, etc.) and human groups in pre-conquest and colonial settings, researchers in the neighboring disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, and art history have long studied traditional elements of material culture in this region. It has not been until recently, however, that systematic inquiry across disciplines has been posed concerning the place of the Andes in the so-called “material turn” in the humanities and the social sciences.

The backbone of the former research traditionally encompasses two major approaches on the study of artifacts, including ceramic wares, wooden materials such as keros (cups), pacchas (ritual watering vessels), and tianas (seats), and different types of textiles such as unkus (tunics decorated with geometric designs called tocapus), khipus (mnemonic knots), paños (cloths), among other objects (Allen, “The Incas”; Cummins, “Let Me See,” Toasts; Brokaw, A History, “The Poetics”; Julien, “History and Art”), and encompasses two major approaches. One major approximation focuses on the inherent value of Andean artifacts as material records, and explores both the conditions that led to the production of these objects as well as the symbolic and social worlds they both form a part of and help shape. Within this framework, it is not uncommon for scholars to focus on the narrative elements contained in these materials, which might help unveil important continuities between these visual narratives and the myths and histories recorded in oral or printed form after the conquest (Quilter; Quilter and Urton). Another approach places emphasis on the representational properties of artifacts. Carolyn Dean’s research on stones as key to Andean notions of space and animacy, Joanne Rappaport’s view of khipus as a type of object writing, and Galen Brokaw’s studies on these informational knots as
complex media intimately connected to other forms of communication (A History), are examples of the important directions of this research. Other recent studies, such as the positions advanced by the Vanderbilt-Chicago-Harvard Workshop for Andean Anthropology (VanChiVard), advocate for the sustained theorization of the Andean region in contemporary discussions on the ontological status and agentive properties of objects, artifacts, and landscapes (Augustine et al.; Szremski et al.; Trever et al.). A salient aspect of these discussions as well is the reconfiguration of the human body within the framework of material culture studies, inasmuch as mummies, heads, skin, and bones all serve, at different points in time, as physical platforms for the negotiation of collective identities. Taken together, these studies acknowledge the complex interdependence of multiple forms of materiality—i.e., objects, spaces, and bodies—in the Andean world. Yet these productive avenues of inquiry fail to bring material ontology back to the question of subjectivity and discursive analysis that has been central to studies on colonialism in Latin America (Adorno “Nuevas”; Cornejo-Polar; Martínez-San Miguel, From Lack).

Through comparative examination of two key post-contact accounts—Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s Comentarios reales de los incas (1609) and Don Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala’s Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno (1615?)—this chapter discusses the ways in which Andean actors employ material culture as a means to renegotiate the chaotic space of contact between Spaniards, Indians, and the increasing population of individuals of indigenous and European descent called mestizos during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Its aim is to shed light on the process by which these lettered subjects establish close connections between objects, physical spaces, and written
discourse to re-imagine, instead, “how human continuity appeared when memories were grouped under less familiar premises,” a phrase employed by Frank Salomon to challenge pervasive myth-history dichotomies in contemporary studies of native productions (“Testimonies” 57), and which is useful as well for understanding colonial representations of cultural interactions across human groups. I contend that a new narrative of the traditional Andean myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” is present in these texts. While Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma do not specifically mention the myth of the revolt, its general structure is evinced in their anxiety over a world turned on its head, a running theme echoing the general Andean visual and narrative trope of the “reversal of not just roles but transformation of entities” (Quilter 60). Paying close attention to processes of formal innovation of this theme in general, and to the reworking of interactions between peoples and things exhibited in the Comentarios and the Nueva corónica in particular, sheds new light on our understanding of the old Andean geometric fascination with “encounters, reflections, inversions, and repetitions” that scholars such as Catherine J. Allen and Marcia and Robert Ascher have identified within the often inter-dependent narrative structures of myth, history, visual art, and material culture (Allen, “When Utensils” 19). I argue that similarly multifaceted and complex relationships of dimension and enclosure manifest in colonial alphabetical accounts; they encompass both physical worlds and human bodies—all of which are mediated by objects.\footnote{In addition to Frantz Fanon (as we saw in the introduction to this dissertation), scholarship in various fields, most notably feminism, has denounced the “objectification” of human agents. Undoubtedly, the validity of this practice must be put into question as it reproduces structures of power that marginalize certain bodies and not others. Yet, on the other hand, we must also be mindful of how these discourses are also complicit in emphasizing Western dualism, and interrogate, instead, how the body as material entity “is made into being through interaction with other bodies and objects” and with the physical spaces it inhabits (Szeminski et al. 7).} In their different
iterations, objects trace the contours of different kinds of shifting boundaries at stake in these texts; the boundaries of the ethnified and racialized body as well as the boundaries of the discrete human groups and territories that constitute the Andean contact zone.

Drawing on literary and cultural analysis of these primary texts, my argument considers the role material culture plays in Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma’s constitution as *mestizo* and as indigenous subjects, respectively. Yet on another level, the present analysis seeks to advance a colonial theory of physicality that is attentive to preexisting Andean traditions accounting for the interconnectedness of animate and inanimate entities. I limit my study to mostly Book One of the first part of the *Comentarios*, dedicated to the narration of the first contact between Spaniards and Indians and to the expansion of the Incan empire, and to Guaman Poma’s images (with occasional references to the alphabetical score of the text), because they best exemplify the tensions of multiple subject positionalities afforded by objects in the changing social and physical landscape of colonial Peru.

Within current understandings of material culture, another relatively neglected aspect in this discussion is the existing relationship in colonial times between material objects and the spatial imagination of the Tahuantinsuyu or Inca empire. Studies such as archaeologist John R. Topic’s proposed model of interaction between *khipus* and Chan Chan architecture allow scholars of later periods to look for other types of connections between discrete elements of the physical world and different types of representational media. This type of research also sets the foundation for a more sustained dialogue between complimentary disciplinary approaches in the study of the Andean world.
(Brokaw, *A History* xii–xiii). Taking a cue from these and other recent findings in the understanding of indigenous spatialities, this chapter examines how the structures of intelligibility founded by the grid of coloniality are perceived, renegotiated, and intervened by the ethnic subjects who most directly they sought to conscript and reduce. I propose that for Inca Garcilaso, the Andean territory is a textual or filiform assemblage of *khipus*, memory, and voice. Quite distinctively to the Inca’s strategies, I understand Guaman Poma’s narration, on the other hand, as complicated by the embodied quality of his artistic craft that brings to the forefront the visual objects that complement the alphabetical component of his text.

If in the previous assemblage of colonial Mexico City we were privy to a colonialist urban fantasy engorged by commodity surplus and aestheticism, both of which were presented as visually hygienic, desirable alternatives to Bernardo de Balbuena’s ugly Indian, this study shifts attention to indigenous and mestizo discursive agency in relation to the material landscape of Peru prior to and in the throes of conquest and colonization. Here the assemblage proposed is one between ethnic actors, the semiotic tensions exerted by textual and visual descriptions of materiality, and the representations of the physical space of the Inca empire or Tahuantinsuyu in several foundational moments staged throughout these texts. Some questions to consider in the present analysis are: What is the status of material culture in colonial Andean narratives? Or rather, what can representations of materiality tell us about the changing limits of colonial bodies, subjectivities, and territorialities in the post-conquest period?
TURNING THINGS AROUND

Comparative approaches to the study of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s *Comentarios reales* and Guaman Poma de Ayala’s *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* vastly focus on questions of language, rhetoric, authority, and identity. While these avenues of inquiry have helped us better understand the synchronic value of these testimonies, new resonances easily arise once we scrutinize these sources from a material perspective. In the analysis that follows, I shed light on these authors’ discursive projects by focusing on the rhetorical strategies these writers employ in making sense of the new colonial order imposed in the physical space of the Tahuantinsuyu. In particular, I pay attention to the general theme of the “Revolt of the Objects” loosely deployed and adapted in two chief complementary principles of these texts, Inca Garcilaso’s “protestación de la historia” (protestation of history) and Guaman Poma’s notion of “mundo al revés” (the world turned upside down).

I take these two fundamental concepts as an important entry point to the study of material ontologies in the discursive battle wielded by these colonial chroniclers.

Inca Garcilaso de la Vega’s groundbreaking refutation of imperial records, the earliest to be written by a colonial subject in the Spanish language, is often credited for visibilizing changing notions of the New World subject’s relationship to writing in the context of a colonial production that is inherently fraught with tensions of authorial and discursive legitimacy. For this *mestizo* writer the task at hand is to debunk inaccuracies that made their way into print about the Spanish territories west of the Atlantic.

114 See, for example, Marie Elise Escalante, Barbara Fuchs’s chapter 3, “Lettered Subjects” (*Mimesis*), Raquel Chang-Rodríguez (“Coloniaje”), and Nathan Wachtel.

115 See Adorno (*The Polemics*) and Zamora (*Language*), among others. Several other studies, most notably José Antonio Mazzotti’s *Coros mestizos del Inca Garcilaso: Resonancias andinas* focus on the import of extra-alphabetical influences in Inca Garcilaso’s writing.
doing, however, it is practically impossible to detangle this author’s assertion of *auctoritas* from emergent notions of ethnic and racial identity, making Inca Garcilaso’s identity as a *mestizo* central to the study of his text and a foundational trope in the study of Latin American discourse (Cornejo-Polar 92–3; Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack* 106).\(^{116}\)

Born out of wedlock in Peru in 1539 to the Spanish official Sebastián Garcilaso de la Vega and the Inca princess Isabel Chimpu Ocllo, Inca Garcilaso arrived in Spain at the age of twenty-one, after inheriting a small sum of money from his father’s death. He was briefly involved in military contest, leading as captain King Philip II’s contingent against the *moriscos* (Spanish Moors) in the Alpujarras wars ten years upon his arrival to the metropolis. In the typical humanist fashion of the seventeenth-century soldier poet, Inca Garcilaso then turns to writing. In this transatlantic context he positioned himself as a *mestizo* writer by eventually abandoning the name he was bestowed at birth, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, and adopting the definitive pen name with which he consecrated his literary career. His first published work was a translation from Italian of León Hebreo’s *Dialogi d’amore*, *La traducción del indio de los tres diálogos de amor de León Hebreo* (1590). This work not only displays his impressive command of Italian—Inca Garcilaso was, in fact, a self-taught polyglot, and could at least read and write in Latin in addition to his two mother tongues, Spanish and Quechua—but also positions the writer as a cultural and linguistic intermediary between Europe and the New World (Zamora 3–4). In subsequent years he completed two more works, the genealogical volume *Relación de la descendencia de*

\(^{116}\) “A los hijos de español y de india o de indio y española, nos llaman *mestizos*, por decir que somos mezclados de ambas naciones; fue impuesto por los primeros españoles que tuvieron hijos en indias, y por ser nombre impuesto por nuestros padres y por su significación me lo llamó yo a boca llena, y me honro con él” (Book Nine, Chapter XXXI, Volume 2, 266).
Garcí Pérez de Vargas (1596) and La Florida de Inca (1605), his notorious account of the conquest of Florida. Having already penned three books in 1605, by the time he composes his chief oeuvre, the Comentarios, he was already regarded as a prolific writer and translator.

In the opening allusion of Inca Garcilaso’s final project titled “Proemio al lector” (Preface to the Reader) we find the customary authorial description of intentions, a textual convention developing from medieval and early modern alphabetical culture. However, the aims of this section are clearly subversive, and immediately one finds Inca Garcilaso engaged in a remarkably deep and poignant critique. In this preface the mestizo author seeks to revise “las cosas que del Perú he visto escritas” (5) by way of supplementation and addition of a rich and densely layered linguistic and cultural gloss. Inca Garcilaso’s writing, the reader is told, intends to correct the inherent blind spots of imperial historiography, particularly concerning the language and customs of the Incas in Peru. Employing classical and Renaissance rhetoric, the mestizo undertakes the task of revising and further “protesting” certain narratives of the history of the conquest misrepresented by Spanish historians Pedro Cieza de León, Francisco López de Gómara, and Diego Fernández, among others:

En el discurso de la historia protestamos la verdad de ella, y que no diremos cosa grande que no sea autorizándola con los mismos historiadores españoles que la tocaron en parte o en todo; que mi intención no es contradecirles, sino servirles de comento y glosa y de intérprete en muchos vocablos indios, que, como extranjeros en aquella lengua, interpretaron fuera de la propiedad de ella, según que largamente se verá en el discurso de la historia, la cual ofrezco a la piedad del que la leyere . . . . (5–6)
First, we should note how in casting historical discourse as a greatly imprecise “cosa grande,” or great thing, this refutation both materializes and monumentalizes the imperial archives it raises questions about. Additionally, it lays down the groundwork for the nuanced commentary of Inca society and customs readers will find in the book, and which the author prefaces throughout the opening chapters of Book One with a substantive clarification of the geo-political and ontological status of the New World in the medieval and early modern world order. Yet at the same time the narrative voice denounces the fragmentation of discourse and of historical memory reconstructed “in part or as a whole” (6) by the Spanish authorities deployed in the Comentarios. This fragmentation of meaning reminds us of Frantz Fanon’s articulation of a colonial objectified condition, as we saw in the introduction to this dissertation. Understood in productive tension with Margarita Zamora’s assertion that Inca Garcilaso used his racial identity as “a legitimizing factor rather than a stigma” (48), Fanon’s racial theory of objectification allows us to read the Inca’s initial statements as an embodied (and thus, material) departure from—a veritable objection to—imperial records.\footnote{Inca Garcilaso’s initial oppositions are extensively voiced as well in the often-cited chapter XIX of the Comentarios, “Protestación del autor sobre la historia.”} In leaving behind at times the Renaissance ideal of the witness-historian to rely, instead, on the experience that his multifaceted identity affords him, the mestizo scribe’s protestación de la historia strategically advances a new interpretation of the pre-Hispanic past as it informs the complex socio-political dynamics arising in seventeenth-century Peru. Inca Garcilaso’s discursive act is not entirely selfless, however. It is grounded on the self-legitimizing enterprise of a particular branch of Cuzco nobility, Tupaq Inka Yupanqui’s royal dynasty
or panaka, to which the author was related by way of maternal descent (Mazzotti, *Coros* 46). Staking claims on the indigenous aspect of his authorial voice allows Inca Garcilaso to situate the Tahuantinsuyu in a greater scheme of European consciousness, as well as it positions him as a foundational voice in the realm of Andean alphabetical expression.

It comes to no surprise, then, that tied to the objections expressed in the protestación is the notion of laying down a proper discursive order, which for Inca Garcilaso could only be achieved through conversion of indigenous orality into written expression: “Para atajar esta corrupción me sea lícito, pues soy indio, que en esta historia yo escriba como indio con las primeras letras que aquellas tales dicciones se deben escribir” (“Advertencias” 7). If Inca Garcilaso oscillates between multiple forms of belonging in relation to his racial identity (Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack* 106–7; Mazzotti, *Coros* 28–9), he does not hesitate, however, in adopting a directive stance toward the alleged confusion about the multiplicity of worlds, climates, and geographical zones debated among Spanish historians upon the discovery of the New World (Book One, Chapter I, 11). Directly reproducing Pedro Cieza de León’s textual account, he contests this assertion by proposing to give a written order to the seemingly insurmountable chaos there existed in the newly discovered Andean provinces (Book One, Chapter V, 17), and which he greatly attributes not only to the conquistador’s inabilities to understand what the Indians said, but also to the very lack of alphabetical media of the latter. Inca Garcilaso’s definition of writing—recalled from an oral exchange with a close relative—as “la memoria de las cosas pasadas” (Book One, Chapter XV, 37) later on in the text is
telling, for it gives us an important clue into the ontological status of Andean materialities manifest in his freeform colonial adaptation of the “Revolt of the Objects” theme.

A quick glance at the prefatory paratext and the first fifteen chapters of Book One reveals that, in accordance with the pre-Hispanic myth of the revolt, the murky quality of “the thing” is reserved for the lack of ontological specificity certain elements and events exhibit prior to the appariation of the sun. During this dawning age, according to Inca Garcilaso, a new social order (that of the Incas) finally triumphs over the “barbarous” tribes spread across the vast Andean territory (some of which practiced cannibalism and idolatry, among other heretic acts condemned by the author). Indeed, the term thing surfaces in at least two dozen instances, including the discussion of the as of yet imprecise geographical contours of the so called New World, the nature of its inhabitants, and its ontological status in relation to extant cosmographic conventions (Chapters II and III); the contentious attribution of the name Perú to the lands previously occupied by the Inca empire (Chapters IV–VI); and, most notably, it appears in the description of idolaters’ practices and “the things they worshipped,” which included a variety of natural “things inferior to themselves” (Chapter IX, 31). For the Inca the problem seems to be that these idolaters had an inadequate sense of worship. They adored things that were explicitly visible—and thus, too material. While at first glance this observation might seem to contradict literary critic and art historian W. J. T. Mitchell’s differentiation between the social legibility of objects and the inchoate character of things,\(^\text{118}\) we must remember that

\(^{118}\) Mitchell offers a subtle distinction between objects and things that is worth remembering here: “Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a history, a science. Things, on the other hand, are simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague. A thing appears as a stand-in when you have forgotten the
these groups existed during the nebulous First Age preceding Inca rule; thus, their obdurate confusion stems from the uncivilized Indians’ misapprehension of that potential energy which is infused in all materials (camay) and, particularly, in the ontological status they afford to “energized matter” in the form of huacas (Salomon and Urioste 19). Let us turn to further clarify these concepts.

In Andean mythology, all beings—including people, plants, animals, and objects—are capable of possessing a vital energy called camay or sami. In Late Horizon (1476 AD–1534 AD) and early colonial socialities, the specialist responsible for properly distributing this energy (camayoc) is able to materialize this internal essence into the ideal forms of objects and artifacts such as keros and khipus (Trever et al. 4). Huacas are a privileged kind of repositories of this energy, and often take the form of living or inert matter, including things and places. According to the VanChiVard position paper advanced by Trever and others, “[l]atent within the huacas is a transformative potential energy that allows stones, springs, or other forms to metamorphose into human forms and then return to seemingly natural forms, crossing and re-crossing the boundaries of subject/object and person/thing” (4). Yet the idolaters of the First Age dared go too far in confusing these boundaries: “Estos fueron simplicimos en toda cosa, a semejanza de ovejas sin pastor. Mas no hay que admirarnos que gente tan sin letras ni enseñanza alguna cayesen en tan grandes simplezas . . .” (Book One, Chapter IX, 27). Because they
lacked alphabetical writing, these groups seemingly existed in permanent confusion about the order of primordial events and the ontological status of their material world. Here the theme of the “Revolt of the Objects” is negatively linked to the apparent order of things adequately conferred by a privileged kind of material object: the book. Thus, a world without alphabetical records is for Inca Garcilaso merely a world of things.

But books are not all that matter; other material objects are ripe for revolt too. As a result of idolatry, numerous other “anomalies” in subject–object relations suggesting a reversal of entities are documented throughout these chapters. During the First Age, for instance, cannibals not only ate human flesh (thus mistaking them for objects of consumption), but also used it to manufacture war objects: “En unas provincias desollaban los cautivos, y con los pellejos cubrían sus cajas de tambor para amedrentar sus enemigos” (Book One, Chapter XII, 31). In other regions, lack of government seems to be the problem: “vivían sin señores que los mandasen ni gobernasen, ni ellos supieron hacer república de suyo para dar órdenes y concierto en su vivir” (Book One, Chapter XII, 32). A parallel social confusion seems to carry over in colonial times, resulting in the reversal of human relations, by which the group previously in power, the Incas, is subjected (or treated like objects) by the Spanish invaders:

De las grandezas y prosperidades pasadas venían a las cosas presentes, lloraban sus Reyes muertos, enajenado su imperio y acabada su república, etc. Estas y otras semejantes pláticas tenían los Incas y Pallas en sus visitas, y con la memoria del bien perdido siempre acababan su conversación en lágrimas y llanto, diciendo: “Trocóse el reinar en vasallaje”. etc. (Book One, Chapter XV, 36–7)

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119 Confusion over the status of the book appears again in the 1532 events of Cajamarca between Atahualpa and Francisco Pizarro. For an interpretation of this scene, see Antonio Cornejo-Polar (Escribir 40).
Embracing Western thought in an Andean context, Inca Garcilaso suggests that the domestication of things in the social realm is effectively actualized in the political life of the res publica—the “public thing” or commonwealth, even as an inversion of social relations has subjected the Inca ruling classes to the new Spanish order. All these examples of overturned social relations prior to the arrival of the Spaniards serve to reinforce Inca Garcilaso’s claims to immediacy in his protestation of imperial historiography. Although with a different end goal, a similar concern for political order in colonial Peru is espoused in Guaman Poma’s reinterpretation of the “Revolt of the Objects” in his Nueva corónica y buen gobierno.

This unpublished address to King Philip III of Spain, finally completed around 1615 after a thirty-year composition timespan, consists of close to 800 pages of alphabetical text in various languages (Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, and Latin) and 398 illustrations made by Guaman Poma. Minutely documenting the tensions between competing cultural, social, and linguistic domains in the face of the demise of both the Tahuantinsuyu and the political stability of the two republics, this indigenous chronicler’s work is structured as a three-pronged critique of the new colonial order—the Nueva corónica, in which he details the pre-Hispanic origins of Peru, a shorter intermediary section on the events of the conquest and the warring years following the transition to colonial order, and the Buen gobierno, a synchronic narration of everyday practices in the viceroyalty of Peru. Such a massive account fuses elements from the discursive genres of

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120 The religious and juridical separation between Spanish and indigenous subjects better known as the república de indios and the república de españoles becomes instituted in 1524 with the creation of the Council of the Indies. The aims of this project was twofold; on the one hand, it oversaw the systematic conversion of Indians to Christianity and, on the other, by confining them to rural areas, it sought to protect indigenous peoples—given that the law legally considered them minors—from exploitation at the hands of Spaniards.
the letter, the relación (petition of favors), the crónica (chronicle), and the historia or history, thus making it difficult, in the words of Rolena Adorno, “to place the book definitively in either the public, historiographic enterprise or the informal, private citizen’s relación” (Guaman 9). Although complex in structure, Guaman Poma’s argument is very clear. He writes to dispute his kin’s land ownership of the Chupas valley, close to his natal province of Huamanga, and to make an impassioned case for the return to an Andean political structure. These claims are punctuated by sustained questioning of the moral, legal, and ethnic status of mestizos, while at the same time denouncing clerical and political abuses of the Spanish order in the region.

Much has been written about Guaman Poma’s life and thanks to invaluable archival documentation today we are certain of the historical existence of the author of the Nueva corónica. He was born around 1550 to Martin Mallqui de Ayala, a Yarovilca who served as ally to the Spaniards, and an Inca mother belonging to the royal dynasty of Inca Tupac Yupanqui, Juana Curi Ocllo. His father’s role as mitmaq or pacifier of the recently incorporated Incan territories prior to the 1523 arrival of Francisco Pizarro must have left a strong imprint on the young child, who as an adult went to pursue several opportunities in administrative posts. As a ladino he was an indigenous subject who could read and write in the imperial tongue, and although critical of viceregal practices, he held several appointments as interpreter and translator for colonial officers. Between 1568 and 1570 Guaman Poma served as interpreter during priest Cristóbal de Albornoz’s campaign of extirpation of idolatries. A decade later he performed translation work for

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121 Frank Salomon provides a useful distinction between the latter three colonial genres (“Chronicles” 10). See as well Adorno’s introduction (Guaman 5–9).
Fray Martín de Murúa, a Mercedarian priest serving in the pueblos de indios (Indian villages) who eventually compiled his own history of the Incas, a volume illuminated with close to 100 images by Guaman Poma. In 1594 his name appears in the archives as interpreter and witness of the Spanish judge of the city of Huamanga, where, as summarily noted in the Nueva corónica, he was also involved in fruitless legal battles over regional lands. Undoubtedly, such disillusionments coupled with his critical stance toward the alleged degeneration of indigenous practices factor into Guaman Poma’s appraisal of colonial Andean society as a “world turned upside down” (Adorno, Guaman xlix). If for Inca Garcilaso chaos ensues as a result of idolatry, cannibalism, and other pre-Hispanic practices prior to the Incan regime, Guaman Poma locates this instability in the colonial Andean context in which he lives.

This indigenous scribe and artist insistently negates the existence of idolatry prior to the arrival of the Spaniards and underscores, instead, the Indian’s belief in God, their adherence to religious principles, and their belief in charity, baptism, and other practices promoted by Christian law. Examples of the Indians’ civility repeat themselves with varying degrees of detail throughout the first third of the Nueva corónica. One illustrative instance portrays the social life of indigenous groups during the Third Age as such: “como prosegúían de buena sangre y tuvieron mandamiento y ley, y mojonaron sus pertenencias y tierras y pastos y chacras, cada señor en cada pueblo, tuvieron sus mujeres casadas, y conversaron y dotaron, y se dieron buenos ejemplos y doctrina y castigos, y había justicia entre ellos y había ordenanza y ley” (58, 44–5). Following this description is a detailed account of the ideal behavior of these groups, which includes civilized drunkenness, an
absence of witchcraft and adultery, female modesty, and expansion of the public and private physical infrastructure of cities and villages. These exemplary practices greatly contrast with the messy social situation in *The City of Kings*, which follows a period of unrest initiated by the Incas, who are portrayed by Guaman Poma as idolaters, sorcerers, and tricksters only paralleled in their abuse of other indigenous groups by colonial Spanish officials and priests.

For Guaman Poma, the chaos that ensues as a result of these colonial abuses gives way to a world turned on its head, or “mundo al revés.” This phrase appears repeatedly throughout the second half of his book, and in several specific instances this formula denounces the confusion of social hierarchies and the adoption of new titles—such as *don* (mister), *doña* (missis), *doctor*, and *licenciado* (esquire)—by the mixed lower classes (409 [411], 298–300). It is also descriptive of the material changes seen in the viceroyalty of Peru, a quickly developing colonial enclave in the seventeenth century which flourished as the center of an important trade network between Europe, the Orient, and the Americas. In this regard, Guaman Poma laments the introduction of sartorial merchandise and other products that allow indigenous servants, *mestizos, mulatos,* and other *castas* to disguise their origins by dressing as Spaniards. Thus, the rhetorical formula of the *mundo al revés* signals Guaman Poma’s stirring anxieties over the decrease of the indigenous population, the harms of racial and cultural intermixing of multiple social worlds, and the shifting boundaries of social merit and class.
In the Copenhagen digital edition of the author’s work\textsuperscript{122} and throughout her critical appraisal of his manuscript, Adorno associates Guaman Poma’s vision of the world with the “topos of European literature” employed “to describe how the traditional social hierarchy has been disordered and inverted by the presence of the Spaniards” (\textit{Guaman} 164).\textsuperscript{123} Focusing on medieval and early modern rhetorical strategies, she continues to trace the history of this concept as understood by literary critics:

Curtius points out the antique origin of this medieval topic of “stringing together impossibilities” and associates it with a critical mood, producing censure and denunciation of the times. According to Maravall, the world-upside-down was one of the great topics revitalized in the baroque period, and he associates it with the marginal culture of the dispossessed, that is, with popular counterculture. For Spain, Maravall sees the topos as the product of a society in transition, in which the alteration in social function and position of various groups created a mood of instability. Citing authors from Tirso and Suárez de Figueroa to Quevedo and Gracián who exploit the theme, he indicates how it was converted into a formula of serious social protest. It is precisely in this manner that Guaman Poma articulates his vision of a “mundo al rreués.” . . . His assessment speaks to the hopelessly inverted order of things, which, he fears, cannot be rightened. (\textit{Guaman} 164)

This passage—a footnote in the original text—is striking due to the Eurocentric critical framework it reproduces. While Adorno’s aims “to perform an act of decolonization in the form of historical literary scholarship” (3) are usually achieved by her foundational contributions to Andean colonial scholarship, I contend that proposing an exclusively European source of inspiration to understand Guaman Poma’s notion of a chaotic world is insufficient—and perhaps reductive. If according to Mercedes López-Baralt the return to ancient myths was instrumental for indigenous groups to assimilate

\textsuperscript{122} The original version of the \textit{Nueva corónica y buen gobierno} is available in its entirety at the virtual house of the Royal Library of Denmark: <http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/poma/info/es/frontpage.htm>.

\textsuperscript{123} See also Adorno’s earlier discussion of the topic (\textit{“The Language”} 109–13).
the hard realities of the conquest (193), it must be noted how Adorno’s interpretation bypasses the influence of pre-Hispanic sources in this indigenous chronicler’s understanding of the shifting and increasingly complex dynamics of the new colonial regime. This is especially relevant in light of Guaman Poma’s eloquent argumentation in favor of a return to traditional Andean customs in the final chapters of his treatise on colonial reform, the “Consideraciones.”

While Adorno has correctly identified a reversal and confusion of roles indexed in the inversion of the hanan and hurin positions along the horizontal and diagonal axes of a considerable number of images (Guaman 89–119), other scholars place the mundo al revés within the indigenous notion of cosmic cataclysm or pachakuti, which signals the end of a time and the promise of a regenerative state, the “good government” (López-Baralt 194; Frye 26, n. 46). Although mindful of Andean systems of thought, the latter interpretation is not completely accurate either. Guaman Poma strictly reserves the term pachakuti for the Inca wars and natural disasters preceding the conquest, and is very careful to document the unprecedented experience of the colonial order under a new name (Adorno, “The Language” 111). In the face of this debate, an interpretive stance that adopts the combined examination of physical, textual, and visual media reveals the myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” as another possible antecedent to this trope.

While there is no specific reference to objects in the alphabetical score—images, however, seem to tell another story (see below)—or any actual mention of this pre-Hispanic narration in the pages of the Nueva corónica, several elements suggest it to be a structuring principle of Guaman Poma’s vision of a world in disarray. This parallelism
becomes evident by breaking down this Andean myth into several of its components; namely, the reversal or inversion of relations between living or animated beings that is central to the trope of the revolt, the transition between social worlds marked by general violence and instability, and finally, the shifting boundaries between human and non-human entities—or in the case of the post-conquest adaptation, between physical bodies objectified by the colonial markers of class, ethnicity, and race that factor into the rapidly-spreading ideology of the castas. These three elements are common to indigenous cosmologies and appear, as well, in Guaman Poma’s work.

As noted in this chapter’s introductory remarks, a fatidic encounter between humans, objects, and animals appears documented in the Peruvian account of Huarochirí, when animated mortars, grinding stones, and buck llamas attack men. In this valuable collection of Andean myths and histories, this commotion occurs after a great flood in which speaking animals—such as llamas, foxes, guanacos, condors, and pumas—and their human adversaries are miraculously saved, and precedes the adoption of a definitive human form of the five-fold deity and double-peaked mountain Paria Caca (born as five eggs, he then transforms into five falcons). In this myth sequence, the anthropomorphization of living and inert entities not only evinces a reflection in human/non-human behavior, but indexes an allegorical conversion of the falcon into a human deity that consolidates the human and territorial boundaries of the Yauyo, a native group which occupied the highland areas during pre-Incaic times.124 For anthropologist Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, the manifestation of a porous

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124 Salomon and Urioste have identified in the figure of Paria Caca a symbol of “inclusive ethnic unity among the teller’s various residential and kingship groups” (6), noting how it later stands as a referent of the expansion of the Yauyo population from the highlands to the Pacific shore.
ontological boundary between human and animal species is a universal belief in Amerindian cosmologies: “Myths are filled with beings whose form, name, and behavior inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability . . . . Amerindian myths speak of a state of being where self and other interpenetrate, submerged in the same immanent, presubjective and preobjective milieu” (464). For Castro, then, “the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity” (465, italics in original).

In a similar manner, Guaman Poma deploys the erasure of boundaries between human and animal forms in his notion of a world turned on its head. His open criticism of the behavior of Spaniards toward the native population renders six types of animals as inept and abusive administrative officials (Fig. 4.1).\textsuperscript{125} Much like its Mesoamerican equivalent (associated by Quilter to Moche iconography), in Guaman Poma’s version of the Andean myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” these animals helplessly devour humans’ insides and tear apart their flesh:

\begin{quote}
Y así de la sierpe, león, tigre, zorra, gato, ratón, de estos seis animales que le come al pobre indio no le deja menearse y le desuella en el medio; y no hay menear y entre estos ladrones, unos y otros entre ellos se ayudan y se favorecen y si le defiende a este pobre indio el cacique principal no le conozca de causas y civiles, criminales, porque son enemigos mortales de este reino. (695 [709], 123)
\end{quote}

Using autochthonous species known by Europeans, this set of unfortunate associations inverts the redeeming account of the gods of Huarochirí by questioning the humanity of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[125] In this way, the Spanish corregidor (judge) becomes a serpent (amaru); the Spaniard of the tambo (road guesthouse) a tiger; the Spanish encomendero (land-holder) a lion; the Spanish priest a fox; and the indigenous cacique (chief) and scribe a mouse and a cat, respectively. According to Zuidema, who analyzes this sequence in relation to other depictions of animals in the Nueva corónica, this hierarchy is structured “from high rank to low rank, large to small, and outside and inside. Amaru and tiger are considered more ‘outside’ than the lion” (231). Adorno, on the other hand, interprets this episode as part of the tradition of medieval bestiaries (Guaman 126).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Figure 4.1. Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Pobre de los indios, de seis animales que comen” [694] (120), 1615, ink on paper, 14.5 x 20.5 cm. Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen, Denmark.
colonial officials. In other instances of abuse denouncing their wrongful behavior we see not the allegorical version of these dynamics but a raw depiction of the violence that plagued interactions between the different groups.

In close to two dozen images Guaman Poma shows us a number of administrators beating the Indians and subjecting them to various degrees of physical torture. Although we can only speculate about a formal process of influence between them, it is worth noting that iconographic depictions of physical abuse in the *Nueva corónica* seem to borrow from a general pictorial language of violence employed by the anonymous artists who painted the extant versions of the myth of the revolt. For instance, the choice of weapon as well as the angle and orientation of the sticks in Guaman Poma’s images resemble closely those on pre-Hispanic Moche pottery rendering the rebellion of inanimate entities (Figs. 4.2 and 4.3). The violent acts depicted by Guaman Poma, if viewed in light of a larger narrative of physical violence and social unrest that runs through the third part of his text, allows us to identify complementary elements in the visual and alphabetical narrative of the *mundo al revés* which ties it to the Andean notions of periodicity and human/non-human interactions that are readily identifiable in the myth of the revolt. If it is true, as it seems, that the iconic narrative of the revolt is about the frontiers of alterity being shifted, then the third and final aspect of the influence of this pre-Hispanic myth in the colonial visual and discursive productions that we have been examining—this being the changing boundaries of the other, portrayed either as a thing, an animal, or as a person—is better evidenced from a comparative perspective of the social life of the objects themselves.
Figure 4.2. Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Fraile agustino, muy bravo y colérico, soberbioso, que da de palos a los indios en este reino” [643] (78), 1615, ink on paper, 14.5 x 20.5 cm. Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhaguen, Denmark.
Figure 4.3. Rolled-out versions of Moche pottery depicting the painted myth of the “Revolt of the Objects” (Quilter 46-7).
BOUNDARY OBJECTS

Under the structural notion of giving order to chaos, the material exchanges that presumably took place between Spaniards and Incas give us insight into the transcultural role objects played in the political semiosis of colonial Peru. In an evocative instance of narration, Inca Garcilaso records an encounter with a rather bizarre object while visiting an Andean mine. A perforated gold-specked stone ensconced between the cracks of millenary layers of geological aggregates lends this author a fitting telluric language to discuss his complex mestizo condition as both a Spanish and an indigenous subject:

El año de mil quinientos cincuenta y seis, se halló en un resquicio de una mina, de las Callahuaya, una piedra de las que se crían con el metal, de tamaño de la cabeza de un hombre; el color propiamente era color de bofes, y aun la hechura parecía, porque toda ella estaba agujereada de unos agujeros chicos y grandes que la pasaban de un cabo a otro. Por todos ellos asomaban puntas de oro, como si le hubieran echado oro derretido por cima: unas puntas salían fuera de la piedra, otras emparejaban con ella, otras quedaban más adentro. Decían los que entendían de minas que si no la sacaran de donde estaba, que por tiempo viniera a convertirse toda la piedra en oro. En el Cozco la miraban los españoles por cosa maravillosa, los indios la llamaban huaca, que, como en otra parte dijimos, entre muchas significaciones que este nombre tiene, una es decir admirable cosa, digna de admiración por ser linda, como también significa cosa abominable por ser fea; yo la miraba con los unos y con los otros. El dueño de la piedra, que era hombre rico, determinó venir a España, y traerla como estaba para presentarla al rey don Felipe II, que la joya por su extrañeza era mucho de estimar. (Chapter XXIV, Book VIII, 203–4)

Previous discussions of this episode have centered on the debated translation of the Quechua term huaca for the Spanish expression “cosa maravillosa.” Antonio Cornejo-Polar’s foundational interpretation of the semiotic conflict between the Andean and the Spanish worlds represented in the Comentarios understands this moment as a symptom of a deeper identity crisis. The event epitomizes the fissures of a colonial discourse of mestizaje.
(miscegenation) underlying Latin American identities (97–100). In my view, Cornejo-Polar’s reading bypasses the immediate conditions that prefigure the colonial subject’s entrance into a system of written expression; namely, the relationship between materiality and discourse—either as printed word or voice—that manifests in the prose of the Comentarios. Of special significance in this description are the anthropomorphization of an imperfectly golden stone, the size of a man’s head, and the fixity of a pluralistic gaze upon an item that due to its compelling rarity, mysterious beauty, and ritual value could have occupied the shelves of any collector’s Wunderkammer.

In this passage, Inca Garcilaso pronounces himself not just as a mestizo but also as Indian and Spaniard, all three, simultaneously, by way of a material juncture: “yo la miraba con los unos y con los otros.” Ambivalence or multiplicity in perceiving the details and rare qualities of the object readily situates Inca Garcilaso in a liminal position or “third space,” as understood by Homi Bhabha.126 This visual performance serves to mark, delimit, and—as the intractable site of the mestizo body itself—reconcile the cultural spaces that imperial and colonial subjects occupy in this text. Objects in general, its author seems to tell us, serve to link seemingly incommensurable subjectivities. The circuitous physical interactions taking place between intersecting human groups become visibilized in the material fragments that mediate colonial inter-cultural relations. This stone in particular becomes a direct link between the body of Inca Garcilaso and the physical space of the mine, the unattainable surface onto which the author both projects and inscribes multiple identity positions.

126 Bhabha’s definition of the term focuses on the in-between or “third space” colonial subjects inhabit to subvert imperial spaces of power, “as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (86, emphasis in the original).
If in my second chapter colonial gold emerged as an extension of an obscured indigenous subjectivity, in the Comentarios as well as in Guaman Poma’s Nueva corónica (Fig. 4.4) it denotes the negotiations—both the transactional and translational processes—of diverse colonial actors. Guaman Poma’s depiction of a bilingual dialogue taking place in Cuzco between the indigenous interpreter Felipillo and the Spanish soldier Pedro de Candia (who is actually from Crete) resorts to the material rhetoric of the visual to expose the crisis of meaning and representation that takes place when their respective worlds collide. The indigenous figure to the right, in symbolically masculine hanan position, speaks in Quechua (with no Spanish translation offered by the author): “Cay coritacho micunqui? [Is this the gold you eat?].” The European soldier, in hurin position, replies: “Este oro comemos.” An assemblage of subjects and objects appears as the center of the image. Both men hold what seems to be a plate; with the other hand they point to its content, a collection of small gold nuggets. Radically different worlds meet precisely at the row of bowls, cups, and other artifacts seemingly made of clay—or gold, as the narrator declares (370 [372], 269)—that rest on the floor, separating the men, and in the physical presence of the desirable metal, which unites them.

If the visual text of the Nueva corónica suggests that gold carries different meanings across imperial and colonial sites, it also implies that it is sufficiently understood in both the indigenous and the European contexts such that the object itself exemplifies and synthesizes the acts of cultural and linguistic translation. Sociologists and anthropologists alike have shed light on the role of objects as important agents of mediation. The concept of boundary objects describes the way in which certain objects and artifacts successfully
develop and maintain their intelligibility (or agreed upon contours) across intersecting human communities (Star and Griesemer 393). Viewed from this interdisciplinary perspective, the translational coherence of these abstract or concrete boundary-forming entities is consistent, as well, with the tinkuy belief in Andean cosmology, the battling yet productive harmonization of opposites as a means to achieve social unity and balance (Allen The Hold 205). The stones, gold nuggets, and clay artifacts depicted in these texts serve the function of boundary objects, lending their authors a material language with which to negotiate the inversion of roles and social hierarchies in the post-conquest Andean region. As the examples from the Comentarios and the Nueva corónica suggest, these material referents become instrumental precisely at the intersecting limit of multiple physical encounters.

Similarly to the colonial dynamics of mestizaje, the physical contours of boundary objects give shape to the end of a time under the guise of human continuity. This dynamic is most visible in Inca Garcilaso’s metonymical association of the mestizo body with the unlikely referent of a quasi-golden stone. The construct of boundary objects, I suggest, could be extended to encompass processes of translation and mediation that are not always equitable or peaceful, but that include those situations of radical asymmetry, violence, and coercion that are often inextricable from colonial processes.

Finally, another meaningful aspect comes to the surface as a result of the textual and visual reading of boundary objects in these two Andean testimonies. Boundary objects signal a paradigm shift in the territorial configuration of the Tahuantinsuyu; their

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127 See as well Michael Horswell’s attentive reading of the symbolic structure of the tinkuy in Andean colonial texts.
Figure 4.4. Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Conquista, Guayna Capac, Candía” [369] (267), 1615, ink on paper, 14.5 x 20.5 cm. Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhaguen, Denmark.
appearance in these texts never fails to index a deceptively stable yet pervasive discourse of political continuity for mestizos and indigenous groups in the face of the conquest. The space of the mine, a contested physical site due to the practices of extraction reaching colossal proportions between 1579 and 1635 in Potosí and other Atlantic regions (Keen and Haynes 88), and the territorial referents of the stone and the golden pebbles echo Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel’s discussion of the “spatial crisis” that inaugurates the Inca’s text and thus the transition to the new colonial order (From Lack 135). On the other hand, the notion of spatial disjunction becomes a central concern during the third and final part of Guaman Poma’s chronicle, which situates the New World and, more specifically, Cuzco at the epicenter of the Spanish empire. Although not within the scope of Martínez-San Miguel’s analysis, the geospatial center of the Nueva corónica migrates from Europe to the Americas and proposes the return to the Tahuantinsuyu as an alternative to the degenerative state denounced by the trope of the mundo al revés.

In the argument that follows, I proceed to comment independently on these authors’ desires to maintain an organic link between the early stages of Andean society and the contested space of colonial Peru.

PRIMORDIAL KNOTS

The Comentarios complicates notions of boundaries and continuities between Spaniards and indigenous subjects in two primary ways: by casting material objects as agents of physical and linguistic translation, and by conceiving the indigenous and mestizo bodies as

128 Contrary to what the symbolic and material emphasis placed on gold in these sources might lead to believe, most available sources of this mineral had been exhausted during the early stages of the conquest and colonization. By the seventeenth century the prime product of American mines was not gold but silver (Keen and Haynes 88).
entanglements of material relations that encompass not only objects but also territories. However, nowhere in the Inca’s text is the complexity of these processes more evident than when indigenous grooming practices—some of which were essential to the political identification of Inca subjects—are confronted with the inevitable changes brought by the introduction of transatlantic materialities to the Tahuantinsuyu:

Usaban de las navajas de pedernal porque no hallaron la invención de las tijeras. Trasquilábanse con mucho trabajo, como cada uno puede imaginar, por lo cual, viendo después la facilidad y suavidad del cortar de las tijeras, dijo un Inca a un condiscípulo nuestro de leer y escribir: “Si los españoles, vuestros padres, no hubieran hecho más de traernos tijeras, espejos y peines, les hubiéramos dado cuanto oro y plata teníamos en nuestra tierra”. (Chapter XXII, Book One, 50)

Due to lack of critical attention, these lines appear to be buried under the many examples of pre-Hispanic Inca practices detailed by the mestizo historian in Chapters XX–XXIV of the first book. This passage in particular belongs to a remarkable narrative sequence in which the Inca offers no supporting Spanish sources to his account (Martínez-San Miguel, From Lack 135), ostensibly relying, instead, on his own personal recollection of the stories he heard as a child in Cuzco to reproduce a written version of the first stages of Inca expansions at the hands of their first ruler, Manco Capac. In tandem with this observation, I would like to draw attention to two additional details in the narration: (1) the introduction of transatlantic objects to the Andean order and (2) the slippage between material objects and territorial negotiations that occurs in the symbolic equivalence between the artifacts and gold. By way of a tense interaction between Andean and European materialities, Inca Garcilaso’s tongue-in cheek assertion
paradoxically reimagines a streamlined continuity between the Incan order and the
colonial regime.129

As it should be clear by now, these newly-introduced scissors, mirrors, and combs
function as boundary objects that nonetheless seem to destabilize Andean human
taxonomies by rupturing from within the allegedly harmonious intermingling of ethno-
racial categories in the Andean contact zone; their role as mediators is underscored,
however, by the interruption of the descriptive thread of the narration, in which the Inca
reproduces a quote in Spanish from an unspecified indigenous source cast in direct
opposition to the mestizo body, as indexed by the epithet of “the Spaniards, your fathers.”
Let us further consider the significance of oral attribution in this passage—and in Inca
Garcilaso’s testimony in general.

For one critic, Spanish citations in the text act as “explosive material” introduced
“under the mode of the one who bears witness”; citations in Quechua, on the other hand,
represent the impulse to restitute in writing “what is gone or disappearing” (Hozven 190).
Mazzotti, however, does not consider the presence of Andean discursivity—in either
language—as mere fragments of a discursive mode that operates under erasure, but
rather as an integral oral expression that undergirds and supports Inca Garcilaso’s quest
for personal and historical legitimacy (Coros, passim). I take this episode as a paradigmatic
example of a subject–object assemblage that maps out, or lends a rhetorical coordinate to,
Inca Garcilaso’s discourse as linked, according to Mazzotti, to the “Andean subtext” of

129 Many have also interpreted the model of “peaceful conquest,” which is at play in different instances of
narration of Inca expansions, with a veiled criticism of the Spanish model of conquest and colonization. See
Patricia Heid and Zamora for complimentary perspectives on this issue. Particularly in reference to the
mirror, the underlying claim could also be that each society, the colonizers and the colonized, served as
specular images of the other. For a colonial critique of the mirror in relation to race, see Fanon.
orality and material memory present in the *Comentarios*. This term refers to the *cantares* or songs deriving from the interpretation and performance of *kipus* that resonate in the Inca’s prose. Through structural analysis of the text’s oral register and the syntagmatic configuration of its *princeps* edition, Mazzotti argues that underneath the formal aspects of European rhetorical conventions, there appear subtextual interactions between Andean ritual spoken word and Inca Garcilaso’s discursive project. Following John Rowe’s interpretation, this critic notes that there is enough evidence to believe that the internal structure of the story evoked the orality and physical manipulation of *kipus*, particularly in the chapters discussing Inca conquests (Mazzotti, *Coros* 37). If we take Mazzotti at his word, it is possible to see how this dialogue indexes the embedded presence of the voice, and more specifically of the orality of the *kipu*, in the narrative sequences detailing the early expansions of the Inca empire.

Inca Garcilaso was, indeed, highly familiarized with *kipus*. He must have learned to manipulate them during his school years in Peru—“Yo traté los quipus y nudos con los indios de mi padre, y con otros curacas, . . . y de esta manera supe de ellos tanto como los indios” (Chapter IX, Book Six, 27)—and memorized portions of these oral histories, which he was able to recall many years later as the aged and mature Peruvian historian exiled in the metropolis we see in the *Comentarios*. Interpreted by *kipucamayos*, or highly specialized administrative officials of the Inca empire, these traditional Andean media are complex topographical and tactile systems of strings and knots made of dyed cotton or wool (Fig. 4.5). Scholars such as Marcia and Robert Ascher, Galen Brokaw, Frank

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130 For a discussion of this oral and musical genre in the context of Andean performance, see Susan Niles (9–11).
Figure 4.5. *Khipus* in the drawings of Guaman Poma. Left: “Contador mayor y tesorero” [360] (259), Inca official with *khipus* and *yupana* (abacus). Right: “Depósito del Inga” [335] (240), administrator extending accounts of stored goods in the store chambers of a *collca*, or warehouse of the Inca.

Figure 4.6. Tahuantinsuyu, or the four corners of the world in the Inca empire (Vargas et al.). Note how its ideographic representation holds visual resemblance with the nodal arrangement of *khipus*.
Salomon, and Gary Urton, among others, have shed light on our present understanding of how these narrative threads might have been employed since pre-Hispanic times—and well into the colonial period—to document official information and history. Although lacking any formal phonetic components (Boone 20), numerous (although as of yet undeciphered) physical elements are part of the logical-numerical system of recording on *khipu*; for example, the colors and spaces between the cords, the directionality of the knots, the width of the strings, or the types and relative placement of the knots on each individual cord. This highly diversified system ensured that virtually all things counted could be recorded, such as the production of gold mines or the dates of important historical events. Prior to the arrival of Spaniards, evidence present in the *Comentarios* suggests that Incas also recorded yearly population or census *khipus* (Chapter VIII, Book Six).

As archaeologist John R. Topic has argued for the pre-Incaic polity of Chan Chan, these artifacts were equally instrumental in the official documentation of spatial information. *Khipus* seem to have operated in conjunction with other topographical elements such as store houses and territorial landmarks in a highly sophisticated organizational structure that secured the streamlined flow of information from the four cardinal regions of the Tahuantinsuyu to the administrative center located in Cuzco (Topic 248–53) (Fig. 4.6). His research proposes that “the principles used in the fiber quipu and the *yupana*, an abacus which could be drawn on the ground, could be applied to a

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131 For the Andean *khipu* as a numerical system, see Leland Locke and Marcia and Robert Ascher. For a description of string directionality and the properties of the knots, see Gary Urton. For analyses relating these media to oral culture and territoriality, see Frank Salomon (*The Cord*).

132 See Martti Pärsinnen for a contrasting view.
third medium, architecture. These principles include the value of place, the use of attributes to record numbers and contextual information, and the importance of ranked categories” (Topic 258). In reversing the directionality of this statement to consider what seems to be an equally interdependent process, the relationship between textuality and space in the Andes, my focus highlights the material presence of these primordial knots in the discursive texture of Inca Garcilaso’s account.

Returning to our reading of the previous passage, the interactions between the filiform and nodal properties of *khipu*-objects—and not just their oral significance as potential bearers of discourse—as elements in a system of Andean signifiers interweaving text, bodies, and territories become evident in light of a larger set of symbolic equivalences and substitutions that take place in chapters XXII and XXIII. Here Inca Garcilaso records how the first Inca ruler Manco Capac partitions the newly-conquered territories by organizing and regulating according to geographical provenance and social rank the bodies of his subjects with “titles and insignia such as he wore on his head” (Chapter XXII, Book One, 55). These included a distinctive headdress consisting of a cingulum woven in different colored wool called *llautu* and ornamented with the *masqa paycha*; a fine woolen tassel made of cloth with a fringe falling over the eyes; a shaved head 133

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133 Since the early twentieth century, most studies have focused on the semiotic properties of the *khipu* and on the associated debate of whether or not it could be considered a system of writing. For a state of the debate and a timely complication of the terms “writing,” “literacy,” and “orality” in the context of *khipu* analysis, see Brokaw’s introduction (*A History* 4–13). Solomon’s study, on the other hand, uncovers the ways in which contemporary communities in the Andes have resignified the material semiosis of khipus by using it as a sort of insignia of community pride and belonging even though they might no longer know how to “read” them. Thus, in Solomon’s investigations modern villagers and *khipucamayos* (*khipu* interpreters) have created new bonds with *khipus* as objects that map onto the social life of this material form, which does cultural work in the present that is very different from its pre-Hispanic and colonial uses as systems of “writing” (see especially chapters 5–8).
with only a thread of hair one finger in thickness; and pierced ears with artificially expanded holes:

El primer privilegio que el Inca dio a sus vasallos fue mandarles que a imitación suya trajesen todos en común la trenza en la cabeza, empero que no fuese de todos los colores, como la que el Inca traía, sino de un color sólo y que fuese negro.

Habiendo pasado algún tiempo en medio, les hizo gracia de otra divisa, . . . y fue mandarles que anduviesen trasquilados, empero con diferencia de unos vasallos a otros y de todos ellos al Inca, por que no hubiese confusión en la división que mandaba hacer de cada provincia y de cada nación, ni se semejasen tanto al Inca que no hubiese mucha disparidad de él a ellos . . . . (Chapter XXII, Book One, 50)

Manco Capac’s distribution of his royal badges or insignias not only aided in partitioning the territory, but also served the purpose of classifying the different Andean nations, along with their different names, under Inca rule (Chapter XXIII, Book One). Based in these series of physical correspondences and substitutions, several observations can be made with regards to their relationship to the textuality of khipus.

Let us remember that prior to Manco Capac’s aforementioned political gesture, he was the only one authorized to wear elaborate semiotic weavings (textiles) as body ornaments. Thus in extending the use of his royal fashions to Andean subjects, Manco Capac incorporates their bodies into the Inca body politic he administers; he grants them a visibility that resembles his own.134 Manco Capac and his threads could also be conceived

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134 Brokaw sheds light on the long pre-Hispanic history of mimetic practices involving multiple subject-object relations in the following terms: “The sociocultural, economic, and political motivations for categorizing and distinguishing between classes of persons—for example, through the use of dress—although initially independent of any secondary medium of representation, might very well have been reinforced and even transformed once it emerged as a convention in Moche iconography. . . . But most forms of mimetic representation also employ metonymy in that they are not exhaustively mimetic: they select elements to represent and rely on them to invoke a larger material and cultural context. . . . In other words, the mimetic mode has at its disposal ready-made systems of signification that are incidental to the mimesis itself. The dress and ornaments that characterize certain figures and the activities in which they are
as the highest signifier in the chain of Andean semiosis. Such originates with the weaving, braiding, and knotting of threads, as well as with other materials and visible signs related to these practices. Anthropologists Denise Y. Arnold and Juan de Dios Yapita have articulated the interrelationship between textiles and texts, the political sphere, and the Andean territory, a connection that illuminates the dynamics at play in Inca Garcilaso’s text.

Arnold and Yapita’s research traces the trajectory from pre-Hispanic times to the present of what they have denominated as “textual polities founded in cloth” (20). This concept highlights how the chief Andean textual practices of weaving, braiding, and the knotting of threads gave rise to a multiplicity of other practices (dancing, painting images, praying, singing) and regional textual forms (cloth, glyph, song) stemming from common weaving elements. These practices are generated from predetermined additive sequences based in cloth, which reproduce the modes of production of Andean societies. When considered alongside the khipu subtext of the Comentarios, these findings are consistent with Mazzotti’s discussion of the monumentalization of the space of the Tahuantinsuyu. For Inca Garcilaso the Inca empire acquired its impressive proportions during Manco Capac’s rule, “whereas archaeological evidence shows,” on the contrary, that its expansion “was much less orderly and abruptly occurred during the last hundred years of Incan rule, starting with the ninth Inca, Pachakutiq” (Mazzotti, “The Lightning” 76). At stake in the referenced narrative sequences seems to be, therefore, both the territorial

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engaged would have made them easily identifiable to anyone familiar with the cultural context of Moche society” (A History 46–7).
limits of the Tahuantinsuyu and the symbolic validity of Andean expression vis-à-vis the new political and discursive colonial order.

As previously mentioned, the passage of the scissors, mirrors, and combs is an example of the presence in the Comentarios of an Andean discursive referent which brings to mind the process of activation of khipus through the interweaving of voice and meaning. Coupled with the instances where Inca Garcilaso narrates Manco Capac’s rituals conferring marks of distinction to his subjects, these episodes represent a mise-en-scène of the foundation of a material semiosis in the Inca empire prior to the advent of alphabetical writing in the New World. This primordial semiosis is inscribed onto primarily two templates: the territory of the Tahuantinsuyu and the bodies of its inhabitants, key agents in the first ruler’s partitioning of such territory. If “[p]olitical and physical dispossession,” as Martínez-San Miguel has argued, “is metaphorically and literally represented in the Comentarios through the detailed narration of the linguistic disavowal of the natives and their relationship with their space” (From Lack 129), then this discursive strategy enables Inca Garcilaso to materialize, through the visual metaphor of the Tahuantinsuyu organized as a khipu-text in the hands of Manco Capac, a mestizo discourse by way of reference to both indigenous and European textual practices and material technologies. Whether this link between semiotic objects and territorial arrangements holds historical validity or not from the analysis of pre-Hispanic Andean societies is less important than the discursive strategies employed by the Inca. In their symbolic and physical properties, the material and visual trope of the Andean khipu allows Inca Garcilaso to reestablish—if only discursively—“the link between identity and ‘space’

135 Historian Carlos Radicati di Primeglio questions the precision of Inca Garcilaso’s account.
that is fundamental in the configuration of a territory” (Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack* 129), thus further legitimizing the indigenous component of his prose before a metropolitan audience in the face of the spatial crisis of the Tahuantinsuyu.

**COUNTER-OBJECTIVE TERRITORIALITIES**

We must contrast Inca Garcilaso’s metaphorical view of the Andean landscape as a writer in exile with Guaman Poma’s richly embodied account of colonial space. If according to Adorno, this indigenous artist and scribe “views pictures as more powerful than writing” (*Guaman* 84), then it is significant that the symbolic topography of the Tahuantinsuyu practically dominates the third part of his manuscript, the *Buen gobierno*. Indeed, this section is strategically placed after a persuasive “face to face” address to King Philip III (“La pregunta”), and precedes the voyage by foot of an aged, tired, and famished Guaman Poma across Andean provinces and cities prior to his eventual return to the viceregal capital, Lima (1095 [1105]). This placement within the text underscores the physical presence of the author in the historical account, while at the same time charts the trajectory from oral to written expression that marks the “cultural doubleness” of colonial Andean testimonies (Salomon, “Chronicles” 12).

Despite this multiplicity, a clearly univocal vision is put forth in these representations: as is the case with all of Guaman Poma’s images, Andean space is depicted according to the ritual directionalities of the Tahuantinsuyu (*hanan*: left/above, *hurin*: right/below). With the arrangement of the figures respecting this logic, the traditional indigenous symbolic topography of the Inca empire is not only recuperated, but also revived in these visual accounts. One scholar associates the act of walking with
other Andean narratives—such as the account of the Huarochirí and Cristóbal de Molina’s *Ritos y fábulas de los Incas* (1573)—in which this trope signals the foundation of a new origin: physical displacement opens up the possibility for the reorganization of the *mundo al revés* (Tieffemberg 224). Thus, these images possess a complex topography that the spectator is expected to enter rather than to passively decode; their purpose is to denounce, make visible, and reestablish the social order that had seem to be lost. With these ideas in mind, I would like to focus on the visual strategies at play in Guaman Poma’s rearticulation of colonial space in one of the most remarkable closing images of his account, the world map of the Indies. To do so, I provisionally move away from physical objects to explore the emergent notion of counter-objective space in this artist’s remediation of the spatial crisis of the Tahuantinsuyu.

As scholars have noted, the 38 maps and bird’s eye views collected in these vignettes seem to respond to question ten of the *Relaciones geográficas*, a questionnaire designed by royal cosmographer Juan López de Velasco in 1577 to obtain information about the nature of American lands and the life of its people, which requested a *traza* or sketch of the cities and environs.136 Though the survey was exclusively addressed to colonial officials, their lack of familiarity with the lands resulted in that most (if not all) of the painted maps in response to this question were produced by indigenous artists, particularly painters or tlacuilo from the region of New Spain.137 Walter Mignolo has

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136 Raquel Chang-Rodriguez offers a useful summary (*La palabra* 40–51).
137 Margaret Beyersdoff notes that there are informational gaps and important distinctions for the *Relaciones* produced in the viceroyalty of Peru: “It is uncertain how many of the survey reports were completed for the provinces of Peru and thereafter received by the Council of the Indies. As far as is known, the cabildo authorities of fourteen provinces composed relaciones of their respective jurisdictions between 1582 and 1586. However, none of these reports, known as the Relaciones Geográficas de Indias—Peru, apparently, included the traza of surveyed towns and territory in Peru as required in assignment ten. In contrast, in the
suggested that Guaman Poma was indeed aware of the product of these efforts, and that any generic correspondences between the Andean artist’s drawings and their Mesoamerican counterparts respond to this familiarity ("Semiosis" 16).

Original to Guaman Poma’s enterprise is, however, a *mappa mundi* in which the indigenous chronicler places the known world within the fourfold schema of the Tahuantinsuyu (Chinchaysuyu, Collaysuyu, Antisuyu, and Cuntisuyu, in order of hierarchical importance), with Cuzco instead of Rome at the center (Fig. 4.7). According to Adorno, the two intersecting diagonals make this representation distinctively Andean: “The first division separates upper and lower fields (with the upper position carrying the preferred value); the second diagonal, an intersection of the first, simultaneously fixes the center of the design (the fifth sector) as well as the positions to right and left” (Guaman 89). It is clear then that Guaman Poma’s strategy to lend order to a world in disarray is to subsume Europe to the physical space of the Americas, thus Andeanizing the topography of empire to include the Old World within it—and not vice versa, as accounts of the period typically proposed.

But in this map we see as well the emergence of a new colonial geography in the form of destructured or counter-objective space. The double diagonals of the Tahuantinsuyu coexist with a particular breed of rational perspective as interpreted by the image’s apparent subservience to the totalizing gesture of Cartesian space, the cartographic grid. Typically, orthogonals provided “an armature for distributing objects

Viceroyalty of New Spain, many such maps were painted and, accompanied by their reports, sent to the Council of the Indies from where they were later disseminated to private or state manuscript collections and repositories in Europe and the Americas” (133).
Figure 4.7. Guaman Poma de Ayala, “Mapamundi del reino de las Indias” [983–984] (354–55), 1615, ink on paper, 14.5 x 20.5 cm. Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen, Denmark.
in space,” thus furnishing “a matrix for experiencing the world” (Leibsohn, “Colony” 277). However, in the coexistence of the orthogonal with the iconic representation of the Tahuantinsuyu plus the display of intimate knowledge about the particularities of the land, the cartographic grid in Guaman Poma becomes transformed into a different kind of sign. Undulating lines add topographical specificity, further suggesting the presence of hills, mountains, peaks, and other elevations in the territory. The incorporation of sinuous veins and arteries chart the trajectories of rivers and other water currents in Andean space—to the point where it is almost rendered as an island. For Guaman Poma, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the layout of the map and the territories depicted. The ill-defined interstices and the imprecise lines of the lattice are a testament instead of both a symbolic entrance into the Spanish colonial order and the precariousness of the imperial objectifying will to dominate the new territories.

Curiously, the grid in Guaman Poma’s orbis terrarum does not extend to include the body of water depicted in the map. It is confined instead to the boundary of trees and animals that demarcates the land. This is something that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries simply no imperial cartographer would have done. As Ortelius’s atlas shows, for instance, the notion of abstract space in the European tradition does not exclude the sea—and especially not ports—from a fundamentally geographic notion of territoriality. In this sense, Guaman Poma’s representation of the grid is akin to its deployment in colonial indigenous cartographies from New Spain. As we saw in chapter 3, Dana Leibsohn has keenly suggested that in colonial maps painted by indigenous

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138 As Marcos Jiménes de la Espada notes, question forty-two of the Relaciones requested a written account as well as a visual description of the ports and coastal areas of the region (89).
tlacuilos (painters) the grid is not a totalizing abstraction, but just another representational figure perhaps akin to the Nahuat hieroglyphs for telluric entities such as stone, mountain, fir tree, or cave. Although belonging to very different artistic traditions, this analogy allows us to see the extent to which indigenous cartographies complicate the notion of the imperial grid as an ideogram of objective, universal space. Guaman Poma’s *mappa mundi* in particular restricts the universalizing properties of this imperial idiom by confining it to a physical extension of the world viewed from an Andean perspective.

Understood in light of the rhetorical formula of the *mundo al revés*, we see the grid as hardly an innocent sign. Guaman Poma’s relationship to this spatial idiom, although borrowing from Ptolemaic conventions, also indicates a paradoxical incorporation of Andean polities into the imperial world of chaos that was replicated in the orthogonal arrangement of Peruvian cities. The relationship between this new sense of colonial space, the exploitation of Andean indigenous communities as recorded by Guaman Poma, and his plan for a good government is aptly summarized by a group of scholars in the following terms:

Guaman Poma documented how Indians were mercilessly preyed upon in the provinces but, for him, the city was even worse. He believed that cities ought to be left to the Spaniards, Africans, and people of mixed race, and that native Andeans should return to their home communities, where they might prosper and be guided and protected by Christianized native governors such as himself. *Guaman Poma found that Indians lost their bearings and integrity in walled districts, intersecting streets, and teeming squares*. Indian women (whose sexual and physical abuse by Spaniards was uncompromisingly investigated by Guaman Poma and is a prominent thread running through his chronicle) slid into habits of brazenness and were lured into prostitution, while honest men became drinkers, idlers, and devotees of petty crime and other forms of degeneracy. (Mills et al. 186, my emphasis)
With these observations in mind, we are able to see how for Guaman Poma rectilinear spaces are to be viewed with suspicion. His complex map of the world both amplifies and contains the notion of a world turned upside; it subverts European notions of space through an inversion of the moral regime associated with the Renaissance orthogonal grid.139 Finally, this *mappa mundi* challenges the notion of objective space, neutralizing the pervasive effects of imperial *dis*-order by taming its symbolic influence under the spatial language of the Tahuantinsuyu.

In the drama of colonial objectification we have reconstructed thus far it is clear that for European actors including Christopher Columbus, Hernán Cortés, and Bernardo de Balbuena, pre-Hispanic and colonial objects stood in metonymical relationship to the territorial possessions of the New World (Goanin, Hispaniola, Tenochtitlan, Mexico City, etc.). The task at hand for Guaman Poma seems to be, on the other hand, to pawn the objectifying enclosures of the Western worldview that are suggested by the figure of the grid. To do so Guaman Poma visually invokes the open-endedness and centrality of the Tahuantinsuyu, which synthetic ideogram, consisting of vectors that radiate in four diagonals from a central, self-fulfilling enclosure exposes the geometric limitations of the square, the closed-off line segments, and the homogenizing reticular pattern of the grid of coloniality. In this sense, Guaman Poma re-spatializes the assemblage of colonial forces as a function of indigenous genealogy. Although not specific to the Andean case, my interpretation sides with Daniel Nemser’s Foucaltian reading of the work genealogy does in the indigenous testimonies of the Mexican archive his work excavates:

Genealogy thus thinks in shapes and figures that move away from the

139 The ideological implications of gridded space have been studied by Hubert Damisch.
geometric uniformity of the line, the segment, the vector. Jagged, unpredictable lines of descent offer new spatial modalities that continually remake themselves: they enable a multiplicity of lines of flight and escape, but at the same time of capture and recuperation.

Genealogy maps descent, lineage, blood, heredity; but it also maps accidents, mutations, reversals, and dispersals. It charts conflicts and battles, alliances and communities, the tensions and struggles that compose the field of power relations. In short, genealogy maps war, “the endlessly repeated play of dominations.” As a social construction that is constituted in and around the interstices of power relations, that is both fixed and fluid, that persists across space and time and is simultaneously rooted in historical and spatial contingency, race and genealogy are structurally analogous. Inasmuch as race always constitutes an authoritative discourse that ties identity to blood, it is structurally homologous to genealogy. (“Toward a Genealogy” 13)

Yet to apply a Foucaultian notion of genealogy to the Latin American colonial archive we must first introduce a key variation to this model, for genealogy alone does not engender liberation (as it is grounded in the logic of reproductive labor, a point neither intellectual fully addresses). We must consider, then, the ways in which racialized subjects are, in colonial exteriority, sequestered from the possibility of genealogy. That is to say, they are occluded in the ontology of the New World object that we began to see in the first part of this study. Furthermore, in the previous chapter we saw how Balbuena’s objects served to encapsulate territorialities, and in such capacity constituted a disembodied network of connectivities that performed the work of exclusion and displacement of the racialized colonial subject. It is unfortunate Balbuena insists on calling this figure el indio feo or ugly Indian, but in the seventeenth century the indigenous and mestizo response to the conditions of such abstractions consists in reframing the cultural field as a material battlescape replete with all sorts of objects—now mobilized in their capacity as tools and weapons—that speak back to the racialized subjects’ conditions of objectification.
I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to the alphabetic and visual examples of boundary objects found in the *Comentarios reales* and in the *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. Like Inca Garcilaso’s stone, Guaman Poma’s array of human-made and natural objects demarcate the contours of both Spanish and indigenous subjectivities, demonstrating that the social frontier between groups is historically contingent as much as it is artifactually created by the repurposing of colonial goods in imperial economic and symbolic networks. Despite this correspondence, the message encoded in Guaman Poma’s image is uniquely significant from a contemporary vantage point. Especially remarkable in this depiction is the artist’s open portrayal of material objects as nodal systems of crisis and conflict, offering a necessary colonial indigenous perspective with which to complicate, among other models, Marxist critiques of consumption.\textsuperscript{140} Rather than concealing the exploitation of subjects and the chain of inequitable social relations behind them, this assemblage not only exposes the tensions of *mestizaje* that arise between Spaniards and Indians at the turn of the conquest, but also shifts our attention to the translational role of objects in relation to bodies and their spatial surroundings.

This premise not only allows us to deepen our understanding of the “crucial role played by objects in delimiting [identities]” (Spitta 9), but it offers, as well, a way to account for the propagation and capricious mobility, the shifting territorialities of what cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt has termed “contact zones.”\textsuperscript{141} In their perpetual

\textsuperscript{140} See especially chapters IV and XXIII–XV of *Capital*.

\textsuperscript{141} For a review of Pratt’s model, which seeks to understand “the spatial” field onto which difference is mapped (6–7), see this dissertation’s introduction.
errancy and restless permanence, objects such as this stone generate a cohesive yet elusive corporeal substance—of its previous possessor, for instance; of a hand that might have held it; or the metonymical and physical qualities of the people directly or indirectly involved in the act of transference. It is not sufficient, for instance, that Inca Garcilaso’s eccentric jewel be discovered; it must be sent to Spain to complete the dually translational process that attempts to reconcile the Andean–European cultural schism the author inhabits. Adding a new layer to the leitmotif of liquidity/liquidation of natural objects we encountered in chapter 2, ultimately this stone is forever lost in the sea and with it its promise of physical synthesis and coevalness. This loss underscores the distance between the colony and the metropolis, and the internal multiplicity of the mestizo subject in terms of what Cornejo-Polar has identified as an “impossible harmony” underlying colonial and contemporary Latin American discourses of mestizaje (91–2).

Although in a different manner, Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma both use a material imagination to pronounce themselves over the experience of the Andean contact zone. Object-relations occupy in these discursive universes an intermediary step in the reconciliation of Andean beliefs with the changing landscape of an equally complex colonial present. As this chapter has shown, objects mediate the rearticulation of territorial boundaries between emerging notions of distinct ethno-racial human bodies and the different groups interacting in these colonial texts.

From simple grooming devices such as combs to the contraptions of human/non-human uprisings and the fascinatingly intricate Andean recording systems of colored strings and knots known as khipus, Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma share an interest in
materiality. Their material referents are representative of the power struggles and asymmetric exchanges taking place between the Spaniards, the colonized Incas, and the rapidly increasing mestizo population in the region. With their representations of colonial materialities, these authors are able to wield strategic, sometimes ambivalent, claims about both the elusive nature of ethnic purity and the complex process of racial intermingling known as mestizaje. As Inca Garcilaso suggests in his protestación de la historia, the numerous objections against imperial archives on the matter of the New World appearing early in the Comentarios, it is in the traces of previously invisibilized experiences that “la primera piedra de nuestro edificio” takes its shape—or conversely, begins to crumble (Chapter XIX, Book One, 44). To take seriously this claim beyond the materialist metaphor would require a bottom-up process in which we scrutinize colonial foundational fictions,142 many of which Guaman Poma adroitly delineates with his maps and sketches of colonial settlements and buildings in Peru. It would require, as well, chipping away the “layers of stone and words that have accumulated on and around New World phenomena,” the edifice of empire as constructed by historical discourse in colonial Latin America (Rabasa 130).

Once committed to this decolonial effort, we are able to see that as stumbling blocks or stepping stones, certain objects require us to re-direct our attention and change paths—or, at the very least, to approach with renewed thrust our critical toolkit of meaning-making practices. This is due, in part, because certain objects seem to found (as much as they cultivate the fiction of being fortuitously discovered) an alternative origin to

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142 My assertion is a play on Doris Sommer’s notion of “foundational fictions.” In contrast to Sommer, however, I would locate these fictions in the building blocks of empire, as understood by the traces of material culture in colonial accounts.
the apparent cohesive unity of identities and communities: the social text that produces them, but that they also help fabricate. Yet despite Inca Garcilaso and Guaman Poma’s engagement with a complex network of material referents, Andean colonial subjectivities must continue to adopt the very alphabetical media they strive to contest in order to gain legitimacy in the Spanish metropolis.

As we have seen, through the strategic repurposing of boundary objects, colonial Andean space is imagined by a writer in exile as a territorial extension of the Inca empire; the Nueva corónica illustrates, on the other hand, how certain objects become embedded in its author’s impassioned narrative of both survival and degeneration of the Inca political and territorial spheres. Taken in conjunction, Inca Garcilaso’s textual and Guaman Poma’s visual representations of social encounters mediated by objects portray the negotiation of boundaries between human groups. These limits are indeed complex and multifaceted, demonstrating that the colonial third space is not only a site of tension for the subject, but also includes interactions between inert and alive matter, and between actual spaces and physical lands.

In the next and final chapter of this dissertation we return to the question of racialization to look at how a different set of actors, this time creoles in the viceroyalty of New Spain, mobilized their own technologies of intelligibility to distance themselves from the colony’s internal others. But not before underscoring the creative potentiality found in inverting, reflecting, and repeating previous models, perhaps until their original meanings transformed. As the two authors of this study illustrate, what makes the grid such an efficient substratum of power is precisely the reason why it should be re-appropriated and
repurposed by so-called peripheral epistemologies. The grid’s conditions of possibility are always and simultaneously local and global. And as such they make it possible to chart not only the pervasive grasp of colonial desire but also, like Guaman Poma’s Andeanized map of the Indies, worlds rightfully turned on their head where human and non-human agents may revolt not against each other, but together.
Figure 5.1. Anonymous artist, *De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás*, c. 1770–1780, oil on copper, 46 x 55 cm. Banco Nacional de México, Mexico City (Katzew, *Casta* 181).
CHAPTER FIVE

Surface and Visibility
Casta Painting, Creole Discourse, Materiality

Water glistens in the streaming fountains of the Alameda Central. Dispersed across the luscious gardens, the tall and slender poplar trees offer some respite from the sun during the habitual promenade. Their feathered elegance contrasts with the recently installed wrought iron fence that secures and demarcates the precinct’s perimeter. On a rooftop, far removed and yet patently in command of the scene, a Spaniard (español) surveys with a spyglass the miniature figures leisurely strolling about the park: men and women in pairs or small groups who remind him of his own Iberian roots. A young woman in red coiffed and adorned with matching headscarf and necklet, presumably his wife, kneels beside him, her body facing the intended viewer and not her husband’s. Blond hair, fair complexion—she is, however, not española, but an albino woman whose lineage conceals a shadow of African blood. Their offspring, a negro torna atrás (literally, black thrown backwards), is dressed in a stylish royal blue suit and white stockings, patiently awaiting his parents’ attention. As his right hand reaches toward the mother’s backside, the small child seems to remind the woman of her true condition as casta, a mixed-blooded individual in the Spanish colonies.143

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143 The term casta refers to the class and status of multiracial peoples in the New World. A standard definition can be found in Magnus Mörner, Race Mixture in the History of Latin America, who insists this category does not include “pure” Spaniards, Europeans, Africans, or Indians, but people resulting from any
Indifferent to the mother-son interaction, however, the father continues to survey the territory. This time he takes note of the squared perfection of the architectural landmark right before his eyes, which parallels the orderly concourse of New Spanish citizens along paths that bifurcate into trilateral islands of cobblestone, grass, and dirt. The combined geometrical arrangement of these elements forms a diamond pattern evocative of the original *traza*, the quadrangle of Spanish civility that furnished the grid of colonization's local infrastructure.

Inside the park, he sees mostly light-skinned people. Many appear to don lavish European fashions similar to those worn by other Spanish compatriots. But some women wear instead a long shawl (*rebozo*), indicating they may be of combined Spanish and indigenous ancestry. Outside the square, the spectacle of colonial society subsides into the less formulaic codes of daily life as experienced by the urban *plebe*. In the upper right corner of the image, for example, at the threshold of the only building whose façade

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degree of miscegenation. The sociopolitical community that developed out of the cultural exclusion of these groups is known as *sociedad de castas* or *sistema de castas*, which began to emerge in the second half of the sixteenth century. To date, the most insightful study of the connections between the Iberian concept of *limpieza de sangre* and the *sociedad de castas* in the colonies is María Elena Martínez's *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*. In a recent article, Laura Catelli has also argued that the category of *casta* does not apply to the criollo elite that started to consolidate a racial discourse around the seventeenth century (163). For a perspective that contradicts standard disciplinary use, arguing instead that the apppellative *casta* designated both “homogeneous” (pure) and “heterogeneous” (mixed) bodies, see Ruth Hill (231–7).
confronts the viewer, a dark-skinned woman is plainly dressed in white (Fig. 5.2). She waves a handkerchief at the kids portrayed next to a brown animal—is it a dog, a horse, or possibly a small mule?—and asks them to come back inside.

Although based on speculative description, the previous observation helps to underscore the powerful spatial rhetoric at work in the larger scene. Following a generic chorographic perspective often used in early modern cartographic representations, the anonymous artist of *De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás* (c. 1770–1780) suggests that in the interaction of multiple points of view—the rooftop and the bird's-eye perspective, to name at least two that are unavoidably conspicuous—the painted image comes to life. If the main theme of this picture seems to be the representation of race mixture in late colonial Mexico, in itself a fictive network of complex simulations, thematic riffs, and affects in the history of colonial vision, what to make then of the presence of multiple vantage points in this pictorial narrative? In order to begin answering this question, allow me to twist and bend at will a passage from a well-known theoretical point of reference, *The Order of Things* (1966)—or rather specifically, the ekphrastic reading of *Las Meninas* (1656) brilliantly proposed by Michel Foucault in this study.

In appearance, this scene is quite simple: we are looking at a painting in which a Spaniard is in turn looking at a park. A mere avoidance, that is, eyes averting each other’s glance, looks that happen to circumvent each other as his and ours converge at the studium of the image, the central fountain. Yet this fine line between careless absorption and studied theatricality, as a more recent critic might put it, exposes a ruse. The Spaniard is turning his eyes toward the park in so far as this metonymic action offers the possibility of genealogical disavowal. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. In being denied the recognition of that gaze, we are forced to assume the position of the lurker. In this precise but neutral place,
Figure 5.3.  Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656, oil on canvas, 276 x 318 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 5.4. Anonymous artist, *De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás*, c. 1785-1790, oil on canvas, 62.6 x 83.2 cm. Private collection (Katzew, *Casta* 141).
a superior form of spectatorship, the local manifestation of a sovereign gaze, identifies not with the painting’s subjects but with other external observers, both the anonymous hand that painted the scene and its intended audience.

My play on the text by Foucault, italicized above, primarily consists of selective inversions and refractions in a modest attempt to reimagine a colonial counterpoint to the imperial gaze reproduced in Diego Velázquez’s painting (Fig. 5.3). By using mimetic distortion (or plagiarism) as part of my citational strategy, I find it possible to destabilize its locus of representation (and, subsequently, Foucault’s interpretation of it) (The Order 4–5). This allows us to consider, instead, how the problems addressed by both the Spanish painter and the French philosopher (the relationship between spectator and artistic subject, the politics of the gaze, etc.) are in implicit dialogue with the challenges raised by the public milieu in which both early modern images—one Mexican, the other European—were produced, disseminated, and consumed. Without further leaps, it could be said a similar project, although underpinned by different ideological implications, was already underway in viceregal casta painting. Evidence of this can be seen in another example of the theme of duplicitous or latent blackness—skeptical, as it is, of the reproductive power of the albina—in which the familiar trope of the artist’s studio that is critical to the visual cachet of Las Meninas reappears, stripped down of its original mystery, as an adaptation to a New World context (Fig. 5.4).144 The relatively minor genre of casta painting, a corpus whose aesthetic impact to this day remains hard to measure, makes this

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144 I am not proposing, however, that these colonial paintings represent a direct, if belated, response to Velázquez’s work. For a similar methodological intervention in the emergent field of decolonial aesthetics, see Pedro Lasch and Jennifer A. González’s exhibition catalogue, titled Black Mirror/Espejo Negro. See also Walter Mignolo’s commentary in this volume (“Decolonial Aesthetics”).
approach particularly fruitful for understanding how diverse social actors, and artists in particular, contributed to a colonial discourse that traversed social, geographical, and political boundaries.

In the first *casta* painting, another set of elements, the scale and location of the architectural and human figures in and around the park in relation to the Spaniard’s body grabs the viewer’s attention. They help to render a scene which takes place in radical exteriority; that is, as it is perceived from a safe distance by an “objective” observer. What we mean by objective is in fact entirely subjective, as we are not referring to just anyone in general. Following the trail of eyes that multiply in the image, as we have, invites speculation about the artist and its audience. The subject who may have painted it and whom this *casta* painting in particular seems to address was most likely an individual who represented or at the very least aspired to gain recognition from the local sector of the New Spanish viceroyalty. This seems to be true despite the fact that many of these images were created for a foreign audience, as the impressive collection of the Museum of the Americas in Madrid suggests. But what evidence may be used to support this hypothesis? I believe the answer lies in the elevated perspective of which the viewer is allowed to partake. This preeminent position appears compromised by the gaze of an invisible subject who, even while alerting us to his own regard, occupies a space that takes place primarily off-scene (*obscaenus*). Through these tactical subterfuges and visual silences, a (tacit) creole subject is able to remain nameless, disembodied, and invisible. More importantly, the relative absence of a creole figure in *casta* painting allows this group to
circumvent the systematic process of ethnic indexicality and racialization that the genre as a whole applies to other mixed-blooded colonials in New Spain.

This hypothesis is consistent with recent studies on the production and reception of *casta* painting. On the one hand, it is true that numerous analyses claim the point of view represented in this genre is predominantly metropolitan (Carrera, *Imagining* 64; Estrada de Gerlero, “Las pinturas” 81; Sullivan 76). However, Ilona Katzew, a leading scholar of this visual corpus, offers substantive evidence that these images “form part of a larger creole discourse of pride” spanning two temporal blocks, a stylistic production that takes place prior to 1750 and one that develops in the second half of the century (*Casta* 4). By examining the politics of local artistic gilds in relation to the racial discourse of the viceroyalties during this period, others have shown that the visual rhetoric of these paintings documents the response of creole subculture as part of complex renegotiations of legitimacy within local and metropolitan spheres (Castro-Gómez 77–8; Catelli 162–3; Córdova and Farago 139–50; Deans-Smith, “Dishonor” 62–8). Still, others have attributed their creation to a parochial manifestation of the Hispanic Enlightenment (Ebert 147–9; Olson 314). These alternative approaches have opened up a productive line of inquiry that, in my view, better allows us to understand how creoles in the New World reacted to the limiting measures imposed by the metropolitan state in its desperate efforts to steer ship away from an imminent crisis of imperial sovereignty.

But let us not lose track of the scene in question. As if it were a disappearance trick, the artist of this *casta* painting redeployes what Santiago Castro-Gómez would call a zero-point gaze, or *hybris del punto cero*. In this picture, its effect is to confuse and conflate
our visual experience as spectators with that of the floating eye that attempts to exert
dominium over the local field of representation—a process that materializes, on one level,
at the surface of the canvas. Castro-Gómez’s own theorization compares creole
representations in New Spain and New Granada to explain the relationship between
science and the discourse of purity of blood that emerged in the American viceroyalties
during the eighteenth century:

Con ello me refiero al imaginario según el cual, un observador del mundo social puede colocarse en una plataforma neutra de observación que, a su vez, no puede ser observada desde ningún punto. Nuestro hipotético observador estaría en la capacidad de adoptar una mirada soberana sobre el mundo, cuyo poder radicaría precisamente en que no puede ser observada ni representada. Los habitantes del punto cero (científicos y filósofos ilustrados) están convencidos de que pueden adquirir un punto de vista sobre el cual no es posible adoptar ningún punto de vista. Esta pretensión, que recuerda la imagen teológica del Deus absconditus (que observa sin ser observado), pero también del panóptico foucaultiano, ejemplifica con claridad la hybris del pensamiento ilustrado. (18)

Castro-Gómez’s concept allows me to discuss the ways in which, following the footsteps of
earlier creole intellectuals, the artists engaged in the making of casta paintings sought to
manipulate the images of colonial subjects, spaces, and materialities at home and abroad.
This intricate web of operations has been deemed, for the most part, as a discursive
struggle that manifested in the field of letters at the intersection of the legal, religious, and
sociopolitical practices of the colonial elites (Higgins 5). In contrast with this position and
also with the traditional periodization used to distinguish between pre-Enlightenment and
eighteenth century discourses, which Castro-Gómez’s model adopts, this study echoes
instead Katzew’s assertion that the Enlightenment might not be the only, or the most
suitable, analytic category with which to study this visual genre (Casta 7). But despite my
appreciation for this argument, I aim to push past it. Circumventing the issue of periodization, which can be easily coopted by nationalist agendas, the study I propose is primarily a discursive and materially dialogic analysis. In this chapter, my argument will explore the cultural background associated with the proliferation of material objects in several pre-independent cultural narratives produced by creoles in New Spain. Forfeiting tidy histories of origin, my sources are intentionally disparate and eclectic. These range from the venerable materialities of the Guadalupan canon and the esoteric monumental artifacts that became touchstones for Mexican antiquarianism to \textit{casta} painting.

Given that space and temporality are mutually constitutive frameworks, and a manipulation of one almost always begets a change in the other, in addition to this corpus’ penchant for subjective concealment I would like to consider the category of “panoptical time” proposed by Anne McClintock. She defines it as “the image of global history consumed—at a glance—in a single spectacle from a point of privileged invisibility” (37). This statement can be applied to creoles on two levels. We know that as peripheral actors of this history and as a way to promote community patriotism creole artists and intellectuals conveniently addressed ideas of scientific universality and local pride, sometimes even in the same breath. Second, and with regards to \textit{casta} painting specifically, in \textit{Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings} (2003), Magali Carrera has argued that these images staged surveillance in efforts to exercise control over the racially mixed colonial body (52–4). A quick assessment of this visual corpus reveals, however, that \textit{time} is a particularly slippery subject in \textit{casta} painting. This is due to the \textit{sociedad de castas’} ideological tendency to formulate
racial mixing, on the one hand, as a historical problem and yet, on the other, as a social and political threat in the present tense. It has been said, also by Carrera, that as a genre casta painting better succeeds at “locating” instead a classifiable quantity, the racial subject, in the social lattice of colonial relations (“Locating Race” 38). However, I would like to take this general statement as an invitation to focus on the larger picture, which is simultaneously forestalled and enhanced by the artifact—the spyglass—that enables one of the many acts of vision staged in the first casta painting. The interpretive route I am proposing builds upon the base construct of colonial assemblages, the grid of coloniality, to consider its impact on the systems of meaning developed by creoles during the second half of the eighteenth century. To this end, my introductory remarks have aimed to illustrate how looking otherwise at two remarkable versions of De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás, and perhaps at casta painting in general, can facilitate a cultural critique that moves beyond the particular aesthetic challenges reflected in these paintings. In the following section, I return to the question of objective materiality that remains unresolved within the confines of the first picture. My aim throughout this chapter will be to address, more broadly, the local field of creole representation as an organic, interdependent unit, and to connect the racial concerns of casta painting with other institutional expressions of criollismo that defined the cultural shift from the Baroque to the Enlightenment in the Americas.

CURATING COLONIALITY: THE MATERIAL UNIVERSE OF CREOLES

Throughout the seventeenth century, a booming Mexico City experienced a surge of new buildings and architectural renovations that reanimated the physical landscape of the
colonial metropolis. Bernardo de Balbuena’s *Grandeza mexicana* (1604) only partially anticipated the extent of these changes. Later commentators would describe this period as a sweeping tide of urban development that brought in dozens of schools, churches, nunneries, and cloisters and thousands of new edifices, which popped up in practically every street and on every corner of the urban perimeter. Buildings grew taller, more ornate, reaching upwards and sideways with added rooms, floor levels, mezzanines, balconies, and domes in a process summarized in vivid detail by Stephanie Merrim:

> Gilded rooftops crowned highly adorned buildings fashioned out of gray quarystone (*cantera*) and contrasting bright hues of the rosy *tezontle* that another seventeenth-century observer called “an exquisite reddish stone, a great oddity.” The Baroque esthetic had already left its grandiose mark on the Solomonic portals of the ever-evolving Metropolitan Cathedral, the luminous Baroque murals of its sacristy painted by none other than Cristóbal de Villalpando, and especially on the astounding altarpieces of the city’s churches. (*The Spectacular* 195–6)

Increasingly, this urban backdrop would “museumize” creole aspirations of self-legitimation, amid which the pressing immediacy of the city irrupted into the elitist republic of letters conformed by the Spanish and creole intelligentsia. While the former maintained, as it had been doing for close to two centuries, a centralized stronghold on the viceroyalty, the latter group devised a bottom-up approach aided in part by the secular creed of the Enlightenment that would unfold throughout the eighteenth century. Beyond the coveted hues of the *tezontle* and other similarly attractive materials, the cultural resources of indigenous pasts became pliable under the revisionist rhetoric of creoles, who found in pre-Hispanic objects and monoliths a non-verbal—but equally powerful—language with which to voice an unswerving sense of loyalty to their Mexican *patria*. The local histories that cultural predecessors such as Hernán Cortés, Bernardino de
Sahagún, Bernardo Balbuena, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz had attempted to domesticate, anthologize, suppress, instrumentalize, or aesthetize, for instance, reincarnated in the form of a glorified presence that constituted the cornerstone of New Spanish creoles’ emergent sense of belonging.

Cultural currency, however, would take precedence over economic solvency, particularly during the earlier decades. Relatively poor, disenfranchised, and exempted from the economic privileges granted by the encomienda system (indigenous labor allocations overseen by the Crown), early seventeenth century creoles were but a mere shadow of their later, more successful counterparts. As Castro-Gómez points out, “[e]l grupo dominante—los criollos—no se definía tanto por tener en sus manos los medios de producción económica y por valores culturales asociados con el rendimiento y la productividad” but for posturing as the sole bearers of an Euro-American discourse of “whiteness” (96). Although creoles did not immediately attain positions of power in New Spanish society, they acquired sufficient leverage to infiltrate key administrative sectors through hard-won clerical battles in the municipal council (cabildo). The changes were gradual but decisive:

In a decree of 1523 Charles V extended the medieval Spanish tradition of strong, democratic city councils to the New World, stipulating that the white citizenry would elect them. New World creoles ran the municipal councils, which managed significant parts of the city budget and had the power to veto some of the viceroy’s expenditures. The Spanish crown’s tendency to reward service with offices rather than with money and its decision in 1558 to fill the royal coffers by selling offices and noble titles in the New World facilitated the creoles’ advancement into other civil positions. While the highest offices of the military and the government long stayed closed to them, by the end of the seventeenth century creoles had obtained some access to the elite high court and royal advisory board, the Audiencia. (Merrim, The Spectacular 15)
Creole involvement in the administrative affairs of the city increased even more in the aftermath of the 1692 revolt, when protesting mobs burned down the royal palace and other government buildings in the main square. Later in the year the viceroy commissioned a proposal for dividing the city into separate Spanish and Indian districts. The task would fall on the hands of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, whose ongoing ethnohistorical research and excavation of the Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacán almost two decades earlier had established him as an authority on indigenous matters past and present (Schávelzon 122). Applying his incipient archaeological skills to reconstructing the lines of the original *traza*, Sigüenza y Góngora believed to have found in the materiality of the urban landscape certain irrefutable clues of the lower classes’ ill will toward their Spanish rulers.\(^{145}\) In *Alboroto y motín de los indios de México* (1692), he describes and interprets a number of “trastes” and “cosillas supersticiosas,” clay effigies and mugs reeking of *pulque* or maguey brandy, that had allegedly been found in a canal under Alvarado’s Bridge—the site that marked the Spaniard’s biggest defeat against the Aztecs (116–7). Several scholars have remarked on the significance of this anecdote in Sigüenza y Góngora’s account, seeing it at once as a mythic reengagement with the spectrum of the conquest, an example of creole racial anxiety, and a latent expression of colonial otherness (Ross 184; Rabasa 71; More 176–84). It is equally tempting to envision Sigüenza y Góngora’s intervention as a type of surface archaeology that mobilizes the

\[\text{\footnotesize \(^{145}\) I follow here the reading proposed in the section titled “Fetishes in the Canals” in chapter 4 of Anna More’s study (176–84), who in turn builds upon an earlier argument developed by Kathleen Ross in “Alboroto y motín de México: una noche triste criolla.”}\]
past not for what it means but for what it does to generate new systems of relation between social actors.¹⁴⁶

For its far-reaching, convoluted, and sometimes contradictory influence in almost every aspect of viceregal society, creole subculture has enjoyed many characterizations. Culturally speaking, the invisibility cloak afforded by the appellative creole created a distinctive social body from that of Iberian-born Spaniards (gachupines) and of those recently settled in American soil (radicados). But most importantly, it rendered the native creole body as an ethno-racial cipher, an irreducible identity position that could be fully comprehended only in relation to It-Self (conversely, material identification would become an important strategy of creole visibility, as we will continue to see). This is, of course, a fiction cultivated by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criollismos, and most importantly, does not represent the historical reality by which creoles were designated as such.

The term criollo comes from the Portuguese crioulo, used in Brazil since the beginning of the sixteenth century to refer to the offspring of African slaves born in the New World.¹⁴⁷ It would eventually be applied to native-born Spaniards, for whom the term did not carry the racial implications of its original meaning, nor of the taxonomical categories applied to the castas:

de este modo el término vino a equiparar a los descendientes de españoles y africanos que nacían en América, por lo que no predominaría una distinción racial específica en su aplicación inicial. No sería hasta que

¹⁴⁶ On Sigüenza y Góngora’s archaeological pursuits, see the studies by Ignacio Bernal and José Alcina Franch.
¹⁴⁷ The edited volume by Bauer and Mazzotti and the study by Bennett provide useful overviews of the linguistic and cultural transformations of the term.
dejen de llegar negros esclavos con el cese de la trata, que el término pasa a designar exclusivamente a los descendientes de españoles y europeos nacidos en las colonias. (Martínez-San Miguel, Saberes 209)

In the scholarly literature, a distinct “identity” has been attributed to creoles by Anthony Pagden based on the political struggles that differentiated them from the *gachupines*, the transient class of metropolitan Spaniards that, according to creoles, were unjustly favored by the Crown and had no real investment in the New World other than personal profit (56–62). Lewis Hanke, Mabel Moraña, and David Brading, among others, have favored the phrase “creole consciousness” to describe a split imaginary defined by a double negation considered, respectively, in geographical and racial terms: *neither* European *nor* Afro-Indian.148 Reflecting on the intricate web of allegiances in which creoles participated, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel uses the category of the “subject” to trace the ambivalence of seventeenth-century *criollismo* toward multiple centers of legitimation and authority (Saberes 35–6). Her work also studies the distinct inflections of assimilationist and “protonationalist” Euro-American discourses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively, by attending to their specificity without necessarily folding the latter into the teleology of the nation (“Colonial Writings” 175). José Antonio Mazzotti, on the other hand, proposes the pluralistic notion of *agencias criollas* to encompass the “diferentes contextos y en diferentes direcciones” toward which creole structures of affiliation gravitated at various points in time during their relationship with the metropolis (Agencias...

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148 The use of this rhetorical formula (double negation) to identify who precisely is creole is a strategy used by Simón Bolívar in his celebrated “Carta de Jamaica” (September 6, 1815). For Bolívar, however, blackness remains excluded from the term’s conceptual boundaries: “mas nosotros, que apenas conservamos vestigios de lo que en otro tiempo fue, y que por otra parte, *no somos indios, ni europeos, sino una especie media entre los legítimos propietarios del país, y los usurpadores españoles*; en suma, siendo nosotros americanos por nacimientos, y nuestros derechos los de Europa, tenemos que disputar estos a los del país, y que mantenernos en él contra la invasión de los invasores” (Pérez Avila 66, my emphasis).
Speaking of its eighteenth century manifestations, Anthony Higgins outlines “a genealogy through which criollos seek to articulate a body of practical and theoretical knowledge of their environment and the history of its inhabitants, with a view to constructing for themselves a position and space of authority within colonial society” (xii).

Higgins’s understanding of what he termed the “criollo archive” proposes that creoles manipulated their claims to authority “first, in the spheres of literature and culture; and second, in the modes of scientific knowledge that can be articulated within the traditional regime, so long as they do not threaten its own authority and order” (5).

These approaches to the distinct but convergent forms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criollismos have been shaped, without a doubt, by the discussions that emerged after the so-called crisis of Latin American colonial studies (as my introduction to this dissertation explored in greater detail). When Rolena Adorno suggested that we revisited the category of the “Other” by paying attention to a full range of discursive productions, from painted codices and ceremonial cups to the visual art of baroque churches, it became clear that the historical subject that could benefit the most from such “decolonization” was the native Indian (“Nuevas” 22–4). To a certain degree, this is exactly true, and we have seen great progress in the last thirty years. My concern lies, however, with the way we have failed to extend this “materialist” logic to non-indigenous (or non-mestizo) groups, including Africans and their descendants of “pure” and mixed backgrounds.149 Furthermore, this type of disciplinary intervention has particularly

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149 When this happens it is almost exclusively through the lens of slavery, as the historian Herman Bennett has noted in the introduction to Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570–1640. I especially echo his assertion that “[t]o accept that slavery is overarching is to lose opportunities to understand how individuals fashioned identities that were meaningful to them outside the
eluded the study of those subjects or groups that have historically profited from different forms of ideological, cultural, and ethnic whitewashing.\textsuperscript{150} White colonial mythologies continue to be read through the lens of universality (or degrees of separation from it), while questions of orality, embodiment, and cultural materiality squarely fall in the critical domain occupied by subaltern groups, racialized subjects, and/or sexual and gender minorities.

The case of creoles stands out more than any other in this particular context given the ways that influential members of this collectivity resisted Eurocentrism in no ambivalent terms. Like José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez (1737–1799) set out to do starting in 1788 with the publication of \textit{Gacetas de literatura}, creole intellectuals often attempted to demonstrate the profound “epistemological limitations of outsiders in comprehending the nature and history of the New World” (Cañizares-Esguerra 282). They did so, however, through a highly polemical strategy. That is, by emptying out the category of the Indian, creoles reshaped indigeneity as both an ontological and a historical surplus distilled from past forms of objecthood, material-discursive formations that were put entirely at the service of what Sigüenza y Góngora calls “nuestra nación system of slavery” (7). A welcome departure from this limited and only partially correct focalization of blackness in the context of the material culture of the slave trade can be found in the doctoral dissertation of historical archaeologist Felipe Gaitán Ammann (“Daring Trade”).

\textsuperscript{150} As it is well known, the characterization of creoles as whites has long been disproved by a number of studies that document creoles’ attempts at erasing their mixed ancestry, and in particular their shared genealogical ties with \textit{mestizos}. See historian Elizabeth Kuznesof, who documents several instances of \textit{mestizos} passing as native-whites; that is, as creoles without genealogical ties to indigenous ancestry. Karen Graubart’s study of the Indians in Lima and Trujillo argues that there was a group of indigenous creoles (\textit{indios criollos}) that used a series of combined strategies—language (Spanish), dress and personal ornamentation, affiliation to Catholic religious organizations, and relocation to urban social arrangements—as gateways to occupy a unique subject position in the “new social hierarchy” (498). Building upon these findings, I aim to underscore how the category of creole became a racial formation that, in addition to wielding complex genealogical claims, used objects and materiality to elude representation within the \textit{sociedad de castas}. 
criolla” (Teatro 181). This and other manifestations of creoles’ politicized engagement with the materiality of culture lays paths for future research that is attentive to questions of material agency as they pertained to creoles’ specific processes of racialization, or the construction of creole discourses of identity that attempted to bypass colonial regimes of ethno-racial intelligibility. A number of scholars have worked extensively to survey the wide range of subjectivities produced as a result of these hierarchies, and I believe it is important as well to highlight how for some of these groups, particularly creoles, the key feature of their own racial positionality was that they could not be defined by their location within the race/ caste system. In this sense, the study of material forms shifts our discussion from the concepts and ideas that went into creoles’ resistance to self-definition along ethno-racial lines to the scaffoldings that naturalized the categories of casta, quality, race, etc. for the figure of the “objective” cultural exegetist, as the play of detached perspectivisms suggests in De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás.

Returning to the question of our current disciplinary engagements, when the analytic construct of the “object” is taken into account it is often done by heeding the points of contact between materiality and written discourse. An example of this critical orientation can be found in the lucid monograph recently published by Anna More, Baroque Sovereignty: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and the Creole Archive of Colonial Mexico (2012). Employing the metaphor of the archive, More studies the disparate corpus of texts penned by Sigüenza y Góngora to trace creoles’ claims for a material genealogy of New Spain. Establishing this genealogy involved both collecting and curating local artifacts into alternative systems of cultural value. As More demonstrates, this hermeneutic
strategy manifests consistently across Sigüenza y Góngora’s writings and those of other seventeenth-century creole intellectuals.

Peripheral to More’s main questions is the ways in which this hermeneutic approach to what we call today material culture extended as well to other systems of representation including the interrelated spheres of governance, art, architecture, and the performance of religiosity. In my view, attending to individual aspects of creole discourse as parts and layers in the heterogeneous platforms of creole expression is crucial in this task, as much as it is tracing its changing, often conflicting positions within the larger infrastructure of colonial assemblages. From Sigüenza y Góngoras’s proto-archaeological studies to the institutional contexts that regulated art production in New Spain starting in the 1720s, for instance, the category of materiality gains primacy alongside writing as a contested domain and an influential avenue of legitimation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century creole discourses.

Adorno and More’s positions are representative of an important segment of the critical approaches our field has seen in recent years. The research to which I am alluding has found a productive space of critique in the strategic alignment, ethno-racial in nature, between objects and others. Always in tension with the former, and a suitable reminder of the literary origins of our discipline, is a second tendency which does not share with the former its emancipatory potential: an avowal of the preeminence of the written word, transmogrified into the analytics of the book, of which the archive is declared ultimate lord and master. To redress the unabashed Eurocentrism of previous models, as well as the exclusion of indigenous agents from the epistemological and hermeneutic grounds of
colonial modernity, Walter Mignolo’s notion of “colonial semiosis” defined a cultural
domain formed by a multiplicity of signs that exceeded the limits of alphabetical
writing. Subsequent studies linking coloniality and material culture have left an
indelible mark in our field by deepening our understanding of the ways in which these
processes and cultural productions transformed the experiences of indigenous actors
(Cummins, Toasts with the Inca; Dean, A Culture of Stone; del Valle, “On Shaky Ground”;
Nemser, “‘To Avoid’”; Russo, El realismo; Verdesio). In line with these propositions I
submit that we must continue to chart alternative pathways with which to assess a
broader spectrum of colonial practices of signification that are meaningful for indigenous
and non-indigenous peoples. In short, we must extend the same kind of material analysis
to the more privileged sectors of colonial society, even when operating under the
assumption that engagements with alternative forms of signification will inevitably differ
across “a multiplicity of entangled actors and agendas (individual, local, regional,
national, imperial)” (Cañizares-Esguerra and Breen 602).

One way out of this conundrum would be to dislodge, when appropriate, the
colonial rhetorics of whiteness, which has its origins in the Spanish medieval discourse of

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151 See my commentary on Mignolo’s paradigm in the introduction to this dissertation.
152 In many instances, a shared recognition of what exactly constitutes Indian expression (lo indio) is the first hurdle to overcome. As Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn have argued, many of these negotiations also take to the realm of material culture to validate the ethno-racial visibility of “the Indian”: “This is one implication of the deception of visibility—that native peoples have to be culturally pre-Hispanic, and their works have to look pre-Hispanic, to be recognized as indigenous. This denies the radical transformations of the lives of indigenous peoples brought about as a result of colonization. Such interests also betray desires to freeze indigenous people in the past, turning them (or aspects of their lives) into artifacts or relics of a bygone, romanticized era. . . . [T]he deception of visibility also permits the denial of indigenous activity in building the colonial world: in too many instances it re-pacifics Indians, marginalizes them, and characterizes them as victims rather than survivors. Visibility thus tricks us into recognizing the native only in very limited and circumscribed ways” (14–5).
purity of blood or *limpieza de sangre*, from the overarching paradigm of a colonial republic of letters. This contention has less to do with the politics and ethics of canon formation than with the need to provincialize the dominant discourses of colonial elites by reading them against the grain of other, “minor” forms of representation. Precisely through laborious reformulations of questions of presence, magnitude, and cultural value, late-colonial creoles turned to archaeological and other material objects from the “past”—almost always of indigenous provenance and until then marginalized from local and European archives—to consistently exert power over the development of different ways for creating historical narratives (Cañizares-Esguerra 206–10). In this context, the study of the interactions between materiality and more traditional forms of creole representation has an added bonus: it sheds light on the *artifactuality* of different subject positions, and of accounts of racialization that pervade Latin American creole discourses in particular, as my opening analysis of the visual imagery fabricated by creoles has aimed to suggest. The following section reconstructs key aspects in the material imagination of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century creole subcultures by working at the intersection of local politics and emergent discourses in New Spain.

**TIME, SURFACE, AND DEPTH: SACRED AND SECULAR MATTER IN NEW SPAIN**

El criollismo es, pues, el hecho concreto en que encarna nuestra idea del ser de la Nueva España y de su historia; pero ya no entendido como mera

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153 Martínez succinctly defines the doctrine of purity of blood: “Having originated in late medieval Castile, the concept of purity of blood and its underlying assumptions about inheritable characteristics had by the late seventeenth century produced a hierarchical system of classification in Spanish America that was ostensibly based on proportions of Spanish, indigenous, and African ancestry, the *sistema de castas* or ‘race/caste system’” (*Genealogical* 1).
Edmundo O’Gorman’s well-known thesis in *Meditaciones sobre el criollismo* (1970) sustains that creole consciousness in colonial Mexico rested on two “concrete” developments, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the history of antiquities in the region. His pioneering observations on the founding statements of creole subculture has motivated modern specialists to chart independent trajectories for these expressions, while mobilizing their debt to Indian culture to celebrate the hybridity and difference of Hispanic *criollismo*. However, in my view, the religious and secular facets of creole materiality need not be completely separated. Only when examined in conjunction does a clearer picture of the ways in which creoles manufactured and circulated strategic accounts of difference begin to emerge.

For one, holy matter in the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes a central theme of debate in creole and post-independent secular histories, much like the work performed by medieval icons in Western Europe, especially during the fifteenth century. Unlike its medieval counterparts, however, the physical substratum of Guadalupan devotion is predominantly, if not entirely, indigenous in nature. At the intersection of what Carolyn Walker Bynum calls “Christian materiality”—the cultural shift toward material objects in late medieval Christianity—and creole appropriations of local artifacts, the cult of the *Virgen Morena* or Brown Virgin sprung forth from an allegedly
Figure 5.5.  *The Virgin of Guadalupe*, fourteenth century, wood (cedar) and polychromy, 59 cm. Real Monasterio de Santa María de Guadalupe, Extremadura, Spain (Spitta 102).

Figure 5.6.  *Portrait of the Virgin of Guadalupe*, sixteenth century, maguey fiber and unknown polychromy, 172 x 107 cm. Basilica of Guadalupe, Mexico City (Spitta 102).
miraculous image (Figs. 5.5 and 5.6). This image appeared on the maguey fiber cloak (tilma) of Juan Diego, the native peasant who witnessed her apparition at the hill of Tepeyac (formerly, the sacred site of the Aztec goddess Tonantzín) in 1531. I concur with More in her observation that “[t]he miracle is thus formed around a specular object: not the apparition itself, but the imprint of the image that reproduced the Virgin’s beauty on the indigenous tilma” (84). The tilma, exhibited today at the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City, plays a “fundamental role as the building block of Guadalupanism” (Spitta 109). Perhaps better than any other object of this period it exemplifies the crossings—and

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154 I allude here to a very limited aspect of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s colossal history, which numerous scholars have treated at length. On the influence of colonial religiosity on Mexican national identity, the locus classicus is Jacques Lafaye. Cañizares-Esguerra’s analysis (especially chapter 5) traces creole intellectuals’ interpretations of the historicity and symbolic power of this icon in relation to Mesoamerican scripts (305–21).
distances—between indigenous and creole textual polities. As if to emphasize the
resistance to unmediated indigenous physical records, creoles in the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries would “translate” the miraculous fabric into a fictive narrative of
integration, one in which they were able to not only symbolically liquidate indigeneity
(Fig. 5.7) but also preside—as the light-skinned version of Our Lady of Guadalupe did—
over New Spain’s heterogeneous social body (Fig. 5.8). In this sense, the function of the
*tilma* is somewhat akin to the sartorial motifs present in the earlier version of *De albina y
español, produce negro torna atrás* discussed above; in particular, the *rebozo*, a textile commonly

Figure 5.8. Luis de Mena, *Guadalupan Scene of Castas*,
c. 1750, oil on canvas, 120 x 104 cm. Museum of
the Americas, Madrid (Katzew, *Casta* 195).
associated with indigenous and mestizo women’s dress. Furthermore, Juan Diego’s cloth, in itself a mantle of strategic invisibility in the popular narrative surrounding the Virgin’s apparition, offers an important link to the pre-Hispanic objects that enthused and challenged New World antiquarians such as the Mexican creole León y Gama, whose commentary on the two Aztec stones discovered in Mexico City fueled an intense racial debate lurking behind a veil of erudition about native artifacts.

If only for their shared approach to the persistence of past events in the material conditions of the present, it seems justified to position the enduring character of Guadalupan devotion alongside the rise of antiquarianism and archaeology in New Spain. Creole intellectuals deployed both discourses, sometimes interchangeably, in order to project backwards a model of historical continuity between the first peoples of Mexico and the cultural reality that took place during the slow process of erosion of imperial allegiance in the region. Expanding the arguments of earlier scholars such as Gerard Cox Flynn, Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpururu, and Francisco López Cámara, Pagden and Cañizares-Esguerra have been among the most lucid commentators of this tradition in Hispanic

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155 The cultural history of this clothing item is summarized by Teresa Castelló Yturvide, who conceives of the rebozo as the “prenda mestiza por excelencia” (76). First described by Diego Durán in 1572, it is formed by “una tira larga de algodón que se tejó aprovechando la anchura del telar prehispánico, el rebozo nació,” she continues, “de la necesidad de cubrirse que tenían las mestizas, pues carecían de los medios suficientes para adquirir los mantos y tocas usados por españolas y criollas y, a la vez, estaban obligadas a sujetarse a la Ordenanza de la Real Audiencia proclamada en 1582” (Castelló Yturvide 76–7).

156 This device of racial obliteration thus advocates something closer to what Higgins calls “cultural archaeology”: “The practice of cultural archaeology facilitates the reconstruction of a historical narrative of continuity linking the scholar with a lost origin, in a narrative that tends to suppress the problem of racial divisions and hierarchies that separate him from his indigenous and mestizo contemporaries in colonial Mexican society” (61). Higgins locates in the works of Sigüenza y Góngora and Juan José Eguiara y Eguren important sources of this practice, hinting at the concept’s applicability for a vast corpus of creole written expressions. I extend Higgins’s understanding of the term to consider a wider array of creole productions, especially in the realms of visual and material culture.
America (“Identity” 70–80; How to Write 204–65). Their approaches have helped flesh out the ways in which creoles appropriated native traditions, a process integral to the cultural identity they would stake claims to in both the local and transatlantic public spheres. In Europe, as Arnaldo Momigliano observes, antiquarian research represented the crisis of traditional history writing (56–8). Whether in the fashion of the curious dilettante or in that of the keen scientific observer, in the early modern era starting around 1650, objects and things suddenly became viable sources of interpretation. Antiquarian pursuits led to the consideration of the fragments of history as material evidence, while archaeological explorations exhumed ruins and artifacts that incited questions about the appropriate methods and sources for writing such history, often producing an autonomous framework of interpretation with which to cross-examine official narratives.

In the Iberian Enlightenment, the vested interest in studying ancient cultures through literary, visual, and material means can be traced back to the series of eighteenth-century legislations known collectively as the Bourbon Reforms. In particular, the measures instituted by the Bourbon dynasty during the reigns of Charles III (1759–

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157 For this earlier scholarship, see Flynn’s Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; Gonzalbo Aizpururu’s Historia de la educación en el época colonial: La educación de los criollos y la vida urbana; and López Cámara’s La génesis de la conciencia liberal en México.

158 Increasingly since the late 1730s, however, the cultural practices of antiquarians and proto-archaeologists also drew intense scrutiny and criticism, notably from Europeans who believed the resources spent on explorations toward the acquisition of ancient curiosities and on the excavations of regional sites that often resulted were better spent on social welfare, education, and economic development. Alain Schnapp’s “Ancient Europe and Native Americans: A Comparative Reflection on the Roots of Antiquarianism” outlines the salient aspects of this debate, in which the opposition seemed to react more favorably toward continuing to fund similar (“ethnographic”) discoveries in the Americas and Asia than to promote the sort of navel-gazing that, for instance, the excavation of Roman artifacts presupposed (58–60).

159 See More for an overview of the critical bibliography on New Spanish antiquarianism, especially the first chapter of her study (44–50).
1788) and Charles IV (1788–1808) had a profound impact on the development of the arts, architecture, and archaeology in Spain and the New World (Estrada de Gerlero, “Carlos III” 63–5; “La labor anticuaria” passim). Often referred to as an enlightened despot, the former devised aggressive measures to consolidate Spanish dominance abroad primarily through sustained economic expansion. As it is widely known, viceregal agricultural and industrial productions had flourished during the seventeenth century and into the first years of the eighteenth century. This surge in productivity had a tremendous impact on inter-colonial trade, which grew more robust by the minute in places like New Spain. The Bourbon state’s response, therefore, was to capitalize on the colonies’ almost-independent economic success by revising governmental structures, strengthening military control, extracting higher taxes, and streamlining production, thus effectively increasing the flow of wealth toward the metropolis.160

At home, however, the imperial state directed the bulk of its efforts toward recalibrating the politicized material value of lineage, memory, and representation—from the physicality of the body politic to collective sites of patrimonial history (Cañizares-Esguerra 155–60; De Vos 277–9; Katzew, Casta 111–4; Sánchez-Blanco 18–9). Taken literally, this approach included policies such as the 1776 Royal Pragmatic, Charles III’s attempt to curtail marriage freedom by controlling local unions for those under the age of twenty-five; two years later this measure was extended to whites and Indians in the colonies, ostensibly to “protect whiteness” from the racial threat posed by blacks and the

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160 See the influential studies by John Lynch and John H. Elliott. For a good summary of Spanish-New World relations during this period, see David Brading (“Bourbon Spain”).
mixed-race castas (Katzew, Casta 52–3). In 1785, concerns over a different kind of patrimony—that of the national community—led to the foundation of the Archive of the Indies. The purpose of this repository was to collect, maintain, and regulate access to primary documentation pertaining to the Spanish territories. A culmination of the numerous domestic and European academic debates that interrogated the quality of Spanish historiography, the Archive of the Indies incompletely reflects the profound material revolution that took effect during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a result of this shift objects and artifacts from the field animated alternative histories that also seemed to escape, if only partially, the ideological reach of spaces such as the Royal Academy of Fine Art of San Fernando (1752) or the recently-overhauled Royal Natural History Cabinet in Madrid (1771). That is to say, that the aforementioned ensemble of cultural institutions formed part of an explicitly political strategy of governance—they had to work in favor of the imperial state and not merely describe or represent it in fragments. As Paula De Vos reminds us, the curatorial integration of textual and material discursivities in the metropolis is a project that harks back, at least, to Philip V’s efforts to furnish the Royal and Public Library of Madrid with books, coins, and other non-written artifacts:

In 1712, he issued a decree requesting books and grammars from the Americas as well as from China, Japan, and the East Indies, and the shipment of “singular and curious things,” or “singular and rare things, including a sheet that explains the names of these things, with a note as to each one’s properties, their uses, and the place they come from.” (278)

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161 The circumstances surrounding the creation of this archive are discussed in great detail in Cañizares-Esguerra, particularly in chapter 3, “Historiography and Patriotism.”
Initiatives requesting the identification and collection of regional artificialia, or human-made objects, multiplied toward the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly in the wake of Luis José Velázquez’s voyage across the peninsula in search of archaeological treasures. The commissioning document, penned by the Marquis of Ensenada in 1752, was titled “Instrucción que ha de observar Don Luis Velázquez de la Real Academia de la Historia, en el viaje a que está destinado para averiguar y reconocer las antigüedades de España.” The “Instrucción” was part of the Bourbon court’s attempt to revise the history of Spain using material evidence to augment, supplement, or correct extant written records. The task of collecting information and carrying a recuperation of Spanish antiquities sought to match similar efforts taking place in other parts of Europe, particularly Italy (Abascal 57). In this voyage Velázquez was authorized to conduct observations and take notes of the antiquities he came across, to survey important geographical landmarks where memorable events took place, and to register and illustrate the ruins and relics of each town. Other activities included conducting minor excavations, visiting the cabinets of curiosities of distinguished individuals, and buying objects from the local population:

Recogerá las estatuas antiguas, vasos, relieves, camafcos, piedras grabadas, medallas y las demás reliquias comprobadas de la antigüedad, comprándolas de las personas que voluntariamente se determinen a venderlas, como su coste no sea excesivo, pues pasando de una cantidad moderada, esperará la Real aprobación antes de ejecutar la compra. (qtd. in Abascal 57)

Exceedingly unrealistic and impractical in his desires, Velázquez intended to rewrite the entire history of the Spanish nation using only material records, an intention that already
transpires in his 1765 *Memorias de el Viage de España* (Abascal 58). Also notable among these efforts is his proposal to correct and augment Miguel de Cervantes’s magnum opus, *Don Quijote*, in an illustrated history based on observations of a wide array of artifacts, including medals, inscriptions, and other ancient monuments (“La historia de D[o]n Quijote de la Mancha ilustrada, y corregida por las medallas, inscripciones y otros monumentos antiguos”) (Abascal 60). On the other hand, similar initiatives would yield a successful hermeneutic strategy in the works of some of Velázquez’s European contemporaries, most notably the French philosopher Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, whose renowned *Antiquity Revealed* (1766) was published posthumously with a preface by Denis Diderot. In the words of the archaeologist Alain Schnapp, “Boulanger . . . uses objects, monuments, and ruins as his starting point before referring to texts and tries to explain prehistory through the tales of primitive men considered to be witnesses to earth’s natural and original history” (60). Following Velázquez’s footsteps were figures such as Francisco Pérez Bayer, the Jesuit Antonio Ponz, Agustín Ceán, Isidoro Bosarte, and José Vargas Ponce, all of who embarked on similar voyages in Spain or abroad. As it becomes clear from these observations, the study of indigenous antiquities thus has a genealogy that is as much European as it is a particular reflection of the Spanish empire’s renewed administrative interest in its territories—and, evidently, of the American response to these changes.

With the patrimonialization of Spanish antiquities proving to be a successful enterprise, the Crown sought to expand the scope of its project by turning attention to the
colonies. Triggering yet another rush of New World objects in a tradition that spanned close to three centuries since Columbus’s arrival to the Antilles, all genre of curiosities were sent to the metropolis, including among them visual imagery produced by creole artists. As Katzew documents,

[i]n 1776, the same year the Gabinete [Royal Natural History Cabinet] opened its doors to the public, an official decree was issued requesting viceroy and other functionaries to send natural products and artistic curiosities. Casta paintings were displayed with a host of archaeological objects, rocks, minerals, fossils, and other “ethnographic” items. (“Casta Painting” 16)

Exhibited alongside ancient and contemporary artifacts, she continues, the inclusion of this pictorial genre in the Royal Natural History Cabinet underscores the position such representations of mixed-race colonial subjects, understood more appropriately as curiosities, occupied in the material hierarchy of the imperial state: “By entering the space of the Gabinete, casta paintings acquired a specific meaning related to their assumed ‘ethnographic’ value. The Gabinete provided the ideal forum from which colonial difference could be contained and articulated as a category of nature” (“Casta Painting” 16, emphasis in the original). Back in the colony, and past the initial impulse motivating the creation of these paintings, the selection of casta sets and individual pieces rested, presumably, on a number of actors. Although we cannot know with full certainty, it is likely the decision was partially in the hands of creole intellectuals and high government officials. Thus, the establishment of Spain’s royal collection toward the last quarter of the eighteenth century already presupposes a primary curatorial exercise from the part of the
viceregal administration. Additional research into this area is needed, as comprehending how this process took place can help us further reconstruct the discursive coordinates of these paintings in their original context of production.

Mexican interest in pre-Hispanic antiquities, on the other hand, can be credited to the results of the aforementioned expeditions as well as to successful excavations in Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Stabiae financed by Charles III and his successor (León y Gama 4; López-Luján, “El ídolo” 204; Schnapp 58). In New Spain, figures such as Lorenzo Boturini, who arrived from Italy in 1736, and the exiled Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero, author of the *Historia antigua de México* (1780), contributed to “the institutionalization of the study of the Mexican past” initiated decades earlier by Sigüenza y Góngora (Castro-Klarén, *The Narrow Pass* 278). Historical archaeologist Leonardo López-Luján also credits this development to the unforeseen consequences of the political agenda of viceroy Count of Revillagigedo. The Mexican creole had returned to Mexico City from Spain in 1789, year in which the capital had reached over 130,000 inhabitants, thus becoming the most densely populated city of the Americas (López-Luján, “El ídolo” 204). During his years in the mother country, Revillagigedo must have witnessed the urban revitalization of Madrid, after which it is likely he modeled his ambitious renovation plan of the city—from straightening and leveling out the stone pavement in high-traffic areas to tackling the perennial problem of solid waste and fecal matter that

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162 Anne Ebert presents an overview of the official correspondence between viceroy Manuel Amat y Junyent and the Spanish monarch on the production of *casta* paintings from the viceroyalty of Peru (139). In contrast to most New Spanish series, also found in individual households in the Americas and Spain as well as in the archbishop’s palace in Toledo, Peruvian images of mixing were commissioned for the Bourbon king’s curiosity cabinet (Córdova and Farago 136; Ebert 144).
seemed to tarnish the seat of empire’s otherwise illustrious settlement history. It was largely in part to these renovations that a previously invisible arcane past irrupted into the current scene of representation. Like nuggets of gold surviving the ransack of the conquest, pre-Hispanic monuments turned up in parts and wholes, showing their gleaming promise under the debris accumulated by decades of colonial history. Parallel to these urban transformations, creole intellectuals’ engagement with indigenous pasts manifested in a discourse of patriotic epistemology that, according to Cañizares-Esguerra, was “slightly less clerical” than its preceding counterparts (267). While agreeing with this interpretation, I find it to be somewhat of an understatement, particularly when considering the great extent to which creole discourse relied on multiple forms of visual media and material culture to validate the historical knowledge of participant clerical observers (predominantly creoles, but not exclusively so) and noble Indian informants with genealogical roots in pre- or early-colonial times.

Scholars have long debated the nature of creoles’ elective affinities toward forms of indigenous expression, including histories, images, and material remnants (Lafaye 65–6, 183; Pagden 70–80). In recent years, critics have generally agreed with the idea that

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163 “La traza ortogonal se regularizó por medio de la apertura, ampliación y alineamiento de numerosas arterias viales. Nuevos paseos y puentes fueron construidos. Además, dotó de empedrado y de anchas banquetas a las calles del centro; los mercados en las plazas públicas fueron reordenados; se pintaron muchas fachadas, y el alumbrado público fue puesto en funciones. En forma simultánea, la ciudad fue reorganizada administrativamente: se creó para ello una división en cuarteles y manzanas; se les puso nombre a las calles y las plazas, escritos éstos en azulejos blancos de Talavera; las casas se numeraron y se marcaron las accesorias. La red de distribución de aguas mejoró sustancialmente gracias a la instalación de acueductos, cañerías y fuentes. Se emprendieron asimismo importantes obras de saneamiento urbano, entre ellas, la construcción y reparación de acequias, drenajes y atarjeas para la correcta conducción de aguas pluviales y negras. También se ordenó a los propietarios instalar letrinas y depósitos de basura en sus casas. Y, como complemento, se instauró un eficiente servicio de limpieza que se valía de carros de recolección para llevar la basura a un sistema de tiraderos distribuidos en la periferia” (López-Luján, “El ídolo” 205).
this shift, already in full force by the second half of the eighteenth century, responded less to European models than to a pressing anxiety to stake claims to a local identity (Cañizares-Esguerra 204–10; Higgins 5–6; Martínez-San Miguel, Saberes 13; Mazzotti, Agencias 87–93; More 8–10; O’Gorman, Meditaciones 25). Creoles were not the first, however, to examine through a critical lens their ties with local pasts. Albeit in different ways, earlier groups in New Spain had been forced to renegotiate the meanings and values of ancestral technologies and artifacts. Let us not forget, as R. Douglas Cope has observed, that among the things that early conquistadors admired the most from the Aztecs were their “feats of engineering, the large and well-ordered marketplaces, [and] the ‘enchanted vision’ of Tenochtitlán itself” (3). Indeed, a number of conquistadors, missionaries, and other powerful agents of the new colonial elites exhibited interest in American antiquities. Their reactions, ranging from curiosity and fascination to dismissal, suspicion, and contempt, have been documented in the writings of Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, among others (Estrada de Gerlero, “Carlos III” 67–8; Russo, “Cortes’s Objects” 3–6; Schnapp 70–6). Yet it never ceases to surprise students of this history, including myself, how Spaniards could marvel at the material grandeur of indigenous civilizations at the same time they exterminated or violently reduced them into pastoral submission.

This paradox is revealing of the fact that from the offset indigenous corporeality was cleaved from the products of indigenous industry and cultural achievement. Building upon this history, patriotic sovereignty separated the “Indian” from thicker social and
political casings and made a bid for epistemological autonomy at the same moment that the imperial state passed stringent measures resulting from constitutional disputes about economic relations. As if exchanging capital for bounded temporality, the material seduction of indigeneity would make its eighteenth century return in the creole secular cult of local antiquities. Enlightened *criollismo* would approach the rediscovery of native artifacts from a “scientific” perspective, marking a clear departure from the affective and aesthetic concerns of the Baroque. Though attempting to trace their deep attachments to the territory back to indigenous ancestors (real or imagined), creole strategies of self-legitimation would often result in what could be termed an *indigeneity without Indians*; that is, a fundamental disavowal of the historical agency of indigenous subjectivity in the direction of its constitution as an object/fetish/commodity-form dependent on its circulation and redeployment as such.\(^{164}\) This spatiotemporal displacement, however, is but one of the many assemblages of race (and racism) founded by colonialism, as the aftermath of Revillagigedo’s urban intervention suggests.

During the repaving of the central plaza in 1790, a number of sculpted monuments were exhumed. Two in particular captured the public’s attention. The first, discovered late in the summer, was a statue of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, incorrectly believed to represent another deity (Fig. 5.9). Stirring mixed reactions among Mexico City’s equally mixed population, the creole elite regarded the statue as a monstrous artifact with diabolical properties; the massive idol was considered too horrifying and

\(^{164}\) The italicized phrase has obvious resonances with the title of Eduardo Bonilla Silva’s book, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States.*
Figure 5.9. Antonio de León y Gama, *Coatlicue*, 1792, first archaeological drawing. *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras*, Mexico City.

Figure 5.10. Antonio de León y Gama, *Sun Stone*, 1792, first archaeological drawing. *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras*, Mexico City.
aesthetically displeasing for human eyes. The Indians, on the other hand, took to its worship almost as quickly as the stone was revealed. Aware of the threats that a revival of pre-conquest religiosity could pose to its authority, the city government sought to repress the impact of this discovery. Upon suggestion of Bernardo Bonavia y Zapata, Mexico’s chief magistrate (corregidor intendente), the monument was buried in the grounds of the university, where it could no longer be admired by the impressionable plebes.

Another important discovery, this time of the famous Sun Stone (also known as the Calendar Stone), took place in December of that same year (Fig. 5.10). The massive disc-shaped monolith exhibited symmetrical carvings in ornate concentric circles, and contrary to the Coatlicue was prominently displayed at the Metropolitan Cathedral. That these and other pre-Hispanic artifacts did not suffer the same fate of previous rediscoveries was a huge accomplishment in itself, “for now they were seen as possessing rich historical content and a certain degree of artistic value. . . . For this reason,” López-Luján continues, “many of these monuments were used as decorative elements at corners, lintels, and entry-ways of mansions that were built at the time, while others went into the growing numbers of public and private collections in the capital” (“The First Steps” 87).

A great deal of speculation and commentary on these enigmatic pieces soon followed, notably by the Mexican intellectual Antonio de León y Gama (1735–1802). In 1792 the creole jurist, astronomer, and antiquarian published a painstaking treatise on the Coatlicue and the Sun Stone, the Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que con ocasión del nuevo empredrado que se está formando en la plaza principal de México se hallaron en ella el
año de 1790. This publication established León y Gama as a leading authority in local scholarly circles and it allowed its author to make a convincing case for the cultural sophistication of autochthonous peoples. His intention to highlight pre-Hispanic achievements, however, is part of a multilayered strategy to legitimize creole autonomy. Although at times critical of imperial violence, throughout the text León y Gama rehearses a postlapsarian homage to the Spanish conquest. By way of these conflictive set of events, it is implied, the Mexican territory achieved its essential unity, smoothing over the difference—the “Otherness”—between its foundational material singularity and its degraded (human) embodiments. In this vein, León y Gama’s Descripción straddles idealistic and practical concerns, masterfully combining encyclopedic historical knowledge and original research on indigenous traditions with a curatorial bent to preserve the resurfaced archaeological treasures before they were destroyed. León y Gama aimed to show his privileged epistemological position as a skilled interpreter of a vast corpus of native discourses, from mathematics and astronomy to visual, material, and linguistic accounts.

In line with the principles guiding eighteenth-century scientific discourses in the New World, his scholarly efforts were “ultimately geared toward proving that foreigners who knew America only superficially could never decode Amerindian scripts” (Cañizares-Esguerra 271). It is indeed this tension between surface and depth that which propels León y Gama’s lengthy and detailed commentary. While the figure of the learned creole had first-hand access to a cultural hermeticism revealed through intense study and
focused observation of local phenomena, his task was to “dig deep” in order to bring this depth to the surface, and thus respatialize submerged temporality such that it could be made to ventriloquize present concerns. Narrated by León y Gama at the beginning of the text’s introductory remarks, this transit is freighted by a historical hermeneutics of the colonial object:

estando excavando para este fin el mes de agosto del año inmediato de 1790, se encontró á muy corta distancia de la superficie de la tierra, una estatua curiosamente labrada en una piedra de extraña magnitud, que representa uno de los ídolos que adoraban los indios en tiempo de su gentilidad. Pocos meses habian pasado cuando se halló la otra piedra, mucho mayor que la antecedente, á corta distancia de ella, y tan poco profunda, que casi tocaba la superficie de la tierra, la que se veía por encima sin labor alguna; pero en la parte de abajo que asentaba en la tierra, se descubrian varias labores. (2–3, my emphasis)

León y Gama’s discourse of a detachable indigenous form without an indigenous thematic interior, in other words, is itself nestled within a colonial theory of the surface, a theme of superficial legibility and interiority obliterated, whose coordinates recall Sigüenza y Góngora’s experience with the uncanny material traces of the “Indian” riots in New Spain as we saw in the preceding episode of Alboroto y motín.

The physical legibility of the Indian body is indeed one of the problems that León y Gama’s primary detractor raises as an objection to the validity of the theories developed in the Descripción. Contending that one of his sources—a document penned by a certain Cristóbal del Castillo—was produced by a mestizo and not an indio, in 1794 Alzate y Ramírez accused León y Gama of not knowing the difference between the two due to him not interacting enough with “real” Indians in Mexico City (Gacetas de literatura 417).

Assuming that bodies and names can reveal their own truths, and that this unambiguous
relationship is accurately discernible by the visual sense, Alzate y Ramírez moves from the surface of language to the surface of skin to claim that the Spanish surname of the source in question is proof enough of his mestizo identity: “¿por qué un indio sin mezcla de español se apellidada Castillo? Luego su origen venia tambien de la España” (Gacetas de literatura 418). Baffled by attacks that he considered both preposterous and defamatory, León y Gama discredited his nemesis’ facile genealogical theories, arguing in favor of thick description to emplace the intersection between language usage and ethnic affiliation in the Spanish colony. Carrera positions this debate, and the preceding discovery of indigenous archaeological vestiges that sparked it, within the context of increased regional discussions on race and governmentality. She even suggests that this “odd, parenthetical discussion of racial identity” is linked to the process of racial classification that took place systematically toward the second half of the eighteenth century: “For León y Gama, categorizing people by race was a process of knowing the boundaries of language usage and listening to how non-native speakers manipulated the limits of usage in certain public contexts” (“Locating Race” 39–40). Carrera’s assertion, framed within her study of casta painting, can be taken as correct if the reader does not consider materiality as a form of colonial discourse and a contested category of creole identification, or the distinction between racial mixing and visibility that these accounts mobilize in the name of a disinterested, rigorous study of Mexican antiquities. However, in my analysis of the episodes that have allowed me to reconstruct creoles’ complex relationship to material culture, I have worked to point out how these considerations are
central to the understanding of both the value of materiality as an analytic category linking sacred and secular creole histories, as well as the value of these histories in relation to the larger field of representation staged by late-colonial creoles.

**BODIES IN ABSENTIA?**

The interpretive work of art historians further reminds us that across times, spaces, and aesthetic practices, a categorical split between material objects and images is not always possible, nor desirable. With the rise of antiquarianism in New Spain among creoles, illustrations of pre-Hispanic objects such as those featured in León y Gama’s Descripción gained scholarly appeal, and in many instances represented the only “encounter” with Aztec pyramids and ancient monoliths lay audiences might experience.\(^{165}\) The medium of copperplate engraving commonly favored for the reproduction of these images befitted the requirements of scientific accuracy and precision characteristic of the Enlightenment; it also permitted them to circulate widely and at a low cost for the printer (López-Luján, “The First Steps” 77). Notwithstanding the development of archaeological illustration as a documentary visual genre, colonial artists continued to rely on traditional image-making techniques such as drawing, painting, and sculpture to craft complex narratives of identity and belonging. Within the rich cultural repertoire of creole materiality herein identified, visual narratives of self-fashioning dominated painterly representations of daily life in the viceroyalty, representations from which the figure of the creole is generally missing.

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\(^{165}\) A useful overview of the history of visual depictions taking archaeological remains as subject matter appears in the edited collection of essays by Joanne Pillsbury. See especially in this volume Leonardo López-Luján’s study of New Spain (“The First”).
Two secular visual manifestations, still life and casta painting produced in Mexico during the eighteenth century, shed light on this paradox of creole (in)visibility. Let us turn now to the first and most improbable case of the two, a genre that by definition is not bound by the imperative to represent the body. From testaments, postmortem inventories, and a rather scant number of surviving examples of this art in New Spain, we know that still life images or bodegones served an ornamental purpose in colonial households, primarily in dining rooms and kitchens. Juxtaposing leisure and labor, in these spaces practices of consumption and preparation of foodstuffs emphasized markers of gender, caste, class, and calidad (quality, status) as both public and domestic rituals. In the painting titled Alacena del pintor, dated and signed in 1769 by Antonio Pérez de Aguilar, the artist proposes through sober composition and a predominantly warm palette a lens with which to see the simple and ordinary objects that occupy a small parcel of his studio (Fig. 5.11). In a wooden cupboard, behind a closed glass door, tools and other trappings of the painter’s craft stand on the three shelves. The artist seems drawn to complex surfaces—glass bottles, woven baskets, silver plates—that are shiny, reflective, or activate the sense of touch in the mind of the viewer. If the rectangular layout and clean lines of the furniture piece promise harmony and order, the haphazard arrangement of these objects defeats this expectation, almost giving in to the habitual and the commonplace, to the silent chaos that reigns over small acts of world making in a day’s worth of labor. At the left of the display a bunch of keys dangle from a sole metallic specimen inserted into the lock’s mechanism. “From these keys we perceive a level of
Figure 5.11. Antonio Pérez de Aguilar, *Alacena del pintor*, 1769, oil on canvas, 125 x 98 cm. Museo Nacional de Arte, Mexico City.
distance represented by the glass door that stands between us and the things within”
(Sullivan 97). Like the spyglass in De albina y español, produce negro torna atrás, the keys alert us
that there are multiple levels of illusion at play; they mark a remoteness not just between
audience and objects, but also between said objects and the implicit hand that turns the
key and unlocks the cupboard’s contents.

On the top shelf a shallow basket collects a number of items that have been piled
upon it: a doll in supine position, a couple of clean brushes, a palette, a clay jar and pestle
used for mixing ground pigments. Next to them we see a wooden frame for cutting
stretchers bars for canvases, a lute and a violin, a pen, some rolled sheets of paper, what
appears to be a sketchpad, and two books. On the middle shelf the artist left a porcelain
bowl sitting absent-mindedly on top of a small wooden barrel. In a more calculated
fashion, he also tucked two silver trays and a semi-covered clay pitcher (with spoon)
behind two loaves of spongy bread folded in half and stacks of circular boxes of varying
sizes. These compact urns served to store cajeta, an ambrosial dessert made of caramelized
goat’s milk. The lower shelf holds a pair of dark glass bottles, an ornamental plate with
Asian flower motifs, and a downturned glass tumbler flanked by two wineglasses. Perhaps
to break repetition and preserve contrast, the left one is full and the right one appears to
be empty. Also in this bottom shelf we see a small, painted drinking cup (jícara) above a
brass or copper pitcher used to serve chocolate, and a blond-weave deep basket made for
holding food, from which a white cloth (pañol) drapes casually over the rim.
This picture is a study of the tensions that arise from the painter’s attempt to capture the quotidian, a challenge Pérez de Aguilar frames using familiar binaries such as intellect/matter, body/soul, noble/plebeian, production/consumption, and high/low culture. *Alacena’s* history of reception in no way helps to bridge these divides. Today, it is displayed at the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City, and is considered by many an exemplary manifestation of still-life art of the colonial period. The upper section of the cabinet may express, as understood by Paula Mues Orts, an artistic defense of the superiority of painting in relation to its sister arts—and especially in relation to the “minor” craft of indigenous weavers, for instance, or the “unskilled” labor of candy makers and sellers. The collection of objects on a whole may be deceiving in its generalized appeal to the five senses, with sound and sight being more abstract than touch and the diminished functions associated with the gustatory system. Additional critical commentary of this painting has correctly pointed out the hierarchical logic of the image. The artist seems invested in making a clear separation between the faculties of the intellect (strictly associated with music, literature, and the fine arts) from the earthly pleasures and basic needs required for physical sustenance: “Así, ‘los alimentos del cuerpo y del alma’ no se mezclan aunque en una mirada puedan parecer desorganizados” (Mues Orts 36). One must not discard, either, a potential autobiographical connection between the representation and its painter, especially in light of Jaime Cuadriello’s hypothesis that the upper portion of the canvas serves Pérez de Aguilar as an “intellectual self-portrait” (22). In this capacity, *Alacena* articulates a triumphant visual narrative of personal and
professional distinction of the figure of the painter at the service of Mexican viceregal institutions.

Although there is little information available on Pérez de Aguilar’s artistic trajectory, beside that he was a member of the Academy of Painting founded in 1753, we do know that since the pre-independent period this work was considered an art object of patrimonial value. Building upon interpretations of earlier art historians, Mues Orts reminds us that Alacena was inducted into the official collection of the San Carlos Academy in 1785 by Fernando Mangino, superintendent of the Royal Mint in Mexico City and a founding official of the Academy, “lo cual indica que fue admirada por los pintores reales que lograron que se antepusiera el título de ‘Nobles’ a las artes que ahí se enseñaban.” She continues: “¿Reconocerían en la Alacena la supremacía de la pintura? ¿Verían a su autor como uno de los ‘suyos’” (36–7)? The latter question becomes especially relevant in light of the mélange of cultural signifiers encoded within each individual item of the display, as Carrera states in her own interpretation of this painting:

Certain cultural associations are evident as well. Some objects are very clearly European in source: the musical instruments, the glasses, the patterned plate, the artist’s tools, and the bread. Others are truly of the Americas: the weaving technique of the basket on the bottom shelf is indigenous in origin, and the basket itself may have been used for holding tortillas, a traditional food; the clay, copper, and silver of the plates and jars are indigenous materials as well. And then there are hybrid objects, such as indigenous clay molded into European shapes. The cabinet narrates a dynamic mix of European, indigenous, and hybrid objects. The objects in the cabinet, paralleling the inhabitants of colonial New Spain, are of diverse, distinct, and mixed identities. (Imagining xiii)

Extending the work of these scholars, I would like to add two things to the discussion. First, a comment on the nodal capacity of the objects inside the cupboard,
which mediate a number of subject positions associated to those who are envisioned to produce, consume, or otherwise make use of them. If the discourse of Mexican antiquities declared mastery over the space of purity of time immemorial (it could be argued that a shared form of pastness connects the Indian-turned-antiquity with the preexisting figure of the Old Christian), this and other painted representations of daily life created by sanctioned viceregal artists expressed anxiety over the present of mixing in the viceroyalty. Indeed, in this painting the location of both the palette and the pestle above an arrangement of ordinary objects suggests this much.

My second observation relates closely to the previous point. These objects further suggest a hermeneutics of mixing that commingles everyday objects with a life-size representation of human form, a carved sculpture of the Infant Jesus. According to Carrera, “[t]he doll might have been a prop used in another type of elite portrait known as a monja coronada, an image of a newly professed nun usually shown wearing her habit, an escudo or chest shield, and a flowered crown, and holding a flowered scepter and a doll-like image of the Christ child” (*Imagining* xv). Importantly, in these associations the painting becomes a portrait of the social economy of bodies and spaces that constituted late-colonial culture (Carrera, *Imagining* xvi). Put in another way, Pérez de Aguilar’s painting constructs and refers to social identity, not by allusion to the figurative image of a person, but by the conceptual linking of social markers and ordered spaces consistent with the discourse of creole materiality.
Like Carrera, while studying the visual imagery produced by late-colonial artists, I was struck by the similarity between the objects depicted in the painter’s cabinet and the objects that appear in Mexican *casta* paintings. Their hierarchical distribution is almost identical: the pen and paper, books, art tools, and musical instruments on the top shelf are exclusively utilized by the upper classes (Carrera, *Imagining* xv). Three objects on the lower shelf—the longneck dark glass bottle, ornamental plate, and downturned glass tumbler—are duplicated in Francisco Clapera’s *De chino e india, genizara* (c. 1785) (Fig. 5.12). As the only known Spanish artist who painted *casta* sets, Clapera, however, elevates their position on the shelves of his own curio cabinet as if to emphasize the family’s humble origins and darker skin color. A version of the blond-weave basket and cloth in *Alacena* also appears in this painting. Except this basket rests on the floor where a young girl playfully manipulates its contents, the heaping bundles of white fiber that seem ready to be turned into thread. Meanwhile, across from her husband and child, the mother winds the raw material onto the whorl of the large wooden spindle occupying the lower right quadrant of the image. I will return to this scene at a later point of my argument. For now, suffice to note that these and other objects depicted in Pérez de Aguilar’s *Alacena* make a regular appearance across late-eighteenth century *casta* paintings (for example, see Figs. 5.13 and 5.14). Following Frantz Fanon, one could argue that the key to making sense of the
Figure 5.12. Francisco Clapera, *De chino e índia, genizara*, c. 1785, oil on canvas, 54 x 40.5 cm. Denver Art Museum, Collection of Jan and Frederick Meyer, Denver.
Figure 5.13. José de Páez, *De español y morisca, albina*, c. 1770-1780, oil on copper, 50.2 x 63.8 cm. Private collection.

Figure 5.14. José de Alcíbar, *De español y negra, mulato*, c. 1760-1770, oil on canvas, 78.8 x 97.2 cm. Denver Art Museum, Collection of Jan and Frederick Meyer, Denver.
perverse originality of New Spanish racial imagery is that in forfeiting the proto-ethnographic accuracy of earlier models, the racialized subject in these pictures appears heavily determined—or one should say objectified—by its place amid other colonial objects at a moment when the commodification of bodies has been naturalized by the violence of the Spanish American systems of forced and corvée indigenous labor (the encomienda, mita, and textile workshops or obrajes) and the African slave trade. In what follows I view casta painting as material portraits in close visual dialogue with both still-life painting and the larger material landscape of *criollismo* heretofore examined.

**VISUAL COMMODITIES**

Unlike still lifes, New Spain *casta* paintings do not picture just objects, but rather objects next to human types. The majority of *casta* paintings were produced in a series, although single-panel paintings with multiple scenes have also been located. Most complete series are composed of twelve to sixteen canvases depicting a mother, father, and child. With the exception of the first panel in each series, which portrays the union between two individuals without discernible traces of impure blood (almost always a Spaniard and a native woman), subsequent generations of parents and offspring represent the most common “products” of racial miscegenation between the colony’s diverse inhabitants. These included Europeans, Indians, Africans, and the racial combinations derived from these groups, and systematically excluded the small but significant population of Asian

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166 See this dissertation’s introduction for a commentary on Fanon’s theorization of the racialization of blackness as a process fundamentally rooted in the object through the twin dynamics of reification and fetishization.
descent that had also settled in the region (Deans-Smith and Katzew 3). Within the repertoire of the grid of coloniality we began to examine in chapter 3, casta painting demonstrates a strong reliance on the compartmentalized aesthetic and spatial idiom of the grid to underscore the social distances and points of connectivity between different racial groups in the colony. As previously mentioned, the origins of this genre can be traced back to the hierarchy established by the viceregal sociedad de castas as well as to contextual adaptations of the Spanish doctrine of blood purity. Scientific discourses from the Baroque and the Enlightenment coupled with questions of local pride also influenced the desires of Mexican, and to a lesser extent Peruvian, artists to paint colonial cities as teeming metropolis, centers of local, regional, and global trade.

The earliest known prototypes of the casta genre date from 1711 and have been attributed to Manuel Arellano, who belonged to an established family of mestizo painters (Katzew, Casta 10). Numerous other artists, mainly creoles, participated in the creation of casta sets well into the last decades of the eighteenth century (Deans-Smith, “Dishonor” 47; Ebert 150; Katzew et al., New World 17; Olson 314). Consumers of casta paintings were mostly upper-class citizens who displayed them in private homes alongside other decorative objects including folding screens (biombos), tapestries, fine textiles, silver, ceramics, paintings, and furniture (Aste 19; Carrera, Imagining 50). An unknown number of paintings were commissioned for Spanish patrons, including the king himself. As we have seen, the Royal Natural History Cabinet was one of the few places in which public audiences in the mainland could come into contact with the pictures. Each image in the
more than one hundred series retrieved articulates a colonial fiction of hyper-legibility (Carrera, *Imagining* 144), one in which subjects are fixed through a range of social markers, attributes, and symbols, “from clothing and jewelry to behavior and setting” (Donahue-Wallace 343). Objects are a significant element of *casta* painting. Examples of material culture overflow each panel, making them “primary signifiers” in the racial narrative constructed by these images (Voss, “Poor People” 414).

*Casta* painting represents a decisive stop in my discussion because of the heterogeneous assemblage of material elements that populates the panels. Hence, an object-centered approach to this genre can begin to note their sheer profusion amid the human portraits. Edward J. Sullivan’s study on the visual language of objects in Latin American art is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind to offer a sustained commentary on the functional logic of objects in *casta* paintings. For this critic, “the taxonomy of things as well as people represents a significant link in the strategies of colonial control and possession”:

> Scenes that take place in kitchens include painstaking visual descriptions of the plates, utensils, cooking implements, glassware, bowls, and bottles, and of the food being prepared. Those that have a shoemaker’s shop as their setting offer elaborate illustrations of the variety of footwear worn by the inhabitants of the viceroyalty and depict the tools used to fashion the leather or straw. Scenes set within tobacconists’ shops provide graphic descriptions of how cigarettes were rolled, stored, and marketed. (78)

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167 Reproductions of the approximately 370 paintings discovered appear in four catalogues. The pioneering curatorial efforts of María Concepción García Sáiz led to the first comprehensive publication of a great number of series, which appeared in *Las castas mexicanas: un género pictórico americano*. To this initiative followed *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, Ilona Katzew and John A. Farmer’s expanded archive of images that surfaced in the following seven years. Katzew’s own landmark contribution appeared in *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth century Mexico*, which to date continues to be the most complete study and catalogue on this genre. Another noteworthy effort, also from the early 2000s, appears in the collection edited by Romero de Tejada and Pilar Picatoste.
Beyond observing that in *casta* painting “the objects appear side by side with the people,” Sullivan’s analysis, however, does not explain how glassware, shoes, and cigarettes, for instance, become agents of racialization. To begin, one could argue that objects do much more than provide relevant physical and social context for the portraits. Although on the surface that is indeed what their concrete rendering suggests, they are essentially tied in more profound ways to the family trope that rules the compositional structure of each panel. Not surprisingly, as the fruits of colonial mercantilism, objects multiply at the same rate, if not more, than the Spaniards, Indians, *mestizos*, mulattoes, albinos, etc. that populate scene after scene the paintings’ imaginative depictions of daily life in the colony.

The work of scholars such as David Brading, Susan Deans-Smith, and Patricia Seed has meticulously traced the historical links between racialized labor and commodity production in New Spain. Both hinge on a reproductive economy of bodies and things, in which the reproduction of the former by way of a highly stratified system of workers and merchants ensures the circulation and further disposal of the latter, the commodities that mask (or make visible) the relationships between social actors. If in Balbuena’s *Grandeza mexicana* the individuals of lower status and mixed ancestry who typically

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168 A similar challenge is often present in archaeological studies on this visual genre. Take, for instance, Diana DiPaolo Loren’s declaration that “*casta* paintings depict more than race as they illustrate details of the material world so important to archaeologists” (23). While her study cautions against a positivist reading of visual records in search of evidence that helps determine the ways in which material culture was mobilized by past actors, Loren sidesteps the material substratum of the racial and sees it instead as a situational condition: “In . . . *casta* paintings, the families are surrounded by material culture that would be familiar to them: upper classes are shown eating from porcelain, while lower classes are often shown eating or drinking from plain earthenware bowls. This way of rendering particular aspects of daily life was a method of classification linked to the *régimen de castas*—a color-coding of social difference tied to the everyday to mark boundaries among different racial groups” (26).

169 See David Brading (*Miners*), Susan Deans-Smith (*Bureaucrats*), and Patricia Seed (“*Social*”).
performed this type of labor could be decoupled from the figure of the New World artisan
that supplied the city with objects of both utilitarian and aesthetic value (as I discuss in
chapter 3 herein), in casta painting the fictive portrayal of this system becomes a
representational threat. This is so because they furnish the viewer with evidence that
economic freedom in the production/consumption of commodities, a point of heated
debate among creoles since the seventeenth century, would not necessarily produce
greater freedom from the “multiplicity of limpiezas and manchas (stains) [that] enhanced the
symbolic capital of genealogies” (Martínez, “The Language” 28), i.e. that the former
could not exist without the latter.

This conflation between the racial form and the colonial commodity becomes a
visible source of anxiety in post-1750 casta paintings. As backgrounds transform from
blank, “empty” spaces to more elaborate ones capturing a range of interior and public
milieus, the castas relocate to urban or rural settings (Carrera, Imagining 68). Increased
flexibility in composition brings about a host of other material changes: as opposed to
earlier paintings, the clothes become less luxurious while a greater range of sartorial
variability is introduced in the portraits. Moreover, the human figures begin to tell a
visual story about their precise location in the New Spanish social hierarchy through
references to work and economic status, consumption patterns (mainly through the
depiction of dress, adornments, furnishings, and leisure activities), and units of proximity
or distance from whiteness signaled by the addition of numerals to the panels (Carrera,
Imagining 68; Ebert 143).
From a pragmatic standpoint, it has been suggested that the proliferation of racial types presented a real challenge to painters. Thus, the addition of richer backgrounds and material elements such as objects, foodstuffs, flora, and fauna in later *casta* sets became necessary in order to tell apart the different mixtures (Vázquez, 68–9). For the relational fusion and profusion of objects and human types, it becomes apt to link the production of *casta* paintings to the pictorial genre of *bodegón* or still life, as I have suggested in my previous commentary on Pérez de Aguilar’s *Alacena*. Yet beyond this influence, it is the figure of the textile and its basic elements (fiber, yarn, thread, and dye) which provides an entry point for subject and object to become interchangeable.

As opposed to Juan Diego’s *tilma*, the prime symbol of ethno-racial consolidation for sixteenth-century creole religiosity, in *casta* paintings textiles and their elements often function as signs of difference. Returning to the canvas from the 1785 series by Francisco Clapera, for example, we see a *casta* family of weavers which consists of a *chino* father, an *india* mother, and their daughter, a *genizara* (Fig. 5.12). Traditionally, unions that enabled the mixing of essentially several generations of black and indigenous blood were discouraged because they threatened the doctrine of whitening (*blanqueamiento*) implicit in the *sistema de castas*. Yet as it becomes clear from this and other canvases that depict the *castas* engaged in productive activities, if anything could tame the disruptive potential of this sort of undesirable mixing was, at least in theory, the continuous demand for these bodies’ labor in commodity manufacture.
For Clapera the progression from raw fibers to thread represents a necessary evil, a tolerable byproduct of social and racial degeneration. In this painting the familial attachment between the young girl, father, and mother is visually and physically reinforced by the white bundles of fiber, yarn, or thread spool that each of them respectively holds in hand. Yet if we treat this image as what it is, a bi-directional narrative, by reading it from right to left instead, what comes to the forefront is the trope of degeneration that represents the hallmark of casta painting. With these mutually constitutive reversals what is made possible is not just the conflation between casta and object, but the conversion of the former into the latter. That is, more than figuring as extensions of their labor, the subjects of Clapera’s painting do not stop at mixing with one another; they become entangled, so to speak, in and with the materials of their craft. Such process of transforming raw materials into baseline commodities (that constitute the foundation for the production of second generation commodities and beyond) calls forth the castas’ accumulative labor hidden beneath the object, under the surface of its physical presence, as part of an assemblage of spatial and temporal differences that builds upon previous mixtures to consign their place within a colonial, mercantile-capitalist regime.

This material understanding of ethnic difference is not a visual symbol newly deployed in casta paintings, but in fact is rooted in a longer tradition well documented in medieval sources from the Iberian Peninsula. It is useful to recall, briefly, that within the multifaceted discourse of ethnic difference that emerged from medieval Castilian—from which we inherited a particular understanding of the semantic links between terms such
as casta, calidad, condición, hidalgo, and linaje, to name a few—the term raza is the one most closely associated with material culture. In fact, its earliest known meaning refers to the “defect” or “stain” in woolen cloth, which later was applied metaphorically to a person’s lineage, most frequently in a derogatory sense (Irigoyen-García 42).

Emphasis on materiality as a differential sign imprinted upon an animal, object, or person later appears in the definition of raza provided by the Spanish lexicographer Sebastián de Covarrubias. In Tesoro de la lengua castellana, published in 1611, Covarrubias’s three-pronged meaning hinges on the object as an element that allows the easy slippage between distinct but interconnected semantic registers. The production of difference as raza is first connected to the branding iron, a heated tool that is used in the domestication of livestock: “La casta de caballos castizos, a los cuales señalaban con hierro para que sean conocidos” (851). In a more extended definition, however, Covarrubias retains the textile interpretation as the primary one, further acknowledging its ties to the Spanish doctrine of human classification: “Raza en el paño, la hilaza que diferencia a los demás hilos de la trama. . . . Raza, en los linajes se toma en mala parte, como tener alguna raza de moro o judío” (851).170 Already present in Covarrubias is the logic of semiotic transference between the object and the racialized other that constitutes “race” as a type of malleable and convertible surface, a mutable assemblage of human and non-human .

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170 Taking as point of departure the links between the wool trade and pastoral literature as a condition to theorize early modern Spanish racism, Javier Irigoyen-García traces a linguistic genealogy of the term raza from the Middle Ages on: “In Juan Ruiz’s fourteenth-century Libro del buen amor, the term appears first in the proverb ‘non ay paño sin raça,’ and second as a complaint about how money is used to cover people’s defects: ‘con el dinero cumplen sus menguas y rus raças.’ By 1516 Antonio de Nebrija’s Vocabulario del romance en latín still defines raza only as a textile term meaning a defect in the cloth: ‘raça de paño, panni raritas’” (Irigoyen-García 42). Other synonyms to raza “borrowed as well from the semantic fields of sheep hearding and wool trade, such as ralea or hilaza” (Irigoyen-García 42).
parts. However, Covarrubias’s emphasis on the worked upon object *already as a commodity*, without negating the wide semantic reach of the term, approximates the concept to a greater notion of materiality that operated in tandem with early modern conceptions of ethnic difference.

It is the conditions generated by early modern capital, no doubt, which create this almost artisanal shaping of *raza* prior to what we may call, borrowing from Walter Benjamin, the work of race in the age of mechanical reproduction. These emergent conditions also lend a particular inflection to the racialization of matter and the materialization of “race” that is related to but also quite distinct from earlier theories of skin color and climate, heritability, and maternal imaginationism, or the belief that a mother’s prolonged visual exposure to dark objects, for instance, could result in dark skin.\(^{171}\) Many decades later, the *Diccionario de autoridades* reflects the reversal of the pre-established order of meaning toward a more modern concept of definition, and which use had already crystallized by the eighteenth century as a signifier of human difference: “Casta ó calidad del origen ó linage. Hablando de los hombres, se toma mui regularmente en mala parte. . . . Por extension se dice de la calidad de otras cosas,

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\(^{171}\) The critical literature on the geographical and accidental causes of physiognomic variation is by now voluminous. For a historical approach that traces the evolution of discourses of the body in early modernity and its classical influences, the reader may consult the edited volume by Manfred Horstmanshoff, Helen King, and Claus Zittel. While focusing on England, Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton have located a textual corpus of medieval and early modern primary sources that is attentive to the Spanish case in the study of racial discourses prior to the Enlightenment. For an argument that highlights the centrality of the body in the Spanish Enlightenment, see Rebecca Haidt. Recently, John Slater et al. have considered many of these debates as they manifested in the Iberian context since early modernity in *Medical Cultures of the Early Modern Spanish Empire*. A number of cases demonstrating the New World adaptation of notions of maternal influence in the racial makeup and aptitudes of *mestizo* offspring have been attended by Larissa Brewer-Garcia (“Bodies”).
especialmente la que contrahen en su formacion, como la del paño” (500). According to María Elena Martínez, this gradual change began to take place in the late sixteenth century when the concept of *raza* in the Iberian Peninsula became more frequently deployed against blackness “because of its presumption of immutability” (“The Language” 41). Like their medieval and early modern predecessors, *casta* painters in the New World such as Clapera built upon older discourses to create representations that adapted these models to their particular cultural milieu.

To be sure, there is no real contradiction between a visual schema that, on the one hand, attempts to blur the representational boundary between subject and object and, on the other, reveals a special concern with discerning, ordering, and classifying different social groups in the colony. Even less surprising is that textiles—in their social life as clothing—become as much a porous inner boundary as they are used to perform the crossing and re-crossing of categories of identity, of social control and exclusion. At different times in New Spain dress played an important role in shaping discussions of sovereignty and belonging, discussions that were powerfully inflected by the language of racialization. During the first two decades of the seventeenth century, King Philip II issued orders that aimed to regulate the public behavior of New Spanish citizens and government officials. Chief among them was the prohibition of wearing different styles of dress outside of a person’s own class and group (Viqueira Albán 7). In 1679, the Bishop of Michoacán echoed the king’s command by decrying “the notable disorder . . . in dress, both for its scant honesty and for the indiscriminate use of silks and precious materials, as
well as gold, silver, and pearls, by nobles and plebeians” (qtd. in Katzew, *Casta* 109).

Almost a century later, Juan de Viera employed a more positive tone when commenting on the difficulty of defining class based on clothes alone: “It is wonderful to see them in churches and promenades, often without knowing which is the wife of a count, which of a tailor” (qtd. in Katzew, “Casta Painting” 20). These celebratory remarks should not distract us from the ways in which official culture used clothing as a mechanism to control and regulate the social body. In the colony, a lavishly clad body had an enormous transformative potential that could lead to confusions in race, ethnicity, class, and status—between a mestizo and a Spaniard, for example, between the poor and the rich, or the noble with the plebeian. As Barbara Voss reminds us, “clothing participates in what archaeologist Martin Hall has termed the ‘microphysics of colonial power’ in imperial domains” (“Poor People” 406). For this reason, clothing and physical adornments were prone to intense policing through “sumptuary laws, commodity trade, and government regulations” (Voss, “Poor People” 406). These macro-strategic measures did not obliterate the creative use of clothing as an agent of self-fashioning among the castas, as we have seen, nor did they forestall local institutions such as the military, the Church, and the guilds from exerting pressure on colonial actors through codes of conduct and practices that had a direct impact on social mobility.

Still, some general trends in dress can be observed during the Bourbon period. Men’s attire included breeches that fell just below the knee, stockings, pullover shirts, fitted waistcoats, and cut-away jackets (Voss, “Poor People” 413). Fashion for women
consisted of a tight-fitting bodice and a floor-length skirt (Voss, “Poor People” 413). The majority of the population wore these typical styles, although important variations in the garments served to distinguish each group. Race, class, and social status were denoted “through subtle differences in the texture, patterning, and quality of fabric; in the methods used to fasten garments; in the degree of elaboration of garment fasteners such as buttons and buckles; and in ornamentation (or its absence) through embroidery, ribbons, garlands, braided thread, broaches, and other jewelry” (Voss, “Poor People” 413). Adaptations from traditional elements of native dress, such as loose-fitting tunics (huipiles), rebozos, ponchos, and headpieces made of folded cloth were also worn by Indian women and other castas with indigenous ancestry, and were inventively combined with Spanish fashions (Earle 383; Voss, “Poor People” 413). Sumptuary laws for Africans and their descendants prohibited these groups from wearing luxurious fabrics, especially silk and lace, and from exhibiting fine jewelry made of gold and silver or encrusted with pearls and gemstones (Voss, “Poor People” 413).

Creoles, on the other hand, were known for favoring conventional styles of Spanish dress. Mia L. Bagneris, citing the work of another art historian, characterizes creole dress in New Spain as intentionally “antiquated and often exaggeratedly Spanish” (173). Long after laced boots called borceguíes, feather hats, spectacularly wide skirts, or inlaid crosses went out of fashion in the Iberian Peninsula, for instance, these items continued to be worn by American-born Europeans in the colony (Arbeteta 168; Bagneris 173). Creoles’ anachronistic performances mimicked Spanishness through affectations in
dress, stance, and ornamentation. Paradoxically, these very performances distanced them from any claims to Spanish authenticity, and instead marked them as “distinctly” creole in the public sphere (Bagneris 173). At this stage, one must ask the following question: if the creole body had become such a hyper-visibilized signifier through the trappings of dress and ornamentation, how does its presence become so elusive in the secular genre of casta painting? The history of reception of casta painting among its contemporaries can provide us with some valuable insight.

PAINTING THE CREOLE BODY

An oft-cited response to the paintings appears in a letter written in 1746 by Andrés Arce y Miranda, a creole theologian from Puebla, to fellow intellectual Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren (1696–1763). As professor and rector of the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, Eguiara y Eguren was at work on what ultimately became his celebrated Biblioteca mexicana, an ambitious compendium of bio-bibliographical information meant to challenge the widely held opinion in Europe that intellectual production in the Americas was deficient or completely lacking. In the letter, which accompanied a manuscript titled “Noticias de los escritores de la Nueva España,” Arce y Miranda suggests that his compatriot discusses the issue of racial mixing in order to dispel the idea that all citizens in New Spain were the product of miscegenation or, as he puts it, “para sacar en limpio la pureza de sangre de los criollos literatos; pues se debe recelar que la preocupación en que la Europa están de que todos somos mezclados (o como decimos champurros), influyó no
poco en el olvido en que tienen los trabajos y letras de los beneméritos” (qtd. in Castro Morales 679).

Arce y Miranda then indicates that several viceregal officials had commissioned artworks that depicted the different racial mixtures of the colony with the intention of presenting them to the Spanish crown. One such effort was in the hands of the Duke of Linares (1711–1716), who selected a series of paintings by Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675–1728), member of a renowned family of painters in Mexico City (Katzew, “Casta Painting” 13). Another canvas, he mentions, had been commissioned by Juan Francisco de Loaiza, auxiliary bishop of Puebla (1743–1746). Painted by the local artist Luis Berrueco, it consisted of vignettes on a four-by-four grid representing the different unions between the castas (Katzew, “Casta Painting” 13). Despite the painters’ artistic merit and reputation, Arce y Miranda was critical of the images, bemoaning the fact that they reflected “las mentes útiles pero no las nobles,” an example of “lo que nos daña, no lo que nos aprovecha, lo que nos infama, no lo que nos ennoblecce” (qtd. in Castro Morales 680). Anticipating by a little over two decades the representation of these categories in Pérez de Aguilar’s still life painting, Arce y Miranda draws a clear distinction between elite and non-elite individuals, between “useful” and “noble” intellectual pursuits that establishes a very narrow framework for what creole, as a category, signified: an elevated state of the mind, and not of the body; an inclination in spirit divorced from the mundane, industrious toils and handicrafts associated with the lower classes; but most
importantly, an identity furnished by strategic dematerialization as a pre-condition for universalism.

Remarkably, Arce y Miranda is not in principle opposed to the premise of racial mixing contained within these images if only, he suggests, they would leave out blacks and their offspring to focus exclusively on mestizaje in its strictest incarnation, that is, between Spaniards and Indians. For Arce y Miranda the epithet of “Spanish” refers both to Peninsulars and their American-born descendants. In this sense it is important to point out that this ambiguity is equally present in casta painting’s deployment of the term, and thus of its portrayal of whiteness as a quality shared by both groups. According to Katzew, “[t]his theory might have accounted for the subsequent inclusion of the Spanish literati at the beginning of numerous casta sets” (“Casta Painting” 14). Arce y Miranda’s second prescription for remedying the “confusion of races” that led Europeans across the Atlantic to misconstrue the racial makeup of creoles is on all accounts much more radical. Dissatisfied with casta paintings’ failure to represent the viability of Spanish and creole unions, and claiming that they did indeed occur on a regular basis, he proposes that the word criollo be scrapped from the dictionary and from the Spanish language altogether for its “ridiculous,” “derogatory,” and “slanderous” connotations, so the category itself would disappear (qtd. in Castro Morales 680; Martínez, Genealogical 244).

Arce y Miranda’s suggestions, along with similar calls made by other creole intellectuals, might explain the exclusion of both the term and the figure of the criollo in all but one known exception. The creole subject appears in a vignette titled De castizo y
española, español criollo, which is part of a single-panel series painted by the Mexican artist Ignacio María Barreda in 1777 (Fig. 5.15). This image features a new mother dressed a la española cradling an infant in an outdoor setting. Both the husband and their offspring wear vermilion-colored items of clothing, which against the whites and creams of their ensembles become symbols of the regenerative marriage between the castizo father and the Spanish mother. It is no less significant the use of the term español criollo in this vignette than the fact that for Barreda creole is the product of the union between a Spanish woman and a castizo (the offspring of a mestiza/o and a Peninsular parent).

Covarrubias links the category of castizo with casta, both of which he defines under the latter term, as follows: “Vale linage noble y castizo, el que es de buena línea y decendencia; no embargante que dezimos es de buena casta, y mala casta. . . . Castizos

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172 Very little is known about Barreda’s life and genealogical history. Beyond affirming his Mexican-born status and his privileged position as a viceregal painter of religious works and portraits, scholars have been unable to confirm whether he identified as a mestizo, a criollo, or as part of any other group. See the scholarly contributions by Walter Pach and Raquel Pineda Mendoza. María Luisa Sabau García has sustained that Barreda attained a degree in philosophy, and that his religious inclinations and academic training secured him a post in the seminary of San Camilo (194).
llamamos a los que son de buen linage y casta” (316).\(^{173}\) It is important to remember that traditionally the reproductive pairing of a Spaniard and a castiza/o was believed to result not in a criollo, but in an español. It produced, however, not just any español, but an American-born Spaniard—that is, the incarnation of several generations of whitening achieved through the mixing of “pure” blood, an exclusive privilege conferred to (white) European and indigenous ancestries.

The polyvalent meanings of the term español are dramatically rendered in the first four vignettes of an anonymous sixteen-scene casta panel (Fig. 5.16). This sequence maps out a genealogical progression from the mestizo racial form back to “Spanishness” through the intermediary figure of the castizo. What distinguishes this progression is not so much the anxiety that seems to surround the figure of the español/a, which appears consecutively in each vignette, nor the artist’s efforts to avoid the term criollo entirely (a conventional

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\(^{173}\) The multiple meanings of casta have not been lost on scholars, who have noted its ties not just to lineage but also to notions of nobility, chastity, and legitimacy, “and more generally to an uncorrupted sexual and genealogical history” (Martínez, Genealogical 162).
choice within the genre). It is, precisely, the addition of a scene titled “Español con Española sale Español,” which tautologically manifests the viability of Spanish-Spanish unions ostensibly taking place between both Peninsular and American-born subjects to complete the dominant narrative of whitening that structured colonial social hierarchies.

Against the demands of creoles like Arce y Miranda—who, as we saw, preferred that the term criollo be eradicated from the Spanish lexicon—, the ambivalence of the term español criollo in Barreda’s painting produces a fissure in the myth of purity that undergirds the individual categories of castizo, español, and criollo. In this example the antinomy of an español and a criollo subject is resolved in the figure of the infant, which recalls the doll-like image of the Christ child in Pérez de Aguilar’s New Spanish bodegón. The infant’s dress, reminiscent of a baptismal gown, hints at but ultimately conceals the body of the creole subject. Moreover, this figure suggests a partial expression of a nascent creole culture sheathed in the casings afforded by clothing and corporeal indeterminacy as ways to avoid racial signification. Barreda’s visual representation of the figure of the creole—if highly unusual—is consistent with the thesis proposed by historians Elizabeth Kuznesof and Patricia Seed, who have demonstrated that many individuals who passed as criollos were often mestizos, castizos, or moriscos (the offspring of a mulato and a Spanish parent) (Kuznesof 156–8; Seed 598–9). In offering us a precise (although speculative) genealogy of the figure of the creole, Barreda thus rejects the idea that it shares a common identity with Peninsular Spaniards. This gesture also challenges the notion,
Figure 5.17. Miguel Cabrera, *De español y de india, mestiza*, 1763, oil on canvas, 132 x 101 cm. Private collection (Katzew, *Casta* 101).
tacitly present in *casta* painting, that the creole body is irrepresentable because it exists outside the ethno-racial jurisdiction of the *casta* system.

**POSTSCRIPT: RACIALIZATION AND CREOLE VISIBILITY**

In a society that relies on outward appearance to identify markers of difference, strategic invisibility—or the choice of how, when, and to what extent one becomes racially legible in the public sphere—is a privilege not to be taken for granted. In Miguel Cabrera’s painting titled *De español y de india, mestiza*, the figure of the would-be creole (referred to as “español”) assumes the position of an observer who is able to look without being seen (Fig. 5.17). This is a gesture we have encountered before. Like the Spaniard surveying the city with a spyglass discussed in the opening lines of this chapter, in both paintings the concealment of the figure’s visage is used to signify his superiority among the *castas*. As Castro-Gómez has argued, this is an example of the workings of a strategic positionality known as *hybris del punto cero*. This positionality, in turn, would become the foundation of a power-knowledge matrix in which, according to Ramón Grosfoguel,

> el sujeto epistémico no tiene sexualidad, género, etnicidad, raza, clase, espiritualidad, lengua, ni localización epistémica en ninguna relación de poder, y produce la verdad desde un monólogo interior consigo mismo, sin relación con nadie fuera de sí. Es decir, se trata de una filosofía sorda, sin rostro y sin fuerza de gravedad. El sujeto sin rostro flota por los cielos sin ser determinado por nada ni por nadie. (64)

The visual archive connected to the discourse of creole materiality already operated within this epistemic matrix and revolved around practices of “close seeing” and deep examination of commodified forms of otherness that paradoxically enabled creoles to
resist that this type of gaze be turned onto them. I have analyzed, to this end, how the racial discourse reflected, imagined, and reshaped by *casta* painting developed hand in hand with deep transformations in the materiality of culture resulting from the dynamic secularization that gave rise to the colonial/modern project. Establishing a close interpretive link between racial portraiture and late-colonial still life painting, the former arose as an extension of a subject positionality that aims to see without being seen, describing the “non-racial,” universal locus creoles seized in the colony.

In this chapter I have challenged the traditional narrative of miscegenation that presupposes that the New Spanish creole did not constitute a particular ethno-racial formation in opposition to—but also not entirely unlike—the racialized subjectivities of the *sociedad de castas*, even if the former aimed to operate historically outside such polemics of mixing. To be precise, it has been my contention that the category of materiality allowed creoles to articulate degrees of collective erasure and visibility from the colony’s racial narrative. But that in order to complicate our current accounts of creole subjectivity we must cease to disavow its articulation as a distinct, if highly elusive, racial form. This field of inquiry points us in the direction of overlapping systems of racial classification that are not fully accounted for in our growing understanding of the discourse of the *sociedad de castas*, and which operated in tandem with the latter. Mapping out this particular ethno-racial assemblage is critical in our understanding of the ways in which the study of particular subject positionalities entrenches some of the dynamics of racialization that
justified the exclusion of certain groups and the inclusion of others into the colonial social, religious, juridical, and political spheres.

Throughout my analysis, I have regarded the study of materiality as a contested category of legitimation that becomes particularly significant as a creole strategy of self-fashioning. Creoles manipulated material culture where traditional (lettered) channels seemed to fail. This material history was indeed everywhere. According to León y Gama, Mexico City rested on a bed of indigenous and European artifacts, which condensed the rich history of the encounter and subsequent confrontation between both camps in Tlatelolco. In the same way that the lakes defined the character of the city, these relics formed part of the subterranean contact zone that, unbeknown to its inhabitants, lent ground to the daily affairs that took place at street level. On the other hand, *casta* paintings were creole visual documents if not about the purity of their own blood, at least about the pervasive nature of mixing in the colonies—an analytic scale by which, positively speaking, creoles paled in comparison, inhabiting the category of whiteness that had previously been reserved for Peninsulars.

A secondary concern of this chapter has been to suggest how the functionality of this visual genre can be better understood not just as part of the history of painting in the New Spain. *Casta* paintings, as images closely associated with the contemporary genre of still life, ostensibly have less in common with the portraits of the *monjas coronadas* and other important manifestations of religious painting during that era—which continued to dominate the visual art that was being produced and consumed in the colony and that
circulated abroad—than with the archaeological relics and curiosities alongside which they were meant to be exhibited.

Throughout this chapter, the coupling of heterogeneous materials—a veritable assemblage of erudite textual sources, intimate testimonies, physical remnants, human and non-human miscegenates, and visual media—intervenes methodologically in declarations of mixture and purity that, as I have argued, became central to creoles in New Spain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet it also aims to move past the question of method to consider its impact on the image of colonial actors “created” by them. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger and the Caribbean intellectual Sylvia Wynter in the same stroke of keys, this approach further reveals the equipmental being of colonial selfhood; or rather, how strategic assemblages of matter and corporeality either obstruct or bring into view the vexed coloniality of a New Spanish creole racial form through its investments in the racialized objectualization of the Indians and the mixed-blooded castas.

As numerous critics before me have argued, casta painting may be interpreted as a representation of a desire on the part of creole elites to classify the continually expanding and increasingly diverse population of New Spain so as to establish paradigms of order and structure. With their insistence on the classification of the many permutations of race in viceregal Mexico, they represent in part a local adaptation of the Enlightenment’s pursuit for order and taxonomic categorization. But, as I have shown, their production is also linked to the cultural management of the social and cultural identities of New Spain’s internal others, starting with a dislocation between indigenous experience and
“productive” indigeneity. In the latter, the once-problematic physical presence of the
Indian is domesticated as both remote past and opaque materiality. As part of a
multimedia strategy of govermentality adopted by creoles since at least the seventeenth
century, *casta* painting links up with religious, antiquarian, proto-archaeological, and
textual discourses to complete a temporal arc that begins with the pre-Hispanic past and
extends into the immediacy of lived experience during the final years of Spanish rule in
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