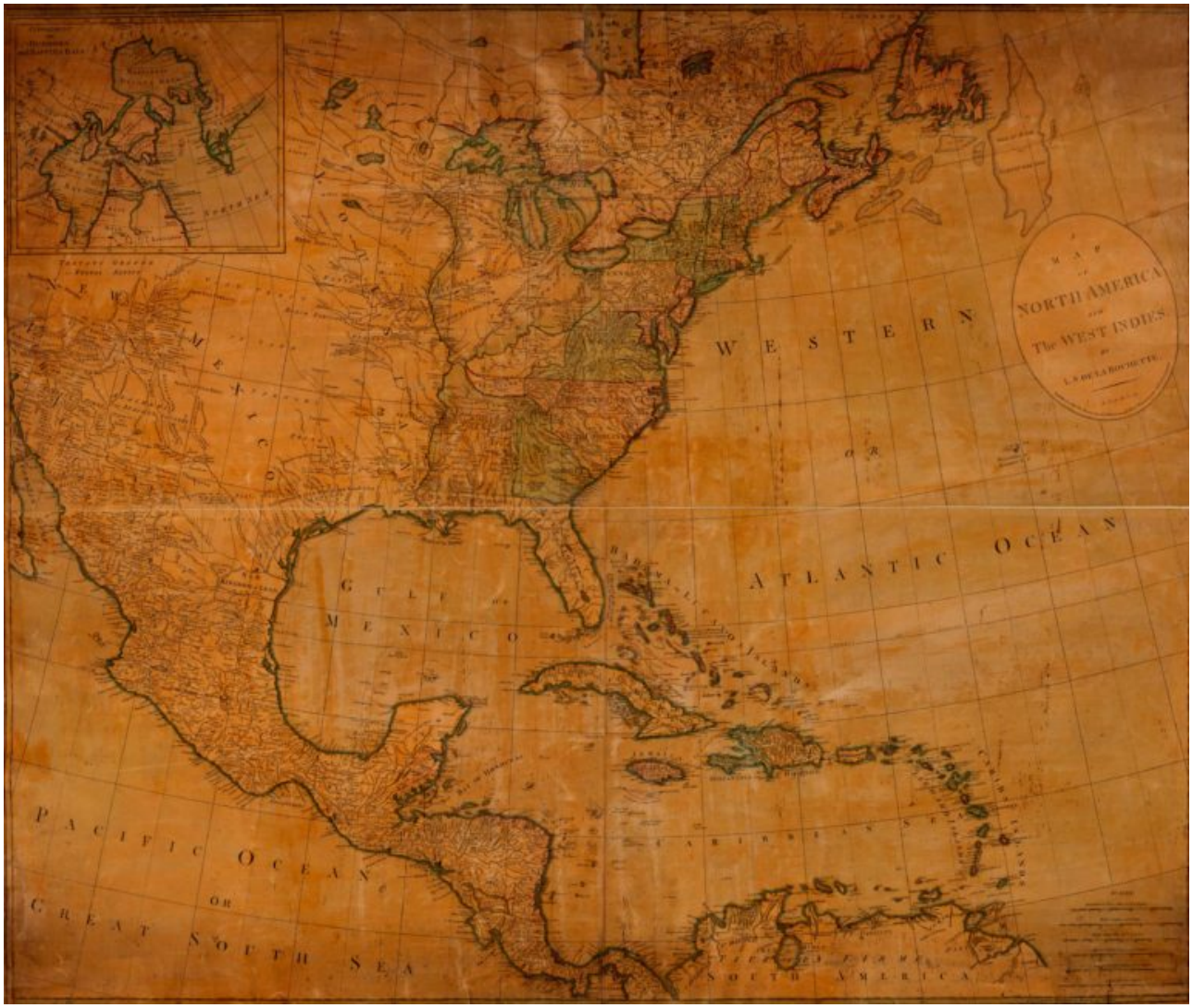
Catastrophe and Colony: Looking South



There is a rich tradition of writing in Spanish on colonial catastrophe, illness, and violence that includes the shipwreck narrative of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca (interestingly, now entering the early American canon of colonial works taught in English translation), Bartolomé de las Casas' *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (often credited with fueling the fires of the Black Legend), and accounts by indigenous or mestizo chroniclers such as Guamán Poma de Ayala's *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* and the Inca Garcilaso's *Royal Commentaries*. Scholars including Beatriz Pastor and John Ochoa have studied what Ochoa calls "the uses of failure" in Spanish American colonial narrative, and José Rabasa has challenged us to consider the violence that is implicit in all instances of colonial encounters. More recently, Charles Walker's *Shaky Colonialism: The 1746 Earthquake-Tsunami in Lima, Peru, and its Long Aftermath* explores the social and political aftershocks of seismic catastrophe in the Andes.

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understand themselves to be the vanguard of an imperial initiative that is also part of their lived experience back at home?

Given that my own research deals with colonial and eighteenth-century Spanish America, while reading *Seasons of Misery* I kept coming back to the same questions: how is writing catastrophe different in early Anglo-America and Spanish America? How is it the same? How are the key terms that Donegan is working with—catastrophe, settlement, colonial and colonization—understood in the texts and contexts with which my Latin Americanist colleagues and I work?

I was particularly intrigued by Donegan's argument that "One reason to pay attention to settlers' misery and the discourse surrounding it is to complicate an account of conquest that sees English colonists as imperial agents who imported and enacted the prerogatives of possession based on convictions of cultural superiority, legal entitlement, and religious imperative … [and] to make a distinction between colonization as an imperial project and becoming colonial as a lived condition." This argument has implications for accounts of Spanish conquest, I believe, despite the obvious differences between English and Spanish imperialism and the Protestant and Catholic religious ideologies that undergirded the imperial project. Spaniards "became colonial" in Spanish America in the context of viceregal institutional frameworks that both empowered and limited them, leading to a particular kind of colonial estrangement.

One question that I'd like to consider is the relationship between conquest, settlement, and empire. How does the question of writing catastrophe change if those involved understand themselves to be the vanguard of an imperial initiative that is also part of their lived experience back at home? In other words, to what degree does the medieval Spanish Reconquista, which played out over seven centuries, attenuate or complicate the incommensurability of Spaniards' New World experience? By the end of the fifteenth century, those living on the Iberian peninsula—Christians, Jews, Muslims—had come to understand themselves in relation to each other and acted on that understanding in ways that, as we all know, led to oppression, censorship, expulsion, and death as well as more felicitous instances of *convivencia* and cultural crossings. Spaniards arrived in the New World already having defined themselves in opposition to an Other—someone whom they were not. Spanish debates about blood purity had already been playing out across the emerging Spanish empire for some time as it began to expand westward as one facet of a drive to consolidate and unite an imperial project, led by the "Catholic Monarchs" Ferdinand and Isabel, that was explicitly Spanish and Christian. As Patricia Seed has examined in her chapter on Spain in *Ceremonies of Possession*, the Reconquest provided the model for Spaniards in the Americas for their approach to conquest and their dealings with the indigenous population. For example, Seed posits that the infamous "requerimiento"—which was read to indigenous peoples in Spanish or Latin, calling upon them to submit to Spanish domination—was a protocol for conquest with often overlooked roots in Islamic jurisprudence.

Donegan's call for "a shift in the evidentiary basis of analysis" is compelling. She notes that many accounts "studiously avoid the uncertainties of contingent temporality in favor of a perpetual present tense that is able to stabilize, authenticate, and transmit information. They represent colonial presence in America in terms of what is becoming known" (24). The same is true for the Spanish American "relación," which attempts to present information in a controlled and organized way in response to an imperial request. But the story about what really happened must often be read between the lines. Ivonne del Valle does this by comparing official accounts of Jesuit missionaries in northern Mexico with the private letters they sent home to family and friends—epistolary renderings of suffering, illness, fear, and isolation.

Donegan maintains that English settlers "were not simply reporting on present conditions; they were also struggling to construct an identity out of the incommensurable experiences of being English and living in the New World" (2). This is undoubtedly true. But Donegan might have discussed further what that "Englishness" meant for the settlers of Roanoke and Jamestown and the British West Indies. By the same token, what does "Spanishness" or "Iberianness" or "Castilianness" mean—beyond what is being held on to? Moreover, what do these categories mean for different community demographics? In the case of Spanish America, at least initially, there were many fewer instances of families, women, and children traveling to the Americas. How does that condition how misery and suffering are experienced and described?

Another issue has to do with structure. After considering the cases of Roanoke and Jamestown, Donegan turns her attention to the Caribbean in the chapter "Barbados: Wild Extravagance." She offers a reading of how the "torrid zone" calls for the creation of a new discursive framework for writing misery that she calls "colonial tropic" (in a nod to Srinivas Aravamudan's notion of eighteenth-century "tropicalization"). One obvious explanation for the placement of this chapter at the end of the book has to do with chronology: the experience in Barbados came later. But I'm curious about whether the colonial spaces of the early Caribbean, understood as "beyond the line" in the eyes of Europeans, must also always be "beyond the line" when one tries to incorporate them in one's scholarly work?

This raises broader questions, I think, about how we do Atlantic Studies or Transatlantic Studies or comparative studies generally in ways that recognize the complexity of metropolitan and colonial networks and that don't impose contemporary geographic or cultural or disciplinary configurations. How do we go "beyond the line" to generate a more inclusive consideration of comparative colonial experiences? This roundtable is one example, as is the work of our colleague Ralph Bauer, of a dialogue between authors and texts from the English- and Spanish-speaking colonial world. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel also invokes this kind of interdisciplinary and multilingual scholarly approach in her book *From Lack to Excess: "Minor" Readings of Latin American Colonial Discourse*. Martínez-San Miguel proposes that texts by Columbus, Cortés and Las Casas can be read as "minority discourse" because they all represent a process

in which a metropolitan discourse has been “deterritorialized.” By “deterritorialization,” she means that the discourse has been removed from its original and authorizing context, and this might be another way to think about Donegan’s notion of “unsettling” early American narrative about colonial settlement. Unsettled and inspired, I’m delighted to be part of this conversation, and I want to congratulate Kathleen Donegan on a book that has pushed me to think in new ways about my own work on colonial Spanish America.

This article originally appeared in issue 15.2 (Winter, 2015).