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The Dynamics of José de Acosta's Colonizing Voice: Ventriloquism in Sixteenth-Century Ethnography

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Abstract:

In an effort to establish a missionary program in the Americas, José de Acosta, 16th Century Jesuit philosopher and theologian, began to represent and organize the anthropological characteristics of different Amerindian groups along a series of hierarchical ladders. This essay examines the discourses of sameness and difference in Acosta's writing to show how Eurocentric models altered perceptions of Amerindian culture. Ultimately, Acosta proposes an evolutionary progression whereby Amerindian culture would develop according to European models later giving rise to the development of the 19th-century disciplines of sociology and anthropology.

1. Introduction

Early representations of Amerindians by European writers proposed that the native population offered a tabula rasa upon which to inscribe their worldview. In essence, Amerindian cognition was a clean slate since it supposedly possessed no political, religious or social structures.¹ Columbus's first entry in his journal after the initial encounter on the island of Guanahani offers a portrayal of Caribbean Amerindians as ready to receive the mark of Europe. "Ellos deven ser buenos servidores y de buen ingenio, que veo que muy presto dizen todo lo que les dezía. Y creo que ligeramente se harían cristianos, que me pareció que ninguna secta tenían [They ought to become good servants and intelligent; I notice that quickly they repeat everything that is spoken to them. And I believe they would easily become Christians as it seems they have no religion] (Colón 1986, 63). European historians began to represent the American Indian and their lands claiming their eyewitness accounts were the most valid method for establishing historical truth. In the days following Columbus's first meeting with the Arawak Indians, he reports that he intended to send six Indians to Spain "to learn to speak", as if utterances in their own tongue did not constitute a language. Consistent silencing of American subjects by European writers accompanied by a consequent insertion of words into their mouths initiates a ventriloquist's farce. This act performed by self-authorizing writers attempted to breathe life into an effigy of Americans created by the European mind. This strategy of authorizing Spanish eyewitness accounts over all others dominated virtually all texts produced during the first century of contact between Americans and Europeans. While most of these texts, primarily addressed and praised the actions of the Spaniards in America, several grappled with the representation of Native American things². One such text, *La historia natural y moral de las Indias* by José de Acosta, examines general notions of cultural development and inquires as to the lineage of Amerindians in its attempt to represent America and capture it in the container of Western knowledge. This project will examine the process by which José de Acosta's *Historia* homogenizes the "otherness" or "exoticness" of America for European consumption while subordinating it to value-laden European hierarchies.

Acosta, a theologian and philosopher, travelled to the Andean region of America to help initiate the Jesuit version of the evangelisation of Amerindians. This encounter between the authorial European perspective and non-Western cultures granted Acosta a bank of experiences and observations on which to base hypotheses regarding the cognitive and cultural development of Amerindians which in turn would inform his missionary objectives. As a result of this encounter, he wrote several texts, the two most important being *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*-a treatise prescribing proper methods of evangelisation-and *La historia natural y moral de las Indias*-a history shaped in the classical model of Pliny's *Natural History*. Acosta designates *Historia* as a step in the process of converting Amerindians to Christianity. In turn, he hopes it will serve as news (noticia) of science and humanity in America "para que lo espiritual y cristiano se plante y acreciente" (Acosta 1954, 139). By establishing for his European audience a taxonomy of American phenomena based on the reports from collectors of natural and historical oddities, Acosta showed how the same matrices containing canonized knowledge about the known world also could hold America and her

¹ The etymology of "America", as noted in Kadir, projects a similar empty signifier—"ghostland" or "no-where-land" for the continent itself (Kadir 1992, 59-61).

² In addition to Columbus's diary, the principal texts and writers referred to above include Peter Martyr's *Décadas de Orbe Novo*, José Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, and Francisco López de Gómara's *Historia General de las Indias*.

constituents. In doing so, he promoted a conception of the Indians as rational beings—linked to their European counterparts—and ushered them into the great Western encyclopedia.

Acosta introduces indigenous elements into the European consciousness through analogy describing the so-called New World as similar or attached to the old. Later, he imposes epistemological structures such as political, social, and technological hierarchies establishing degrees of civilizational development. By characterizing American cultures in terms of Europe's extant structures, he creates a measuring stick by which the many American ethnicities could be evaluated and graded. Not only did Acosta use these hierarchies in *De Procuranda* and *Historia* to create difference between non-European groups but, on a more practical note, they helped him design evangelical methods that would be pedagogically sound given the varying levels of intellectual development he perceived among Amerindian groups. By organizing behavior into distinct levels of "Europeaness", he places the Amerindians on the same developmental path already traversed by the Western World. The establishment of these similarities allows native Americans to experience a teleological conversion to a pre-Christian state within Western consciousness. Once the Indian undergoes this conversion, Christian teaching will be able to assist the progression of the Amerindian up the hierarchical ladder of civility. By using the Western episteme as a yardstick to measure the advancement of Indian cultures, Acosta guides the movement of Indian civilization in the same direction as that of the European mentors.³

2. La Historia Natualy Moral De Las Indias

The novelty of Acosta's *Historia* was that his search for American truth used philosophy, more specifically Aristotelian dialectic, in an attempt to understand the causes and effects underlying this "new reality". In the prologue he mentions the scarcity of Amerindian texts that follow this methodology: "los que han escrito de Indias Occidentales no han hecho profesión de tanta Filosofía" (Acosta 1954, 4). Acosta's investigations of the causal relationships of natural phenomena and human development in America tries to fill a void in scholarship. By the late sixteenth century, writers had observed and reported vast quantities of strange phenomena in America. But no one had produced philosophically sound explanations for many of these unforeseen circumstances, such as unusual climatologic conditions and breeds of plants and animals unknown to Europe. "Mas hasta ahora no he visto autor que trate de declarar las causas y razón de tales novedades y extrañezas de naturaleza, ni que haga discurso e inquisición en esta parte" (Acosta 1954, 3). An example of this type of dialectic appears in Acosta's exploration of whether the biblical lands of mythical riches, Tarsis and Ofir, were references to America. After presenting hypotheses in favor of the thesis, he argues against theories connecting America with these ancient lands known during King Solomon's reign. Acosta notes differences between characteristics attributed to the two regions in question, refutes any etymological connections, and cites Josephus to support his claim that Tarsis and Ofir were East Indian regions (Acosta 1954, 22-24). His application of this classical literary technique to the emerging and somewhat chaotic body of knowledge being produced by European observation of America was part of the general reorganization carried out by Humanist scholars.

As mentioned, one of the declared functions of *Historia* is to prepare the missionary, or more generally the European, to understand the origin and nature of the Indians. Achieving this understanding allows the missionary work among Amerindians to continue unfettered by theories arguing that Indians were irrational and, as such, were unable to comprehend and act on Christianity's tenets. The three-step process below outlines how Acosta transforms Amerindians into proto-Christians and converts America ontologically from an unknown or marginal entity into an acknowledged part of European epistemology. In a sense he "authors" or textualizes the American hemisphere as a means to legitimize its position among the already textualized lands--Europe, Asia, and Africa. He sought to make Amerindians both rational beings and potential Christians so as to justify their inclusion within the fold of Christ. O'Gorman confirms this in his introduction to *Historia*, "su conocimiento [de los indios] tiene, ademas, las finalidades de hacer patente la capacidad racional de los naturales del Nuevo Mundo y de proporcionar bases sólidas para predicarles con eficacia el Evangelio y evitar injusticias en el regimen legal que se les imponga" (O'Gorman 1962, xxxiv). The process by which Acosta constructs the natural and human in America involves three intermediate steps: 1) the insertion and legitimization of the American "reality" within the European consciousness, 2) the organization of that "reality" in terms of European taxonomies, and 3) the proposal of a universal dynamic whereby cultures progress or regress over time according to their social, political, and/or economic circumstances. The first step emphasizes similarities, the second establishes difference, and the third weaves both similarity and alterity into a theory of civilizational development and cultural evolution.

3. Insertion and Legitimization

The initial step involves the insertion of American nature into the existing European body of knowledge through the extensive use of analogy. By describing corn in terms of wheat, cocoa beans as almonds, and llamas as cattle, Acosta establishes a link between the Old and New worlds, binding things purely American to European nature (Acosta 1954, 109, 116, 134). This is not merely a linguistic connection, because as Foucault reminds us regarding sixteenth-century Europe, "nature and the word can intertwine with one another to infinity, forming, for those who can read it, one vast single text" (Foucault 1973, 34). Acosta interweaves the sign (European lexicon) and the signified (American phenomena) altering the future signification of things American by binding them to biological and anthropological knowledge already canonized in Europe. For example, although many Andean practices closely resembled Christian ritual (e.g. confession, monastic life, penance, etc.), Acosta describes their rituals as demonic and attributes their origin to Lucifer. They are assigned a demonic meaning, ascribing their similarities with Christianity to the Devil's cleverness imitating the things of God (Acosta 1954, 157). Though religious practices were in some cases identical, Acosta's

³ Note Foucault's definition of episteme as "the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences and possibly formalized systems" (Foucault 1972, 191).

interpretation attached opposing signifieds—Christian ritual valued as correct and proper while the same actions performed by Indians constituted immoral and demonic activity. The future signification of religious practices in the Andean region was bound to Acosta's interpretation or assignment of meaning—as evidenced by the successive campaigns against idolatry carried out during the next century.⁴

Acosta used his power to signify inserting his observations and interpretations of American phenomena into an existing corpus of scholarship. However, since the existence of the American continents was unforeseen in European epistemology, an expansion of the ontological space within the European consciousness to include the Western Hemisphere became necessary. This expansion was then followed by an attempt to legitimize that space by its attachment to what was known to European epistemology. One relationship that could expand this space required the ancients to have known of or made reference to this Hemisphere. If Acosta could find recorded evidence of America's existence in the texts of classical antiquity, then its attachment to the collective Western consciousness would be complete because these texts were vested with canonical authority in the sixteenth century. Acosta consulted Pliny, Plato, and Aristotle among others to determine whether that link indeed existed.⁵ Acosta's analysis of the biblical reference to Tarsis and Ofir was part of the same project to find a legitimate or canonized container to hold American reality. For example, he relates the story of Carthaginian vessel carried by storm to an unknown land. Upon the ship's return, the Senate prohibited further exploration because it feared its population would be overcome with greed to obtain and populate this new land (Acosta 1954, 20). Though Acosta could not confirm the link, the mentioned story allows the possibility that ancients knew about America. Acosta was forced to consider the possibility that America may have been the lost continent of Atlantis or even that Amerindians were indeed remnants of the lost tribes of Israel because many scholars at the time were considering and advancing theories which explicitly connected America to lands mentioned in Old World scholarship and travel narratives (Gerbi 1985, 271-6). In a dialectical fashion, Acosta explores these theories searching the texts of the classical philosophers and patristic Fathers for geographical orientation and cultural description that might reveal consistencies. Unable to find them or justify their legitimacy through reason and logic, he refutes all connections from the scholarship available to him.⁶

By arguing that these fabled lands might have been the American continent, writers appropriate what was once mythical space and use it to contain "real" space—one that was being measured and experienced. Thus, they applied signifiers contaminated by legends and bestiary narratives to represent the American pantology. Many of the elements that once characterized those mythological places were juxtaposed onto America and, by association, became a part of America's supposed reality within the European mind because writers had appropriated this mythical space in the European consciousness to create a space for American reality. There are abundant examples, from sailors' reports of mermaids or sirens [manatees] to the existence of giants [dinosaur bones] and including Columbus's fascination with the Amazons—a legendary race of giant women said to inhabit an island in the Caribbean (Gerbi 1985, 61-2).

After examining and refuting these hypothetical connections to marvelous lands, Acosta still required a conclusive determination of how the Amerindians had come to exist and thrive on this heretofore unknown continent. The possibility of separate creations was unfathomable because it would call the teachings of the Bible into question. After refuting popular theories connecting America to known peoples or places, he determined Amerindians, without the use of the compass, could have arrived either by land, deliberately by sea, or unintentionally carried by a storm (Acosta 1954, 30-31). After heaping doubt upon migration by sea as a feasible origin for such a vast population, he states: "Los primeros pobladores de ellas [las Indias], porque se ha de decir, que pasaron, no tanto navegando por mar, como por caminando por tierra; y ese camino lo hicieron sin pensar, mudando sitios y tierras poco a poco; y unos poblando las ya halladas, otros buscando otras de nuevo, vinieron por discurso de tiempo a henchir las tierras de Indias de tantas naciones y gentes y lenguas" (Acosta 1954, 33). By postulating the American Indians had migrated by land, Acosta not only foretells what has since been verified archeologically, but he connects the two worlds, grafting the genealogy of these mysterious people into Adam's lineage.

4. European Taxonomies

The second step in Acosta's project involves the ordering of this new topos. An epistemological dynamic organizing the encyclopedia of knowledge into a series of interrelated hierarchies based on the *scala naturae* was later referred to as the Great Chain of Being. It explained relationships of difference between analogically associated elements and extolled one over the other as better, grander, or more developed based on a myriad of criteria.⁷ The origins of this dynamic are found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Lovejoy remarks

there are in the Platonic dialogues occasional intimations that the Ideas, and therefore their sensible counterparts, are not all of equal metaphysical rank or excellence; but this conception not only of existences but of essences as hierarchically ordered remains in Plato only a vague tendency, not a definitely formulated doctrine. In spite of Aristotle's recognition of the multiplicity of

⁴ Kenneth Mills's text, *Idolatry and its Enemies: Colonial Indian Religion and Extirpation, 1640-1750*, explores three distinct periods of official extirpation of idolatrous practices all of which followed the publication of Acosta's *Historia* and *De Procuranda*. Note also that the Jesuits were particularly vehement in carrying out the extirpation of idolatry in the Andean region. The demonization of Andean religious practices by the Jesuits also continued in Arriaga's extirpation manual published in 1621 in Lima.

⁵ Chapters nine through twelve of book one in *Historia* explore texts of the ancients for references to America.

⁶ "Por tanto debemos colegir que a los antiguos les quedó gran parte por conocer, y que a nosotros hoy día nos está encubierta no pequeña parte del mundo" (Acosta 1954, 26).

⁷ Lovejoy states, "The vague notion of an ontological scale was to be combined with the more intelligible conceptions of zoological and psychological hierarchies which Aristotle had suggested" (Lovejoy 1978, 59)

possible systems of natural classification, it was he who chiefly suggested to naturalists and philosophers of later times the idea of arranging (at least) all animals in a single graded *scala naturae* according to their degree of 'perfection' (Lovejoy 1978, 58).

Aristotle made references to this natural sequence in many treatises, but *De anima* and *De generatione animalium* contain the most explicit examples of hierarchies applied to botanical and zoological elements. In *De anima* Aristotle refers to the powers of the soul that certain living things possessed: "nutrition, sense-perception, desire, movement in respect of place, and thought" (Aristotle 1993, 14).⁸ He goes on to address these potentialities with respect to plants and animals, posing a hierarchical connection between these criteria and exploring the reason for their arrangement into a successive structure. "For without the nutritive faculty there does not exist that of perception; but the nutritive faculty is found apart from that of perception in plants. Again, without the faculty of touch none of the other senses exists, but touch exists without the others; for many animals have neither sight nor hearing nor sense of smell" (Aristotle 1993, 16). Aristotle places these "powers of the soul" into a hierarchy whereby nutritive capabilities, sense perception, and desire progress from basic to complex and asserts ultimately that imagination is the highest power. "Nature proceeds from the inanimate to the animals by such small steps that, because of the continuity, we fail to see to which side the boundary and the middle between them belongs" (Aristotle 1991, 61-63). Balme notes that Aristotle's comment does not constitute an evolutionary theory, but rather that "the same characters exist at different levels of development in different animals" (61). While the *Historia Animalium* deals primarily with animals, Aristotle occasionally places man within the developmental hierarchy, but only in general terms.

For some characters differ by the more-and-less compared with man, as does man compared with a majority of the animals (for certain characters of this kind are present to a greater degree in man, certain others to a greater degree in the other animals), while others differ by analogy: for corresponding to art, wisdom and intelligence in man, certain animals possess another natural capability of a similar sort (Aristotle 1991, 61).

His classification of animals requires one to use a series of criteria which are based on physical and cognitive capabilities. Though Aristotle does not place man explicitly within the same analysis, he does note that animal characteristics also are present in man. His mention of the analogy to the human activities of art, wisdom and intelligence attaches the *scala naturae* to a similar, though unspoken, hierarchy within the realm of human development.

The application of hierarchies to the textualized elements of reality became a necessary part of the legitimization process. During the creation, the Christian God had ordered the universe and if these exotic and new realities did not fit into that order then, by extension, they could not be divine. Not only did Acosta apply the *scala naturae* to plants, animals, and minerals, as Aristotle had done, but he imposed hierarchical structures to categorize humanity. He ranked the different American ethnicities according to the advancement of their culture. Criteria such as refinement of socio-political structures, linguistic technology, and belief systems determined the level of superiority of one culture over another.⁹ The standard against which all of these cultures were measured was strictly European; the aristocratic society, phonetic writing systems, and Christianity all represented the pinnacle of cultural development. Zavala confirms that "European supremacy was based on a cognitive function of contrast with the 'other,'" (Zavala 1989, 325). Adorno reiterates "los discursos creados sobre-y por-el sujeto colonial no nacieron sólo con el deseo de conocer al otro sino por la necesidad de diferenciar jerárquicamente el sujeto del otro" (Adorno 1988, 66). At one point in *Historia*, Acosta initiates a comparative analysis of Inca and Mexica cultures "en edificios y grandeza de corte, excedía el Montezuma a los del Perú: en tesoros, riqueza y grandeza de provincia excedían los Ingas a los de Méjico" (Acosta 1954, 191). Acosta ranks the development of the different Amerindian ethnicities much in the same way Aristotle had categorized animals according to their capabilities. Acosta established alterity along a vertical ranking system. His use of this difference-making structure, together with the earlier noted effort to link America to the known world through analogy and attachment, introduces a binary role reversal which fluctuates between self and other, alike and diverse, connected yet underdeveloped. Step one brings America into legitimizing contact with the known world and step two subjects it and its inhabitants to the taxonomies of the Western worldview.

5. Cultural Evolution

Consequently, the third step in Acosta's project to textualize America in *Historia* involves the proposal of a dynamic whereby cultures evolve or devolve conditioned by their social, political, and economic circumstances. In his explanation for the Indians' barbarity, Acosta postulates: "por haberse perdido de su tierra o por hallarse estrechos y necesitados de buscar nueva tierra, y que hallándola comenzaron poco a poco a poblarla, no teniendo más ley que un poco de luz natural" (Acosta 1954, 38). Having connected Americans to the biblical creation, Acosta had to provide a logical explanation for their lack of European-like development. In doing so, the most reasonable solution (one that conformed with the universal creation advanced by Christian

⁸ Aristotle refers to the powers of the soul as the product of form and matter. "And since the product of the two is an ensouled thing, the body is not the actuality of soul, but the latter is the actuality of a certain kind of body (Aristotle 1993, 14).

⁹ Acosta established a first category "los que tienen república estable, leyes públicas, ciudades fortificadas, magistrados obedecidos y lo que más importa, uso y conocimiento de las letras" (Acosta 1954, 392). He placed the Japanese and the Chinese along with the cultures of other Oriental provinces in this group (Acosta 1954, 392). The second group contains those cultures which had not yet achieved the use of writing and philosophical and civil knowledge, though they did possess a stable socio-political system and a form of religious worship. Acosta places the Incas and the Mexica in this second category. The last group corresponds to all those ethnic groups that lacked cultural organization of any kind.

dogma) was that the ancestors of the Americans had forgotten their civilized past due to the demands of migration and survival.¹⁰ Del Pino observes that "una generalización de su teoría evolutiva a la humanidad entera, incluida la sociedad cristiana desde sus orígenes, hubiera significado una ruptura con la versión bíblica del Génesis" (Pino Díaz 1978, 537). Though Acosta does not summarize his theory of cultural evolution explicitly or apply it to Christian society universally, he does make reference to Europe--specifically certain regions of Spain and Italy--where groups of uncivilized people had been found. He reports "aunque hubiesen salido de tierras de policía, y bien gobernados, se les olvidase todo con el largo tiempo, y poco uso; pues es notorio que aún en España y en Italia se hallan manadas de hombres, que si no es el gesto y figura, no tienen otra cosa de hombres. Así que por este camino vino a haber una barbaridad infinita en el nuevo mundo" (Acosta 1954, 38). He implies that through isolation from civilizing factors, all people--even Europeans--forget their rational and civilized roots.¹¹

Acosta reverts to a discourse of similarity by proposing an evolutionary process that influences all cultures universally. Since certain Europeans isolated from civilizational catalysts once existed at a barbaric developmental stage, Acosta insinuates that Amerindians are analogous to Europeans, but only farther behind in the cycle of cultural evolution. The Europeans are closer to the "cradle of civilization" so they have not had to migrate as far and could spend their energy on societal achievements rather than migrations and geographical adjustments. Acosta establishes another connection with the Old World by noting that two peaking cultures in America--Aztec and Inca--would facilitate the spreading of Christ's word in the same way that the Roman empire served as a successful vehicle for the diffusion of Christianity. He states, "así como la ley de Cristo vino, cuando la monarquía de Roma había llegado a su cumbre, así también fue en las Indias occidentales" (Acosta 1954, 244-245). While this analogy links Amerindian and Roman civilizations, particularly their political systems, it also equates Spanish evangelism with early Christian proselytism.

At the beginning of book seven in *Historia*, Acosta cites a passage from the book of Ecclesiastes that refers to the cyclical nature of the universe: "thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (1:9). Pagden comments on this verse: "this would seem to suggest a typically Aristotelian view of history as a series of cycles doomed to repeat themselves throughout time. The evidence of ancient history had shown Acosta that entire cultures -- like that of Rome, whose history offered examples of every known form of government -- may rise, decline and then fall, to be replaced by a new cycle" (Pagden 1982, 192). This proposes that European ethnicities once lacked the cultural sophistication they now praised and imposed upon their cultural "others"-- a thought Acosta avoids saying explicitly. Nevertheless his characterization clearly identifies Amerindians as neophytes beholden to their European mentors. "Acosta's evolutionary model of development is fully consequential with a Eurocentric concept of history and subjectivity that, if not repeated literally (mainly because it's religious language does not fare well with modern science), in substance still informs nineteenth and 20th-century anthropologies and theories of development" (Rabasa 1993, 211). Furthermore, Acosta's assertive emplotment of American identity in the collision of two antithetical discourses foreshadows the complexity of filters that still burdens modern ethnography and anthropology.

In summary, analogies and allusions to extant knowledge link the two hemispheres while hierarchies separate them according to Eurocentric criteria. Later within his evolutionary model, Acosta is able to attribute sameness through alterity--culturally and civilizationally distinct, Europe and America were progressing along a universal developmental ladder. He successfully fuses the two discourses in an attempt to restrict the limits of Amerindian identity, placing it within the confines of Europe's past and projecting its future in terms of Europe's present. This project, replete with practical and philosophical benefits for Jesuit missionaries and Europe in general, nevertheless subjects American culture to a paternalistic and colonizing mind. Using Foucault's words, Acosta's textualization of America "reconstitutes the very order of the universe by the way in which words are linked together and arranged in space" (Foucault 1973, 38). Notwithstanding the benefits of Acosta's philosophical connection of America to the known world, this new ordering reflects the image of Europe upon a silent America.

¹⁰ Acosta also makes reference to the Great Flood in his investigations of the origin of the Indians because they reported myths of a great flood also. To keep the biblical rendition of the Flood intact, Acosta states "los rastros y señales que hay de diluvio no son del de Noé, sino de algún otro particular" (Acosta 1954, 38).

¹¹ This theory is interconnected with another presented in *De Procuranda* in which Acosta defends the nurture side of the nature/nurture argument. He states "la incapacidad de ingenio y fiereza de costumbres de los indios no proviene tanto del influjo del nacimiento o la estirpe, o del aire nativo, cuanto la prolongada educación y del género de la vida no muy desemejante al de las bestias" (Acosta 1954, 412).

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