



EARLY IMAGES OF AMERICA IN TWO LETTERS OF DISCOVERY

Jerry M. Williams
West Chester University

Utilizando os modelos do Paraíso e da Idade de Ouro como pontos de partida para a avaliação de descobrimentos inspirados pela Divina Providência, Cristóvão Colombo e Pero Vaz de Caminha traçam a história dos primeiros contatos entre as civilizações indígenas e européias. Dadas as mudanças que a descoberta da América impôs na historiografia renascentista, os dois autores se defrontam com o duplo problema da representação precisa e da autoridade sobre o texto. Mais revelador ainda é que o Novo Mundo seduz a sensibilidade e o pensamento europeus, criando assim para o discurso teórico um fórum no qual várias formas narrativas podem mutuamente investigar seus limites e sua credibilidade.

*Para bem contar e falar o saiba fazer pior
que todos. Mas tome Vossa Alteza minha
ignorância por boa vontade; e creia, como
certo, que não hei de pôr aqui mais que
aquilo que vi e me pareceu, nem para
aformosear nem para afear.*

Pero Vaz de Caminha

*I thought about writing all of this trip in
great detail, from day to day, everything
that I would do, see, and experience.*

Christopher Columbus

The "Letter of Columbus" (15 February - 4 March, 1493) from the first voyage and that of his contemporary, Pero Vaz de Caminha, "Carta a El Rei D. Manuel" (May of 1500) reflect the first manifestations of Renaissance literary efforts to chronicle the New World and offer valuable insights into the budding humanistic frankness with which America was viewed. Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, explores the role which resemblances and differences played in advancing the knowledge of the western world, arguing that "the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another" (25-26). Accordingly, upon examining diacritically the body of textual writings which comprise sixteenth century historical discourse (the *carta*, the *relação*, annal, chronicle, history, and so on), we find a dialogue between textual and discursive formations: "textual characteristics can migrate from one discursive type to another. . . , while discursive types can overlap" (Merrim 58). The Caminha *letter* is ostensibly written in the form of a *diary* and meets all the requirements for this classification, whereas the Columbus *letter* is a conscious compendium of descriptions first registered in his

diary. Given that the original Columbus diary was lost, what we know of its content is the *précis* made by his friend, the friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who had handled the journal. Pedro Álvares Cabral left no personal records of his voyage, save the primary account by the ship's notary, Caminha.¹ For this study, the use of the Columbus letter over the diary is indicated since the diary is a fragmented travelogue which in great part reconstructs the four voyages through a framework of limited quotations and paraphrase. The accuracy of Las Casas' reading and interpretation of the diary is difficult to measure. About the authenticity of the Columbus letter there is no dispute but that it renders accurately the Admiral's words and is therefore, like the Caminha letter, a more genuine, original text. Also worthy of note is that while Caminha composed directly from the coastline and shores of Brazil, Columbus penned his letter while in transit from the New World. Caminha's on-site record contrasts sharply with Columbus' reliance on memory to redact his voyage, and serves to reference one of the initial distinctions between the two authors. Striking are the similarities shared by Columbus and Cabral and the narratives that chronicle the two expeditions: both errant voyages result in accidental discoveries occasioned by men who emerge from relative obscurity to canalize the most stellar event in the history of their respective countries, only to fall into disfavor with the crown after their return (Cabral for an unknown transgression, Columbus for reasons of political and economic intrigue); both documents are a watershed of the chronicle's firm link with the spirit of Renaissance humanism; the biography of each explorer is riddled with incognita; both explorers suffer crippling losses at sea; and, they advance the cause of nautical science through discoveries of ocean currents and experiments with measuring coast lines.

The Caminha and Columbus letters can be referred to as the "birth certificate" or first page of their nation's respective literary history in America; they contain the seeds of some of the enduring themes found in the writings of subsequent explorers. Both texts postulate "a pre-existing reader who is missing in the text, but who authorizes it" (de Certeau 79). Of supreme importance is both authors' shrewd reporting of the first contacts between the indigenous and European civilizations; their detailed observations of nature and the geographic distribution of the land;

and their commentary on the customs, religion and physical characteristics of the native populace. In contrast to the account authored by his Spanish contemporary, there is less of the messianic sense of historic mission in Caminha. His language, "fluente e poética" (Castello 33), is unpretentious yet humorous, slightly picaresque, and reflects a measured response to the marvels he experienced; he opts for a seemingly unembellished approach to reporting. Caminha's humanistic attitude toward the Indians likewise underscores the ethnographic dimension of his treatise; the *carta's* documental or prosaic character is transcended by the writer's ability to capture the affections of both the land and its peoples.

A variety of relative phrases underscore the interpretation of reality and the creation of arbitrary categorizations, based on what both explorers witness or are told by native informants: *creio, parece-me*, I am told that, it is true that, I understand that, and so forth. These relative phrases, as rhetorical formulae, in no way subvert the content of the writers' message, and there is no correspondence between the subjectivization of data and the objectivization of conclusions drawn (Pastor 76-77). Moreso for Columbus than Caminha, the New World, seen against a complex backdrop of medieval expectancies, unfolds as a utopia affording "consolation and lyricism" (Foucault xviii). For Caminha, discovery is supported by a strong tradition of colonial experience in Africa and India with its attendant conquests, violence and settlements.

The poetic imagery which characterizes Columbus' account is not to be found in the Caminha letter, for the rhetorical structure of the latter does not reflect the use of extensive metaphorical devices to validate descriptions. Objects are seen at face value, named for what they are, not for what they should represent. Unlike Columbus, Caminha does not immediately recognize the value of his finding (island versus continent) and checks abruptly the potentialities for characterizing it. The "ilha" inhabited by diverse species of parrots is construed by Caminha to be a convenient stopover on the route to India: "esta pousada para esta navegação de Calecute" (191).² Columbus, on the other hand, exploits possibilities: "I have taken possession in this Hispaniola [Espanola], in the situation most convenient and in the best position for the mines of gold and for all intercourse as well

with the mainland here as that there, belonging to the Grand Khan, where will be great trade and gain" (12).

Nature: exploding metaphor

The historical narrative is seen by Hayden White as an "extended metaphor" where experience is encoded and reproduced in order to provide the reader directions for locating an icon in the fabric of our literary tradition. Only by likening or contrasting the actual with the imaginable can we exploit "the metaphorical similarities between sets of real events and the conventional structures of our fictions" (91) and render the mysterious or the inexplicable familiar. So considerable are the resources of America that its vastness is graphically elusive and is addressed in the abstract. Not only is the land more fertile but its diverse fruits exist in abundance as an extreme of nature, as if in defiance to its ordered state in Europe. Tree groves are "muitos e muitos e grandes e de infindas maneiras" (170); birds, particularly the *pombas seixas*, "pareceram-me maiores, em boa quantidade, que as de Portugal" (170); from the sea, the interior affords a unique view of only extensive lands and forests; the waters, sweet and endless, await exploitation by those wishing to promote rapid growth of vegetation.

Columbus provides a working model for abstractions.

In it are marvellous pine groves, and there are very large tracts of cultivatable lands, and there is honey, and there are birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity. In the interior are mines of metals, and the population is without number. The sierras and mountains, the plains and arable lands and pastures are so lovely and rich for planting and sowing, for breeding cattle of every kind, for building towns and villages. (6)

Texts are punctuated with testimonials to the collective terrain and the quality and quantity of its bounty: both narratives share common adjectives and hyperbolic phrases that reinforce the idea of prosperity: fertile, sweet, abundant, large, fat, beautiful, strong, profitable, numerous, infinite, thick, better than, extensive, endless, and so on. Although the New World symbolizes all that the Old is not, the "actual," i.e. the concrete

presence of America, is not easily describable. The novelty of the new lands and strange peoples disquiets the sensibilities and tests the anecdotal talents of testimonial writers such as Columbus, Caminha, Magalhães de Gandavo, Lopes de Sousa, Gabriel Soares, and others. Writers broach the question of how to approximate equivalents for the diverse elements witnessed, stating that a finding is without parallel or that it has no equivalent in the European market, that it has to be seen to be believed.

In it [Juana] are many harbours on the coast of the sea, beyond comparison with others I know in Christendom, . . . many sierras and very lofty mountains, beyond comparison with the island of Teneriffe.(4)

Given the changes which the discovery of America imposed on Renaissance historiography, the struggle faced is as much for adequate representation as it is for accuracy and authority (Elliott 3-7). Frequently, chroniclers of the period declare that they do not know where or how to begin to particularize the matter before them, be it architecture, vegetation, native customs, the land, or the sea. The level of empiricism, of experimental autonomy that America afforded molded, to a large extent, the attitude of historians to accommodate the *caelum novum et terra nova* of biblical prophecy. It is, after all, López de Gómara, the official biographer of Cortés, who declared that "The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies" (Elliot 10).

The land ultimately defies description. Columbus reports that the flora and fauna "cannot be believed to exist unless they have been seen" (6). Caminha contemplates a grove of foliage and admits "que lhe não pode homem dar conto" (176). The cautious or restrained sense of the idyllic that Caminha exhibits lacks true elements of surprise. At best, digressive tales and anecdotes about curiosities punctuate his description of nature. In contrast, the fancies of Columbus nurture more the idea of invention over discovery.³ Given the amount of irregularity which the lands afford, Columbus' mythical and mystical complex leads him to conclude

. . . that the world is not round as they describe it, but that it is the shape of a pear . . . which has a raised stalk . . . like a woman's nipple on a round ball (30). Not that I believe that to the summit of the extreme point is navegable, or [that there is] water, or that it is possible to ascend there, for I believe that the earthly paradise is there and to it, save by the will of God, no man can come (36). These are great indications of the earthly paradise, for the situation agrees with the opinion of those holy and wise theologians (38).

Todorov conjectures that this "intransitive admiration of nature [is] experienced with such intensity that it is freed from any interpretation and from any function" (23). The objective condition of such abundance is inexplicable to many historians, yet the term *abundância* is culturally loaded in a positive way. On the heels of Todorov, Julio Ortega points out that abundance is the natural model that results from transatlantic exchanges, that the natural processes of the New World are a metaphor for its riches, and that "fertility exceeds representation" (111). The inexplicable is not menacing, i.e. the abundant land is not the howling wilderness, for it does not threaten as readily to feralize as to transform social organization and discourse. Man and nature are thrust into a hegemonic discourse by categorical labels, suspended in a complex of symbols from which meaning is invented.

Civilization and barbarity

The natives' spiritual and physical qualities are likened to an oxymoronic notion of a "wild humanity" (White 193).⁴ Scrutiny of the indigenous population finds expression in terms which reveal humorous curiosity and a sympathetic attitude, governed by a complex of European values in response to the presence of the Other. The natives lack many of the distinguishing attributes of European nations: they are lawless, naked, anthropophagous, sexually uninhibited, spiritually misguided, and enjoy neither domesticated beasts, private property nor arms, nor metals for the construction of weapons. Within the framework of "description by deficiency" (Berkhofer 27), moral judgements and ethnographic particulars are inseparable.

True to his intention, Caminha seeks neither to beautify the natives nor to make them less attractive. They are described alternately as dark and somewhat reddish, with painted bodies pleasing in appearance and comparable in color to the tapestries of France. Peaceful, good faces and well shaped noses, with smooth hair well cut above the forehead, are elements that round out the sketch. Bones inserted in the lower lip do not impede them from speaking, eating or drinking. It is the element of nudity and body paint that arrests the detailed attention of Caminha.

Também andavam entre eles quatro ou cinco mulheres moças, à mesma nuas, que não pareciam mal e entre as quais andava uma, com uma coxa toda, do joelho até ao quadril e a nádega toda tingida daquela tintura preta; . . . e suas vergonhas tão nuas e com tanta inocência descobertas que não havia, nisso, nenhuma vergonha. (152)

Women possess an innocence "tão graciosa, que a muitas mulheres de nossa terra, vendo-lhe tais feições, faria vergonha, por não terem a sua como ela" (137). Of men it is said that their innocence "é tal que a de Adão não seria maior quanto a vergonha" (188). The exquisite physical and spiritual nudity proves fashionable to European freedom.

Caminha's overall scrutiny of the populace reveals sentiments of admiration, enchantment, and protectionism: the Indians' natural manner invites responses of cordiality and understanding from the Portuguese crew.

. . . Do que concludo ser gente bestial e de pouco saber e por isso são assim esquivos. Eles, porém, contudo, andam muito bem curados e muito limpos e nisso me parece, ainda mais, que são como aves, ou alimárias monteses que lhes faz o ar melhor pena e melhor cabelo que às mansas, porque os seus corpos são tão limpos e tão gordos e tão formosos que não podem ser mais. (158)

Seen as birds and as the children of nature, they subsist only on fruit, seeds and roots, yet withall "andam tais e tão rijos e tão nédios, que o não somos nós tanto, com quanto trigo e legumes comemos" (179). Caminha, forever the sharp and penetrating observer, encourages the indigenes to adapt to forms of

European civilization. After the *gente bestial* initially reject the offer of bread, boiled fish, wine, honey, dried figs, cakes and comfits, they are won over by the persistent kindnesses of the mariners:

Sentaram-se cada um em uma cadeira e de tudo o que lhes deram comeram muito bem, especialmente presunto cozido, frio, e arroz. . . Comiam conosco do que lhes dávamos e bebiam, alguns deles, vinho e outros o não podiam beber. Mas parece-me que se lho avezarem que o beberão de boa vontade. (173)

Indians lack many of the proper cultural tools needed to separate them from nature: food, sheets and mattresses to tame (i.e. to socialize) them ("cama de colchões e lençóis para os mais amansar"). When presented with proper European bedding, they readily accept it, as if in appreciation of its inherent cultural and social value: "dormiram e folgaram aquela noite" (173). Sherry B. Ortner posits that the culture/nature dichotomy is the key to understanding all ideological differences between the self as part of the "properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere . . . to its moral precepts" and the other, who is seen as "lower than man, [occupying a] 'middle status' on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature" (84). Indians are judged to be physically superior to the Portuguese, more trusting, honest, and closer to nature; their cleanliness and good nature Caminha ascribes to "o ar a que se criam" (158).

Columbus, in a style less pedestrian than Caminha's, promotes an engaging interpretation of his first contacts with the Taino natives. The collective population is "very well-formed, nor are they negroes as in Guinea" (14). They are by nature "marvellously timorous", and save an exception or two "all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them" (6). So cowardly are they that they are adjudged incapable of destroying the recently fortified town of Villa de Navidad because "they do not know what arms are" (14).

They are so guileless and so generous with all they possess, that no one would believe it who has not seen it. Like savages, [they] gave what they had. (6)

They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they fitted to use them. And this does not come because they are ignorant; on the contrary, they are of a very acute intelligence.(10)

In his description of the cannibals (*caribes*), Columbus exploits the differences between islanders and promotes a dual presentation of the natives as a savage yet redeemable race, "not only hostile but depraved" (Berkhofer 7). This dualism is characteristic of the very polar possibilities representing difference.

One of these provinces they call 'Avan', and there the people are born with tails. (12)

In these islands I have so far found no human monstrosities, as many expected. As I have found no monsters, so I have had no report of any, except an island . . . which is inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. (14)

In another island, which they assure me is larger than Hispaniola, the people have no hair. (16)

Columbus gives vent to his imagination with tales of cannibals, hairless men, humans with tails, and Amazon-like inhabitants of the island of 'Matinino'. These metaphors, the creation of which itself is a form of possession and self-possession, i.e. the maintenance of the integrity of oneself and one's world view, become "crucially necessary when a culture or social group encounters phenomena that either elude or run afoul of normal expectations or quotidian experiences" (White 84). Unlike Caminha who attributes the Indians' staying power to the very air they breathe, Columbus speaks of superior tribes capable of withstanding extreme cold due to their frequent intake of hot meats and drinks: "they endure it, being used to it and with the help of meats which they eat with many and extremely hot spices" (14). Mythical beings are more the product of a utopic vision of the newly discovered lands and peoples than a reflection of reality, yet this mystical complex also embraces a view of the Indians as collectively passive and lacking cultural diversity, the solution to which is to christianize them and ultimately encourage their enslavement. The native friendliness is met with

apprehension: "Andavam já mais mansos e seguros entre nós, do que andávamos entre eles (179). São muito mais nossos amigos que nós seus" (179).

With the model of paradise and the Golden Age of antiquity as points of departure for evaluation of their providential discoveries, both Caminha and Columbus suggest an "assimilationist" (Todorov 43) approach to the Indians, i.e. to cast the Indian in the European image by providing him with Christian dress, religion and customs. Michel de Certeau points to the historian's need to combine empirical data with that received from tradition: "Only an appeal to the senses (hearing, sight, touch, taste) and a link to the body (touched, carved, tested by experience) seem capable of bringing closer together and guaranteeing, in a singular but indisputable fashion, the real" (74). The transposition of the ideals of Arcadia, the Garden of Eden, medieval Christendom, and classical antiquity is in direct antithetical collision with the duality of character of the new-found Atlantic nations and peoples.

It is Caminha who, unlike Columbus, distinguishes himself through his attempts to *comprehend* the Indian as the Other by repeatedly intermingling with the populace. As is typical of Caminha's balanced narrative, the five acts of intermingling between the Portuguese and Indians during eight of the twelve days (April 21 - May 2) on shore reflect a concerted and mutual effort: "andarmos todos quase misturados" (161). Michel Foucault, in tracing the transition of world prose from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century discusses this concept of similitude, and presses upon us that communication occurs with the juxtaposition of elements:

Their edges touch, their fringes intermingle, the extremity of the one also denotes the beginning of the other. So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears . . . And then, from this contact, by exchange, there arise new resemblances; a common regimen becomes necessary. Adjacency is not an exterior relation between things, but the sign of a relationship, obscure though it may be. In the vast syntax of the world, the different beings adjust themselves to one another. (18)

Caminha, unlike his contemporary, Columbus, does not rely heavily on analogy to acquire knowledge of the Other; comparisons of equality and inequality sparingly grace the *carta*. The approach to intermingling allows Caminha to see the Indians not so much as anomalous humans but more as part and parcel of the vast synthesis of God's creation. The notes of understanding and respect for the Indian and for his innocence constitute the foundation of Caminha's "misteriosa plasticidade" (Arroyo 27) and his call for syncretism over immediate enslavement.

The struggle for lexical authority reveals "the impossible Word at work within the text" (de Certeau 79). After an initial attempt during which "I could have no speech, because they all fled immediately" (4), Columbus resorts to forcibly capturing several natives "in order that they might learn [to speak Spanish] and give me information. . . , and so it was that they soon understood us, and we them, either by speech or signs" (10). Luis de Torres, a converted Jew who had been in the service of the *adelantado* of Murcia and who spoke Hebrew, Chaldean and some Arabic, was employed by Columbus to serve as emissary to the Grand Khan.⁵ The Indians possess a tool for communication but it does not constitute a language *per se* from Columbus's point of view: "they all understand one another, which is a very curious thing" (12).

For Caminha, the first two attempts at communication are frustrated by the breaking of the waters on shore. There is subsequent trouble with how to interpret native signs and speech. Nowhere in Caminha's narrative is there mention of indigenous terms, or signs of tobacco, tattooing, or anthropophagy. In telling of an encounter where the exchange of beads and trinkets took place, Caminha relates that although he was inconvenienced by not speaking the native tongue, he nonetheless could reasonably interpret the Indians' motives.

[O índio] acenava para terra e então para as contas e para o colar do Capitão, como que dariam ouro por aquilo. Isto entendíamos nós, por assim desejarmos; mas se ele queria dizer que levaria as contas e mais o colar, isto não queríamos nós entender, porque lho não havíamos de dar. (128)

The burden of processing speech forces a destabilization of Caminha's frame of reference and compels him to admit that, much like the natives, he is ill-served by his own language and that of the New World.⁶ The use of figurative over technical language is the historian's tool for "rendering the strange familiar and. . . the mysterious comprehensible" (White 94). In order to stabilize and to control the frame of reference, Caminha knowingly imposes an equivocal interpretation and personal motive in response to the subject matter.

The world is covered with signs that must be deciphered, and those signs, which must reveal resemblances and affinities, are themselves no more than forms of similitude. To know must therefore be to interpret. . . The function proper to knowledge is not seeing or demonstrating, it is interpreting. (Foucault 32)

At the conclusion of trading, we are informed that "Ali e então, não houve mais fala nem entendimento com eles, por ser a algazarra deles tão grande que não se entendia nem ouvia ninguém. Acenamos-lhes que se fossem e assim o fizeram" (134). To be sure, they show themselves incapable of learning the Portuguese tongue quickly enough "por ser gente que ninguém entende" (146). An encounter on the river with an old man in his *almadia* illustrates the frustrations of failed communication.

Falou, estando o capitão com ele, perante nós todos, sem nunca ninguém o entender, nem ele a nós, sobre as coisas que a gente lhe perguntava de ouro, que nós desejávamos saber se o havia na terra. (152) [. . .] E com toda a fala que com ele passou e com a carapuça que lhe deu, logo que se despediu começou por passar o rio, que se foi logo recatando e não quis mais voltar do rio para cá. (158)

For Caminha, the Indian's voice within the discourse of encounter is imperfect or deficient. If we place into a discursive domain Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic (psychological and linguistic), we find the semiotic governed by "the resources of rhythm, intonation, gestures, and melody" (Burke 111). The Indian's voice is a prelinguistic one of sounds, not coherent

words. It could only be thus, for, as Burke argues, the semiotic imposes "gaps in meaning, pauses, and silences. The discourse of the Logos is literally ruptured to make room for what it has not allowed to be said" (112). Caminha's position toward the oral sphere of the natives also brings us closer to understanding his relation to the written world of dominant discourse. He is himself laconic, concise to the point of seeming mysterious or disinterested: "E, assim, não foi este dia mais que para escrever" (173). When the natives are said to finally learn how to communicate with the mariners, the act of speech is not fully desired and is met with a lukewarm reception: "Era já a conversação tanta que quase nos estorvavam no que havíamos de fazer" (167).

Spiritual conquest

Beyond the ordered state of religion in Europe lies an impressionable Indian populace whose spiritual development, though wanting and at odds with Christian sensibility, can be treated. Columbus's exploratory voyage is commissioned "after having ended the war against the Moors who reigned in Europe, and after having terminated the war in the very great city of Granada. . . [and] after having expelled all the Jews from our kingdom and seigniories" (Columbus, *Los cuatro viajes* 15-16). The crown's recently waged campaign against the infidels finds a logical extension in America through Columbus. First-hand knowledge of and contact with the conventions of non-Christian peoples – Africans, Jews, Moors, Orientals, Moriscos, Turks – serve many chroniclers as a canon for discharging a volley of observations and conjectures about the Indians. Propitious circumstances for the realization of advancing the catholic faith are present because the natives share a common "speech", physiognomy and customs. Columbus believes that by trading with them

. . . they might conceive affection. . . and might become Christians and be inclined to the love and service of their highnesses and the whole Castilian nation and strive to give us the things which they have in abundance and which are necessary to us. (8)

The fortifications that Columbus establishes with men, provisions and weapons exist for the sole purpose of encouraging trade over spiritual conversion. He promises to send back amongst the cargo of spices, cotton, mastic and aloe wood "slaves, as many as they shall order to be shipped and who will be from the idolaters" (16).

In the often failed marriage of religion and economics, Caminha strives to maintain balanced relations with the Indians. In the search to learn more about the lands, there is an early decision to do so by peaceful means; repeatedly, coercion is rejected at every turn.

[O Capitão-mor] perguntou se seria bom tomar, aqui, a força, um par destes homens. . . Nisto concordaram que não era necessário tomar por força homens, porque geralmente, era costume dos que assim levavam, a força, para alguma parte, dizerem que há af de tudo o que lhes perguntam. E que, portanto, não cuidassem de, por força, aqui tomar ninguém, nem fazer escândalo, para os de tudo mais amansar e apaziguar; em vez disso, somente deixar aqui os dois degredados, quando daqui partíssemos. E assim, por melhor parecer a todos, ficou determinado. (146)

In commenting on the first mass celebrated in Brazil, Caminha points out that the Indians responded favorably to the rudiments of religious instruction by faithfully imitating the Portuguese in kneeling and kissing the cross. Since the natives observe no recognized form of scriptural beliefs, the mind is seen as a *tabula rasa* on which to limn.

Parece-me gente de tanta inocência que se a gente os entendesse e eles a nós, que seriam logo cristãos, porque eles não têm nem atendem a nenhuma crença, segundo parece. Na verdade, esta gente é boa e de boa simplicidade e gravar-se-á neles, ligeiramente, qualquer cunho nho que lhes queiram dar. (176-79 [error in pagination of original])

Their receptivity to spiritual guidance notwithstanding, there still remains one central obstacle which overshadows even the question of their genealogical separation from the rest of Christendom: linguistic isolation. To be wholly Christian and

gain access to culture, they need both to understand and to be understood.

A esta gente não lhes falta outra coisa para ser toda cristã, do que entender-nos, porque logo aprendiam aquilo que nos viam fazer, tal como nós mesmos. (188)

That the natives seem pious and attentive during mass is a source of edification for Caminha and the Portuguese. But true devotion and mere curiosity are to be distinguished, as in the case when natives gather around a group of carpenters who are constructing an altar: "Creio que o faziam mais por verem a ferramenta de ferro com que a faziam, que por verem a Cruz, porque eles não têm coisa que disso seja" (167). Caminha conjectures that by the time the crown dispatches a priest to undertake baptismal rites, the natives, to be left under the supervision of two convicts, will have a greater knowledge of the Catholic faith. The best fruit which the land could yield would be to "salvar esta gente; e esta deve ser a principal semente que Vossa Alteza nela deve lançar" (191). Only by adaptation and conformity is the soul to be made articulate.

On a personal note, both chroniclers close their narratives with a petition directed to their respective sovereigns for favors. Although Columbus cites finding little of economic value save Indians, cinnamon and rhubarb, he requests additional ships, "if their highnesses will render me very slight assistance," for undertaking a second voyage in order to claim gold "and a thousand other things of value, which the people whom I have left there [Hispaniola] will have discovered" (16). Caminha's request is for humanitarian relief: to have his son-in-law, Jorge Do Soire, return from the island of Sam Thomé, "o que d'Ela receberei em muita mercê" (194).

By way of conclusion, where it may be said that through action and conviction "Columbus has discovered America but not the Americans" (Todorov 49), Caminha, through attitude, deed and word, has discovered Brazil. Where the proprietary interests of Columbus lead him to claim peoples and properties on behalf of the crown, Caminha names and describes in an effort to comprehend. America seduces European thought and sensibility and challenges the very nature of Europe's legacy and

relationship to the existing continents. Most tempting is that the New World offers theoretical discourse a forum where diverse narrative forms can probe each other's boundaries and authority.

NOTES

¹ The sole documents that have survived Cabral's voyage are Caminha's letter and that of the Galician astronomer Mestre João, who had served as Dom Manuel's personal physician. Mestre João's brief letter, written in Spanish, is of great interest for the nautical data it provides concerning how mariners determined longitude and latitude. Caminha makes no mention of Mestre João's presence on board. See António Baião, *Os sete únicos documentos de 1500, conservados em Lisboa, referentes à viagem de Pedro Álvares Cabral* (Lisboa: Agência geral das colónias, 1940), and Abel Fontoura da Costa, *A marinharia dos descobrimentos* (Lisboa: Imprensa da Armada, 1933).

² Brazil is alternately labeled "terra da Vera Cruz" by Cabral and "ilha da Vera Cruz" by Caminha. Vaz Valente (95-102) ascribes to Caminha an "intenção reservada" in his use of the term "ilha" over "terra firme".

³ Edmundo O'Gorman strongly argues for the term *invention* over *discovery* as a way of characterizing Europe's response to the New World in *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1961).

⁴ The contradictory characterizations of a normal humanity and an abnormal one are the result of an ambiguity about "the nature of 'humanity' on which Europeans of the early modern age prided themselves" (193) informs Hayden White in "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish," *Tropics of Discourse*. Accordingly, American natives were seen to be "continuous" with humanity yet to exist "contiguously" to the Europeans. This article complements "The Forms of Wildness" of the same essay collection. White undertakes an archaeological inquiry into the notion of wildness throughout the cultural history of Western civilization, and traces the development of the term "wild man" to its eighteenth century concept of the "noble savage". Also, consult Stanley L. Robe, "Wildmen and Spain's Brave New World", in *The Wildman Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, eds. Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1972) 39-53.

⁵ See the Columbus diary entry for Friday, November 2, 1492.

⁶ Fray Ramón Pané, who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage, was charged by the Admiral with the task of living amongst the natives in an effort to learn their language and culture. He was quick to point out the problems which resulted from a common language barrier. "As the Indians have no alphabet or writing, they do not tell their myths well, nor can I write them down accurately, and I fear that I am telling last things first and the first last; but I put it down just as I had it from the natives of the country. . . As I wrote in haste and had not enough paper, I could not put everything where it belonged, yet I have made no mistake, for they believe everything that is written here" (155-56). "The Relation of Fray Ramon Concerning the Antiquities of the Indians", *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*, ed. Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1950) 150-169.

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