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IX

Transculturality and the Colonial Legacy of Popular Belief in North-East Argentina

DOT TUER

When I speak of tales and of memory, it is in the sense that, in the realm of culture, imaginaries are constructed... More than ideology, the imaginary is the poetics of collective identity.

Susana Rotker,

Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina.

This text takes as its location the Argentine province of Corrientes (in the north-east of the country bordering Paraguay, Uruguay and Brazil), and as its object of inquiry a hybrid saint, San La Muerte, Lord of Good Death. Through an analysis of the way a colonial legacy of mixing between indigenous and European cultures is embodied in the popular belief in San La Muerte, and of the way this saint “stands in” to protect those bodies marked by the state as marginal and excluded, I demonstrate how transculturality can be understood as a social imaginary that transverses historical time to imbue objects, such as San La Muerte, with a bodily and spiritual

memory of subjugation and resistance. In so doing, I explore how representational traces of the past serve as productive markers of identity in which colonialism is being acknowledged and questioned in the present. From my perspective the stakes of this questioning are extraordinarily high—as evidenced by the power of the saint himself—because they require confronting an inheritance of Eurocentricism and the modern nation-state in the Americas that has made (and continues to make) histories and bodies disappear.

Since transculturality implies a complex nexus of *créolité*, *mestizaje* and hybridity, which are in themselves theorized and disputed signifiers of identity and difference, I want to begin by very briefly situating my use of the concept. My starting point lies in Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz's coining of the term "transculturation" in his *Cuban Counterpoint* (97–103). Ortiz created this neologism to distinguish the violent displacement and hybridization of cultures through colonization from the anthropological concept of acculturation, in which the identity of the colonized is absorbed by the dominant culture of the colonizer. In his study of Cuba, Ortiz analysed the ways in which the slave plantation economy and the racial mixing of African and European came to be embodied in and signified by the commodities of tobacco and sugar (3–93).

In the context of literary studies, Angel Rama took up Ortiz's term in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, arguing that the development of regional literatures through the incorporation of indigenous and populist subjectivities in post-independence Latin America is an original and formal innovation of European vanguard modernism. For Rama, this originality is anchored in a multiplicity of narrations that evoke the mythic, semiotic, and material dimensions of colonial domination and the resulting racial, linguistic, and cultural processes of *mestizaje* (11–57). Following Rama's important study of modernist literature in Latin America, Mary Louise Pratt used the term in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and*

Transculturation as an analytical tool for interpreting European representations of Latin America and Africa. Pratt positions her study on the rhetoric of travel writing as an ideological critique of the metropolitan “dynamics of possession and innocence” (6) that reveals the authors’ negotiation with the cultures they encountered and wrote about. In so doing, she argues that the narrators’ interaction with the “contact zones” (5) of colonial space can be interpreted as heterogeneous representations of the periphery in the service of imperial expansionism (10–11).

In contradistinction to Rama and Pratt, I take up the term *transculturation* in Ortiz’s sense of the hybridization of culture to describe the dynamics of conquest during the early colonial period in Argentina and Paraguay, rather than as a means to identify the multivalent dynamics of literary innovation and travel writing. I use *transculturality* as a way to identify post-colonial representational practices whose social imaginary is circumscribed by the continuity of colonial memory and the discontinuity of modernity. By showing how the material residue of *transculturation* is embedded in the performative and semiotic dimensions of San La Muerte, I argue that the popular belief in the saint serves as an example of how the social imaginary of *transculturality* is the strategic reappropriation of a colonial past that resists the oppositional paradigm of modernity through the local diffusion and mingling of cultural differences.

In early colonial Argentina and Paraguay, officially designated by the Spanish Crown as the Río de la Plata, the origins of *transculturation* lie in a rapid and widespread *mestizaje* that occurred in the 1500s between the Guaraní, an indigenous people who occupied an area of the coast of Brazil to the Paraguay River, and the Spanish conquistadors who sailed up the Paraná and the Paraguay Rivers to establish the fort of Asunción in 1537. The conquistadors viewed this racial mixing of cultures as a *pacto de sangre* (blood pact) that secured their *amistad y alianza* (friendship and alliance) with the Guaraní. The offspring of these unions between indigenous women

and the conquistadors were known as the *mancebos de la tierra* (youths of the land) who founded the cities of Santa Fé (1573), Buenos Aires (1580), and Corrientes (1588).¹ While most of the historical, sociological, and anthropological literature for the colonial period focuses on how this *mestizaje* resulted in the acculturation of the Guaraní to Hispanic norms, I am interested in how the manifestations of this *mestizaje* in the realm of symbolic exchange—that is in the sphere of signs—reveal a much more fluid process of cultural slippage and mixing of identities and beliefs.²

In this sense, I find the concept of “colonial semiosis” proposed by Argentinean post-colonial theorist Walter Mignolo to be useful (14–15). Mignolo uses this concept to reach beyond the racialized dimensions of Ortiz’s transculturation in order to analyze the “coloniality” of power as a system of representations and an epistemology. While Mignolo posits colonial semiosis as an alternative to transculturation, I prefer to consider them as complimentary frameworks, whereby the negotiation of radically different cultures in the “contact zone,” the colonial legacy of miscegenation, and the contemporary signs of hybridity converge in the social imaginary of what Mignolo terms “local histories” (19) and which I identify as the terrain of transculturality.

In the local history of the Argentine province of Corrientes, which shares more cultural affinity with Paraguay than with the greater Buenos Aires metropolitan area, manifestations of colonial semiosis are found in the Guaraní language spoken by most rural Correntinos, the food made from *maíz* (corn) and the staple root crop of *mandioca* (cassava), and the folk art that owes its religious content to the influence of the famous Jesuit missions established in the region in the 1600s.³ Local dishes include *chipas* (cassava biscuits), *abati pororo* (salted corn), *mbaipy cuajada* (polenta), *sopa paraguaya* (corn cake) and *iopará* (mixed beans) (Velilla de Aquino, 9–51). The tradition of religious art—first practiced by anonymous indigenous

artisans, who carved the elaborate altar pieces and sculptures of the Jesuit missions that characterize the Hispanic-Guaraní baroque (Plá 103–155, Bailey 144–182)—is manifested in brightly coloured carvings of saints such as San Miguel slaying the devil/jaguar (*Arte popular del Paraguay*, 11).

Less visible, but equally salient to a consideration of colonial semiosis, is the widely practised but rarely mentioned belief in *pajé* (a shamanistic worldview that takes its name from the Guaraní shamans, or *payés*, of the colonial period). *Pajé* is a practice of both curing and sorcery, of protection and bodily harm. A toad that appears at the doorstep of the house with its mouth sewn shut signifies that a curse, which only a *curandero* can remove, has been laid. The veneration of household saints safeguards against *el mal* (evil)—in Guaraní *mba'asy*. While most of these saints are recognized Catholic icons, the most powerful and popular saint, San La Muerte, is an illicit one.⁴

San La Muerte is a small amulet, no larger than five to seven centimetres, traditionally carved from human bone by prisoners. In Corrientes, medical students are rumoured to donate cadavers to the jailhouse for this purpose. It is also carved from dead people's coffins or crucifixes. San La Muerte is made in two forms. One is the grim reaper, the other is a small crouched figure. San La Muerte is usually a private and personal saint, providing protection and granting favours. It is carried by its owner in a pocket or small pouch and hidden from view in the house. A blood pact with the saint makes him more powerful, creating a complicit relation between the possessor and the possessed in which the saint demands to be fed drops of blood.

Gauchos sometimes cover the grim reaper version of the saint in silver and sew it inside the skin of their forearm, where it serves as a shield against bullets and violent harm. When a person dies with a San La Muerte embedded under the skin, it must be removed before he is buried or his soul will not leave his body. In this instance, a close friend or relative removes the

saint and either keeps it or buries it with the deceased. In recent years, prisoners in the local jails and youths from the poorer barrios of Buenos Aires have begun tattooing the saint on their bodies. Although the use of San La Muerte as a protector against violence is usually associated with gauchos and outlaws, Aurelio Schinni reports in his essay on San La Muerte that a prostitute confided in him that she used the saint for protection against disease and danger, placing him in her vagina before her nightly shift and removing him to rest in holy water upon returning home.

The small crouched version of San La Muerte can also function as a collective icon to whom followers make offerings in return for *promesas* (favours). These saints are passed down the maternal line, with the women in the family responsible for maintaining an elaborate altar for their glorification.

In the private shrine to San La Muerte that I visited in Corrientes, a separate room has been built to house the altar of the tiny saint carved of wood. In a videotaped testimony I obtained from his guardian, she explains that he has been in the family for over two hundred years and communicates to her through her dreams. He chooses whom he wishes to be passed down to and has foretold her future, including her husband's death and the survival of her daughter after a motorcycle accident. His followers come from all over the city and the province to honour him and leave him gifts. Although San La Muerte is not sanctioned by the Church, in cases where the saint has a substantial following, the neighbourhood priest will acknowledge its existence as a form of Señor de la Paciencia. In all its forms and uses, San La Muerte cannot achieve his considerable powers as an oracle, protector, and procurer of favours unless he is hidden on the body or inside the wooden figure of an official saint or Virgin and blessed unwittingly by a priest in a church on seven occasions.

In the rituals associated with San La Muerte, a myriad of associations emerge that link him to the colonial history of the

region and the spiritual practices of the Guaraní. The blood pact made with the saint tumbles us back in historical time to the initial *pacto de sangre* made between the conquistadors and the Guaraní. The crouched figure of the saint carved from bone evokes both the Guaraní custom of burying their dead in a crouched foetal position and stories of the cult of bones, told by Jesuit missionaries from the colonial era and modern ethnographers alike.

León Cadogan, a Paraguayan ethnographer who lived with the Mbyá-Guaraní of Guairá in the 1950s, describes how the Guaraní preserve the bones of the dead by burying the corpse in a foetal position in a bamboo basket. When the body is decomposed, the corpse is dug up and the bones preserved. Sacred chants are pronounced to the bones to conjure the sacred realm, in hope of obtaining revelations linked to *la tierra sin mal*—an earthly paradise where souls come to rest after death. According to León Cadogan, it is possible to go from one realm to the other without discontinuity—that is to reach *la tierra sin mal* in human form without dying—if the bones are venerated (85–105).

In the early 1600s, the Jesuit missionary Antonio Ruiz de Montoya recorded similar stories of the Guaraní's bone worship. In his *La conquista espiritual del Paraguay* (1639), he describes how a pagan boy led him deep into the forest to a cave where bones wrapped in hammocks “covered with precious cloths of coloured feathers” (86) were worshiped by the Guaraní. In one of the hammocks lay the bones of a famous shaman, who had been dug up from a Christian church after the Guaraní heard him crying from his grave that he was suffocating (86).

In San La Muerte's contemporary manifestation as a hybrid saint, vestiges of these shamanistic practices can be discerned. Neighbourhood altars to San La Muerte are modern versions of the ancient shrines of the shaman's bones, with gold rings and lace coverings substituting for precious cloths and coloured

feathers. Like the venerated shaman's bones, the carved figure of San La Muerte promises access to and protection from the sacred realm. Just as the ancient shaman's bones needed to be unearthed for his soul to be free to travel to the spirit world, so the San La Muerte buried beneath the dead gaucho's skin must be removed to liberate the soul from the body.

The shamanistic powers of the ancient *payés* embodied in San La Muerte also resonate with a history of indigenous resistance to evangelization during the colonial period. In the Jesuit accounts of the 1600s and 1700s, there are numerous descriptions of Guaraní shamans who appropriated and inverted Christian rituals. In his *Historia de la conquista del Paraguay, Río de la Plata y Tucumán* (1754–55), Pedro Lozano describes how Oberá, who was one of the most famous shamans of the colonial period, led a rebellion in 1579 in which he proclaimed himself the son of God and performed elaborate ceremonies to un-baptize his followers (Lozano, III: 211–228). Ruiz de Montoya writes about an indigenous cacique, Miguel Artiguaye, who sought to obtain prestige and followers by becoming a priest:

In his private chamber [...] robed in [...] brilliant feathers and other adornments, he pretended to say mass. He would spread a table with cloths and place upon them a manioc cake and show the cake and wine as priests do, finally eating and drinking everything. (53)

Similarly, a Jesuit report in the 1730s noted the existence of a fugitive settlement of Guaraníes who were imitating Christian ceremonies and sacraments. Deserters from the Jesuit missions, they founded their settlement in the Iberá wetlands south of the city of Corrientes. Subsisting on cattle rustling and engaging in polygamy, they were able to maintain their mimetic alterity of the Jesuit regime for a year before a punitive raid launched by the Correntino settlers dispersed them (Maeder, 162–165).

These and other tales of spiritual confrontation between shaman and missionary recorded during the colonial period offer a rich fabric of representations from which to excavate the genealogy of San La Muerte, who similarly derives his power from his mimetic relationship to the Catholic faith and rituals.⁵ Equally salient to the saint's genealogy are accounts of the first years of conquest in which Spanish and Guaraní cultures clashed and merged. One story in particular of a Spanish-Guaraní joint raid against enemy nomads led by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, which was recorded in the *Comentarios* (1555), suggests how San La Muerte can be seen to "stand in" as a sign for how the body becomes symbolically marked by cultural and spiritual difference.

The *Comentarios*, written by Cabeza de Vaca's secretary Pero Hernández, describes Cabeza de Vaca's brief tenure as governor of the Río de la Plata from 1542–1544 before being deposed by the Asunción conquistadors. The *Comentarios* was preceded by Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 *Relación* (better known as *Naufragios*), in which he recounted the eight years he spent in Florida, Texas and Mexico as one of four shipwrecked survivors of the ill-fated Pánfilo de Narváez expedition to *La Florida* in 1527. In this *Relación*, he describes how he lived as a slave among the indigenous peoples of the coastal regions of the Gulf of Mexico before walking across the southwest United States and Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. In recounting his journey, Cabeza de Vaca tells how he became a healer, subduing the hostile peoples he encountered by making Christian miracles happen through mixing indigenous rituals with the sign of the cross.⁶

Upon returning to Spain in 1537, Cabeza de Vaca was given the position of *adelantado* (governor) of the Río de la Plata and set sail for the Americas in 1540. After landing in Brazil in 1541, he crossed overland to Asunción and, shortly after arriving in March 1542, undertook the joint raid with the Guaraní against their enemies. In Hernández's account

of the raid, the sign of the cross evoked by Cabeza de Vaca in the 1542 *Relación* reappears in a different guise. Hernández tells how Cabeza de Vaca set forth with two hundred Spanish soldiers and ten thousand Guaraní warriors, bodies painted in red and black and ochre and decked in brilliant blue and green parrot feathers. While marching deep in the jungle to meet their enemy, the Guaraní warriors became frightened by a tiger—a *yaguareté* or jaguar—and fled into the woods. In the ensuing confusion, the startled Spanish began to fire on them. After going into the woods after the Guaraníes and calming them, Cabeza de Vaca ordered that a white gesso cross be painted on the back and shoulders of all ten thousand warriors so that they would not be fired on again or mistaken for the enemy (Hernández, 208–218).

In the Guaraníes' inexplicable reaction of terror to a jaguar in the woods and Cabeza de Vaca's gesture in response, we can see an intersection of fear, bodies, and signs that plays out in the symbolic and spiritual realm. The panic of the Guaraníes, who were experienced hunters as well as warriors, suggests that what spooked them so much was no ordinary tiger, but an apparition of a feared jaguar/shaman, whom the Jesuits described in their *cartas anuas* of the 1600s as invisible and unassailable.⁷ In light of this spiritual intrusion, Cabeza de Vaca's actions can be understood as a response to an intangible and unknowable threat, suggesting that what he sensed or saw transcended the material boundaries of perception. Responding to the disorder caused by the tiger by using the cross as a marker of identification, Cabeza de Vaca acted as a mediator of the spiritual realm, deploying the symbolic power of the cross to brand the warriors and guard them against the unknowable and *el mal*.

In this entanglement of shamanism, Christian signs, shape-shifting and the ritual of exorcism lies the origins of the symbolic power of San La Muerte. Through the mixture of Guaraní shamanism and Christianity, San La Muerte stands in for the confrontation of cultural difference first recorded in the

Comentarios. Echoing Cabeza de Vaca's marking of the cross, the gaucho embeds the saint within his skin, and the prisoner tattoos him on the surface of his body. A hybrid sign of the spiritual realm, San La Muerte evokes the feared jaguar/shamans of the colonial era and the cross that sought to vanquish them. He becomes an amulet that transverses the spirit world and historical time, leveraging the power of signs to conjure a colonial clash of worldviews.

For the followers of San La Muerte, the saint offers protection from the physical and symbolic harm that social and historical exclusion has wrought. For scholars of transculturation, he serves a different function. Performing a poetics of collective identity that is historically specific and contingent, San La Muerte reminds us of a colonial legacy of spiritual confrontation that underpins the social imaginary of transculturality. By way of a provisional conclusion to my reading of San La Muerte, I want to propose that he also functions as a theoretical amulet for our understanding of the relationship between local histories and beliefs in the Americas as a discursive site of cultural difference and mixing.

Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro sought to codify a hemispheric sense of the Americas, albeit within a modernist progressive schematic, in his *Las Americas e a Civilização* (*The Americas and Civilization*), first published in 1969. Ribeiro chose to identify the process of cultural transfer in the Americas as one of transfiguration, devising a typology of what he termed the "extra-European peoples of the modern world" (79). For the Americas, Ribeiro identified three core groupings: the Witness Peoples, the neo-indigenous mestizos of the Andes and Mesoamerica; the New Peoples, an amalgamation of African, European and indigenous cultures; and the Transplanted Peoples, who leveraged European values to displace Witness Peoples and deny the emergence of New Peoples.

For the region of the Río de la Plata, Ribeiro identified two core groups at play in this process of the cultural witnessing,

mixing and amalgamation: the New People of the neo-Guaraní or *pynambí* of Paraguay and colonial Argentina, and the Transplanted Peoples, who marked an ideological rupture with the New People of the neo-Guaraní during the nineteenth-century (390–402). The dominant intellectual and political class of the Transplanted Peoples in nineteenth-century Argentina—of whom Domingo Sarmiento, author of *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845) and president of Argentina from 1868–74, is representative—predicated the making of the nation-state on the civilizing influence of Europe and an antipathy for the Indians, mestizos and their *caudillo* leaders in the older colonial provinces of the littoral and northern Argentina.

Within this Eurocentric conception of *la patria*, Asunción's *mestizaje* as the origin of the nation and the transcultural aspects of a colonial past were relegated to a shadowy historical corner, subsumed by the march of progress enacted through the annihilation of the Pampa Indians in the Desert Wars of the mid-1800s and massive European immigration to Buenos Aires from the 1880s to 1914.⁸ In defiance of the absence of *mestizaje* from the ideology of the Argentine nation, San La Muerte, tiny and hidden, resists the suppression of this mestizo history of which, as Susana Rotker points out in *Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina*, “scarcely a trace can be found in the streets, in textbooks, or in national narratives” (6).

In Serge Gruzinski's *The Mestizo Mind*, he argues against static categorizations of culture and identity, positing that an inherent ethnocentrism at work in the way the colonial past is analysed disguises the ways that “sets of practices and beliefs” function as “an amorphous cluster in perpetual movement” (25). Central to the elision of this hybrid fluidity, argues Gruzinski, is the understanding of colonialism as an oppositional struggle rather than as a mixing and becoming within a local context (23). In the context of Gruzinski's hybrid fluidity, San La Muerte alerts us to a complexity of local histories that shape the settler nation of Argentina, as well

as the *creolité* of the Carribean and the mestizo phenomenon of Mexico.

In turn, the complexity of local histories calls into question the ways that transculturation is conceptualized as a colonial process of conflict and dominance in which linguistic and cultural *mestizaje* is made comprehensible through the imposition of what Pratt terms the “global meaning” of European modernism. This discursive schism bracketed by modernity between the social imaginary of colonial struggle and a post-colonial hybridity is reflected in Patricia Seed’s review essay “Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse”, published in *Latin American Research Review* in 1991. Seed begins her essay by identifying the emergence of “an extraordinary interdisciplinary moment” (181) in which exchanges between literary critics, ethnographers, historians and cultural anthropologists produced critiques of European representations of non-Western “others”. Against her cited array of these critiques—ranging from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* to James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* and Michael Taussig’s *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*—, Seed positions what she terms “traditional criticisms of colonialism” (182). She characterizes these as “tales of resistance and accommodation” (182) that encompass a broad spectrum of historical and anthropological work on Latin America and Africa undertaken since the 1960s. Noting a growing dissatisfaction with the “distressing sameness” (182) of traditional criticisms of colonialism, Seed argues that by the late 1980s, tales of resistance and accommodation were “being perceived as increasingly mechanical, homogenizing and inadequate versions of encounters between the colonizers and colonized” (182), and links their loss of credibility to the ascendancy of post-structuralist and post-colonial theory.

In *Latin American Research Review*’s Fall 1993 issue, responses to Seed’s antagonistic positioning of colonial critique and post-colonial theory by Hernán Vidal, Walter Mignolo, and Rolena Adorno were published in the Commentary and Debate

section. The authors counter Seed's oppositional schema by arguing that in Latin America, colonial discourse has had a long and distinct trajectory. Central to this trajectory is the recognition of the non-universality and non-neutrality of language and the specificity of context, which Mignolo identifies as the "loci of enunciation" (123)—the places from where one speaks. Vidal, Mignolo and Adorno trace the roots of this distinctiveness back to the resource extraction and mercantile economy of the Spanish empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the importance of oral narrative traditions and different writing systems from the Quechua *quipas* to the Mexica codices, which expand the site of textual deconstruction to encompass what Mignolo terms a discursive polyvocality; and the overlay of the Hispanic Baroque, the Castilian chivalric romance tradition, and indigenous cosmologies and languages.

This distinctiveness leads Adorno to conclude that the uniqueness of the transcultural encounter of early modern Spain with the Americas "stands outside the quintessential colonial experience: it is not typical but rather prototypical or atypical, and distinctly different in character" (145). In this context, Adorno disputes Seed's assertion that narratives of resistance and accommodation had lost credibility by the late 1980s. She cites the studies of Andean colonial culture by Steven Stern, Karen Spalding and Brooke Larson as examples in which the deployment of these narratives reveals diverse responses to colonial rule that were tactical rather than oppositional in nature.⁹ For Mignolo, the distinctiveness of Latin America's colonial past identified by Adorno extends to the present, in which the "others" of colonial discourse are not only the vanquished Indians of the conquest but the representational practices of Latin Americans reflecting on the multivalent nature of their culture and history (123).

In the context of Adorno and Mignolo's arguments for the distinctiveness and specificity of the transcultural study of the Americas, San La Muerte stands at the crossroads between

historical narratives of resistance and accommodation and the post-colonial deconstruction of cultural difference. Rather than construct a dichotomy between a materialist history of colonialism and a post-structuralist play of signs, the figure of San La Muerte embodies the conjoining of the two. He serves as a concrete example of a social imaginary that is tactical and polyvocal in its manifestation of the fluid mixing of cultures and temporalities.

In the spirit of Mignolo's local histories, Grusinki's hybrid fluidity, and Mignolo's "loci of enunciation" and in honour of *San La Muerte* who exemplifies all three, I end with a story told by León Cadogan, the Paraguayan ethnographer of the Guaraní, in a small pamphlet, *Ta-ngy Puku*, published shortly after his death in 1973. In this pamphlet, Cadogan examines the Guaraní nomenclature for the trees of eastern Paraguay from a botanical, linguistic, and cultural perspective. For Cadogan, the Guaraní process of naming reveals a multiplicity of dimensions: folkloric, spiritual, scientific and material. The act of recording this nomenclature, cautions Cadogan, is never neutral, and not without the power of domination. By way of example, he concludes his botanical study with the story of a forestry engineer named Hutchison, whom he accompanied in his work of documenting native trees.

Cadogan recounts that Hutchison encountered situations in which his Guaraní informants would refuse to divulge the names of certain trees whose branches and leaves he brought to them to identify. One day, frustrated at an informant's refusal to provide him with names for his specimens, Hutchison pointed at a nearby tree known in Guaraní as *kyrypyné* (in Spanish *copaifera*) and asked what its name was. In response, the informant went up to the tree, embraced it, caressed it, whispered to it, and then caressed himself, in the same manner that two Guaraníes would greet each other in order to demonstrate their friendship. Based on Cadogan's research of the Guaraní cosmology, in which trees share a common origin

with humans and speak to them from time to time of the earthly paradise, *la tierra sin mal*, he concludes that Guaraní's embrace signalled an intimate and fraternal relationship with the tree. What the Guaraní whispered to his brother, the tree, Cadogan could never know, but he imagines the following words:

Brother *kyrypyne*, everything is over. Those who possess the thunder have started to show me branches and leaves of your brothers, that are at the same time my brothers. But why? Undoubtedly in order to tell me that they intend to destroy you, like they have destroyed our palms, our subsistence, the herb trees whose fruit fed so many birds, the cedars whose scent was refreshing and who offered cones to the monkeys; ...and now it's your turn, *kyrypyne*, it is for this that they signal to you and want to know your name. (42)

By greeting his tree as his brother, the Guaraní crosses a boundary between the objective ordering of the natural world and the subjective realm of human emotions. He effectively changes a story about naming and nature to one of representation and culture. In turn, Cadogan's narration of the Guaraní's caress changes a story about naming and nature into a story about representation and domination, in which a modernist and universalizing Enlightenment project of classification is inscribed upon local history, and in the process, effaces it.

In Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, she argues that the overarching project to achieve a "planetary consciousness" was "marked by an orientation toward interior exploration and the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history" (15) that began with the publication of Linnaeus's *Systema Natura* in 1735. As Linnaeus's disciples fanned out across continents,

exploration of non-European worlds became inextricable from the codification of nature as the codification of reality. As Pratt argues:

In the second half of the eighteenth century, whether or not an expedition was primarily scientific, or the traveler a scientist, natural history played a part in it. Specimen gathering, the building up of collections, the naming of new species, the recognition of known ones, became standard themes in travel and travel books.... Descriptions of flora and fauna were not in themselves new to travel writing. On the contrary, they had been conventional components of travel books since at least the sixteenth century. However, they were typically structured as appendices or formal digressions from the narrative. With the founding of the global classificatory project, on the other hand, the observing and cataloguing of nature itself became narratable. (27)

Through the processes of recording, naming and collecting, the ascendancy of natural history contributes to what Michel Foucault describes in *The Order of Things* as a “system of identities and the order of differences existing between natural entities” that constituted the emergence of modernity and a “new field of visibility” (50).

In her specific analysis of naturalist travel writing on Latin America, Pratt identifies the expedition of Humboldt and Bonpland (1799–1804) and their subsequent production of 30 volumes of writings and illustrations as pivotal to the “reinvention” of America. In Humboldt’s narrative description of the New World as a place in which

man and his productions almost disappear amidst the stupendous display of wild and gigantic nature. The human race in the New World presents only a few

remnants of indigenous hordes, slightly advanced in civilization; or it exhibits merely the uniformity of manners and institutions transplanted by European colonists to foreign shores. (Pratt, 111)

Pratt locates the infusion of science with the aesthetics of the sublime, creating edenic fantasies and fecund wildernesses that would reshape European and Creole (Latin Americans of Spanish descent) perceptions of the New World (120–129). What is as striking about this “field of visibility” as its dramatic vistas is how indigenous culture disappears. Through the ordering of things that Michel Foucault identifies with the emergence of modernity, the natural world was severed from its cultural genealogy and history was purified of its local slippages and cultural exchanges.

In the quest to trace the formation of a discursive hegemony that extended across the globe in the early nineteenth century, Pratt provides a valuable and influential critique of European representation of the periphery. Yet at the same time, her emphasis on a world viewed through European eyes disregards the perspective of the producing colonial subject. For scholars who seek to analyse the production as well as the representation of cultural difference from the “contact zone,” Cadogan’s story of the Guaraní’s performative gesture, which harkens back to the shamans’ inversions of Christian rituals and Cabeza de Vaca’s marking of the cross, provokes a central question for the study of transculturality: How can we account for the complexity and contingency of cultural exchange, as the Guaraní does when he caresses the tree? As a theoretical amulet, *San La Muerte* does not so much provide an answer as points to a practice of believing and seeing that cuts across the temporal, spiritual and material boundaries of knowing. In so doing, he evokes an arena of interpretation where a social imaginary of transculturality emerges from the storytelling and performance of cultural slippage to constitute a “new field of visibility.”

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Notes

- ¹ For an overview of the early colonial period, see Julián María Rubio, *Exploración y conquista del Río de la Plata: Siglos XVI y XVII* (Barcelona: Salvat, 1942) and Enrique de Gandía, *Historia de la conquista del Río de la Plata y del Paraguay: los gobiernos de don Pedro de Mendoza, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca y Domingo de Irala, 1535–1556* (Buenos Aires: Librería de A. García Santos, 1935).
- ² In addition to the historical literature cited above, key anthropological and sociological works that emphasize the acculturation of the Guaraní to Hispanic social norms include Florencia

Roulet, *La resistencia de los Guaraní del Paraguay a la conquista Español (1537–1556)* (Posadas, Misiones: Universidad Nacional de Misiones, 1993); Branislavia Susnik, *Los aborígenes del Paraguay II: Etnohistoria de los Guaraníes* (Asunción: Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero, 1979–1980), and Elman Service, *Spanish-Guaraní Relations in Early Colonial Paraguay* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971).

- 3 Overviews of the Jesuit mission project in Paraguay include Sélim Abou, *The Jesuit “Republic of the Guaraníes (1609–1768) and its Heritage* (New York: Crossroad, 1997); Barbara Anne Ganson, *The Guaraní under Spanish Rule in the Río de la Plata* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Guillermo Furlong, *Misiones y sus Pueblos de Guaraníes* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Teoría, 1962); and Maxime Haubert, *La vida cotidiana de los Indios y Jesuitas del Paraguay* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 1991).
- 4 There is little formal documentation of the practice of *pajé*, the beliefs and practices of which are passed down from generation to generation through the oral culture of *curanderos* and local practitioners. Similarly, until recently, there was relatively little documentation on San La Muerte. In 2006, Aurelio Schinni published an important monograph on the local practices of San La Muerte, “Devoción popular en tallas benditas,” in *San La Muerte: un voz extraña* (Buenos Aires: Colección Arte Brujo, 2006). Frank Graciano also devotes a chapter to San La Muerte in *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). One of the first articles on San La Muerte was written by Rodolfo Walsh in 1966 and is reprinted in *San La Muerte: una voz extraña*. The description that follows of the saint is based on my knowledge of San La Muerte, acquired through discussions with friends in Corrientes and Aurelio Schinni’s essay on the saint in *San La Muerte: una voz extraña*. Images of San La Muerte can be found at <http://ar.geocities.com/cultosanlamuerte>.
- 5 For further analysis of the spiritual inversions of shaman and missionary during the colonial period, see Dot Tuer, “Old Bones and Beautiful Words: The Spiritual Contestation between Shaman and Jesuit in the Guaraní missions,” in Allan Greer &

- Jodi Bilinkoff, Eds., *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas 1500–1800* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003).
- ⁶ Pero Hernández, *Comentarios* (1555) and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Relación* (1542) are published in Serrano y Sanz, Manuel, *Relación de los naufragios y comentarios*. Vol. 1 & II (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1906). Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz provide the definitive overview of Cabeza de Vaca's life and primary sources pertaining to his biography in *Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: his account, his life, and the expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez* (3 vol.) (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
- ⁷ A description of the Guaraní belief in jaguar-shamans is found in "Relación de lo Sucedido en las Reducciones de la Sierra y en Especial en la de Jesús María," dated January 1, 1655, published in Helio Vianna, *Jesuitas e bandeirantes no Uruguai (1611–1750)* IV (Rio de Janeiro: Biblioteca Nacional, 1970), 278. It relates how "there died another sorcerer who prophesized that he would transform into a tiger. This illusion appeared to be true for the devil had persuaded him that he would transform into a tiger, thus at the time to attack he began to growl like a tiger and gestured with his hands and arms and jumped like one."
- ⁸ For a cultural and ideological analysis of Sarmiento's influence in constructing a nationalist ethos in Argentina, see Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). For an analysis of immigration, see Fernando Devoto, *Historia de la inmigración en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2003). Frontier wars against the Pampa Indians took place over the duration of the nineteenth-century from the 1830s to the 1870s with the final brutal assault occurring during General Roca's *Conquista del Desierto* of 1879–80. For an analysis of the Indian Wars and the disappearance of the Indian from the historical imaginary in Argentinean modernity, see David Viñas, *Indias, ejército y frontera* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1983).
- ⁹ Steven Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Karen Spalding, *Huarochirí, an Andean Society under Inca and*

Spanish Rule (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Brooke Larson, *Cochabamba, 1550–1900: Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998).