Abreast of Columbus: Gender and Discovery

Margarita Zamora

In the so-called "Capitulations of Santa Fe" (17 April 1492) Christopher Columbus's legal rights and obligations on his first westward voyage in the Ocean Sea were carefully spelled out. So was the mercantilistic and imperialistic nature of the enterprise. In the Santa Fe document Columbus was commissioned by the Catholic monarchs to *discover*, *take possession*, *govern*, and *trade* in whatever islands and mainlands he might come across on his westward voyage. Striking in its absence is any reference to where or what those lands might be. No direct allusions were made to the Asiatic destination most historians believe to have been the explicit goal of the voyage.[1] The "Capitulations" assumed only that

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1. Antonio Rumeu de Armas, *Nueva luz sobre las Capitulaciones de Santa Fe de 1492 concertadas entre los Reyes Católicos y Cristóbal Colón* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1985), 126–31, speculates that the vagueness of the references to Columbus's destination in the "Capitulations" and other documents of the immediate prediscovery period may have been the product of a

these anonymous islands and mainlands would be governable, in other words inhabited, and that the inhabitants would have objects of value to trade. Yet pervasive use of the subjunctive mood underscores the hypothetical nature of these assumptions, and so of modern assumptions based on them. In its first textualization, then, "the Indies" (as the New World is called in these texts) appeared as a sign with very little content. For all practical purposes the anonymous islands and mainlands of the "Capitulations" constituted a semantic void.[2]

My approach to Columbian writing, first of all, involves situating it in the context of the dialogue between Columbus and the Crown initiated in the "Capitulations." This strategy was suggested to me by the contrapuntal structure of petition and response of the contract itself. It was reinforced by a phrase near the end of the Prologue to the "Diario." There the inception of the voyage and the act of writing are justified in terms of the mandates contained in the "Capitulations":

> I left the said port, very well provided with supplies and with many seamen, on the third day of August of the said year, on a Friday, half an hour before sunrise; and I took the route to Your Highnesses' Canary Islands, which are in the said Ocean Sea, in order from there to take my course and sail so far that I would reach the Indies and give Your Highnesses' message to those princes *and thus carry out that which you had commanded me to do. And for this purpose I thought of writing on this whole voyage, very diligently, all that I would do and see and experience. . . .*"[3]

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conscious and deliberate attempt by the Spanish Crown to create a smoke screen, thereby lessening the possibility of rival copycat expeditions by other European monarchies.

2. I have used Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas's version of the text of the "Capitulaciones," which appears in volume I, chapter xxxiii of his *Historia de las Indias* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951). The original document in Spanish, signed by Isabella and Ferdinand, has disappeared, but there are four other well-authenticated early copies. They are described by Cecil Jane in *Select Documents Illustrating the Four Voyages of Columbus*, 2 v. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1930), 1: 27. For an English translation of the "Capitulations" see pp. 26–29.

3. Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus' First Voyage to America*, trans. Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 19–21 (my emphasis).

There is a significant linking in this passage of the voyage and the act of writing with the "Capitulations." The English translation by Dunn and Kelley (the most literal one available) does not render the connotations of the Spanish original well, however. The translators have used the phrase "carry out" to render the Spanish verb *cumplir*. Now *cumplir* has an illuminating etymology; it is derived from the Latin *complēre* (to fill up). In Spanish the word has the connotations of completing and responding to a command or request. There is an equivalent verb in English which all the modern translators I checked curiously had overlooked. Yet it comes closer to the sense of the Spanish original than any other term since it shares the same etymological root: to comply. The passage in question, retranslated substituting the vague "to carry out" with "to comply," would read, "and thus *to comply* with that which you had commanded me to do. And *for this purpose* [that is, in order to comply] I thought of writing on this whole voyage. . . " etc. (my emphasis).

This new (and hopefully improved) translation sets in relief the dialogical nature of the Columbian texts of discovery, underscoring Columbus's notion of writing as compliance in its dual senses of response and completion.[4] The admiral wrote in compliance not metaphorically speaking, but literally, in fulfillment of his responsibility to inform the Crown that he had accepted the commission of royal emissary. The void to be filled by this act of writing the discovery is, in my reading, the semantic void created by the reticent treatment in the "Capitulations" of the anonymous

4. By "texts of discovery" I mean those whose function ostensibly was to give testimony on the lands and peoples observed during the voyage. Namely, the "Diario" or ship's log of the first voyage (1492) transcribed and edited by Las Casas, the letter addressed to Luis de Santangel, the Crown's treasurer, describing the discovery (1493) and signed by the Admiral, the Account of the Third Voyage (also transcribed and edited by Las Casas) addressed to Ferdinand and Isabella (1498), and the letter written in Jamaica addressed to the Catholic monarchs relating the events of the fourth voyage (1503), also known as the "Lettera rarissima." For a discussion of the questionable authorship of the letter to Santangel, see Demetrio Ramos Pérez, *La primera noticia de América* (Valladolid: Casa-Museo de Colón, 1986). For a discussion of the problematic mediative role Las Casas played in the transmission of many of Columbus's writings, especially the "Diario," see Margarita Zamora, "'Todas son palabras formales del Almirante': Las Casas y el 'Diario' de Colón," *Hispanic Review* 57 (1989): 25–41.

islands and mainlands which were to be Columbus's destination. I will argue that Columbian discourse of discovery was conceived in compliance with the economic and political mandates outlined in the "Capitulations" and in response to questions this document implicitly raised (and left unanswered) about the nature of the lands and peoples to be discovered. To comply with the mandate of discovery, as Columbus realized, required not just physical exploration or reconnaissance but also reporting back on what was found. Combining the discourses of testimony and interpretation, Columbian writing on the discovery constituted a powerful act of representation whose impact on the development of Western notions of difference is still felt today. In the remainder of this paper I will trace the process of interpretation of Amerindian reality carried out in Columbian writing. Specifically, I will be looking at the development of a conceptual model of otherness manifested tropologically as a series of metaphors of difference. When the Columbian texts of discovery are viewed as a unified discourse and not in isolation from one another, these tropes of difference reveal a hermeneutical strategy of feminization and eroticization that ultimately makes gender difference the determining characteristic of the sign "the Indies."

A note on terminology: I use the term *discovery* in a sense which seems archaic to us but was commonly accepted in the Spanish of Columbus's time. The admiral employed *descubrir* (to discover) meaning to explore or reconnoiter a territory in preparation for war or some other endeavor.[5] This sense of the word implies strategic research "in the field," as it were, for the purpose of gaining an advantage. I hope to show that my preference for this definition is not idiosyncratic, but that, on the contrary, it is ideologically consistent with the nature and diction of the Columbian enterprise.

Saussure defined meaning in language as the product of dissimilarity, suggesting that in the most basic way signs "mean" in relation to what they do *not* "mean." Columbus's "Diario" poignantly bears this out. On 16 October, just four days after landfall, we find the following observations on the flora and fauna of

5. See Sebastián Horozco de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua Castellana o Española. Primer Diccionario de la Lengua (1611)* (Madrid: Ediciones Turner, 1979).

the islands—"I saw many trees, very different from ours. . . . Here the fish are so different from ours that it is a marvel." [6] And on the following day:

> And the trees [are] all as different from ours as the day is from the night, and thus also the fruits, and grasses, and stones and all things. It is true that some trees were of other varieties found in Castile, but there was altogether a very great difference. And the other trees of other kinds were so many that there is no person who could tell it nor compare them with others of Castile.[7]

Columbus's insistence on difference from the European norm as the definitive semantic characteristic of the sign "Indies" is so pervasive in his earliest observations as to become monotonous. Moreover, it persists as an important characteristic of the discourse through the narrative of his fourth and final voyage. Frequently dissimilarity is explained in terms of the marvelous—"fowl and birds of so many varieties and so different from ours that it is marvelous."[8] The quality of such exclamations is undeniably euphoric. Yet enthusiasm cannot disguise the fact that in the earliest Columbian hermeneutics, difference represents the ineffable, that which resists interpretation and assimilation. The qualifier "marvelous" does little to resolve the situation. For Columbus, "marvel" is analogous in the natural realm to "miracle" in the realm of faith—that which cannot be expressed or explained. The exclamation may function here as an attempt to disguise the

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6. I have worked with the Alvar edition of the "Diario" in the original Spanish (*Diario del Descubrimiento*, ed. Manuel Alvar, 2 v. [Las Palmas: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1976]) and with Consuelo Varela's *Cristóbal Colón: textos y documentos completos* (ed. Consuelo Varela [Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1984]) for all the other texts. I have consulted various English translations, alternating among them in search of the most literal renditions of the Spanish original. In some cases where the English translations at my disposal seemed unsatisfactory, I have provided my own.

7. Columbus, "The Diario of Christopher Columbus, October 10–October 27, 1492," in *A Columbus Casebook. A Supplement to "Where Columbus Found the New World,"* trans. Eugene Lyon (Washington: National Geographic Society, 1986), 31.

8. Columbus, "Diario," 21 October.

narrator's aphasia in the face of difference, an aphasia that was the result not of some personal shortcoming but of the essential incapacity of the discourses at his disposal to express difference adequately. Some half a century later the Frenchman Jean de Léry, in his *Voyage fait en terre du Brésil, autrement dite Amérique* (1578) expressed a similar inarticulateness much more candidly: "[The natives'] gestures and countenances are so different from ours, that I confess to my difficulty in representing them in words, or even in pictures."[9] Columbian discourse represents "that" as "not this." The "Indies" are defined in terms of what they are *not* like—Castile, Africa, the familiar landscapes of the Old World.

Dissimilarity in the natural landscape is initially articulated as a semantic void, thinly veiled in a discourse of the ineffable. But it is expressed in terms of *lack* or *deficiency* when it pertains to the Indians. In his well-known book on the question of the Other, Todorov argues that Columbus was unable or unwilling to perceive fundamental differences in Arawak culture.[10] I propose that, on the contrary, not only are differences indeed recognized in the Columbian texts, they are in fact an essential component of the process of interpretation. Difference is not only a dissimilarity perceived in passing but the very basis of representation in Columbian discourse. The first contact with the natives of Guanahaní, on 12 October, is described thus: "And I believe that they would easily become Christians, for it seemed they had no religion. I, if it please Our Lord, will take from here at the time of my departure six to Your Highness(es) so that they may learn to speak."[11] In the letter to Santangel, Columbus observes another deficiency: "These men reconnoitered the country for three days and found an infinite number of small settlements and countless people, but without order or government."[12] The rhetoric is ingenuous, though the terms of the argument are hardly credible.

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9. Jean de Léry, quoted in J. H. Elliott, *The Old World and the New, 1492–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 22.

10. Tzvetan Todorov. *La Conquête de l'Amérique: la Question de l'Autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 48–49.

11. Columbus, "Diario," 12 October.

12. Columbus's letter to Santangel announcing the discovery, dated 15 February 1493, is a summarized and somewhat sanitized version of the "Diario."

Arawak difference in three fundamental areas of human behavior—worship, speech, and government—is expressed as a lack, probably not because Columbus had any reason to believe they did not have a religion (how could he possibly have determined this from such a brief initial contact?), or that they did not have some form of government (he later acknowledged they had "kings"), or that they could not speak (are we to believe that the first encounter was totally mute?). In this context lacking must be understood as a value judgment—the Indians had no religion or language or government *worthy of the name*, where the standard of value was European.

Value is, in fact, the crux of the matter in Columbian hermeneutics. Difference could be represented as absence or deficiency. However, what it absolutely could *not* be was valueless or value-neutral. The mandate in the "Capitulations" was expressed in a discourse concerned with issues of power and economic exploitation.[13] Columbian writing replied in an ideologically complementary discourse of appropriation and domination. But its hermeneutical nature necessarily rendered its specific terms distinct from those employed by the Crown.

In the natural economy of the "Diario" the notoriously elusive gold, spices, and precious gems stipulated as the preferred merchandise in the "Capitulations" are perforce replaced by the fertility and beauty of the land:

> In all of Castile there is no land that can compare with [the island] in beauty and sweetness. This entire island and that of

13. The following passage from the Jane translation of the "Capitulations" will give the reader a sense of the flavor of that document.

> Your Highnesses appoint the said Don Christopher their Viceroy and Governor-General in all the said Islands and Mainlands which, as has been said, he may discover or acquire in the said Seas, and that for the Government of each and every one of them he may name three persons for each Office and that Your Highnesses may take and choose the one most suitable to your service, and thus the lands which Our Lord allows him to discover and acquire in the service of your Highnesses will be better governed. Item, that of all the Merchandise whatsoever, whether Pearls, Precious Stones, Gold, Silver, Spiceries, and other Things and Merchandise of whatever kind, name, or description that may be, which may be bought, bartered, found, acquired, or obtained within the limits of the said Admiralty. . . . (Jane, *Selected Documents*, 1: 28)

> Tortuga are cultivated like the Cordoban countryside. They have planted ajes, which are small branches they plant, and at their base some sprout some roots, like carrots, that serve in place of bread, and they grate and knead them to make bread, and later they plant the same small branch again elsewhere and it sprouts four or five of those roots again which are very tasty and resemble chestnuts in their flavor . . . and he says the trees are so luxuriant that the leaves no longer appeared green, but dark from such intense verdure. It was marvelous to behold those valleys and rivers of good water, and the land for bread and livestock of every variety . . . for orchards and for all things that man may ask for in this world.[14]

The land itself becomes the substitute merchandise, the desirable object to be possessed. In the letter to Santangel, Cuba is described in these terms; "It is a desirable land, and once seen, is never to be relinquished."[15] The text creates in the reader a longing for the land. It employs a rhetoric of desire that inscribes "the Indies" in a psychosexual discourse of the feminine whose principal coordinates are initially beauty and fertility and, ultimately, possession and domination.[16]

At issue here are the very questions of power and value (aesthetic and economic) expressed in the "Capitulations." The Col-

14. Columbus, "Diario," 16 December. Passages like this one abound in the Columbian texts. The ones in the "Diario" are particularly poignant since they are products of the original encounter.

15. Columbus, *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus,* trans. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Heritage Press, 1963), 185.

16. José Antonio Maravall, in *Estudios de historia del pensamiento español. La época del renacimiento,* 3 v. (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1984), 1: 397–99, explains that Columbus's act of taking possession of the islands he discovered followed the juridical formula of taking possession established in the Alfonsine *Partidas.* The Alfonsine texts, the most complete expression of Europe's juridico-political culture prior to the discovery of the New World, according to Maravall, defined a territory not only as space but as a qualitative entity. To take possession of a territory in the Columbian intellectual world implied an elaborate process of interpreting the relationship of "belonging to," of establishing a right of possession. In essence, this is what my analysis of Columbian discourse will attempt to elucidate—that is, the terms in which the justification of the relationship of posssession and domination mandated in the "Capitulations" is articulated in Columbian writing of discovery.

umbian texts exhibit a curiously dichotomized discourse whose parts at first appear contradictory. On the one hand, there are the idealized and poeticized descriptions of the natural and human landscapes reminiscent of the classical *locus amoenus* and the legends of the Golden Age. These passages invariably emphasize the physical or spiritual beauty of the indigenous element. On the other hand, there is a mercantilistic and imperialistic discursive mode. It is characterized by a marked disdain for the Indians and explicitly responds to the tone and terms of the mandate outlined in the "Capitulations." While the two discursive modes may seem at odds with one another, they are in fact complementary when viewed as parts of a discursive whole.

Although they are radically different in their specific terms on the textual surface, the poeticized or idealized and mercantilistic or imperialistic discursive modes often appear contiguously in the text. At the level of enunciation there is very little that differentiates them in the way of punctuation, compositional divisions, context, or tenor.[17] The writing appears to flow seamlessly between one mode and the other, even when stylistically it would seem desirable to distinguish them:

> All this coast and the part of the island which I saw is almost all beach, and the island (is) the most beautiful thing which I have seen. If the others are very beautiful, this one is more so. It has many large green trees. And this land is higher than the other islands discovered. . . . I wished to go to anchor in it in order to go ashore, but the anchorage was shallow and I could not anchor except far from land, and the wind was very good to come to this cape, where I (have) anchored now, which I named Cape Hermoso (Beautiful Cape) because it is. . . . And I even believe that there are in it many herbs and many trees which are very valuable in Spain for dyes and for medicinal spices, but I do not know them, for which I feel great sorrow. And having arrived here at this cape, there came from the

17. Las Casas, in his edition of the "Diario," often alternates between the first- and third-person narrative voices in these passages, but this is clearly an anachronistic editorial manipulation which could not have existed in the original text. For further discussion of this issue see Zamora, "'Todas son palabras formales del Almirante."

> land so good and delicate an odor of flowers and trees that it was the sweetest thing in the world.[18]

The transitionless shift from an idealizing or poeticizing mode, intended to provoke aesthetic appreciation (even rapture) in the reader, to a consideration of the possible economic value and exploitability of the land is typical of many of the geographical descriptions in the Columbian texts.

Idealization of the land has its counterpart in the human economy in the appreciation of the Indians' physical beauty and their innate aptitude for evangelization. On 13 October, the day after landfall, the text reads:

> After dawn there came to the beach many of these men, all youths, as I have said, and all of good stature; a very handsome people; their hair not curly but loose and thick like horsehair and all with very wide foreheads and heads, more than (any) other race which I have seen up to now. And their eyes (are) very handsome and not small, and none of them dark, but the color of Canary Islanders. . . . Their legs are straight, all in a line, and no belly, but very well built.[19]

In the entry for the following day, the narrator observes the generosity and willingness of the Indians to provide the Spaniards with food and water, apparently (he thought) because the Indians believed they had come from the heavens. He relates his search for an apt location to build a fort, describes their lack of military skill, and then adds: "Your Highnesses might order (that) all can be brought to Castile, or be held captive on the same island, for with fifty men you (can) have them all subjugated, and you would make them do whatever you might wish." He concludes the entry with the following observation: "They war upon each other, even though these people are very simple and very handsome bodies of men."[20] Especially striking in this passage is the idea that somehow the Indians' martial simplicity is related to their physical

18. Columbus, "Diario," 19 October.
19. Ibid., 13 October.
20. Ibid., 20 October.

beauty. Or, to put it another way, that their beauty explains and even justifies their lack of skill in warfare.

Desire and disdain cohabit in the Columbian texts, nondisjunctively and noncontradictorily, the same discursive space. Narrating for Santangel, the following ethnographic observations are made:

> The inhabitants of this island, and of all the others I have seen or of which I have received information, all go naked, the women as well as the men, just as they came into the world, with the exception of some women who cover themselves with a leaf or something made of cotton which they make for that purpose. They do not have any iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them; not from any deformity of body, but because they are incredible cowards . . . for it has sometimes occurred that when I have sent two or three men to some village to speak with the natives they have been greeted by countless Indians and after they saw them arrive they fled so that even the fathers forsook their children. And it is not the result of any harm that we might have done them, for on the contrary, everywhere I have been and have been able to speak to the natives, I have given them everything that I had . . . without receiving anything in return, but they are hopeless cowards.[21]

In this passage the distinction between physical beauty and moral valor is clearly drawn. The Indians have the former but lack the latter. They are physically well endowed but morally deficient. In a passage cited earlier, the Spanish word *mancebo* (male adolescent, or youth) is used to describe the Indians who come to the beach to greet the Spaniards. While the choice of this term could be interpreted as serving an idealizing function, describing their youthful physical beauty, *mancebo* also has the important connotations of incomplete masculine sexual, intellectual, and moral development (Fig. 1). Covarrubias, in the first dictionary of the Spanish language (1611), defines *mancebo* as a male child still under his father's authority. The paternalistic implications are obvious. Arawak inferiority is defined in relation to Spanish superi-

21. Columbus, "Letter to Santangel," 15 February 1493.

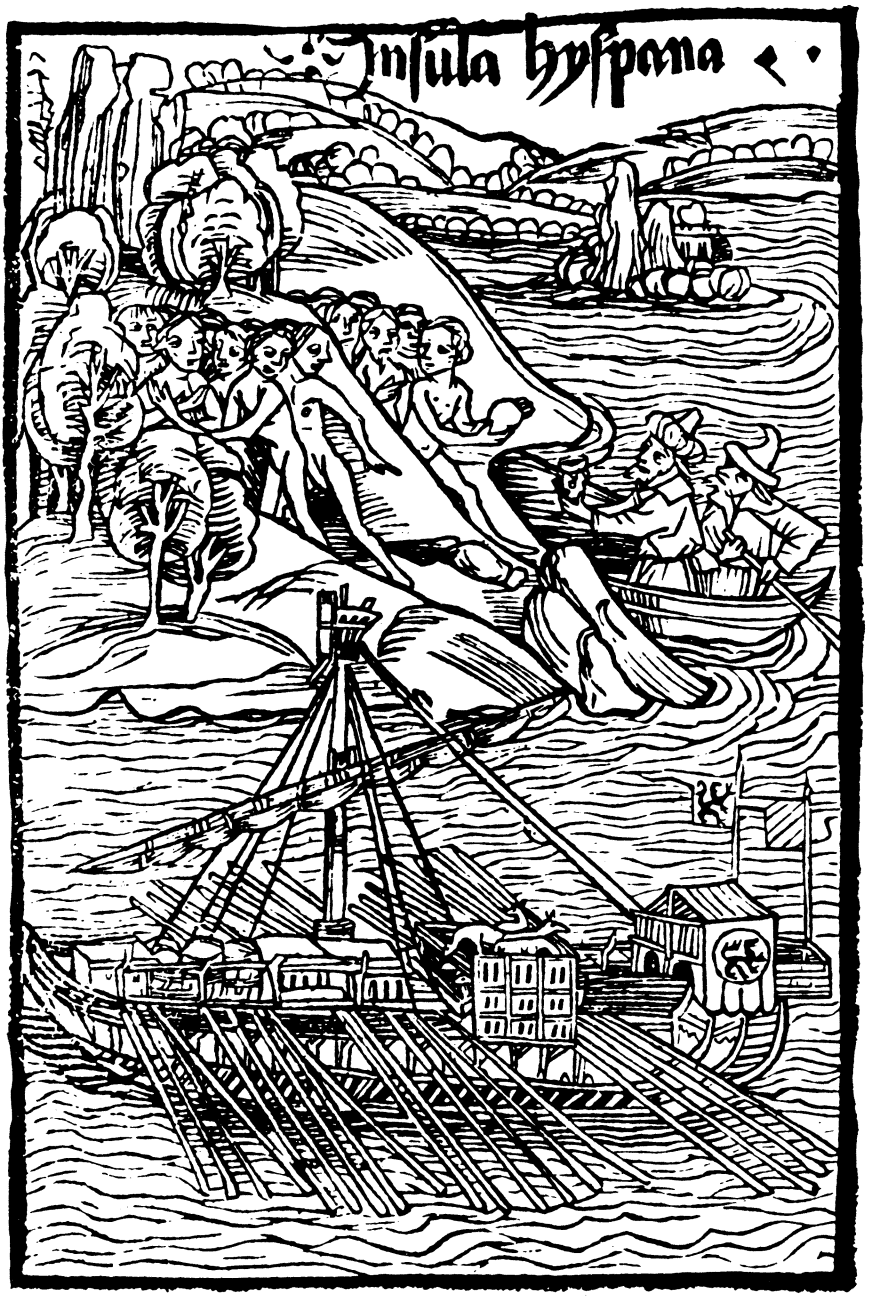

Fig. 1. Adolescent-like representation of the Indians from a woodcut illustration accompanying the first Latin edition of Columbus' letter of the discovery, "Insula Hyspana"—*De insulis inventis epistola Cristoferi Colom,* Basel, 1493. Reproduced in Ricardo E. Alegría, *Primera representaciones gráficas del indio americano, 1493–1523* (Barcelona: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1978), 19.

ority, which initially manifests itself as a benevolent custodianship: "I forbade that they be given such vile things as pieces of broken dishes, glass or latchets, although if they could obtain them, they considered it the most priceless jewel in the world. It even happened that a sailor received for a latchet gold worth two and a half castellanos. . . . Even for the broken stems of pipes, they gave anything they possessed, like animals."[22] The explicit comparison of the Indians to beasts in order to explain the qualitative differences in intellectual aptitude between them and the Europeans is particularly striking. Thus generosity, initially a component of the spiritual idealization of the Arawaks, turns into an inability to discriminate between the priceless and the worthless, typical of animals. It is rendered an intellectual deficiency.

The comparison of the Indians to beasts should not be misunderstood as a questioning of their humanity. Quite to the contrary, from the introductory commentary of the Prologue to the "Diario" Columbian discourse consistently affirms that the newly found peoples can and should be converted to Christianity. But while the Indians' humanness per se is never doubted, it is clear that they are considered an inferior *class* of human being. Pusillanimity, lack of martial ability, and an underdeveloped or nonexistent discriminating faculty are the fundamental negative characteristics that Columbus attributes to the Indians. Even though the Caribs are described as aggressive in the letter to Santangel, their perceived inferiority in relation to Europeans is evident, and the narrator is disdainful:

> Thus, as I have said, I found not a trace of monsters, nor did I hear of any except for a certain island called Carib, the second island as one enters the Indies, which is inhabited by a people considered very fierce throughout these islands, and they eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they travel to all these islands of India, stealing and taking whatever they can. They are no more different than the others except that they wear their hair long like women. . . . They are fierce among the other peoples who are exceedingly cowardly, but I think no more of them than of the rest.[23]

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

Beyond the patent contempt expressed in this passage, the allusion to monsters evokes again the fundamental element of Columbian New-World hermeneutics—difference. But deficiency and dissimilarity are inextricably linked in the interpretation of New-World reality.

The triad—monsters, Caribs, women—forms a complex metaphor for inferiority whose ideological source can be traced to Aristotelian notions of difference. As Kappler points out, Aristotle maintained that the male principle governed the workings of the universe. Deviation from the male principle constituted imperfection. Thus, the less an offspring resembled its father, the more imperfect it was considered to be. Femaleness was the first step toward imperfection, which in its extreme manifestations yielded monstrosity. The triumph of female matter over the male principle, although necessary for the survival of the species and therefore not monstrous in itself, opened the door as it were to imperfection and consequently to the possibility of monstrosity.[24] In *Politics*, this ontology of difference acquired a pragmatic sociopolitical dimension. The Aristotelian concept of natural slavery articulated in Book One was the centerpiece of a theory of domination and subjugation that pretended to explain the innate inferiority of certain types of human beings in order to justify the exercise of power by elite males in the subjugation of others. According to Aristotle the natural slave was a physically gifted but intellectually and morally deficient being. He argued that from birth all creatures are marked for either subjugation or domination, and that the rule of those deemed superior over those deemed inferior is both natural and expedient. Not surprisingly, female inferiority is highlighted in this category: "Again, the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind. Where then there is such a difference as that between the soul and body, or between men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master" (I, 5, 1132).

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24. Kappler's encyclopedic *Monstres, Démons, et Merveilles à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Payot, 1980) demonstrates how Aristotelian notions of difference helped

Columbian usage of the term *monster* in this context should be understood to mean someone who does not conform either in appearance or behavior to the European norm. In the passage cited above, it is the Caribs' anthropophagy and their long feminine hair that strike Columbus as monstrous. Both attributes are symbols of difference and inferiority. Coupled with Columbus's comparison of the Indians to beasts, they complete the triad which according to Aristotle constituted the category of natural servant or slave—animals, women, and deficient men (Fig. 2).

The similarities between the Aristotelian natural slave and the larger Columbian portrait of the Indians are obvious. In both cases inferiority is expressed as *lacking*, especially in the areas of intellectual and moral capacity. Superiority is conceived as *possession* of a full complement of the attributes that constitute humanness in its highest form. In the Columbian texts as well as in Aristotle's *Politics*, domination is presented as a philanthropical and paternalistic act: the "haves" (read fully human elite males or citizens) supplement the deficiency in the "have nots," or natural slaves, through paternalistic intervention. They thus allow the natural slaves to lead better lives. Inferiority, then, means to lack, while superiority means to have, but it especially means to be able to supplement a deficiency in others, to complete, to fill an empty space.

Inferiority is one of the marks of difference in Columbian writing; the other, as we have seen, is ideality. Columbian discourse oscillates continually between these two poles, between disdain and desire:

> I have become . . . great friends with the King of that land, to such a degree that he took pride in calling me brother. And even if he should decide to hurt these people (the Spaniards), neither he nor his subjects know what weapons are, and they go naked as I have said. They are the biggest cowards in the world, so that the few Spaniards who remain there are enough to destroy the entire country.[25]

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define the conceptualizations of monstrosity in the Middle Ages. The medieval mind, melding the Aristotelian notion with the Augustinian contribution that monstrosity found its justification in the divine plan, marveled at the plurality of the universe and yet felt repulsed by difference as a marker of inferiority. See, esp., ch. 4, 135–43.

25. Columbus, "Letter to Santangel."

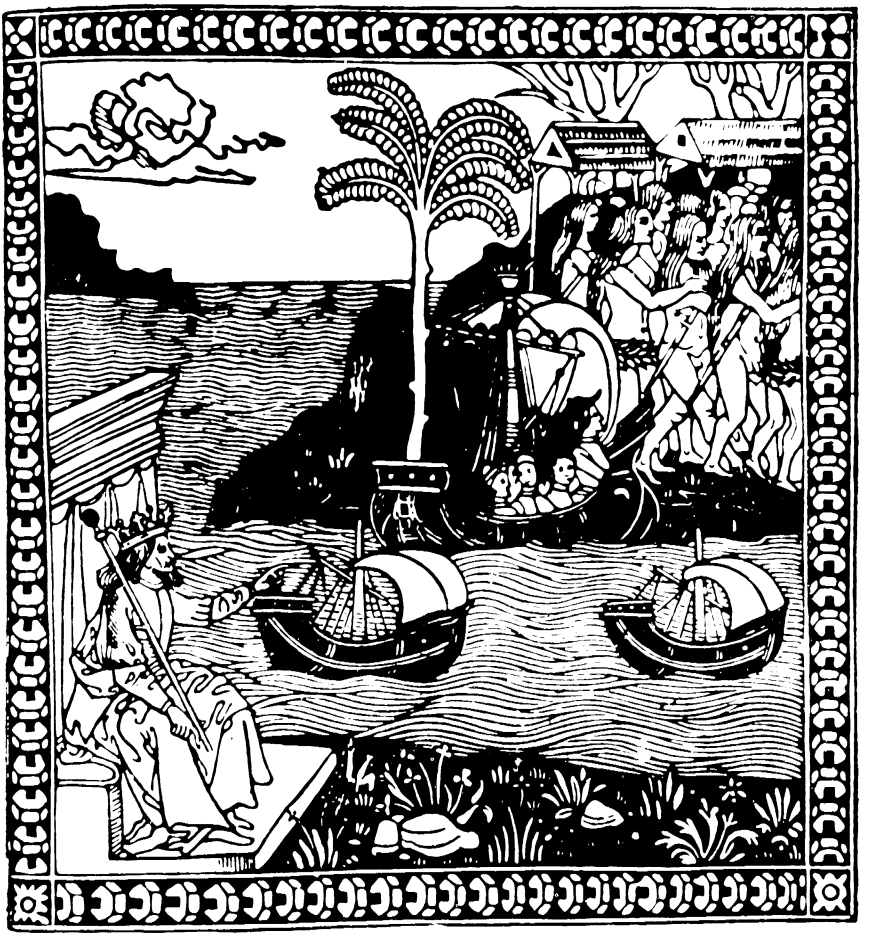

Fig. 2. Long-haired Indians in a woodcut illustration accompanying the first Italian edition of Columbus's letter of discovery—*La Lettera dellisole che ha trovato nuovamente il Re dispagna,* Florence, 1493. Reproduced in Alegría, *Primera representaciones gráficas del indio americano, 1493–1523,* 32.

> These people, as I have said, are all of graceful stature, tall of body and beautiful of countenance, their hair (is) very long and straight and they wear their heads wrapped in beautifully wrought scarfs, as I have said, that from a distance appear to be made of silk and gauze.[26]

At issue in both these passages is the interpretation of the relationship of domination of the Indians by the Spaniards and the establishment of the latter's right of possession. The idealized feminizing descriptions of the Indians such as the one contained in the second passage above ultimately are as much at the service of the interpretation of the power imbalance expressed in the dichotomy Spaniard/Indian as are the most obviously denigrating passages.

In Columbian hermeneutics this dichotomy is ideologized in terms of the dualist opposition masculine/feminine and is articulated through the rhetorical feminization of the term *Indian* that is contrasted to the masculine term *Spaniard.* Numerous remarks in the "Diario" suggest an effeminate Indian. Particularly striking in this respect are those passages dealing with the Arawaks' physical attributes, their cowardice, and their apparently spontaneous and natural subservience to the Spaniards.

> And some of those of my company went ashore after them, and they all fled like hens. (15 October)
>
> [T]hey delighted in giving us pleasure. (16 October)
>
> . . . a very gentle and timid people, naked, as I have said, without weapons or law. (4 November)
>
> [T]en men will make ten thousand [of them] flee. So cowardly and timid are they that they do not bear arms. . . . (3 December)

Columbian writing defines the Indians through a series of dualist oppositions that are gender-specific and hierarchized in Western culture—courage/cowardice, activity/passivity, strength/weakness, intellect/body. In activating these cultural dichotomies, it ultimately interprets difference in the Indian as gender differ-

26. Columbus, "Account of the Third Voyage."

ence, not in the sense of biological sexual difference, but difference ideologized and inscribed onto a cultural economy where gender becomes fundamentally a question of value, power, and dominance.

In the letter to the Crown recounting his third voyage, Columbus makes a striking and seemingly aberrant observation. He refers to the newly discovered lands as "otro mundo" (other world). Moreover, he affirms that the earth was not round at all, as most of the authorities on the subject believed; rather it was shaped more like a pear or a woman's breast. As he sailed to this "other world," claims the narrator, he actually moved upward on the slope of the breast, toward the location of the Earthly Paradise. The Garden, he declared, was in fact situated on the nipple, very appropriately, he added, since it was the spot closest to *heaven*. This startling interpretation of the shape and location of Paradise, significantly anchored on the term "other world," illustrates in its most extreme and notably complete manifestation the process of feminization—and, in this case, even eroticization—of the sign "Indies" that has its origins in the "Diario." The metaphor of the paradisiacal breast should be read not as an aberration but as an emblem or avatar of a hermeneutical process that began as early as 12 October 1492.[27] Significantly, Columbus warns initially that paradise is not accessible to men except through divine intervention. As Giamatti pointed out is the case with most literary garden sites—be they classical or medieval—Paradise is symbolic of the ideal, of yearning and nonpossession, of desire and inaccessibility.[28] However, through eroticization the Columbian paradise enters—as a fruit-breast—into the discursive economies of appropriation and domination: it becomes acquirable. Columbus metaphorically "delivers" the Indies-cum-paradise to Ferdinand and Isabella, according to the terms stipulated in the "Capitula-

27. That this process should culminate in the "Account of the Third Voyage" is at least partially explained by the historical circumstances. By the third voyage the enterprise of the Indies had fallen into such disrepute that, in order to achieve the colonization of Hispaniola island, the Crown was obliged to offer a pardon to any criminals (heretics, sodomites, and counterfeiters excepted) willing to sail with Columbus.

28. A. Bartlett Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

tions." Divine injunctions against entering Eden notwithstanding, he must have thought it was the Catholic monarchs' problem to figure out how to get God to open up the gates.

While it is a fact that the correspondence of sexual desire and the paradise image as inaccessible ideal is made explicit throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance in the classic works of Dante, Ariosto, Spenser, Shakespeare, and others, more significant for Columbus's articulation of this topic must have been his familiarity with popular treatments of the paradise theme in the context of mercantile and conquest literature. Closer to Columbus's own ambitions and dearer to what we know of his literary tastes was the narrative of Marco Polo's travels in the Far East, which was fundamental reading for Columbus during the period in which he formulated the nature and goals of the enterprise of the Indies. In the mercantilistic discourse of the *Travels* Polo establishes the link between commerce, desire, and paradise in describing the ancient Chinese city of Kin-sai: "At the end of three days you reach the noble and magnificent city of Kin-sai, a name that signifies 'the celestial city,' and which it merits from its preeminence to all others in the world, in point of grandeur and beauty, as well as from its abundant delights, which might lead an inhabitant to imagine himself in paradise."[29] The erotic element is made explicit a few pages later in Polo's description of one of Kin-sai's primary delights—its prostitutes: "Thus intoxicated with sensual pleasures, when they [the merchants] return to their homes they report that they have been in Kin-sai, or the celestial city, and pant for the time, when they may be enabled to revisit paradise."[30] Notably, Kin-sai is precisely the city mentioned by Columbus in the "Diario" as his destination during the first voyage, where he hoped to find the Great Khan.[31] The metaphorical linking of eroticized gender difference, the idealization of territory, and the interpretation of otherness had an important precedent for Columbus in the popular ballads associated with the Christian reconquest struggles against the Moors. In the historical ballads of the *romanceros*, military struggle is frequently related to erotic situa-

29. Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 290.
30. Ibid., 296.
31. See the entries in the "Diario" for 21 October and 1 November.

tions or topics, where the other (the enemy) may appear as the object of the subject's desire or scorn. For example, in a well-known ballad, the Christian siege of the Moorish city of Granada is articulated as a seduction. The Christian besieger is presented as suitor, the city is personified as a reluctant woman, and the territorial appropriation represented by the siege itself is eroticized through a rhetoric of love and betrothal.

Columbian writing of discovery inscribes the characteristics of otherness and difference in a discourse that is unmistakably and persistently gender-specific. The feminization and eroticization of the sign "Indies" are articulated in two seemingly contradictory operations—idealization and denigration. Yet in a cultural economy where unequal valuation is built into the dichotomy masculine/feminine, eroticization of the feminine implies *both* desire and disdain. As a rhetorical operation in Columbian writing, eroticization permits the idealization and denigration of the feminized object to inhabit the same discursive space without disjunction or contradiction.[32] What initially may have appeared to be a discursive schizophrenia in the Columbian texts—the oscillation between the bucolic and vilified visions of the Indies—is resolved through the erotic reading that the image of the breast suggests. In the "Lettera rarissima" the denigration of the Indies culminates in an apocalyptic discourse ideologically grounded in Christian providentialism. Nature and the Indians turn against Columbus with an ire that threatens the very survival of the expedition. The ships are battered, the men tired and sick, the Indians have suddenly become hostile when a delirious Columbus hears a voice in the darkness assuring him that he is God's chosen one and urging him to endure. The Indies finally has turned Medusa-like, a devourer of men, an untamable shrew. And only through divine intervention are Columbus and his crew saved from her wrath.[33]

Rolena Adorno has suggested that the feminine paradigm, in

32. As Catharine A. MacKinnon, in *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 221, has noted, eroticization is a primary mechanism of the subordination of women in patriarchal cultures.

33. Gilberto Araneda Triviños, "Los relatos colombinos," *Ideologies and Literature* 3, no. 1 (Spring, 1988): 81–96, argues that the anti-idyllic, antiparadisiacal

its negative dimension, becomes a central component in the construction of New World otherness by Spanish writers of the sixteenth century.[34] The common ideological denominator shared by the Columbian interpretation and that of the humanist thinkers who continued the process of defining the Amerindian in terms of Spanish hegemony is clearly Aristotelian. However, it bears noting that Columbian discourse, more medieval in its Christiano-chivalric idealization of the feminine, is also considerably more subtle and complex. Sixteenth-century interpretations would turn a dialectic formulation into a monolectic one by eliminating the idealizing element of the Columbian paradigm, in the case of Vitoria and Sepúlveda, or, in the case of Las Casas, by suppressing the negative or disdainful dimension.

Hélène Cixous argues in *The Newly Born Woman* that Western culture defines otherness in relation to sameness, constituting a hierarchized dichotomy where identity is the privileged status. For Cixous identity can be the product of an inherent sameness or of a process of appropriation or assimilation. It can be triggered by a desire to make something one's own, to possess something

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vision present in the letter of the fourth voyage destroys and supplants the myth of the Indies-cum-paradise found in the earlier writings. I hope to have made a strong case, however, for a reading where the interpretation of difference in a gender-specific mode in fact makes the idealizing and denigrating components of Columbian discourse complementary operations, thus allowing one to read Columbian writing of discovery as a coherent discursive practice, evolving along the same ideological continuum proposed by the "Capitulations." Helen Carr, "Woman/Indian: 'The American' and his Others," in *Europe and its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, Diana Loxley, 2 v. (Colchester: University of Essex, 1985), 49, has also seen this conjunction of the positive and the negative in the feminization of the Amerindian in colonial North American culture:

> So man/woman, husband/wife, seducer/seduced, rapist/victim, can all be transferred to the European/non-European relationship and the European right to mastery made natural. Secondly, by transferring this diference, all the ambivalence towards woman's unknowable otherness can also be projected on to the non-European. So the first effect of transferral is to naturalize the desire for, and legitimize the right to, possession; the second is to provide a language in which to express the fear of the Other's incalculable potential for resisting and for damaging the would-be possessor.

34. Rolena Adorno, "El sujeto colonial y la construcción de la alteridad," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* XIV, 28 (1988): 55–68.

considered to be unequal, understood not just as different but as less than self.[35] Woman, therefore, enters into the cultural economy not only as the opposite of man, but as less than man. She acquires her value as use-value, as merchandise for exchange among men, as Luce Irigaray puts it.[36] Antonello Gerbi has asserted that contrast "gives way to a vague but significant awareness of affinities and similarities," even as he acknowledges that Columbian writing inscribes the relationship Spain/Indies by emphasizing difference.[37] For Gerbi, similitude is the sign of assimilatability. Although his case for the role of resemblance in these texts seems much overstated ("Haiti is the *isla Española [Hispaniola],* the 'Spanish Island.' It is Spain, it belongs to Spain and resembles Spain in every way."),[38] it is nevertheless an important observation. Columbian discourse not only attempts to define the "Indies" but, above all, strives to assimilate it. Affinity and resemblance ultimately serve the articulation of New-World inferiority. Nature in the Indies resembles an idealized and poeticized Spanish landscape, but as Gerbi himself has noted, it is a landscape especially suited for Spanish domination.[39] Thus similitude, through the process of feminization and eroticization of the sign "Indies," becomes yet another marker of difference and consequently, again, of inferiority.

Columbus's supposed inability to perceive difference can instead be viewed as a discursive desire to appropriate and assimilate otherness, to obliterate the autonomy that otherness implies

35. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 79.

36. Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 105.

37. Antonello Gerbi, *Nature in the New World*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 18.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 17, where Gerbi himself has underscored, if only implicitly and probably unconsciously, the erotic nature of Columbian discourse, recording his own impressions in a sentimental mode filled with sexual overtones, which in turn also appear to have affected the English translator in his word choice: "But his [Columbus's] glance dwells lovingly on every detail of the islands. . . . His pen, at times so dry and energetic, now becomes a brush whose delicate strokes caress the tiny islands. . . . With a sort of lover's awkwardness he seeks to wax poetic, and produces a flood of warbling nightingales, blossoming springtimes, May meadows, and Andalusian nights."

within a relationship of equality. The appropriation which Columbian discourse actualizes is far more complex than that articulated in economic and political terms in the "Capitulations." The strength of Columbian discourse is derived from its interpretive nature—from Columbus's ability to inscribe New-World reality into the Western cultural economy. If the "Capitulations" mandated political and economic domination of whatever lands might be discovered, the Columbian texts responded by interpreting the nature of the newly discovered territories and their inhabitants. It should come as no surprise that they articulated the terms of the relationship self-servingly, rendering possession and domination by the Europeans the only correct and expedient actions.

In my approach to Columbian writing as an essentially hermeneutical act, I have tried to show that the texts of discovery do not simply record differences (a value-neutral operation), as Gerbi has suggested; they *interpret* difference in dialogue with the mandate to dominate and appropriate expressed in the "Capitulations."[40] As an act of cultural inscription, these texts ultimately respond, in Cixous's words, to a "political economy of the masculine and the feminine," where hierarchized gender difference becomes the preferred discursive strategy for the articulation of discovery as a hegemonic practice. To conclude, I would like to invoke again the mammary image found in the "Account of the Third Voyage." Columbus's "Indies," as a feminized and ultimately eroticized sign, was inscribed into Western culture figurally, as a feminine value, intended for consumption in a cultural economy where femininity is synonymous with exploitability.

40. Noé Jitrik, in *Los dos ejes de la cruz. La escritura de apropriación en el Diario, el Memorial, las Cartas y el Testamento del enviado real Cristóbal Colón* (Puebla: Editorial Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1983), discusses the discourse of appropriation in the Columbian texts from a Marxist perspective. However, he does not perceive the fundamental role that feminization and eroticization of the sign "Indies" plays in Columbian writing. A similar omission hampers the otherwise insightful interpretations of Columbian writing in Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1497* (London: Methuen, 1986), and Beatriz Pastor, *Discurso narrativo de la conquista de America* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1983). When the issue of gender in these texts is taken into account, what at first appeared a personal schizophrenia in Columbus assumes its full sociocultural significance.