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LAST100: VIDEO 3: “The Colonial Experience”

Last time, we discussed the voyage of Christopher Columbus and his crew across the Atlantic. Their arrival in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, provides a mythic point of origin for Latin America. But we questioned the founding narrative that this date seems to anchor, and the fiction of historical progression or epochal break that goes with it. 1492 could have been a date like any other. It was only later that it was, retrospectively, imbued with such significance as the dividing line between pre-colonial, pre-Hispanic, (and thus, pre-Latin) America, versus the long periods of colonial rule and post-colonial legacy that follow.

But we went on to suggest that this doesn't mean we can dispense with such narratives altogether. Myths are not so easily surrendered. Instead, we offered a reading of the Columbus story as allegory--a literary genre whose true object is missing or displaced--and we showed how his journal battles with a gap between the thing itself and the means he has to represent it. This battle suggests the onset of a crisis of representation that will affect modernity as a whole. Latin America induces in a particular way an anxiety about our inability to communicate, even to say what things are.

Before going on to examine how this anxiety informs and infects the colonial experience, let us return briefly to 1492.

1492

In Spain at the time, there would have been little doubt as to the significance of that date, for it was the year of two momentous events for Spanish history. First, early January saw the Fall of Granada, as Mohammed XII, Emir of that city, surrendered to the Catholic monarchs after a lengthy siege. This brought an end to eight hundred years

of Moslem control (and an almost equally protracted "Reconquista" or "reconquest") in what was known as al-Andalus, which gives its name to Andalucía, southern Spain.

Then in March, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed the Alhambra Decree, which ordered the expulsion of all Jews from the peninsula, unless they converted to Christianity. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands were evicted over the following months. Today, we would see this as an exercise in ethnic cleansing. In this context the departure of Columbus's three small ships in August was easily overshadowed. Spain was finally coming into its own as a unified political entity (culminating in the accession of Charles I in 1516), a unity apparently purged of ethnic or religious heterogeneity.

But nothing, as we're beginning to learn, is quite so simple.

New Categories of Otherness

For the "discovery" or "conquest" of the Americas, and Spain's expansion as an imperial power, opened up a multiplicity of new categories of otherness. In some ways, then, everything that Ferdinand and Isabella had supposedly achieved in 1492 was undone in the fall-out from Columbus's various voyages. Both practically and conceptually, new means of managing difference were now required.

The first issue concerned the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. What kind of people were they? This was the nub of the debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas that we mentioned last time. Drawing on Aristotle, Sepúlveda claimed that the New World's native peoples were "natural slaves." But Las Casas saw them as potential converts to Christianity. In *A Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies*, he denounces conquistador cruelty above all for sabotaging the project of conversion and indoctrination by which (he argues) the indigenous would otherwise be easily claimed for the Catholic Church.

Las Casas's tireless lobbying had its effect, as in 1542 Charles I proclaimed the "New Laws of the Indies," designed to restrict the exploitation of native labour on the part of colonist landowners. Yet the attempt to enslave the inhabitants of the Americas had

already run into difficulties, most obviously with the wholesale depopulation of much the Caribbean and elsewhere, thanks to the introduction of diseases from Europe to which the indigenous had no immunity. Within fifty years of Columbus's first voyage, the population of the Americas had probably halved; by 1600 it was perhaps a fifth of its pre-conquest size. In part to compensate for this deficit, as early as 1525 the Spanish, and later the Portuguese, had begun importing slaves from Africa.

The second issue, then, concerned this new element forcibly hauled across the Atlantic. Over the next couple of centuries, many millions of sub-Saharan Africans were transported to just about every corner of the New World but predominantly to the plantations of the Caribbean and the Atlantic coast. Here the conditions of life cultivating sugar, to satisfy Europe's newly-discovered sweet tooth, were particularly harsh. Overall, by 1800 probably six times as many Africans as Europeans had come to the Americas.

It may surprise you to learn that the number of slaves that were brought to what became the United States (some half a million) was far less than the number taken to places such as Cuba (700,000), Hispaniola (900,000), or, above all, Brazil (well over three million). Even countries that we now hardly associate with slavery, such as Mexico and Peru, had significant black populations.

By 1825 (for most of Latin America, the end of the colonial period), about 18% of the region's population were of African descent. 19% were white. And around 35% were indigenous Amerindian.

But do some quick maths: what of the other 28%? They were *mestizo*, that is, a mix of white and indigenous. And in fact the figure for the black population that I've just mentioned includes so-called mulattoes--a mix of white and black. Indeed, this way of collating the data, to include everyone who has some African "blood" under the single category of "black" is, as we will see, a very North American way of understanding or constructing racial categorization. In Latin America, things were done quite differently.

We are a long way here from the dream of ethnic and religious homogeneity that the reconquest of al-Andalus and the expulsion of the Jews was supposed to have ensured. Instead, we have a bewildering array of sometimes overlapping, potential differences and distinctions. Colonial Latin America was a hotbed of diversity in ways that (for various reasons) colonial Africa, Asia, or even North America were not. And the Spanish state and its imperial bureaucracy were determined to chart and manage this complex demography, while social mores in the colonies themselves made much of even apparently small differences.

Casta Paintings

There is no more vivid illustration of the desire to manage and negotiate difference than the so-called "casta paintings" that enjoyed a vogue in the colonial centres of eighteenth-century New Spain (that is, Mexico) and Peru.

Before we continue, I'd like you to take the time to look at some of these images. Consider the ways in which the various groupings they present are distinguished both from each other and internally. Think also about the similarities between them or the ways in which distinctions are sometimes hard to pick out. While you do that, I'll run and get a soda. But I'll be right back.

[pause]

What did you see? Casta paintings are (almost) always multiple. They comprise a series of scenes--usually, sixteen--of racial and ethnic purity and mixture, each illustrated by a family group. They start with the basic building blocks of difference: white (*español* or "Spanish"), indigenous (*indio* or "Indian"), and black (*negro*, or sometimes *moro*). In combination, these basic elements then produce *mestizo* (white plus indigenous), *mulato* (white plus black), and *zambo* (but also sometimes *chino* or *lobo*; indigenous plus black). Things soon get very complicated. For the paintings go on to chart just about every possible succeeding combination: white plus *mestizo*; *mestizo* plus indigenous; *mulato* plus *zambo*; and so on. Few sets of paintings agree exactly on the correct designations.

At times, a spark of purported purity re-emerges to offer the promise that difference can somehow be bred back out of the system: *castizo* plus *español* produce (once more) *español*. But on the whole what explodes from the canvas is an extraordinary profusion of *castizos*, *moriscos*, *albarazados*, *cambujos*, *calpamulatos* and the like. It all gets too much: we have labels such as *tente en el ayre* ("hold yourself in the air") or, perhaps most revealingly, *no te entiendo* ("I don't understand you"). We can almost see, graphically depicted before our eyes, the frustration of the very drive to classify that motivates these images in the first place.

The casta paintings set out to contain difference, by assigning each racial or ethnic classification (quite literally) its own box. Note the comprehensiveness of this intent. Not only is every racial combination given its "proper" name, but each is also assigned a whole series of secondary attributes: clothing, occupation, even at times the housing or landscape in each scene are calibrated in line with the proffered ethnic designation.

So the family that unites *español* and *castizo*, for example, could be portrayed as landowners with the Spanish father in a fine waistcoat (having accomplished his mission of racial whitening) puffing contentedly on a cigarillo in front of a verdant landscape. But the *zambaigo* and his indigenous partner are at each others' throats, and at the bottom of the scale the family of the *tente en el ayre* are apparently itinerant, barefoot collectors of firewood in a far harsher natural environment. In short, these paintings give us a vision of a hierarchical social order in which racial difference is in synch with a whole series of other distinctions. Everyone has a place in this panorama of colonial society, but the internal grid implacably divides one social group from another.

At the same time, the grid also functions as a mechanism to *produce* difference. Compare, for instance, the lens through which, as we said, race has been historically viewed (or constructed) in the United States: the famous "one-drop" rule, by which anyone with any African ancestry at all is construed as "black." By contrast, the micro-management of difference evidenced in the casta paintings produces an ever-more arcane set of distinctions whose logic is increasingly unfathomable. Moreover, precisely in its desire to account for all possible ethnic combinations, the casta painting cries out

for us to ask about the possibilities that it inevitably cannot cover. What comes of a *zambaigo* and an *albarazada*, for instance? A *chamizo* and a *negra*?

To put this another way: the grid attempts to provide a place for everyone, and mark sharp dividing lines between them, but it is needed precisely because these same lines are, in practice, consistently crossed, forever blurred.

Anxious Identity

We have here not only, once again, a crisis of representation, of the attempt to fit names to things. We also have one of the central themes and preoccupations of Latin American self-reflection and thought: an anxiety about identity. No longer simply "What kind of people are *they*?" but now "What name should we give *ourselves*?" and perhaps--but only perhaps--more fundamentally, "Who *are* we?" It's unsurprising that, to answer this question, Latin Americans have turned to notions of (biological, cultural, and social) mixture. It's doubly unsurprising that we have a proliferation of concepts that try to denote or capture this mixedness: *mestizaje*, but also syncretism, transculturation, hybridity... each of which is (or is argued to be) slightly different, slightly more "proper" as a name for the very impropriety that it both references and hides.

So Latin America is a place where identity seems to come into focus, as in Todorov's contention that it is here that the European "self" is invented, by way of its encounter with the American "other." But it is equally a place where identity always threatens to dissolve, for both good and ill. We see the potential of such dissolution in the fascinating story of Catalina de Erauso, a Basque nun who reinvents herself in the colonial Americas as a swashbuckling conquistador, disturbing gender distinctions in some ways and reinforcing them in others. But we also see it in numerous other narratives of everything from devouring jungles to drug-trips with Shamans. Latin America makes us question where and when, but also *who* we are.

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