

RECONSIDERING COLONIAL DISCOURSE FOR SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICA

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Like the other two responses to Patricia Seed's review essay, this one comes from the field of literary studies. I regret that no historian or anthropologist has joined in this debate because it would have been illuminating to have reflections from the other fields on which Seed (herself a historian) has commented. My remarks are necessarily limited by—and to—my own disciplinary perspective.

One of the most salutary effects of Seed's review essay is that it provides a locus where those of us from different disciplines can come together to converse. Courageously willing to make statements about various disciplinary practices, including that of history (about which she has not hesitated to be critical), she has taken the position that we share significant common themes and talking points. I agree that we have such points of contact and exchange. I was instructed by her views on the subject, and I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on the issues she has raised.

The major point I would like to discuss here is the notion of colonial discourse, reconsidering its applicability to the study of Spanish America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Before doing so, however, I would like to comment on Seed's initial remark that in the late 1980s, historians and anthropologists became interested in language—the rhetorical and literary devices used to write ethnographies and histories—and that literary scholars began to take into account anthropological theory and historical considerations in their examinations of the texts of "high culture."¹

In literary studies, interest in anthropological and historical dimensions was already much in evidence by the late 1980s. If one example will suffice, consider the splendid one of Angel Rama.² His posthumous *La*

1. Patricia Seed, "Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse," *Latin American Research Review* 26, no. 3 (1991): 181–200, 181.

2. Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984); *Transculturación narrativa en la América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982); and José María Arguedas,

ciudad letrada (1984), which offered a powerful theory and critique of Latin American history, explored with extraordinary perspicacity the relationships among history, anthropology, and literature. His profound understanding of the ethnographic and literary work of José María Arguedas yielded his 1975 anthology of Arguedas's essays, *Formación de una cultura nacional indoamericana*, and anthropological ways of thinking illuminated Rama's 1982 *Transculturación narrativa en la América Latina*, which viewed Latin American literary production in the light of more general processes and principles of cultural adaptation and innovation. Among Latin American critics and intellectuals, this was not a new trend of the 1980s. Seed might have been thinking of literary scholars in the United States, but their anthropological and historical interests also predate the end of the decade just past. Here, Roberto González Echevarría's *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* comes to mind.³ His inquiry into the shaping of Latin American narrative over the past two centuries is deeply concerned with the relationship of anthropology to literature in the twentieth century.

Perhaps because I am neither a historian nor an anthropologist, I was somewhat surprised by Seed's comment that the fields of history and anthropology have recently become dissatisfied with "traditional criticisms of colonialism," that is, studies whose themes were either native resistance or manipulative accommodation. Seed states, "In the late 1980s, these tales of resistance and accommodation were being perceived increasingly as mechanical, homogenizing, and inadequate versions of the encounters between the colonizers and the colonized" (p. 182).

For the study of the Andes, at least, this dissatisfaction surfaced much earlier and was addressed by the work that began in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s. With this time frame in mind, Steve Stern has recently written:

Finally, dissatisfaction that the framework of Black Legend debate consigned Indians to a marginal status in the making of early colonial history inspired efforts to write a history that went beyond the story of European villains, heroes, and microbes acting upon devastated and pliable Indians. A new history saw in early colonial Indians something more than victimised and ineffectually protected objects of trauma and paternalism. It sought to explore Indian agency, adaptations, and responses within a colonial framework of oppressive power and mortality. It sought to unearth the impact of Amerindian initiative on the early colonial social order as a whole.⁴

Formación de una cultura nacional indoamericana, edited by Angel Rama (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1975).

3. Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

4. Steve J. Stern, "Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, Politics," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, Quincentennial Supplement (1992):1-34, esp. 28-29.

Frankly, it would be difficult to proceed with any sort of cultural or literary study involving autochthonous Andean society or consciousness without taking into account studies like those of Stern, Karen Spalding, and Brooke Larson, works that I would identify with the themes Seed mentions.⁵ For this reason, the assertion that "narratives of resistance and accommodation were losing credibility" overstates or overgeneralizes the case. Reflecting again on Seed's remarks, it appears that she is suggesting that by the late 1980s, an awareness was growing that social and economic analysis had to be augmented by linguistic and cultural considerations. This, I think, is a point very well taken, and I would look forward to her response to my reading of it.

One last point regarding chronology and causality: I wish that Seed had discussed the reasons for her view that narratives of resistance and accommodation were losing credibility in the late 1980s. She identifies this period as the time when historians and anthropologists became interested in language (p. 181), yet she seems not to consider the interest in language as a cause of new dissatisfactions but merely a simultaneous development. I would look forward to her clarification of this part of her argument.

I would like to move on now to other general issues central to literary studies. On reading Seed's essay, I marveled at the diverse collection of books she brought together to comment on, and I think she succeeded in justifying a collective discussion of them. Four of the five titles clearly make the examination of language their focus and reflect the growing tendency to tease historical, anthropological, and literary understandings out of the ways in which language was manipulated in particular sensitive settings of the cross-cultural contacts of colonialism. A common thread among these books is the attempt to articulate text with event and language with change and to recognize the written word as not merely reflective of social practices but in fact constitutive of them. Furthermore, these studies examine written cultural productions that lie beyond the literary canons of high culture. Among the books reviewed by Seed, Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters* exemplifies this approach.⁶ In exploring the paradoxes of colonial situations from 1492 through the eighteenth century, he juxtaposed Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, John Smith's accounts of Pocahontas, and *Robinson Crusoe*, deftly demonstrating that the peculiar-

5. Brooke Larson, *Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia: Cochabamba, 1550-1900* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Karen Spalding, *De indio a campesino: cambios en la estructura social del Perú colonial* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1974); and *Huarochiri, an Andean Society under Inca and Spanish Rule* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984); and Steve J. Stern, *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

6. Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (New York and London: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1986).

ities of colonial ideologies are best revealed by moving among writings categorized as canonized, popular, or mundane.

This leads me to my assessment of the single most important intellectual development of the past decades concerning cross-disciplinary exchange. It has less to do with the disappearance of the subject or dismissing authorial intention or original meanings (about which I will comment later) than with a more fundamental observation with which Seed begins her discussion. I merely underscore and redirect it slightly. This is the concept of the opacity of language (p. 183), from which follows the conclusion that writings of all types—whether popular or elite, high culture or low—function as texts. That is, notions about communicating information and description are set aside in favor of examining verbal productions for their assertive and interpretive values. From the viewpoint of scholars who take this position (myself among them), no clear dichotomy exists between document and text insofar as both require the same kinds of analysis and scrutiny; moreover, not all texts are written. Walter Mignolo addresses the second of these claims in his commentary, and I wish to emphasize the first.

To put the matter another way, the documentary may be included under the rubric of textuality as one of its many subtypes. Colonial situations offer no shortage of examples from which to argue that archival documents need to be scrutinized with the same skeptical eye turned on works more commonly designated as texts. For example, how straightforward and transparent is the testimony given in a trial, found in the “*Idolatrías*” section of the Archivo Arzobispal de Lima? More subtly, what is involved in any mundane transaction that we read today as part of the colonial documentary record? Take the example of the *composición de tierras*, or confirmation of land titles.⁷ According to colonial practice, the judge-inspector sends out the corregidor’s deputy along with surveyors and a notary; these are the Spanish officials. Accompanying them is a native interpreter who translates back and forth between the native claimants (or occupants) and the officials. The corregidor’s deputy makes the decision to give the claimants less land than had been ordered by the inspector judge, and the explanation by which the deputy justifies his decision cites the richness of the lands assigned and the contentment and commitment of the native claimants to the disposition. Natives local to the area often act as witnesses to corroborate the proceedings.

Can such a report be taken at face value—as a documentary record

7. This example comes from my analysis of the newly published record of land-title litigations in which Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, the Peruvian author of the *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno* (1615), was a plaintiff. See *Y no ay remedio . . .*, edited by Elías and Alfredo Prado Tello (Lima: Centro de Investigación y Promoción Amazónica, 1991); and Rolena Adorno, “The Genesis of the *Nueva crónica y buen gobierno*,” *Colonial Latin American Review* (New York) 2, nos. 1–2 (1993):53–92.

of what transpired, was witnessed, and agreed upon? Perhaps, but only after submitting the document to the same kind of scrutiny that one would give to a written text judged a priori to be a gesture of assertion and interpretation rather than as simple description and then assessing it in light of complex extratextual factors. In this respect, "textuality" is a critical category that implies a set of operations to be performed on the account being examined rather than a configuration of elements that characterizes the account itself. Seen as text, however, any stable configuration of semiotic signs is less a thing than part of the process of signification—the process by which, to quote Roland Barthes, meanings are produced.⁸

How widely this emphasis on the opacity of language has been taken seriously is not clear to me, but it does seem to have been considered widely enough to have generated some debate. In addition to Seed's reflections, a new article by historian Eric Van Young comes to mind. In his examination of the record of an 1812 criminal prosecution for insurgency against an illiterate Indian named José Marcelino Pedro Rodríguez in Cuernavaca, Mexico, Van Young makes an important qualification in considering what he calls "the textuality of the document": "[I]t is not so much that we have a set of floating signifiers, as that they are anchored so firmly and narrowly in singular circumstances that their meaning is obscure or unrecoverable."⁹ Cast in the language of literary theory, this historian's insight makes a valuable contribution to cross-disciplinary exchange. If the "linguistic turn in the human sciences" is to mean anything to scholars in literary studies, it is precisely to avoid divorcing texts from the circumstances that produced them—however irretrievable these circumstances may be. To be not only theoretically enlightened but also historically responsible is a twin goal worth pursuing.

I turn now to the first of the related concepts that guide Seed's article, that of "colonial and postcolonial discourse." Mignolo's commentary challenges the notion of "discourse," and I wish to put into question the notions of the "colonial" and, consequently, "colonial discourse," testing their applicability to Spanish America of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While I now question blanket use of the term "colonial discourse" for this period, I used to embrace it enthusiastically.¹⁰ Although I

8. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press), 263. In my view, one of the most influential essays on the question of language as a signifying system not necessarily confined to the alphabetic was Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957). See Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

9. Eric Van Young, "The Cuautla Lazarus: Double Subjectives in Reading Texts on Popular Collective Action," *Colonial Latin American Review* (New York) 2, nos. 1-2 (1993):3-26.

10. I have used the concept in several of my publications, including "Discourses on Colonialism: Bernal Díaz, Las Casas, and the Twentieth-Century Reader," *Modern Language Notes*, no. 103 (1988):239-58; and "Nuevas perspectivas en los estudios coloniales hispanoamericanos," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, no. 28 (1988):11-27. In addition, Walter Mignolo and I edited a volume of *Dispositio* entitled "Colonial Discourse," nos. 36-38 (1989).

stand by my understanding of the discursive as representing polyvocality and synchronic, interactive, and dialogic practices that permit us to transcend the old certainties of an earlier literary history and contemplate the messiness of cacaphonic worlds,¹¹ I am less sanguine about the fixed concept of "colonial discourse." Recently I have begun to find it wanting. I will begin with some general observations and then proceed to more specific comments regarding its use for my own field of study.

One of our problems today is that there are hopelessly many disciplinary and subdisciplinary conversations going on. Our academic world is fragmented in a truly postmodern sense. We often do not know what other colleagues are doing, which is precisely what leads us to reach out for commonalities, posit comprehensive approaches, and attempt to transcend the confines of our particular narrow purview. We are always on the lookout for what can serve as a lingua franca. "Colonial discourse" strikes me as just such a tool, and I think Seed's position reflects well the guiding sentiments of the Group for the Critical Study of Colonial Discourse (GCSCD), which grew out of the Sociology of Literature Conference "Europe and Its Others," held at the University of Essex in July 1984. The objectives of the new network were stated as follows:

This bulletin is an attempt to link those whose work critically examines historical and analytical discourses of domination where these discourses address cultural and racial differences. The network is not restricted to work in any one historical period, nor any one discipline or field. Thus, while for many of us the focus of our work is primarily the colonial context, others in the network are extending their inquiry to ex-colonial societies, the colonial legacy in the West, and contemporary systems of domination where race, class, ethnicity, gender and/or sexuality intersect.¹²

Given such a statement, the question arises as to whether "colonial discourse" is a field of study or a series of related approaches. Mignolo views it as the latter and suggests that Seed might be treating it as both. I agree that Seed treats colonial discourse as both a field and an approach because her definition of it as "an emergent interdisciplinary critique of colonialism" (p. 182) implies equally an approach ("critique," "interdisciplinary") and an object of study ("colonialism"). The statement of the GCSCD likewise suggests a cultural politics by focusing on issues of racial or cultural difference in writings that it has identified as discourses of domination.

The GCSCD statement emphasizes a long time span and takes into account colonial and postcolonial perspectives. If we look at this globalizing notion across time, it represents no less than half a millennium, assuming as a starting point the oceanic voyages of Portugal down the west coast of Africa in the fifteenth century and ending with today's postcolonial-

11. Adorno, "Nuevas perspectivas," 13-15.

12. *Inscriptions*, no. 1 (Dec. 1985):1.

isms throughout the world. Considering the idea spatially, we discover that the referential worlds of colonial and postcolonial discourse include cultures and societies as diverse as those of the Indians of South Asia and the "Indians" of South America. Such sweeping grandeur is exhilarating in some ways, but I have found that for the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish America, such an expanse risks offering too much too easily and at too great a cost.

A recent challenge to such all-encompassing approaches to colonialism has been made by the anthropologist Jorge Klor de Alva. In his provocative inquiry into notions of colonialism and their applicability to Latin America, Klor de Alva argues that the critical concepts and theories of colonialism, as inventions of the study of colonial experiences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are inappropriate for shaping ideas about the experience of Spanish America from the sixteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries: "Evidently, the specific modern and critical connotations we give to these interrelated terms [colonialism and imperialism] come from the experiences of the non-Spanish European colonial powers, especially Britain, as a consequence of their primarily Old World experiences beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century."¹³ Klor de Alva goes on to argue that this post-1760s situation, when the European colonies (including Spanish America under the Bourbons) "began to be fundamentally modified to serve the interests of the industrializing core," has been applied retrospectively and anachronistically to the first two and a half centuries of Spanish dominion in America.¹⁴

During that early period, according to Klor de Alva, Spain's mercantile empire was one in which the metropolises were primarily buyers and consumers of their foreign possessions' commodities, with the metropolis exploiting areas that supplied precious metals, slaves, and tropical products: "Though all of this was extremely disruptive, most social groupings not devastated by epidemics or forced labor continued their everyday lives in much the same way as they had prior to contact with the Europeans, especially those largely self-sufficient communities which, based on subsistence agriculture and domestic production, were poor markets for manufactured goods."¹⁵ At the same time, the mass immigration of European settlers, combined with the dramatic decline in the indigenous population, produced by the second half of the sixteenth century "widespread intermarriage and cross-cultural mating [that] were generating new ethnic communities" without significant metropolitan connections. Immigrants who were not part of the merchant or official aristocracy

13. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages," *Colonial Latin American Review* (New York) 1, nos. 1-2 (1992):3-23, citation from p. 16.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. *Ibid.*

were transplanted Europeans or their descendants, who were “relatively disconnected” from the metropolis.¹⁶

These conditions differed greatly from those of the mid-eighteenth century onward, which were geared toward reorganizing the colonies as markets and consumers of the goods manufactured in the centers, and implied a shift toward commerce, industry, and commercial agriculture. All these changes resulted in modifications in land tenure and ownership as well as “the implementation of forced and coerced wage labor for commercial agriculture and mining, the introduction of monetary payments, the reduction of home industry, and the restriction of production and exportation by natives.”¹⁷

Such fundamental differences, it seems to me, preclude lumping together the symbolic practices of all variations of European domination over other peoples and places across five centuries. If the objects of study differ so much one from another, is it possible to examine them with a set of common approaches and shared assumptions? I think not, and I would like to suggest a critique, paralleling that of Klor de Alva, that examines the writings produced about or from Spanish America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

On considering the applicability of “colonial discourse” to sixteenth-century Spanish America, Bernal Díaz provides a good example. From a social and economic point of view, he exemplifies the principles outlined by Klor de Alva. Bernal Díaz was perfectly content to remain far away from the metropolis, and he returned to Spain after the conquest of Mexico only twice, once in 1540 and again in 1550. His goal was to achieve economic prosperity for himself and his heirs, and he was fairly successful. Living outside the merchant and official aristocracy, he had no serious relationship with the metropolis and wanted to be left alone by it. His world of reference for prestige was that of the reconquest of Spain from the Muslims, and success meant the comfortable independence that an old soldier could achieve by settling in territories granted to him by royal decree. Bernal Díaz could not have imagined the struggles of his descendants who in the eighteenth century, as Americans of several generations, constituted the backbone of the *criollista* society that learned to loathe the power of the distant ancestral homeland over their lives. Bernal Díaz was neither a colonial nor a creole but a Castilian. If we cannot identify him as a representative of a colonial society, can we study his writings using the critical assumptions of postmodernism? In my view, we cannot not study him through the eyes of postmodernism, but we must do so by taking into consideration the conceptual mediations and historical transfor-

16. *Ibid.*, 18.

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

mations that separate us from the sixteenth century. Let me try to explain what I mean.

As described by Patricia Seed, the new poststructural sensibility implies the disappearance of the subject and the dismissal of authorial intentions or meanings (p. 194). Nevertheless, the characteristic "colonial" voices and perspectives of Spanish America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries stand out insofar as they seek to oppose—for the purposes of replacing, not dismissing—the "subject of authority, legitimacy, and power" (p. 184). Bernal Díaz was among the writers who defined what was unique about Spain's early experience in America, and he sought precisely to impose himself as a writing subject imbued with legitimacy, authority, and power. Thus although poststructuralism may question the traditional humanism and expose its heroes (which may well be our approach to twentieth-century intellectual life), we cannot attribute the same sensibilities to these early modern voices. I am therefore suspicious of the dangers of calling every act of writing by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors like El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz "subversive." It may be our current impulse to undermine and subvert the traditional heroes of humanism and imperialism, but to attribute the same to the literary minds of the seventeenth century ignores or underestimates the social and artistic criticism that intellectuals in any period tend to practice.

Furthermore, we still need the concepts of authorial intentions and "original meaning" but in a decidedly contemporary fashion. That is, we need them not for the purpose of taking them at face value and assimilating them but rather to juxtapose them with what the writing subject actually set out to do, which always differs from how we assess what he or she actually accomplished. Here we profit from poststructuralism's critique of "the sovereign subject as author" and do not dismiss but rather work through the author's declared intentions to determine his or her hidden agendas. Bernal Díaz exemplifies the amateur writer whose achievements far transcended his efforts: he created an eternally vivid picture of sixteenth-century New Spain where he had intended only to set the record straight and lobby for rewards concerning his role in a certain war of conquest, which he hoped to portray as more glorious than any in Castilian history.

My point is that only from the eighteenth century onward can we speak of "colonial discourses" emerging from Spanish America.¹⁸ The

18. One of the best examples from Spanish American intellectual and literary history of a transitional figure, who Janus-like looks both backward and forward, is the Mexican creole writer Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora (1645–1700), a distant relative of the Spanish Baroque poet Luis de Góngora. An obvious example of a creole intellectual who can be identified with the world of colonial discourse would be the Mexican friar and patriot Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1763–1827).

world of royalist, courtly, and chivalric values inhabited by Bernal Díaz, Cabeza de Vaca, Hernán Cortés, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and even culturally mestizo writers like Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl is foreign to the “discourses of domination” in which the battleground is the site of racial and cultural differences. In this regard, I would cite Seed’s discussion of Beatriz Pastor’s book.¹⁹

Seed’s characterization of Pastor’s work is illuminating inasmuch as Seed’s judgment of it reveals that the expectations of the “colonial discourse” purview are inappropriate to the field in question. Thus when Seed characterizes Pastor’s study as a “less theoretically sophisticated critique of the political dimensions of conquest stories” than Peter Hulme’s, she faults Pastor for what are precisely her virtues. Seed is correct that “all of the forms of critique identified by Pastor . . . clearly reside within the limits established by sixteenth-century Spanish political orthodoxy” and that “these critiques are thus imbued with a nostalgic, even reactionary desire for the return of traditional medieval Hispanic values” (p. 188). Pastor has been historically responsible and used excellent theoretical judgment in two ways: in confining her study to a recognizable and coherent phase of Spanish political, cultural, and literary history; and in working from a theoretical grounding that does not require the writings she studies to respond to perspectives that they could not possibly reflect. In his commentary, Hernán Vidal makes this important point in a different way. If the “perspective remains wholly European” and “the natives in these narratives remain a blank slate” (Seed, p. 188), it is because Pastor could not responsibly have teased out—from either Alonso de Ercilla or Cabeza de Vaca—debates on racial and cultural difference of the type required by a “colonial discourse” critique relevant to later times.

Overall, Patricia Seed’s remarks about Pastor’s book have helped me realize that a historically situated concept of colonial discourse corresponds mainly to those in literary studies and allied areas of cultural critique who are concerned with the Anglo-European worlds of colonialism and postcolonialism. Spain and its possessions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are irrelevant to that paradigm, temporally, geographically, and culturally.

That very irrelevance is nevertheless a source of fascination. Scholars who habitually study the Hispanic world and even those who do not have been smitten with it. Consider works like Tzvetan Todorov’s *La Conquête de l’Amérique* (1982) or Stephen Greenblatt’s *Marvelous Possessions* (1991).²⁰ Such works testify to the unique character of cross-cultural en-

19. Beatriz Pastor, *Discursos narrativos de la conquista: mitificación y emergencia*, 2d ed. (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1988).

20. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); and Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

counter that the experience of Spain represents, even as they appropriate it in order to explore the authors' own ethical concerns about the twentieth century. These works reaffirm my conviction that early modern Spain stands outside the quintessential colonial experience: it is not typical but rather prototypical or atypical, and distinctly different in character.

On balance, I think that Patricia Seed has performed a useful service by calling attention to the notion of "colonial discourse" and using it to take a position on intellectual trends of an interdisciplinary sort. Yet the interdisciplinary dimension of "colonial discourse" is open to debate. The first bulletin of the GCSCD counted among its members some eighty-five scholars in literary studies (plus eight more in film and art), about twenty anthropologists, and sixteen historians. It is to Seed's credit as a historian that she has joined in the discussion and taken strong positions in it. Yet the rubric of "discourse" reflects its origins in literary theory and philosophy and in effect excludes many scholars of colonialism who do not find their own disciplinary practices reflected by the concept. Whereas the term *discourse* can be off-putting, *colonial* has been generalized to a broad spectrum of situations and used in a variety of disciplines. Nevertheless, once historicity and geography reenter the arena (Klor de Alva's argument), we can be more critical of its applicability. For the case of Spanish America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I think that colonial discourse has spent itself. It served a legitimizing, ecumenizing purpose in our academic cultural politics, but it has also led to an erroneous sense of sameness that, like so many labels, has come to conceal more than it reveals. Hence I share Hernán Vidal's concerns about a literary criticism that runs the risk of becoming technocratic.