Review Essay: Rabasa, José. *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*

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All this makes the introduction to a provocative and stimulating essay, preparing the reader for the actual text by Las Casas. I observed one major mistake. The Spaniards did not migrate to the Indies at the beginning of the fifteenth, but of the sixteenth century (13).

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The title, *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*, itself indicates clearly the direction of Rabasa's theoretical thrust in his investigation of how Europeans discovered and perceived the New World. After the significant anniversary of Columbus's achievement (1492/1992) with its flood of historical, literary, anthropological, and ethnographic studies, Rabasa's claim does not really come as a surprise. Mary B. Campbell (1988), Urs Bitterli (1991), Anthony Grafton (1992), and Valerie I. J. Flint (1992), among others, have repeatedly and convincingly argued that America was not discovered in the proper sense of the word, but was rather reappropriated from past texts dealing with the exotic Orient, the imagery of which then was projected onto the new continent.

Rabasa, in his Ph.D. thesis submitted at the University of Santa Cruz and revised for printing, tackles his theme from a different angle, however, since he aims for a semiotic, text-critical perspective. In other words, he suggests we read the discovery as a textual phenomenon, as a reading and writing process, in which even allegedly scientific, objective approaches to the New World in the form of an atlas, a map, and icons reveal their rhetorical function of making a case to "effect the real" (in Barthes's terms). Rabasa believes,
according to Roy Wagner, that the invention of America through the
textual products also implies the invention of our own, European his­

tory (12). A good example for this theoretical position can be found on
page 27. We read: “The naturalness of America is a mere mirage of
European culture and its exploits. The emergence of America marks its
loss of identity. It becomes merely a ‘naked body’ for the inscriptions
and longings of a European imagination.” This is a brilliant observa-
tion, yet also fraught with a host of interpretive problems extending far
beyond the simple scholarly arguments. It amounts to a declaration of
faith if we would accept this statement, yet it sounds appealing because
of the skillful combination of historiographical, literary, and poststruc­
turalist rhetoric. Simply put, did Columbus not see anything? Did all
those explorers do nothing else but dream up the New World? Further,
How is human perception possible without an anchoring in personal
experience? Without the analogy no understanding of new objects is
possible, which pertains, *mututis mutandi*, to the travel accounts as
well. Of course, Rabasa has a point in that human observations are
subjective, and thus fallible, if not deliberately misconstrued. But does
he not stretch his argument too far when he claims that, in the final
analysis, even the pictorial presentations of America and its discoverers
were the result of deliberate spatial illusions (35)?

Of course, Rabasa is heavily indebted to thinkers such as Edward
Said (*Orientalism, 1978*) and thus puts a disclaimer on anything the
explorers and discoverers postulated, because they neither explored
nor discovered, but instead created and projected (39). This leads us
further into a fundamental discussion about epistemological valence
and forces us either to reject Rabasa’s analysis entirely or to follow his
path as dedicated disciples caught in an ideological net.

This binary opposition is the unfortunate result of an overly
anxious subscription to poststructuralist theory and undermines the
otherwise fascinating discussions in the following chapters. First,
Rabasa examines Columbus’s various texts from his journey, which
here emerge as documents of a new intellectual era in which the cre­
ative writing process has replaced the medieval veneration of the writ­
ten word and the reading process. With Columbus, moderns no longer
follow the textual authorities from the past, but begin to inscribe
Chapter 3 analyzes the correspondence between Cortés and Emperor Charles V, focusing on the equation "knowledge is power" (85) and on the writings by Cortés as a means to transform Mesoamerica into a New Spain. Chapter 4 deals with encyclopedias and their new approaches to the American world, such as by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, by the Franciscan missionaries such as Fray Toridio de Benavente (Montolinía), Fray Gerónimo do Mendieta, and Fray Andrés de Olmos, and finally by Bartolomé de Las Casas. Their attempts at deciphering the New World according to the remaining semiotic signals after the ravishment of the first explorers reversed the traditional course and reintroduced a decapitated older cultural discourse (164). Yet, the traditional ethnographic and anthropological sources from antiquity and the Middle Ages continued to exert their influence, even on Las Casas, despite his attempts at protecting the native population from the Hispanic tyranny.

Moreover, the religious orientation of these encyclopedists and missionaries reconnected the New World with the Old, made the former the colony of the latter, and thus basically left the European perspectives unchanged.

In chapter 5, Rabasa examines the genre of the atlas in which America was included from very early on. Not surprisingly, European colonialism left its indelible mark on those atlases as well, which the author calls, quite interestingly, "palimpsests" because they collect old and new information and create a bricolage of geographical data (186). The ongoing appearance of monsters thus does not reflect an egregious ignorance, but rather "sedimented symbolic associations of topographical regions with the fantastic and the demonic" (199). Why this would lead to a rewriting if not reinvention of Europe, and why the atlas invites the spectator to converse in a "non-European idiom" (208), remains a theoretical postulate, if not a non sequitur.

This is a fascinating book, highly intelligent in its theoretical approaches, but lamentably weakened because of its speculative, purely ideological theses.

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