theories and methodologies

Mistranslation, Unsettlement, La Navidad

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ON 14 OCTOBER 1492, ON THE ISLAND THAT HE HAD JUST NAMED SAN SALVADOR, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS SEIZED SEVEN TAÍNO INDIANS TO serve as translators. The abduction was clearly an act of significant forethought, registering Columbus's intention that these interpreters "inquire and inform . . . about things in these parts" (Columbus, "Letter" 118)—a first step toward the subjugation of all the inhabitants of San Salvador, who might one day be "taken to Castile or held captive" on the island (Columbus, Diario 75). The taking of these indigenous translators has been no less momentous for contemporary scholarship, perhaps especially in early modern English and American literary studies: in the year of the Columbian quincentenary, Stephen Greenblatt memorably called it "the primal crime in the New World . . . committed in the interest of language" (24); Eric Cheyfitz concurs that "translation was, and still is, the central act of European colonization and imperialism in the Americas" (104). Yet the concept of translation as a wholly imperial instrument, as commonplace in Columbus's day as in our own, has limited our thinking in important ways (Adorno, "Polemics" 20). As ethnohistorians and literary critics alike have suggested, the interpretive sway of the "linguistic colonialism" model can obscure as much about its Native objects as it reveals about the purported discursive complexity of its European subjects.[1]

This essay returns to the scene of this primal linguistic crime to consider its role as the origins story for an alternative history—one that, as I tell it here, draws on Native American studies' multilayered concept of sovereignty to reconsider a canonical episode of colonial history.[2] How we frame and comprehend this episode has obvious bearing on how we write the early American literary past, for Columbus's writings inaugurate the Western record of a now largely anonymous body of Native translators engaged in the acquisition and interindigenous dissemination of diplomatic knowledge and political expertise regarding the hemisphere and the early Atlantic world. The network of intellectual production and transmission adumbrated by these Native translators has been easy to overlook

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because of the still dominant critical tendency to understand translation in the colonial American context primarily as a tool of empire, a dutiful metonymy of *translatio imperii*.[3] If Columbus violates what Scott Lyons calls the "rhetorical sovereignty" of the Native captives, denying "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination," much contemporary scholarship unwittingly repeats that denial by misrecognizing these captives' use of translation to engage in acts of political diplomacy in behalf of a self-determining people—and thereby to set "at least some of the terms of the debate" (462). Our prevailing literary and historical narratives of colonial settlement in the early Americas are intimately tied to this critical misrecognition; working against it is a first step toward recovering what I elaborate below as a history of American *un*settlement. In what follows I offer a speculative reading grounded not in Columbus's narrow construal of translation as an instrument of (European) empire but in a series of motivated mistranslations actively dispatched by the collective of indigenous interpreters he regarded as his to control.

Columbus's *Diario* is a famously mediated text: a paraphrase, including some direct quotations, written by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), who owned a copy of Columbus's (now lost) original, which was itself a highly self-conscious text intended for the Catholic monarchs.[4] Even through the opacity of its textual layers, though, and its fantastical projections of colonial desire, Columbus's *Diario* reveals that soon after he has committed the kidnapping, the abducted interpreters in the making are directing the voyage of supposed discovery. When Columbus is unsure in what direction to proceed, he turns to his indigenous captives, who purportedly tell him "by signs that there were so very many [islands] that they were numberless. And they named by their names more than a hundred" (Columbus, Diario 77). If Columbus's ability to understand the captives must be viewed with skepticism, it is nevertheless clear that these captive translators present him from the beginning with an overwhelming stream of information that proves singularly unhelpful, even obstructing the voyage's progress. And when Columbus finally sails to Santa María de la Concepción, he does so because "these men that I have had taken . . . kept telling me that there they wear very large bracelets of gold" (79). Whether or not he has understood his translators' words, Columbus has followed the signed indications of their directions and continues to do so throughout the remainder of the voyage.

Even so, by the time of their arrival at Santa María, Columbus loses some confidence in his interpreters: "I well believe that all they were saying [of gold bracelets] was a ruse in order to flee" (79). Already, then, the possibility of motivated mendacity on the interpreters' part haunts the project of translation for which the seven captives have been detained. Yet Columbus can envision only a limited horizon of possibilities for evaluating the information supplied by his interpreters: they are lying, he reasons, simply because they are seeking to escape. The logic here is retroactive, for while the ship anchors off Santa María two of the San Salvadoran translators jump overboard and make their way ashore. Yet the successful flight of these two interpreters is followed by several events that not only belie Columbus's logic but also call into question the unidirectionality of imperial translation. After the translators have escaped to the island, where they have presumably communicated their experience in captivity, a new Native interlocutor draws alongside the ship in a canoe. When the man is taken aboard, Columbus understands the event as the capture of another interpreter and decides to use the opportunity of this unplanned abduction to stage a release that will win the Spaniards

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good favor with the people of Santa María (81). It never occurs to him that this purported captive might have a tactical motive—*raison d'état*—of his own for being on the ship. Columbus plies him with gifts, sends him back ashore, watches as he reunites with the Natives of Santa María, and then imputes to the former captive a point of view that he believes himself to have generated and manipulated:

> He considered it a great marvel, and indeed it seemed to him that we were good people and that the other man who had fled had done us some harm and that for this we were taking him with us. And the reason that I behaved in this way toward him, ordering him set free and giving him the things mentioned, was in order that they would hold us in this esteem, so that . . . the natives will receive [us] well. And everything that I gave him was not worth four *maravedís*. (81–83)

So satisfied is Columbus with his dissimulation, and with what he imagines to be his control of an unequal exchange, that both he and his future readers lose sight of the obvious: Columbus's Native interlocutors share his desire to create a diplomatic impression, to manipulate cross-cultural perception in order to shape the course of future political events.[5]

En route to the next island, Fernandina, Columbus's ship is approached again by a lone canoe. This time a Native intermediary not only approaches the vessel but virtually offers himself as a potential translator: "He came up to the ship and I had him enter, *which was what he asked*" (85; my emphasis). By this point the initial European act of abduction has become something else entirely: a diplomatic engagement initiated by an indigenous agent. Columbus nevertheless clings to the unidirectional model of statecraft, outlining a plan to carry this new voyager to Fernandina and "give him all of his belongings in order that, through good reports of us . . . the natives will give us of all that they may have" (85). Even when Columbus observes that his new interlocutor is carrying two Spanish *blancas* (silver coins)—"because of which I recognized that he was coming from . . . San Salvador" (85)—his powers of induction still do not extend to their logical conclusion: the intermediary has been shadowing the movement of the ship, traveling with a foreign currency, and has reasons of his own for boarding the vessel.

If Columbus cannot see this, neither can much contemporary scholarship: both suffer from what Craig Womack notes are peculiar "forms of myopia that undermine sociopolitical sovereignty" (358). But once we recognize every small engagement of these Native interlocutors as a political act of diplomacy premised on self-determination, key details in Columbus's story begin to appear in a different light. Consider an earlier scene from the voyage, when Columbus explores eastern San Salvador. Coasting along the shore, the ship is hailed by large groups of San Salvadorans, who come down to the beach calling and offering water and food to the famished voyagers. Columbus, however, soon becomes "afraid, seeing a big stone reef that encircled that island all around" (Diario 75); the waters near this part of San Salvador are treacherous for porting. But more dangerous to Columbus is his failure to recognize that the Natives' gesturing, their communication of apparent hospitality in summoning the Spaniards toward the reef, may require more than a literal interpretation. Before he has even encountered their words, Columbus has already failed to imagine that the diplomacy of the San Salvadorans, like all international diplomacy involving a potentially dangerous opponent, might deploy the appearance of social niceties to effect underlying strategy. As the voyage continues, Columbus's inability to conceive of a Native interest in manipulating the flow of information—to apprehend the multidirectionality of diplomacy that underlies all translation in this milieu—will continually distort his view of what is occurring as the voyagers

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pursue an ultimately fruitless itinerary in search of gold, back and forth from Cuba to Hispaniola, "according to the indications that these Indians that I have give me" (109).

Nowhere is this more apparent than during the occasion of Columbus's founding of La Navidad, the first European settlement in the Americas. The precise location of this settlement remains unknown, though archeologists continue to search for it in Haiti, near the northern coast where one of Columbus's ships was wrecked in December 1492, catalyzing his decision to build a fort using the remains of the vessel. Columbus's *Diario* blames the wreck on a disobedient steersman who left the helm to a cabin boy against the admiral's express orders, with disastrous consequences. But the account later suggests a different explanation for the accident when it introduces Guacanagarí, the Taíno "king," who "had sent to invite and beg [Columbus] to come *with the ships* to his harbor" (279; my emphasis). In this version of events, Columbus appears to have been deliberately approaching the island, in response to Guacanagarí's summons. Whether or not this king, like the hospitality-proffering Natives of San Salvador, deliberately gave directions that guided the vessel onto the reef, the text registers a hint of reproach toward Guacanagarí simply by recording his fervent invitation.

Columbus understood the founding of La Navidad to be no less momentous than the kidnapping of the first seven Taíno translators. As Columbus's son Fernando Colón explains in his biography of his father, the admiral

> reasoned that God had caused [the shipwreck] to pass that he should make a settlement there, so that the Christians he left behind might trade and gain information about that country and its inhabitants by learning their language and trading with that village [so that] when he returned . . . with reinforcements, the colonists would be able to guide him in settling and subjugating that land.[6]

On his return to Spain from the West Indies, Columbus made careful notations about La Navidad—and not only for his own convenience. The notes had a symbolic purpose and were meant for a wider audience; as Fernando put it, "The admiral thought it well to mention these facts in order to make known the position of the first Christian town founded in the Western world" (85). In his famous letter from the first voyage, dated 15 February 1493, Columbus announces with fanfare, "In this island of Hispaniola, I have taken possession of a large town which is most conveniently situated for the goldfields . . . and have built a fort there."[7] It is perhaps his most profound act of colonial naming during a voyage based on this linguistic process: "I have named this town Villa de Navidad" ("Letter" 120).

Despite the prestige Columbus invested in this site, few university students today could readily identify La Navidad as the first European settlement in the Americas: one that, in Fernando's words, included a fortress along with "thirty-six men," "a great store of trading goods and provisions, arms and artillery, the ship's boat, carpenters, caulkers, and other men needed for making a settlement, namely, a physician, a tailor, a gunner, and the like" (86). Students often know the names of Columbus's ships—the *Santa María*, the *Pinta*, and the *Niña*—but they have rarely heard of the "first Christian town," the earliest American colony, the original "lettered city" of the imperial imagination, to use Ángel Rama's phrase.

Why? Because La Navidad was gone when Columbus returned in 1493. In the account of Diego Alvarez Chanca, the physician on the second voyage, first discovery becomes southern gothic as the ship arrives at Hispaniola.[8] The Spaniards find two corpses near the bank of the river and two more bodies upstream, and their ship is followed by a canoe of Taíno Indians who row away as soon as the Spaniards turn around and try to approach them. Columbus orders the lombards to be fired in

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hope of summoning the Spaniards, "but there [is] no reply" (Chanca 145). The next day Columbus searches the land and finds the fort burned and the "village demolished by fire" (146). Only at this point will Columbus and his men accept what they have been told by one of the captive interpreters, now a seasoned transatlantic voyager, fluent in Spanish, who has the information through his own channels of transmission: that the settlers at La Navidad are "all dead" (146), destroyed by those whom Columbus had earlier pronounced "the most timorous people in the world" ("Letter" 120). Their translator in chains has known the violent ending for some unspecified stretch of time, perhaps even since the founding of La Navidad—but so unsettling is this outcome of the first American settlement that, as Chanca puts it, "we had not believed the story" (146).

With this unnamed transatlantic interpreter as its initial narrator, the demise of La Navidad offers a kind of alternative origins story for what I am calling the "unsettlement of America," a phrase enlisted here in several interrelated ways. *Unsettlement* signifies in its literal sense as the destroying or thwarting of settlement along with the active attempt to discourage European colonization. In this sense it offers a heuristic for a wide range of texts related to settler colonialism in the Americas, including many of those that depend on and record the work of indigenous translators. But *unsettlement* also argues for the kinds of counterfactual historicist practices that work against the assumed inevitability of European settlement in the Americas and of the institutions and legacies of conquest. The story of La Navidad is but one of many consigned to relative obscurity by the history of those privileged, "successful" settlements that tend to organize our narratives of early (North) American literary history: Jamestown, Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island. What might a more disruptive narrative look like, one of American unsettlement, centered on the writings of failed settlements, lost colonies, disappeared colonists, obstructed and abandoned colonial efforts as well as willfully false and otherwise failed translations?

Such a narrative requires a reparative approach to a written colonial archive that we think we already know—an approach that seeks imaginative or speculative possibilities and their consequences rather than the mere exposure of flawed ideological positions. It requires moving beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion focused solely on the translation of empire and the imperial uses of translation—beyond a new-historicist conception of translation as the distorting projection of the colonizer onto the words of the colonized, a mere "fiction of translation" on "parade as linguistic coherence."[9] The exclusionary historical disposition of the written archive is itself a powerful lens onto what Diana Taylor has called the "repertoire" of subaltern history; as a part of that repertoire, the occluded history of indigenous knowledge production will become more visible to us when we reframe scenes of imperial translation as moments of strategic and motivated mistranslation underwriting a *longue durée* of American unsettlement.

The distinction between translation and mistranslation is, of course, an artificial and unstable one, as shown by a venerable genealogy of translation theory, from Walter Benjamin through the contemporary work of Susan Bassnett, Lawrence Venuti, Edwin Gentzler, and others. Yet even in the field of translation studies—until recently nearly invisible to American literary studies, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz has observed (85–87)—there remains a tendency to downplay the relevance of translation theory to the intellectual labor of indigenous interpreters in the colonial Americas, as if the role of hermeneutic subject were somehow naturally restricted to the translator of texts and not available to the interpreter between speaking subjects.[10] When indige-

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nous interpreters become the object of analysis, the critical focus seems to narrow rapidly, reducing them either to victims of "historically specifiable acts of translative violence" (Krupat 32) or to romanticized facilitators of Native-European harmony. The latter formulation is a staple of the proleptic United States story line, exemplified by the tale of Squanto (c. 1585–1622), who, though "initially the victim of a British kidnapping, seemed to forgive the horror of his abduction [and] helped to negotiate a treaty . . . which led to over fifty years of peaceful coexistence" (Gentzler 12–13). This sunny Anglo-American model of indigenous interpreter reasserts itself even in the scholarly realm most dedicated to dismantling the concept of the transparently faithful translation.

We need to reimagine the place of early American literature in the "translation zone," to borrow Emily Apter's phrase, where translation and mistranslation alike become "means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history" (6). Such a focus will bring transatlantic and hemispheric approaches into dialectical relation rather than privilege one by occluding the other (Bauer, *Cultural Geography*; Hill; Voigt). At the same time, putting unsettlement front and center in a reconstellated literary history speaks to the recent emphasis in Native American studies on the "outernational" or global dimensions of Native American history and culture, in which United States literary history becomes a short-lived part of a "longer and larger continental history that is by definition predominantly Native American" (Calloway 200). Mistranslation and unsettlement formed vital parts of the history of what Jace Weaver calls the "Red Atlantic"—a space created by the movement of "Native ideas, resources, and peoples themselves travel[ing] the Atlantic with regularity and [becoming] among the most basic defining components of Atlantic cultural exchange" (Weaver 422)—and thus also contributed to what Robert Warrior has aptly termed Native "intellectual trade routes" (*People* 181) and what Sean Kicummah Teuton has called the "international imaginary" produced by "indigenous cosmopolitanism." Such perspectives clarify the extent to which Columbus's interpreters—those who escaped, those who remained in chains, those who survived the voyage to Spain and back—participated in a process of transatlantic discovery and exchange that was not simply Native-European but also interindigenous, as the translators and would-be translators traveled from island to island and from the Americas to the European contact zones created by their arrival in Spain. From the moment they were directing the course of Columbus's voyage off Hispaniola, these translators were forming and participating in an interindigenous and hemispheric network of knowledge production whose contours and implications even compromised texts such as Columbus's *Diario* may help us discern.

Indeed, within the broad translation zone of the Red Atlantic it is indigenous *knowledge*, rather than culture, that comes to the fore, tempering the logic of multiculturalism, particularly the idiom of authenticity ever present in scholarly encounters with indigenous history and culture. In some sense multiculturalism and new historicism are flip sides of a single, highly durable coin: on one side we see the powerful, self-authenticating technology of European literacy, and on the other an abundance of Native cultural perspectives to be subsumed by a contested but still unified "American" literature (Bauer, "Early American Literature"; Brooks, "Digging" 234–37). Instead, by recognizing what Walter Mignolo calls the "double process of translation" by which indigenous epistemologies appropriate and transform rather than simply resist their colonial counterparts, we might look in the early modern Americas for the Native conceptual origins of the so-called New World, for the discernible traces of the acquisition and transmission of knowledge—in transatlantic

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and hemispheric, Native-European and interindigenous, contexts—and for the means by which this circuit of knowledge transmission came to shape historical outcomes and the historical record itself (Mignolo, *Darker Side* 224–25; Mignolo and Schiwy). To attend to the role of Native translators in the unsettlement of America is to unsettle our own modes of knowledge production, and to ask what we can learn from the demands that these translators make on the interpretive processes that guide us.

Notes

1. In the ethnohistory field, James Axtell, e.g., notes that Columbus's attempt at seizing linguistic power indicates no "cause for smugness in the language department" (23). At the same time a long tradition of historical studies has focused on Native translators as cultural brokers rather than (or sometimes in addition to) victims of imperial translation, presenting disparate models of translation in the process. Eric Hinderaker provides an excellent overview of this work. In literary studies, Joshua Bellin and Laura Mielke; Lisa Brooks, in *Common Pot* and "Digging"; Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss; Matt Cohen; Laura Donaldson; and Phillip Round, among others, have shown that technologies of literacy and print were not simply the overpowering imperial weapons once theorized by Tzvetan Todorov; they were elements of both "colonial Native subject formation" and the "syncretic literary practices" formed "within the Native spaces of communicative performance" (Round 11). Brooks, e.g., elaborates a "spatialized writing tradition" in northeastern North America that incorporated and altered European literacy on its arrival, instead of succumbing to it (*Common Pot* 12), while, as Sabine MacCormack observes, at the other end of the hemisphere indigenous "networks of communication . . . reached as far as the Inka frontiers and the Amazon valley" (106).

2. The debates on sovereignty in its legal, political, and literary dimensions are wide-ranging and complex. Most pertinent here is the work that contests the implied opposition of Western knowledge and Native culture (in particular, Lyons; Warrior, *People* and *Tribal Secrets*; Womack; and Weaver and, in Latin American studies, Mignolo, *Local Histories*, and Adorno, *Guáman Poma*)—a dichotomy that inevitably casts the history of invasion as a story of European intellectual development versus indigenous cultural resistance. Jace Weaver's essay on the "Red Atlantic" has been indispensable as a model for balancing the conceptual frame of Native political sovereignty with the interindigenous transmission of ideas and knowledge in the colonial era (and before).

3. Though I use the shorthand phrase *colonial American*, I am referring to the multiple and heterogeneous contexts of European colonialism in the Americas, which unfolded differently at different times and in disparate British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish milieus. The term *colonial* as applied to the Americas has been called into question by some scholars, as Ralph Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti note in their useful overview of the history of this debate; see also Michael Warner. My use of *colonial American* follows scholarship on settler colonialism by Patrick Wolfe and others as well as the work of Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein; Mignolo, in *Darker Side* and *Local Histories*; and José David Saldívar in assuming that the operations of colonialism in the early modern Americas constituted a dramatic historical shift, influencing without necessarily replicating all future forms of European (and United States) colonialism, while also producing a larger and varied coloniality of power that shaped and continues to shape modernity and the modern-colonial world in which we now live, inevitably making terms such as *modern* and *early modern* problematic.

4. On the textual status of Columbus's *Diario* and other writings, see Jane xxvi–xxxiii, xlv–xlvi; Hulme 17; and studies by Cummins; Fernández-Armesto; Henige; and Zamora, *Reading*.

5. Vilches discusses the mutual manipulation of trade depicted in *Diario* (70–73).

6. Colón 5. On the biography's questionable authorship, which has been attributed to Fernando (or Hernando) Colón, see Rumeu de Armas.

7. The 15 February letter, published in J. M. Cohen's edition of *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus* as "Letter of Columbus to Various Persons . . . ," was one of four versions announcing the news of the first voyage. This version survives in copies addressed to Luis de Santángel and Rafael Sánchez and is thus also called the Santángel-Sánchez letter to distinguish it from the 4 March "Letter to the Sovereigns," a copy of which was discovered and published in 1989 by Antonio Rumeu de Armas and later translated into English by Margarita Zamora, who also analyzes the discrepancies between the two versions and the history of their dissemination ("Christopher Columbus's 'Letter'").

8. As Nicolás Wey Gómez argues, Columbus understood his project as a discovery of the tropical South.

9. Cheyfitz 205. Alternatively, see Gentzler, citing Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, on the "fictional turn" in translation studies, which emphasizes the productive potential of fiction in theorizing translation (108–09). The Taíno and Cuban scholar José Barreiro's 1993 novel *The Indian Chronicles*, e.g., postulates a suppressed translation of the diary of Diego Colón, one of Columbus's Native translators.

10. Michael Cronin examines the marginalization of interpreters and the "specificity and sophistication of oral

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thinking" in translation studies; as Doris Sommer notes of modern courtrooms, "[I]nterpreters, true to their title, often shape the exchanges more than simply translate them" (102).

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