



“If Cahonaboa learns to speak ...”: Amerindian Voice in the Discourse of Discovery*

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The prevailing popular image of the Discovery of America is of an immediate and relentless projection of European power against the essentially passive native peoples of the Caribbean. This image conforms perfectly to the ideology and practice of discovery articulated in the “Capitulaciones de Santa Fe” (17 April 1492), the prediscovery contract between Columbus and the Crown of Castile.¹ In this document Columbus was commissioned to discover, take possession, govern, and trade in whatever islands and mainland he might find on his voyage. Remarkably absent from that document are any references to evangelization or diplomacy as goals of the enterprise. The “Capitulaciones” dictate political domination, through the use of force if necessary, in order to facilitate economic exploitation of oriental markets. A comparative reading of the contract and the *Diario* of the first voyage shows that Columbus’s account conformed to the letter and spirit of his contract with the Crown.² The rhetoric of domination employed by Columbus in relating the events of the first navigation responds to the mandates to discover, take possession, govern, and trade.³

The questions I am interested in exploring here concern the pragmatics of Columbian writing, established in the contract between Columbus and the Crown and, especially, how the exchange established in that document conditions the representation of Columbus’s dealings with the Arawaks of the Greater Antilles. I will not, however, be addressing directly the issue of communication between Columbus and the Amerindians. There already exists an interesting bibliography on that subject.⁴ The focus here will be on the question of agency, understood as acting or speaking in ways that influence the course of events or modify the attitudes and intentions of others.⁵ According to Homi Bhabha (1994, 185), an agent is one who is capable of deliberative, individuated action (of word or deed). For Bhabha’s postcolonial definition to be fully useful in a colonial context, however, it must also take into account the impact or results of acting. In exchanges predicated on the exercise of power, on the imposition of one’s will over another’s, the efficacy of action and the impact of words are at least as significant as the deliberative or intentional dimensions. It is typical of colonialist discourses to represent the colonized “other” as passive object of colonialist agency or inadequate subject incapable of effective action. This is evident throughout the Columbian texts, where the representation of the Amerindian as cowardly and/or deficient culturally and militarily predominates. In the accounts of discovery, the Arawaks usually appear as passive recipients of European action or as defective agents of failed, inadequate, or inappropriate

action. In Columbian writing the weather and the “malas lenguas”, not the Indians, are Columbus’s most formidable foes.

I find it helpful to think of agency in narrative as “voice” in the authoritative sense of “having a say”. In representations of interactions between self and other, voice reveals itself precisely at those moments when intentionality, or the subjective will, is allowed full expression. It is not so much a matter of “who speaks” in the text, as whose voice is heard, whose utterance counts, whose actions are represented as effective or significant, who expresses intention with authority. In Columbian writing, the absence, suppression, discounting, or denigration of the other’s voice constitutes a defining element of the discourse of discovery.

I will argue, however, that a close reading of the *Diario* of the first voyage at the very least muddies the waters of discovery. Although Columbus’s rhetoric underscores the capability of the Europeans to overwhelm the timid islanders and exploit their resources, the text also contains important evidence pointing to another side to the story of the discovery. The *Diario* records a series of interactions between the Europeans and the Amerindians that suggest both parties to the encounter recognized and exploited the opportunities and limitations of contact arising from their respective circumstances. Notably, these interactions appear to be founded on the principle of negotiation, not domination, in striking contrast to the prescription for dealing with the Indians typically found in Columbian writing. They initiate what could be described as an incipient diplomatic dialogue that contradicts the hegemonic rhetoric prevailing in Columbus’s communications with the Crown. In fact, the *Diario* initially presents two distinct and conflicting versions of Spanish–Arawak relations or, to put it another way, two very different ways of discovering the “other”. Remarkably, Columbus’s readers, detractors and hagiographers alike beginning with Ferdinand and Isabella down to the present day, largely have overlooked the implications of this dialogue.

One of the very first things the *Diario*’s narrator affirms about the Amerindians is that they must be taught to speak: “Yo plaziendo a Nuestro Señor levaré de aquí al tiempo de mi partida seis a Vuestras Altezas para que dependan hablar” (Columbus 1995, 111). Columbus brought an interpreter on the first voyage, Luis de Torres, who spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and some Arabic. But it must not have taken very long to realize that the Arawak tongue spoken by the islanders did not resemble any language known to the Europeans. This remark, denying the Arawaks speech simply because the Europeans could not understand them, seems absurd at first glance. The *Diario* also asserts with equal confidence that they had no religion or government. It is indeed tempting to deride Columbus for those observations by attributing them to a presumed ethnocentrism that rendered him incapable of comprehending anything about the lands and peoples of the Caribbean except what he could interpret in terms of his own culture. But if one reads beyond the remark in the entry for 12 October to consider the denial of Arawak speech in Columbian discourse as a question not of communication but of agency, what seems like simply a racist remark grows in complexity and significance. The phrase “to learn to speak” has important political and diplomatic connotations here and elsewhere in Columbian writing

that scholars of the Discovery by and large have ignored. The *Diario* makes it clear, page after page, that such a statement should not be interpreted literally. Columbus repeatedly asserts that he “speaks” with the Indians wherever he encounters them, reporting to his readers what they told him or, at least, what he understood them to say, in apparent literal contradiction of his earlier statement. Arawak speech is usually conveyed in third-person paraphrase, but occasionally in virtual first person, by which I mean that although it is represented in the grammatical third person, the context suggests quotation. At other times Columbus describes and interprets gestures, signs, and actions. “To speak” in this context obviously means more than simply the ability to express oneself orally, emblematically, or deictically. It refers especially to the notion of having a voice or say, that is, the capability to communicate one’s agency. The Arawaks are not incapable of communicating in Columbian writing, but what they do lack is the authority to speak, to make themselves heard. If Cahonaboa finally learns to speak, the passage just quoted implies, it can only be to divulge his great knowledge of the land.

Historical events confirm that Columbus and the Arawaks communicated sufficiently during the first voyage to engage in a lively trade. It is also evident that more complex forms of communication were achieved, making it possible for the Admiral to construct a fortress he called La Navidad, to house some 40 men he would leave behind in the good graces of the local cacique. The remarkable exchange between Columbus and the cacique Guacanagari that made La Navidad a historical reality is recorded in the dramatic entries for the days 25–30 December 1492, relating the *Santa María* disaster and its aftermath. On the night of 25 December, the *Santa María*, largest of the three discovery vessels, hit a sand bar and became dislodged from its mooring. It then ran aground on a reef in the Bay of Caracol, leaving the ship useless for further navigation. The surrounding territory belonged to Guacanagari, with whom Columbus had been trading for the previous two days. Witnessing the grounding, Guacanagari immediately offered assistance in unloading and transporting the contents of the ship and lodging and feeding the displaced crew. On 26 December the *Diario* records a complex interaction between Columbus and Guacanagari, and then another one on the 30th, involving Columbus, Guacanagari, and five other caciques invited by Guacanagari. These interactions are represented with all the trappings of diplomatic festivities, including lavish descriptions of the rich and elegant attire of the participants, the exchange of gifts, and the sharing of meals. Guacanagari boasted, or so Columbus interpreted it, that he could supply him with “cuanto oro quisiese” [as much gold as he might want] (1995, 179) and the Admiral in turn put on a display of European firepower, to the great astonishment of his native hosts.⁶ This ostentation of wealth and generosity by the caciques and military strength by Columbus took place as the Europeans were constructing a fort in which to house the men who would have to remain on the island.

Although Columbus plays it in the *Diario* as if Divine Providence had intervened in the *Santa María* disaster, turning the accident into a boon for Spain, the fact was that the situation was dire for Columbus and his men. Not only had the largest of the three ships been lost, but the *Pinta*, captained by

Columbus's nemesis Martín Alonso Pinzón, had strayed from the fleet to explore on its own, in open defiance of the Admiral, and Pinzón had not been heard from since. Columbus was left with only the *Niña*, smallest of the three vessels. The predicament the Europeans found themselves in must have been evident to Guacanagari as well, for he not only offered immediate assistance but sent his relatives to console a weeping Columbus with promises of even more generous aid (1995, 178).

Focusing on the descriptions of the ceremonial-like interactions between Columbus and the caciques, historian Luis Ramos Gómez has concluded that the Admiral must have entered into formal pacts with Guacanagari and his allies on 26 and 30 December 1492 (1993, 142–63). The idea is intriguing, because of its implications and because the enigmatic textual evidence both contradicts and supports the possible existence of pacts. Columbus himself makes no explicit reference to any agreements with Guacanagari anywhere in his writings. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue against Ramos Gómez. The ceremonies as described in the *Diario* strongly suggest negotiations between Columbus and the native chieftains of an economic and military nature. Moreover, based on the wealth of detail provided in the text, it is reasonable to conclude not only that agreements were reached but that they contained some or all of the following elements. Columbus would erect a fort in Guacanagari's territory to house the men he would leave behind upon his return to Spain. They would be heavily armed and charged with the defense of the cacique and his allies against their enemies, identified by Columbus as "caribes". The contingent would be under Guacanagari's authority in Columbus's absence. Guacanagari, in turn, would collect gold for Columbus and help provide for the regiment. The degree of confidence Columbus had in his friendship with the cacique is evident in the fact that he chose to situate the fortress within virtual earshot of the Arawak village, expressing all the while complete faith in Guacanagari's benevolence and cooperation.⁷

Let us have a closer look at a key passage in the *Diario* entry for 26 December, the day Columbus presumably entered into negotiations with Guacanagari. The scene opens with the arrival of the cacique who has come to console Columbus with the promise of help in salvaging the contents of the disabled ship. Meanwhile, certain Indians arrive with gold to trade. Guacanagari, observing how the sight of gold cheers the Admiral, offers to give him as much of the precious metal as he may desire. Columbus then invites him to dine on board. We pick up the action at the conclusion of the meal:

El rey comió en la caravela con el Almirante y después salió con él en tierra, donde hizo al Almirante mucha honra y le dio colación de dos o tres maneras de ajes y con camarones y caça y otras viandas qu'ellos tenían, y de su pan que llamavan caçabí; dende lo llevó a ver unas verduras de árboles junto a las casas. Y andavan con él bien mill personas, todos desnudos; el señor ya traía camisa y guantes, qu'el Almirante le avía dado, y por los guantes hizo mayor fiesta que por cosa de las que le dio. En su comer, con su honestidad y hermosa manera de limpieza, se mostrava bien ser de linaje. Después de aver comido, que tardó buen rato estar a la mesa, truxeron ciertas yervas con que se fregó mucho las manos; creyó el Almirante que lo hacía para ablandarlas, y diéronle

aguamanos. Después que acabaron de comer [Guacanagari] llevó a la playa al Almirante, y el Almirante enbió por un arco de turquesco y un manojo de flechas, y el Almirante hizo tirar a un hombre de su compañía que sabía d'ello; y ese señor, como no sepa qué sean armas, porque no las tienen ni las usan, le pareció gran cosa, aunque diz [el Almirante] que el comienzo fue sobre el habla de los de Caniba, qu'ellos llaman caribes, que los vienen a tomar, y traen arcos y flechas sin hierro ... El Almirante le dixo por señas que los Reyes de Castilla mandarían destruir a los caribes y que a todos se los mandarían traer las manos atadas. Mandó el Almirante tirar una lombarda y una espingarda, y viendo el efecto que su fuerza hazían y lo que penetravan, quedó maravillado, y cuando su gente oyó los tiros cayeron todos en tierra. Truxeron al Almirante una gran carátula que tenía grandes pedaços de oro en las orejas y en los ojos y en otras partes, la cual le dio con otras joyas de oro qu'el mismo rey había puesto al Almirante en la cabeza y al pescueço; y a otros cristianos que con él estaban dio también muchas. El Almirante rescibió mucho plazer y consolación d'estas cosas que vía, y se le templó la angustia y pena que avía rescibido y tenía de la pérdida de la nao, y cognosció que Nuestro Señor avía hecho encallar allí la nao porque hiziesse allí asiento. (1995, 179–80)

The entry for 26 December concludes with a touch of Columbus's characteristic millenarian zeal: he expects that upon his return to La Navidad from Castile he will find nothing less than “un tonel de oro, que avrían resgatado los que avía de dexar, y que avrían encontrado la mina del oro y la espeçería, y aquello en tanta cantidad que los Reyes antes de tres años prendiesen y adereçasen para ir a conquistar la Casa Sancta” (1995, 181).

With the construction of the fortress well under way, another ceremony takes place on 30 December.

Salió el Almirante a comer a tierra, y llegó a tiempo que avían venido cinco reyes subjectos a aqueste que se llamava Guacanagari, todos con sus coronas, representando muy buen estado, que dize el Almirante a los Reyes que “Sus Altezas ovieran plazer de ver la manera d'ellos.” En llegando en tierra, el rey vino a resçevir al Almirante y lo llevó de braços a la misma casa de ayer, a do tenían un estrado y sillas en que asentó el Almirante, y luego se quitó la corona de la cabeça y se la puso al Almirante, y el Almirante se quitó del pescueço un collar de buenos alaqueques y cuentas muy hermosas de muy lindos colores, que parecía muy bien en toda parte, y se lo puso a él, y se desnudó un capuz de fina grana, que aquel día se avía vestido, y se lo vistió, y enbió por unos borzegués de color que le hizo calçar, y le puso en el dedo un grande anillo de plata, porque avían dicho que vieron una sortija de plata a un marinero y que avía hecho mucho por ella. Quedó muy alegre y muy contento, y dos de aquellos reyes qu'estavan con él vinieron adonde el Almirante estava con él y truxeron al Almirante dos grandes plastas de oro, cada uno la suya. (1995, 183)

The description of the ceremony is interrupted rather abruptly at this point, to record that certain Indians arrived bringing news of the siting of the wayward *Pinta* and Columbus immediately returns to his ship.

One of the most notable things about these two passages is that there is no explicit reference to an agreement or any explanation regarding the significance

of the exchange. Indeed nowhere in the surviving Columbian texts is there any acknowledgment of agreements between Columbus and the caciques of Hispaniola. Yet the overtly ceremonial and symbolic character of the interactions clearly implies negotiation. Consider, if you will, the following discursive characteristics of these passages: (a) the striking parallelism in the actions of the respective parties; (b) the reciprocal nature of the exchange; (c) the commensurability of the exchange of gifts (in striking contrast to Columbus's usual practice of trading objects Europeans considered of little value when bartering with the Indians); and (d) the dialogical nature of the interactions. This last aspect is particularly noteworthy since dialogue is seldom the reported mode of communication between Columbus and the Arawaks in the *Diario*. Columbus typically recorded simple requests for information and his own interpretation of the Arawak response. Only in these two passages does the text record the other's voice. Guacanagari's agency is obvious in these passages. He initiates action, sets the tone and parameters of the exchange, and even controls Columbus's actions guiding him through the various steps of the ceremony.

Modern ethnology of the Caribbean basin facilitates speculation on the probable symbolic significance of this exchange and its importance in establishing status and promoting alliances.⁸ In native Caribbean cultures today, masks are associated with the shamanic aspect of elite rule. Shamans have the ability to see realities hidden to others. Thus the mask given to Columbus could have had the purpose of allowing Columbus to "see" through the golden eyes of Guayahona, the mythical ancestor of the chieftains of Hispaniola.⁹ Columbus may be seen as assimilated to the chiefly category through this gift, thereby establishing his status as an equal in relation to Guacanagari and thus the basis for an alliance. The symbolic value of the brilliant metals that predominate in the exchange is also connected to shamanic sources of chiefly power. In particular *guanín*, a rare, naturally occurring form of gold-silver-copper alloy, was a symbol of cacical authority (Stevens-Arroyo 1988, 69). Thus the metal objects Columbus typically bartered (brass trinkets, bells, etc.) and the silver ring he gave to Guacanagari on 30 December established his status in the negotiations as well as a mutual indebtedness and reciprocity in the eyes of his Arawak hosts. One might also see in the ceremonial character of these interactions a desire on the part of Guacanagari to control Columbus through making him conform to indigenous categories and practices. That Columbus accepts these gifts, especially the mask, may have implied to Guacanagari an acceptance of the basis of his cacical authority.

The significance of the exchange for Columbus, on the other hand, seems easier to deduce. With the loss of the *Santa María* he was left with an excess of some forty men for the return voyage. According to testimony in the *Diario*, he had no intention of establishing a settlement before circumstances (Columbus would say Divine Providence) forced it on him: "porque él iba siempre con intención de descubrir y no parar en parte más de un día, si no era por falta de los vientos" (1995, 180). Moreover, his anguished reaction to the loss of the ship, before he seized upon the providential interpretation of the event, suggests that he perceived his situation as desperate. Reaching an agreement with Guacanagari that would allow him to leave the men in relative safety was not

just convenient, it was imperative. The ultimate terms of the agreement were probably no more than barely palatable to Columbus as they were not without significant risk and potential damage to the enterprise. In leaving the men at La Navidad, an armed fortress, with a defensive role to play on behalf of Guacanagari, he had obtained a measure of security for them. In addition, he hoped to derive considerable economic benefits for the service to Guacanagari, since the cacique had promised to provide Columbus with as much gold as he could want. Greed and desperation seemed to find a joint solution in the apparent alliance with the cacique of Marién. But Columbus could not have been insensitive to the dangers to which he was exposing his men. By leaving a small contingent serving essentially as mercenaries, in total ignorance of the land, the culture, and the social and political milieu in which they would be forced to live for an indefinite amount of time, he was putting them at great risk. The terms of this pact must have seemed far from ideal to Columbus. For it must have been obvious that although La Navidad was looked upon with benevolence by Guacanagari and his allies, at least for the time being, it would certainly be viewed with suspicion and even rancor by his enemies.

What was in it for Guacanagari? It is more difficult to say with any degree of certainty because Columbus provides the only information we have. It seems evident, nevertheless, that the cacique of Marién was courting Columbus's favor. It is also likely that military support was sought out by Guacanagari, or at least readily accepted, in exchange for allowing the Spaniards to remain in his province. We have no way of knowing what the balance of power was among the native chieftains of Hispaniola in 1492, but it seems clear that Guacanagari seized on an alliance with Columbus as a way of altering it in his favor. In the two instances when Columbus displayed European firepower (26 December and 2 January) for Guacanagari, the *Diario* links the display to discussions regarding the cacique of Marién's fear of "caribe" aggression.¹⁰ La Navidad was not a sovereign settlement then, as Columbus claimed elsewhere, but was politically and economically dependent on Guacanagari, who remained lord of the land and therefore in a position of superiority in the alliance with Columbus.¹¹ Columbus must have understood this from the beginning, as is evidenced in his commending his lieutenants, Escobedo and Arana, to Guacanagari upon embarking on the return voyage to Spain (1995, 185).

It should be noted that the exchange represented in these passages is inscribed primarily in the idiom of symbolic action, reflecting the necessarily emblematic and deictic nature of the communication between Amerindians and Europeans during the first voyage. Yet it is remarkable how effective a form of communication it was. In all likelihood there were misunderstandings on both sides, yet in spite of them and in the absence of any possibility of real linguistic communication, Guacanagari and Columbus nevertheless were able to establish a common ground based on the identification of complementary political, economic, and military interests. Moreover, they managed to seal their friendship through intricate ceremonial prestations and counterprestations that proved quite satisfying to both parties.

The vital results of Columbus's exchange with Guacanagari notwithstanding, the textual evidence suggests that the Admiral altered their significance in his

communications with the Crown by suppressing the connection between the La Navidad and his negotiations with Guacanagari. In the *Diario* entry for 26 December, immediately after relating the first ceremonial exchange, Columbus boasts of his confidence regarding the security and profitability of La Navidad: “Agora tengo ordenado de hazer una torre y fortaleza todo muy bien y una grande cava, no porque crea que aya menester por esta gente, porque tengo por dicho que con esta gente que yo traigo sojugaría toda esta isla, la cual creo qu’es mayor que Portugal y más gente al doblo, mas son desnudos y sin armas y muy cobardes fuera de remedio” (1995, 180). The rhetoric of denigration so evident in this passage is fashioned to support Columbus’s superiority with respect to his hosts. Yet this justification suppresses several important aspects of his interaction with Guacanagari, either explicitly stated or strongly implied earlier in the text, that belie Columbus’s arrogance. They include La Navidad’s role in defending Guacanagari and his people from enemy attack (a prominent topic in his discussions with the cacique), the mutually beneficial and reciprocal nature of the relationship he entered into with the cacique, and Guacanagari’s ultimate authority over the territory and the Spanish contingent. These are precisely the aspects of the relationship that could explain the otherwise inexplicable reference to eliciting the “love” of the Indians among the reasons that justify the construction of the fortress.

In the “Letter to the Sovereigns of 4 March 1493” announcing the discovery, the existence of the fortress at La Navidad, by then a *fait accompli*, again is severed from its original context in the negotiations with Guacanagari. In fact no mention is made anywhere in this important text of the protracted interactions between the cacique of Marién and Columbus, despite the explicit reference to the *Santa María* disaster that occasioned them. This suppression of the negotiated status of the Spanish settlement forced Columbus to provide a different explanation. In the letter of 4 March, the “village” of La Navidad is given the status of a Spanish possession and the sovereignty and security of the Spanish settlement is emphasized. Moreover, the passage concludes with the ironic and mocking remark about Guacanagari’s happy acceptance of the new state of affairs:

[dejé] en esta [isla Española] en posesión de la villa de la Navidad, la gente que yo traía en la nao, y algunas de las caravelas, probeídos de mantenimientos para más de un año y mui mucha artillería y mui sin peligro de nadie, antes con mucha amistad del rrey de ay, el qual se preçiaua de me llamar y tener por hermano; el qual todo amostrava de aver en la maior dicha del mundo. (Zamora 1993, 185)

The “Letter to Santángel” distorts the circumstances leading to the construction of La Navidad even further by claiming that Columbus had taken possession of a large town where he had erected a fortress, “he tomado posesión de una villa grande a la cual puse nombre de la Villa de Navidad, y en ella he fecho fuerza y fortaleza” (1995, 224). The astonishing implication here is that not only was La Navidad fortress a sovereign entity but that Guacanagari’s village had been taken for Spain as well.¹²

Columbus's preferred explanation for the existence of La Navidad is Divine Providence. On 26 December, at the height of his desperation at the loss of the ship, he claimed that God made the *Santa María* run aground "porque hiziesse allí assiento". The *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, the first dictionary of the Spanish language, dating from the early seventeenth century, defines the verb *assentar* as to settle with authority, to establish one's residence. Thus, the best English translations of the *Diario* render the passage as "so that he would found a settlement there".¹³ However, the same verb could also signify to accord or agree. It is used in royal documents of the period in precisely this sense.¹⁴ The nominal form, *assiento*, is also defined in the *Tesoro* as agreement or accord. Clearly, then, there is room for speculation regarding the significance of *assiento* in the *Diario* entry for 26 December. Columbus, who had just realized that the *Santa María* was irremediably grounded, was in the process of relating his first and very amicable encounter with Guacanagari. The noun *assiento* makes its appearance on the heels of Columbus's expression of relief at the friendliness of the Indians nestled in the context of his providentialist interpretation of the potentially disastrous loss of the *Santa María*. "Accord" would be a reasonable alternative translation for *assiento* in this context were it not for the fact that there is an abrupt shift in the tone and tenor of the narration precisely at this point in the entry. While relating the amicable interaction with Guacanagari, Columbus inexplicably gives the astonishing justification of the construction of the fortress at La Navidad for the protection of the Spaniards. The obvious contradiction between the description of the friendliness and generosity of Guacanagari and the construction of a fortification to protect the Spaniards is glossed over by Columbus with the lame comment, "mas es razón que se haga esta torre y se esté como se a destar estando tan lexos Vuestras Altezas y porque cognozcan el ingenio de la gente de Vuestras Altezas y lo que pueden hazer, porque con amor y temor le[s] obedezcan" (1995, 180). But the specific reason given for the construction of the fort—"so that with love and fear they [the Indians] will obey them [the Spaniards]"—is noteworthy on two counts: for its omission of any mention of the fort's role in defending Guacanagari from his enemies and for the emphasis it places on the intimidation and subjugation of Guacanagari and his people.

The apostrophe to Ferdinand and Isabella explaining and justifying the fortress at La Navidad is a turning point in the *Diario*. It not only contradicts the tone and tenor of the earlier passages describing Columbus's friendship with Guacanagari but undermines the diplomatic character of the encounter with an aggressive, even antagonistic rhetoric. Ultimately, the contradiction in question derives from the seamless juxtaposition in the narration of two distinct and ideologically incompatible discursive instances. Columbus's dialogue and negotiations with the Arawaks in the wake of the *Santa María* disaster recognizes Guacanagari and his allies as political equals. However, his dialogue with the Crown interprets and justifies the events and actions of the final days of December 1492 along hegemonic lines.

That two opposing discourses are conflated in the narrative need not necessarily give rise to an absolute contradiction. For instance, a metadiscourse interpreting the significance of Columbus's interactions with the Arawaks in

light of the circumstances and in relation to the larger goals of the enterprise could have been provided in the text at this point. However, doing so would have necessitated an admission of vulnerability by Columbus and the recognition of his dependence on and subordination to the cacique of Marién. Moreover, to recognize Guacanagari's authority over the territory would have undermined Columbus's own authority and privileges as defined in his contract with the Crown.¹⁵ The "Capitulaciones de Santa Fe" dictated both the projection of Spanish hegemony in any lands to be discovered and the concomitant rewards that would accrue to Columbus upon his return to Spain if he were successful. An admission that La Navidad did not constitute a sovereign Spanish settlement but was instead the product of an agreement negotiated with a legitimate foreign government that left Columbus subject to its authority would have undermined both the ideological underpinnings of the enterprise of discovery and the terms of the contract he had negotiated with the Crown. At this critical juncture in the *Diario* Columbus apparently opted to suppress the link between La Navidad and his negotiations with Guacanagari in favor of a hegemonic fiction. In his version, Divine Providence had provided, through the loss of the *Santa María*, the opportunity to establish a sovereign Spanish settlement with the capability to intimidate and subjugate the native inhabitants. Thus, the discourse of diplomatic encounter initiated on Christmas Day, 1492, was abandoned in favor of the discourse of discovery of the "Capitulaciones de Santa Fe", dictating the imposition of Spanish hegemony over any islands and mainlands to be discovered in the Ocean Sea.

For the conclusion of the story of La Navidad we must turn to the *Libro copiadador* accounts of the second voyage. In 1493, communication between Columbus and the natives changed dramatically. On the second voyage, Columbus had Arawak interpreters along, captives from the first voyage who had learned Spanish in Spain to serve as "lenguas" for the Admiral. The nature of this voyage was also significantly different from that of the first. The enterprise that began as an expedition of primarily nautical discovery and trade was transformed on the Second Voyage into one of large-scale colonization. In 1493 Columbus brought with him seventeen vessels carrying some 1,500 colonists, livestock, and supplies for an indefinite stay. The *relaciones* of 1494–1496, not surprisingly, focus on Columbus's activities on dry land, including the establishment of settlements and the exploration of the inhabited interiors of the three Greater Antilles, Hispaniola (Haiti), Cuba, and Jamaica. These texts abound in references to exchanges, both friendly and hostile, with the natives.

The most interesting exchange related in the accounts of the second voyage is the reunion between Columbus and Guacanagari. Upon Columbus's return to Hispaniola after almost a year's absence, he found the fort at La Navidad burned to the ground and no survivors. The explanation for the demise of the fortress and its occupants is provided by Columbus in his "Letter to the Crown of January, 1494". According to the Admiral, Guacanagari blamed one of his enemies, Cahonaboa of Cibao, cacique of a neighboring province, for the destruction of the fort and the death of the Spaniards. Furthermore, he blamed misconduct, dissension, and insubordination among the men of La Navidad for their vulnerability and ultimate susceptibility to attack. As Guacanagari told

Columbus “por palabra y señas”, their downfall began when a faction led by Pedro and Escobedo disregarded his admonitions and entreaties, setting out for the interior province of Cibao, home of Cahonaboa and territory reputed to be rich in gold. Those remaining at La Navidad had devoted themselves to a life of debauchery and were ambushed by Cahonaboa as they slept.¹⁶ Columbus adds, in interpretation of Guacanagari’s account, that the men at La Navidad were unable to control their arrogance, greed for gold, and lust for the native women, causing them to disregard the orders and instructions he himself had given them. Other sources for the second voyage suggest that these orders included staying together as a unit, avoiding attached women and conflicts with the Indians, and remaining always within the confines of the territory of Marién.¹⁷

In the letter of 1494 Columbus also states that his suspicions were aroused by both contradictory physical evidence and irregularities in Guacanagari’s story, for example the cacique’s claim that he had tried to help the men in the fort when Cahonaboa attacked and had been wounded. No evidence of any wound was evident on his body upon examination by the fleet’s surgeon, Columbus noted.¹⁸ Columbus also speculates that rivalries among the men of the Navidad contingent may have resulted in murders of Spaniards by Spaniards, pointing out that the Indians’ general cowardice made such an attack on the fort seem implausible. Nevertheless, the Admiral decided to overlook the inconsistencies in Guacanagari’s account and his own suspicions and accept Guacanagari’s story at face value. No explanations are given for his faith in the accuracy of Guacanagari’s account, but it seems reasonable to surmise that Columbus welcomed the excuse to move against a native lord who was reputed to possess major sources of gold. This decision would have profound implications for European–Arawak relations on Hispaniola, altering the course and nature of the discovery enterprise itself.

With Guacanagari’s encouragement, Columbus decided to proceed to the interior province of Cibao, to capture and punish Cahonaboa. He succeeded in taking him prisoner through a ruse. The cacique was tricked into putting on shackles and was carried away to a ship anchored in the Bay of Caracol, where he would remain imprisoned awaiting the voyage to Spain. Cahonaboa attempted to negotiate for his freedom, but when that failed open rebellion broke out against the Europeans. Outgunned, the natives devised an ingenious strategy to repel the invaders. They tried to starve them into leaving by destroying their own crops upon which the Spaniards depended to supplement rations they had brought from Spain. Tragically this strategy not only failed to rid the island of the foreigners—it backfired. The weather did not cooperate and the subsequent harvest was meager and late. Thousands of Amerindians died of hunger, far more than were killed in open warfare.

The consequences of moving against Cahonaboa were not as devastating but nevertheless significant for the colonizers. The starving natives were in no condition to trade with or pay tribute to Columbus. As the harvest collapsed, the sources of fresh food dried up for the Europeans. Complaints began to surface among the settlers. The promises of large quantities of gold withered in the absence of indigenous laborers to work the mines. The resentment against the

colonizers spread and intensified in the face of growing abuses against the Indians by the frustrated settlers. In March 1495 the cacique Guatiganá managed to assemble an army against Columbus, who repelled the attack with the help of his old ally Guacanagari. The idyll of discovery, if ever there was one, was over. The settlers' dissatisfaction with Columbus also surfaced during this period, breaking into open rebellion against his government on several occasions throughout the spring of 1499. Columbus would pay the political price back in Spain, losing his authority on the island to the Crown's appointee, Francisco de Bobadilla, who was sent to Hispaniola with the unlimited powers of chief justice. Bobadilla arrested Columbus and returned him to Spain in October of 1500.

The case of La Navidad constitutes the most sustained and complex encounter between Europeans and Amerindians related in the writings of Columbus. Spanning the first and second voyages, it provides what is perhaps our best opportunity to examine one of the most elusive and least studied aspects of Columbian writing—the question of native agency or what I have termed the Amerindian “voice” in the discourse of discovery. Historically, the La Navidad incident quickly transformed Amerindians from essentially passive recipients of European action into important players in the exchange. In Guacanagari's self-interested diplomacy and Cahonaboa's alleged attack, there is ample evidence to support the existence of significant native agency and resistance. The analysis of the encounter between Columbus and Guacanagari in the accounts of the first and second voyages has shown that Guacanagari was indisputably an agent in the exchange. Not only did he demonstrate the capability for deliberative and individuated action in assessing the possibilities and limitations the circumstances offered him to advance his interests and those of his people but, more importantly, he was capable of effective action to secure the desired results. Despite the spin Columbus gave to his actions in the closing days of 1492, the fact remains that he left some forty men under the authority and at the service of Guacanagari. Moreover, in the critical first days of the second voyage, it was Guacanagari's representation of the events that moved Columbus to the disastrous decision to proceed against Cahonaboa. In a single stroke of brilliant rhetoric, Guacanagari secured his position as ally of Columbus and convinced the Admiral to attack his rival.

Disregarding his obligation to historical accuracy in the official record, Columbus presented a very different version of events in his accounts to the Crown. The rhetoric of discovery employed by Columbus effectively altered historical fact, replacing it with a hegemonic fiction that left him in possession of the Arawak village and the fortress he constructed nearby. By suppressing the link between La Navidad and his negotiations with Guacanagari, Columbian discourse of discovery also initiated the systematic suppression of the Amerindian voice. From this point on the exchange of the Indies became a dialogue exclusive to Europeans, where the only voices to be heard ultimately were those of Columbus and his sovereigns. The Amerindian voice in the discourse of discovery would hardly be heard again. As Columbus himself anticipated when he captured Cahonaboa with the intention of sending him back to Spain, if Cahonaboa learned to speak (Spanish?), it would be only to divulge his great knowledge of the land to the colonizers: “Yo enbió a V. Al. a Cahonaboa y su hermano. Este es el mayor cacique de la isla y más esforcado

y de ingenio. Si éste depende de hablar, dirá todas las cosas d'esta tierra mejor que nadie, por que no ay cosa que de toda suerte qu' él no sepa" (1995, 330). Cahonaboa and his brother never made the voyage to Spain. They drowned when the ship that was their prison sank in a storm while anchored awaiting departure for Europe.

Notes

* This article is dedicated to Enrique Pupo-Walker.

- ¹ On the language of the "Capitulaciones de Santa Fe" see Kadir (1992, 67–76). The text of the document can be found in Rumeu de Armas (1985, 52–53). For an analysis of the impact of the "Capitulaciones" on the ideology of gender in the discourse of discovery see Zamora (1993, 152–79).
- ² For a discussion of the *Diario* in dialogue with the "Capitulaciones" see Zamora (1993, 27–28).
- ³ There exists a pre-discovery document, Columbus's so-called "passport", suggesting some sort of religious dimension to the enterprise. However, the purpose and weight of this document within the discovery mandate is difficult to determine. Its influence in the discourse of discovery is minor, as Columbus strives in the *Diario* and elsewhere to respond to the hegemonic mandate of the "Capitulaciones de Santa Fe". The text of the passport is quoted by Jane (1930, lxx): "Mittimus in presenciarum nobilem virum Christoforum Colon cum tribus caravelis armatis per maria oceanica ad partes Indie pro aliquibus causis et negotiis servitium Dei ac fidem orthodoxe concernentibus."
- ⁴ On the nature and scope of communication between Columbus and the Arawaks see Calvi (1991). Interesting arguments on the larger issue can be found in Todorov (1984) and Greenblatt (1991).
- ⁵ On the question of agency in narrative see Bremond (1973).
- ⁶ Unless noted otherwise, all English translations are my own.
- ⁷ The following remarks appear in the *Diario*: "Mostró mucho amor el cacique al Almirante y gran sentimiento en su partida. ... Dexó en aquella isla Española ... treinta y nueve hombres con la fortaleza, y diz que mucho amigos de aquel rey Guacanagari" (1995, 185).
- ⁸ The following interpretation of the possible ethnological significance of the exchange is based on conversations with my colleague at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Caribbean anthropologist Neil Whitehead.
- ⁹ For a discussion of the significance of gold placed in the eye sockets of Taíno *cemí* effigies see Stevens-Arroyo (1988, 66).
- ¹⁰ The controversial questions of ethnic identities and the native political situation in the Caribbean prior to the arrival of Columbus are discussed in several essays in Whitehead (1995). See especially Hoff, Sued Badillo, Hulme, and Whitehead in that collection. Stevens-Arroyo suggests that Taíno caciques used Island Karina (Carib) mercenaries from the Lesser Antilles against their Taíno rivals (1988, 50–51).
- ¹¹ In the "Letter to Santángel" Columbus claims that he took possession of a large "villa" (town) he named Navidad, where he constructed a fortress. In the "Letter to the Sovereigns" of 4 March 1493 he makes a similar claim that he left people in possession of the village of La Navidad. Las Casas's version of the status of La Navidad contradicts this claim. In the *Historia de las Indias* he states unequivocally that the Navidad contingent was placed under Guacanagari's authority: "quedaban en su tierra y debajo de su señorío" (1951, 203).
- ¹² For a comparative discussion of the "Letter to Santángel" and the "Letter to the Sovereigns" see Zamora (1993, 9–20).
- ¹³ The most reliable translation of the *Diario* is that of Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. (1989). It includes a transcription of Las Casas's abstract (287).
- ¹⁴ A notable example is the "Capitulación oficial de Granada" of 1491, the agreement between the Catholic sovereigns and the muley Boabdil regarding the surrender of Granada: "Idem, se asienta y conuerda, que el día que entreguen a sus altezas la Alhambra y el Alhazán, las puertas y torres de la dicha Alhambra y el Albaicín, y los arrabales y las puertas de sus torres, y las otras puertas de las tierras de la dicha ciudad, según queda dicho, sus altezas mandarán

- entregar al rey de Granada su hijo, que está en poder de sus altezas en Moclín” (Díaz-Plaja 1984, 294).
- ¹⁵ For the confirmation of specific privileges and political authority by the Crown see also the “Carta de Merced” in Rumeu de Armas (1985, 239–41) and the “Carta real de confirmación,” also in Rumeu de Armas (249–53). Columbus was promised and granted, among other titles, the admiralty, governorship, and viceroyalty of any islands and mainlands he might discover.
- ¹⁶ For a summary of Guacanagari’s story regarding the fate of La Navidad see Columbus (1989, 455–58).
- ¹⁷ See Las Casas (1951) bk. 1, ch. 63 and Fernández de Oviedo (1959) bk. 2, ch. 6.
- ¹⁸ The account of Dr. Chanca, a physician accompanying Columbus on the second voyage, corroborates Columbus’s suspicions. He was present when Columbus asked Guacanagari if his surgeon and physician could inspect the wound and describes the episode thus: “Estábamos presentes yo y un zurugiano de armada; entonces el Almirante dijo al dicho Guacamarí que nosotros eramos sabios de las enfermedades de los hombres que nos quisiese mostrar la herida: el respondió que le placía, para lo cual yo dije que sería necesario, si pudiese, que saliese fuera de casa, porque con la mucha gente estaba oscura e no se podría ver bien; lo cual él hizo luego, creo que más de empacho que de gana; arrimándose a él salió fuera. Después de asentado, llegó el zurugiano a él e comenzó de desligarle: entonces dijo al Almirante que era ferida fecha con ciba, que quiere decir con piedra. Después que fue desatada llegamos a tentarle. Es cierto que no tenía más mal en aquella que en la otra, aunque él hacía del raposo que le dolía mucho” (Major 1978, 55–56).

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