This article offers a critique of some of the presuppositions which inform scholarship on colonial Spanish American satire. Specifically, I attempt to question an assumption that I take to inform much of that scholarship, namely the notion that satire is a discourse that endlessly fractures and subverts the hierarchies and norms out of which the order of viceregal societies was constructed. By focusing on the work of the seventeenth-century satirist of Lima society, Juan del Valle y Caviedes, I investigate the hypothesis that an apparently critical discourse might simultaneously function to re-stabilize the coordinates of the power structure of viceregal Peru, even as it seems to question and fragment them. In order to develop this line of analysis I offer a reading of Caviedes’s poem “Coloquio entre una vieja y Periquillo a una procesión celebrada en esta ciudad,” seeking to demonstrate how this work brings to light some of the problems involved in reading colonial Spanish American satire.¹

I argue that Caviedes’s poem plays out a crisis of white letrado subjectivity in seventeenth-century colonial Peru. I conceive of Caviedes as an individual who is unable to write from the position of coherence available within the framework of the “lettered city” or “republic of letters,” but who has to work within a broader and more unstable social sphere where the twin dynamics of the market and of mestizaje are increasingly disrupting the structure of a society organized, from its inception in the middle of the sixteenth century, around the ordering center of white male intellectual subjectivity.²

I. Critical Articulations of Parody and Satire.

Although there are a wide variety of definitions of the terms parody and satire, I will base my own discussion on the following commonly accepted distinction: I regard satire as a mode in which a writer questions the norms, values, and inconsistencies of a given social order, while the work
of parody is primarily oriented towards the rearticulation of the mechanisms of objects more readily identified as texts, be they specific genres, styles, linguistic or symbolic systems. At the same time, however, I allow for the combination and confluence of the two in any given work, particularly in view of the shifts in conceptions of the social sphere produced by semiotics, and structuralist, and post-structuralist thought.

Recent studies in both Hispanism and the broad field of literary studies have sought to reappraise the contributions of parodic and satirical writings to the history of literatures in western Europe and the Americas. Historically accorded a low position within classical hierarchies of genres and styles, satire has been recuperated for playing an important role in the configuration of both popular and erudite literary forms, particularly in Bakhtin’s work on medieval and Renaissance folk culture. Likewise, the status and significance for literary history of parody, often seen as a purely destructive and parasitic mode of writing, have been the subject of revisionist critical readings, oriented towards consideration of different writers’ exploitation of that genre as a form of meta-literature, a medium in which to reinvent and retheorize the stylistic and structural features of canonical genres or individual works.

In the field of Spanish American colonial literary studies satire and parody have also become more common objects of study, particularly for the roles these genres have played in the articulation of discourses which critique and transgress the established order of viceregal societies. Of particular importance have been the studies realized by Lúcia Helena Costigan and Julie Greer Johnson on the canon of Spanish American and Brazilian satirical writing produced during the colonial period. Johnson’s book, in particular, reconstructs a teleological narrative of counter-hegemonic texts written from the perspectives of individuals relegated to the lower echelons of the hierarchies of the colonial regime due to their gender or race (xvii, 155-63). Her account of the genre’s trajectory in the vicerealties, and celebration of its emancipatory power, nevertheless, runs into problems when she attempts to discuss the large number of satirical works written by Spaniards or criollos whose social position was much less marginal than that of an indígena, woman, mestizo, or mulatto. Most telling are her efforts to maintain the works of poets such as Juan del Valle y Caviedes—many of which are heavily marked by misogyny and racism—within the framework of such an account (88-89, 99-104).

Generally, satire can be seen to divide into two types: one which has a didactic, moral component, and which seeks to change or correct the aspects of the social order which it attacks; and another, which appears to be designed solely to destroy, without presupposing the possibility of an alternative order. Scholarship on colonial Spanish American satire veers between these two conceptions, often depending on the social or formalist orientation of critics. While both groups assert the differences between their
positions and modes of analysis, they tend also to share the assumption that all satire somehow represents a challenge or threat to the viceregal regime (Costigan 155-58; Johnson 5-12; Torres 84-86).

II. Carnival and Colony.

The theoretical paradigms through which recent criticism has tended to read Spanish American colonial satire tend to be heavily dependent on the thought of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, especially the book-length study Rabelais and His World. The principle concepts derived from Bakhtin’s work are those of carnivalesque humor and grotesque realism (4-12, 18-21, 52-54). In Johnson’s Satire in Colonial Spanish America the concept of the carnivalesque is deployed in the construction of an account of how the established order and hierarchies of the viceregal regime are endlessly dismantled in satires written over the span of the three centuries (15-16, 130-38). At the same time, Johnson also uses the trope of the grotesque to analyze how certain writers, such as Caviedes and Juan Rodríguez Freile, construct images of debasement and monstrosity as corrective counterparts to the utopian representations of the colonial order offered in official chronicles and relaciones (3-6, 50-63).

In order to develop my own counterpoint to studies such as Johnson’s, I would like to propose a reading of Bakhtin in which I will seek to reconsider the terms under which his theories of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism are used in thinking through the specific characteristics and dynamics of colonial satire. Specifically, I believe that there are three key features of Bakhtin’s understanding of medieval and Renaissance popular culture, and the texts in which it subsequently continues to survive within early modern societies. First, the agglomeration of forms of unofficial culture which gather and mutate ceaselessly around official religious and secular festivals and ceremonies are not the object of censure or repression by ecclesiastical and seigneurial authorities, but are, rather, sanctioned by them, in large part, no doubt, since they were seen as structures of containment of popular dissent (Bakhtin 8-10). Second, both the notion of the carnivalesque, and the manner in which the popular culture which unfolds in conjunction with official religious and secular festivals, are inextricably bound up with the trope of a pre-modern organic community, undivided by notions of bourgeois individualism and of the division and specialization of labor (Bakhtin 11-12, 21-26). Bakhtin is at great pains to describe many later forms of satirical and parodic discourse, from the seventeenth century on, as “degenerated” versions of that earlier folk culture (38, 52-53). Third, he is insistent about the dual character of both the carnivalesque and grotesque realism as both critical and utopian, negative and positive, destructive but regenerative, all at once (56-57). Such dualism, in Bakhtin’s account, is replaced as modernity unfolds by less equivo-
cal discourses which are oriented solely towards criticism and destruction, again in accordance with the increasing hegemony of bourgeois subjectivity and forms of social organization, oriented more towards the private, enclosed space of the household more than the outdoors of the carnival.

Embedded, therefore, in Bakhtin’s thought is a concept of the carnivalesque not as something static and eternal, but as a set of discursive practices whose role changes and is largely displaced by the economic and social structures of modernity, although they continue to insinuate themselves into, or irrupt onto, the scene in mutated forms of cultural expression. In keeping with this aspect of Bakhtin’s work, therefore, I posit that it is important to consider the specific features underpinning the production of satirical verse in colonial Spanish America. First, the societies produced by the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism are marked by sharp divisions along lines of class, ethnicity, gender, and language. The order of these societies is that of a hierarchy structured in accordance with the principles of purity of blood lines, religious orthodoxy, and place of birth. Second, satirical literature, the primary manifestation of the contestatory discourses of the period extant today, is, notwithstanding its relatively marginal status within viceregal society, largely the work of members of a small elite who exercise a significant degree of power thanks to their mastery of alphabetic writing. In such a situation, satirical writing is often not so much disruptive of the established order, but becomes a component—even if an unacknowledged component—of a regime in which cynicism towards the order does not challenge it, but emerges as one of the very conditions which assures its continued functioning.

III. Satire of Satire: Caviedes’s Vision of a Lima Festival Procession.

I will now attempt to develop these arguments further through my analysis of Juan del Valle y Caviedes’s “Coloquio entre una vieja y Periquillo a una procesión celebrada en esta ciudad.” Born in Porcuna, Jaén, probably in 1644, Caviedes appears to have moved to Peru by 1669 (Lohmann Villena, “El personaje” 21-25). There, with the help of a family member he developed a spotty career in the administration of mining concerns and attempted various business projects, which were largely unsuccessful, periodically finding himself in financial difficulties. In 1671 he married Beatriz Godoy Ponce de León, who died between 1686 and 1694. Caviedes himself is presumed to have died around 1698, soon after the failure of another mining venture (Lohmann Villena “El personaje” 79). Scholars of Caviedes’s work, both those who focus primarily on a social referent (Xammar 75-82; Cáceres 15-17, 51-95; Costigan 86-89) and those who attempt, in a formalist vein, to reconstruct the “literariness” of his satire (Reedy 44-48; Luciani 337-38, 342-47; Torres 72-77), tend to concur in arguing that it establishes a position of critical distancing with re-
spect to the colonial order. For Costigan, author of the most rigorous version of the socio-historical reading, Caviedes is a dissonant voice — albeit not fully conscious of the implications of his satire—who exposes the most negative aspects of the status quo: the incompetence that plagued professions like medicine; corrupt and inefficient government; the cynicism and extravagance of certain sectors of the clergy (69-73). In Torres’s account Caviedes is held to have inaugurated, in his satire, a Spanish American aesthetic differentiated from Spanish models, one based on the principles of inversion and dialogism formulated in the prefatory poem to the Diente del Parnaso manuscript, the “Fe de erratas” (69, 75).

The very fact of this easy state of consensus between apparently oppositional critical schools about the imputed transgressive character of satire should perhaps invite suspicion about the validity of such a thesis, at least when it is used to read the works of Caviedes. In order to work through my own misgivings about the readings summarized above I would like, therefore, to offer a theorization of satire in colonial Spanish America as a mode that may often be oriented towards restabilizing the terms of the viceregal order even as it might appear to be calling them into question.

As has been noted by those scholars who have reconstructed his biography, Caviedes was an individual who enjoyed a position of privilege within Peruvian society, at least in the early years following his immigration from Spain. His family connections to important members of the viceroyalty’s economic and administrative elites afforded him access to the mining industry (Lohmann Villena, “El personaje” 23-27). Furthermore, he married a woman who bore a name of illustrious lineage, Ponce de León, (Lohmann Villena, “El Personaje” 27). It is only subsequently, as a result of the failure of Caviedes’s economic ventures and health problems that his social status appears to have declined (Lohmann Villena, “El personaje” 32, 54-55, 64-80).

I would argue that Caviedes’s satirical works should be read in the light of this decline in fortunes and the simultaneous rise of members of subaltern groups, most notably mulattoes, in seventeenth-century Lima society. As a result of the failure of the economic ventures made possible by his familial connections, and his inability to find a place within the circle of the lettered city, Caviedes was forced to eke out a living in a realm shaped by the forces of the market and racial miscegenation. Read in the light of such conditions, his satire might best be seen as a series of interventions in a war of all against all, set amidst an unstable matrix of class, gender and racial identities.

Irrespective of whether one lends any credence to Palma’s dubious reconstruction of Caviedes’s life, in particular the idea that he at one time maintained a stall in one of Lima’s main marketplaces, it does seem likely that he frequented such spaces. Forced to circulate in such places, rather than the more ordered and stable spheres of the viceregal palace or the
Universidad de San Marcos, Caviedes reflects in his satirical works the encounter with an unsettling mix of race, class and gender formations. In his writing what one finds is not an embracing of such indeterminacy, but a moralizing stance, one which seeks to reimpose the clearly-defined hierarchical order of colonial society established by the conquistadores upon the more fluid and unstable conjuncture of the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

The most striking portion of Caviedes’s poems comprises mordant satires, directed at diverse targets, particularly doctors, lawyers, women, mulattoes, Jews, and indígenas. Modern critics tend to celebrate him as a lucid subject exposing the gap between the idealized image of Lima society offered in official discourse and the reality of a bankrupt and degraded colonial regime (Cisneros 110-13; Johnson 89-94, 104-06). Correspondingly, they reconstruct him as a critical eye, seeking to correct the ills of that society, in particular the incompetence of doctors and the corruption which pervaded all levels of the system of viceregal government (Kolb 17-26, 50-52). Undoubtedly, such elements are present in parts of Caviedes’s satire. Nevertheless, they are also inextricably intertwined with more perplexing strands, specifically the anxiety of a white male subject, disconcerted by the disruption of the hierarchies of caste, gender and race established at the beginning of the viceregal period, and by the frequent crises caused in Lima by pirate attacks, epidemics and economic instability.11

In much of Caviedes’s satire what one finds, then, is not so much the transgression of a constraining and authoritarian order, but the denunciation of a state of affairs in which the authority of such an order is already being routinely transgressed and dissolved. Obliged to function outside the realm of the “lettered city,” Caviedes circulates in a “contact zone” (Pratt 4) characterized by the destabilizing factors of orality and linguistic variety, and by a heterogeneity of race, class and gender identities, the spectacle of which threatens the coherence of his own subjectivity. In the last part of this article I will analyze how the encounter of Caviedes, as lettered subject, with such a space is staged in one of his most interesting works.

Thé “Coloquio entre una vieja y Periquillo a una procesión celebrada en esta ciudad” is a romance composed of 328 lines. It is written in the form of a fictional colloquy between a young street urchin—Periquillo, the Child of Experience—and an old woman—the allegorical figure of Old Curiosity, to whom he relates the details of a festival procession through the streets of Lima, and the rituals surrounding it, specifically tapadas, transvestism, poetry and oratory. The premise of the work is the notion that the festival or carnival has become a metaphor for the actual daily reality of Lima life. Performance and representation have flowed over into that existence rather than just produce a temporary diversion from, and disruption of, official order.

In the “Coloquio” satire and parody merge and complement one an-
other. In effect, the “Coloquio” is a mexetatext, a satire of the various forms of satirical practices effected within the framework of the festival. To this extent, it does not articulate an attack on a rigid system of societal norms, but, rather, is directed against, the very inversions and disruptions of such norms that are performed by those who participate in the festival. Caviedes’s satire emerges, therefore, not so much as a celebration of displacement and indeterminacy, but as expressing a concern to invert the inversions of carnival, to control difféance and polysemy, and return the viceregal social order to the form of a hierarchy in which race, class and gender identities are more clearly defined.

In keeping with the conventions of the satirical text, Valle y Caviedes channels the poem’s commentary on the procession through the mouth of the young boy, as told to the old woman. The subject who is somehow incomplete, neither fully integrated into the symbolic order of society, nor yet arrived at the state of plenitude associated with the privileged position of the male adult within early modern Hispanic culture, emerges as the source of truth in the midst of a world of illusion and inversions:

Vieja: ¿Qué me cuentas, Periquito?
Mira, niño, no me mientas,
porque dudo que pudiese
suceder más en Ginebra.

Peri: No, Señora, que en los niños
y los locos son cosecha
las verdades; y aunque amargue,
la verdad es evidencia.

Vieja: Oh ¡qué claro es el chiquillo,
en medio de su sencillez:
A fé que para escribano
es el muchacho una perla. (27-38)

Periquillo opens his relación by commenting on the freedom of action and discourse which the festive ritual of the tapada produces in the women who take part in it. With their faces veiled, the women feel free to transgress the limits placed on their speech in ordinary communicative situations and engage in the exercise of learned and witty discourse, in the form of the chanzoneta, or derisive saying. Here, these practices become objects of censure:

Peri: Según el infiel orgullo
con que el misterio celebran
las tapadas, pues me digan
tarascas de aquella fiesta;
sopilforas, insolentes
que a la herejía asemejan
como cubiertas del velo,
pierden el de la vergüenza.
Con los bárbaros barbados
andaban de chanzoneta
muy preciadas de letradas,
ignorantes bachilleras;
que aunque el Christus no conocen
en medio de tantas letras,
por hacer más execrable
su desenvuelta insolencia,
hacían del sambenito
la gala más deshonesta . . . (1-18)

The poem then presents a lengthy and humorous description of the proliferation of extravagant and verbose religious orators during the festi-
val (51-72), after which the old woman asks Periquillo to inform her about the "hidalgos" who have participated in the procession (89-92). This re-
quest ushers in an extended commentary by the young observer, in which he pokes fun at the claims made by members of different sectors of Per-
uvian society to noble birth. The pretensions of these individuals are mocked
by means of a series of puns and conceits, beginning with a play on the meanings of "bastardo" ("illegitimate") and "letra bastardilla" ("italics"):

Peri: Pues ya guardando el decoro
con debida reverencia
a tanto noble espléndor,
excepción en estas reglas,
hablaré con solo aquellos
que por meterse en docena,
siendo de miseras flujo,
se introducen a primera:
caballeros sólo in voce
de su jactanciosa lengua,
hidalgos sin más informe
que un don de bastardas letras,
cuya ambición vinculada
en falsas sevillanetas
a ilustres categorías
aspira en bases plebeyas. (109-24)

Periquillo’s remarks offer a mordant critique of the widespread use of
the title don by members of the different ethnic groups of colonial society
in their attempts to establish their rights to courtly privileges on the basis
of their family genealogies. Reproducing much of the logic of Quevedo’s
satire, Caviedes exploits the perceived disjunction between the would-be
nobles’ pretensions and the reality of their low-born status.13 In its depic-
tion of the perceived insubstantiality of the signs used to denote social prestige, the segment expresses a nostalgia for a seigneurial world of presence, of the essences and stable social hierarchies of an imagined feudal past, and an anxiety in the face of the blurring of the basis for the clear differentiation of nobility from persons of lower social standing. This anxiety is expressed more fully in a series of lines which refer to the common practice of the purchase of titles of limpieza de sangre and nobility in colonial society:

y como firmen el don,
aunque de donado sea,
les basta sólo el firmarlo
para su información plena;
que en esta Babel, con sólo
el contacto de la huella,
se constituyen los sastres
en potentados de Grecia,
los galafates en condes,
duquesas las taberneras,
principotes los arrieros
y las gorronas princesas.
De suerte que el que quisiere
exaltar su descendencia,
en jurando el domicilio
no necesita más prueba.
Y es cosa muy singular
que aun sin saber formar letra
sino caracteres griegos,
siempre aquellas tres primeras,
que constan en solo el don,
con gran claridad expresan,
pero todos los demás
su abuela que las entienda. (129-52)

Satire is articulated here not so much as a temporary disruption of authority, but out of a desire to reimpose a discursive order on a scene in which the signs of elevated social rank and authority have become dispersed and devalued. This kind of operation is effected again in the next portion of Periquillo's description of the procession, which is an account of the confusion of gender distinctions produced through the ritual of transvestism. Notable here is the observer's anxiety in the face of a heterogeneous array of gender formations in the physical appearance and clothing of the participants:

Otros duendeclilos vanos,
muy sin forma ni manera,
por suponer entidad
forman varias apariencias
ya de fantasmas galanes,
don Guindos de la comedia;
ya de familiares trasgos
metidos en sus carretas;
ya de súcubos maricas
o hermafroditas diablescas,
con más afeites y aliños
que una doña Melisendra;
mucho capote de franja
pañuelo a la picaresca,
metidos entre cortinas
como en jaula cotorrera;
por un lado marimachos,
por otro lado machihembras,
las cabezas circundadas
con cintas de raso o tela. (173-92)

In the final part of his relación Periquillo discusses the relaxation of women's sexual mores within the sphere of the carnival. Ostensibly, the logic informing the portrait of these women—presumably prostitutes—is that of grotesque realism, of a markedly material representation of female subjects and their sexual activities designed to bring down to earth the idealized image presented in the pastoral tradition. Such a corrective vision is elaborated in accordance with the coordinates of a misogynistic gaze, concerned with the spectacles of promiscuity and the extraction of capital from male subjects:

Vi exhalaciones con manto
o fantasmas corpulentas,
andan por calles y plazas
jugando gallina ciega;
unas son topa-con-todos
por ver si pega, o no pega;
sin ser de peso pesadas,
livianas sin ser ligeras;
y aunque desbarbadas no,
son muy rapantes barberos,
que a los míseros barbados
desuelan que se las pelan.
Otras, más chulas o soeces,
entrando a las casas mismas
por echar el resto al saque
con todos pelota juegan . . . (245-60)

Typical of Caviedes's predominantly conceptista style is the series of
puns and extended conceits used to convey the actions of these women: “pelar,” in the senses of cropping a person’s hair short, of taking off one’s clothes, and also of taking another person’s money; the play on “saque,” a serve in a ball game, such as pelota, and “saquear” (“to plunder”); the double sense of “pelota” as the ball game, and as referring both to removing one’s clothes and taking one’s money.

The dialogue ends with an interchange in which the old woman and Periquillo move towards the conclusion that the events of the festival carry Lima society to the point of dissolution. The disruption of caste hierarchies and the transgression of gender distinctions and roles are represented, through a series of metaphors—“esta confusa Babel,” “perspectivas aparentes / de humo que el viento subleva / en ficticios obeliscos a desvanecida esfera,” “eructos sin sustancia,” “oropel sin fundamento,” “toda paja, ningún grano” (285-304)—as manifestations of a society in a state of disarray, in which an earlier regime of fixed essences and norms has given way to a world in which the order of signs of caste and gender identity has become destabilized.

I have undertaken this reading of Caviedes’s “Coloquio” with a view to arguing for a more ambivalent approach to satirical poetry written during the viceregal period than is often offered by critics. While it is evident that some satirical writings do destabilize the structures of authority and norms comprising the symbolic order of the colonial regime, it is important not to ignore that other such writings manifest, by contrast, a concern to restore the terms of that order. Indeed, both operations can often be found functioning in the work of single writer, or in a single text. In conclusion, I would argue that an attention to this duality of destruction and reconstruction, transgression and normativity, allows for a firmer grasp of the complexity of the different kinds of satirical texts produced in Spanish America during the colonial period.

Notes

1It is difficult to establish with exactitude when this individual work was composed, since only three of Caviedes’s poems were published during his lifetime (Reedy 25). Nevertheless, it seems that the bulk of his poems were written between 1680 and 1697 (Reedy, Prólogo xvii-xix). For the purposes of this study, I will refer to the version of the “Coloquio” in the Reedy edition of Caviedes’s works (205-13).

2I derive the concept of the “lettered city,” or “ciudad letrada,” from the work of Ángel Rama. For a discussion of the meaning of the concept, see Rama (25-29) and John Charles Chasteen’s discussion (vii-viii) of the term in the introduction to his English translation.

3My understanding of these two devices and the difference between the
two is based primarily on the analyses undertaken by Dane (145-47) and Rose (80-86).

4For a representative statement about the classic hierarchy of styles and the lowly position of satire within Spanish literature, see López Pinciano (3: 231-43).

5The meta-literary role of parody is discussed extensively by Hutcheon (34-45) and Rose (91-99).

6Although Caviedes himself was largely self-taught, it seems logical to deduce that it was thanks to his initially privileged position within Peruvian society that he was able to access the forms of written and print culture necessary for him to further his education (Lohmann Villena, "El personaje" 23-28; Cisneros 101; Kolb 60).

7The main source for this brief account of Caviedes’s biography is derived from the reconstruction undertaken by Lohmann Villena on the basis of his discovery of an autobiographical poem and archival documents pertaining to the satirist’s life, most notably his marriage certificate and the will he drew up in 1683 during an illness ("Una poesía autobiográfica"; "Dos documentos inéditos"; "Un poeta" 776-80; "El personaje" 20-28; 53).

8Costigan does nuance her account by discussing Valle y Caviedes’s nostalgia for a stable seigneurial order (97). Nevertheless, she ends up arguing that the mechanisms of heteroglossia allow for popular voices to speak through his satire (157-58).

9Laschober and Costigan discuss the importance of this factor for the discussion of certain of Caviedes’s satirical poems (Laschober 9-13, 20-28, 150-71; Costigan 95-97, 155-56).

10Palma appears to have initiated the use of the nickname “Poeta de la Ribera” to refer to Caviedes in his “Prólogo muy preciso” to the manuscript published by Odriozola (5-6). Cáceres argues that the cajones—stalls where usually items such as oil, vinegar, dried vegetables and fish were sold—were important spaces where individuals gathered to converse and dialogue (27-28). Here one can posit the existence of loci other than the official arenas of the lettered city for the discussion and circulation of discourse and ideas. One might also surmise that it is likely that those who frequented the cajones constituted at least a part of the implicit audience to which Caviedes addressed his satirical works.

11Laschober offers a systematic analysis of how Caviedes’s satires reflect the racial prejudices and tensions of seventeenth-century Peru (64-125).

12By naming the character Periquillo, Caviedes inserts his work into the realm of the picaresque mode and its thematization of the process of the construction of social subjects through their simultaneous adaption to, and alienation from, the social order. On this, see Guillén (77-81, 100-06) and Sieber (x).

13On the relationship of Caviedes’s satire to that of Quevedo, see Costigan
(55-59) and Torres (76-82). The thematics of desengaño and the opposition of reality and appearance has been studied by Hopkins Rodríguez (7-8, 14-17).

On this aspect of Caviedes’s poetry, see Kolb (30-34) and Costigan (104).

Works Cited


