

COLUMBUS' LEGACY OF EXILE<sup>1</sup>

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Vivian Twostar —single Native American mother, and pregnant scholar— has found a document, presumably, Columbus' legendary lost diary. This discovery triggers a set of «gendered» quests, in which Vivian's will finally outreach the others' and become women's will/testament not only for her newly born daughter, but also for future generations. According to her, now that the past cannot be changed, we should at least come to terms with it, and learn from it. Besides, we should use all knowledge we have acquired, regardless of its cultural origins and recognise its usefulness in our daily fights. Furthermore, we are invited to see truth as Indians, as never fixed, or only temporarily so, always on the verge of being substituted by a new and more convincing one, always contingent. Columbus', European and gendered heritages (legacies) at this century's end are thus revised and given a new use.

Literature not only gives a voice to marginal cultures, such as the Native American, but also becomes a site of encounter in which Natives and non-Natives alike can re-organize, re-adjust and revise their prejudices and discover new potentialities for future practices. In an age of visual and written communication, Native American literatures reveal to us the power of aural and oral traditions, of storytelling as memory, the energy of oral contact.

Louise Erdrich and Michael Norris's *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) provides a useful framework for the theme of exile, forced, chosen or both. Besides focusing on Native Americans as survivors of exile, this narrative also shows how geographical, cultural, legal, class and gender boundaries envelop people, creating spheres beyond which individuals cannot communicate until they learn to adjust to the changes in perspective that these boundaries impose.

Erdrich's text interests me for several reasons. First of all, as a Basque questions of exile have always attracted my attention, especially because I was born in Castille and migrated to the Basque Country with my family as a small child during the industrial expansion of the fifties. Thus I am familiar with topics of exile and migration. But my Spanish identity also reminds me of another «history» connected to Christopher Columbus' feat, which brings to my mind controversial issues such as: the discovery of a new continent, America, and the redrawing of geographical maps; the encounter between the «Old World/Europe» and the «New World»; the colonization process and the construction of the «colonized other»; the history of European imperialism; an endless immigration process; different, varied and multiple experiences of exile related to diverse boundaries established by geographical sites as well as by class, race and gender, language and religion. In addition, this book is authored by two writers, wife and husband as co-author or co-operators in a single-multiple text, dedicated to «their bouquet of violets», their mixed-blood children.

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The fact that countries whose people have migrated over long periods are now reluctant to welcome immigrants like themselves when they had to leave their lands has always surprised me. I am also amazed when I find scholarly studies of migratory movements in which those who leave the country or arrive in it matter, without taking displaced natives into account. The European migration to America, for example, has obliterated the continuous displacement of the Natives.

In fact, one of the immediate consequences of Columbus' discovery of America was an increasing migratory movement from Europe to America. It also meant the drawing of new world maps in which the new found lands were re-presented and made «visible», especially for certain material interests, by establishing not only new boundaries, but also new «economic» conquests, new enslaved territories: the colonies. But maps, as Geoff King claims, were used to impose meaning on the world, for they «create rather than represent the ground on which they rest» (1996: 3)<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, we are told in the novel that Columbus held «as ardently as he could to the maps in his head, [and so] ... he continued to fit everything he saw into the framework of his prior leaving, his familiar reference points.»(275)<sup>3</sup> Vivian, a Native American and the main character of *The Crown of Columbus*, affirms «The mess we're in [is] Columbus' fault ... because he came here with an attitude, a power attitude and he imposed it.» (153)

The Natives' response to the Europeans was unequal. The numerous tribes has different customs, languages, problems of internal communication, whereas the Europeans were organized and self-confident; they also had superior weapons including germs, smallpox, measles and other infections (114), and the will and right to win; the Europeans had one god, one family, one creation story, and one agenda: to rule the world. (113)

It was Columbus who introduced colonialism and capitalism<sup>4</sup> into the New World by regarding the Natives, from the very beginning, as «good slaves»:

Columbus was a slave-trader ... from the very first entry in his diary it's clear ... he couldn't visualize anything but a slave-master relationship between the people he met and Europeans like himself. (152)

The text points out that «in order to escape enslavement by the Spaniards, Indians killed themselves in terrible numbers.» (313) Vivian will also refer to the diverse kinds of slavery she has to endure: when she surrenders to the white editor of the alumni magazine; her tenure; in short, the different rules and roles imposed on the individuals by social demarcations. Nevertheless, I would agree with Vivian, that «if not Columbus, another expatriate»(31) would have claimed those lands for his/her masters, if not for him/herself. What is not under question is the «traditional» celebration of Columbus' discovery of America by Europeans, and by the Spanish in particular. The «celebration» of the five hundredth anniversary has brought a novelty: some Native tribes took advantage of its «popularity» to denounce the grave effects of the colonization process and the desolate state of the surviving

<sup>2</sup> King, Geoff 1996: *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* London: MacMillan Press.

<sup>3</sup> Erdrich, Louise & Dorris, Michael 1992: *The Crown of Columbus* Harper Paperbacks (1991). All quotes have been taken from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> The representative of capitalism in the book is Henry Cobb, who is only interested in making money out of Columbus' Diary; «a scion of capitalism» (315); «His face became the mask of every crooked trader who ever sold a smallpox-infested blanket to an Indian» (260); «a slave-trader» (152).

tribes today. These counter-attitudes will be represented by the two main characters in the novel: Vivian, of Indian ancestry, and Roger, a Wasp. She will express her rejection of the celebration saying that she has other interests in life other than paying attention to the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. He will take this opportunity to complete the elaboration of his poetic version of Columbus' journal, held to be lost, in order to attain fame: «Once rendered in my poem his name would be forever linked with mine.» (70)

Their different attitudes are closely connected to each one's «ethnicity» for the «encounter» between the Natives and the whites was totally disastrous for the former, as the words uttered by the editor of the alumni magazine show, when he assumed that Vivian's article on the «quincentennial» «would pen a vitriolic lament, an exhortation blaming Columbus for all the Indian's trouble.» (71) Although it is true that Vivian blames Columbus on several occasions, for «it's a year of mourning for American Indian peoples» (16), she readily changes her mind when she realizes that the task of dealing with Columbus will give her the opportunity to re-visit her past, both personal and collective. At this point, the quincentennial turns into a quest, a search, and a mystery which will provide her with an alternative perspective on the discovery of America and allows her to adapt a revisionist approach, as when she states that «just finding it (Columbus' Diary) would be like making a connection with the past.» (214) Vivian also realizes that «the relative importance of events and ideas could be assigned only in retrospect. Columbus, like any other figure, was essentially the accumulation of his causes, and more important, of his effects through time» (356-7). Curiously enough, her visit to Eleuthera, the first island Columbus set his feet on, will remind her of the reservation (252).

Contemporary conceptions of exile<sup>5</sup> are predicated on the geopolitical notions of the nation-state, imperialism, and the ideologies of (post)colonial «national» cultures (Henderson 1995: 10)<sup>6</sup>. But the (post)modern fragmentation of social and cultural identity in late capitalism, in an increasingly complex and interdependent global economy, has caused the boundaries of once stable nation-states to be «reabsorbed into larger communities that overreach and interconnect national identities» (Hall: 12-3)<sup>7</sup>. This makes a definition of exile and its subsequent use more problematical since it has lost its possible stable meanings. But this indefiniteness can be utilized productively<sup>8</sup>. As Edward Said reminds us, «exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience» (1984: 54)<sup>9</sup>. Exile, in its various existential, psychological, spatial and temporal dimensions, can, indeed, have creative effects as, for example, when it becomes an occasion for self-expression; when it provides a liberating condition regarding political institutions and available discourses on identity; when it is both an experience of temporal displacement and one of unbounded identity. Moreover, as Mae Henderson points out, «each vision of exile presents possibilities of radical opposition to or reconciliation with the dominant culture» (1995: 7).

The first example of exile mentioned in *the Crown of Columbus* refers to the Mexican artist, José Clemente Orozco, unhappily exiled from Mexico to New Hampshire in

<sup>5</sup> In Spanish the word exile as a verb also means colonize, inhabit as well as exodus; it all depends on the observer: who leaves, why, where he goes; who comes, what for.

<sup>6</sup> Henderson, Mae 1995: *Borders, Boundaries and Frames* New York: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, Stuart 1990: Ethnicity: Identity and Difference. *Radical America* 23.4: 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Columbus himself is described as «a marginal character himself» (167), «simple foreigner, amateur, beggar, outcast (416).»

<sup>9</sup> Said, Edward 1984: Mind of Winter: Reflection on Life in Exile. *Harper's Magazine* September.

the mid 30s, and author of a huge mural painting in a library at Dartmouth College which represents

conquistadores and peasants, Aztecs and Jesuits. Only one major figure a schoolmarm, ... and a pregnant woman whose chitinous offspring - fetuses packed in bell jars - wore mortar-boards, ... a glorious, cathartic, absurd inside joke against the academic institution (14).

Other forced exiles are Henry Cobb, who is now living in Eleuthera because he has legal problems, and Hilda, professor of geography, and her husband Racine, a medievalist. Hilda is described as the sole remaining member of a Jewish Slovakian family annihilated by the Nazis, who has been exiled in England and Australia before arriving in the United States, and who speaks several languages: Slovak, Czech, French, German, Yiddish, English and Hebrew (73). Fortunately, though, hers and Racine's experiences as refugees, outcasts and immigrants «had rendered them immune to culture shock, their home had become each other, not some bounded piece of real state». They are also depicted as «moving around the planet as casually as ... expatriate Europeans in America, aggressively American in Europe ... everywhere foreign and therefore everywhere equally content» (343). It seems as if physical and mental survival lies in people's capacity to find new territories of their own.

Depending upon the circumstances, there are many ways in which people can be discriminated against and in this connection Vivian also endures different experiences of exile. Thus we read, «Vivian was to be excluded ... because of her gender and background ... as if the variables of sex and class could be banished.» (374) Vivian tells us that «like Columbus ... I had no need of crowns because I had no country.» (452)

Exile and identity co-form each other, and both concepts must be considered here. Since the essentialist definition of identity has been highly contested, it is being reconceptualized at present. However, it is still held by those who try to defend a monologic vision of both individuals and communities. This issue is so important for some that they use it to justify the killing of others.

Is identity —Native-American, Basque, Spanish, European— a question of language, customs, place of birth, state of mind, physical disposition or face marks? The problem arises when its definition is rooted in an essentialist and therefore fixed vision of identity, be it ethnic, cultural, or otherwise, that is, a belief in *nativism*, an authentic ethnic identity, and the desire to return, following the catastrophe of colonialism, to an unsullied indigenous cultural tradition (Williams 1993: 14)<sup>10</sup>. Curiously enough, Vivian, the Native American narrator of *The Crown of Columbus*, describes herself as «Coeur d' Alene-Navajo-Irish-Spanish-Sioux by marriage» (14). As Susan Castillo reminds us,

several scholars like Werner Sollors have pointed out how difficult it is in today's America to classify a writer as belonging exclusively to one ethnic group, given the existing degree of cultural syncretism. [...] It is more productive ... to view ethnicity not as a static entity but rather as a dynamic, historically constructed process (1995: 183-4)<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly enough, Vivian tells us that «being a Jew ... Colon had to recreate himself before he took for his own the name of a discoverer and a christianizer, Cristóbal Co-

<sup>10</sup> Williams, Patrick and Chrisman, Laura 1993: *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

<sup>11</sup> Castillo, Susan 1995: *Notes from the Periphery: Marginality in North American Literature and Culture* New York: Peter Lang.

lón (297)», for he was «an Italian in Iberia, a Jew in Christendom, a layman among Franciscans, foreign, didn't fit in anywhere and that was his engine. He was propelled by alienation» (168). Furthermore, Vivian continues,

Columbus' paradoxes, his impossibilities attracted me. He couldn't be all he said he was, yet I recognized the fiction that he had constructed and presented. ... He was a certain kind of man in court, another in the Caribbean; a mercenary, a saint, a scholar, a fanatic, and, of course, a slave trader (168).

Two conceptions are at war here: an essentialist conception (Columbus' attitude towards the Indians, sometimes clear, —slaves—, sometimes ambiguous) and a view that regards identities as liable to change, not totally determined by community but also chosen by individuals bearing a critical view of others and of themselves. On the one hand, identity imposed by others, be they family, community, nation-state, immigrants or colonists; on the other, identity or identities chosen by individuals or communities. In other words, identity understood as not fixed by the past, by tradition, but moulded, constructed by it, and therefore, changeable, produced but also productive, caused by and causing agency.

When binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, master/ slave, Indians/whites, are undermined, a space is left for the emergence of new identities subsumed until now in the second of the two terms of the dichotomy. At this stage, the peripheral individuals that have always been perceived as «others» now have the chance to find their place within a framework of equality where difference is recognized and accepted. The marginalized and marginal selves can now free themselves from the heavy weight that essentialism has imposed upon them to seek an answer to the difficult question of the construction of their gendered subjectivity within a historical framework. As Foucault proposes, we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries (1982)<sup>12</sup>. In defense of a constantly evolving self, we should consider ourselves as subjects that are not subjected to an immutable identity but one that possesses the possibility of change. This great decentering of identity, that is a consequence of the relativization of the Western world, of the discovery of other worlds, other peoples, other cultures and other languages, will not only affect the whites, but also other communities, who will also start questioning their position, place and identity in new frame(work)s. Now that the subject is able to relate critically to the surrounding world and has gained mobility and the capacity to change, (s)he opens the critique of what we are, which implies a recognition of the limits that are forced upon us both from within and from the outside (culture, society, language, geography, race, class, gender and so on) and experiments with the possibility of going beyond.

In *The Crown of Columbus*, Louise Erdrich and Michael Norris undertake the task of working out or re-working the problematics of the borders, the boundaries and the frame(work)s that structure our various and multiple notions of identity, —textual, personal, collective, generic and ethnic among others— by showing us certain characters who cross geographical, cultural, national, ethnic and family borders and, thus, refuse to occupy a single territory. In this sense, we see Roger under different guises: «his official, public self, the full professor, the authority.» (368) Likewise, Vivian not only claims to have «different characters at different times of the day» (12), but also to be able to «look the way

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, Michael 1982: The Subject of Power. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinov (eds.), *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism ad Hermeneutics*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

the world expected: wistful for a lost past, distant and harmless.» (20) Her son, Nash, also illustrates the complexity of being. He states that

There are different ways of feeling like an Indian for me (when off or on the reservation) ... I'm a survivor of survivors of survivors. Memory fades, identity gets blurred, as fast as blood gets mixed. 500 years ago, Indians in Eleuthera, now ... they were gone, anonymous and invisible, as if they never existed. ... we were the proof (484-5).

This all seems to coincide with Stuart Hall's description of identity as «something that happens over time, [...] that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference» (17), that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding self. The various labels applied to Native Americans, —North American Indian, Native Indian, Native and Amerind (16)—, are an example of the non-fixity of names used by Vivian to bring nominalism under question, for it seems to fail to «capture the essence.» Names apparently stand for functions rather than entities. When Vivian is in trouble she uses all the knowledge she has acquired from different cultural sources, including Navajo chants, Karate and Spanish, among others.

In today's post-colonial world Said argues against culture and national identity as single, pure entities. By dismantling the «us» and «them» of empire, he shows how such insidious imperialist assumptions continue to influence Western politics and culture (1993)<sup>13</sup>. Angeline, Vivian's grandmother and an «old traditional», represents this sort of open attitude, for she was

always ready to change her mind, accept a new theory if it was logical enough. [...] Nothing [...] was fixed in its interpretation. Truth was all in the story, in the way it was told, in who was doing the telling. It could change in a minute or remain the same forever. A truth lasted only until a better one came along and replaced it. Or sat alongside it, an equally plausible alternative (482).

Assuming that «discussion of ethnicity is always also by implication a discussion of gender and sexuality [for] ... control of women and their sexuality is central to national and ethnic processes»(Williams 1993: 17), Vivian, having chosen to be a single mother and a Native challenges both social institutions, although she is in favour of positive discrimination and will take advantage of it when she applies for her job promotion (her tenure)<sup>14</sup>, while admitting that hers has not been an orthodox promotion case. Her research methods will also be criticized by Roger, «the orthodox, professional academic», who will label her a «dilettante» on several occasions. Not surprisingly, it is Vivian's unreliable research method which will turn out to be more enlightening and useful, for she is able to give the words a new meaning. Following Columbus' legacy when he imitated God's doings with words, Vivian is going to create a new world perspective. It was Columbus' use of words which gave the inhabitants of the New World a (mis)name, «Indian», and an identity with certain characteristics which have survived both Columbus and the people he encountered, for several tribes have disappeared since then. Similarly, Vivian, by retelling the story of the past will create that world anew. Thus, her initial tendency to place blame will turn into a search for the necessary tools either to regain lost power or to attain a new power. Columbus, who brought the Native Americans' ill fate will now bring a prosperous future for her. She will achieve professional recognition and tenure, and the legal consequences of the discovery of Columbus' Diary will support Native claims (276).

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<sup>13</sup> Said, Edward W 1993: *Culture and Imperialism* London: Chatto and Windus.

<sup>14</sup> Indian woman, a single mother and Native, a minority (17).

As Amritjit Singh suggests,

Ethnic writers have also employed their storytelling to redefine history and culture and to legitimate personal and collective memory [...] multiple voices [...] used as a means of creating a community as part of a dialectic between the past and the present in moving toward the future. [...] This interest in the past, and how it affects the present, is integral to ways in which alternative cultures oppose and subvert the dominant culture that has historically both repressed and assimilated them. [A] process of re-visioning that is essential to gaining control over one's life and future. Ethnic narratives [...] create «narrative knowledge» which includes [...] notions of competence, images of how to do things, how to live, how to care for one another, how to be happy (1994: 18-9)<sup>15</sup>.

Singh adds that «the act of storytelling is also an act of empowerment because of its associations with unauthorized forms of knowledge» (1994: 18). Actually, although she recognises that she is using the language and the vocabulary of the colonizer (268), Vivian will also admit that she is employing devices of the «old traditionals». She recognises that she has invented a story to fit the evidence, to make sense ... [by following] the trusty oral tradition. « (287) Besides, Vivian's re-reading of the past is necessary since the pre-Colombian tribes had no written documents; she has to read between the lines of the self-serving Spanish and English accounts (110). This explains the fact that «[e]very word Columbus wrote ... had enduring importance to Indians ... either as a record of our world as it had existed before contact, or as evidence we could use to seek overdue justice» (199)<sup>16</sup>. According to her, the colonized other (the Indians) belongs to a system which has been shaped by the white European historical narrative which Columbus legitimated in his descriptions of the Indians as naked, poor, ignorant, underdeveloped (6) and always to be blamed (183). This narrative was to be imitated by learned Indians for when they wrote the common theme was abject apology: «[they] were all sorry for who they were, for what they hadn't done right. Nobody was deserving of the kindness ha has been shown» (186). In short, they were totally brainwashed. But, there was one discordant voice, that of Peter Paul, who «belonged to the last generation to be born without the foreboding of domination» (187). Although Vivian does not try to romanticize the life of Peter Paul's mother in a tribal community, for it was undoubtedly hard, dangerous, and uncomfortable, she emphasizes that at least it was hers. Peter Paul's message, «make trouble and you stand out» (187), is the one that Vivian is going to follow.

All cultures are hybrid. None is pure; none possesses a homogeneous tissue. Furthermore, in the construction of all cultures large doses of inventiveness and fantasy — myths — have intervened in order to elaborate and re-create the diverse images a culture has of itself. Culture is always historical and social, implying contention among different styles and definitions, among world views and rival interests. By bearing this in mind, Vivian is able to demythologize not only the figure of Columbus, but also all he represents: «Without the myth, he is just another man. Not the father of manifest destiny. Not the hand of fate. Not the inevitable force. Not some agent of God. Just a man whose bad luck was our bad.» (221) Furthermore, we read that, «[t]he world has become a small place, all parts connected, where an Indian using an ancient Asian art can break into an old European box,

<sup>15</sup> Singh, Amritjit et al. 1994: *Memory, Narrative, Identity* Boston. Northwestern U.P.

<sup>16</sup> Vivian found within the text (Columbus' Diary), material for a plethora of legal approaches under international law, issues of aboriginal claim and sovereignty, of premeditated fraud (500).

witnessed by someone who grew up in Australia.» (492) Maybe the future lies in forging links between cultures.

Although *The Crown of Columbus* reminds the reader that Columbus himself ended up an exile in the country he had served so well, his feat is not diminished. In fact, following his example we are invited to create our own storytelling, to be empowered by words, not to be perished by them. Certainly, Vivian's re-examination of a historical period (Columbus' discovery of America, his legacy) and its effects upon the present has allowed us to understand how a knowledge of History frees the subject from an essentialist heritage, from a single, coherent and immutable self that has defined the human being simply as belonging to a certain sex, race, religion or social class. History becomes the element through which it is possible to connect the personal aspects in the text to social reality; this way the text becomes the site of resistance within the relation knowledge/power and writing is a tool used to break through the limits set by *assigned identities*. Writing becomes a subversive tool, a way to negotiate one's identity and rebel against diverse dichotomies.

The reading of this text teaches us to re-consider our notions of what ethnicity is and to understand that it can never be found in a totally pure state. Besides, «ethnic identity» is just one of the many an author holds and sometimes it may compete against or complement other roles involving race, gender, nationality, age, class or sexual preference.

In addition, we «border critics (intellectuals)» by analyzing the contested existence of borders (both internal and external) have the desire and even the responsibility to transgress, as George Steiner says, to «press the unpleasant questions, the embarrassing questions, the taboo questions» (Henderson 1995: 3) in spite of being regarded as borderland inhabitants and therefore transgressors and aliens.

As teachers/critics of a foreign literature we act as cultural translators and transgressors. We cross geographical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural borders, among others, thus becoming temporary «exiles», undergoing a positive experience in which similarities and differences are overcome by a creative, performative state of mind. We have the opportunity to be engaged in daily acts of cultural translation and negotiation of meanings, what Henry Giroux calls «border pedagogy»: moving between cultures, travelling within zones of cultural difference (1991)<sup>17</sup>, but with a warning, to exercise analytic caution before transposing analytical concepts from one culture or context to another.

If I had to summarize I would just say, «find the means to know and respect the other». Individuals who belong to a specific culture ought to be able to negotiate their differences with other cultures by undertaking a reflexive critique on their inherited heritage. In addition, they ought to be open to learning from other traditions and cultures as well.

My proposal would be a defense of interculturalism which would make more aware of the fact that our culture is neither the «norm» nor the «best», but simply the one we know best and are more familiar with. Interculturalism attempts to make other cultures known, especially those marginal or peripheral cultures, so that the experience of discrimination

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<sup>17</sup> Giroux, Henry A. (ed.) 1991: *Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy. Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity. Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. New York: State University of New York Press.



can be better understood. In this context, ethnicity is not biological but, rather a social construct. Ethnic differences are natural but any hierarchizing or social discrimination are social and cultural facts. Interculturalism teaches us that racism is a way of getting rid of guilt and responsibility and of maintaining privileges. Racism aims to find, legitimate or rationalize a determined structural balance. It is an ideological process which serves to present as natural a social order based on inequality. As an ideological construct it can, no, must, be avoided. Marginal or peripheral literatures can help to show us (teachers and students alike) how to do so. As Vivian suggests, «[O]ne can change ... One can also accommodate the habits of others.» (500).

