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Colonial Origins and Colonial Transformations in Spanish America

ABSTRACT

Archaeological data have been critical in articulating the manner by which system-wide structuring elements of Europe's colonial projects in America were adjusted or transformed in local settings. This paper explores the ways in which certain of these structuring elements in Spanish colonial America were played out in a variety of households and communities, with the ultimate goal of approaching an archaeologically informed, comparative study of American colonialism. Several parameters are offered as examples of potentially fruitful points of comparison among colonial systems through which researchers might assess local agency at both intra- and inter-colonial scales. These include varieties of economic and governmental centrality, forms of labor organization, varieties of religious experience, gender relations, idealized social identities, and frontier-urban dichotomies.

Introduction

Some general observations are offered about the economic, socio-political, and ideological structures that shaped Spain's colonization of America, with the caveat that literally dozens of historians and archaeologists in North America, Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America have already devoted their careers to this same effort. That work will be drawn from extensively.

The observation of the 1992 Columbian quincentenary stimulated a tremendous surge of historical archaeological research in areas of Spanish colonization over the past two decades. That work has been crucially important in gaining a more balanced understanding of the complexity, diversity, and range of human experience in the Spanish colonial past as well as in understanding the personal and institutional power negotiations that conditioned local cultural practices. Less inquiry, however, has been oriented toward a better-informed understanding of the larger, aggregate cultural structures within which local traditions are embedded and which suggest commonalities shared by members of social groups

on a broader scale. The mandate of The Society for Historical Archaeology session from which this article is derived offers us an opportunity to engage in a newly informed and, perhaps, even neo-processual conversation about American colonization in which questions of structure and agency can articulate and inform one another in a dynamic way. It is this interscalar dialectic that offers us a potentially productive focus for the comparative study of the American colonial project through historical archaeology.

Spain in America

Spain's imperial expansion into the 16th-century Americas was simultaneously an invasion, a colonization effort, a social experiment, a religious crusade, and a highly structured economic enterprise. Unlike most earlier or later colonial ventures, it was both sudden and unexpected, involving two parts of the world that had no prior idea of the other's existence. The Spanish colonial empire in the Americas of the 16th century was the largest ever known in the Western hemisphere, incorporating an extraordinarily diverse array of societies, ethnic groups, geographic landscapes, and polities (including at least two American empires), and it endured as a colonial entity for more than three centuries (for English-language overviews of historical-archaeological studies of Spanish imperial expansion and its consequences, see Deagan 1988; Milanich and Milbrath 1989; Thomas 1989, 1990, 1991; Dillehay and Deagan 1992; Farnsworth and Williams 1992; Bray 1993).

The Spanish colonies were also marked by certain consistent political, religious, and social patterns that cut across and conditioned the local experiences of people in all of these diverse settings. Among the most pervasive of these were the centralization of government and economy under Crown control, monolithic Catholicism, an emphasis on life in towns, and formalized notions of class and race. These elements will be the focus of the following discussion—to consider how they structured colonial life and how they were adjusted by colonial experience. These concepts are also inextricably interrelated in the Spanish colonial arena, and it must be noted that

it is probably both impossible and inappropriate to fully segregate them as analytical units.

Colonial Origins

That said, it is necessary to briefly divert to pre-Columbian Spain, since the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas can only be understood against the backdrop of more than 2,000 years of invasion, colonization, and multiculturalism in the Iberian Peninsula itself. From the 8th century B.C., Iberia was colonized by Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, and, finally, in the 8th century A.D. by Muslim Arabs and Berbers.

Under the subsequent eight centuries of Muslim rule, a richly diverse society developed, blending elements of Roman, Iberian, and Arab cultures, in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted and intermarried (Mann et al. 1992; Vernet 1992). Nevertheless, Christian rulers began efforts almost immediately after A.D. 711 to recapture Spain from its Muslim overlords, and in 1492 the last Moorish stronghold of Santa Fe de Granada fell to the Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabela. The fall of Granada not only united Spain under Christian rule but also ushered in a new era of religious fervor, intolerance, and intense proselytizing promoted by Queen Isabela. It was in this context that Columbus returned from his first voyage of exploration with news of the New World, and the invasion of America by Spain began.

The initial Spanish colonial effort was very different from the system that ultimately prevailed in the Americas. The Columbian project was an economic partnership between the Crown and Columbus's private interests, self-consciously modeled on the Portuguese *feitoria* system. It was specifically organized as a moneymaking trading venture in which largely self-contained European communities would establish profitable trading alliances with American natives and share the profits with the Crown. Once in America, however, this economic vision did not remain compelling to either the Spanish colonists or the colonized people of America. Local needs and expectations were simply not met by the institutional model of the *feitoria*. Resistance, rebellion, and individual enterprise among both American Indians and nonelite Spaniards quickly recast the original imperial project from one of a

private-monarchical mercantile partnership to the territorially based and centrally controlled pattern of political and economic domination that came to characterize the Spanish empire from the 16th century onward (for expanded discussions of these themes, see Pérez de Tudela Bueso 1954, 1955; Stevens-Arroyo 1993; Deagan and Crucent 2002:15–18).

The shift that occurred after 1500 (and after Christopher Columbus) in Spain's colonial strategy was a return, in a sense, to an earlier medieval pattern and a rejection of the economic modernity that persisted in the Portuguese colonies. The second mode of Spanish expansion into the Americas followed a pattern that had been translated from the Iberian *reconquista* to the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Canary Islands, which took place between about 1477 and 1497. Crown-licensed *adelantados* (expedition leaders) led largely self-supported expeditions of conquest during which successful conquistadors were rewarded with allocations of land and the servitude of the native people who occupied it.

Although the conquered populations were obligated to contribute labor as a token of their submission to Spain; nevertheless, they were theoretically granted the privileges of Castilian subjects as long as they adopted Christianity and accepted the sovereignty of Spain. The status and privileges of their chiefs were formally recognized. However, those new subjects who continued resistance (and the conquistadors defined the concept of resistance in very broad terms) were considered appropriate candidates for enslavement and despoliation (for detailed discussions of the structure and policy of early contact in the Canary Islands see Gibson 1966, 1987; Sauer 1966; Aznar Vallejo 1983; Lockhart and Schwartz 1983:59–86; McAlister 1984:63–65; and Tejera Gaspar and Aznar Vallejo 1992; and in America see McAlister 1984; Moya Pons 1986; Elliott 1987).

American Encounter and Dominion

American colonization was also (at least from the point of view of the Spanish Crown) a compelling religious mission in which the conversion of conquered peoples to Catholicism was a paramount goal equal to that of economic exploitation. The revelation

that uncounted numbers of souls in need of Christian conversion were waiting in the New World intensified the religious motive for this enterprise. The justification for colonization itself was explicitly religious, codified in 1493 by the Bulls of Donation, issued by Pope Alexander VI (a Spaniard), which assigned Spain “a just title” to American lands. The colonizers were obligated to evangelize the inhabitants and make them Christians. Officially, this was the sole authority and justification for the Spanish empire in America.

The encounter with indigenous Americans provoked intense discussion, debate, and soul-searching in late-15th and early-16th-century Spain about the nature of these people and their potential capacity to live like Christian Spaniards (for synthetic and contrasting discussions of these see Hanke 1949; Brading 1991:79–101; Pagden 1992). From the very beginning, the official position of the dominant colonial institutional powers—the Crown and the Church—was in conflict with the practical position of the Spanish colonists and indigenous peoples who lived in the Americas. The Crown, vigorously encouraged by the Catholic Church, asserted that the Indians were their legal subjects and merited both rights and protection, while the colonists asserted that the Indians were subhuman and were best suited as a resource of labor. After it was formally determined in 1500 that they were, in fact, human beings by virtue of possessing souls, the Spanish Crown was careful to legally ensure that indigenous Americans could not be officially enslaved, and it issued a series of edicts to protect the American Indians (the Laws of Burgos) in 1512 (Hussey 1932). Much social and economic institutional development in America after that time was designed to ensure that the “free” Indians would be, nevertheless, a ready and reliable source of labor.

The problem of observing the Church and Crown’s mandates to protect and respect the rights of the Indians while at the same time ensuring a reliable source of labor was initially resolved by a uniquely American interpretation of *encomienda*, implemented in Hispaniola in 1503 (for discussions of this institution see Lockhart and Schwartz 1983:64–72; McAlister 1984: 157–166; Elliott 1987; Gibson 1987). Those Indians associated with a particular allocation of land to an *adelantado* or conquistador were

obliged to exchange their labor for instruction in Christianity and civilization. In order to make this more efficient, the Indians were regularly relocated and consolidated at centralized town locations convenient for Spanish labor exploitation and conversion. This process, known as *reducción*, figured centrally in the transformation of the American social landscape under colonization, leading in many cases to both a breakdown of traditional cultural patterns among many American Indian groups after contact and the spread of epidemic disease.

Epidemics provoked a rapid demographic decline in the native populations of the earliest Spanish-American colonies (Crosby 1972; Dobyns 1983; Henige 1986; Ramenofsky 1987; Bray 1993; Cook 1998), and this led in turn to a desperate (perceived) need by the Spanish colonists for alternate sources of labor. Their solution spelled doom for the hundreds of thousands of African people brought unwillingly to the Americas as slaves and introduced another social and population element into the colonial arena after 1520.

The enslavement of African peoples was justified by reference to the same religious-legal arguments that prohibited the enslavement of Indians, the Bulls of Donation issued by Alexander VI in 1493, which implied no obligation to evangelize and convert Africans since Spain held no territorial presence there. Furthermore, Africa was tainted by the hint of Islamic influence, which was sufficient justification for slavery. Curiously, once African slaves reached the American colonies, they were subjected to the ministrations of the Church, including evangelization and conversion. Conversion, however, did not bring liberation (Klein 1967:88–89). At the same time, we should note that a number of black Christian Spaniards (*ladinos*), both free and unfree, participated in the conquest and colonization of America as conquistadors and *encomenderos* (Landers 1990).

Race did not structure social interactions with conquered peoples in the Spanish empire in the same way that it appears to have in other European colonial arenas. In many ways, class and religion (although certainly an issue) overrode considerations of race. The labor requirements imposed on American Indians by *encomienda* and *reducción*, for example, applied principally to nonelite individuals. From the beginning of

imperial expansion in both the Canary Islands and in the Americas, official policy stressed respect for and recognition of the political importance of the *caciques* (paramount leaders). Elite accommodation was a cornerstone of initial Spanish policy toward the American Indians, based on the recognition, at least in principle, of a legitimate “Republic of Indians” and the political authority of its leaders (Hanke 1949:27; McAlister 1984:180; Gibson 1987:377; Bushnell 1989). These policies were formalized in 1512 by the Laws of Burgos and came to characterize Spanish-American interaction in those areas of the Americas with strongly differentiated chiefs and stratified societies.

In its own way, the accommodation of elites helped mitigate the tension between Crown policies to protect Indians as free subjects and colonists’ desires to exploit Indian labor. By securing the alliance of the *caciques*, it was expected that they would impose conversion, labor requirements, and tribute on their vassals (Hanke 1949; Gibson 1987:377). This alliance came to be an especially important mechanism in frontier areas where there were few Spaniards and fewer towns.

In the earliest years of contact, the accommodation of elite American Indians included intermarriage between Spanish conquistadors or soldiers and Indian *caciquas* and noblewomen (Morner 1967:37; Floyd 1973:59–61; Lyon 1976: 148; Deagan 1985:304–305). Such marriages were intended to legitimize Spanish claims to land and labor, although in some cases, such as Spanish Florida, the marriages were entered into mistakenly through a misunderstanding of matrilineal descent rules.

Economy and Identity

The need to control land and labor was critical to elite Spaniards. Such control was essential to gain access to American resources and raw materials (such as metals, cattle, and sugar), which were the primary sources of wealth in the context of Spain’s mercantile colonial economic system. Control of labor and land was also necessary to maintain the elite social identity of *hidalguía*, being identified as a *hidalgo* (a person with claims to elite lineage, an *hijo de algo*). *Hidalguía* depended on a visibly Spanish lifestyle, the acquisition of wealth in the form of

rewards for service to God and country, and the avoidance of labor (Wolf 1963:55–59; Lockhart and Schwartz 1983:61–63; Elliott 1987:1–10). To sustain *hidalguía*, it was essential, therefore, to control American resources that could be translated into wealth in the highly regulated colonial economy.

Spanish trade with the American colonies operated under a mercantilist policy, that is, the colonies were permitted to import from and export to Spain alone. To implement the policy and control commerce, a system of annual trade fleets known as the *Carrera de Indias* was implemented in 1503 (for detailed discussions of the *Carrera* and its impacts see Haring 1947; Parry 1966; Lynch 1969; Phillips 1990; Morales Padrón 1992; Avery 1997). The *Carrera* was controlled by a government institution known as the *Casa de la Contratación*, which was located in Seville. Through the *Casa*, Seville came to establish a monopoly on the control of Spanish-American shipping, and throughout most of the colonial period the mechanisms for the distribution of goods were designed to work to the advantage of the powerful Sevillian merchants who, in turn, made strategic trading alliances with land- and labor-owning colonists.

European manufactured goods were exchanged for such American materials as bullion, spices, cattle hides, sugar, and dyewood at annual and highly regulated trade fairs. This is not to say that the European goods arriving in Spanish America were of exclusively Sevillian or even Spanish origin. Archaeological assemblages (as well as shipping records from various archives) show an immediate and sustained international character in Spanish colonial material life in all parts of the Spanish Americas; German, French, Portuguese, Chinese, Dutch, Italian, English, and Spanish goods passed through Seville and made their way to the colonies (Deagan 2002a: 24–27; 2002b).

The *Carrera* system primarily benefited those who controlled resources on both sides of the Atlantic, but it proved to be inefficient and unable to meet the needs of the majority of Spanish-American colonists. Irregular scheduling, pirate attacks, hurricanes, shipwrecks, and a multitude of taxes and duties on shipped goods all contributed to the inadequacy of the Sevillian system as the exclusive mechanism for colonial trade. These problems provoked widespread

dissatisfaction in the colonies and contributed to the colonists' willingness to engage in *rescate* (illicit, non-Spanish sources of trade). The Crown authorities were simply unable to control their subjects' *rescate*, and, in fact, the control of *rescate* came to be a very lucrative monopoly for many colonial officials. In some instances, such as in western Hispaniola, Spain was forced to relinquish its colonial territorial claims in order to impede smuggling activities (Hernández Tápia 1970; Hamilton and Hodges 1995).

Colonists also responded to the inadequacy of the exclusionary trade system by initiating the production of European-style goods in the Americas. Craft guilds (*gremios*) were established in New Spain during the first half of the 16th century to regulate the commercial production of a wide variety of commodities (Santiago Cruz 1960; Deagan 2002b:31–33). To archaeologists, among the most interesting have been the ceramics industries studied by Florence Lister, Patricia Fournier, Thomas Charlton, and others (Lister and Lister 1987; Charlton and Fournier 1993; Fournier 1998). Such production was not encouraged by the authorities who were “chronically suspicious of the commercial activities of its colonial subjects. If they traded with one another they could not easily be prevented from trading with foreigners” (Parry 1964:317). By the early decades of the 17th century, Spain had prohibited (although apparently could not prevent) all intercolonial trade in those commodities that were important Spanish exports, including wine, raisins, olives, almonds, silk, metals, and china goods.

Excavations in home sites throughout the Spanish empire reveal the extent to which these prohibitions failed. During the 17th century, for example, Mexican majolicas overwhelmingly dominated the assemblages of Spanish colonial households in Central and South America as well as in Florida, the Caribbean, and the American West. Ceramics produced in Spain are rare after 1600 in nearly all contexts but American-bound shipwrecks (Deagan 2002b:xvi–xvii).

Life in Towns

The establishment of settled towns for both Spaniards and Indians was central to the Spanish imperial strategy for asserting social, political, and economic control in the Americas, and towns were the idealized setting for “civilized”

life. The creation of Spanish towns in the Americas was a closely regulated and centrally controlled undertaking, both in the physical and the administrative organization of these settlements. The regulations governing town planning and organization were developed through the 16th century and formally codified in 1573. They provide a remarkable statement about Spanish intentions and ideals concerning “civilized” life and address not only spatial patterning but also environmental concerns, health, civic authority and organization, relations with Indians, religious matters, status, economy, commerce, and urban aesthetics (these are largely translated and reproduced in Crouch et al. 1982 and discussed by McAlister 1984:134–139). Nearly all Spanish-American municipalities established after 1500, whether urban centers or borderland *presidios*, show an overwhelming adherence to the general spatial patterns established in these ordinances (Foster 1960; Jones 1978:5–11; Chueco Goitia and Torres Bálbos 1981; Crouch et al. 1982; Deagan 1982).

However Spanish cultural practice was not sustained with such zeal within the households of these Spanish colonial towns. Archaeologists throughout the Spanish Americas have revealed striking adjustments to traditional Spanish practices in the domain of women in Spanish colonial households. Excavations at 16th- through 18th-century home sites in the Caribbean, Florida, Mexico, Panamá, Venezuela, and the Rio de la Plata region consistently reveal that domestic, female-associated aspects of those households are represented predominantly by American elements or mixed European-American-African elements, regardless of their documentary-based ethnic or racial identification. These include cooking technology (*manos*, *metates*, griddles, pots), ceramic technology, foodstuffs, and household management (such as the use of American Indian-style smudge pits in Spanish homes) (Deagan 1983: 108, 1995; Domínguez 1984; McEwan 1988, 1992; Ewen 1991; Charlton and Fournier 1993; Reitz and McEwan 1995; Senatore 1995). In contrast to this, as has been argued elsewhere (Deagan 1983, 1996; Ewen 1991), both traditionally “male” categories and socially visible categories of the material world (e.g., architecture, religious items, clothing) remained Spanish or European in form from the 15th through the 18th centuries.

This pattern of carefully maintaining the ideal of Spanish identification in socially visible areas while adapting to the local circumstances of the colonial setting in private and domestic life developed very rapidly as a mechanism for social integration in the towns of the Spanish empire. It suggests adherence to a highly structured set of pre-existing precepts—embodied in this case by the centralized church and government controls and the ideal of Spanish identification but implemented simultaneously with a high degree of flexibility and accommodation to local, indigenous conditions. Non-European women were a potent force in this process. Whether as wives, concubines, or servants, they were the brokers for European, Indian, and African exchanges within Spanish-American households and communities.

Mestizaje and Cultural Genesis

Intermarriage and consensual relationships among Spaniards (mostly men) and Indians and Africans (mostly women) formed a crucial dynamic in creating, transforming, and stabilizing the social milieu of the Spanish-American colonies (Morner 1967; Nash 1980; Esteva-Fabregat 1995). Alliances between European and non-European partners accounted for between one-quarter and one-half of all marriages in some parts of the Spanish colonies during the 16th and 17th centuries (Arranz Márquez 1991). This was not a simple function of gender ratios since the proportion of Spanish women to Spanish men in the first 50 years of colonization was about the same as English gender proportions in the first decades of the Anglo-American colonization (Konetzke 1945; Deagan 1996). It was, rather, the influence of both the Catholic Church and, probably, the centuries-long traditions of *convivencia* and intermarriage in Spain itself.

While canonical law considered different religions to be an obstacle to marriage, it did not consider race an obstacle as long as both parties were Catholic (Konetzke 1946; Morner 1967:26, 36). Queen Isabela, for example, instructed the governor of Santo Domingo in 1503 to see to it that “some Christians marry some Indian women and some Christian women marry some Indian men, so that both parties can communicate and teach each other, and the Indians become men and women of reason” (Morner 1967:26). A large number of Spanish men also lived in *concubinage*

with Indian and African women, and the Church tried vigorously to make them marry.

These unions led to a bewildering array of genetic (and social) admixture among European, Indian, and African populations, to which Spanish imperial ideology responded in characteristic fashion by the formal institutionalization of race mixture into more than 25 categories (which were explicitly illustrated in more than 1,000 colonial Mexican “Casta” paintings, best seen in García Saíz 1989). Although these categories reflected a commitment to social hierarchy and racial prejudice; nevertheless, they provided a formal means of integrating and legitimizing virtually any combination of racial attributes in a recognized institutional structure. Furthermore, they were used very flexibly in social practice. In 18th-century Mexico, for example, individuals often identified themselves at different times as belonging to different racial categories depending on the relative advantages of a category in a specific situation (Boyer 1997). Regardless of imperial legal categories and distinctions, people in the Americas apparently regarded their racial identity “not so much as an indicator of group membership or even as a badge of self definition within a static and rigid system, but rather as a component of (his) personal identity that could be manipulated and often changed” (Chance 1978:130–131).

The Frontier

The goals of establishing civilized Christian life as dictated by the Church and the Crown were apparently adjusted most strikingly (and perhaps even largely ignored) in rural and frontier areas of the empire. There was little social integration of colonized people in these areas into the empire beyond the symbolic acknowledgment of imperial and Catholic dominion. In fact, there is some indication that the Spaniards who lived in these communities made far greater adjustments to the American mode of life than vice versa (Deagan 1985:300–304; Fowler 1991; Smith 1991; Thomas 1991; Charlton and Fournier 1993; Gasco 1993; Loucks 1993; Ruhl and Hoffman 1997). One historian of the Spanish frontier in New Mexico characterizes “Spanish colonists” as “anyone living in a manner more Spanish than Indian” (Kessell 1997:50).

The Catholic Church, however, was as profoundly influential on the colonial frontier as

it was in town settings. Missions evolved along the frontiers of the Spanish empire not only as centers of Christianity but also of Spanish political presence, economic production, labor organization, and defense. Both the institution of the mission and the concept of peaceful evangelization were features found exclusively in Spain's overseas holdings, evolving in response to local conditions. The idealized goal of empire—the creation of a Catholic state—had been achieved in Spain itself exclusively by force: warfare, forced conversions, expulsion, and the Inquisition. It was only in the isolated territories of the overseas empire that the greatly outnumbered Spaniards developed the principle and quite often the process of peaceful proselytizing and conversion.

Catholicism in America of A.D. 1500 was faced with a situation that recalled the original spread of doctrine more than a thousand years earlier—the accommodation of Catholic doctrine and practice to deeply held pagan beliefs and practice. The Spanish missionaries were, for the most part, flexible in recognizing that the acceptance of Catholicism was a highly variable and selective process for most American Indians, both materially and spiritually (McEwan 2001). Historical and archaeological research in Spanish-American missions documents the many ways in which elements of Catholic ritual were selected, rejected, and transformed by various groups from the Maya to the peoples of the United States southwest and southeast (Clendinnen 1987; Thomas 1990:357–397; Gutiérrez 1991:82–91; Weber 1992:105–121; McEwan 1993, 2001).

Archaeology has also begun to suggest that the Spanish missionaries themselves may have actively negotiated the adjustment of church ritual at the missions. Excavations have documented, for example, the inclusion of native and European grave goods with Christian Indian burials inside mission churches as well as the incorporation of charnel-house remains into Christian contexts (Thomas 1988:120–122; Milanich 1999:139; Larsen et al. 2001). And one of the most dramatic expressions of missionaries' accommodation to native patterns can be seen at the 17th-century site of San Luis de Talimali in Florida. There the massive Apalachee council house, symbolically and ritually important in native terms, looms over and faces the Catholic Church across the town

plaza where the traditional ritual ball game was played (Hann and McEwan 1998:75–77).

This accommodation of non-Christian practices and Catholic ritual can still be seen today throughout Spanish America in such things as the correlation of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Patroness of America) with the Aztec Maize goddess Tonantzin and the incorporation of native music, dance, and images into celebrations of the Mass and other rituals.

Conclusion

There is no more relevant issue for historical archaeology than the European expansion and colonization after 1500, which was arguably the most influential historical process shaping the world in which most of us live and do archaeology today. Engaging in a comparative, archaeologically informed study of colonial systems in the Americas is something that we as archaeologists often talk about but rarely do. This undoubtedly has to do with the complexity of such a project, which not only requires investigation at a variety of distinct and explicit scales of inquiry (ranging from individual household experience to the colonial "system" itself) but also requires maintaining a continuous, vertical conversation among those scales.

The preceding assessment, admittedly selective and heavily condensed, of Spanish colonial practice and origins has tried to suggest some potential parameters along which such a comparative study of American colonization might be approached. They include the degrees and varieties of economic and governmental centrality, forms of labor organization, varieties of religious experience, gender relations, idealized social identities, and frontier-urban dichotomies. The aspects of such a comparison to which archaeological research can be particularly vital lie in understanding how these parameters, once defined, are played out in communities and how they shaped—through resistance, innovation, or incorporation of the "other"—the evolution of the colonial project itself.

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