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Columbus's Gift: Representations of Grace and Wealth and the Enterprise of the Indies

Elvira Vilches

At the start of Spain's colonial enterprise, the itinerant court of Ferdinand and Isabella was the first stage where travel accounts and specimens of all kinds coalesced and where the New World "yielded wonder on top of wonder."¹ In May 1493, upon returning from his first voyage, Columbus presented at the royal court in Barcelona a procession of naked Indians adorned with gold and accompanied by multicolored parrots. This spectacle previously astonished crowds in Lisbon and Seville, and a similar display would follow his second voyage. After spending three years in La Española, in October 1496, the explorer brought to Burgos a cavalcade of Indians and mules loaded with gold objects (Bernáldez 600, 678). Inscribed as wonders—that which exceeds the ordinary—and inserted in the ambience of court spectacles, these subjects and objects represented the

¹ Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park stress the impact of the New World as the most outstanding event contributing to the vogue for the marvelous (100–8). *El coleccionismo en España* by J.M. Morán and Fernando Checa studies royal collections from the 12th to the 17th centuries and gives a detailed account of Americana held by the Spanish monarchs and their extended circle of families and friends. I thank the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at North Carolina State University for supporting my research with a Summer Stipend Grant. The completion of this article has been possible thanks to a Library of Congress Fellowship in International Studies. I am indebted to both Natasha Chang and Gina Herrmann for their insightful comments and editorial advice.

fertile lands, great mines of gold, and the thousands of other valuable things that the Admiral listed in his writings and professed to have discovered in the New World. As the physical extension of these texts, New World wonders carried with them the sense of unmediated experience and the irrefutable proof of financial success. Praised and admired for their visible and tangible connection with the New World, wonders functioned as *pars pro toto*, shards that reconstructed the new territories piece by piece in a carefully edited depiction of what the West Indies might be (Mason 1–22).

Barcelona, Burgos, and Medina del Campo were also the stages where Columbus created situations of pleasure exclusively intended to satisfy the monarchs' taste for wonder. His intentions were to advertise his mistaken landfall in the Caribbean as success, fulfill the financial expectations of his royal sponsors, and buy some time in order to reach India and find gold. At the royal palace, New World wonders not only depicted wealthy and exotic lands, but also were constituted as minimal representations of a boundless gift bestowed upon the Spanish sovereigns by the Lord and retrieved by Columbus.² Displaced from their original location and environment, Amerindian people, along with their crafts and pets, became objects that circulated between Columbus and the monarchs serving as profane tokens of holy grace and wealth. The theatrical presentation of New World wonders in Spain was at the center of a complex network of ceremonial exchange that stemmed from a complicated narrative of obligations and expectations between the explorer and his sponsors. In Columbus's writings this initial circle between the monarchs and the explorer becomes secondary; the language of property and that of benefit are integrated within a discourse of providential grace that rewards the Spanish monarchs' efforts to expand Christianity with a title of property to the New World, and appoints the Admiral as its elected envoy.

² In his ground-breaking work, *Marvelous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt examines Renaissance aesthetic theory of wonder and how it serves to mediate the ways in which Europeans represented non-European peoples, and supplements literature on colonial rituals of appropriation. He analyzes Columbus's rhetorical strategies to draw his readers toward wonder and claim possession. He argues that the ritual act of claiming possession is followed by the construction of a divine gift that at once sanctions legitimation and transcends the previous legal act (80). My concern is to elucidate in which ways the claim of a holy gift is compatible with Columbus's failure to reach India and find gold.

Generosity, grace, and obligation relate Columbus's texts to the practice of gift exchange as an essential relational mode used in both medieval and early modern Europe. In his seminal work *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss studies gift exchange—with its blend of reciprocal giving, persons, and things—as a permanent part of social life. Drawing from Mauss's model, Georges Duby also contributes to scholarship on gift exchange in his depiction of medieval European society as a world of war and giving: "Society as a whole was shot through with an infinitely varied network for circulating the wealth and services, inspired by 'necessary obligation'" (48). The plundering of goods was turned into the orderly collection of the gift of tribute; war booty was distributed to followers as rewards and benefits, and to the church as offerings; magnates rivaled each other in gift presentation at the royal court in order to seek royal favor and protection (48–57). In Spain such social organization defines the world of the conquistador and provides a model that bridges the takeover of Al-Andalus and the conquest of the Americas.

Both Duby and Lester Little pinpoint the inextricable link between gift exchange and market practices and values. The latter argues that during this period gift exchange was complementary to profit-oriented commercial economy. Little examines the paradoxical manner in which Franciscans and Dominicans celebrated poverty and yet accommodated the commercial life of thirteenth-century cities. These religious orders encouraged merchants to turn their gains into generous gifts to the poor, to hospitals, and religious institutions (212–13, 216). Natalie Davis studies the cultural and social practices of giving in sixteenth-century France. She describes what she calls a "gift register" or a "gift mode": "gift exchange persists as an essential relational mode, a repertoire of behavior, a register with its own rules, language, etiquette, and gestures" (9). Davis stresses that for early-modern people gift exchange is defined according to two age-old core beliefs: first, everything we have is a gift from God and what comes in as a gift has some claim to go out as a gift; second, humans were held together by reciprocity. Both beliefs were thought to complement each other as they stressed the assumption that gratitude was necessary for society to function (11–13).

Columbus's writings concerning his travels convey these ideas. If the whole world—which the Lord has created, governed, and donated—could be constructed as a gift then the newly found territories were simply the richest part of such gracious donation. The theme of gratitude appears in scattered manifestations through the ongoing

textual dialogue between the Crown and Columbus as it rephrases material gains into rewards.³ The commercial language of the royal contract, “Capitulaciones de Santa Fe” (April 17, 1492), coexists with the language of benefits and favors of the “Carta de Merced” (April 30, 1492), which describes the concessions and privileges to be conferred upon the successful completion of the voyage. The document addresses the monarchs’ appreciation for Columbus’s services. This royal recognition of Columbus’s efforts and risks binds the explorer in his duty by gratitude and ties Columbus to the sovereigns in a bond that transcends the first navigation.⁴ In the “Letter of 1492,” Columbus’s first response to the pre-discovery documents, initial profits, benefits, and privileges are translated later into an evangelical mission that relates the monarchs to a series of events linking the expulsion of the Jews, the conquest of Granada, and Columbus’s mission to the Indies—(Zamora, *Reading Columbus* 27–37). The letter that Columbus wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella from Portugal on March 4, 1493 completes these actions with plans to re-conquer the Holy Land. Columbus promises that after seven years he will be able to pay for an army of “five thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot soldiers for the war and conquest of Jerusalem” (Zamora, “Letter” 7). The liberation of Jerusalem is presented as a conjoined gesture of gratitude involving both the crown, for having received an island “signaled by the hand of Our Lord,” and Columbus, for receiving “little investment” on the part of the king and queen “in this beginning of the taking of the Indies and all that they contain.” The request for further help is followed by a reminder that their Highnesses “should order that many praises be given to the Holy Trinity” and that they should not forget the privileges and favors promised to Columbus in reward for his services (“Letter” 6–7).

Columbus’s writings concerning his travels delineate a “gift register” as a double relational mode that is employed both in the Caribbean and in Spain. Anthropologists such as Mary Helms and Roberto Cassá analyze the relevance of gift exchange and particular regimes of value in Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean societies previ-

³ I am following Margarita Zamora’s *Reading Columbus* and her analysis of the influence of medieval notarial arts on the articulation of the enterprise of the Indies and the norms of exchange between Columbus and the crown (21–38).

⁴ See Helen Nader’s *Book of Privileges Issued to Christopher Columbus by King Fernando and Queen Isabella, 1492–1502*.

ous to Columbus's landfall.⁵ Beatriz Pastor and Stephen Greenblatt, on the other hand, have stressed the inequality of exchange between Spaniards and Amerindians. Pastor examines the ways in which Columbus's texts construct America as booty. Greenblatt, on the other hand, describes the dealings of what he calls "Christian imperialism": a discursive economy that gives the Indians "an absolute gift," that is faith, in exchange for their gold (70). José Piedra argues instead for an interactive and cross-cultural exchange of values and valuables.

In Spain, there is a "gift mode" that encompasses Columbus's royal presentations, travel writings, and letters that coexist with the royal commission, as well as the royal privileges that were either granted or suspended. Stephanie Merrim suggests that "Columbus marshals a 'language of success' to cover his failures and to seek legitimation and reward (63, 59–67). My main concern is the ways in which the gift as a register with its own rules can be used as a means to represent the wealth that Columbus promises but is not able to produce. The fact that Columbus did not reach his intended destination and that there was little gold to be found is not seen by him as an actual impediment, rather as a partial obstacle that will be cleared as exploration progresses. Time becomes a central issue. Four successive expeditions (1492–1504) offer the opportunity to search for gold, correct previous errors, and meet previous goals. But sailing time is also included within the rhythm of the gift that Columbus promises to deliver and reciprocate. Every gift produces a return gift. Sixteenth-century courtesy books prescribed that benefits should not be returned too soon because it would make the donor feel the gift had been forced, nor too late because it would humiliate the first giver (Davis 66). This

⁵ Mary Helms's study of Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean Indians at the end of the fifteenth century identifies networks of elite associations that maintain access and control over certain scarce and highly valued resources such as salt, textiles, gold, emeralds, pottery, and captives. This exchange of valuables had stronger political and ideological meaning than economic significance. Estimation of value was fixed by tribal cosmologies in which geographical distance conveys esoteric value, either because it correlates with supernatural distance or because it stands as physical proof of the distant places where warriors ventured (40–54). Roberto Cassá amplifies these observations by analyzing Taíno exchanges. In *La Española*, bones, woods, and seashells belong to the same regime of value as the items enumerated above, whereas other goods such as hammocks, parrots, beads, spears, fish, and produce are included in a wider circle of ordinary exchanges. Cassá defines a gift exchange system similar to potlatches of the American Northwest described by Mauss (116–18).

repertoire of behavior also affects those gifts exchanged between God and his children. Blessings are to be reciprocated by more gifts and by magnifying the Lord's name. In Columbus's writings the promise of a holy gift of free gold establishes a rhythm of exchange that covers the span of his four voyages. During his first voyage Columbus pledged to pay for the largest conquering army to liberate Jerusalem. This promise was never fulfilled but renewed time and again. By promising to finance a crusade after a period of seven years of earnings Columbus establishes the interval necessary for a proper return and gives an estimate of future profits. But he can only materialize these prospects by sending sporadic handfuls of gold, pearls and spices, by presenting New World wonders, and by selling Indians as slaves.⁶

At stake in the promise of providential gold and the delivery of New World wonders as "objects of encounter," is the creation of an alternative means to embody wealth and monetary value. In the context of the enterprise of the Indies the logic of the gift goes beyond the social assumptions of generosity and gift giving, as well as issues regarding giving and consuming.⁷ In Columbus's texts the theme of the gift posits questions on how to represent the worth of what is given. In the following pages I explore the ways in which monetary value is constructed in order to materialize the bountiful wealth of the Indies. I begin elucidating this process by looking at the ways in which a ceremonial exchange in *La Española* is rephrased in a narrative of reward and gratitude. The obligation to return is undertaken by Columbus himself. The pledge to conquer Jerusalem is at once an expression of gratitude, a means to represent monetary value, and an opportunity to buy time in the hope to finally meet the preset goals of the enterprise of the Indies. As the holy gift cannot be substantiated it becomes a metaphor of absolute value with a status similar of that of the general equivalent. Then the holy gift of free gold opens a register of exchange and circulation in which its worth is represented by tokens such as bits and pieces of gold and wonders. All these layers and elements overlap in order to create a paradigm of

⁶ New World wonders or exotic Americana can be understood as "objects of encounter," the term that Mary Helms applies to both western and nonwestern cultures to designate the importance of objects as a means of incorporating and understanding other cultures and reaffirming cosmologies ("Essay on objects").

⁷ See "Why Gift" by Alan D. Schrift, "Taking Account of the New Economic Criticism" by Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee and "The Questions of the Gift" also by Mark Osteen.

symbolic value—"the economy of the marvelous"—that represents the mountains of gold that lie on the other side of the Atlantic.

I. Ceremonial Exchange across the Atlantic

In *Diario del primer viaje*, the entry of October 11, 1492 shows that in order to win the Indians' friendship Columbus gave them red bonnets, beads, and bells. The natives would row or swim to reach the caravels and barter in order to get more trinkets. From October to February, Columbus and his crew were engaged in transactions of various kinds. Gold was bartered for bells on October 21, while previously the crew only obtained cotton, parrots, and spears. During that time, some Indians eagerly sought barter in order to trade trinkets among their own people, while others fled and took their valuables with them. Gold was very scarce, yet by November 12, Columbus describes sources of gold ore and spices. On December 3, Columbus infers that if the Indians were so willing to trade everything they had, they would give gold for nothing (Varela 123, 135, 151). By the end of the month, Columbus met Guacanarí, one of the *caciques* of La Española, and both exchanged presents. Columbus invited the *cacique* on board and offered him Spanish food. Two days later Guacanarí came back with his retinue, bringing five pieces of gold. Columbus reciprocated with an amber necklace, a beautiful tapestry, red shoes, a bottle of orange blossom water, and a silver ring. Days later, the ceremonial exchange was expanded to the whole community. The locals gave food and parrots. Columbus distributed glass beads, brass rings, and then he was brought to the village where he was given two big pieces of gold. In the following days, the young *cacique* sent a gold mask, while his people offered gold and food in exchange for trinkets and even helped the crew gather the cargo scattered by a shipwreck and built a fort. Columbus entertained Guacanarí with a demonstration of artillery and promised protection against his enemies, the Caribs (Varela 182–85).

Between perfect strangers, exchange provides a contact zone where different items are seen through different views. Barter bypasses obvious linguistic barriers and transcends the domain of currency transactions (Thomas 21). In reading *Diario* what becomes apparent, as Piedra points out, is that there is a course of double transactions through which each group becomes aware of the other's values and valuables (52). The journal describes the constant material transactions in which natives are hesitant about what is offered in

exchange, and other instances in which natives incorporate foreign goods into their own trading. The ceremonial exchange of gifts between Columbus and Guacanarí mirrors the Taíno system of exchange that Cassá analyzes, whereby *caciques* exchange gifts to establish bonds, assign political ranks, and sanction legal ties (117). In La Española, ritualized gift exchange establishes peace and alliance. In Spain, however, this friendly settlement is set aside by a gift flow that evokes the Lord as the original supplier of everything humans have, as well as the spectator of all gift transactions. In the “Letter to the Monarchs” (March 4, 1493) divine intervention bestows upon the monarchs the greatest victory ever given to a prince, an island signaled by the Lord where he will grant Ferdinand and Isabella as much gold, spices, mastic, ligmun aloe, cotton, and many slaves as they need. Such a manifestation of divine grace is augmented by an overt reference to Columbus’s share of ten percent. If in a period of seven years the soon to be Admiral were to be able to pay for a crusade army of five thousand cavalry men and fifty thousand foot soldiers, and even produce such a powerful army after five years, then the riches contained by the Indies would have to have been extremely bountiful. The description of such shining prospects is slightly dimmed by Columbus asking for a little investment needed for what he describes as “this beginning of the taking of the Indies and all that it contains” (“Letter” 7). Among a long list of data describing routes, islands, peoples, riches, and manifestations of gratitude, this line goes almost unnoticed even though it encapsulates a recurrent problem in the enterprise of the Indies: the materialization of the wealth that Columbus professes to provide.

II. Grace and Wealth

Columbus advertises his mistaken landfall as the Indies thanks to his gift of writing and his ability to improvise conceptual tokens.⁸ *Diario*, discourse mirrors the actual error of the sailing course since geographical uncertainty becomes a linguistic wandering in search of signifiers for the Eastern centers of trade. Sporadic findings of gold make up for the phonic inaccuracy of new adaptations of Cipango

⁸ Jose Rabasa discusses Columbus’s ability of constructing scriptural tokens in “Columbus and the Scriptural Economy of the Renaissance” in *Inventing America* (49–82).

into Cibao, Colba, and finally Cuba. Moreover the listings of frequent sightings of cannibals, Amazons, mermaids, and griffins substantiate the improvised names with the exotic races and creatures that medieval lore locates in the Orient. In the official version announcing the discovery, the Letter to Santángel (February 15, 1493), La Española embodies the holy gift of free gold. The vastness of the island, its proportions, and features are slowly portrayed down to the smallest details: its fertile lands, lavish vegetation, wide ports, friendly and generous population, and its rich mines. The organized depiction of the island takes the reader by the hand to follow Columbus's steps from the coastline to the interior. The island is a wonderland of untapped wealth, whose fort is conveniently located near gold mines, and close to the trade routes connecting with the main land where the territories of the Great Khan are found.

In *Diario's* entry of March 6, the editorial voice of Bartolomé de Las Casas tells us that Columbus's return from an unknown corner of the world overwhelmed everyone with wonder. While he stayed in the port of Lisbon masses flocked to the docks to see the Indians. Las Casas adds that it was astonishing because people were full of wonder at the offerings that the Lord bestowed upon Ferdinand and Isabella for their desire to serve God (Varela 215). Discernible connections between New World wonders, wealth, and grace surface in every presentation. The ten Indians admired at the port of Lisbon also dazzled crowds in Seville, and Barcelona. In Seville, the parade of Indians wearing golden masks with precious stones and carrying colorful parrots marched with the procession of Palm Sunday (Bernáldez 600). During his trip to Barcelona, Columbus had to make frequent stops because crowds would pack the road to see these marvels (Colón 133). And even before Columbus reached Barcelona in mid April, the duke of Medinaceli, one of his first supporters, wrote to Cardinal Pedro de Mendoza to report the success of the expedition and to ask him to gain the queen's favor so that he could send his own ships to trade:

Colón ha hallado todo lo que buscava y muy cumplidamente, lo cual yo luego supe: y por fazer saber tan buena nueva a Su Alteza, gelo escrivo con Xuárez y le enbio a suplicar me haga merced que yo pueda embiar en cada año allá algunas caravelas mías. (Gil and Varela 145)

I learned that Columbus has found all he was entrusted to discover. I am sending a letter with Xuárez to communicate the good news to Her Highness and to ask the queen to grant permission so that I can send my caravels to the Indies every year. (My translation)

At the royal reception in Barcelona, the transposition from the marvelous to the miraculous stimulated the mental multiplication of all the specimens the Admiral brought. In his *Historia de las Indias* Las Casas writes that the pieces of gold certified the infinite amounts those lands held and confirmed the crown's great expectations for replenishing the royal treasure (334). When Ferdinand and Isabella received the explorer and marveled at the wonders of the Indies he presented, they also saw their hopes come true. Two documents concerning future settlements, explorations, and gold mining were issued with haste. The "Memorial to the Sovereigns on Colonial Policy" (April 1493) and "Instructions of the Sovereigns to Columbus for His Second Voyage to the Indies" (May 1493) designated trustworthy officials to obtain gold and ship bullion. On September 25, 1493, a fleet of seventeen caravels departed from Cádiz to La Española to establish a colony (Nader 25–29).

The high hopes raised by the documents announcing the Discovery were soon overshadowed by the penury of the first settlement. Against the reality of the Americas, the Admiral constantly claimed that he would find gold soon. In the meantime, the incommensurability of the holy gift was only determined by his pledge of financing the most powerful and mighty army to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim rule with his share. In fact, he keeps delaying the moment of both the full delivery of the gift of the Indies and that of the crusade as a counter-gift for both the monarchs' support and the Lord's guidance—He "favors and gives victory to all of those who walk in His path" ("Letter" 7)—during three more fruitless expeditions. Instead of the holy gift of New World gold what remained as the most significant treasure was a corpus of letters and relations, along with sporadic presentations of Indians, exotic animals, and handfuls of gold.

Gifts carry on a repertoire of behavior that conforms to symbolic systems with their own rules that can be absorbed and endlessly reproduced without the actor even being aware of what he or she is doing. Pierre Bourdieu's famous notion of the *habitus* is central also in explaining the rules of courtesy establishing the gift rhythm of obligation and gratitude. In his ethnographic study of the Kabyle of Algeria, Bourdieu notes that what makes gift exchange different from regular exchange is the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift. It is this delay that makes it possible to pretend that each donation is simply an act of generosity, and to deny any element of self-interested calculation (6). In medieval and early modern Europe the early or

late return of a gift causes anxiety about whether the first donor will be insulted or humiliated (Davis 66). Making ritual sacrifices to Divine authority such as alms for the poor or donations were repeated over time (Duby 56). In the case of Columbus, this spiritual bond is expressed by the Admiral's vision of exploration as pilgrimage, by his covenant with the Lord, and by the goal of financing a crusade.⁹ As Margarita Zamora suggests, Columbus constructs the Atlantic crossing as an act of personal piety:

The journey became an *imitatio Christi*, carried out not only in the name of Christ but in the same evangelical manner of traveling undertaken by the Savior himself. It was a pious offering to Christ and the figurative first step in a millenarian journey to carry the World beyond the borders of Christendom to the farthest pagan realms . . . Christoferens, the name with which Columbus signed his writings from 1501, on is the emblem of a journey undertaken not just on behalf of Christ but in the "manner of Christ. (*Reading Columbus* 97)¹⁰

Yet the goals of returning with gold, spices, and precious stones that would help liberate Jerusalem remained a problem. The promise of holy gold constitutes a long parenthesis during which Columbus provides symbolic substitutes of wealth. In the end, such a long delay escapes the temporal structure of the gift.

The liberation of the Holy Sepulchre exceeds the textual limits of the first navigation and emerges during his subsequent voyages with a stronger conviction.¹¹ As three voyages follow with no apparent results and the crusade is postponed, the promise of a holy gift of free

⁹ In *Columbus and the End of the Earth*, Djelal Kadir makes a very thorough study of the Western Judeo-Christian culture and, in particular, its prophetic and apocalyptic traditions as the basis for both Western colonial expansion and the legitimization of conquest and colonization in the New World. Kadir relates Columbus, medieval visionaries, philosophers, and geographers in order to demonstrate the makeup of Columbus's worldview. This impressive scholarship includes biblical quotations, medieval prophecy, and eschatology. Kadir studies Columbus's role as a providential agent, and argues that Columbus's perception of his own prophetic role may have been identical with his sense of history which derives from an appreciation of a long tradition in which prophecy and history run concurrently (4).

¹⁰ In *Colón y su mentalidad mesiánica* Alain Milhou elucidates the ideological context that explains the relevance of Columbus's assumption of this particular name (55–90). He also argues that Columbus's sincere piety confirmed his consciousness of being one of the Elect and supported his obsession with power, titles, fame, and wealth.

¹¹ The theme of the liberation of Jerusalem expands through this series of texts: "Letter to the Monarchs" (February 1500), "Letter to the Queen" (August–September 1501), "Letter to Pope Alexander VI" (February 1502), "Book of Prophecies" (September 1503).

gold and its inherent flow of reciprocation becomes a waiting game, that is, the tempo of a narrative that keeps delaying the advent of the gift. The gift then becomes an unfinished event, an envoy that, like Columbus, will fail to arrive at its destination. Although the monarchs have dominion over the islands signaled by the hand of the Lord, the promise of all the gold, spices, and slaves that the monarchs may want hardly materializes. The holy gift of free gold turns into an unfeasible quest for something that cannot be found, exchanged, and finally given. In the end there is only Columbus's own gift for writing and representation.¹² The holy gift, then, stands as a metaphor that will compensate lack with excess. In order to turn language into gold, Columbus designs the gift as the unilateral expression of absolute values. In fact, the promise of lands of gold can be seen as a version of the Holy Grail, the medieval solution to material scarcity that Marc Shells describes as a "free and infinitely large gift" representing a spiritual as well as a material cornucopia (45). In contrast to the Grail, the holy gift does not produce spiritual and material nourishment, but rather a secular register of equivalencies that the medieval imaginary situates in the East, a fantastic geography that encompasses both the sacred and the profane as it includes Eden, the Holy City, and monstrous races that dwell in lands of spices and precious metals. The correlation between the exotic and gold is then culturally motivated. The presence of fabulous beings in the vicinity of the most coveted commodities also eroticizes wealth by implying that riches represent and stand for all kinds of excess, pleasures, and prohibitions. The difficulty of materializing the vast bounty that the holy gift promises is partially resolved by providing qualitative substitutes that may fill in the absence of gold. In this way the occasional display of specimens and people from the Indies constitutes alternative valences to impersonate gold. I have named this process of supplanting gold with the erotic and the exotic the "economy of the marvelous."

¹² The impossibility of delivering the holy gift puts Columbus's gift in dialogue with current discussions on the nature of the gift as an impossible phenomenon. Derrida's understanding of the gift is that, in order to exist, the gift must not be returned, and it goes further to contend that even a mere recognition will annul the gift (13). If, for Derrida, recognition is a form of return because it gives back a symbolic equivalent, for Columbus, the symbolic equivalent becomes the gift, a general equivalent whose symbolic forms of value will turn exchange into representation. The holy gift of free gold becomes a metaphor that will compensate for lack with excess. In the end, the promised donation is only visible as a referential guarantee of absolute value.

Cannibals, Amazons, and exotic animals appear both in *Diario* and the letters of the first voyage as indexes and tokens of gold. Among the islands that Columbus explored he writes about Matenino, inhabited by Amazons, Caribo, the island of the cannibals, Faba where people with tails live, and Jamaica the island of hairless people. In all instances the extraordinary features and customs of these fantastic races serve as irrefutable proof of great riches that multiply all the coveted goods located in the proximity of La Española. Writing is able to contrive the wealth the holy gift promises, but it cannot carry away and demonstrate its symbolic abstraction of value. What is described on the page must be displayed later at the royal court: the place where travel accounts and real specimens are combined to convey the sense of first-hand experience and the indisputable evidence of financial success, and the stage where wealth is displayed through marvelous tokens.

III. Tokens of Gold

The wonders of the New World overflowed Europe's imagination and fascinated the most privileged circles of society. Throughout the sixteenth-century all kinds of Americana kept their strong princely associations for they represented wealth, nobility, and colonialism (Daston & Parker 100–08). The consumption of wonders alternated between the physical presence of specimens and minute written reports describing travels to exotic unknown lands, as well as spectacles and collections. The conjunction of Columbus's texts and edited displays is reflected in writings by chroniclers witnessing the impact of wonders from the Indies in Spain—Andrés Bernáldez, Bartolomé de las Casas, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Peter Martyr, and Columbus's own son Hernando Colón—and other transatlantic travelers—Miguel de Cuneo and Guillermo Coma. Court spectacles, relations, and accounts, as well as the coding of subjects and objects from the Americas as wonderful tokens of gold, originate in the material culture of wonder. Inextricably related to court life and the figure of the prince, this elitist sphere is determined by the interest of collecting, admiring, and displaying the extraordinary and the outlandish as symbols of luxury, status, and power. This cultural dimension is indispensable in understanding Columbus's gift, since he manipulates the cultural appreciation of wonder as a means to create symbolic value and to satisfy financial expectations.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the author of *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, was present at Columbus's royal presentation in Barcelona. Oviedo writes that the six Indians Columbus took there were baptized in the presence of the monarchs and the crown prince don Juan, who kept one of the Indians named after himself in his company at court. The rest returned with the Admiral to La Española in the second voyage (31) when Columbus established a colony there. The problem of producing reliable sources of gold emerges from the beginning. In "Relación del segundo viaje" Columbus declares that he is sending a map with the location of gold and spices to minimize the fact that he found nothing of value except the natives and that he instructed Antonio de Torres to sell a cargo of 500 enslaved Indians.¹³ In the "Memorial" (January 30, 1494) that Torres brought to the king Columbus reiterates the existence of rich mines while he blames the fact that so little gold was sent on the sickness and hunger of the colonists (Varela 255–59). Instead of gold, the Admiral sent to the king more wonders. This time the erotic stands out as he sent a group of cannibals along with their alleged concubines and some castrated young males, as well as many parrots that, as he suggests, can be given away to different kings as signs of Castille's remarkable colonial undertakings (Varela 247, 249). During this year, Columbus organized La Española into the classic European trading post, with the worst consequences for the Indian population and his own political career: upon their return with Torres's relief fleet (February 2, 1494) Bernardo Boyl and Pedro Margarite informed the monarchs that there was no gold and the investments of the crown would never be recovered (Nader 35).

The first and second voyages disclose a register of exchange through which the wealth of the Indies is conveyed by a syntax of the wonderful that encompasses both texts and physical displays. The parade of New World wonders that Columbus presented to the monarchs in Barcelona is a visual synthesis of the symbolic qualitative equivalencies that both *Diario* and the letters announcing the Discovery establish. These texts resort to the tiresome enumeration of expensive species, golden objects, and native reports about rich mines to produce glowing descriptions of the islands. The prospects

¹³ The economy of La Española was never strong. The estimates of the overall gold production during the first decade was only 4,964 kg (Bernal 573). Yet Europe was dazzled by the glow of gold, even though gold mining was replaced by sugar plantations as the primary economy of the Caribbean (Moya Pons 30–57).

of free gold are further assured and insured by a repertoire of fantastic races and exotic animals culturally associated with European myths of the Orient. The cargo sent with Torres also adds parallel valences. On the one hand, the sale of enslaved Indians allows the direct translation of commodities into cash. On the other, the group of alleged cannibals sent to the king constitutes a more important layer of estimation that augments the cachet of New World wonders with an array of erotic fantasies.

Although the axis of commercial exchange—slaves/money—pays for supplies and provisions, it does not portray the golden lands that Columbus divulges. Interestingly labor and commodities are displaced by the axis of currency exchange that balances the inclinations of the flesh against gold. The king's cannibals convey a mere example of Columbus's custom of offering Indians to the dissatisfied settlers in La Española as "consolation prizes" that, as Piedra notices, consist of "valuable souls to be saved, bodies fit to work," and especially a gratifying "potpourri of homoeroticism and heteroeroticism" ("Loving" 243–46). Such a variety of options also abound in Columbus's recurrent tales about cannibals and Amazons as indexes of gold.¹⁴ In *Diario* and "Relación del segundo viaje" gold is supplanted by tales of cruel one-eyed men who alternate between making war and making love to their harmless Taíno neighbors, as well as the warrior women of Matinino. The cannibals' preferences for killing and mating are further enhanced by the fact that they, as well as the Amazons, prefer those of their own gender.

The memoirs of Guillermo Coma and Miguel de Cuneo, two Italian members of the second expedition, demonstrate that the company of the natives in work and play turned colonial disappointment into rewarding romance. Coma writes that local women enjoy seducing white men with their lascivious dances, whereas Cuneo gives lustful portrayals of the women sent to Spain together with the cannibals. He adds that the Admiral gave him a young cannibal woman whom he raped. He states that Indian women have beautiful bodies, that the natives make love in public, and that they are sodomites—perhaps as

¹⁴ Peter Hulme argues that in *Diario* gold is the signifier where the discourse of trade—oriental—and that of otherness—savagery—intersect. As the Oriental market places are not found the discourse of trade shifts to otherness and defines the meaning of cannibal by weaving together gold and anthropophagy (20, 32–41). To my mind the archive of topics clustered around gold, such as savagery, monstrosity, and anthropophagy, provide a direct link between the precious metal. This indexical relation is expanded as the index is used also as token for gold.

a way to deny the problematic sex appeal of Indian males as the aesthetic and erotic ideal of Caribbean beauty that Piedra discusses.¹⁵ Cuneo also adds that from a group of 1,600 slaves to be shipped, only 550 were actually taken and the rest were given to the settlers for nothing (Gil and Varela 251).

The transatlantic paradigm of substitutive formations that Columbus designs conceives of pleasure as an alternative to gold. Given the shortage of the precious metal, libido becomes a subsidiary medium of exchange on both sides of the Atlantic. In Spain, the iteration of constructing the erotic as a token of wealth through writing and live displays overcharges New World wonders with a constellation of passions and desires that, together with their restricted access and controlled distribution typical of the culture of wonder, construct people, fauna, and crafts as exclusive sumptuary symbolic goods. New World wonders resemble what Mary Douglas calls “primitive valuables”—coupons—because, although marvels act as money, they are not a generalized media of exchange, but display rank, patron/client relationships (69), eroticized views of gold, and colonial advancement. If Coma and Cuneo, among others, enjoy bodies of pleasure first hand, those witnessing royal spectacles delight in admiring and imagining being in the Indies. When the court was residing at Medina del Campo in the spring of 1494, Peter Martyr observed several times the group of cannibals. The author of *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo* wrote that he as everyone else who crowded frequently to stare at the cannibals felt their heart trembling with a mixture of passion and fear: “no hay quien los vea que no confiese que un estremecimiento punza sus entrañas: tan atroz y diabólico aspecto les presta su naturaleza y su crueldad. Lo digo por experiencia, tanto de mí mismo como de los demás que, juntamente conmigo, se apiñaron con frecuencia a verlos en Medina” (Gil and Valera 55). “There was no one who saw the cannibals whose hearts did not tremble with wonder and fear, so infernal and repugnant was the aspect nature and their own cruel character had given them. I affirm this after what I have myself seen, and so likewise do all those who, like myself, often crowded to stare at the cannibals in Medina” (My translation).

Martyr describes the “systole of the heart,” the symptom of wonder, with the overtones of an extreme excitement whose pleasure is often

¹⁵ Piedra discusses the Discovery as a gay zone and the colonial power dynamics of masculinity in both “Loving Columbus” and “Nationalizing Sissies.”

sought.¹⁶ In the palace as well as the islands libidinal capital advances tangible assets and establishes flesh as a symbolic representation of gold.

In order to deny the rumors regarding the failure of the first colony, Columbus left La Española in 1496. In late October, he visited the sovereigns in Burgos to present financial shortcomings in the best light and to ask for further support (Phillips 210–11). According to the chronicler Andrés Bernáldez, Columbus brought the brother and the son of the vanquished great *cacique* Caonaboa, who died at sea, and he brought as well many exotic animals, wares, jewels, and gold nuggets (678). The mixture of conquered enemies, golden pieces, and the perplexing presence of the exotic helped Columbus regain the trust of the sovereigns (Colón 213). To my mind, the most outstanding element of this presentation is the enactment of Columbus's spiritual bond and religious persona. Dressed as a Franciscan friar, the Admiral performed a dramatic *mise-en-scène* in which the striking contrast between his humble monk habit and his gold samples enacts the symbolic disclosure of the gift by inscribing himself as Christo Ferens, a carrier of both God and gold. The presentation conjures up the epiphany of the gift by establishing metonymical links between the Franciscan impersonation, Columbus's self-inscription as the chosen emissary, and Paradise. Despite guaranteeing the advent of the holy gift, the two remaining voyages reiterate the previous strategy of replacing wealth with symbolic substitutes. In this case sacred symbols of plenitude such as Paradise and a personal covenant with the Lord prevail without disavowing the profane and the material.

Columbus departed from Seville on May 30, 1498 for his third voyage with the goal of finding China, but instead he landed first in Trinidad and later off the coast of Venezuela. The disappointment was obvious because the people were similar to the Indians in La Española and there were no cities to be found (Nader 54). Facing failure and disappointment, he consoled himself with the thought that he had found the continent, which he believed to lie south of India, and which he believed to be the source of the four great rivers of the Earthly Paradise. In "Relación del tercer viaje" Columbus

¹⁶ Albertus Magnus identifies this reaction as a symptom of experiencing wonder. J. V. Cunningham discusses this aspect in his book *Woe and Wonder* (79). Greenblatt comments this aspect regarding Jean de Lery's account on his voyage to Brazil and his stay with the Tupinamba in Brasil (16–20).

claims to have reached the gates of Paradise at the mouth of the Orinoco river by invoking the amalgamation of spiritual and carnal satisfactions to convey the bliss of eternal salvation and the pleasure of being at the nipple of a breast shaped earth (Varela 380). The euphoric arrival at Eden culminates not only in what Columbus considers the highest geographical location of the earth, but also in the system of libidinal exchanges that wonders carry out. As the resounding image of the one-breasted Amazon, Paradise stands as the jouissance that the erotic treasures of Columbus have created.¹⁷ By the fourth exploration, libido is displaced by gold's organization of economic value. Both registers are redirected to the sacred to reiterate Columbus's covenant with God, which interestingly is elucidated in terms of a reversible equivalence between the spiritual and the material.

On June 29, 1502, Columbus proceeded to Central America, searching again for a route to Asia. He tried to establish a trading post on the coast of Tierra Firme but hostile natives forced him to abandon the site, leaving the crew on ship stranded on a sand bar. Marooned on Jamaica for a year, in his "Relación del cuarto viaje" the God-fearing explorer writes that while being atop the ship calling for help he fell asleep because of exhaustion and fever and heard a compassionate voice that consoled him on his misfortunes. In a long exposition, the voice tells him that all his tribulations are written in marble as a condition of God's covenant, the securest bond, because only the Lord's deeds agree with his words: "¿Quién te a afligido tanto y tantas vezes: Dios o el mundo? Los privilegios, las cartas y promesas que da Dios todo lo cumple con abantaje, y después de haber recibido el servicio acrecienta las mercedes y les da el Paraíso" (Varela 492). "Reflect, who has afflicted thee so grievously and so often, God or the world? The privileges and promises that God bestows, He doth not revoke; nor doth He say, after having received service, that that was not His intention, and that it is to be understood differently. Nor doth He mete out sufferings to make a show of His might. Whatever He promises He fulfils with interests" (Morison 378).

The double-sided vocabulary of giving, paying, and debt transfers full compensation from the realm of Christian largesse to that of money.¹⁸ If God gives, money buys and pays, for nothing can resist its

¹⁷ See also "Loving Columbus."

¹⁸ Regarding the ambiguity of giving, paying, and returning see Émile Benveniste's "Gift Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary."

“alchemy,” as Marx argues following Columbus’s thinking, “not even *res sacrosantae*” (132): “El oro es excelentísimo; el oro se haz thesoro, y con él quien lo tiene, haz cuanto quiere en el mundo, si Dios Nuestro señor no le contradice, y llega a que hecha las ánimas al Paraíso” (Varela 497). “O, most excellent gold! Who has gold has a treasure with which he gets what he wants, imposes his will on the world, and even helps souls to paradise” (Morison 383).

The cultural custom that hides finances behind providential recompense discloses a homology between two opposite notions responsible for the axis of symbolic functions upon which Columbus constructs his notion of absolute valuation. As the conjunction of ideal values, the boundless gift encapsulates two complementing contraries that enrich their own capacity as ultimate symbols. In his book *Art and Money* Marc Shell contends that money is a particularly delicate matter in Christian thinking because it emulates the relation existing between the ideal and the real that religion establishes. Money is a general equivalent and also relates to Jesus as “god-man” because it is a “manifestation of authority and substance, of mind and matter, of soul and body,” which makes “money disturbingly close to Christ as a competing architectonic principle” (8). Thus, the holy gift of New World riches resembles the “free and infinitely large gift” that the Holy Grail entails (*Money* 45). If the Holy Grail, as Shell argues, is both the source and symbol of all things, the transatlantic holy gift is only a symbol, a thing out of this world, a promissory note whose credit can only be fulfilled by a secular index of equivalencies in which libido issues its currency of nudity and promiscuity as expressions of and means to wealth and Paradise.

IV. Wonders and Value

The localized demand for New World wonders in the restricted royal network delineates an economic arena in which use value has been displaced by desire. Taking into account the ideas of the marginalist movement and specifically Karl Menger, Jean Joseph Goux looks at the relationship between economic value and desire in order to define economic utility as the subject’s desire to procure a given item at a given time. To create value, then, all that is necessary is to create a sufficient intensity of desire (*Symbolic Economies* 200–01). In the specific case of Columbus this force derives from his ability to offer cannibals, Amazons, and naked Indians as perverse substitutes for the real thing. By promising providential gold and giving New World

wonders, Columbus produces the scarcity that automatically increases the desire to enjoy both. The interstice that the spectacle of the marvelous creates between abundance and scarcity, satisfaction and desire produces a “metaphoric thirst” which seeks satisfaction in comparable things and signs (*Symbolic Economies* 201). The yearning for something else is consequently associated with lack and disappearance, since they are effective means to entice desire. Gold is almost absent; New World wonders are equally scarce in the Old World. Transplanted into a strange environment, people, pets, and crafts are exclusive specimens to be admired and collected. Their uniqueness, their status as fragments of the wealthiest lands, along with an imposed erotic cachet displaced economic value with attraction value.

In Columbus’s royal presentations such a calculated strategy reveals to what extent Columbus takes advantage of the conjunction between wonder and wealth. He esteems wonders highly because they evoke the fabulous wealth of faraway lands, are metaphorically exchangeable for luxury, and are regarded dearly because of their exclusive localized conditions of supply and demand in Europe. As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parker observe in *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, the discourse and practice of the marvelous corresponds to an overall growth in the complexity of court life. Princes and nobles orchestrate the aesthetic of wonders to represent wealth and power. In this sense, the collection and display of *mirabilia* stand for liquidity and for ostensive proof of colonial endeavors (100–08). For example, in a letter written from Segovia in August 1494, queen Isabella promises great rewards to the Admiral, asks him specific questions about the islands, and requests a cargo of wonders: “Write us about all this for our benefit and send us as many falcons [parrots] as can be sent from there, and specimens of all the types of birds that are and can be collected there, because we want to see all of them” (Nader 99). This is also the case of two of the Indians brought in the spring of 1493: Juan de Castilla, the Indian that Columbus gave to the crown prince John, and Diego Colón, Columbus’s own interpreter; the cannibals sent with Torres; as well as the presentation of the brother and son of the feared Caonaboa. The Admiral, indeed, takes the side of his sponsors/customers and evaluates wonders against the satisfaction expected in order to yield surplus value from the situations of pleasure he designs for the king and queen.

V. “Cash, Check, or Charge?”

The problem set by the “economy of the marvelous”—the symbolic economy that constructs substitutes of holy gold—is that although New World wonders are given as tokens, they are not convertible in materialized value. Although marvels are inscribed and issued as IOUs or blank checks for the riches to come, they lack the necessary funds to fulfill their transactions. The absence of gold—the real means of reserve—is filled by an accumulation of representations that keep renewing the promise of impossible Dorados. In this respect, wonders can be compared with scriptural money and to its pertinent semiotic and symbolizing modes that Goux outlines in the economic sphere (“Cash” 114–28). For wonders, just like scriptural currency, carry over the traces of their own original inscription without involving their realization in liquid assets. If the “treasury of a bank,” as Goux elucidates, “is nothing more than signs of operations upon credits” (“Cash” 118), the treasury of the New World wonders is constituted by the constant mention of themes such as golden lands and bodies for the taking.

The reiterative representations regarding the Americas, the Indians, and gold constitute a triple remainder that is always formulated, evoked, and reinvented by colonial discourse throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If we take into account the publishing boom that the New World motivated by the multiple printings of the “Letter to Santángel” in 1493, as well as the ample publication of Martyr’s *Decadas* (1516, 1520) and Fernández de Oviedo’s *Sumario* (1526) and *Historia natural de las Indias* (1535–1557) throughout the sixteenth century, what becomes apparent is an extensive depository of representations and fictions that perpetuates Columbus’s syntax and estimation of the marvelous.¹⁹ Texts, allegories, as well as the celebrated Americana collected by the Habsburgs, establish a fund of scriptural assets that keep the promise of real gold on the horizon just as a referential guarantee.²⁰ This is true even when gold is actually

¹⁹ David Beers Quinn’s “New Geographical Horizons” studies the emergence of geographical knowledge through an exhaustive account of the texts of exploration that were published and the maps that were made from 1493 till 1562, whereas Rudolf Hirsch’s “Printed Reports on the Early Discoveries” concentrates on the publication and distribution of the texts by all major explorers from Columbus to Cortés, Martyr’s oeuvre, and Oviedo’s *Historia*.

²⁰ For the Habsburgs’s collection of Americana see *El coleccionismo en España*; C. F. Feest’s “The Collecting of American Indian Artefacts and Art in Europe, 1493–1750,” and Thomas Dacosta Kaufman’s “From Treasury to Museum: The Collections of the Austrian Habsburgs.”

found, for the Mexican and Peruvian gold rather than replenishing the treasure of Charles V became a source of unlimited credit to finance the empire.²¹ But before the Indies were the American Express Gold Card of the Habsburg monarchs, the Indies constituted a cornucopia of wealth always renewed by a monotonous but tantalizing repetition of motifs such as cannibalism, engulfing voracious warrior women, monstrous species, and wealth beyond measure. The thesaurus of the New World carries over the trace of the holy gift as it continues to promise the delivery of infinite gold. But what is left is the exchange of two deferred promises regarding geography and trade. In the end, the gift of gold becomes a gift of writing, whose narrative, just like credit, advances (symbolic) value and (surrogate) payments, and makes use of the future by literally buying time in the hope of finally arriving at the right destination.

Oscillating between the poles of generosity and calculation, the gift is an ambivalent category that Columbus masters in his search for value. His competence combines the authorized representations of profits with the tempo of delayed reciprocity. This strategy redirects the misrecognition of a colonial agenda to a deliberate oversight of Columbus's failure to find gold. In this way the holy gift stands as a guarantee that he has indeed found riches. By assuring that he has achieved his goals, Columbus enters into an ambiguous relation with time because: on the one hand, this affirmation puts time on his side, whereas, on the other, time also works against him. The high hopes that the documents announcing the Discovery arouse are soon overshadowed by the penury of the first settlement. Against the reality of the New World, the Admiral constantly claims that he will find gold soon. In the meantime, the incommensurability of the holy gift is only determined by his pledge of financing the most powerful and mighty army to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim rule with his share. In fact, he keeps expanding the tempo of both the full delivery of the gift of the Indies and that of the crusades as a countergift through three more fruitless expeditions. But instead of the holy gift of gold what really remains as the most significant treasure is a narrative composed by a corpus of letters, relations, and documents of privileges.

The writing generated by four voyages composes a narrative that gives so much time and delays in the cycle of exchange that it escapes

²¹ On the finances of the Habsburgs's see Ramón Carande's *Carlos V y sus banqueros* and Juan E. Gelabert's *La bolsa del rey. Rey, reino y fisco en Castilla (1598–1648)*.

the temporal structure of the gift. In Columbus's writings the holy gift of free gold disavows its conclusive status by producing a realm of representations where the promised donation is only visible as a referential guarantee of absolute value. This ideation of the gift as a supreme symbol of value embodying the New World provides means of partial delivery by establishing symbolic functions where the multiple expressions of the marvelous are related to and compared with gold. Columbus's gift consists of a metaphor of absolute value that can only be conceived as a discourse fixated with the pursuit of tokens. For Derrida what the gift gives is a symbol, a general equivalent of the given whose own symbolic exchanges guard the gift against itself (52–54). Likewise for the resilient mariner, since he offers what he does not have by guaranteeing an ideal of unlimited value that can never be obtained even when it loses its superfluity in endless transactions and substitutions. As the symbolic organization proceeds, the tempo of the gift puts forward a waiting game, whereby the archetype of estimation that the gift embodies fades away as it is diluted in a movement of interchanges in which the exotic and the erotic become its tokens. This paradigm of value combines gold's function as general equivalent and a reserve of value with the New World wonders as means of exchange.

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