

The Sense of Place in Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá's *Historia de la Nueva México*

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I propose to explore when, how and where allusions are made to space in Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá's *Historia de la Nueva México*. In order to appropriately discuss such a concept, I first contextualize the text in critical and literary historical terms. Next, I examine the various references to physical landmarks along the route from central Mexico toward New Mexico, paying close attention to how and why such references are made. Then I discover that there is a pendulum effect between geographical space and mythic allusion. The end of the poem concentrates on action that takes place within the walls of the Acoma Indians and the events — including thought processes — involving the Spaniards. The oscillatory structure helps describe how the text struggles with conflicting interests between a military chronicle and a morality play.

Keywords: Gaspar de Villagrá, space, geographical references, myth, military chronicle, morality play.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo me propongo explorar cuándo, cómo y dónde se hace alusión al espacio en la *Historia de la Nueva México* de Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá. Para poder

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aproximarme de manera adecuada a este concepto, primero conceptualizo el texto en términos de crítica e historia literaria. Tras ello, examino las diversas referencias a lugares concretos en la ruta desde el centro de México a Nuevo México, prestando especial atención a cómo y por qué se hacen dichas referencias. Con ello descubro que hay un efecto de péndulo entre las menciones a un espacio geográfico y las alusiones míticas. El final del poema se concentra en la acción que toma lugar entre los muros de los indígenas de Ácoma y en los acontecimientos (incluidos los pensamientos) que conciernen a los españoles. Esta estructura oscilante ayuda a describir el modo en que el texto se debate entre los intereses encontrados de una crónica militar y de un drama religioso.

Palabras clave: Gaspar de Villagrà, espacio, referencias geográficas, mito, crónica militar, teatro moralista.

One can only wonder why a regional foundational text such as Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà's *Historia de la Nueva México* (1610), a weighty text with an undeniable literary ambition, would remain dormant from or, outside of the radar screen, of readers and critics for long stretches of time since its publication. It suffered such a fate while rarely receiving critical attention in the last four hundred years as readers seemed to be few and far between to the point that only isolated experts discussed it, except rarely in terms of establishing it at best as a canonized Latin American text or at least as an acceptable Mexican text comparable to *La Araucana* by Alonso de Ercilla for its distinct epic qualities. No doubt its long-standing obscurity overshadowed its relative notoriety. It seemed to exist suspended in some imaginary space always waiting to be "re-discovered" as a missing link of a literary heritage originating in Mexico's northern frontier. Still, no one seemed to claim the work as part and parcel of their aesthetic tradition, leaving it in a limbo status to chance and serendipity. We can safely assert that within Hispanic literary tradition the work existed as a real phantom.

Yet, as Manuel Martín-Rodríguez has effectively demonstrated, in "La *Historia de la Nueva México* de Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà: recepción crítica (con nuevos datos biográficos de su autor)," this work has intermittently been discussed more than we give it credit, although too often in non-mainstream sources. In fact, Martín-Rodríguez provides a useful century-by-century summary of key moments since its publication in 1610 when the work received scattered commentary, except that it more frequently continued to go into a series of long-term hiatuses, sometimes proving that it had a life

of its own. In the process, *Historia* experienced a similar fortune of the majority of written materials of the Spanish colonial period by becoming a lost footnote or a book collecting dust in some forsaken shelf. Already Luis Leal (1973; 1980; 1993), Werner Sollors (1986), Martín-Rodríguez (2006, 2009), Lomelí (1983), Genaro Padilla (1992; 2010), Miguel Encinias *et al* (Villagrà 1992), María Herrera-Sobek (1999) and others have claimed that *Historia* distinguishes itself as the first American epic poem, preceding Captain John Smith's *General History of Virginia* by fourteen years. Before its more contemporary resurgence in the 1980s, only a few critics (i.e. John Gilmary Shea in 1887, in "The First Epic of Our Country: By the Poet Conquistador of New Mexico Captain Gaspar de Villagrà," and Gilberto Espinosa's *History of New Mexico by Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà* in 1933) dedicated efforts toward saving it from oblivion. The other instances (i.e., Francisco Pimentel, Erna Fergusson, George P. Hammond, Fray Angélico Chávez, etc.) were isolated cases of individual inquiry, but Luis Leal was the first to associate the work within early Chicano literary tradition. His critical assessments led to a reevaluation of where to situate it in terms of literary history, giving it a new impetus as an antecedent of Chicano literature.

But, it must also be openly said that if Villagrà's work had been written in English or French, it probably would have enjoyed considerable fame as an early and permanent landmark of colonial writings. Its denseness, its accentuated realism, its massive volume and its *sui generis* nature (how many chronicles were written in *cantos*?) as both an epic poem and a chronicle — a 'history' and a 'collective story' — clearly challenge a perfunctory reading. If some considered it a long-lost nugget in literary history, we are now realizing that *Historia* represents more an important vein of gold that keeps on giving, offering an infinite amount of critical perspectives and approaches. Its recent popularity, including expanding critical reevaluations, is contributing to how the work is transcending its sphere of influence — more and more regarded as a kind of missing link that holds an important key to understanding how early Hispanic literary legacy became established in the remotest regions of northern Mexico. It must be stated with some caution that even a few English departments are taking notice as if the work were a long-lost archive. In other cases it has become catapulted into a prominent role, comparable to 'discovering' a buried treasure or a Borgian Aleph where all points of the Spanish Conquest converge.

Part of the dilemma in the work's reception lies in the general perception that the Spanish colonial period resembled a type of dark ages from two important perspectives. First of all, Mexicans tended to either downplay *Historia* or ignore it altogether because it didn't reflect centralist colonial concerns. Its heavy focus on *el vasto*

norte or what later became the northern border(lands) has always seemed remote, on the fringe and beyond the more cultured spheres. *La frontera* to this day is viewed in low regard on both sides of the border. In addition, the region's conquered status after 1848 further contributed to its stigma of being an aberration or anomaly of Mexico, and thus there would be no necessity to use works from that region as emblematic of mainstream Mexico because the indigenous peoples from New Mexico were considered more 'barbarous' than the ones in central México. On the other hand, mainstream American literary historians have also ignored it because its theme and epic narrative were too Spanish and thus outside of the early American social domain and mentality. In other words, it wasn't Anglo American enough, lacking pilgrims, Paul Revere, Daniel Boones or Lewis and Clarks. Therefore, *Historia* falls somewhere in between the historical cracks of two future nations by being perceived as neither this nor that, that is, a bastard child suspended in a historical limbo.

As Chicano literary history developed after the 1970s, though, Villagr a's work captured renewed interest because it uniquely emphasizes literary production rooted in a specific region that makes more sense in its own geographical and historical context, analogous to a New Mexican Homer's *Iliad*, and in greater part inspired in Virgil's *Aeneid*, down to the analogous rhetorical contortions of the verses in order to maintain the unrhymed hendecasyllabic verses. As a side note, such exigencies did not negatively affect Alonso de Ercilla's *La Araucana* (1569) because the text served both purposes: to cement Chilean cultural identity and a pan-Latin American quest for an epic representation before nationalist configurations emerged. But, *Historia* by Villagr a seems to have more frequently than not fallen off the face of the earth unable to recover its intrinsic value as a literary work because it challenged the chronicle genre at the time. It is not altogether clear why Ercilla's *La Araucana* survived as the exemplary chronicle of conquest whereas Villagr a's *Historia* never reached that level of recognition, except for their strategic positioning and their difference in composition. The latter's lack of pithiness and epic precision put most readers on the defensive by being forced to acquire the necessary tools to read such a substantive work. Unfortunately, *Historia* did not reverberate as a work of "intrinsic quality" to some, while recognizing that it effectively embellished the myth of C bola by perpetuating a sense of enchantment and fantasy.

A sense of place, then, is crucial in that the narrative emphasizes a south to north axis as the story moves away from central México to New Mexico, the latter serving as the main geographical destination, except that the move is filtered through the imagination rather than a physical space. The focus becomes a parallel imaginary of a "noble" but hardship-filled land named New Mexico, viewed as a place of novelty, awe

and a degree of civilization where chinaware is made of fired mud. Although Villagr a does not mention the myth of Aztl an directly, he does recreate the founding of Tenochtitlan within a purely Roman mythology by superimposing the two brothers Remus and Romulus who founded Rome. In fact, a two-headed imperial eagle is mentioned that corresponds more to the Roman Empire¹ than the eagle on Lake Texcoco. The quantum leap here is from the physical to the mythic by concocting an imaginary impression before actually arriving in New Mexico, almost suggesting a Europeanized Tenochtitlan with Greco-Latin features.

The storyline in the first twelve *cantos* appears sluggish and oftentimes stagnant, filled with vacillations, in-fighting, multiple delays, political *movidas*, unnecessary intrigue, and failed attempts to move north much like zigzags of a puzzle. New Mexico becomes the North Star of an enterprising caravan that gives the Spaniards' mission direction, legitimacy and purpose. Without having this target, it would appear that the expedition could turn cannibalistic and thus disintegrate before it ever departed. It is not until the soldiers reach the region of New Mexico that the action becomes more alive pulsating with mystery, anticipation, danger and challenges. Reaching their goal justifies all their sacrifice but they are also enthralled by the unknown contours of the high desert landscape, hoping in great part that their fantasies of encountering a mythic land will satiate their expectations and greed. The poem is a forward looking view of eventuality more than attempting to establish a clear extension of central Mexico, thereby placing New Mexico as *the* protagonist of the story as both a place and a mythic text. Villagr a feels a compelling urgency to focus on the new found region in order to qualify its uniqueness, referring to it as "Nueva M xico" by anticipating riches comparable to the Aztec Empire. By literally resorting to cardinal points on the map, the author wants to scientifically pinpoint where New Mexico is, knowing full well readers would otherwise concentrate on the fanciful implications instead of the real-life location:

Beneath the Arctic Pole, in height
Some thirty-three degrees, which the same
Are, we know, of sainted Jerusalem,
Not without mystery and marvel great,
Are spread, sown, and overflow
Some nations barbarous, remote²

Here the poet spends considerable time identifying and describing its physical location in order to insist on its materiality by situating it in a "new" longitudinal meridian of 270 degrees within a range of 33 and 37 degrees latitude, thus countering the possible interpretation that this place is imaginary or an extension of a literary construct. Villagr a,

however, is unable to stay completely true to that impulse of verifiable data because he is overwhelmed by the seductive power of myth.

Villagr 's fanatical insistence on what New Mexico is reaches a proportion of hyperbole in part, except that he fills this inflated view with facts, minutiae and details that can boggle the mind by expanding the metanarrative originally told by such explorers as  'lvar N 'nuez Cabeza de Vaca, Francisco de Coronado, Fray Marcos de Niza and others. While these explorers generally justified their findings to extol their grandeur and appeal to their respective kings for special favors, their principal focus at times entailed capturing the strange and the unreal. Villagr ' indulges in certain moments in the fantastic when the devil in the form of a "judicious" woman appears to the soldiers as a way of metaphorically admonishing the bellicose actions. In other words, we quickly encounter false praise of their actions, hinting at New Mexico's inevitable downfall. A devil figure here implies that evil hovers or reigns in this Spanish advancement. He seems to measure New Mexico in classical terms because it is something his readership would know, plus it affords him the opportunity to elevate his sense of realism to a lofty literary historical level.

But, Villagr ' finds himself in a situation of no return: he cannot continue to inflate the mythical genealogy of the region for very long because he, and the members of the military caravan, are faced with the stark truth of impoverishment and an uncontrollable realism that demands his *tosca pluma* as a witness to tell things as they are and not as others wish them to be. In other words, the "physical" New Mexico imposes itself upon the Spaniards as a real place, although they continue to be driven by stuff of dreams and ecstasy. His fascination quickly turns into disappointment and disenchantment when he writes about extreme conditions:

Others, in contrary, were much cast down
And wept their hunger, nakedness, fatigue,
The fearful cold, the snow, blizzards.
The burning sun, the rain, the hail,
Great poverty, the labors of the land,
The miseries of toilsome road (32)

His "canto mal cantado" turns into a rhetorical device to capture events as they unfold because this narrative on New Mexico demands to be written with all its foils. He cannot help himself, completely enraptured by the region, its captivating spirit and the extraordinary qualities contained herein among the Indians and their dwellings. While he intended to be an instrument of the Spanish conquest in trying to please King Phillip III, his narrative is overwhelmed by the mystique of the region for its unabashed

independence and autonomy, its brave Pueblo natives and their pride, and its resiliency and determination to survive vis-à-vis foreign invaders. In this manner, Villagrà becomes the scribe for telling a New Mexican story that also functions as its epic and history.

Much like Ercilla in *La Araucana*, Villagrà intended to portray and stylize the glorious advancement of Spanish conquest and colonization, but his encroachment into New Mexico soon dwells on a vertical, in-depth view of the indigenous inhabitants whose bravery and sense of homeland matches Homer's Troy. The prism turns introspective distancing itself from Mexico City and European mythologies. The narrative stops to contemplate the surroundings of the flora, fauna, geography, but most of all, its people, consequently reiterating their nobility, good looks, intelligence, pathos and courtesy. More and more, then, New Mexico, notably for its large river that criss-crossed the region, becomes a place of many nuanced dimensions that captivates the eyes of the gazer. A key moment occurs when the Acoman leader Mómopil in Canto XII, acting almost as a cartographer, draws on the sand with the point of a long arrow for the lost Spaniards a mathematically precise configuration of the region:

The line, the Zodiac, and the signs,
 Each one thirty degrees in length,
 The two remote, miraculous Poles,
 The Arctic and the Antarctic entire,
 The might circles, the axle,
 And like an excellent geographer,
 With reference to the heavens he drew us
 Some parts of the low lands.
 He put the two Seas of the North and South,
 With islands, springs, mountains and lakes,
 ...
 And the location of the might stream [Río Grande] (114)

If Villagrà's original plan entailed exalting the Spanish conquest, suddenly Spaniards finds themselves at the mercy of the indigenous people, as Mómopil demonstrated by drawing the mountain passes that they can successfully traverse and the location of water holes. At this point in the epic poem New Mexico becomes a deflated mythic construct replaced by a very real place that is foreign to the Spaniards and that can swallow them up in a second's notice. Villagrà effectively shows how his encounter of a worthy foe alters his perspective, for he reaches the point of admiring their personal and community makeup in the same manner that Ercilla praised the leader Colo Colo and other indigenous protagonists for their larger than life qualities as orators, judicious judges of human tendencies, military strategists, a deep love for family, a profound sense of nation, and most of all a sense of honor. What starts as a self-promotion of Spanish

accomplishments soon turns into two directions: who and what the Acomans are and what the Spaniards reveal themselves to be. The poetic voice gradually becomes impressed with their multi-layered Pueblo urban constructions and the cornucopia of vegetables and other foodstuffs they produce, giving us a sense of a stable, permanent culture — almost a civilization. At the same time, his view also turns sour as he laments the circumstances under which the Spaniards overreact toward the Acomans, causing a destruction of epic proportions that will forever blemish the original intentions of conquest. At this point, the poetic voice is steeped in New Mexico and its people and he can't help but to look both ways. In Canto fifteen, somewhat surprised and overtaken, he lauds the Pueblo people:

They are extremely skillful laborers.
 They spin and weave, the women cook
 And build and take care of the house
 And wear seemly cotton mantles
 Of diverse colors, many hued.
 They are simple, peaceful folk,
 Of good faces and all well-formed
 ...
 And these folk have a certain thing
 Worthy of noble esteem and excellence
 And 'tis that they have never had nor used
 Any sort of drunkenness or of beverage
 With which they might deprive themselves of sense,
 Evident argument that they are kept
 By Heaven's majesty and now disposed
 For that holy flock of the chosen ones
 Which is marked out for salvation. (146)

Since Villagr a is now surrounded by a New Mexican landscape, he feels driven to describe the region in lofty terms in order to give its mythification further credence. Part of the justification is based on the Spaniards' incursion into the expansive American plains where they encounter the extraordinary herds of buffalos, but no hint of Comanches, for example, is given. In Canto 19 the battle lines begin to be formed between the Acomans and the Spaniards, and the poetic voice moves from one group to the other in subsequent *cantos* in order to show motives, strategies, and mentalities by emphasizing their preparations for war. A crescendo of tension develops around the two battle lines after some Acomans kill eleven Spaniards, and the two sides prepare for a response of vengeance like rabid dogs. Both seem to seek a "just war". Consequently, the rest of the poem hinges on the effects and nature of war as it plays itself out like a human drama in New Mexican soil among two peoples that perhaps should not have

reached that point of no return. The poet can't help to praise his soldier countrymen for their bravery and noble motives, but he also quickly sees how war alters and distorts their original impulses. The battle lines become both stuff of epic chronicles and actual accounts of blood and savagery. The principal action in the following *cantos* involves observations from both sides as to how they see their positions and positionality vis-à-vis the other. The poem, then, also becomes a tragic play of various acts that unfold in an epic battle in which both sides are ultimately losers. A mythic New Mexico, sometimes described as full of potential and riches and other times as inhospitable, turns into the curtain that will eventually fall, spelling disaster and a lost opportunity. The physicality of the region becomes internalized and momentarily obfuscated by both sides as they seek vengeance, sacrificing in the process a golden opportunity for common goals to merge for the sake of two peoples who could learn and benefit from each other. What is significant in the work is how the Acoman voices of Zutacapán, Zutancalpo, Gicombo, Pilco, Luzcoija and others become the central protagonists of the action at the end, essentially replacing the Spaniards as the characters of greater moral fiber.

Specifically, the remainder of the poem concentrates on being inside or outside the protective fortress of the rock mesa of the Sky City: the Acomans are vigilant waiting for the Spaniards to attack and the latter looking for the right moment to penetrate the outer walls. The speeches rage with sentiment among some of the Indian leaders like the “memorable Gicombo”, the “noble Zutancalpo” and the “brave Bémpol”, even to the point of considering a mass suicide in emulating the inhabitants of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Numancia*. Canto 31 reproduces the excessive devastation caused by the Spaniards upon the Acoman people, clearly reaching a graphic detail unlike any previous text, furthering the notion that fanciful mythification — or textual space — has acquired the substance of flesh-and-blood historicity. New Mexico as myth becomes a cultural ground in an epic encounter that defined forever the two people’s treacherous destiny. Bartolomé de las Casas’ famous cruel and bloody rendition in his *Destrucción de las Indias: Un relato breve* (1552) does not even come close. Villagrà is driven by detail and realism by allowing his images to speak for themselves instead of resorting to facile editorializing. Instead, he becomes a measured conscience of war and destruction in order to deter and rein in the degree of violence exercised. New Mexico in this way becomes a lesson to be learned, a moral play of what good instincts and good motives should be. In other words, the author turns Acoma, and by extension New Mexico, first into a collective tomb metaphorically of defeated souls — much like Troy — and then into an ideological tool of moral standards to follow and avoid in the wake of conquest and colonization. So, if his original intention was as a simple scribe, it soon becomes a defense of proportion,

restraint and regret. Death here is not seen as an equalizer but as an exaggerated form of misguided moral justice. The Acoman leader Bémopol exclaims wondering in Canto 33:

O Acoma, what god have you defied,
 What reason is there that the lofty gods
 Should wish to be angered at us!

Villagr a feels compelled to close Canto 33 with words of contrition about what has just happened in the slaughter of Acomans:

And, contrite, weeping, on our knees,
 We all, together, sank down there
 And asked of God's great Majesty
 To take pity on those poor souls
 And take them into His sainted glory. (293)

Villagr a's *Historia de la Nueva M xico* in the last *cantos* is transformed into a tale of repentance where the fanciful descriptions of a mythic New Mexico give way to a sad and regrettable landscape, a colonial Guernica. Its physical beauty and marvel also disappear when the two peoples clash like classic titans in a battle that should have been avoided or somehow mitigated. The text is transformed into an emblematic *auto sacramental* at the end which behooves us to learn from such mistakes where the zealotry of riches and conquest are the root of the problem. Villagr a laments in strong terms how both myth and history repeat themselves as manipulated by humans whose shortcomings overrule their virtuous motives. The author, then, starts with a mythic New Mexico and then explores a physical one, but the one that stands out is the ethic place of human drama from which we can learn various lessons on how to approach otherness. The mask of myth is consequently removed, the physicality of the people and the landscape is exalted, but the veil of war appears to undermine the potential for two cultures to come together in some meaningful way. Clearly, Villagr a does not believe that war is the answer and that is perhaps the greatest lesson he proposes in his *Historia de la Nueva M xico* despite his frequent use of military terms and jargon. The sense of place, then, creates a literary space by which we can measure and govern our restraint when myth and history clash.

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NOTES

¹ This corresponds to the most recent translation titled *Historia de la Nueva México, 1610; Gaspar Pérez de Villagrás: A Critical and Annotated Spanish / English Edition*. M. Encinas, A. Rodríguez and J. P. Sánchez. Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1992. See footnotes 10 and 11 on p.13

²*Ibid.*, 4-5.