



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1986 Volume II: Writings and Re-Writings of the Discovery and Conquest of America

Introduction

No event prior to it, and few since have been as much written about as the Discovery and Conquest of America. It is a commonplace to say that America was “discovered” by the printing press, which made the news available to many throughout the Western World. Columbus’ letter to Luis de Sántangel, written in February of 1493, was quickly printed and distributed widely in Latin as well as in most of the vernacular languages of Europe. Soon, by 1500, Peter Martyr d’Anghiera had written his first set of “decades,” which already attempted to incorporate into history Columbus’ deed. Writing the history of America was no ordinary task. The Discovery and Conquest taxed the writers’ skills and received ideas to the limit. How could this new story be told in a language burdened by old stories? How did this event affect the idea of history held until then? How did America fit in the scheme of sacred and secular history? Where was America in the Holy Scriptures, where in the classical tradition? Why had the Church Fathers not written about this unknown land teeming with people whose origin it was difficult to establish?

For the natives the Discovery and Conquest was even more shocking and bewildering. A handful of strange men, armed with weapons that seemed to have harnessed fire and thunder and mounted in prodigiously strong animals brought down their civilizations. To account for this astonishing event, the natives incorporated it into a providential scheme: the arrival of these bearded white men had been announced by the gods. Revelation had become history.

New world, new words: to write about the Discovery and Conquest of America writers like Las Casas, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Garcilaso, and in our times Carpentier and Neruda, needed to found a fresh language. The act of creating words or adopting old ones from native languages is the essence of the New World as literary event.

Many of the students taught by the participants in this seminar undergo a process of discovery similar to the one found in the texts about the New World. Coming from San Juan to New Haven as a child can be as bewildering as going from Seville to Tenochtitlán. It is evidently for this reason that most participants have chosen as the topic of their units the blending of European and native cultures in America. These teachers witness their students undergoing the pains of acculturation suffered by both Spaniards and Indians in the sixteenth century, and hear the sounds of the new language being forged by their young discoverers. Whether this language will express more violence than love, as was often the case in the not so distant fifteen hundreds, is something about which we can only speculate.

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