Post/Colonial Toponymy: Writing Forward ‘in Reverse’

QUETZIL CASTAÑEDA

Amerigo Vespucci the voyager arrives from the sea. A crusader standing erect, his body in armor, he bears the European weapons of meaning … . Before him is the Indian ‘America,’ a nude woman … an unnamed presence of difference … the conqueror will write the body of the other and trace there his own history …. She will be ‘Latin’ America … initiated here is a colonization of the body by the discourse of power. This is writing that conquers. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production. (Michel de Certeau, The Writing of History)

The past is very near the surface in Mérida. (Nelson Reed, The Caste War of Yucatan)

When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said uic athan, which means, ‘what do you say’ or ‘what do you speak,’ that ‘we do not understand you.’ And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called Yucatan … . (Tzvetan Todorov, Conquest of America)

Listening in Place of Writing: Mise-en-Scène

The discourse on place names initiates the collision between Maya and European as it nonetheless repeats the founding acts of Maya societies. Let us consider the scene of initial encounter between Maya and Spaniard, a scene that had always already been a trope of cultural collision but since the 1980s has become a trope of colonial discourse analysis. It is said—said endlessly by tour guides, in guidebooks, by Yucatec intellectuals, in regional histories, by Mayas and Mayeros, in villages and cantinas—that when the Spaniards landed—landed on this ‘tierra del faisán y venado’ this ‘land of the pheasant and deer’—the Indians called it ‘u luum cutz, u luum ceh’; and, when they met the natives who approached, they asked, ‘what is the name of this land?’ Not understanding the k’astrant’aan (i.e. Spanish), one Maya turned to the other and exclaimed, ‘Uuy ku t’aan!’ [Listen how they talk!]. Up to this point in the story this much is certainly known and known with certainty, albeit with some variations to be explored below. But what happens after this moment in the encounter and in the stories of the encounter is total speculation—despite what some may assert with finely polished claims of authority.

Having, as an anthropologist, an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ of village life
among the Maya of what is now Yucatán, the spectacular story that I tell meets the approval of my colleague, Juan Cocom, who is not only an anthropologist and a Maya, but also a descendent of a noble lineage of these lands of the pheasant and deer. Listen: ... and the Spaniards asked the two Maya standing by their houses on the neck of land at the edge of the sea, ‘what is the name of this land?’ Not understanding what it was that had washed ashore, the one Maya said to the other not a little surprised, ‘Uuy! Ku t’aan!’ [Listen! It talks!]. The other, no doubt poking the first in the ribs with his elbow while expelling a very nasal and elongated aspiration, ‘Hah...’ [Yes!] and sternly pointing with his nodding chin to the bearded, smelly, pink person in shiny clothing, responded, ‘Uuy a watan!’ [Listen to your wife (talk)!] Listening attentively (no doubt) to repeat the words—‘uuy ku t’aan’ ‘uuh yu ku tan’—but without having a course in phonetics, the Spaniards figured—figured somehow—that these new lands must be called ‘Yucatán’.

Commentators across five centuries have proliferated different words and possible sentences in their conjuring up of conjectural reconstructions of this mythic event that inaugurated the invasion and conquest of what has come to be known as ‘Yucatán’. Consider another sixteenth-century version that has itself become a trope for twentieth-century critics. This discourse on the naming of Yucatán has become a topos not only of Yucatán but of Latin American colonial discourse criticism, since it economically marks the complex textual invention of alterity forged in the encounter between European and Indian. See for example Greenblatt (1992, p. 104), who recontextualizes a quote from Inga Clendinnen (1987, p. vi) which is itself a quote from Antonio de Ciudad Real (1588) which also happens to be the source of Todorov’s (1984) recitation and reiteration:

When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said uic athan [or: uuyik a t’aan], which means, ‘what do you say’ or ‘what do you speak’, that ‘we do not understand you’. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called Yucatan ...

Notice first that these translations ‘of the Maya’ are not literal. They are metaphoric in terms of the actual words that are speculated as having been spoken. ‘What do you say’ and ‘what do you speak’ in contemporary Yucatec Maya would be ba’ax ka walik, ba’ax ka waal, or ba’an ka t’aan. ‘We do not understand you’ is ma t naatik a t’aani’ or ma t naatike’exi’. While these sentences are possible reconstructions for the speech event, phonetic corruptions of these twentieth-century sentences and their sixteenth-century equivalents do not too easily render Yucatán. Thus, the colonialisit interpretation and writing of history is clearly revealed as a colonizing writing that operates not simply ‘after the facts’ but more importantly ‘in reverse’: An event of dialogue in the past is blatantly reconstructed as an origin based on visions, logics and assumptions from the present. From the historical given that the toponym ‘Yucatán’ is given to the Spaniards by Mayas, the task becomes simply a process of offering messages whose semantic values would correspond to what a Spanish chronicler (and later a structuralist theorist and new historicist historians) imagine those Maya to have thought and expressed in the face of Spanish Conquistadores. While Beverley (1999) has suggested that postcolonial and/or subaltern critique need be a kind of historiography that deconstructs the colonialisit/colonizing texts
through analytical ‘reversals’ of meaning and power, here a certain ‘writing in reverse’ seems to be part and parcel of colonial discourse.

Second, notice that there was no invasion and conquest of some pre-existing entity, Yucatán. Rather, ‘Yucatán’ was itself an artifact, an imaginary place, invented with and at the ‘moment’ of invasion and conquest as a strategic weapon deployed to those ends—notice, however, that this moment is quite complicated as it not only spans several decades but includes Maya Conquistadores (see Restall, 1998)! The interesting point here is that since these contemporary re-enactments of the naming event by various cultural critics do not more than cite this as an example of the imposition of the European weapons of meaning, they reproduce and repeat this colonization of space, history and people. In seeking to reverse a writing that conquers there is recourse again to a history that colonizes the agency, speech/‘voice’ and participation of the ‘subaltern’. The topographic order is inscribed in the colonial historiography and then re-inscribed again in the postcolonial text, now, however, with a lamentation of the voracious power of the European weapons of meaning and their colonizing effects. What is missing is a more rigorous decipherment of this glyph that traces the active participation of the Maya in its construction as historical truth and invention as reality.

Third, the pursuit of such complicity and complexity is necessary to understand the invention of the Maya without falling into the dual trap of positing the Indian as a pure artefact of European conquest (by sword and by historiography) or the Indian as an authentic, atemporal essence continuously linked to a proper (subaltern/subordinate) identity via a primordial origin. The task cannot be to find a Maya subaltern and to ‘see’ their ‘voice’ cursing and talking back. In this dense reiteration of recitations of the writing of a speech event, the alternative, however, is just as speculative, but we can avoid ventriloquism by ‘surfing’ the textual/discursive surfaces for semantic and perlocutionary divergences and ‘reversals’.

The Maya—or more accurately groups among the peoples that are in the twenty-first century anachronistically called Maya (Restall, n.d.; Gabbert, n.d.)—also participate in this economy of re/citation in the discursive battle for authorial propriety and political legitimacy. In later efforts to render intelligible the name that the Spaniards gave, they ‘translated’ ‘Yucatán’—rather, transcribed this word written in the oral encounters of Spanish histories into the sixteenth-century Maya books of history—as U-kal-peten, or the Neck-of-the-land, which nonetheless, in the centuries following, becomes identified in popular understanding as the authentic and original, i.e., native, Eurocentric name:

This is the name of the year when the foreigners arrived, the year one thousand five hundred and nineteen. This was the year when the foreigners arrived, here at our town, (the town) of us Itzá, here in the land of Yucalpeten, Yucatán, in the Mayan Language of the Itzas … . This is the year which was current when the foreigners prepared to seize Yucalpeten [Neck-of-the-Land] here. It was known by the priest, the prophet Ah Xupan as he is called. Christianity was introduced to us in the year 1519 … . (Roys, 1933, p. 119; emphasis added; cf. Edmonson, 1986, pp. 221–223)

The text goes on to cite the year for the arrival of yellow fever, drought, famine
and related calamities. The key phrases translated in italics above, \textit{uay ti luum yucalpeten, yucatan, tu than Maya Ah Itzaob lae} and \textit{ca hoppi u ch’aic uba dzulob utial u chucicob uay yucalpeten lae} (Roys, 1933, p. 40, p. 63c), are traditionally interpreted as indicating the Maya correction of the Spanish invention of a name of the country based on a corruption of a misheard Maya word. Might this, instead, be a Maya rendition of a nonsensical sound pronounced in sixteenth-century Spanish? This thesis is supported by Edmonson’s reasonable speculation that the name Maya derives from the name of the cycle of thirteen katuns, \textit{may}, that organizes the space and time of social, political, astronomical and cosmological events; the Maya are people of the \textit{may} and the term Mayab, ‘of the May’, is another name for both the ‘country’ (or sociopolitical and cosmological territory) in which the \textit{may} reigns and in which the people live that propitiate this cosmological cycle of space/time (see Restall [n.d.] for an alternative speculation on the etymology of Maya).

In other words, this suggests that the name Yucalpeten is a Maya invention of a complex pun that was anchored to a Maya logic of toponyms. Maya toponymy manifests throughout the sixteenth-century books of the Chilam Balam, but is especially evident in the migration stories. For example, in the book of Chuy-mayel, places are listed as being the site where the group arrives and then these places are described through a pun on the toponym: ‘Then they arrived at Panabha, where they dug \textit{panab} for water \textit{ha’}’ (Roys, 1933, p. 70). In this manner each place is narrated as part of the migratory conquest of the Itzá (a Maya lineage group of Gulf Coast origin/ethnicity) as they arrive and take over Chichén Itzá—or, to use the Maya expression, ‘seat’ themselves ‘at the mouth’ \textit{chi} of the ‘well’ \textit{chen} of the ‘Magicians’ \textit{Itz} ‘of Water’ \textit{ha’}.

A more complicated rhetoric of punning, placing and cosmology is expressed in what has been called the ‘sermon’ or ‘song’ of the \textit{uinal}, which is Maya calendrical 20-day period. This is often metaphorically called the Maya ‘month’ because there are 18 of these periods within the Maya ‘years’ of 360- and 365-day cycles, called \textit{tun} and \textit{hab} respectively, as well as 13 periods in the 260-day cycle, whose name anthropologist have given it is \textit{tzolk’in} [‘count of the days’]. The ‘song’ tells of the birth of time itself since the \textit{uinal} is not only the building block of all three encompassing ‘yearly’ cycles. But, it is also about the birth of ‘man’ \textit{uinic} and perhaps the human body \textit{uinkilil}, since these words share the same roots, linguistically and cosmologically speaking:

This is the sermon of the occurrence of the birth of the \textit{uinal}, which was before the awakening of the world Eurocent, and it began to run by itself, alone. Then said his [the \textit{uinal/man’s}] mother’s mother, then said his mother’s sister, then said his father’s mother, then said his sister-in-law, ‘What is to be said when a man is seen on the road?’ So they said, whilst they were going along. But no man occurred. And then they arrived there at the east. And they began to say, ‘Who is it that passed by here now? Here are his tracks, right here. Measure them with your foot according to the word of the planter of the world.’ Who is the holy God. This was the beginning of saying the count of the world by footsteps \textit{xoc lah cab oc}. [This was] Twelve Foot [a day name, Lahca Oc].\textsuperscript{2} This is the account of his birth. For Oxlahun Oc occurred [a day name meaning Thirteen Foot], and they matched each other’s paces and
arrived there at the east. They said his name, since the days had no name then, and he [the man/uinal] traveled on . . . . The month [uinal] was born and the day name was born, and the sky was born and [so was] the earth, the pyramid of water and land, stone and tree. There were born the things of sea and land.

The text continues by calling each of the days by name in a perlocutionary act of giving the name to the day and naming that which was ‘created’ during that day of the uinal. This text makes evident the Maya ordering of space, time, places and place names into a unified, coherent cosmology, to use the concept anthropologists traditionally apply to this cultural form. But such a cosmological chronotope can also be grasped as a topography in the sense defined in this essay. These examples demonstrate the extensiveness and seriousness with which the sixteenth-century Maya (of this place that came to be called Yucatán) make use of word play to communicate political, religious and social values/meanings.

Let us recite again an Itzá Maya version of the arrival of the Spaniards: ‘This was the year when the foreigners arrived, here at our town, (the town) of us Itzá, here in the land of Yucalpeten, Yucatan, in the Mayan Language of the Itzas . . . . This is the year which was current when the foreigners prepared to seize Yucalpeten [Neck-of-the-Land] here.’ Can we speculate, then, that according to the Maya scribes, the Spaniards were ‘taking hold’ of the land in their attempt to ‘strangle’ the legitimate (indigenous) authority of this (fictional) Yukalpeten? In the transcription of a misunderstanding the Maya underscore the military seizure of the ‘country’ (peten) by the Spanish. Here the ‘lands’ (luum) and ‘country’ (peten) that are being seized by ‘the neck’ (u kal) are not marked as the proper/property of a specific Maya lineage or polity; that is, ‘lands’ is not qualified with reference to any pre-established sociopolitical boundaries or ‘ethnically’ named or controlled territory. Already, the Maya polities (here the Itzá are mentioned by name), their traditional structures, and all contesting claims to cosmo-political legitimacy, are rendered subordinate to a new arrival (Christianity) whose import contests the status quo. Thus, the name, its event and its retelling are a collision of misreadings—multiple transcriptions of difference into other languages. Here is a discourse of a name that covers the absence of an authentic meaning and the loss of an original referent with the veil of an identity constructed as the simple translation across codes of an integral essence or proper meaning. Thus, this text or textual web that binds a double encounter of naming and erasure (the Spanish overwrite the previous Maya word with a name, the Maya overwrite the Spanish name with another name) marks, in the form of a confusion of tongues, the zero point of a war of knowledge waged in and as the topography of a space henceforth called Yucatán.

This discourse on toponyms proceeds, from this moment, backward, forward and askew through the events that have marked the Yucatec landscape and the histories of this topography. What ‘explains’ the ubiquitous presence of this discourse not only in tourist and academic literatures, but everyday talk across all ethnic and class lines? Certainly a history of its performance can be traced across various texts; but such an inquiry relies on a juxtaposition of occurrences that creates a meaning, i.e. the meaning of an explanation. On the other hand, we can simply understand this concern for place names as a ‘cultural predilec-
tion’: This act of naming a topos is valued and recognized among all Yucatecs as a key to the social history of a locality, the identity of its inhabitants and the everyday life of the community. Thus, place name itself becomes a topos of discourse through the generation of a ceaseless commentary that re-enacts the transcription of an ‘essence’ into a proper name and vice versa, via the recounting of a storied event that accounts for the toponym and that constitutes a topography (i.e. a proper positioning and hierarchy of value: order).

This discourse of toponyms is clearly a speculative discourse. It is not mere intuition, although this is necessary, nor is it simply ‘explanation’ according to a logic of semantics that binds the name, in its act of being given, to the topos. There is an essential element, the propriety of the place, that is factored into the giving of the name through speculation. Operating here are speculative moves that both invest in a profit or a return according to the debts of giving and a sighting, along the logic of the gift itself, that declares a vision in which everything has its proper place: An order, immanent in space, is unveiled in the place of the proper name, the toponym. This dual system of topoi, the topos that is named and the topos of its speculation or discursive repetition, is a scene of writing. A spectacular scene, indeed, whose operations, whose economy, comprise the questions of this essay, or excursion in the topography of topoi.

Let us return again, now with Bishop Landa, to that moment when a logo-centric (Spanish, Christian, European) topography overwrites the hieroglyphic (Maya) landscape. What Landa tells us, ‘was learned from one of the early conquerors, Blas Hérmendez, who came here [Yucatán] ... on the first occasion’ (Gates translation, p. 24). Here, then, is not simply an eye(I)-witness, but an attentive ear, the ear of an entire jury, that not only sees but listens to what the evidence has to say. Having established his audience and courtroom scene, Landa is certain to extract the truth. Through Landa’s ventriloquism, let us listen with Blas to the speech of the evidence:

When Francisco Hérmendez de Córdoba came to this country and landed at the point called Cape Catoch, he met certain fisherfolk whom he asked what country this was, who answered ‘Cotoch,’ which means ‘our houses, our homeland’ ... When he then by signs asked them how the land was theirs they replied ‘Ki u than,’ meaning ‘they say it’ [or more accurately, ‘they speak nicely,’ ‘sweet words’].

Here, then, is a different conjecture on the lost moment of contact between Maya and Spaniard, a moment considered original, even though secondary, because it is from this moment that ‘conquest’ is deemed to have progressed (be sent) to its rightful destination. Regardless of how the encounter is speculated, the punchline remains the same, repeats itself: The unintelligible, unrepeatable and apposite words ‘elicited’ (evoked?) as an answer to the second question asked by the Conquistadores (Ki u than) becomes transformedscribed into the toponym, ‘Yucatán’. Or, at least that is yet another version of this founding act of an origin of a toponography of war between Maya and Spaniard.

First, let us be certain that this fabulous account (as was the previous speculation that I recounted) which not merely ‘passes as’ but is a historical truth (a speculation of an oral event veriﬁed in writing and through the authorization of the names attached: ‘de Ciudad Real’, ‘Bishop Landa’, etc.) is a pure ﬁction (see Haraway, 1989, pp. 3–5 on fact/fiction). The text of this writing incorporates the
reality outside that the text is to re-present and transforms this outside; a new truth is manufactured. This event of naming, then, is perlocutionary, performative, in both its original writing/being written and in its derivative, speculative orality. This is a new account of reality that erases and conquers the alterity of the Indian other and their past. Can we be certain that these Conquistadores, anxiously awaiting their destiny that God (and Crown) has designed for them, would exchange such pleasant, or at least contemplative, intercourse? Would they not have immediately read the letter of the required Proclamation, i.e. the Requerimiento, that Pope, King and Queen entrusted them to execute mercilessly? Upon arrival, would they delay this letter at its destination? Would they defer their destiny that is written therein according to providential design, which as its carriers they could then embark upon with its proper delivery? From the first-hand, eye-witness account of Bernal Díaz we find no mention of this verbal ritual of Conquest, but instead an anxious encounter of gestures with hand-signs, swords and muskets. Whereas the eye-witness accounts focus on the military dimensions of the exchange, Landa’s account presents a tranquil dialogue on the edge of the sea. The violence of the actual exchange of signs and the details of their transmission are deleted, erased from history and, therefore loses and is lost. (It both loses its position as the original moment of contact and is lost in the dusty archives from the circuitry of the general historical recollection.)

In substitution as the original interaction in the moment of initial encounter, the other scene of naming (the question/answer exchange), which as already noted is constituted by its own, ‘internal’ mise-en-scène is written into the histories as the (f)actual and the real.

Second, in this substituted event(s) of mispronunciations can be recognized the invention of the Maya in and through an apparatus of writing that began to operate some ‘500 years ago’. This scene and its recounting inaugurates an economy of knowledge, of sociopolitical practices in which the Maya have been and are still written as particular kinds of objects. Following De Certeau (1984, pp. 134–135), three critical factors of writing can be identified: One, the constitution of a ‘blank page,’ i.e. a proper place wherein writing is to occur, in which a Cartesian subject–object relationship is established; two, the construction of a text through articulated operations (literally writing and other gestures) that trace on this ‘page’ ‘words’, ‘sentences’ and, thus, a textual system (of meaning); three, the incorporation and transformation of the world ‘outside’ the text through a ceaseless manufacture of the ‘external’ reality according to the text’s (cosmo)vision and objectifications. The double mise-en-scène of the naming of the toponym clears the space for the European writing of the Maya and incorporation of this other within the text of European writing (history/knowledge). In a repetition and reflection this blank page is formed as the topos of the transcription of place names. Through this transcription of (mis)pronunciations, a text is constructed, a discourse of toponyms, that simultaneously designates a universe of meaning and locates the Maya in this discursive topography of the political imagination.

Third, there is another displacement, that of the indigenous topography in the Spanish inscription of the landscape according to its logic of names. Such (European) inscription is necessary as the first step to complete the travel, that is to transform the destination of the colonizing travel into the oikos (‘home’) or point of departure from which the exploration of lands preceded. As narrative,
conquest is not ‘completed’ in either sociomilitary terms or ideological legit-
imization, until the travel that initiates conquest (a reconnaissance) returns full
circle to its proper home, the topos of travel (colonization); however, one does
not return to the same oikos (place of origin) but makes a new home of the
destination (clears a blank space to be named and occupied as the place of
identity to Sameness). Here there is a return without return, that constitutes
(re)invention of the same ‘as always’ and of alterity ‘as other’: The otherness of
the destination is domesticated in the guise of the same upon (the textualized)
return in narrative, while the alterity of the place of departure (Spain) is
‘returned’ (restored) to the destination (pagan lands) upon (re-)arrival. The
outside and the beyond is brought into the ‘known world’ (an oikumene, that is,
this world of imaginary places or topography whose textualization is contested
and thus exists in the contestation of those texts), which incorporates these new
lands, this new home, according to the logic of the oikos, an oikonomia of travel
(see Van Den Abbeele, 1992). This is called here a scriptural economy (see de
Certeau, 1984), where a domesticating travel and multiform writing operate the
invention of self and other in their proper places.

Fourth, from the (mise-en-scène of the) scene of writing and its speculation in
a discourse on toponyms, a scriptural economy is put into operation. The
Spaniards, according to Landa’s account, land at a point which they called
‘Cotoch’. Why? Notice a duplicity in this moment of contact that immediately
differentiates a whole series of terms and sets these in motion. The initial
moment of contact is itself split into two instances of dialogue, that of mutual
intelligibility and of concerted misunderstanding: When De Córdoba asked—but
here in a universal and crystalline language that apparently eliminated all false
detours of meaning since it spoke in a voice that bound the essence of word and
thing—the question was ‘understood’ as a question since it was answered ‘as
such’ in a single word spoken and written down (in eye-witness memory and
written histories); this word, in turn, was received as an answer whose meaning
and reference was already intelligible, without misunderstanding and without
mispronunciation: ‘K toch’. How could such clarity of language occur in the first
instance and not in the second when the name Yucatán is invented? Could it be
that the sign language used in the second case caused the misunderstanding and
mispronunciation? If so, what happened to the transparent or apparently divine
speech of the first instance of dialogue? Passing between the Spanish under-
standing of the answer to their first question and their asking the second
question was the collapse, seemingly, of a tower of Babel that ruptured com-
munication.

Rereading the account left by an eye-witness, Bernal Diaz, especially over the
shoulder of Clendinnen (1987, pp. 4–10), we might wonder how the event could
ever be described by Landa as such a diplomatic encounter on the beach. On the
contrary, the encounter was conducted entirely through sign languages in which
one party, according to its customs, ritually and explicitly enticed the other to a
battle and in which the other party construed what was initially viewed as a
safe, friendly and warm reception as a treacherous ambush. In these texts, the
Maya, all dressed for war, ‘beckoned them towards the town, saying something
which sounded like “cones catoche, cones catoche”, which the Spaniards
guessed [How? When? No one explains; when did they understand that it]
meant “come to our houses”, and which was to lead them to name the headland
Cape Catoche’ (Clendinnen, 1987, p. 7). Again, the details of the transmission of messages and meanings is erased, the gaps and delays in and between locutionary speech, listened understanding, perlocutionary hortatory (‘write it down’), misheard text—listen to the words!—are whitewashed, all as if to make a blank page, a mise-en-scène, on which another history is written, a history of European desire to possess. Here, then, is a writing that conquers through its own legitimation.

But, listen again, to the written text: Was the pronunciation of the Maya words a ‘k toch’ meaning ‘our house’ or was it ‘ka toch’ meaning ‘your house’? Certainly, the Spanish ear would have added a vocalic value after the consonant ‘k’ to render it repeatable and writeable. Was it ‘come to our house’ or ‘come to your house’? Then again, ‘ka’ is two: ‘come to [the?] two house’ or ‘come to [the] dual house.’ Indeed, it is a dual or double house: ours/yours.

Listen: ‘K(a) toch’ (our house/your house) ‘Ka toch’. And the Spaniards repeat the words (repeat there on the path to the blood-drenched temples in the centre of town, there in the historical remembrance of an originary moment of belonging) whose ambivalent meaning transforms from our (Maya) to your (Spanish) house, from your (Spanish) to our (Spanish) house: ‘Catoch’—and we can here imagine their emphasis on our house, our home. Arriving at their destination, the Spaniards give the name of this point, Cape Catoch, ‘our oikos’, with its echoes in the Spanish ears as ‘our world’ and the destiny of possessing the/ir world. For notice that this toch, this oikos, this home, is not the home to which they will not return in Spain as rich hidalgos (in spite of being the goal of this travel), but the home that by design they have ‘returned’ to after their travails during their ‘voyage of conquest’. They—and here speaking of the Spaniards as whole to which the crew of de Córdoba’s ships are a synecdoche—have reached their destiny: They have reached their (new) home, even as de Córdoba’s crew fled from the cruel ‘ambush’ of savage, even cannibal, hospitality even as Hernán Cortez, later, returns to this coastline and departs again to find his home in the Mexican capital, even later, as another three generations of Montejo Eurocentric each arrive at their imagined home of conquest only to depart and return again until finally a fragile military domination is established, tentatively. On this foundation, the colonial regime is erected, or, as in the Maya trope of political possession, ‘seated’ in its proper place.

But, listen here! This is not the final destination of these transcriptions. To add to this confusion of tongues seeking to speak the proper name and to thereby possess its property, consider that:

… possession in Roman Law was based largely upon the principle of bodily occupation: ‘possession is so styled,’ the Digest of Justinian explains, ‘from the ‘seat,’ as it were ‘position’ (a sedibus quasi positio), because there is a natural holding, which the Greeks call KATOCHÉ by the person who stands on a thing.’ By means of a striking inversion, this principle of positioning—that is, occupation by virtue of placing one’s body upon a piece of property—is then made to apply to the placing of a piece of property upon one’s body. (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 27, cf. p. 157 fn 6; original emphases)

‘Konex k toche.’ Listen to the words. Listen to how the Spaniards listened to these words as they were spoken. Imagine them listening: How they must have
resonated in the Spanish historical memory, that is, in the collective recollection of reiterated encounters of interpretation. These words must surely have echoed, and echoed with distinct inflections of meaning with each reiteration, not simply in the ears of ambushed Conquistadores swearing their return to avenge Indian treachery, but in the legal minds of the Scholastics—who authentically Greek-Spaniard hybrids who developed their own transcultural philosophico-theologico mestizaje, scholasticism—obsessed with the lawful legitimization (of everything generally, but especially) of the ‘Christian wars of conquest’ (Pagden, 1982; Keen, 1971). Listen to how Landa, as he writes decades later a legal defence of his inquisitorial actions in Yucatán, listens to the words of a speculated Maya speaking and how he imagines—or repeats in advance what the anthropologists five centuries later are to imagine again—that the Maya sounds Greek, that is, like Greek-come-Spanish philosophy of law spoken by a Spaniard-come-Greek Scholastic lawyer: 'Koneex k toche, Koneex Katoche.' 'Come to our home. Let’s go to your home.' 'Possess your home.' Uuyik u t’aan.

What an event! It is an event so speculative that it appears hallucinatory as we ‘listen’ to its destined arrival in the Yucatec landscape of this text. It is an event that is purely theoretical (visual, speculative, conceptual, imaginary, reconstructive, deductive, and grounded in a self-serving perspective that effaces its self, its positionality). An event whose value resides precisely in being theoretical and, as such, being a double theatre of memory and of drama through which a war is waged in its place, in its name.

Is this not precisely how Landa13 rewrites the event in his account, which in turn is an apologia and justification of his own war of religious conversion, that is, the Inquisition that he began in 1562 with an Auto de Fé (see Clendinnen, 1987)? Whereas Columbus’s meticulous ritual of possession is enacted as naming (Greenblatt, 1991, pp. 52–85), Landa’s is a legitimization (and re-enactment) of violence performed as a simple writing of (the history of a transcription of) a spoken name. In his text, only a brief ‘Description of Yucatán’ precedes this founding act of epistemic violence, which is entitled ‘Etymology of the Province: Its Situation’. Here, then, we can say with the certainty of Derrida that the letter never arrives at its destiny and always already arrives at its destination: In communication the message (a text, a letter) is destined to arrive at its place of the receiver with a difference in meaning than what was sent by the sender; and yet this detour through the (mis)interpretive frames of the receiver is its destination. But look: The Maya who understood perfectly the first spoken question are now impressed or amused by the sign language used to ask the second. And these spoken ‘letters’ sent by those attending Maya are not addressed to Spaniards, but reach their destination nonetheless, only to be sent again on another circuit, another travel and other toponymic destinations: uic a than. ‘Yucatán.’ ‘Yukalpeten.’ In the logic of this word(s) the Mayab ‘land of the pheasant and the deer’ is overwritten by a mishearing, mispronunciation, transcription, and a pun of political discourse. Here we may say that the letter is always already de/signed to arrive at its sender.

Assuming that there even was such a speculative theatre of diplomatic dialogue on the beach by ‘our houses,’ the travelogic of toponymy enacts a writing that conquers. From this transcription of mispronunciations a scriptural economy arrives at Cape Cotoch that is destined to invent a new topography. From this (mise-en-)scene of writing, Maya and Spaniard depart from Cape
Cotoch to travel, in an endless tour of marking boundaries and contours, a Yucatec landscape. Enfolded in the hieroglyphics of this toponym are the histories of multiple collisions of heterogenous ‘cultures’. Listening to the topography, we might hear the creaking of these landscapes scraping against each other like pen against paper. And notice the illusion of the moment of origin as a tranquil act of speech by the sea. But, it is not merely the act, rendered in such soft tones, that is illusion. The figures enacting this encounter—‘the’ Maya and ‘the’ Spaniard—are themselves historiographic fictions that are actualized in part by fables such as these that name and define the spaces of colonial engagement.

Postcolonial Topography

A certain trajectory within postcolonial discourse/studies begins with a consideration of travel and travelogues in the Americas (e.g. De Certeau, Hulme, Todorov, Pratt, Greenblatt) and reaches an apogee with the multitude of studies questioning aspects of the 1492–1992 problematic (e.g. Jara and Spadaccini, 1989, 1992) and Latin American Eurocentricities/postcolonialism (Chanady, 1994; Dussel, 1995; Benítez-Rojo, 1996; de la Campa, 1998; Mignolo, 2000). Key moments in this discursive trajectory—Todorov, Greenblatt, Clendinnen—revisit the topos of the toponym of Yucatán. Might we listen with our eyes to these words again to hear what they write about this landscape of postcolonial theory/discourse in which the words are performed as a perlocutionary writing that carves up space and settles in it a strategic order?

The juxtaposition of quotes by De Certeau about the Amerigo–America encounter and by Todorov of the event of listening/writing the words of Yucatán as rewritten, which begin this essay, might initially strike one as redundant. They ‘say’ the same thing. The event of listening/writing the perlocution of uy ka taan becomes in the postcolonial studies that recite ‘it’ or De Certeau’s recitation of it (e.g. McClintock, 1995, p. 25), a trope that functions to quintessentially define the power/knowledge relations of colonizing and colonizer–colonized dynamics. But, do they ‘say’ the same thing? Or, is it rather that the interpretations of both within this discourse of postcolonial studies come to the same analytical point: There is a pre-given binary of elements that come into contact that not only establishes a political hierarchy of domination but an erasure of the original dialogic and corporeal event of contact by a colonial historiography that instead stages its own mise-en-scène of purities colliding as the condition of the perpetuation of this writing that conquers. The postcolonial disclosure repeats again this mise-en-scène of essential identities in collision. This is clearly evident in the work of Todorov, who in his meticulous tracing out of the colonial logic of identity/difference in the ‘conquest of México’ reproduces an all the more insidious and, thereby, refortified Eurocentric racism (see Root, 1988; Clendinnen, 1990).

In the works of Greenblatt and Clendinnen, the trope of Yucatán does not work to this unfortunate effect. Although these analyses leave the story of listening to the words as emblematic, they seek to disclose the inventiveness of agents and how their actions hybridize the relations of identity and cultural logics that become engaged in colonial encounters. The hybridity of colonial cultures is mutual on both sides of the ‘great divide’ of power. Yet, this divide
is only enlarged and fortified if we imagine it in our panoply of analytical machines and historiographic weapons as a separation that resolutely imposes itself such that the agency of its targets is erased. To listen to words and silences before that erasure is often a speculative enterprise, yet it may be among the few ways to ‘reverse’ the effects of particular modes of discursive-epistemological structures of domination and to avoid the self-deluding ventriloquisms that construct subaltern voices from the past. The analytical speculation would then be, as it were, a writing forward from here, but ‘in reverse’.

Notes

1. Sixteenth-century Maya polities ‘of Yucatán’ also recorded visions of past and current events in books known as the Chilam Balam (‘Jaguar Spokesman’). These are notoriously difficult for Western logics and hermeneutics to penetrate. An initial problem of course is that although these texts are written in the Roman alphabet, there is not a standardization of punctuation, spacing and capitalization. Thus, the initial act of reading these texts is a highly interpretive process that requires the reader to ‘collate’, as it were, the letters into words and sets of words into sentences. This aspect of the transcription and translation of the texts has given room for various translators to assert that the Maya scribe/author has made errors in writing the text. While perhaps such might be the case, these errors are noticeable in the first instance because an aspect of the text does not comply with the logic of interpretation that the translator has imposed on the text in his/her efforts to render it intelligible.

2. There is alliterative and poetic punning here in the Maya text. Xoc lah cab oc, ‘count all [the] world [by] footsteps’ and the day name called Lahca Oc ['Twelve Foot'] sound very similar except for the first word xoc, which also has the semantic value of ‘read’. One would therefore read: ‘Xoc lah cab oc, Lahca Oc’.

3. It can be noted that this is a story of creation that has interesting points of resonance with and difference from Christian cosmogenesis. As in the creation story of the Popol Vuh or Pop Wuh, there is room for different interpretations of syncretism, assimilation, transculturation, etc. To my mind, however, the text is not very Christian and no doubt written in theological opposition to Christian thought. Further, it manifests a logic that bears an uncanny resonance with Derridean logic of différence, in which there is a double articulation of the spatialization of time and the temporalization of space such that that which structures is already structured by that which it structures. Leaving this comment as no more than a suggestive tease, we could call this logic of the uinal Maya différence or a Maya theory of différence.

4. This is an allusion to an organizing theme of analysis in Clendinnen’s (1987) detailed reconsideration of the Spanish—Maya interface between 1517 and 1570. While she attunes her analysis to a hermeneutic recovery of meaning (what actions/words meant to Maya and Spaniard and how meaning was cross-culturally misconstrued), the inquiry here is oriented towards the mechanisms and operation of discursive practices and their conflictual intersection. A similar analysis, which has influenced my thinking, is Greenblatt’s (1992) work on the encounter of 1492, specifically his discussion of Columbus’s ‘ritual of possession’ (pp. 52–85) and the ‘kidnapping of language’ (pp. 86–118). See also Seed (1994) on the ceremonies of European possession-taking.

5. Among the non-Maya, this tradition may have been initiated by the questionnaire distributed among the first encomenderos; questions nine and thirteen concern toponyms and their etymologies (de la Garza et al., 1983, pp. xlv—lvi, lxix—lxx, 7–12). It is not clear to me what the relationship may have been between this widely deployed questionnaire of the Spanish Crown and the sixteenth-century humanist treatises prescribing the correct methods of travel. These methodologies, which are formalized along Ramist principles, give marked attention to place names in relation to the social, historical and political characteristics of the visited place (see Stagl, 1990, 1995). Much later, in his apologia, Landa is also concerned with place names (see Tozzer, 1941) and provides interpretations of these. But note that he is reporting what his Maya informants said to him, thus ‘acculturating’ himself to the Maya practice, which no doubt extends well beyond the Spanish invasion, or he is ‘syncretizing’ two parallel traditions. For example, the Chilam Balams (e.g. Roys, 1933) clearly illustrates that the Yucatec Maya developed a hermeneutics of place names with intricate punning that operated in political discourses.
of domination, legitimacy and control. Derived from this initial colonial concern, it has become standard practice for Yucatec intellectuals to discuss and debate the meanings and correct interpretations of these names (e.g. Cirerol Sansores, 1951, pp. 17, 20–21; Pacheco Cruz, 1959; INAH, 1965, p. 2; Sansores, 1979; Díaz Bolio, 1972, pp. 15–26; Piña Chan, 1987, pp. 13–15; Roche Canto, 1987). Roys’s (1935) contribution to this discourse is now reprinted in pamphlet form in order to circulate in the tourist market. Guidebooks on Yucatán, or the sections pertaining to Yucatán in books on Mexico, employ a standardized trope whereby etymological snippets are typically situated in the text after phonetic transcriptions of localities, so as to suggest a natural order between pronunciation of the name and the meaning of the place (e.g. Díaz Bolio, 1972; Arochi, 1974, pp. 21–25; Zapata Alonzo, 1984; Mallan, 1986; Brosnahan and Kretchman, 1983; Brosnanhan, 1989).

6. Landa directed the Spanish Inquisition in Yucatán. See Clendinnen (1987) for a psychosocial analysis of his persona and motivations in executing his plan for extracting the truth of Maya heresies. Clendinnen’s drama-focused hermeneutic of meaning provides substantial secondary evidence for the present argument in that her analyses demonstrate the creative, transcultural, adaptive agency of Maya caught in the colonial structures of power that they did not choose.

7. Here and throughout the essay, analytics rely on and make use of the debate between Derrida (1990) and Lacan (1973) on the meaning and value of Poe’s short story, ‘The purloined letter’, as an allegory of the problem of signification (see also Mehlman, 1973; Johnson, 1977). While Lacan reads this text as a psychoanalytical fable about the phallus, power, signification and ‘truth’, Derrida’s reading converts the story into a deconstructionist fable about language, text, and mis/communication, and ‘truth’. Without getting into the details that have stimulated wide-ranging discussions (e.g. Muller and Richardson, 1990) my use of these issues, debates, terms and concepts is limited to an articulation of the problematics of how communicative acts are addressed and received through an interpretive mode that necessarily revises the meaning of messages in ways that it (the message) becomes both different and the same as the message that was sent. This understanding follows Derrida’s argument that interpretation always necessarily entails a shift in meaning or, to phrase it another way, interpretation is always a kind of misinterpretation because the meaning of messages cannot be controlled or determined in advance; when received, the message/meanings of the text are occasions for endless re-interpretation (see also Derrida, 1979, 1980, 1988) that alters, however slightly, the message if for no other reason that the context of its receipt creates different meanings. The interesting aspect of this theory of (textual/literary) signification and communication is that it is not simply phrased, but theorized and formulated within a terminology of travel: it is a theory of travel, a travelogic theory, and a travelogue of theory (see Van Den Abbeele, 1992). Messages are ‘letters’ and ‘postcards’ that are open to endless re-visioning by receivers at their point(s) of destination, where destination has a double valence of receiver and context, or ‘place’ of the receiver. The ‘detouring’ of mis/interpretation entails a proliferation of destinations (what in other texts Derrida calls dissemination) that are both intended and unintended and, therefore, that ultimately include the sender as among the destinations of communicative signification. That messages are often expressed with the pretext of being for another but are actually addressed to oneself—or what might be called the ‘self-addressed return’ quality of signification—is economically signalled by the concept of postcard, which is often written to another but for oneself. Intrinsic to the discussion of the purloined letter, and especially to Derrida’s continued elaboration of the theme (e.g. Derrida 1980), is the problematic of the gift, in that ‘sending’ is a mode of signification that is related to giving. This thematic no doubt contributed to Derrida’s even later turning to question of the gift and then to ethics in his returning engagement with Levinas. This elaborate elaboration is appropriate in a footnote as this indeed forms a subtext of this essay on toponomy, the propriety of names, and the topography of discourses.

8. Bernal Díaz, in his eye-witness account of the landing, does not detail this dialogical interaction, but instead focuses on the gestures of war that were exchanged (i.e. ‘friendliness,’ ‘aggression’, etc.). In the eyes and re-memorization of the participant Spaniards, the Maya tricked the Spaniards into an ambush. Here the trope is that of the good/bad Indian that Hulme (1986) shows to derive from the ethnological distinction Carib/Arawak which in turn is premised on the moral differentiation between cannibal/docile Indian (Pearce, 1988, ch. 7).

9. Without getting into polemics of historical truth, my comment refers to the historical memory of a generalized discourse of contemporary life; of course, the rarefied and esoteric memory of historians and anthropological scholarship does not forget these details of different accounts.
10. A less theoretically loaded phrasing can be found in Mary Pratt (1992), who has argued that specifically travel writing has produced the world. Although citing Foucault’s discussion of the discursive production of the real, Pratt qualifies the scope (Eurocentrism) of this assertion/thesis with idea that she is analysing how the world is produced by (travel) writing for a European readership.

11. The crucial histories in English for the ‘conquest’ of Yucatán are Chamberlain (1948), and Scholes and Roys (1948). The idea that some Maya ‘of Yucatán’ were not conquered until the eighteenth century and others not until the twentieth and even others have yet to be conquered is a theme that resonates implicitly in the epigraph from Nelson Reed, which holds, to paraphrase in the inverse, that the (European/Spanish, Criollo) present is only a light or slight ‘surface’ on the (Maya) ‘past’. Studies by Roys (1943, 1957), Tozzer (1941), and Farriss (1984) are important for their analyses of Maya society before and/or after Spanish colonization. Clendinnen’s (1987) treatment of Landa’s Inquisition and Jones’s (1989, 1998) study of the ‘conquest’ of the southern Maya margins are important revisionist histories that demonstrate that the unqualified use of the term ‘conquest’ is itself a historiographic manifestation of colonizing desire and colonialist will to power. Restall (1997, 1998) has provided a different revisionist and even ‘reversalist’ history of the ‘conquest’ based in Maya sources and interpretations. This revision can be summarized in three points: one, Restall’s work argues that the social basis of Maya society was other than what had been imagined, i.e. based in community and lineage not kingships; two, that different Maya groups participated, whether in ‘actuality’ or only in their after-the-fact historiography of the Spanish invasion, as conquistadores, thus the phrase ‘Maya Conquistadors’; and, third, that some groups we know today as Maya did not call themselves Maya but rather sought to conquer other groups that they considered, in a pejorative sense, Maya (see Restall, n.d.). Restall contributes to a series of works (cf. Gabbert, n.d.) that deconstruct the ethnic-racial identity term ‘Maya’ as something that was invented at the end of the nineteenth century.

12. See Seed (1994) for a different kind of historical analysis of the rituals and logics of possession in the colonial encounters of the Americas than that which is elaborated here (cf. Greenblatt, 1992).

13. Perhaps it is here that we should note that there is now some questioning about the text that is authored by the name Landa. Landa’s Relación may not be Landa’s (Matthew Restall, personal communication, 2002). Landa, like the Maya, seem all to be artifices of historiographic imagining and desires for solid and stable entities.

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