

Estevanico's Legacy (an excerpt)

By Rolena Adorno

1. Transatlantic and Tri-Continental

"Estevanico's Legacy" is a response to a challenge posed by a course I designed for undergraduate students in the Spring of 2001 on colonial texts and postcolonial theorizing. These comments excerpt a paper, the full version of which is available on the Internet, that I wrote for a roundtable discussion at Rutgers University, organized by Yolanda Martínez San Miguel and her colleagues. They asked: "How can we propose comparative studies on transatlantic cultural relations that do not replicate Eurocentric models of understanding the colonial subjects?" and "How can we transcend national paradigms to foster comparative studies that re-establish the internal contacts between metropolitan centers and colonial territories?" In other words, how can we articulate broader perspectives on colonialism that are also more representative of the specific objects of analysis that we seek to examine?

My first clues in trying to answer these questions did not come from Estevanico, who, of course, was never allowed to speak for himself. As a slave, he was prohibited from offering legally certifiable testimony about his and his companions' seven-and-a-half year captivity in North America. Nevertheless, his experience was central to the dynamic that I want to discuss. His case epitomizes the circumstances and globalizing reach of early modern colonialism, and it renders a regional or even national purview on colonialism altogether too limited.

Estevanico was a black African slave—Christianized but Arabic-speaking—who helped Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and two other Castilians of the ill-fated 1527 Pánfilo de Narváez expedition to La Florida survive nearly eight years of hardship in the Texas wilderness. After the men's successful return to Spanish-held territory, Estevanico was resold into slavery and died violently somewhere in today's New Mexico. In his years with Cabeza de Vaca he imposed the authority of white European men on native Amerindian communities on a continent to which neither he or the white men, whose bidding he was forced to do, belonged. From his native North Africa to Castile to the Caribbean to eastern coastal Texas to Mexico-Tenochtitlán, and ultimately to what was probably the land of the Zuni in today's New Mexico, Estevanico trudged a trail of forced migration common to the colonized subjects of imperial Spain. Today, he is heralded as having been "the first black man in North America."

If in the sixteenth century Estevanico was enslaved on three continents and could not speak for himself, a twentieth-century Ghanaian literary critic, Josephat Bekunuru Kubayanda (1944-1991), who was educated on the same three continents, has spoken for both of them. Kubayanda, too soon deceased, wrote

comparatively on Latin American and Caribbean as well as African and African Diaspora literatures. I cite here his 1990 essay, "On Colonial/Imperial Discourse and Contemporary Critical Theory." As he undertook a review of the "contribution of Third World critics and minorities in the Western cultural setup," Kubayanda (4-5) spoke of African critics' resistance to theories "devised almost exclusively from a certain privileged ideological or power position . . . and from a very small number of eurocentric texts." He cautioned that critical theory had the "potential not only to exclude, or marginalize, but to lie about its universality."

Among the authors Kubayanda considered favorably, he characterized Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, originally published in French in 1957 under the title, *Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur*, as the major postcolonialist contribution of the end of the 1950s.

Memmi's work is dated from today's perspective, insofar as the hopes for African national liberation that Memmi espoused have long been dashed, and he came to regret his exclusion of women from his discussion of the colonialist drama by the time of the onset of the women's movement a decade and a half later. Nevertheless, his treatment of language and culture are, in my view, still remarkably pertinent. In fact, the issue of language and the position of the colonized writer in Memmi's work have great relevance for postcolonial studies generally and for those of us interested in postcolonial perspectives on colonialism today.

Teaching, even more than scholarly investigation, urges us to undertake cross-cultural comparative studies in order to test variants of theories of colonialism (in this case, intellectual life under colonialism) in diverse cultural or cultural historical settings and/or, conversely, to elucidate the unique or common traits of any particular cultural or cultural historical instance. The point I wish to make is that Memmi's work made it possible for my students to conceptualize and imagine more vividly the often subtle burdens of intellectual life under colonialism.

2. The Colonial Situation and Linguistic Dualism

"The colonial situation": In 1957 Memmi defined living under (or, alternatively, off the fruits of) colonialism as a "situation," as a set of objective social and historical circumstances. In doing so, he rejected the hold-over notions that colonialism was a "natural" system and that those subjugated by it were simply living in accordance with their biological nature: "What is the colonized, in actual fact? I believe neither in metaphysical essence nor in psychological essence. One can describe the colonized at present." (Memmi 152-153). One can define a colonized subject, that is, only by his or her circumstances.

Among many other factors, Memmi further described the colonial situation, as it pertains to the colonized, in terms of linguistic dualism (Memmi 99-101, 105, 106). This "linguistic dualism" constitutes one of the most productive dimensions of Memmi's concept of the colonial situation for exploring the writings of

colonial Latin America. Linguistic dualism's colonial form is "colonial bilingualism," which "cannot be compared to just any linguistic dualism." Insofar as having two languages means participation in two psychical and cultural realms, the problem in colonial bilingualism is that "the two worlds symbolized and conveyed by the two tongues are in conflict." It is "neither a purely bilingual situation in which an indigenous tongue coexists with a purist's language (both belonging to the same world of feeling), nor a simple polyglot richness benefiting from an extra but relatively neuter alphabet." It is instead a "linguistic drama" (Memmi 107-108).

The position of the colonized writer is one of the most perfect examples of this "linguistic drama." For whom shall he or she write? For his or her own people, who may not read any language at all, or for the bourgeoisie and the scholars, who read only the colonizer's language? The paradox arises from the need to write in the colonizer's language in order to claim the dignity and legitimacy of one's own. The result: "The colonized writer is condemned to live his renunciations to the bitter end" (Memmi 108, 110-111). The rawness of Memmi's account is heightened by the fact that he personally shared in this linguistic and cultural dilemma: "I was a sort of half-breed of colonization," he (xvi) wrote, "understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one." (Memmi belonged to the Jewish community in Tunis, lived alongside the colonized society of the major Moslem minority, and conducted his intellectual life in French.)

By his own self-description, Memmi raised many of the pertinent issues regarding external and self-identification. The immediacy of these questions as Memmi posed them created a threshold, easily crossed, that allowed my students entrance into the realm populated by the creole (criollo), mestizo, and Indian voices of the Latin American past. Issues of language, colonial bilingualism, and cultural complexity are all pertinent. Memmi's "I was a sort of half-breed of colonization, understanding everyone because I belonged completely to no one" applies as well to writers from early colonial Mexico and Peru, such as the Peruvians El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539-1616) and Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (1530s-c. 1616). (See the full version of this paper for examples.)

Hence, reading Memmi gave my undergraduate course on colonial texts and postcolonial theory four tools of great use. The first was Memmi's help in moving readers beyond the common binary opposition of colonizer and colonized so as to be able to speak to the mutual dependency and ambiguity of colonial relationships. The second was that his essay made it possible to transcend the moment of the horrors of military conquest and help the students contemplate with interest all that followed the shocks of violent encounter and swift subjugation. It was Memmi, after all, who focused attention on the phenomenon of colonialism as "the colonial situation," which is a term that was later taken up in Latin American colonial studies, where it remains a productive category of analysis. Third, Memmi draws our attention to the writing subject as a mediating and highly mediated position. After Memmi, one picks up the works of El Inca Garcilaso or Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala not for the usual tale of conquest they tell, but with an acute awareness of the writer and the complex

positioning of the writing subject. Fourth, even though Memmi's work is more than forty years old, it nevertheless requires us to confront the currency of the colonial situation in the world today.

3. Colonialism and the Book

The book stands at the heart of the colonial relationship. Essays like Homi Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders" and Sabine MacCormack's "Atahualpa and the Book" make the point, respectively, for British colonialism in the nineteenth century and Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth. Antonio Cornejo-Polar's "Voz y letra en el 'dialógo' de Cajamarca," the brilliant first chapter of his *Escribir en el aire*, has the longest reach, charting the representation of the colonial book and Atahualpa's death all the way from the accounts of Spanish chronicles and indigenous writings in the sixteenth century through today's popular festivals in the Andean sierra, which Luis Millones has studied so effectively in *Actores de altura*.

Signifier of colonial desire and discipline, "measure of mimesis and mode of civil authority and order," as Bhabha (29, 32) calls it, the book always seems to be at the center of the quintessential colonial encounter. He suggests what has also always been true, namely, that alongside the sacred book is the secular book. I learned this, years before his death, from Joe Kubayanda. The recollection gives me the opportunity to tell the anecdote that stimulated me to think about colonial Latin America through the lens of writers from postcolonial Africa. Kubayanda told me that what "the book" meant to his forebears was, simply put, colonialism. In the oral traditions of his family, he said, he recalled being told that when the British colonialists arrived, a uniformed colonial officer walked into the Kubayandas' ancestral village, opened a book, and read out the names of all the villagers, including those of Joe's elders. It was the census book and that, said Joe, was his family's introduction to colonialism: the assignment of duties and the assessment of taxes. All in all, it was the imposition by outsiders of responsibilities, for all of which one was held accountable because one's name was already written in a book.

It is revealing that many centuries earlier, in 1570, and on another continent, in highland Peru, one of the last living members of the Inca dynasty, Titu Cussi Yupanqui (4), recalled a similar phenomenon. He explained to the Spanish priest who was transcribing and translating his account of the Spanish invasion to which he had been an eyewitness: "And even we have seen with our own eyes how the Spaniards speak with their white sheets and name some of us by our own names, without us even telling them, just by looking at the sheet they have in front of them." The historical and cultural differences involved in these spatial-temporal leaps are enormous, but the events and processes that distinguish them are, at the same time, submitted to principles and techniques of interpretation or "sense-making" that are interestingly similar.

These points of interpretive contact allow us to set up productive juxtapositions that do not wrongly assert cultural historical similarities where none exist, but that, rather, help us to "jog loose" the revealing detail in its uniqueness and

specificity. In this light, it is not the “sameness” of the colonial Ghanean census book and its colonial Spanish forebear that is of interest; neither is it, per se, the event of their respective historical appearances. The pertinent factor is that the interpreters of the events, in both cases the colonized witnesses to it, grasped the book’s strangeness and therefore its significance. Whether this was done immediately, during the historical event, or later, in reflective interpretation, matters not. It is only the latter site to which we are privileged observers.

In this regard, I am not suggesting that the Kubayanda anecdote or the Bhabha essay (or any other postcolonial writing) should act as a kind of template, telling us to “see certain things” in colonial writings from other times and places. On the contrary, the postcolonial speculation, productively understood, merely invites us to ask questions other than those we might customarily have been asking within our familiar academic and disciplinary traditions of often limited protocols. As a “revealing detail,” Titu Cussi’s reference to the Spaniards’ “white sheets” is not of interest because it was an action that was repeatable and repeated in the long history of colonialism but because, uniquely in Titu Cussi’s circumstances, it produced a certain result: his timely and timeless account of the conduct of the Spanish invasion.

4. Estevanico’s Legacy

I am convinced that by careful reading we can transcend national paradigms to foster comparative studies that re-establish the internal points of contact and the similarities of conduct that exist between metropolitan centers and colonial territories in different times and places. And I also believe, as in the demonstration about Titu Cussi Yupanqui’s narrative, above, that we can then return to the specific object of analysis more productively. In this regard, the tri-continental, transatlantic experience of Estevanico, now taken as a critical category, is unambiguously illuminating. Just as his life extended beyond the acquaintance of a single region and far beyond a single continent, and just as his experience showed that a single pair of languages or a single pair of cultures was insufficient to describe and contain whatever one might seek to imagine or write about him, his legacy to colonial studies is the invitation, or the requirement, to think more broadly: historically, along cross-Atlantic lines, theoretically, into postcolonial formulations, and intuitively, always beyond the binary opposition. The value of doing so is to enlarge the range of questions and insights that we might address. The challenge of doing so is to avoid anachronistic thinking and facile, misleading comparisons. The challenge, in other words, is to be at once historically responsible and theoretically informed, that is, to act on the basis of what one knows and to speculate smartly about the latitudes and limits of the possible.

In this regard, the figure of Estevanico himself becomes emblematic. As he was portrayed by Cabeza de Vaca, Estevanico is characterized in the narrative for acting and surviving by his wits. While Cabeza de Vaca foregrounded himself and his Castilian compatriots as acting on their Christian faith and comporting themselves with caution and reticence during the long years of the Texas sojourn and the trans-Texas-Mexico trek, he described Estevanico as the one who was

sent out, alternately into the wilderness and into the crowds, playing the crucial and dangerous role of scout and mediator. Cabeza de Vaca (in Adorno and Pautz 1: 232, 233) wrote: "The black man always spoke to them and informed himself about the roads we wished to travel and the villages that there were and about other things that we wanted to know." It was Estevanico who had to act on the basis of what he knew (his experience, his "history") as well as on the basis of his smartest speculations (his best efforts at "theorizing"). The fact that he survived those seven and a half years testifies to his success in undertaking this double challenge. In transatlantic, tri-continental circumstances that cannot be reduced to dual arrangements, the double challenge posed to history and theory constitutes, for us as academics and in its broadest metaphorical sense, the "legacy of Estevanico."

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