

Alterity in Pero Vaz de Caminha's *Letter* on the discovery of Brazil

Multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia

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ABSTRACT. Pero Vaz de Caminha's *Letter* to King Manuel of Portugal is reread in the light of post-colonial theory. Emphasis is given to the colonial encounter between the Tupinambás and the Europeans. The former are analyzed as "others" or colonized objects whereas the Portuguese are investigated as colonial subjects with panoptican and universalist ideology. Information generation, utopian notion of the "good savage", body details, agency and mimicry show not only the worldling of the natives but also their reaction to objectification.

Key words: Caminha's *Letter*, othering, post-colonial studies, mimicry, Tupinambás.

RESUMO. *Alteridade na Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha sobre o achamento do Brasil.* A *Carta* de Pero Vaz de Caminha ao Rei Manuel de Portugal é relida à luz da teoria pós-colonialista. Dá-se ênfase ao encontro colonial entre os Tupinambás e os europeus. Aqueles são analisados como "outros" ou objetos colonizados enquanto estes são investigados como sujeitos coloniais imbuídos de ideologia panóptica e universalista. A geração de informação, a noção utópica do "bom selvagem", detalhes do corpo, o determinismo e a mímica mostram não apenas a colocação dos nativos no mapa mundial mas também destaca-se seu revide à objetificação.

Palavras-chave: A *Carta* de Caminha, alteridade, estudos pós-coloniais, mímica, tupinambás.

The status of the *Letter*

Although Caminha's *Letter* has never belonged to the Portuguese or Brazilian literary canon, its importance consists in being one of the first eye-witness reports (Master João's and the Pilot's reports have never put Caminha's letter off the limelight) on the discovery of Brazil written by the secretary of the royal fleet on board. However, it is interesting to mention that this important report was only discovered in 1773 by João de Seabra da Silva in Lisbon's Torre do Tombo, published by Fr. Manuel Aires de Casal in *Corografia Brasileira* in 1817 and critical editions were undertaken only by the Portuguese scholar Jaime Cortesão in his book *A Carta de Pero Vaz de Caminha* in 1943 and by Almeida Prado in *A Carta* in 1965. It seems that Caminha began writing the letter on the 24th or 26th April, 1500 and finished it on the 1st May 1500. It was sent to King Manuel of Portugal by the victuals ship (Pereira, 1964: 10; henceforth only page number)

Led by Captain Pedro Álvares Cabral the 13-strong fleet boarding 1201 men together with 8 Franciscan friars (Friar Henrique de Coimbra among them) and 9 priests sailed from Lisbon on 9th March 1500 due south to round Africa and then due north towards India. King Manuel (1495-1521) attended a Mass celebrated prior to the fleet's departure and listened to Bishop Diogo Ortiz's sermon on Portugal's overseas discoveries and conquests. Cabral's hat and the banner of the Order of Christ were blessed. The fleet arrived near the Canaries on the 14th and, on the 22nd, the sailors saw the Cape Verde islands. On the following night Vasco de Ataíde's ship was lost. However, on the 21st April 1500, Easter Tuesday, signs of land were seen. On the 22nd April, a hill (immediately called *Monte Pascoal*) and the dark outline of an extended horizon were seen. The land was called Land of the True Cross [*Terra de Vera Cruz*]. The crew stayed at two positions (17°00" S and 39°00" W; 16°45" S 39°00" W) off the shore of the present state of Bahia. Colonial encounters abounded but the fleet had to

continue its east-bound journey. It sailed away from the “new found land” on the 2nd May 1500 after leaving four Portuguese males in Brazil.

Although it is the birth certificate of Brazil (Bosi, 1983:16), Caminha’s *Letter* has never been analyzed from a thorough postcolonial point of view and a new rereading of the text is thus necessary at this point in history when Brazil is “celebrating” the fifth century of its discovery. Bosi (1983) dedicates a mere page to the *Letter* and merely contextualizes it within contemporary Portuguese and Spanish travel literature. Still stranger is Bosi’s silence in his book *Dialética da colonização* (1992), in which there is neither a critical analysis nor the usual descriptive Eurocentric denunciation. Moisés and Paes (1980: 198) describe it as “a detailed and pleasant report of the first survey of the land” in the context of information literature common at that time. School text books follow the same line (Tufano, 1984:19; Faraco and Moura, 1986:200) or, as Rodrigues *et al.* (1979), not mentioning the letter at all. Kothe (1997) is perhaps the only Brazilian author who comments on the absence of criticism on Caminha’s *Letter*. He complains that the above authors miss the opportunity to give a wholly different idea to students studying Brazilian literature. Even though Kothe seems to have the best approach among Brazilian critics because he investigates it from a post-colonial point of view, he misses the ideological stance of the Portuguese enterprise which totally others the South American native and causes the mechanisms for producing alterity and objectification. Rightly enough he analyzes the *Letter* as an intertextual device in the context of Columbus’s and Vespucci’s discourses on the New World. He rather roams when discussing the European gaze and awe, the quest for gold, the planting of the European religion, the cultural shock and the problem of the “good savage” in the milieu of colonial encounters. Nevertheless, the fact that Kothe analyzes these themes is already a breakthrough in the history of Brazilian criticism, especially when one considers that a post-colonial stance of the first literary production off-shore Brazil would certainly influence the whole critical corpus. Triumphant critical attitudes and noncritical ones have had devastating results and have cut in the bud real post-colonial criticism in Brazilian literature.

Signs

Even if the discussion about the possible intentionality of Cabral’s fleet travelling so much westward on its way to India is discarded, Caminha

seems to be certainly acute in the reading of signs. Needless to say these signs are constituted on different levels. There are signs of approaching land: different types of algae and birds (123 -124) indicate the presence of land which is seen on Wednesday, April 22, at dusk. There may be gold and silver in the new land: the two natives brought on board the Captain’s ship see Cabral’s gold necklace and the ship’s silver candlesticks and gesticulate towards the land. Caminha seems to reason that if the natives linked the presence of a parrot on board and the abundance of the same birds on land, the existence of precious metals was practically guaranteed. Furthermore, when the scribe narrates the episode of the natives approaching Cabral and other crew members on a Sunday, this is interpreted as coexistence, familiarity and mutual understanding. The natives’ imitation of the Portuguese religious gestures, especially at the last celebration of the Mass and at the raising of the Cross, is interpreted as docility towards the Christian religion and their probable conversion to it if means are posited for its implementation. This sign is confirmed by the native gesticulating towards the altar and to heaven interpreted by the Portuguese as a good omen to their intentions.

When verbal language is nonexistent the only means that man has is the reading of appearances and the disposition of inanimate objects. Since sign reading is a subjective activity, it may be the outward revelation either of wishful thinking or of ideology. The native’s hand pointing to the Captain’s golden collar and towards the land *would be* a sign of the presence of gold on shore. In fact, finding gold was really one of the chief aims of Portuguese navigation entrepreneurship, or rather, the exploitation of the East and the transportation of its richness to the metropolis. Caminha read the sign and interpreted it as a possibility of gold deposits in Brazil known to the Tupinambás who, in turn, would transfer such knowledge to the Europeans. However, Caminha is silent about what this possibility would entail. The conquest of the land and the enslavement of the natives are not even mentioned. From the Portuguese experience on the west coast of Africa and commercial activity with India, one may presume that these factors are at the back of Caminha’s mind and that of his companions. The overall view of the writer certainly calls attention to the Europeans’ superior stance and to the subsequent othering of all non-Europeans for the sake of commerce. This may be corroborated by Caminha’s insistence on the Tupinambás’ mimicry of religious gestures. The sign of the natives’

openness to the Christian religion indicates the ideology of a superior European religion which has to be implanted in the natives. In sign reading Caminha constructs the Tupinambás' alterity caused by his own Eurocentric ideology and forms a pretext for invasion and objectification.

Colonial encounters

The first colonial encounter (Thursday, 23rd April) consists of the Portuguese (still on their ships and boats) looking at seven or eight men walking on the beach (the number increased to 18 or 20 later in the day), a long-distance description of the Tupinambás, the impossibility of speaking to them because of the heavy breakers, Coelho's orders to the natives to lay down their bows and arrows and a quick exchange of trifles. Speech is absent; the gaze predominates.

The gaze has been extensively discussed by Lacan (1977). It may be the gaze of the mother in the mirror phase or the initial process by which identity is achieved. It may be an attribute of the male in his attitude of othering the female, objectifying and fabricating her according to his desire. In Caminha's *Letter*, it is the gaze of the Other that enacts anthropologically the processes of identification, objectification and submission. It is interesting to note the telescoping view that the Portuguese, while still on board their ships, have of the natives on the shore in this first instance. The first encounter boils down to a male, and therefore, imperial, gaze. The Tupinambás were "totally naked, without any clothes that covered their private parts". From Columbus's diary to Captain Smith's report naked natives constitute the leitmotif in discovery literature. In Caminha's *Letter* this first encounter concentrates on nakedness, lack of clothes and uncovered sex parts of the men on the beach. The gaze of the Europeans puts the viewer on a vantage point from where he surveys the colonized "subject" and fixes his identity. The Portuguese on their ships and boats immediately confirm the natives' subalternity and powerlessness.

The awe and strangeness that the gaze on naked natives provokes are related to difference and to culture. The distance kept between the Portuguese and the natives is a symbol of the difference the European insists on and is convinced of. With his fleet, weapons, armor and his superiority complex the European immediately distances himself from unclothed people and reduces them to objects. He does not see the natives as Sartrean subjects (Sartre, 1957). On the contrary, to the European mind their nakedness is not a mere physical trait but a cultural

one. Nakedness is the absence of learning and a lack of a set of affinities that constitute cultural contents. Differentiation and cultural emptiness objectify the natives and confirm the *tabula rasa* characteristic of the other. Such objectification by Europeans may be corroborated by the impossibility of speech. Caminha says twice that communication was impossible because of the sound of the waves (125). More than the obstacle of speech, there was the deeper and inherent impediment of a subject-oriented person to maintain any communication with a differentiated person. If the Tupinambás are othered, there may not be any communication as equals and thus subject to subject communication is totally impossible. Only the subject-object interaction is possible when Coelho orders them to lay down their arms and when he begins an exchange of trifles characteristic of all colonial encounters. The exchange of trifles (red cap, linen cowl) with native cultural gifts (hat of long bird feathers, a string of small white beads) is metonymic of an unbalanced cultural exchange which will lead to the objectification of the native and encroachment of European culture dislodging native identity.

A closer gaze occurred on Friday May 24th when two natives are brought on board the Captain's ship in a seemingly ambiguous episode. The verbs *tomou* (127) and *trouueos* (129) used by Caminha to describe the Tupinambás' coming on board indicate enforcement and constraint. The action, almost hidden by trivial information within a festive milieu (129), furnishes a deeper gaze at the natives. Their pale yellow-brown color is now a reddish hue; nakedness is not merely described but commented upon. "They are so innocent that they exhibit their private parts as if it were their face" (129). There are detailed descriptions of their perforated lips, haircut, headdress, silence, mores (eating, drinking and sleeping) and reactions to household things such as domestic animals raised by Europeans. The following morning they were sent away. Caminha's text, even to the point of showing that the natives were not circumcised, shows the enactment of panoramic observation. The writer is thus "placed either above or at the center of things, yet apart from them so that the organization and classification of things takes place according to the writer's own system of value" (Spurr 1993:16). The *panopticon* (Jeremy Bentham's term coined in the 18th century and used by Foucault, 1977) implies power because the "subject" is always under the impression that he is being constantly observed. Thus, sight means power; for the observed, visibility means lack of it. Although the *panopticon* (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998)

exercised by the Portuguese on the two natives is all-embracing, the text shows that some agency still exists and the natives' mimicry is possible.

In this second encounter displacement, a characteristic of the colonizing power, also occurs. The displacement of colonized peoples subverts their identity, uproots their subjectivity and makes them lose contact with their culture. Even though there seems to be some agency in the two natives taken on board, their muteness is a symbol of decreased identity. In post-colonial terms displacement is multifaceted. In this episode of natives' displacement, the sense of dislocation between their experienced environment and the imported context in which things happen occurs at "language" level. Their refusal to eat and drink, their fear of a harmless hen and their lack of interest in a kid show pronounced disruption from their natural milieu. It seems to be the experience of Heidegger's *unheimlichkeit* (not-at-home-ness) which can only lead to alienation and alterity (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1991:82-83; Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:73).

Similar to the aims of Dutch scientists in early 17th century Brazil with their portraits of "exotic" animals and plants, the atomization of the native reveals a strategy of securing knowledge and dominion. Dissecting the colonized "subject" and analyzing his/her constituent parts is tantamount to empowering the colonial subject, the Other, to take possession of and subdue the other. In this specific case, the Portuguese colonial self is constructed on the same basis and at the same time as the construction of the other. The process of othering really occurs in the natives' worlding by the Europeans. When the Europeans coast the shore with their ships and boats, cross the river, walk on the beach, they consolidate the European self (the Other) imposing the terms of objectification and colonization. Othering is also constituted by negative evaluation or debasement attributed to the two natives (and subsequently universalized) whom Caminha refers to as "jente bestial e depouco saber e por ysso asy esquivos" (151). Since they are "beasts", with no houses to live in (151), without any religion and domestic animals (163), harvesting exclusively staple food, Caminha's logical conclusion is that the King should "intervene in their salvation" (163) since the new land ("vossa terra", 123, 175) and its inhabitants already belong to his majesty. The Other's ultimate aim is to domesticate ("amansar", 151) the non-Europeans. Othering is further constituted by the hierarchy imposed between the natives and the Europeans. The binary code, "we" and "they", and the terms "carrying and laying down

of arms", are so repetitive that it is an example of the formation of the history of the other and, at the same time, the construction of otherness. The Manichean code is equally reinforced by the deprivation of speech in the Tupinambás and by the orders, sermons, discussions and deliberations of the Portuguese.

Information

Although the Portuguese might not have had any intention of going to India from the Western part of the globe as was Colombus's in 1492 regarding China, Caminha's *Letter* is a source of primary but essential information of the "new found land". Information on sea, bay soundings and swamps, on the existence of fresh water and rivers, on sea (shrimps, mollusks, mussels, abundance of fish) and land (hearts of palms, manioc, seeds) food, on wood and forests, on gold and metals, on huts (their inside and their exterior) and hamlets, on the coast and the fertile land was urgently needed for the colonizer's survival and the survival of other Europeans that would certainly arrive later on. Needless to say, information about the natives and their mores was vital too. Even though not all information was for immediate use (on May 2nd the fleet had to continue its journey to India), colonizing Europeans knew very well that knowledge is power. To this end, a hypothesis was raised in a council of war held among the captains on board about "taking by force two natives to send to your majesty" so that they would give further information about the land and its richness. The captains were against this strategy since previous experience had taught them that there was a possibility of misinformation being imparted to them by the natives. Exact and better information may be given by deported Portuguese (143) than by natives who would be slow in learning a European language and might be prone to lie. The fear of a bad translation or interpretation, delay in giving exact information ("perao saber tam bem dizer", 143) and mistrust of native ("dizerem que há hy todo oque lhe preguntam", 143) indicate that Europeans trust more their own kind, albeit of a vicious character, and *a priori* shun the native's information, though presumably more reliable. The Portuguese's attitude is thus different from the British one in similar circumstances. Examples from history and from imperial ideology underlying fictional texts of this early period clarify the contrast. Prior to his reduction to slavery Caliban gives vital information to Prospero for the latter's survival on the island since, as "virtually all sixteenth-century Europeans in the New World, the English ... were incapable of

provisioning themselves and were in consequence dependent upon the Indian for food" (Greenblatt, 1989:23). However, this "friendship" was generally followed by oppression that *The Tempest* example makes clear. Anyhow, the white European prefers and trusts another European's information and refuses to rely on that given by a non-European. Robinson Crusoe's attitude towards Friday and towards the Spaniard shows very clearly the existence of different degrees of othering (Bonnici, 1993).

Good savages

It would be anachronistic to discuss Montaigne (1533-1592) in the context of Caminha's *Letter*. However, Montaigne's essay "Of the Cannibals", amply used by Shakespeare in the formation of *The Tempest* (1611), deals with native societies being discovered abroad. Travel reports were the French philosopher's material sources. These reports tended to describe natives as purely virtuous or purely vicious. Although there is the common theme of the "commonwealth" or utopia ideology, some travelers speak of the brutality, treacherousness, ugliness and infidelity of natives. The *True Declaration* called them "human beasts" and John Smith alluded to them as "perfidious, inhuman, all Savage". Sandys compares them to the Cyclops but states that "more salvage ... are the West-Indians at this day" (*apud* Kermode, 1990:xxxvi). Nevertheless, another trend, practically upheld only by Montaigne, exists in which Amerindians are considered as untouched nature in contrast to corrupted nature. "In those are the true and most profitable virtues, and natural properties most lively and vigorous, which in these we have bastardized, applying them to the pleasure of our corrupted taste" (Montaigne, 1990: 304).

Most probably Montaigne never read Caminha's *Letter* and his description of the Tupinambás, but the Portuguese scribe seems to share the idea of man and woman in primeval state, sinless and innocent, without guile and mischief. Perhaps this utopic idea of the "savage" may be only a pretext to Caminha's real intentions. Examining closely Caminha's wording one may notice that behind the insistence on Amerindian innocence lurks a colonizing mind and a colonial discourse. The Portuguese arrival on the shores of Bahia produces the former as a dominant group which imposes specific knowledge, discipline and values upon the Tupinambás as a dominated party. In the short space of a week the Europeans constructed a set of signs and practices in which untouched nature and the idea of the "noble savage" were ordered so that a colonizer-colonized

world would emerge and in which (and in no other place) thenceforth the native would see himself. Thus the "noble savage", always portrayed with a fine, athletic, healthy body (pictures of Delaune, Thevet, Eckhout, de Bry), is a metonymy of a sub-European being, inhabitant of a land, presumably holding deposits of precious metals, who should be dealt with in a childlike manner. European culture shows itself superior, colonial relationships are sealed and the formation of the periphery guarantees commercial exchange for the exclusive enrichment of the metropolis. Perhaps this is the reason why the "innocent savage" is always given trifles. Whereas Caminha's companions gave out shirts, cowls and beads to the Tupinambás and Smith distributed to the North American native bells, pins, needles, beads or glasses, Purchas comments that "children are pleased with toys and awed with rods; and this course of toys and fears hath always best prospered with wild Indians either to do them, or to make them good to us or them" (*apud* Knapp, 1994:3). Almost a century before Caminha seemed to have the opinion that natives are good in so far as they are subordinated to the colonial power and hedged within the constraints of order and hierarchy. The episode of the native who perhaps would have liked to take away the beads and Cabral's golden collar (131) shows that rules are from now onwards set by the colonizer and not by the colonized. After all, the vision of innocence and of untouched nature is only a stage in the overall aim of "domesticating and transforming them into harmless people"(143). Since the verb domesticate ("amansar") is extensively used in the *Letter*, it certainly refers to the pretext to put "the noble savage" into alterity. Caminha would not undersign Montaigne's essay "Of the Cannibals", leaving the French philosopher unique in the 16th century to uphold utopian views.

Body Details

As it has already been mentioned above, body details are extensively described in Caminha's letter. The Tupinambás are described as pale yellow-brown, naked fellows (125). Closer descriptions register an almost reddish skin, regular faces and well-made noses, naked bodies, with their lower lips perforated; smooth hair and shorn upper head (129). Detailed description of body painting is given: half their body is painted in one color, black or bluish or squared, the other half the natural color of the body is maintained (135). Female representation is highly detailed. "There were strolling among them [native males] three or four women, very young and extremely gentle; their hair was very black and fell

on their shoulders and their back; their sexual region was so high, so tight, so hairless ..." (135). Other descriptions of the female are recorded and practically repeat the same items. Body painting is also a trait of the female. "One of the females had one of her tight painted, from the knee up to the hips, and her buttocks painted with a black hue; the rest of her body had its natural color ... Another young woman was also carrying a small boy or a girl from her neck, wrapped in a cloth which I couldn't identify and strung to her breast; only its little legs could be seen. However, the legs of the mother and all the other parts [of her body] were not covered by cloth" (147). Sexual awe, the Renaissance obsession for anatomic details, the sheer difference between European and natives may explain this insistent description of bodies (Kothe, 1996; Jane, 1986; Vespucci *apud* Kothe, 1996). Even if Columbus and John Smith use the same terms in describing the Caribbean and the North American natives, it seems that these descriptions intentionally enhance this distance and consequently cultural diversity.

The items described, however, amount to secondary signifiers (headdress, lack of clothes, paint) acknowledging separate and distinct systems of behavior, attitudes and values. This enhances exoticness, another characteristic of imperialistic ethnography (Bhabha, 1988). Distinct from cultural difference (Derrida's *différance* and its corollaries of ambivalence and hybridity, Bhabha 1988), cultural diversity which includes nakedness and the body's sexual region of natives, tends towards deepening the notion of the colonial other whose culture should be suppressed and substituted by European (and supposedly correct) mores. Garbed in polite language, the insistence on the pubic prepares the way for the European violation. The native's corporal descriptions seem to be an allegory of the pretext to rape the "new found land" and force her to lose her "maidenhood", to evoke the famous dictum of Raleigh (1928). The opportunity thus rises to other the natives by raping their land.

It seems that there is an affinity between colonial discourse and sexuality. Young (1995) has found that colonization is based on the discourse of rape, penetration and impregnation. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad's description of the Congo woman (Conrad, 1969:102), as in all literature from the colonial period to the end and beyond, female bodies symbolize the conquered land. Commerce, trade, sexuality are so intertwined that they are part of the colonial scheme and strategy. "The history of the meaning of the word 'commerce' includes the exchange both of merchandize and of bodies in

sexual intercourse. It was therefore wholly appropriate that sexual exchange and its miscegenated product, which captures the violent antagonistic power relations of sexual and cultural diffusion, should become the dominant paradigm through which the passionate economic and political trafficking of colonialism was conceived" (Young, 1995:182). Therefore, in Caminha's *Letter* overlapping occurs between sexual domination and colonialism. The Tupinambás, as a society, occupy the same space as women. Since the women's nakedness is so evident and their description so detailed as to make them ready to be raped by the colonizer, both symbols begin to represent the land, which is ever so ready to be violated and exploited by colonial trade.

Agency

The worldling of Brazilian Amerindians brings forth two issues: "The consolidation of Europe as sovereign subject, indeed sovereign and subject, ... [and] an alternative historical narrative of the worldling of what is today called the "Third World" (Spivak, 1985). We are thus concerned about the way by which colonized space is brought into the "world", or rather, how colonized space has become part of the world constructed by Eurocentrism. "Worldling on inscribed earth" (Spivak, 1995:269), synonymous to "inscribing imperial discourse upon colonized space", may be done in many ways. One instance of worldling has been described (the Portuguese navigate close to the coast of Brazil or stroll on the beach and in the woods). Another instance is Caminha's own letter containing news of the land and sent to King Manuel of Portugal, who, in his turn, sends the same information to the king of Spain - the Island of the True Cross (Ilha de Vera Cruz) will be placed on the map of the world. At the same time, the Pope will receive the information and missionaries will come to evangelize the natives. Brazil will thus appear on the religious map of the Catholic world.

Coupled to the *tabula rasa* and to the "nakedness" theories, Caminha uses the highly significant symbol of typography. "These people are good and of great simplicity and will receive immediately every impression that one would like to give them" ("Esta jente he boa e de boa sijnpresidade e enpremarsea ligeiramete qualqr crunho que lhes quiserem dar" (163). People are seen as "books" which can be "read" by others. The sexual act is seen, from the male's point of view, as being like printing in so far as the man reproduces copies of himself with the woman as "press". Emphasis is on the supposed passivity of women in sexual intercourse and on the dimension of authority and ownership. The printing metaphor is

thus used by the male who acquires "copyright" in the woman's body. (Thompson, 1987). Extensively used by Shakespeare some 100 years thence and by others (Gubar, 1982), especially in a gender context, the printing metaphor refers to the Amerindians as "gentiles [who] may well be likened to a smooth, bare table unpainted, or a white paper unwritten, upon the which you may at the first paint or write what you list, as you cannot upon tables already painted, unless you raze or blot out the first forms" (Peter Martyr *apud* Porter, 1979:28). When the types (Europe, male) are impressed on a blank sheet of paper (native, female), the violation is complete and sufficient to determine the colonized "subject". Unwillingly s/he is forced to abandon the "subject/agency" stance and, consequently, to refrain from any action in engaging or resisting imperial power (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Slemmon, 1994; Parry, 1987).

According to Fanon's view on the colonized "subject" endeavoring for agency (Fanon, 1952:231), the Tupinambás produce traits of subjectivity even in the muffled text of Caminha: the almost offhand way of the two natives on board Cabral's ship, their non-acknowledgement of Cabral as chief (131), the rejection of Afonso Ribeiro by the natives (133), the vain old man with his magnificent headdress (136), the refusal of some to lay down their arms (131), the distance kept by some natives and even their fleeing from the Portuguese (131,133) are indicative of agency.

Nevertheless, we are here confronted with an ambiguity characteristic of post-colonial discourse. Although there are signs of disruption, Caminha's text is very clear on the natives' objectification. The fact that Coelho's orders to lay down arms (125,135) almost becomes a habit ("do emsino que dantes tijnham poseram todos os arcos" (145), that many approached the Portuguese (153), that many shared activities with the colonizing power (163,165) and might have been called friends ("muito mais nosos amjgos que nos seus", 165) shows that native agency was extremely diminished. This fact may be corroborated by the obedience required of the natives who were already kept as pages to captains Cabral, Simão de Miranda and Aires Gomes (165) and who helped the Portuguese to take water and wood to the ship.

Objectification, even though ambiguous, may be surmised from two items: covering nakedness and mimicry. The *différance* caused by the concept of nakedness and the absence of shame produces the subtle imposition of European culture. The covering of the male and female bodies is an urgent task for the European: the natives on board Cabral's ship are covered with a coat (manto, 131); one of the natives already wears a shirt ("huu dos seus ospedes ... oqual

veo oje aquy vestido na sua camisa", 165), shirts were given to two natives on the last day (171) and the only female present at the last mass was given a piece of cloth "with which to cover herself and they placed it around her body; when she sat down, however, she didn't take much care in covering herself" (171). Distribution of shirts and clothes is not merely a means of covering the natives' nakedness. Rather, it signifies the abrogation of their culture by the European one. Soon, the European culture will be predominant because all native culture will be supplanted and the introduction of Eurocentrism a *fait accompli*.

Mimicry is the ambiguous adoption of the colonizers' cultural habits, assumptions, institution, values (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1998:139). The result may be a parodic copy and constitutes a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behavior of the colonized. Bhabha (1994:86) says that mimicry or the copying of colonial culture, behavior, manner and values by the colonized is "at once resemblance and menace". The locus of mimicry in Caminha's *Letter* may be found in details on the mass and the raising of the cross ceremonies. The dramatic activities involving the first mass (139) were accompanied by natives on the shore who engaged themselves in diverse activities in a theatrical manner. The raising of the cross (166) was intentionally suggested so that "they would see the devotion we have [for it]" (167) by kneeling in front of it and kissing it. The mass celebrated on May 1st aimed at the solemn raising of the cross. The Tupinambás followed all the gestures (sitting, kneeling, standing, raised hands) practiced by the Portuguese. The kissing of the small tin crosses and the solitary action of the young girl at mass (171) reinforce the mimicry element. Caminha concluded: "I certify to your majesty that these [gestures of the natives] produced much devotion in us" (167). Further, he says, the natives are practically disposed to receive the faith and baptism and to be royal subjects. Once more the sexual and reproduction allegory is revealed: "the seed that your majesty should plant" is to "save these people and increase the range of our faith" (171). As Christians they would be the King's subjects and this fact explains Caminha's insistence on "your land" and "your island" (171).

Caminha's interpretation of the natives' devotion and his conviction that they will accept the faith are based merely on the mimicry of a dramatized event. The imitation may also mean the internal refusal of the natives to accept the violation of the European religion and consequently European dominance. Although there is no overt resistance to the Europeans, "sly civility" (Bhabha, 1985; Sharpe, 1989) seems to pervade the surface attitudes shown by the natives. Mimicry

would then be a menace to the European empire. The colonized subject would be ultimately beyond the control of the colonial authority. Their subversiveness and disruption would disturb the “normality” of dominant colonial discourse. The Tupinambás, “almost the same but not white” (Bhabha, 1994: 86), are a witness that culture is always potentially and strategically subversive.

The aftermath is history. When the Portuguese returned and other Europeans tried to colonize the country and enslave the Tupinambás, the marvelous structure of Caminha’s *Letter*, with all its manifestation of strangeness, awe and uncanniness of the “new found land”, and its cautious treatment of Amerindian natives, crumbles down. The colonizer’s othering policy and strategies that lurked in the background and that lay hidden deep in the European notion of the Other succeeded in fabricating the native within the colonial web. The colonial encounter construed such alterities that it would be impossible for the native to escape. He wouldn’t know how to go anywhere else. Notwithstanding, Caminha’s *Letter* is unawares already a witness to a colonized subversive stance. Disruption and mimicry witness the affirmation of agency which culminated in the Tupinambás giving advice to some Europeans in the marketplace at Rouen in 1562 (*apud* Hulme, 1986; Montaigne, 1990). “The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes” (Campbell, 1985:129) roams beneath the optimistic lines of Caminha’s triumphant letter.

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