

# COUNTER-REFORMATION VISUALITY AND THE ANIMATED ICONS OF HERNANDO DOMÍNGUEZ CAMARGO'S *POEMA HEROICO*

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Among the most pressing questions in Spanish American scholarship today is the region's unique coloniality and the need for more adequate theories to explain it. With the post-colonial studies of the 1980s, Latin Americanists turned largely to theoretical paradigms created in First World schools of thought by scholars focused primarily on British colonialism. Recent scholarship, however, has pointed not just to the lack of attention to Spain's earlier and more long-lasting colonization of large parts of America, but also to the philosophical Eurocentrism of the conceptual models provided for understanding imperial domination.<sup>1</sup> The search for theoretical and testimonial voices more revealing of colonized epistemologies has prompted re-examination of many Creole and European texts once regarded as the origins of the region's literary canon—texts such as Hernando Domínguez Camargo's *Poema heroico a San Ignacio de Loyola*, a Creole eulogy to the founder of the Jesuit order.<sup>2</sup> Though celebrated at one time for asserting a uniquely American aesthetics of “counter conquest” (Lezama Lima 303), texts such as the *Poema* have been cited more recently for exoticizing the Amerindian and for reinforcing the same myths of civilization and modernity that nurtured the ideology of Occidentalism.<sup>3</sup> The present essay reconsiders this particular poem's relevance to the “colonial question” by focusing on its ekphrastic icons—its verbal images of visual objects of art.<sup>4</sup> The *Poema's* icons of religious artworks and of nature scenes “picture” certain commonplaces of European literature. Yet they simultaneously incite the reader to “see” in ways contrary to two of the principal myths that sustained Occidental imperialism: the myths of Cartesian

objectivity and of Christian providentialism. In the pages that follow, I suggest that the *Poema heroico's* icons fill a gap in notions of Spanish American coloniality by revealing a sort of border epistemology among Creole elites different from that of Amerindians and different, as well, from the perspective of early modern European colonizers. Furthermore, I argue, these poetic icons alert us to potential contradictions in twenty-first-century approaches to the colonial question, insofar as they prefigure the subject position assumed by a number of the very critics who today emphasize the inadequacy of Anglophone postcolonial theory for a Latin America with a far different pattern of colonization.

### *Positional Hybridity and Ekphrastic Pictures*

In contrast to areas of the world colonized in later centuries and by other European powers, Latin America saw the rise of a demographically self-reproducing, interstitial colonial elite that existed at the borders between metropolis and periphery (Osterhammel 9).<sup>5</sup> Spanish by law but American by birth, European in cultural origin but American in homeland, white in class but frequently *mestizo* in blood, Creoles fully fit neither of the categories of “alien rulers” nor “exploited local inhabitants” that typically distinguished colonizers from subalterns in other colonial areas. Hernando Domínguez Camargo, an American-born, Jesuit-ordained Creole who, for reasons unknown, was expelled from the Order shortly after entering it, exemplifies the positional hybridity of this Spanish American elite. As a Western-educated white, Domínguez Camargo shared the cultural memory and sensibility of those who developed the Western myths of civilization and modernity that legitimized European conquest and colonization of Amerindian peoples. However, as an institutional outcast who elected to reside in a series of embattled Muisca-Chibcha towns for the duration of his expulsion,<sup>6</sup> Domínguez Camargo also knew the consequences of these myths for Amerindians: their decimation by forced labor and their loss of land and livelihood under forced relocation. This interstitiality notwithstanding, interpretations of the *Poema heroico* have oscillated between one of two ideological extremes. Upon the poem’s rediscovery

in the early twentieth century, scholars placed the work firmly within the Peninsular tradition, noting its *culteranismo* and seeing in it the culmination of Luis de Góngora's style in the Indies. Beginning in the 1960s, intellectuals reinterpreted the work as the origins of an interracial, cross-class Latin American literary tradition, seeing in its heterogeneity and in its expressions of pride in America and its people an "unambiguous consciousness of alterity" (Sabat Rivers and Rivers 10). With the advent of the Subaltern Studies Group, however, critics once again began to locate texts such as the *Poema* within the European (Western) tradition, connecting their exoticization and anthropologization of Amerindians to a perpetuation of the technologies of racial classification that nurtured the ideology of Occidentalism and legitimized imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

Though both Peninsularist and Americanist readings offer valuable contributions to understanding the *Poema heroico*, each underestimates the multilayeredness of the subject position it fashions. In particular, the poem's ekphrastic icons suggest an ideological position more complex than either of these interpretations, the interrogation of which challenges current notions of Colonial Latin America's articulation to Western modernity. It has been a commonplace of literary criticism that images or word pictures introduce a mute moment into language that creates a lapse in a text's signifying power. Picture theory has shown, however, that such silent, iconic ekphrases exercise power on a number of levels that affect ideological thought patterns. On a semiotic discursive level, ekphrases function, like pictures in other media, to transmit meaning through what they show: through symbolism and signs. The *Poema heroico's* vivid, verbal images, for example, show a notable Counter-Reformation style and subject matter, an attribute which several studies have linked to the Jesuits' evangelical work.<sup>8</sup> On a deeper, relational level, icons also exercise power through what they don't show. Iconic representations require a targeted reader or viewer to fill in what is not shown in order to make sense of a picture. In the process of rendering a subjective visual experience, artists transform the spatial facts of a picture, obscuring (hazing, blurring, blocking, foreshortening) certain elements and relying on the knowledge and experience of the viewer to fill in information and render the picture

intelligible (Friedländer 14). Very recent picture theory shows that the demands a picture makes on a reader create an additional residual or surplus value of the sort that escapes semiotic critique yet exercises a far-reaching and powerful effect on ideological beliefs. What a picture obscures or angles away from, theorists such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and W. J. T. Mitchell explain, re-functions a viewer's imagination and memories and draws a beholder into seeing, thinking and dreaming in certain ways. Encouraging people to see 'this' as 'that,' animated icons introduce new associations, points of view and perceptions into the world which may stand contrary to current myths or ideologies (Mitchell 92).

In the *Poema heroico*, the demands Domínguez Camargo's icons actively place on the reader incite ways of seeing that run contrary to some of the myths and perceptions of the world that sustained Occidental imperialism. In this study, I analyze two broad categories of ekphrastic icons in the *Poema heroico*: religious icons and icons of nature, looking not just at the Counter-Reformation subject matter they show but also at the desires, perceptions and points of view they encourage. Focusing on two characteristics of these pictures, in particular, their liquidity and their violence, I suggest that, at the same time these icons perpetuate certain Occidentalist stereotypes of Amerindians, they simultaneously posit a mode of seeing that reflects critically on both the scientific-rational and the mercantilist-providential myths of modernity that undergirded Spanish colonialism. The contradictoriness of this position, I believe, reflects a larger struggle for power and authority among Creoles that distinguished colonial Spanish American imperial domination and resistance from that of other colonial regions. It also prefigures the complexity of the position assumed by a number of modern-day Spanish American scholars whose own academic and artistic work on post-colonialism aspires to a similar kind of border thinking.

### *Religious Icons and Cartesian Objectivity*

Some of the most elaborate icons in the *Poema heroico* depict artistic representations of biblical figures or objects used in religious worship. In some passages, these images involve the description of an actual

statue or work of art, as in the passage where Ignatius withdraws to a cave in the mountain of Monserrat and erects a crucifix of Christ to aid him in his meditations:<sup>9</sup>

Tesoro antiguo de su casa era  
 un crucifijo, que condujo, escudo  
 en que pudiese rebatir severa  
 flecha letal de Leviatán sañado: [...]  
 (Book 2, canto 4, stanza 118, 140)

y erigida la Cruz, ensangrentada  
 desde el mástil al gajo cortezudo,  
 se dobla al peso del cadáver yerto,  
 que eleva a Cristo vivamente muerto. [...]  
 (Book 2, canto 4, stanza 119, 140)

las blancas manos y los pies nevados:  
 cada cual, sobre boto, así es severo,  
 que en cárdenos rubíes desatados,  
 al que fue el paraíso de los ojos,  
 cuatro raudales lo desatan rojos. [...]  
 (Book 2, canto 4, stanza 120, 140)

Rota la encía, ensangrentado el diente,  
 en el ultimo anhelo el labio abierto,  
 poca lengua a la vista le consiente,  
 que al paladar se eleva descubierto:  
 no sepulcros de pórvido luciente,  
 de jaspes sí manchados, donde al yerto  
 cadáver de la lengua destrozada,  
 cubren terrones de su sangre helada.  
 (Book 2, canto 4, stanza 124, 141)

The crucifix's vivid colors and detailed wounds—its white hands and snowy feet, its ruby streams of blood, broken gums and blood-stained teeth—recall polychromatic images of saints and their sufferings such as the *Cristo de la Clemencia* sculpted by Juan Martínez Montañés in 1603. In other passages, the image of a religious object emerges as the poet describes a feature of nature using an elaborate extended metaphor. Domínguez Camargo's description of the mountain of Monserrat, for example, evokes a figurative temple of religious

worship:

Al monte sube, y mira en la ardua peña  
que la nube excedió, [...]  
(Book 2, canto 3, stanza 67, 126)

En la apacible entretenida escena  
el alma derramada, halló vencida  
la tan fragosa cumbre como amena, [...]  
(Book 2, canto 3, stanza 70, 127)

La opulencia del templo envidió a Ignacio  
a tributos de mármol, el instante  
que, sin dejarle a descartarse espacio,  
sus opulencias le arrojó delante;  
la vista se subió con el palacio  
hasta el cielo, y cansóse en lo distante;  
que olvidado de sí, al Empírio sube,  
y débil se apeó de nube y nube.  
(Book 2, canto 3, stanza 71, 127)

Coronó los umbrales de la puerta  
y embistióle los ojos y el oído  
la opulencia y la música; [...]  
(Book 2, canto 3, stanza 72, 128)

Navega, en cuanto espacio se dilata  
una lámpara y otra suspendida,  
el culto Potosí en naves de plata  
el piélagos del viento. . .  
(Book 2, canto 3, stanza 77, 129)

Reference to the mountain's opulence, its marble, the threshold of its door, its music and silver lamps creates before the mind's eye an image that recalls sumptuous religious edifices of the sort that existed in Spain and the centers of the American viceroyalties by the 1600s. In still other passages, a decoration is formed as the poet arranges or selects details in a way that simulates the viewing of a particular genre of art that existed in visual form. For example, Domínguez Camargo's description of the Virgin as she appears to Ignatius in his state of penitence in Monserrat (Book 2, canto 2, stanzas 35-46, 118-

21) dedicates a single stanza to each of the Virgin's physical features and orders them from the head downward, similar to a Petrarchan or Marian blazon.

In general, the religious icons that decorate the *Poema heroico's* monument to Loyola recall types of art that proliferated during the Counter-Reformation and that encouraged forms of religious attention promoted by Loyola and the Council of Trent. As Parkinson-Zamora explains, in contrast to countries with Protestant seats of power, where an ideology of spiritual autonomy and individualized, vertical relationship to God encouraged forms of seeing that involved individual intellectual insight and apprehension, in Spain and its territories, Loyola's *Ejercicios espirituales* and the Council of Trent's ideology of spiritual community and participatory empathy with Christ and the saints encouraged visual practices that involved communal participation and personal, affective response to physical stimulation of the senses (3, 35-37). The realism of the *Poema heroico's* icons (the crucifix's broken gums), their strong appeal to the senses (the cave of Monserrat's marble walls, lamps, and music; the Virgin's milky skin), and their explicit, naturalistic physical depiction of topics of suffering (the gore of the crucifix's ruby streams of blood and blood-stained teeth) encourage a communal, Counter-Reformationist envisioning of divinity in the mind's eye by evoking empathy in viewers. Like other religious objects of the era, they produce "arrebato y piedad: compasión, comunión pasional con el otro" (Durán, Serrano 44).

While generally similar to other religious art objects of the Counter-Reformation, however, in at least one way Domínguez Camargo's icons also stand apart. As Alicia de Colombí-Monguió has noted, Domínguez Camargo displays a tendency to dissolve everything from flesh to stone to air into a liquid, oceanic universe in flow, what Colombí-Monguió calls an "extensión sin precedentes, en el contexto de lo verbal, de la forma rectora [de lo sinuoso] en la semiótica de la estética barroca" (282). In the above-mentioned ekphrasis of the crucifix of Monserrat and in a similar vision of Christ in Book V of the *Poema heroico*, for example, the flesh and fibers of Christ's face and hair become a "golfo" and "ondas" as his eyes and their pupils ("niñas") become ships ("bajeles") and sirens ("niñas" =

pupils/maidens) afloat in a Mediterranean sea (Book 2, canto 4, stanza 121, 140). In the portrait of the Virgen of Monserrat, Mary's hair becomes the "ondas" of a "Nilo [de] oro", her ear a "caracol torcido," the twelve stars that surround her hair an "armada" that sounds her hair's "orillas," her nose an "estrecho" between "dos mares rojos," and her milk, "licor" from Potosí (Book 2, canto 2, stanzas 35-45, 118-20). In a later portrait of Loyola himself as a student in Paris, the saint becomes a new "Colón" and his books, "reales naves" from a "literaria flota" that "desat[a] de las columnas / con que Minerva enfrena el literario / piélagos" to discover a "Nuevo mundo literario" (Book 4, canto 1, stanzas 1-3, 235). Like a moving water color, these descriptions blur their subject matter into a liquid entity which the reader/viewer must continually fix and solidify in order to make sense of the description's picture. Obscuring the contours of their religious object, they animatedly "demand," to use Mitchell's metaphor, that the reader fill in additional information to render the picture intelligible.

Critical discussion of this obsessive liquidity or aquatic imagery has generally concurred with Colombí-Monguió's theory that it reflects Domínguez Camargo's profound, probably unconscious intuition of water as the prime matter of the universe (295). However, recent theory on optics and what Martin Jay describes as "scopic regimes of modernity" suggests that its significance may go deeper.<sup>10</sup> As Jay points out, throughout the period in which Domínguez Camargo wrote, the dominant form of Western visuality was that of Cartesian "perspectivalism," a system of perspective based on a model of symmetrical visual pyramids with one apex as the receding vanishing point of a painting and the other as the eye of the painter or beholder (Jay 116). This model, which painters adopted to create the illusion of seeing as from a God's-eye view from afar through a transparent window at objects localizable within a homogeneous, three-dimensional space (Fig. 1), supported European notions of truth and scientific objectivity, which in turn nourished the myth of (European) rationality that underwrote the ideology of Occidentalism (Jay 118). Jay points out that a competing Baroque scopic regime arose in the seventeenth century, offering a model of distorted images and anamorphic forms that acquired proper contours only from an angle





Fig. 1: Raphael, *School of Athens* (c. 1510). Apostolic Palace, Rome



Fig. 2: El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos)  
*Laocoön* (c. 1610/1614)  
Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery

at which the remaining reality was blurred. This alternative to the dominant model created the illusion of seeing from multiple viewpoints in a convex mirror held up to nature (Fig. 2). In contrast to Cartesian perspectivalism, it insisted on the fact that “reality” (truth; the God’s-eye view) existed only as a product of where one happened to stand—on the inextricability of subject and object, gaze and reality (Jay 122).

The burden that Domínguez Camargo’s religious icons place on the viewer to participate in their reconstruction as solid objects takes up the Baroque emphasis on the constitutive role of the observer. It reminds the reader that viewers play a role in constituting the truth of what they observe. Yet it also goes beyond insistence on the interestedness of any supposedly objective, rational observer to question, as well, the association of objectivity or rationality specifically with seeing from or as in Europe. For as the reader attempts to make sense of the *Poema heroico*’s liquid icons by fixing their corporeality/materiality in a particular space, the geographical attributes of the oceans and liquids into which the poem’s icons dissolve continually shift the reader from place to place around the (largely non-European) world and render these places themselves sites of truth construction. The “ondas . . . [del] Nilo” from which the reader reconstitutes the Virgin’s hair place this “seeing” reader in Northern Africa; the “mares rojos” from which the reader recomposes the Virgin’s cheeks place the reader in the Middle East; the Potosí “licor” from which the reader creates the milk that runs through the veins of the Virgin’s breasts places the reader in South America; the “Minervan columns-to-Indies” voyage from which the reader recreates Ignatius’s studies in Paris places the reader along the transatlantic circuit traveled by Columbus. As the poem’s icons set the reader to constructing their reality or truth from different locations around the continents colonized by Early Modern Europe, they remind the reader that truth construction is not exclusive to Europe. Truth determining goes on all across the colonizing and colonized worlds.

The effect of this aquatic de/dis-loca[liza]tion, I believe, reveals a level of border-thinking in Domínguez Camargo that has previously gone unrecognized. On one level, Domínguez Camargo himself

perpetuates the illusion of the availability for objective knowing of the colonial world by depicting Amerindians within his poem as fixed in a temporal past and at a geographical distance from himself. Though Domínguez Camargo resided for years in their villages in the viceroyalty of New Granada, the Amerindians who figure in his poem are not the Muisca or Chibcha peoples among whom he lived, but the ancient "Inca monarchs" and "august [Inca] Coyas" from the pre-Conquest era and from the viceroyalty of Peru. They remain fixed at an unambiguous remove from his (ostensibly) independent knowing, writing self. Yet at the same time, Domínguez Camargo's icons demand that readers "viewing" this poem continually re-constitute and fix the objects of his icons within his ever-shifting watery flow. This reminds the reader of the artificiality of any illusion that objects simply are fixed, are "there" — that they function as a standing reserve or universal truth independent of a subject who sees from a particular perspective in a particular context and under a particular circumstance. Simultaneously affecting objectivity while calling attention to seeing's/knowing's inherent subjectivity, then, Domínguez Camargo illustrates the multi-positional locus of enunciation of an enclave of Creole writers that struggled against its own marginalization within the *república de españoles* by placing themselves above or on the border between European and Amerindian views of the world. Over against a myth of European rationality that at times barred Creoles from positions of power in the colonial hierarchy on account of their birth in the Indies and presumed inferior rationality, Domínguez Camargo demonstrates a mastery of European training and education as well as a skepticism of it, together with an openness to other epistemologies.

#### *Nature Icons and Christian Providentialism*

A second large category of visual icons in the *Poema heroico* further illuminates this border position by opposing another scopic regime that nurtured the ideology of Occidentalism. Along with images of religious figures and objects, another broad category of icons that decorates Domínguez Camargo's poetic monument to Loyola are images or likenesses of nature, images so beautifully elaborated that

some have considered them, and not the poem's religious material, "el mayor atractivo del *Poema heroico*" (Mora 61). Some of these icons depict the zoological, as in the passage where the poet describes wildlife in the outskirts of Loyola's cave in the mountain of Monserrat.

Las zarzas y los riscos enmaraña,  
y desde centro igual las redes tiende  
con lazos, más que hilos, el araña,  
y hurtada un tanto, en su retiro atiende  
la simple mosca, a quien su vuelo engaña,  
y mal entre sus nudos se defiende  
cuando, sacre, la embiste y aprisiona  
en una y otra, que le implica, zona.

En el abrigo duerme de la grama,  
melena del arroyo fugitivo,  
la querelosa rana; y de su cama,  
presa en el diente despertó, nocivo,  
del que en sus venas tósigos derrama  
serpiente, en sus rüinas tan altivo,  
que grifa la cerviz, torvos los ojos,  
que le sobran ostenta los enojos.

Al pedernal se tuerce menos rudo  
el serpiente a dormir; y ya dormido,  
de las hormigas se desata mudo  
el escuadrón; y en cuernos dividido  
le imprime el diente cada cual agudo,  
y aun antes que dispierto, así embestido  
por cuanta escama falseó, se advierte  
que sus muertes abrevia con su muerte.

(Book 2, canto 4, stanzas 114-16, 139)

The minute details and vivid delineations of the tiny creatures we see in these stanzas—a spider capturing a fly; a snake devouring a frog; ants removing the remains—resemble the kinds of miniatures that became popular with the scientific advances of the Renaissance. Other icons focus on the botanical, such as in the poet's description of a garden that tries to seduce one of Ignatius's companions into its "Argel (i.e. jail) de Flora":

Hojosa imán, la rosa descollada  
 prende su corazón en sus abrojos  
 cuando, purpúrea cuna regalada,  
 mece las niñas de sus tiernos ojos,  
 al tiempo que, del aire retozada,  
 en los halagos de su seno rojos,  
 en blandos a la vista da rubies  
 mullido lecho, en copos carmesíes. [. . .]

De su olorosa aljaba las mosquetas  
 con arpones de ámbar, a su aliento  
 flechando están suavísimas saetas  
 en el arco diáfano del viento;  
 fragantes los jazmines son cometas  
 que predominan en el pecho atento  
 del joven, que a su influjo dio, süave  
 de sus potencias la rendida llave.

El clavel, laberinto escrupuloso,  
 que nasa al aire se intimó teñida,  
 en el livor del tiro más precioso,  
 a la vista del joven advertida,  
 volumen se le enreda sinüoso,  
 en que se pierde dubio, y la salida  
 en sus hilos le ofrece; y siempre incierta,  
 a volverse a sus párpados no acierta.

(Book 5, canto 4, stanzas 104, 106-07, 343)

The poem's anthropomorphization of the plants into actors that try to seduce the ascetic disciple—the rose capturing his heart in its brambles, the rosehip shooting him with fragrant little darts, the ivy snaring him with its multiple arms—draw attention to their unique features as plants. A number of other images of nature depict flora and fauna not just as plants and animals but also as foods on a table, a genre known as the *naturaleza muerta* or *bodegón*. In one passage, the poet describes the opulent banquet of animals from earth, sea and air laid in celebration of Ignatius's baptism: a spread of "platos [de] tan rara suma, / que al paladar su copia nunca vista / nuevas Indias de gula le conquista" (Book 1, canto 1, stanza 58, 53). In another, he describes a rustic banquet of fruits of the sea served to Ignatius by two fishermen, netted prizes that "h[acen] . . . teatro dulce [de] la prolija mesa" (Book 3, canto 2, stanza 64, 189). In another, he describes

a rustic dinner given to him by an elderly laborer, a dinner that includes, among other dishes, “el blando seno [de] la parda garza . . . a quien este mi patrio Magdalena [a river that runs through Colombia] da . . . oro a la cuna [y] espuma al nido” (Book 4, canto 3, stanza 108, 264).

As in the case of the *Poema heroico's* religious icons, these nature icons draw heavily on Peninsular models and uphold Counter-Reformation forms of visual attention. In northern Europe, the scientific and religious upheavals of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries produced a move toward nature representation as an independent genre. Painters whose orthodox view of the world had been shaken attempted to achieve a greater realism by abandoning the orthodox medieval preference for timeless, placeless, gold-backgrounded icons of saints and increasingly incorporating detailed landscapes with concrete references to time and place (Friedländer 20, 156). Spain saw an analogous movement towards nature representation as an independent genre not in painting, but in poetry. Poets likewise discarded the medieval poetic tendency to minimize nature and included ever more imaginative descriptions of nature and the natural world. Within Counterreformation hagiographic poems, these nature descriptions served as a stage for the saint: they emphasized the saint's virtue by depicting nature as a test of moral fiber, and they served as a testament to God's own greatness: to the wondrous beauty and diversity of His creation (Woods 57). The *Poema heroico's* highly detailed and geographically-specific nature icons echo this hagiographic poetry's use of nature to set ecclesiastical figures into a particular time and place and to inspire empathy and admiration in the viewer.

However, in these icons too, there is a particular stylistic idiosyncrasy that separates them from the majority of other such icons of the time. Like Dutch landscape paintings and the Spanish nature poems that followed, Domínguez Camargo's icons show a tremendous formal density: they swamp the religious narrative with their pompous processions, proliferating chains of subthemes, morphosyntactic concentration, and shining lexicon. Yet unlike Dutch paintings and Spanish hagiographic poems, the excessive accumulation of Domínguez Camargo's nature icons shows a constant

violence that, Mora Valcárcel notes, involves a repeated “tránsito de la vida a la muerte . . . tránsito de un estado a otro estado” (74). For example, in the zoological description of the outskirts of the cave of Monserrat, the animals are each portrayed in some phase of the act of attacking and killing one another: the spider, hidden in its web, tricks the fly and imprisons it in its knots; the snake devours the sleeping frog.<sup>11</sup> In the botanical description of the garden that seduces Ignatius’s disciple and in an earlier still life in Book 2, stanzas 174-84, the plants are depicted as anthropomorphic entrappers of humans (the rosehip firing its amber harpoons; the ivy entangling him in its threads) or attackers of other plants (the garlic growling at the escarole with its burnished “dientes”; the lettuce stabbing the cucumber—“muy picado”—with its sword-like leaves). In the *Poema heroico*’s numerous *bodegones*, the ostensibly quiescent “foods” that lie on the table are depicted as valiant warriors and as victims of cruel executions: the fish charge the knotted walls of the fishermen’s nets only to end up, along with the lobsters on the table, “da[ndo] . . . al paladar suavísimas ruinas.”<sup>12</sup> Like horrifying cinematic montages, these descriptions fragment their beautiful subject matter into clips of mutilation and death which the reader must continually reconstruct and restore to life to make sense of them as pictures of praise of God’s wondrous bounty.

As in the case of the aquatic imagery of Domínguez Camargo’s religious icons, this violence in his nature icons has inspired relatively little critical discussion. Domínguez Matito, in one of the few theoretical considerations of this topic, suggests that this “dinamismo violento” may reflect a colonial subtext in Domínguez Camargo’s *imitatio*: that it may be explained by “el entorno vital y los presupuestos culturales desde los que escribía Camargo como sujeto colonial barroco” (123). Yet here too, critical theory on optics and scopic regimes of modernity reveals an additional significance. Alongside Cartesian perspectivalism, a second scopic regime that arose during the Early Modern era and that exhibited a certain fit with the ideology of colonialism was the Dutch art of describing, which included expansive vistas of small objects spread across a flat canvas with careful illumination of their material surfaces, textures and colors (Fig. 3). A model that focused not on the place of an object within a legible,



Fig. 3: Willem Claesz Heda  
(*Still Life*, 1651)

Furst Liechtensteinsche Gemäldegalerie

framed geometric space from a God's-eye point of view but rather on the attributes of the object's material surfaces and its material solidity, the Dutch art of describing valorized the materiality of worlds of small objects, much as Europe's emerging market economy fetishized the materiality of world commodities recently brought to Europe by the opening of new trade routes (Jay 122). Baroque art's competing representation of scenes of great material plenitude contrasts with the Dutch art of describing by overfilling space with objects of sensual and ornamental purpose and by wrapping these objects not in light, but in shadows, indecipherability, distortions, and *vanitas* (Fig. 4). This *horror vacui*, which betrays, in its very compulsion to fill all available space, a fear ("horror") of void ("vacui"), suggests, for its part, the futility of earthly things and human certainties, the emptiness of material accumulation and of humanly conceived metaphysical constructs (Spadaccini and Martín-Estudillo xxix).





Fig. 4: El Greco  
*El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (1588)  
 Iglesia de Santo Tomé, Toledo

The burden that the *Poema heroico's* nature icons place on the viewer to stay their move towards death and void takes up this Baroque emphasis on the emptiness of material wealth. It reminds readers of their own role in (re)constructing the world as something more or other than what it actually is. Yet it also goes beyond critique of materialism per se to question the meaning given to material wealth specifically as derived from America. For as the reader attempts to deny the death implicit in the *horror vacui* of the *Poema heroico's* icons, the repeated insistence of the poem on these icons as theaters of abundance from or like the Indies leads the reader to rethink the European myths that made sense of Spanish accumulation of American material goods as a divine reward for progress towards God's plan for a universal Christian monarchy. In various *bodegones*, the wealth of slaughtered, bloodied fruits of land and sea laid before the courtly saint is a "teatro de la mesa" (Book 1, canto 1, stanza 62, 54; Book 3,

canto 2, stanza 64, 189). Items in this theater— the “ave. . .[d]el occidente. . .del Inca diadema” in the baptism banquet (Book 1, canto 1, stanza 54, 52); the “parda garza. . .[de] este mi patrio Magdaleno” in the laborer’s banquet (Book 4, canto 3, stanza 108, 264)— come to this theater-table from the Indies. The spectacle of this bounty, furthermore, is likened explicitly to a “nuevas Indias de gula” (Book 1, canto 1, stanzas 58, 53). By forcing the reader to grapple with the death and violence specifically of wealth such as that amassed in the American “theater,” the poem’s icons remind the reader of the emptiness of the myth that would interpret this opulence as a God-given gift to Spain for progress toward His divine plan. Their particular denial of void forces the poem’s readers to re-view the spoils of the Conquest of New Granada for what they really were: the fruit of war, conflict and aggression.

This violence-ridden *horror vacui*, then, further illuminates the epistemological border position from which Domínguez Camargo writes. On one level, many of the same metaphors that critics such as Lezama Lima cite as evidence of the poet’s proto-nationalism repeat conventional stereotypes of America that nurtured the ideology of Conquest. Descriptions such as the Virgin’s breasts as “Potosís” (mountains/fountains of silver) that shoot “licor” (silver/milk/sustenance) into baby Jesus’s mouth, for example, reinforce the notion of America as a fountain of wealth that willingly sustains God’s human representatives (the Catholic monarch and the *república de españoles*) on earth (in Europe or the Americas). Yet on another level, Domínguez Camargo’s nature icons demand that the reader continually deny or hold at bay the death and instability revealed in their bounty—a reminder to the reader of the artificiality of the providential myth that these (American) objects (plants, animals, people) are simply “there” for Europe as a prize from God—that they are not continually wrested from life by acts of calculated and bloody conflict. Simultaneously participating in this myth while calling attention to its instability, that is, Domínguez Camargo once again illustrates the epistemological privilege and multi-positional locus of enunciation assumed by Creole writers who enjoy a viewpoint from the border between Europe and America. Faced with a narrative of history that sometimes barred Creoles themselves from the fruits of their fathers’

labor for lack of access to court, Creoles demonstrate an alternative access derived of their full comprehension of European understandings of the world, together with an American knowledge and experience that rendered them capable of identifying the delusions on which this understanding rested.

In the icons we have just analyzed, Domínguez Camargo reveals an epistemological in-betweenness that belies a purely Spanish heritage. Although schooled in the scientific-rational and Christian-providential perceptions of the world that sustained Occidental imperialism, Domínguez Camargo embellishes his highly European monument to the founder of the Jesuit Order with ekphrastic icons that challenge the scopic regimes of modernity that have sustained these myths in the cultural realm. Counter to the Cartesian truth-determining model of seeing as the activity of a single kind of viewer in a single location, he poses an epistemological model that includes the activity of multiple viewers on both sides of the Atlantic. Counter to a model that fetishizes objects and obscures the conditions of their procurement, Domínguez Camargo offers a model that exposes the instability not only of material wealth but also of the myths that justified its violent accumulation. Though the *Poema's* icons do not constitute first-hand testimony that reveals an authentic Amerindian epistemology, they nevertheless reveal what Walter Mignolo has described as "moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks" (23).

Interrogating the ideological border position suggested by these ekphrastic icons allows us to re-evaluate current understandings of Colonial Spanish America's articulation to Occidental modernity. It illustrates a struggle for power and authority among Creoles that distinguished colonial Spanish American imperial domination and resistance from that of regions with different patterns of colonization and different colonial elites. It also suggests potential cross-currents for modern-day Spanish American scholars (not to mention North American scholars of Spanish America) who currently reside in the metropolis as an "enclave asediado" in a world that privileges subjects of knowledge and sources of authority other than Spanish America. Much like seventeenth-century Creoles, Grínor Rojo has pointed out, these intellectual exiles (voluntary, in many cases, involuntary in a

few) seek cultural authority by establishing “un *locus* de enunciación por encima de la oposición centro/periferia. . . hac[iendo] así de una circunstancia de menoscabo el *plus* que les permit[e] decir lo que dicen desde una zona blanca” (Rojo 14). This stance, Domínguez Camargo’s poem shows, does not inevitably go hand in hand with a clear validation of local knowledges as equal in rank with the knowledge produced by Western scholars. It does, however, provide a useful reminder of the myths that condition our understanding of reality. And if these texts illuminate the difficulties of speaking from a critical “zona blanca,” they also remind us of the difficulties of seeing from a “zona franca”—of seeing in ways that avoid the demands and customs imposed by modern scopic regimes that condition the way we see, think and dream.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mabel Moraña and Carlos Jáuregui's recent collection of essays, *Revisiting the Colonial Question in Latin America* (2008), provides a useful overview of this critical debate. On the strengths and deficiencies of Anglophone post-colonial scholarship for Latin America, see also Mignolo, Bolaños and Verdesio, and Mazzotti (*Agencias criollas*).

<sup>2</sup>The *Poema heroico* was begun in 1630 and remained unfinished upon the author's death. For my analysis of the text, I will use Meo Zilio's 1986 edition of the poem. Any translations not otherwise indicated are my own.

<sup>3</sup>See, among others, Beverley ("*Máscaras*," *Una modernidad*), Bolaños and Verdesio, Jáuregui, and Moraña and Jáuregui.

<sup>4</sup>A more general term for such images is simply *ekphrasis*. However, since the term *ekphrasis* may refer as well to many other ways of referencing visual art in writing besides offering a likeness of it, I use the term in the sense of an *icon* (meaning likeness, image, or figure) for the sake of clarity. My focus on icons in the *Poema heroico* is inspired, in part, by Walter Mignolo's discussion of the narrative in images by Amerindian Guaman Poma in *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* as an example of border thinking, and of Mignolo's contention that "To be or feel in between . . . was possible in the mouth of an Amerindian, not of a Spaniard" (Mignolo x).

<sup>5</sup>Some have argued that Latin America was never in fact colonized since Latin American territories were annexed to Spain as additional kingdoms. Ruth Hill, for example, has called for a historical/material analysis of the positional hybridity (double consciousness and beyond) of viceregal subjects that moves beyond "theories of colonial and postcolonial discourses as they are presently constituted" (15). However, because the word "colony" is broadly defined as a type of sociopolitical organization that rests on the opposition between an "alien ruler" and the inhabitants of a geographically remote "possession" (Osterhammel 10)—as an organization that involves "forthright exploitation of an appropriated culture's resources and labor combined with systematic interference in its capacity to organize its dispensations of power" (McClintock 295)—, scholars continue to discuss the conquest and exploitation of America's local population by Spain as a form of colonization and I will discuss Domínguez Camargo's *Poema heroico* as a colonial text.

<sup>6</sup>Upon departure from the Order, Domínguez Camargo took a position as a secular cleric in the small Indian village of Gachetá. From Gachetá, he moved to Tocancipá, to Paipa, and then to Turmequé (Meo Zilio xiv-xv). Two years before his death in 1659, again for reasons unknown, he was unexpectedly reinstated into the Company.

<sup>7</sup>Those who have acknowledged or argued for the *Poema's* peninsularism in some measure include Diego, Carilla, Mora Valcárcel, Osuna, Webster

Bulatkin, Varela, and Torres Quintero. Those who identify an incipient *americanismo* in the *Poema*—often as a mode of political challenge that made way for national liberation in the nineteenth century—include Sabat de Rivers (“Interpretación,” “El Barroco”), Lezama Lima, Gimbernat de González (“En el espacio”), Domínguez Matito, and Torres.

<sup>8</sup>See studies by Sabat de Rivers (“Lírica”), Gimbernat de González (“En el espacio,” “Apeles,” “La expresión”), Bernucci, and Durán and Serrano.

<sup>9</sup>Hernando Domínguez Camargo himself never visited Spain or saw some of the places and objects he describes. He bases his descriptions of them on readings from the Jesuit tradition of writings on the life of Loyola, such as Padre Eusebio Nieremberg’s *Vida de San Ignacio de Loyola fundador de la Compañía de Jesús* (1631).

<sup>10</sup>Martin Jay describes three main visual subcultures or historically defined ways of seeing in the modern era: Cartesian perspectivalism, a Seventeenth-century Dutch Art of Describing (theorized in works by Svetlana Alpers), and a Baroque Model of vision (theorized by Christine Buci-Glucksmann).

<sup>11</sup>Domínguez Camargo’s careful attention to animals, in general, may be linked to the popularity of emblematic literature among the Jesuits. See Gimbernat de González (“El nieto”) and Pinillos for discussions of some of the emblematic motifs in the *Poema heroico*.

<sup>12</sup>“Coronadas morrión, vistiendo escudos, / dorando mallas, argentando golos, / dardos vibrando duramente crudos, / esgrimiendo cuchillas en las colas, / las murallas violando de los nudos, / Belona de la espuma y de las olas, / langostas en la mesa dan, marinas, / al paladar suavísimas ruinas” (Book 3, canto 2, stanza 67, 190).