

# No Gods, No Countries, No Kings, No Masters. From the New World to the World Anew – Carlos Grassa Toro

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(Do not confuse topics with subjects.)

“How many volumes would be needed to include only the terms with which we would identify the different collections of phenomena, if these were known?”

Source. Diderot: *On the Interpretation of Nature*. 1753-1754.

Sources. Columbus, Christopher. Diaries. 1492-1493. Colón, Fernando: *Historia del Almirante don Cristóbal Colón* (History of Admiral Christopher Columbus).

(Edition date and place are not specified for the sources. The date of writing is unspecified. Let the reader discover the different editions.)

Source. Pané, Ramón: *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (Narration about the Antiquities of the Indians). 1498.

## Case study 5: Inventing America

Case posed by Peter Bichsel, in “America Does Not Exist”, *Kindergeschichte* (Child’s Play).

Topics: Reality, writing, power, conquest, science, knowledge, painting, book, truth, nature, journey, theology, men, oblivion, stain, source.

Hypothesis: All that is written exists.

Hypothesis: What exists is written.

It is impossible to write everything, writing is a choice, reality is a choice.

America already existed before Columbus began his navigation. Columbus had read in *Imago mundi* by Pierre d’Ailly, *Natural History* by Plinio, *Historia rerum ubique gestarum locorumque descriptio* by Eneas Silvio and *Voyages* by Marco Polo how the land to which he had decided to travel would be; that is why when he reached the first island, he only had to recognise it and not discover it, as he repeatedly, and wrongly, insisted.

Before leaving, Columbus knew he would reach India, specifically the area where the ancient ones had located the biblical Garden of Eden. And there he arrived. Columbus was a man of faith. Reality did not make him change his opinion, simply because reality was what he wrote in his diary. Columbus went in search of Wonderland and found it in his first trip. Little did he care that which he faced, and if anything interested him, it belonged to the mineral or vegetable kingdom. The Admiral was not about to make the effort of getting to know the *Indians*, not even recognised that they had a tongue in which they could communicate with precision, but he had more than enough intelligence, or cunning, to know that this knowledge was part of the conquest, and he delegated it on a Franciscan monk called Ramón Pané.

The monk travelled two years along the New World, accompanied by interpreters and, patiently, went about compiling an Indian vocabulary. He wrote what the Indians told him. The information Pané contributes is not very relevant, but his procedure indicates the path towards knowledge: you must travel, live in the place you want to study, mingle with its population, learn their language.

Pané is not yet an ethnographer, much less a naturalist, but he is recognised as a pioneer in the discovery, understood as knowledge of America. Pané is placed at the beginning of a chain that leads us to Humboldt, and maybe up to Nuria Rodríguez.

In these first years of the Conquest (end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries), the New World was what the writers wanted it to be: they supplied the only information to be had and the rest of humanity had the choice of believing or not. Besides, it was written information and, huge novelty, published thanks to the press. In those days, writing and even more, editing, had already substituted oral transmission as a reliable model. Writing was confused with truth and truth with reality.

Columbus wrote, Pané wrote, Gonzalo Fernández de Ojeda, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Fray Diego Durán, Francisco Hernández, Bartolomé Álvarez, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, Josef de Acosta and tens, hundreds of other men (masculine) wrote during the Conquest of America. They wrote about everything and at all times.

Faced by a practice as unusual and colossal, in the history of humanity, one must pose the same questions that serve us to analyse the shortest of test: for what? what? how? when? where? for whom? And on this occasion it is necessary to invert the order of the answers.

For whom do they write? Pané worked (wrote) for Columbus; Columbus worked for the Catholic King and Queen; the Catholic King and Queen for the Pope and he for God. This hierarchy is explicit (in writing) from the first moment, when Pope Alexander VI signs the first bills authorising the Conquest to the king and queen of Spain.

God does not read, he needs not; when Sahagún or Acosta write, God already knows what they will write; even more, he decided in his time (eternity) the existence of Sahagún and Acosta. The pope reads: he wants to tally the new Christians. Besides, he wants them to be Catholics. The king and queen read (or are read to): the Catholics, Charles I, Philip II read because they want to control everything that happens thousands of kilometres away in a land that belongs to them, they want to know how much gold is extracted from their mines; what plants are edible or medicinal; who among the conquerors will be the next traitor to the crown; where the fountain of eternal youth springs.

The writers of the Conquest write to the greater glory of God, and for the greater power of their kings and their country. Their priority is to use writing as a conquering weapon.

Where do they write? *In situ*, in a place, a geography, and ecosystem, a landscape, of which they knew nothing until the day they arrived and that changed each moment as the conquest advanced and they advanced.

When do they write? At all times, while they travel on foot, on horseback, in a canoe or carried on the back of an Indian; while they cured the ill, captured live parrots, put down mutinies on board, read the writers that precede them by a hand span or cook the meat

of any mammal; while they collect plants never before seen, traffic with slaves, offer mass, organise libraries or observe eclipses.

How do they write? In Spanish; exceptionally as is the case of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, in Náhuatl and Spanish. Some writings are accompanied by descriptive illustrations. The diary format dies with Columbus; soon come the accounts, natural histories, and moral stories or of other things, the chronicles. There is an intent to order, organise in hierarchies, classify realms of knowledge.

What do they write? Their experiences, what is lived, and they emphasise that they were there, that what they tell they have seen with their eyes, touched with their hands, heard with their ears, even smelled with their noses and tasted with their mouth. The information that their senses contributed, becomes the main topic.

They also write on the past of the peoples they conquer, from the information that the Indians themselves offer orally or through their writings teeming with images unknown in Europe which must be deciphered. Who said an image was the universal language?

Why do they write? The first aim is the creation of reality: they write, name, number to create a reality to be able to survive. This creation of reality soon is confused with the appropriation of reality and then writing becomes one more weapon of conquest, that favours, argues, legalises the physical and spiritual sacking of a continent and its population. To carry out this great conquering action knowledge is necessary. Far from the common place scorn for the other, the Spanish conquerors recognised the other and what is foreign. They recognise and want to know everything relative to the New World, everything because they want everything.

Source: Todorov, Tzvetan: *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre* (The Conquest of America and the Question of the Other).

The conquerors wanted knowledge to conquer.

Knowledge of what they considered good (salt, water, gold, pearls) served them to survive or to obtain wealth and power. The knowledge of what they considered bad (idolatry, cannibalism, sacrifices), was necessary to be able to combat and eradicate it.

The sheer size of the endeavour, one more, has bequeathed us with an amount of documents unheard of until that time.

The task of collecting information, analysing, comparing and converting it into knowledge can only be asked of who had the capacity of perception and communication, and obviously, talent for writing. There were not too many candidates, neither was there a lack of them, they were religious men, medical doctors, clerks, navigators, soldiers. Writing could be their main task. They could combine it with navigation, evangelisation, battle, administration or survival, as was the case of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca.

Here we will deal with some of the main characters, those who bequeathed extensive and pertinent knowledge from which humankind would feed from the beginning, or centuries later as is the case of those works that the governing powers considered, at the time, inconvenient, harmful, reprehensible and were never printed.

Source: Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar: *Naufraios y comentarios* (Shipwrecks and Commentaries). 1541-1555.

Pané was the first. I have already spoken of him.

Pané never got to write a book. His texts have come to us through quotes and copies made by Anglería, Las Casas, Hernando Colón.

In the prologue to *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias* (Summary of Natural History of the Indies) Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, emphasises how important the existence of a book is. Specially if the author has had first-hand knowledge “by sight of eyes” of that environment until then unknown: “Sacred, catholic, Ceasarean, royal majesty. What best preserves and sustains the works of nature in the memory of men are histories and the books in which they are written and those which, esteemed truer and more authentic because by *sight of eyes* the cautious understanding of the man who walked that world and wrote it, and said what he could see and understand of such matters”.

Fernández de Oviedo is one of the pioneers in the American narrative; he wants to reach a wider public and for that, chooses for the *Sumario* a manner of broadcasting that differs from the narratives of old and directs itself toward a Renaissance writing with more scientific features: the order in which topics are classified, concision in their description and supported by images of reference.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, we have already said, is an exceptional case: his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of Things of the New Spain) is a book that aims to englobe the total knowledge available on the Aztecs. When referring to these things he announces that the list of topics will be exhaustive, and it is.

Sahagún’s working method is exemplary: first he drafted a first memory of the subjects on which he was going to elaborate; then he gathered the important people of Tepepulco and asked for “able and experienced people with whom I could talk and who could explain what I ask”. He was introduced to a dozen elders and “up to four latins” (they spoke their native language, Spanish and Latin), who had studied in the school of Santa Cruz de Tlatiloco. From there, he begins to gather information: “All the things we conferred were given to me in paintings, which was the writing they used of old and

Source. Sahagún, Fray Bernardino de: *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain). 1558-1577.

the grammarians said them aloud in their language, and that declaration was written at the foot of the painting. I still have the originals. Also at that time I dictated a comment and the songs; which were written by the latins in that same town of Tepepulco”.

Besides the bilingual text and annotations made by Sahagún himself, the original codex included one thousand eight hundred and fifty five descriptive illustrations made by tlacullos, professional Aztec designers and painters.

Sahagún devoted forty years to writing his works, finishing it when he is 77. That same year, 1577, Philip II addresses the viceroy Martín Enriquez in a letter to forbid writing about the Indian superstitions. *Historia General de las cosas de Nueva España* is not published. The original codex, first in the hands of the papacy, is revealed in 1793. The first complete edition dates from the end of the twentieth century. Sahagún himself volunteered to censor the work and offer a very abridged version only in Spanish.

Francisco Hernández was the doctor of Philip II when, in 1570 he was ordered to travel to America to “write the history of the natural things of our Indies”. He reaches out to the archbishop of Veracruz, professors, chroniclers and with the Indians that collaborate on his expeditions: painters, doctors, herbalists, guides. He is a naturalist of the Renaissance advancing on a conquered landscape. He fulfilled his commission: thirty-eight books on plants and animals, that Philip II did not give to the press (power over writing). He did not resist writing a brief history of the Náhuatl culture: Mexicas, Tetzococanos, Tlaxcalteas, Chilultecas, in its last stage, the Aztecs: *Antigüedades de la Nueva España* (Antiquities of the New Spain).

Source. Hernández, Francisco *Antigüedades de la Nueva España* (Antiquities of New Spain). 1570-1577.

Hernández notes in the prologue a resistance on part of the Indians that the other writer ignored or silenced:

What was most difficult and turned me away from this work was that the rites of these people, so varied and inconstant, that hardly anything that was firm and continuous could be transmitted and this could hardly be pried from these men, because, or caring for themselves or hating us, they keep hidden what they know and researched, or because forgetting things of their elders (such is their rudeness and their disdain) they have nothing notable to tell.”

Francisco Hernández nails it: how reliable was the information that for years the Indians offered those who dominated them? Why should the Indians deliver information that would not give them a better life? Didn’t the Spanish have enough with the gold, that they also coveted their ancestral knowledge of nature?

When in 1764 Mutis asked King Charles III to publish the entire work of Hernández, he suggests that new pictures be commissioned “suited to the taste of the century”.

Hernández, travelled with his son Juan, the geographer Francisco Domínguez, indigenous painters, herbalists and bearers. The indigenous painters had their own way of representing that did not always coincide with Hernández’s interests who wanted true images.

Source. Durán, Fray Diego: *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme* (History of the Indies of New Spain and Islands of Solid Ground). 1570-1581.

Fray Diego Durán also used oral testimonies and makes them explicit, but gives the most importance to the Indian's books, that the Spanish would insist in calling paintings; for this from the prologue of *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de Tierra Firme* manifests his indignation: "They did wrong many of them who with great zeal but not much prudence, burnt and destroyed in the beginning all the paintings of antiquities they had, since they left us so in the dark, and before our very eyes idolatry is practised and we do not understand them."

Among those with "great zeal" was the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa who, as he collected information in Yucatán, physically destroyed the sources and sometimes their owners as well. Fire could serve both purposes.

Durán is not satisfied with one version, he seeks, questions, compares sources and finally keeps the one which satisfy him most. The concept of truth begins to change.

Source. Landa, Diego de: *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (Narration of Things of Yucatán). 1556.

Bartolomé Álvarez, a priest who spoke Spanish, Latin, Quechua and Aimara, understands clearly that that he writes to remedy what he believes are the poor results of fifty years of evangelisation. Nearly a hundred years later, "About the Customs and Conversion of the Indians of Peru", written by Álvarez coincides with the intentions of Pané. The difference being that now there is a library of the Conquest, and each new book not only has to face reality, but also with the rest of the books. For this, with explicit brazenness, Bartolomé Álvarez sends the Jesuit Josef de Acosta the following message:

Source. *De las costumbres y conversión de los indios del Perú*. (About the Customs and Conversion of the Indians of Peru). 1587-1588.

"I doubt if Father Acosta's story will touch upon what I speak of about the holy sacraments because he has that religion (the Jesuits), an opinion totally contrary to all the ecclesiastic state residing in this kingdom. And because his opinion, and that of many, is to speak well of the Indians and mine is to speak ill of them, it seems I know that I will not find anyone to favour me, if the truth I deal with does not favour me; in which I trust because all the bad things that I tell of the Indians are to make them visible, and to study how they can be brought to know the goodness in which they can be saved."

Writing against writing: Fierce struggle to impose their own truth.

Josef de Acosta had not yet published *Historia Moral y Natural de las Indias* when Bartolomé Álvarez charged against his work, which makes us think once more in a community of knowledge.

Source: Acosta, Josef de: *Historia Moral y Natural de las Indias* (Moral and Natural History of the Indies). 1591.

Josef de Acosta is a Jesuit. He represents the end of an era and the beginning of another. The Renaissance has left, its imprint, whereas his predecessors believe with blind faith in the truth. A relativism that announces another way of understanding and describing knowledge. The notion of research and progress appears. A hundred years have passed since Columbus wrote the first lines of his diary; the world has changed. Acosta knows it and not only this. They also have changed: it begins to be difficult to include people such as Josef de Acosta as a conqueror. He is a scholar: "Different authors have written different books and narrations on the New World and the West Indies. They relate news on the new and strange things discovered in those places, and of deeds and happenings of the Spanish who had conquered and populated them. Moreover, up to now I have not seen any author that tries to declare the causes and reasons of these novelties and oddities of nature, nor to discourse and inquiry on this part; neither a book have I found a book whose content be the deeds and history of the very Indians, antique and natural inhabitants of the new orb".

Acosta wants to learn the causes, the reasons beyond the narrative. A new phase of knowledge begins, explanation follows biased inventory. There is much to be done and Acosta will do it: "Thus, although the New World is no longer new but old as much has been said and written, I still think that in some way this story could be held as new: precisely because it is history and in part philosophy, and because they are not only works on nature but also of free will, that are the deeds and customs of men. This is why I have thought of giving the name of *Historia Natural y Moral de Indias*, trying to embrace with this both things."

What is natural and what is moral together: we approach the notion of the system, so dear to Humboldt. Writing on the world will change. We go towards modernity. The *Encyclopédie* will not appear yet, but the bases are being established. There is no longer a New World: the possibility of writing about the New World begins.

The Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada began in 1783 under José Celestino Mutis, a priest at the service of king Charles III. Mutis proposes, criticises, confronts the power; what it means to be a free spirit is sensed. Mutis also writes, a diary among other things: "Everything needs to be said, meditated and written: but always suspending judgement until a competent number of observations and experiments confirm the truth or falsehood of such stories. America, more than any other part of the world, is full of such credulities. The reason for this is easy to deduct since it is not a cultivated nation nor absolutely barbarian."

On July 16 1799 Humboldt arrives to the American coast. In 1801 he meets Mutis in Bogotá; Bonpland is always present.

Humboldt works for no king, noble or powerful man. He finances his own expeditions, collections and editions with his own money. He does not erect a flag while he advances through unknown lands and waters. He does not thank God for the encounters, discoveries, findings, nor does he remember him when he contemplates beauty, and does not even ask to come out alive from dangerous situations. Humboldt does not conquer, nor subdue, nor sack: he only wants to learn and broadcast the knowledge. Humboldt inaugurates modernity, thought that was lay, scientific, universal. Where his predecessors, who he had read and knew well, made inventories, described and, in the best of cases, admired, Humboldt is capable of contemplating, of melting in, of recognising himself as a part of nature, an element in a system that deserves, as a whole his complete respect, and why not say it: love.

Nuria Rodríguez had from where to choose and has chosen Humboldt. She has renounced truth.

She could have written and has preferred to read and has passed this time collecting, could have written and has painted, has stained her hands: this gesture that stood in the beginning of all and that is in danger of being forgotten.

Nuria Rodríguez could have written and has written. What has she written? What reality has she chosen? All journeys begin with a question, even with two.

Humboldt fulfilled Diderot's wish on the over interpretation of nature: "Observation does not require more than the common use of the senses, experience demands continuous expense. It would be desired that the nobles would add this manner of ruining themselves to all the other less honourable ones they have imagined." 1753-1754.

Source: Rodríguez, Nuria: *La maleta de Humboldt: una arqueología de la modernidad* (Humboldt's Suitcase: Archaeology of Modernity) Unpublished document. 2016-2019.

This last note does not refer to the text since it is finished; it is reading of the exhibition Humboldt System. Friedrich Schiller in his *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* "The elegiac seeks nature but seeks it in what is beautiful, not only in what is pleasant, in accord with the ideas, not only in his indulgence with need" 1795-1796.

[1] Alexander von Humboldt (1805-1809) *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803 et 1804: Plantes équinoxiales* / par Al. de Humboldt et A. Bonpland; rédigé par Alexandre de Humboldt. Paris: F. Schoell. (Digital image courtesy of Zentralbibliothek zürich, NF 35 I F, [http:// dx.doi.org/10.3931 /e-rara-30036](http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-30036))



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[2] José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias: en que se tratan las cosas notables del cielo y elementos, metales, plantas y animales dellas y los ritos y ceremonias, leyes y gouierno y guerras de los Indios*. Madrid, casa de Alonso Martin, 1608. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València

[3] *Atlas de historia natural* (manuscript). [Spain], [between 1575 and 1625]. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València