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Lope de Aguirre, the Tyrant, and the Prince: Convergence and Divergence in Postcolonial Collective Memory

Jennifer Estava Davis

In Latin America, collective remembering is shaped by stories of colonizers whose voracious ambitions left an indelible mark on the landscape and its people. This essay examines a set of narratives about a legendary colonizer, Lope de Aguirre, that continue to be invoked in the collective imagination on the island of Margarita, in Venezuela. Drawing on Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory and Bakhtin's work on cultural discourse, this analysis shows that on the one hand, the narratives converge to support official records of Aguirre as an archetype of colonial brutality. Yet on the other, alternate versions of the stories reveal a more discordant picture, one that complicates Aguirre's character and reevaluates his influence on the island and in the wider context of Latin America.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Postcolonial Latin America; Symbolic Convergence; Cultural Discourse; Heteroglossia

Retelling History in Postcolonial Latin American

While historical narratives have traditionally been concerned with the accurate and objective recounting of the past, modern historians and other scholars interested in collective memory studies have opened up for question the accuracy and objectivity of so-called “official” or authoritative historical narratives. These scholars generally claim that historical accounts are unavoidably produced within particular social and cultural contexts, and therefore not only vary according to different perspectives, but usually coincide with and depend upon the exigencies of the present. The authority to write history is, historian William Cronon (1992) states, a major burden for modern historians. Historians, he says, “in the act of separating story from

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non-story . . . wield the most powerful yet dangerous tool of the narrative form” (p. 1347). Cronon terms this the “rhetorical razor” that “defines [what is] included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered” (p. 1349). This “razor” can, in effect, be used to “cut-and-paste” history, producing a bricolage-like narrative that contains only the relevant, useful bits of the past. But what processes determine these “relevant bits”? Cronon contends that historical narrative exerts its greatest power by glossing over inconsistencies that undermine its coherence. That is, it sanctions specific “bits” at the expense of, and while suppressing, others (p. 1350). The past, then, is molded from those “bits” that support and promote current structures of power. The bits are deployed in different ways, depending on how they align with circumstances in the present. Consequently, only the portions of the past that are of particular currency are reassembled and rearticulated as history.

David Lowenthal (1985) concurs that in the process of collective remembering, we “contrive missing continuities, emphasize or invent ancestral prerogatives and achievements, minimize or forget defeat and ignominy” (p. xxiv). Similarly, Michael Kammen (1993) claims that the past is used to reconstruct memory “with the needs of contemporary culture in mind—manipulating the past in order to mold the present” (p. 3). Radstone and Schwarz (2010) agree that “memory is active, forging its pasts to serve present interests” (p. 4). Elsewhere, Radstone (2005) notes that while memory challenges history’s linear flow, it is important to understand that the relationship between what we remember and how that is woven into the broader social arena involves “questions of broad social forces and power relations” (p. 139). How cultures write, rewrite, and narrate the past, then, is an ongoing, changing process that attends to, and is contingent upon, present social and ideological projects.

Latin America, a region notorious for political unrest and social turmoil, makes obvious the ambiguities involved in reproducing the past. It also acts as a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1992) where narratives of colonial conquest are used to mediate present visions of history. As Jeff Browitt (2009) notes, Latin America retains a “colonial logic [that] . . . is still alive and well, both as real material process and as unconscious sedimented ideology underpinning political and cultural imaginaries” (p. 255). The influence of this colonial logic, of the ways in which colonial narratives shape historical and contemporary views of the past, is articulated in a number of noteworthy studies. Mary Louise Pratt’s (1992) seminal work makes evident the ways in which indigenous Latin American cultures appropriate colonial narratives as a strategy of representation. Other studies that conceptualize how colonial texts shape present-day notions of collective memory in Latin America include, among others, the work of Leopoldo Zea (1994) and Walter Dignolo (2000), whose efforts have helped frame discussions of current Western modes of epistemological colonization in Latin American scholarship. Beverly, Oviedo and Aronna’s (1995) collection of essays about postmodernity, and Moraña, Dussel and Járegui’s (2008) volume on postcolonial debate in Latin America further exemplify current research in this area. Other institutional efforts to investigate and theorize Latin American postcoloniality

include *Sincronía* (1996–2011), an electronic journal from the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, the Rómulo Gallegos Center for Latin American Studies in Venezuela (CELARG) and the Center for Latino, Latin American, and Caribbean Studies (2012) at the University at Albany, New York.

This essay addresses a set of narratives that evince the dynamic tensions inherent both in retelling the past and in shaping collective memory in Latin America. The analysis focuses on stories of Lope de Aguirre, a prominent figure in the history of the island of Margarita, in Venezuela, known locally as “El Tirano” [The Tyrant]. Although Aguirre is regarded throughout Latin America as a singularly ruthless and tyrannical conquistador, his stories and symbolism remain alive in interesting ways. Aguirre has inspired a myriad of writers in Latin America, and Venezuela is no exception with the novels of well-known national writers like Arturo Uslar Pietri (1947/1992), Casto Fulgencio López (1953) and Miguel Otero Silva (1979) fictionalizing his story. Eduardo Casanova (2008), a contemporary Venezuelan author, writes of the local attraction to Aguirre:

One of the characters that has fascinated those who look to the shadows and torches of our region is Lope de Aguirre. He inspired Gerbasi... Miguel Otero Silva... Casto Fulgencio López... Arturo Uslar Pietri..., and the popular imagination finds him in ghostly wildfires that appear in the darkness.

Uslar Pietri, López, and Otero Silva’s texts are key narratives in this analysis, as they have captured the imagination of twentieth-century popular culture in Venezuela and given contour to the narrative in Margarita. In addition to these nationally recognized works, I also examined all the written texts that were available about Aguirre in the two largest libraries on the island, in La Asunción and in Antolín del Campo. I also gathered information from local historians, such as Angel Félix Gómez (1991, 2001a, 2001b), whose 2002 interview forms part of the sources, Jesús Manuel Subero (1974), José Salazar Franco (1982), and other locals who have recast stories about Aguirre in their own voices. These textual sources, however, do not show how Aguirre continues to be present in the collective memory in Margarita. The written, “official” records, then, are supplemented with “unofficial” ones, with the views of locals interviewed while traveling around the island.¹ It is worth noting that the materials examined here have been either published within the last century and/or gathered in the last decade, and are thus, historically speaking, relatively recent. However, all of these, with no exception, rely on and can be traced back to chronicles written during and shortly after Aguirre’s time. These chronicles have circulated widely on the island and are well documented in the literature of the Spanish conquest in Venezuela (Mampel González & Escandel, 1981).

Using central concepts from Bormann’s Fantasy Theme Analysis/Symbolic Convergence Theory and from Bakhtin’s ideas about cultural discourse and heteroglossia, the chosen materials were carefully examined to discern patterns of convergence and divergence in the narratives. That is, the analysis focused on tracing where, collectively, the stories of Aguirre align with official narratives, where he is depicted as a deranged tyrant, or, alternatively, where the stories pull away at this

official narrative to show Aguirre as a more complex character operating in a more dynamic environment. Firstly, I illustrate how the stories of Aguirre help to foster unified narratives that crystallize in common rhetorical visions of collective identities (Bormann, 1972, 1982, 1985, Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 1994, 2003). I then demonstrate how these same stories serve to disperse unity and break away from organizing metanarratives to reveal the complex, multivocal, and heteroglossic nature of reconstructing the past (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984, 1986).

Aguirre's Legendary "Wrath"

Born around 1516 in the Basque region of Spain, Lope de Aguirre traveled, like many others, to América in search of New World riches. In 1560, after more than twenty years in South America, he joined Pedro de Ursúa's 300-strong expedition in search of El Dorado. Sanctioned by King Phillip II, this expedition comprised Spaniards, a few women, a large number of servants and slaves, some priests, and Lope de Aguirre, who was accompanied by his daughter, Elvira. Their journey would eventually span the entire length of the Amazon River and end up in Margarita, an island off the northern coast of Venezuela. Before it reached the island's shore, however, the expedition had undergone major changes. Somewhere in the remote Amazon jungles, Aguirre murdered Ursúa and his followers, gained control of the expedition, declared war against Philip II, and proclaimed himself the king of Perú, announcing to all who could hear that he was the "Wrath of God, Prince of Freedom" and ruler of "the Kingdom of Tierra Firme and the Provinces of Chile, Lord of South America, from the Isthmus of Panama to the Strait of Magellan" (Minta, 1993, p. 180). After seizing control, Aguirre decided to abandon the expedition to El Dorado and instead planned to return to conquer Perú by way of the Caribbean.

British scholar Stephen Minta (1993), writes that Aguirre was "a soldier of fortune" who "had spent almost a quarter century in the New World, fighting to win a share in the riches of the Conquest" (p. 74). By the time he joined Ursúa's expedition, Aguirre was, for the time, an old man with nothing to show but scars, and Ursúa's expedition was his last chance to gain some of the booty. He was, nevertheless, a seasoned and fierce fighter. At fifty years old he was hardened by combat, psychologically scarred, physically deformed from intense fighting (he is said to have walked with a limp as a result of being shot in the leg), and well versed in the art of cunning. He is described as being "short and of very slight build; with a bad temper, his face small and sunken; eyes that when they stared they looked like they were boiling inside his helmet, especially when he was angry" (Vázquez, 1945, p. 147). This psychological profile sketches the characteristics that have earned Aguirre a place in history as a deranged psychopath, a characterization most recognized in Werner Herzog's (1972) film, *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*. However, this celebrated and captivating film is anachronistic in its retelling of Aguirre's journey. It ends with Aguirre alone on a raft in the Amazon River, succumbed to madness. Thus Herzog's film omits to tell us that Aguirre's journey continued beyond the isolated jungles of the Amazon to Margarita, where Aguirre's wrath was at its peak. Aguirre arrived on

the island with some of his men in 1561, and after wreaking havoc there for little over a month, on 31 August he attempted to escape his enemies (among them Spaniards representing the crown, and his men who were astute enough to desert his ranks) by moving towards the Venezuelan mainland. Once he got there, however, Aguirre was cornered; he surrendered and was executed, but not before stabbing his own daughter to death. Aguirre was so feared and loathed that his body was supposedly quartered and sent to different parts of the country to ensure that he would not return to life.

From an historical point of view, the Aguirre narratives in Margarita are interesting because they reconstruct a significant era of European expansion and colonization in the Americas. From a rhetorical perspective, they are important because they draw attention to the ways in which the past is invoked to both support official, sanctioned narratives and to simultaneously challenge them in what is a richly textured, dynamic, and ongoing process.

Converging Narratives

Bormann's (1972, 1982, 1985; Bormann *et al.*, 1994, 2003) theory of Symbolic Convergence/Fantasy Theme Analysis affirms that communities are formed and maintained by the stories they share. It argues that recurring narratives create identification and common bonds across a group. To be sure, the stories of Aguirre in Margarita converge to support Aguirre's image as a typically vicious colonizer whose rapacious ambitions brought terror and misery to the locals. This type of "symbolic cue" or "cryptic allusion," Bormann (1985) asserts, is indicative of "symbolic common ground" and evidence of the sharing of fantasies: "[w]hen a group of people have shared a fantasy theme, they have charged their emotional and memory banks with meanings and emotions that can be set off by a commonly agreed upon . . . symbolic cue" (p. 6). The following image (Figure 1), included in local historian José Joaquín Salazar Franco's (1982) book on myths in Margarita, offers a particularly salient view of the symbolic cue Aguirre invokes. This illustration, by Carlos Stohr, who created all of the book's drawings, is one of the very few images found in all the materials examined, and it offers a unique contemporary rendition of the tyrant in full form.

The image depicts Aguirre standing as the central character on the shores of the island, in a scene of havoc and death. In the ocean behind him is the ship that is presumed to have carried him there. It is worth noting that Aguirre could not have been traveling in such a large sea-faring boat, as he had just navigated the Amazon River after his failed expedition. It is more likely that he would have been traveling in a much smaller vessel like a river boat, or canoe. The ship thus depicted, rather than accurately reflecting reality, symbolizes the archetypal vessel of the Spanish conquest, the caravel. Center stage, Aguirre stands, larger than life in his sixteenth-century Spanish armor, one hand on his sword, the other on a whip, and a victorious boot firmly planted on the torso of a dead man speared through the chest. A lifeless body to Aguirre's left is obviously another of his victims. A man, diminutive in comparison to Aguirre, hides behind a shrub, and though he carries a spear he



Figure 1 Carlos Stohr's Illustration of Aguirre on the Shores of Margarita. In J. Salazar Franco (1982), *Mitos y creencias Margariteñas* [Myths and beliefs in Margarita], p. 49. Used with the permission of Julián Salazar Velásquez, director of the Joaquín Salazar Franco Foundation, Tacarigua, Margarita.

appears to be wearing only a loin cloth and seems fragile and helpless, suggesting that the islanders are powerless against Aguirre's colonizing aspirations. The moon reflects the image of Aguirre's face, a sign that his power permeates even the natural world. The vulture perched on a rock behind him gives the scene an extra fatalistic touch, and the treasure chest, next to the dead man over whom Aguirre stands, gives away motive: the zealous quest for riches and power.

This image represents a composite narrative of Aguirre as the archetypal embodiment of the violence of colonialism. The image functions as a collective trigger to recall the crimes committed against the locals in the name of Empire. Aguirre is, as Alexis Márquez Rodríguez (1992) notes, a reflection of those times and the product of a period of violent conquest (p. 27). Antonio López Ortega (1992) also observes that Aguirre reproduces "one of the most exceptional episodes of our history: the restless search for the core myth of the Conquest" and personifies "the madness inherent in the mentality of conquest: to transfer the Medieval European view [of life] to American lands" (p. 380). From this perspective, Aguirre embodies the European fantasy of frenzied looting and widespread conquest; he is the unrestrained colonizing imagination incarnate. He is, at once, the archetypal colonizer, and a bloodthirsty and vicious madman whose actions were brutal and impulsive.

As Aguirre traveled through the Amazon, toward the Caribbean Sea and Margarita, the written record depicts him as progressively more cruel and neurotic. The time

Aguirre spent on the island was, however, when his wrath was at its worst. Local historian Angel Félix (Felito) Gómez (2001a) states that “in the forty-two days he remained there, [he] left a trail of death and desolation on the island” (p. 225). He also notes that “Aguirre, not content with destroying documents and murdering left and right, also devastated the fields and crops of the island, wreaking total ruin” (p. 20). Aguirre’s brutality is further illustrated: “There was not a man or a woman who was not treated ill by this most cruel of killers . . . And women he murdered as well . . . he murdered his own confessor, just after making confession, with a garrote around his mouth, to cause him the greatest of pain” (Gómez, 2001a, pp. 241–242). Together, these accounts reconstruct a violent past in which Aguirre becomes a trope for the brutality of the wider Spanish colonial mission. As a fearsome colonizer, Aguirre invokes a common narrative that casts the people of Margarita as humble, innocent folk caught in the middle of a war of imperial expansion and dominance. Even the physical landscape bears the imprints of conquest in names of villages, neighborhood corners, buildings and road signs. Aguirre’s legacy in Margarita is writ large: a village is named “El Tirano” after him, and a nearby beach, where he supposedly disembarked, also bears this name. And while all of these designations have become everyday names, they symbolize the indelible marks of colonization.

Aguirre also invokes a common rhetorical vision in the island’s rich myths. He haunts the collective imagination and gives rise to a “creative and imaginative interpretation of events” and fulfills “psychological or rhetorical need[s]” (Bormann, 1985, p. 5). He fosters a fantasy theme that is part of the island’s mythology, stories and cast of characters. Gómez, for instance, states that because his “deeds were so disastrous,” Aguirre’s presence is still felt across the island as “one of those scary apparitions,” that instills fear in the locals and keeps children hiding under the bedcovers at night (personal communication, July 22, 2002). As a myth, Aguirre’s soul has no rest; it is doomed to roam aimlessly as a tormented spirit, sometimes appearing as an *ignis fatuus*, a fire visible at night over the horizon of the sea that also attaches itself to ships’ masts. José Joaquín Salazar Franco (1982) explains that “[a]mong the beliefs that have become deeply rooted in the island we can say that the existence of the soul in torment of ‘El Tirano Aguirre’ holds a privileged position in the consciousness of the people of Margarita” (p. 49). He goes on to say that Aguirre can be heard at night,

... passing on his neighing horse, dragging chains and dry skins, with infernal haste. His screams from beyond the grave and the jabbering of his vassals can be heard. People, when they hear him curl up in a corner and consign him to the Devil. No one dares to even look at him, fearing he will attack them. He shows up sometimes as balls of fire that go across the firmament in all directions, or on the surface of the sea and end up sticking to the masts of ships. (p. 50)

Vicente Gerbasi (1955) describes Aguirre’s mythic character in verse:

The water flows, reflects your rusty armor/your shining sword, that cut in Margarita/the heads from sailors, friars and the clerks/among the nets spread out for salty winds./The water flows . . . and leaves some room still now for tears/

... mountain-rose lights even now its flame/where night keeps ever present your
 horrific ghost and ill-fame. (pp. 43–44)

Elsewhere, Aguirre is an angry ball of fire that floats “across the sea at Puerto Fermín and then on to the Archipiélago Los Frailes” before returning “to vanish in that [first] port” (Subero, 1974, p. 42). In Paraguachí, the port where Aguirre is said to have disembarked, people believe that when his presence is felt, the ocean turns black and the fish hide from fishermen’s nets. Local fisherman Félix Rodríguez explains that when Aguirre’s presence is felt, “the sea gets bad, bad, bad” especially “when people want to work” (personal communication, July 18, 2002). Leo, another local, contends that “the sea gets furious” and that Aguirre is “very bad . . . wherever he is, he does lots of damage . . . he can’t be still” (personal communication, July 27, 2002). Together, these written and oral accounts create a fantasy chain that cultivates a common narrative to explain away and rationalize a mysterious and inexplicable world, and to make sense of an irrational universe and unpredictable reality.

Cultural myths help to authenticate reality because they make sense of our collective existence. We “live by myths, of necessity” because “only by acting *as if* the world made sense can society persist and individuals survive” (Kammen, 1993, p. 25). Hart (1997) states that myths are the “substance of culture,” master stories that make sense of the past and connect it with the present. They provide a “heightened sense of community” because they help us to organize our realities and to comprehend our roles in a larger, unified collective experience (pp. 242–243). Myths can be understood, then, as rhetorical visions that codify collective consciousness and as abbreviated guides to what binds a particular culture. They also serve to translate what is obscure and mystifying in human existence by explaining the unknown in understandable terms. The stories of Aguirre’s ghost roaming the dark of night are much like camp-fire stories, or Aesop’s fables, acting as cautionary tales that admonish evildoers. The moral makes it simple: Aguirre’s despicable crimes were punished with pain and torment after death; therefore, one must not commit crimes of this sort for fear of similar punishment. Salazar Franco (1982) affirms that “for all of [his] atrocities,” the wretched soul of Aguirre has found no rest, for “neither God nor the Devil have been able to amend him;” therefore he is “condemned to atone for his sins in Hell after walking the earth for a long time” (p. 50). Stories of Aguirre’s wicked deeds provide a code of conduct for acceptable behavior and emphasize standards that perhaps also align them with the principles found in religious narratives.

Aguirre’s stories also perform another important cultural function. Tales of Aguirre’s supernatural presence resonate with other well-known legends on the island by drawing attention to human “flaws” and acting as didactic instruments that establish sanctioned standards of conduct. For instance, the story of “La Chinigua,” tells of the tormented spirit of a beautiful woman who, because she flirted with many men but gave her heart to none, roams the mist of foggy nights searching for true love. There are also spirits, known as “Las Animas Benditas del Purgatorio” (the Blessed Souls of Purgatory), to whom the locals light candles and make token offerings and promises with the hopes of a favor in return (Salazar Franco, 1982, pp. 49–50). In the language of symbolic convergence, these stories, in all their

spine-tingling dramatizations, are master tropes that unify and simplify daily experience in ways that are consistent with collective cultural practices and support a common vision. Aguirre's stories also converge by providing a scapegoat to act as a "representative" or "vessel" of certain unwanted evils, the sacrificial animal upon whose back the burden of these evils is ritualistically loaded" (Burke, 1941, pp. 39–40). Culpability comes to rest on Aguirre as a supernatural enemy against whom there is little defense, for example the fishermen who are able to attribute a poor day's catch to Aguirre's disturbance of the sea. When problems arise and things are "not right" in the world, it is easier to attach blame to someone or something else. As Gómez says, "The one who pays for all this mess is the tyrant" (personal communication, July 22, 2002). As a scapegoat, Aguirre unites the locals as collective victims of unexplainable harm and becomes the "goat" whose sacrifice allows purification and redemption.

In sum, as coherent narratives that speak of the scars of colonization, and explain and simplify reality, Aguirre's Margarita stories turn a potentially "chaotic and confusing" world into an "organized and artistic" one (Bormann, 1985, pp. 9–10). Yet Aguirre's symbolism is more dynamic and complicated than the framework of Bormann's model allows. In particular, Bormann's theory does not fully address the dynamic nature of collective narratives, in other words how they compete for authority and attempt to re-write history in ways that are legitimized by divergent ideological currents. The symbolic convergence framework provides a useful general vocabulary for understanding cohesiveness in group interaction, but it does not tease out the deviations and tensions inherent in competing fantasies, nor does it deal with the iterative nature of collective memory as it continually gets defined and redefined. The following section offers a critique of Bormann's work and a potential corrective.

Challenging Convergence

Since the publication of Bormann's seminal article in 1972, Fantasy Theme Analysis and Symbolic Convergence Theory have generated a significant body of scholarship. Despite the popularity of Bormann's theory, however, it has been subject to criticism. One of the earliest and most famous charges comes from Mohrmann (1982), who argues that the theory's taxonomical approach yields little of value for rhetorical analysis and is overly simplistic. Mohrmann speculates that Fantasy Theme Analysis became an accepted methodology because "the terms are at hand . . . [and] because it has been shown that brief instructions in [it] are sufficient to produce statistically significant" results, yet it does not prove "that social reality is composed of dramatic constructs, rather that they emphasize ease of application" (p. 120). He considers the method to be a reductive "categorical scheme" of little or no value to criticism that "lacks sophistication," and "invites mechanical application" (p. 119). Joshua Gunn's (2003) more recent critique of Bormann's framework argues that Bormann and his followers have "repeatedly elided" notions of human agency and motive in their framework (p. 51). Gunn suggests that Bormann's model would be better if it acknowledged the role of an unconscious imaginary that incorporates ideology as a

central concept in both subject and community formation. I draw attention to Gunn's criticism because it highlights a fundamental problem in the Symbolic Convergence model: it does not account for ideological work. Yet despite these limitations, the framework is a valuable tool for identifying communicative practices that foster collective unity. Its terminology yields an overall impression of narrative associations that bring people together under the same umbrella. Yet as Mohrmann suggests, it gives us neither the language nor the interpretive framework to understand what is under the surface of this unity. By focusing almost exclusively on coherence and convergence, and making claims about collective unity without fully considering competing narratives that vie for influence in reconstructing the past, the symbolic convergence model risks eliding the underlying friction of collective memory production.

John Bodnar (1992) reminds us that vernacular or "unofficial" narratives have the potential to exert pressure on stable, authorized ones and to pry them open for debate. The "official" past, then, is constituted by dominant elements that set the public agenda and determine, to a large degree, which version prevails at any given time. Collective memories are brokered ideologically by "authorities" that are publicly appointed and recognized, and whose underlying structure endorse and sustain the status quo. Official narratives rely on "dogmatic formalism" in an attempt to "reduce the power of competing interests" (Bodnar, 1992, pp. 13–14). In other words, official culture maintains power through a perceived sense of structure, organization, and unity. Vernacular cultures, on the other hand, are "diverse and changing and can be reformulated from time to time by the creation of new social units" which can "even clash with one another" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 16). The vernacular, then, conveys diverse realities and competing interests, and it is rather unorganized and messy.

In light of these distinctions, Bormann's theory of convergence more closely resembles an official rather than a vernacular culture. Bormann (1982) states that "the sharing of fantasies within a group or community establishes the assumptive system portrayed in the common rhetorical vision Discursive argument requires a common set of assumptions about the nature of reality and proof" (p. 292). That is, the rhetorical vision of a community is supported and reinforced by its underlying value system and by the logic that forms community bonds. The main focus of Bormann's framework is the "continuity of existing institutions" (Bodnar, 1992, p. 13) and the integrity of the community or group. Fantasy themes and visions abstract reality to identify a cohesive, uncomplicated story that authenticates views and experiences in a way that *all* members of the group can accept. And while it may be a way to represent how groups of people work to maintain a coherent sense of identification, it largely ignores alternate visions of reality. Gerard Hauser's (1999) analysis of vernacular cultures brings the main weakness of Bormann's (1972, 1982, 1985; Bormann *et al.*, 1994, 2003) method into sharper focus: "Members of pluralistic societies belong to several, perhaps many, overlapping discursive arenas in which they experience the polyphony of concurrent conversations as vernacular languages that rub against one another, instigating dialogues" so that "vernacular exchanges both lack and transcend the force of official authority" (p. 67).

The vernacular thus asserts “the weight, priority, and importance participants ascribe to a projected world and therefore are subject to the dominion of social powers themselves vying for hierarchical political status” (p. 67). The point being made here is that ideological agendas are implicit in everyday discourse and group building, and that “consciousness -creating, -raising, and -sustaining,” (Bormann *et al.*, 2003, p. 369) is always involved in and deeply influenced by internal as well as external structuring and de-structuring forces. What Bormann’s method lacks, then, is an account of the ways in which the ongoing production of collective memory critiques and challenges unified narratives. Mikhael Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986; Morson, & Emerson, 1990; Emerson, 1997) work on cultural discourse and heteroglossia is useful to supplement the symbolic convergence framework and to help contextualize the analysis of Aguirre’s narratives.

Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986; Morson & Emerson, 1990; Emerson, 1997) sees cultural discourse as an active network of narratives that intersect, interact, respond, and reflect upon one another to form a coherent whole. A culture’s collective memory, then, is developed in dynamic social spaces in ongoing, unfinished, processes. Narratives that give shape to community are dialogic in that they contain “diverse, discriminating, often contradictory ‘talking’ components,” are polysemic and “resist . . . homogenization” (Emerson, 1997, p. 36). They are, in Bakhtin’s view, inevitably heteroglossic, and while they may be situationally and culturally specific, they contain traces and mixtures of other diverse social meanings, values, situations, and uses. In this light, Bormann’s (1972, 1982, 1985; Bormann *et al.*, 1994, 2003) convergence aligns with what Bakhtin (1981) refers to as the centripetal forces that “serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (p. 270). Convergence is the centralizing of discourse into a “unitary language” that reflects an uncomplicated and “monoglossic” reality. It pulls towards monologue, limiting ambiguity by crystallizing a stable reality that fosters maximum agreement. For Bakhtin (1981), “a unitary language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (p. 271). As Morson and Emerson (1990) explain, in Bakhtin’s view, “the cultural world . . . consists of both ‘centripetal’ (or ‘official’) and ‘centrifugal’ (or ‘unofficial’) forces. The former seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous and messy world; the latter . . . disrupt that order” (p. 30). As a result, group consciousness is “tension-filled” and “contradiction-ridden” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272). Opposing forces in cultural narratives “continually [translate] the minute alterations and reevaluations of everyday life into new meanings and tones” (Morson & Emerson, p. 30). The following section explores how alternate voices in the Aguirre narratives challenge, disperse, and potentially alter the unity of convergence.

Heteroglossia and Symbolic Divergence

López (1953) points out that Aguirre is one of the most difficult colonizers in the history of America to describe, and that all the “epithets that have been attached to

his name in order to define him show the multiple facets of a personality . . . tyrant, traitor, rebel, madman are only a few aspects of a complex abnormal personality” (p. 172). While Aguirre is known in Margarita for his tyranny, he is also recognized on the island and elsewhere for his rebellion against Philip II, king of Spain. Aguirre’s loathing for the Spanish king is related by Uslar Pietri (1947/1992) who describes how Aguirre reacted violently when he found a “King of Swords” card while marching with his men:

Aguirre looked fixedly at his feet. There was a [bright] card fallen in the dust . . . It was the King of Swords [from the Tarot]. Aguirre roared, and . . . began to kick the card and spit upon it, while he screamed blasphemies and insults . . . And he jumped and turned about like one possessed, while all the others looked on terrified. (p. 260)

Gómez (2001a) describes other incidents that showed Aguirre’s deep-seated hatred of Phillip II and royalty in general:

He wanted to get rid of everything royal by breaking the “pole of justice” . . . [it] was a stick, a log, like those they set up in the main Square; it represented justice . . . So he went to get rid of the King’s authority by breaking it . . . but [it was] hard as they come, so he couldn’t break it. (p. 266)

Uslar Pietri (1947/1992) recounts this same event: “Aguirre sent out his soldiers with axes to destroy the pole set up on the square as a symbol of royal authority. But this hardest of woods, the guaiacum, rang with the blows of the steel that bounced off its impenetrable surface” (p. 260). In Otero Silva’s (1979) narrative, however, we see how the same account is elaborated so that Aguirre’s hatred for the king is justified, and he is redeemed as a defender of the oppressed fighting for freedom from empire:

With his *good intention* of erasing every vestige and symbol of imperial dominion on the island, Lope de Aguirre ordered the destruction with an axe of the log of wood that authorized, by order of the King, the hanging of people in the town square, and later had [his men] tear to pieces the door of the room that held the royal treasure chest, and confiscated the golden coins and burned the royal record books that were there, and also burned the royal registers and journals, [so that the] *story of the island began anew*. [*my emphasis*] (p. 256)

Here, Aguirre has “good intentions” toward the locals. His attempts at destroying the king’s symbols are portrayed not as a token of a pseudo-psychotic hostility toward the Spanish crown but as proof of Aguirre’s selfless concern for the locals. In de-imperializing the island, he helps locals to begin to rebuild their own narratives and construct a new reality sans Empire. Here, Aguirre, the Spanish conquistador and bloodthirsty tyrant, becomes a defender of the locals.

Otero Silva (1979, 1998) is not alone in depicting Aguirre as a champion of liberty. Elsewhere, there are frequent references to a letter that Aguirre wrote in 1561 to the king of Spain. This letter is of particular interest to Latin American scholars because it goes against the grain of dominant narratives. Aguirre’s letter is different, for example, from the travel and exploration narratives that idealized colonization by extolling the beauty of the New World and glorifying exploration and discovery. His

tale is one of broken promises and dreams, a cry from an angry and disillusioned soldier who is at the end of his tether, lashing out against those who put him there. Aguirre's letter is an unusual "unauthorized" act of rebellion against colonialism from a colonizer, and some argue that Aguirre's insurrection was a catalyst for efforts to break away from Spanish domination. Otero Silva (1979), for example, insists that,

...an outrage was committed when he was judged to be nothing more than a bloodthirsty murderer, a raving madman and an emissary of Hell. His story was written by his bitterest enemies... [T]his sinister legend, fed by [equal parts of] fact and distortion, has been accepted to the letter by the immense majority of the writers and historians who have dealt with the figure of Lope de Aguirre. Hardly ever has there been praise for his rebellion against King Philip II and the Spanish monarchical system, nor his denunciation of plundering landlords and lying monks, nor his proclamation of the independence of Perú and Chile, launched from the very heart of the Amazon jungle... (p. 70)

Jesús Manuel Subero (1974), another historian in Margarita, echoes this defense, arguing that Aguirre has been misjudged because most of the stories about him have been told from the perspective of his enemies, —people in service of the Spanish king. Subero (1974) quotes from Aguirre's famous letter to highlight his disillusion and disenfranchisement:

I accuse you, King, that on account of how you ought to have done right and justice for the good vassals that you have in this land [and have not done], and since I cannot suffer more the cruelties used by your Witnesses, Viceroy and Governors, I have in fact... abandoned your obedience... oh king and lord, you made insufferable your great torments, unjust rewards and punishments imposed by your ministers, who for your sons and servants have usurped and robbed our fame, our life and honor, which is, our King, most shameful for the mistreatment we have borne. (p. 187)

Subero also notes that such rebellion could not be accepted because it was "the most horrendous blasphemy ever spoken by Spanish lips against the divine majesty of Phillip II" (p. 190). Therefore, for the purposes of the colonizing mission, Aguirre had to be demonized and his image as a rebel "extinguished and erased from all memory" (p. 190). These authors offer an entirely different perspective on Aguirre's character: here, he becomes a "Prince of Liberty" bestowed with some of the essential qualities of a warrior of independence. Otero Silva (1979), again, credits Aguirre with espousing "freedom of the New World from the yoke of the Spanish Crown" and warns us that "history (our history) protects and even glorifies warriors who acted with worse ferocity than Aguirre" (p. 75). To him, the explanation is simple and logical: the stories of Aguirre were told by his most passionate enemies, once they had defeated and decapitated him. Thus, Aguirre is undeservedly shunned as "a total madman, a bloodthirsty psychotic, a feral neurotic, a combination of Nero and Herod," simply because history, and especially historians, have not been on his side (p. 75).

Otero Silva, among others, draws attention to the fact that Simón Bolívar himself, the most illustrious champion of independence in Venezuela and Latin America, was

apparently an Aguirre enthusiast. He reminds us that Bolívar was impervious to the “relentless condemnation heaped upon the memory of the “Tyrant.” Instead, he “praised his attitude as [one of] implacable insurgency against Spanish autocracy” and called Aguirre’s letter to Philip II “the first manifesto of American independence (p. 70). Thus, Aguirre’s transformation from “Tyrant” to “Prince of Liberty” was no small accident, as Gómez (2002), observes:

Who gave him the title of “Prince of Liberty”? [It was] Simón Bolívar. Simón Bolívar [wrote] a letter from Bogotá . . . to the military governor of Maracaibo and asked him to publish plenty of copies of the letter that Lope wrote to the King . . . because Lope de Aguirre is the “prince of American liberty.” (personal communication, July 22, 2002).

In this vision, Aguirre represents the opposing force of the indigenous rebellion, the anti-conquest, and the deep yearning for independence from imperial control. The conqueror in this narrative becomes the indigenous soldier fighting imperial control for the poor and oppressed. Moreover, he is authorized as a pioneer by the quintessential revolutionary in Latin American history: Bolívar. In this alternate vision, Aguirre does not personify the colonial mission—to the contrary, he is imbued with the qualities of the ultimate independence warrior.

The ambiguity in Aguirre’s characterizations is further revealed in narratives concerning his daughter, Elvira. Having been abandoned by his men and surrounded by those men seeking his death, Aguirre unsheathes his dagger and stabs his daughter, killing her. Elvira’s brutal death is recounted in the performances of poor children who, for a few coins, act out the history of the island, including Aguirre’s wrath, atop the tourist-filled fort of La Galera. Their movements and voices impersonate the tyrant stabbing the girl while saying “Die, die, my daughter, for I do not want people to know you are the daughter of a tyrant!” Elvira’s fate is also reiterated in poems and songs, as this excerpt from the famous Venezuelan composer, Vicente Emilio Sojo’s (1970) *Romance a la hija del tirano Aguirre* demonstrates:

Where is the daughter of Aguirre/The Tyrant, the Marañón?/She is dead,
gentlemen/This/morning she expired!/Her father has stabbed her/Lope de Aguirre,
the Marañón/So she would not fall in love/A dagger in her heart!/And he has not
shed a tear/Red the dagger he put away . . .

Elvira is, in a sense, her father’s alter ego; whereas she is innocent and pure, he is rancorous and merciless. He is physically and mentally scarred and corrupted by power and avarice. Elvira, on the other hand, remains chaste, unsullied by her father’s tormented character and his increasingly erratic behavior. Otero Silva (1979) writes that in an effort to stop her impending death, Elvira’s handmaiden unsuccessfully pleads with Aguirre: “Don’t do that, Sir, for God’s sake, don’t do that. Miss Elvira is innocent as a field lily. Don’t kill her, Sir, for the devil has deceived you when he advised you to commit a crime so horrific and fierce” (p. 319). Elvira is a saintly figure; Aguirre is the devil’s peon.

Yet Elvira is also a symbol of Aguirre’s capacity for love and of his “native” sensitivity. For some, Aguirre killed Elvira to save her from being raped, tortured, or

killed by his enemies, and thus the murder was the last token of his devotion. Jesús (Chuito) Guerra, another historian in Margarita, says “They say he killed her so she wouldn’t fall into the hands of his enemies—because it seems that back then when [a woman] was caught, she wasn’t imprisoned but raped, whenever the opportunity arose. Yes. So he preferred to kill her” (personal communication, July 18, 2002). Similarly, in a radio melodrama (Garmendia & Failache, 1975) the voice of Aguirre’s character bellows as he approaches his daughter to kill her: “Elvira, hold your crucifix, and entrust yourself to God. I don’t want you to be a mattress to the Spaniards!” Otero Silva (1979) also reconstructs the same scene:

... I do not fear the King, nor death, nor Hell. The only danger that shakes my flesh with fear and terror is the matter of what will happen... to my child Elvira... there will be no man’s sword to defend the wholeness of her body when the mobs of infamous rabble comes in to rape the daughter of the cruel tyrant, (almost weeping) to rape my little girl... [Aguirre calls out] “My daughter, take up a crucifix and commend yourself to God, for I am going to kill you!” (p. 319).

By killing his daughter, Aguirre preserves her dignity and prevents her saintliness from being desecrated. We see, then, how the story of Elvira pulls inward to support the vision of Aguirre as a merciless tyrant and ruthless killer committing the ultimate act of cruelty, and simultaneously disperses outward, to a romantic vision of a loving father making the ultimate sacrifice.

Conclusion

Bart Lewis (2003) and Evan Balkan (2011), both North American scholars, have recently argued that it is no surprise that the official history about Aguirre, in all its monoglossic might, has been challenged. Lewis notes that from the mid-twentieth century, Latin American writers all across the region, attending to the pressures of progress, global political and economic shifts, and progressive modernist imperatives, sought to reclaim their countries’ past and identity in ways that were specific to their cultural circumstances but that were original and inventive. They did this, Lewis (2003) asserts, by “exploding narrative and reinventing it.” The result of this explosion, Lewis continues, is that “there are no ghosts to frighten... [writers] into dutiful repetition of a traditional record.” Being rid of these “ghosts” has allowed them the freedom “to revise their countries’ history,” which has led, in turn, “to significant literary triumphs and a new confidence in directing the cultural debate” (pp. 157–158). As a result of this shift, Venezuelan writers like Uslar Pietri, López, and Otero Silva have prized open the national and local discourse about Aguirre. These alternate narratives have given Aguirre a different voice, one that restores his image and “balance[s] the record” of history. Instead of the bloodthirsty madman, he is the consummate revolutionary, a leader of emancipation for the natives, whose efforts were akin to those of other independence leaders like Simón Bolívar (Balkan, 2011, pp. 14–15). In Margarita, however, as the written and oral materials examined here attest, the contrasting narratives about Aguirre coexist in a “dense sea of voices,”

the tones of which are ambivalent and dissonant. They are at once imbued with unifying and convergent themes, and shot through with conflicting divergence. They reaffirm that the process of reconstructing the past refuses “the certainty of absolutes” and is “capable of shattering the unity of man’s being through which he thought he could extend his sovereignty” (Foucault, 1977, p. 154). Ultimately, the Aguirre narratives are an emphatic reminder that collective remembering is an organic process permeated with different ideological textures and cultural tensions and constantly enmeshed in the pull and tug of present-day cultural construction.

Note

- [1] During a one-month long research trip to Margarita in July 2002, in addition to interviewing Angel Félix Gómez, one of the few living local historians whose work on Aguirre is documented in the written materials, I interviewed other people around the island, some of whom are well known as experts in the oral history of Margarita (such as Jesús Guerra) as well as other locals in the area of Paraguachí, the vicinity of El Tirano, and at various other points around the island. The interviews were conducted during casual conversation, recorded on tape, and transcribed later. All persons interviewed were told of the nature of the project and consented to be recorded and quoted here.

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