

History, Poetry, and Politics in Gaspar de Villagr a's *Historia de la nueva Mexico*

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ABSTRACT

Gaspar de Villagr a's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* (1610) has lingered on the margins of U.S. literary history for centuries. Embraced as a source of historical information, the poem was seldom seen as a work of literary merit. In the past four decades, however, critics of Chicano/a literature have paved the way for a reinterpretation of the poem that places Villagr a's *Historia* at the onset of Chicano/a letters. But reclaiming the poem means addressing its politics as well. In this article, I analyze the ways in which history, poetry, and politics are intertwined in Villagr a's *Historia* in ways that maximize ambiguity, open-endedness, and contradiction.

Keywords: Gaspar de Villagr a, literary history, margins, Chicano/a literature, colonial violence, ambiguity, open-endedness.

RESUMEN

La Historia de la nueva Mexico (1610) de Gaspar de Villagr a ha permanecido en los m rgenes de la historia literaria estadounidense hasta fechas recientes. Si bien se ha valorado con frecuencia su importancia como testimonio hist rico, pocos estudiosos han defendido sus m ritos literarios. Durante las  ltimas cuatro d cadas, sin embargo, el creciente inter s por el poema entre los expertos en la literatura chicana ha conseguido

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situar la *Historia* de Villagr a en un lugar fundacional para las letras norteamericanas. La asignatura pendiente, en lo que a esta recuperaci n concierne, ha sido la de valorar el legado pol tico del poema. En este art culo, analizo la forma en que la *Historia* de Villagr a articula las tensiones entre historia, poes a y pol tica potenciando la ambigüedad, la apertura y la contradicci n.

Palabras clave: Gaspar de Villagr a, historia literaria, margen, literatura chicana, violencia colonial, ambigüedad, apertura textual.

The number and variety of readings of Gaspar de Villagr a's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* has increased dramatically in the past few decades. As I started documenting elsewhere ("La *Historia*," *passim*), more than half of the two hundred and eighty known references to this seminal text of United States history and literature were printed during the past twenty years. In that earlier article, I noted several trends in how the poem was read at different times and in different nations, which makes it unnecessary to repeat this information here. I will only indicate, in order to begin exploring my topic, that Mexican American intellectuals first embraced Villagr a's poem in 1898, in the midst of the Spanish-American war and that, for somewhat different reasons, Chicano/a critics also claimed the text as their own starting in the 1970s. In 1898, for the editors of the newspaper *El Progreso* in Trinidad, Colorado, the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* was both a material signifier of cultural citizenship (instrumental at that war time juncture for negotiating a new *Hispano* identity in the New Mexico area) and a remarkable discursive site of contention. In the editorial column that announced the publication in installments of the poem, the editors of *El Progreso* first invoked the authority of Adolf F. A. Bandelier and Hubert H. Bancroft to certify the historical significance of the poem, only to suggest without delay that Villagr a's work belonged first and foremost to "nuestro pueblo" and not to theirs:

Lea nuestro pueblo esta noble composici n; cons rvela y gu rdela para transmitirla   su posteridad. Si EL PROGRESO no obtiene m s m rito que el haber publicado esta Historia, esto s lo bastar  para recompensar   sus editores por los muchos contratiempos que necesariamente son parte de la carrera periodistica (El Progreso 1).

El Progreso's enthusiasm for Villagr a's poem is evident throughout the editorial and, while acknowledging some of its literary shortcomings, the editor considers this work

as “uno de los monumentos inmortales de la conquista” (1). For most Chicanos/as, later on, the marked *hispanofilia* of *El Progreso*'s arguments was no longer tenable or desirable, and thus their own recovery and reclamation of the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* had to find new lines of argumentation. Luis Leal, in his groundbreaking 1973 article “Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective,” suggested that its distinctly American theme made Villagr a’s poem part of Mexican American literature, and he asked: “If *La Araucana* belongs to Chilean literature, why cannot the *Historia de la Nueva Mexico* be a part of the literature of Aztlan?” (36, original emphasis). In thus turning the question from *hispanidad* to *americanismo* Leal brought Villagr a’s poem closer to the Chicano Movement’s ethos, but such lingering issues as the colonial violence that the poem chronicles and justifies would still be problematic for later readings by younger critics.

Recovering and embracing Villagr a’s poem, therefore, poses some challenges and paradoxes for Chicano/a critics and readers alike, because there is no easy way to claim the text as part of one’s literary tradition without claiming the history that it tells as part of one’s historical experience as well. In that sense, the words of William Carlos Williams, in his essay “The Fountain of Eternal Youth,” may well serve us to approach the complex politics of filiation and affiliation that have made the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* a Chicano/a and a U.S. Latino text:

History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery. No, we are not Indians but we are men of their world. The blood means nothing; the spirit, the ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood (39).

Williams’ emphasis on *us* and not on *them* clearly underscores the painful lines of filiation open to the post-Hispanic American subject in the so-called New World. Like Jos e Mart ı a few decades earlier (and like Luis Leal half a century later), Williams stresses the value of that which is American and not European. But just a few pages later in his essay (and, again, decades before Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales would replicate the strategy in his 1967 poem *I Am Joaqu ın*), Williams’ text leaves no doubt that this foundational violence is not just *theirs* against *us* and that — as far as modern America is concerned — both the murderers and the victims are now intertwined in their descent: “We are, too, the others” (41) he asserts, and immediately afterwards “We are the slaughterers” (41).

Nothing suggests that William Carlos Williams ever read the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* but, if he had, I am sure he would have found in Villagr a’s politics and poetry a remarkable assessment of that beginning of history for “*us*” that so interested him as well. Villagr a, who postpones singing about major violence until the twenty-second of his thirty-four-canto poem, seems conscious nonetheless of the symbolic

significance of violence — not peace — as the true foundational moment for the new Mexico his expedition seeks to discover and/or create. If, as René Girard suggests in *Violence and the Sacred*, “all man’s religious, familial, economic, and social institutions grew out of the body of an original victim” (306), the final cantos of Villagrà’s *Historia* could well epitomize the politics of thus transforming violence and an individual victim into such a cornerstone for a new society. Only, as I will explore in more detail below, Villagrà does so with an unsettling poetic trick up his sleeve, since he offers his readers three victims, not just one.

The death of the *maese de campo* Juan de Zaldívar, which he describes in Canto XXIII of the *Historia*, provides Villagrà with a perfect original victim, and he seizes that opportunity with unerring poetic talent, though he postpones evaluating the true significance of that death until the end of Canto XXXIII, ten full cantos later, just as he approaches the end of his poem. There, as the poet wraps up the *materia épica*, the *sargento mayor* Vicente de Zaldívar laments the demise of his brother in a moving *planto* that is charged with poetic and political significance. Surrounded by the few surviving Acomans, Vicente de Zaldívar proclaims the defeat of the natives with the familiar phrase “Aqui fue Troia nobles caballeros,” (415) and he endows the death of his brother with foundational qualities by comparing the Acoma mesa with both a mausoleum and an altar on which he plants the cross that symbolizes a new beginning:

Y assi es fuerça digan todos fuiste,
 Muy bienaenturado en tal jornada,
 Donde no puede ser que la grandeza,
 De todo el vniuerso que gozamos,
 Pueda darte sepulcro mas pomposo,
 Ni mas gallardo y alto enterramiento,
 Que el que en aqueste muro memorable,
 Quiso la fuerça de Acoma ofrecerte,
 A quien yo estimo, tengo y reuerencio,
 Por preciosissima Ara y Monumento,
 Donde por tu ley santa poderosa,
 Por Dios y por tu Rey alto inuencible,
 A su gran Magestad sacrificaste,
 El resto de la sangre que tuuiste, (415)

...

Aqui por su alto esfuerço y zelo ardiente,
 Y por su gran valor, insigne y raro,
 Quedara para siempre eternizado,
 Y por el consiguiente conocido,

...

Y con esto arbolò vna Cruz en alto,
 Y contritos llorando de rodillas,

Todos juntos alli nos derribamos,
 Y á la gran Magestad de Dios pedimos,
 Que de sus pobres almas se doliesse,
 Y que à su santa gloria las lleuase, (415-416)

Had the poem ended there, Gaspar de Villagrà's politics would be easy to dismiss (or celebrate, depending on the critic's position) as an all-too-evident justification of the Spanish colonial enterprise. However, the poet decided to add a final canto — and even then not too “final,” since in it he proposes to write a second part of the poem. Villagrà used part of that last Canto XXXIV to inform his readers of such details as the death of Zutacapan, whose corpse is cut into pieces by several Acoman women, and of the divine intervention of celestial bodies in support of the Spanish troops, among others. But perhaps the most significant element of Canto XXXIV, and the one that has generated the most critical attention, is the capture of Tèmpal and Cotumbo and their eventual suicide by hanging, a well-known epic *topos* (Quint 114) that is charged nonetheless with original meanings in this context.

Referring to this episode, José Rabasa suggests that Villagrà's poem embodies “an aesthetic of colonial violence that draws its legitimacy from an ideology of just war against Indians, but whose force of representation resides in the use of grotesque images that rob indigenous peoples of all dignity, even in death” (158). As such, Rabasa's interpretation exemplifies one of the two main possible readings of this final episode that David Quint had already outlined several years earlier in “Voices of Resistance,” when he considered how “[t]he ending of Villagrà's poem allows for diametrically opposed readings as it confronts the victims of the Spanish conquest, both endowing them with and denying them a separate identity and perspective” (Quint 117).

It could be argued, however, that both Quint and Rabasa overly privilege the scene of the hanging at the ending of the poem for their interpretation of the text's politics, and that they do so without exploring the multiple ways in which that particular scene dialogs with earlier episodes in the *Historia*. An exploration of such an intratextual dialogue may offer an alternative reading of the suicide of Tèmpal and Cotumbo, one that allows for an ideological opening of the poem, to complement the already mentioned formal open-endedness of the *Historia*.

As I discuss in more detail in my critical edition of the poem (Villagrà 458 and *passim*), Villagrà structured his *Historia de la nueva Mexico* around a series of parallelisms that are yet to be fully analyzed by scholars. The deaths of Tèmpal and Cotumbo are an essential part of that web of internal correspondences, as I will try to illustrate below. In order to do so, I will connect the scene of their suicide with that of the death of Juan de

Zaldívar, first, and — through that motif — with several other passages of the *Historia*, including the foundational legend of Tenochtitlán that Villagrá explores in Cantos II and III. I am confident that this comparison will leave few doubts about the possibility of reading the final scene of the *Historia* as part of a critical discourse that, rather than containing or suppressing conflicting ideological messages, as Quint suggested (115), accords them the kind of textual space they need to become fully fledged in the reader's mind.

In comparing the deaths of Zaldívar, on the one hand, and Cotumbo and Témpal, on the other, there are several elements worth highlighting. First, the notion of physicality (presence) versus spirituality (absence) plays a major role. The bodies of Témpal and Cotumbo are left hanging at the end of Canto XXXIV as visual reminders of the defeat of the Acomans. By contrast, Juan de Zaldívar's corpse does not exist. In Canto XXXIII, we learn that his attackers

En blanda y tierna masa combirtieron,
Su miserable carne con los guessos,
Y en confusso monton los recogieron,
Y en vna gran hoguera lebantada,
Con pujañça de leños que arrimaron,
Los rayos del Sol fueron emboluiendo,
En vna obscura sombra temerosa, (412).

Juan de Zaldívar is, therefore, a trace (in the Derridean sense), that is, the absence of a presence and the presence of an absence, a metaphysical category that Villagrá reserves for martyrs in his poem, as is also evident in Canto XV, when the whitewashed walls of an indigenous dwelling in Puarai reveal — underneath a freshly applied coat of paint — a mural depicting the killing of several friars who had entered the new Mexico in 1581 with Francisco Sánchez Chamuscado, and whose bodies are nowhere to be found either.

What I find most remarkable about these two interconnected episodes (the death of Zaldívar and that of the friars) is that they are contingent upon the narrative authority of the native Americans: in one case (Zaldívar), the Acomans inform Villagrá verbally; in the other (the friars), Villagrá learns about their fate through a native narrative painting. In exploring the hanging of Témpal and Cotumbo, Quint had suggested that their curse amounted to “an alternative history of resistance that competes with Villagrá's narrative of conquest” (115-16), though he immediately dismissed the idea, concluding that resistance against the Spaniards (as promised by the curse) would prove suicidal for the Acomans, “[a]nd the same may be said for the future history that is projected by their curse, the narrative that would go beyond and compete with

Villagrás official history” (117). However, by focusing almost exclusively on the final scene of Canto XXXIV, Quint may be underestimating the role that the native voice plays in other parts of the poem. If we take a closer look at the narratives of the death of the friars and of that of Juan de Zaldívar, it becomes obvious that, in retelling these episodes, Villagrás — the historian — is forced to rely on the accounts of the native New Mexicans, thus conferring historiographic trustworthiness to his native sources (as long as we are willing to read those accounts as true at the diegetic level). The physical absence of the Spanish bodies (in both episodes) is thus filled by the embedded presence of the native American discourse which, in a sense, takes their place.

Faced with the absence of the corpse of his brother, and with the presence of the native account of his demise, Vicente de Zaldívar’s ability to honor the deceased is limited to adding a supplementary discursive layer, intended to re-interpret the natives’ account by turning his brother’s absence into an allegory of the Christian knight’s sacrifice. By calling his brother “primer primicia que se ofrece / En esta nueva Iglesia Mexicana” (414), Vicente de Zaldívar invests Juan’s disappearance with religious signification, further connecting this episode with that other martyrdom chronicled in the frescoes of Puarai. Without a body to inter or a grave where he could pay his respects, Vicente de Zaldívar is moved to proclaim the entire Acoma mesa to be both a mausoleum and an altar for his missing brother. Villagrás’s artistry, so often questioned from so many quarters, is in full force in this episode when he superimposes the various discursive layers, much as the natives of Puarai (allegedly) did with coats of paint. In doing so, the apparent conclusiveness of Vicente de Zaldívar’s allegorical interpretation of his brother’s death remains forever dependent on (and is forever deconstructed by) the underlying discursive account of his death by the Acomans, which continues to be visible nonetheless, *under erasure*.

As a symbol, moreover, the sacrificial altar that Vicente de Zaldívar sees in the Acoma mesa acquires a polysemic character in Villagrás’s *Historia* that, far from containing contradictory discourses, appears to exacerbate them, at least — once again — if we are willing to contrast this episode with other parts of the poem. Zaldívar’s metaphorical altar’s structural parallels are found in cantos II and XXXIV. In the former, the altar corresponds to the mysterious metallic mass that the Aztec goddess drops to serve as a boundary between Aztlán and the lands of the south to be explored by the future Mexicas. Villagrás claims that this malefic landmark was so horrific that horses would not go near it, and that its dreadful powers were only annulled when a priest celebrated a mass on the spot, using the marker as an altar:

Y por sus mismos propios ojos viendo,
 La grandeza del monstruo que alli estaua,
 Al qual no se acercauan los cauallos,
 Por mas que los hijares les rompian,
 Porque vnos se empinauan y arbolauan,
 Con notables bufidos y ronquidos,
 Y otros mas espantados resurtian,
 Por vno y otro lado rezelosos,
 De aquel inorme peso nunca visto,
 Hasta que cierto Religioso vn dia,
 Celebró el gran misterio sacrosanto,
 De aquella Redencion del vniverso,
 Tomando por Altar al mismo hierro,
 Y dende entonces vemos que se llegan,
 Sin ningun pauor, miedo, ni rezelo,
 A su estalage aquestos animales,
 Como a lugar que libertado ha sido,
 De qual que infernal furia desatada, (79).

As for Canto XXXIV, the association is based on a somewhat obscure allusion that earlier critics and editors have left without comment but that is crucial nonetheless for interpreting the deaths of Témpal and Cotumbo. The relevant lines, concerning the suicide of these warriors, are the following:

No los fuertes hermanos que en Cartago,
 Corriendo presurosos alargaron,
 A costa de si mismos los linderos,
 Assi a la triste muerte se entregaron,
 Dexandose enterrar en vida viuos,
 Qual estos brauos baruaros que estando,
 Al pie de aquellos troncos lebantaron,
 La vista por la cumbre, y en vn punto,
 Como diestros grumetes que ligeros,
 Por las entenas, gauias, y altos topes,
 Discurren con presteza assi alentados,
 Trepando por los arboles arriba,
 Tentandoles los ramos se mostraron,
 Verdugos de si mismos, . . . (426).

The reference in those lines is to the Philaeni brothers, who participated in the settling of a boundary dispute between Carthage and Cyrene. The two warring parties agreed to determine their new boundaries by way of a race. The agreement stipulated that a pair of runners would leave each city at the same time and that the boundaries would be set on the spot where the four runners met. The Philaeni brothers ran so fast, that they

were accused of cheating. In due course, Cyrene agreed to the new boundaries, as long as the brothers consented to be buried alive on the spot, to which they agreed. In their honor, an altar was erected where they died.¹

At the risk of sounding too enthusiastic about Villagrá's poetic ability, I believe he handled this series of parallelisms with mastery in his poem. In each of the stories he used, there is a pair of brothers (the two that departed from Aztlán in Canto II, the Zaldívares in the several cantos I have quoted above, and the Philaenis in Canto XXXIV), and a question of boundaries. For the *aztlanecos* divine intervention settled the limits between north and south;² for all the others, death was required to settle the score. In the case of the Zaldívares, the death of Juan is the spark that allows Vicente to launch war against the Acomans, seemingly crushing their rebellion (which — incidentally — Villagrá at times portrays as legitimate self-defense).³ But then, we must ask, why did Villagrá choose to save the double suicide of Témpal and Cotumbo for the end of his poem, and why did he compare their willingness to die with that of the heroic Philaenis? What boundaries are those that Témpal and Cotumbo might be setting by embracing their deaths with as much gusto as the brothers from Carthage?

To begin answering these questions, it may be worth repeating that the presence of their hanging bodies at the end of the final canto, is followed by the promise of a second part of the *Historia*:

Con cuio fuerte passo desabrido,
 Dexandolos colgados ya me es fuerça,
 Poner silencio al canto desabrido,
 Y por si vuestra Magestad insigne,
 El fin de aquesta historia ver quisiere,
 De rodillas suplico que me aguarde,
 Y tambien me perdone si tardare,
 Porque es dificil cosa que la pluma,
 Auiendo de seruiros con la lança,
 Pueda desempacharse sin tardança. (427)

As far as we know, that second part of the *Historia* was never printed or written, and thus our final vision of the new Mexico remains that of the hanging bodies of Témpal and Cotumbo. Rabasa and Quint, as we saw, interpreted this closing (open-ended as it is) as an endorsement and justification of colonial violence (Rabasa) and as a strategy of containment (Quint) that — by raising the specter of possible indigenous uprisings in the future — likewise validated the harsh punishment of the Acomans. Sound and consistent as these two readings are, my goal — as stated above as well — is to propose that Villagrá's text allows for the possibility of other readings of this final passage that

— while they may or may not reflect the author’s own personal perspective — remain nonetheless visible behind the poet’s apparent justification of violence, almost like the Puarai frescoes did behind the whitewash.

For this alternative reading of Villagrá’s ending, I would like to turn back to William Carlos Williams, first, and then — closer to the New Mexico area and to Chicano/a culture — to Fray Angélico Chávez, one of the state’s foremost historians and poets. In his passionate condemnation of the Spanish violence in the Caribbean, Williams too resorted to the image of suicide by hanging (not an epic *topos* in his case):

The Spaniards killed their kings, betrayed, raped, murdered their women and children; hounded them into the mountains. . . They took them in droves, forced them to labor. It was impossible to them — not having been born to baptism. How maddening it is to the spirit to hear: — Bands of them went into the forests, their forests, and hanged themselves to the trees. What else?
(41)

Perhaps the salient element in Williams’ rhythmic prose in this passage is the repetition of the possessive *their*: *their* kings, *their* women, *their* forests (with this last instance of the use of the possessive further highlighted by the parenthetical clause). As the passage progresses, this reiteration takes on an ominous tone, as a sort of disguised *ubi sunt*, which signals — in fact — that all those things that Williams names are (or will be) no longer theirs. In that light, it is important to note that Williams chooses not to refer to the trees (at the end of the quoted passage) as *their trees*. Something has changed already and those trees, the instrument of their deaths, apparently are not theirs anymore, but the Spaniards’.

Like Williams much later, Villagrá, too, had connected the motif of suicide by hanging to the dispossession of the land of the indigenous people by the Spanish crown. Cotumbo and Témpal, before uttering their famous epic curse, had this to say in that regard: “Gustosos quedareis, que ya cerramos, / Las puertas al viuir, y nos partimos, / Y libres nuestras tierras os dexamos” (426). It is difficult not to read these lines as a somber counterpoint to the act of possession of the land, inserted by Villagrá in Canto XIV. And like Williams much later, Villagrá had also associated the trees with the Spaniards, not the natives. Cotumbo and Témpal asked for knives to kill themselves, but they were given ropes instead, thus being forced to find a tree from which to hang.

Much more so than in Williams’ quoted passage, the tree from which Cotumbo and Témpal hang is first and foremost a symbolic tree, Judas’ tree in a sense, but more plausibly a negative inversion of the so-called “tree of life,” that is, the cross that was both cause and justification for their land dispossession. And yet, since Cotumbo and

Témpal die (like the Philaeni brothers before them) for their “country,” their characterization includes a healthy dose of indirect heroism, Rabasa’s fitting criticism notwithstanding. Hanging from a tree, Cotumbo and Témpal also turn the Acoma mesa into a sort of altar, but not the one with the cross that Vicente de Zaldívar envisioned for his brother; rather, their altar is like that of the Philaeni brothers’, one that signals a new boundary: in their case, that of an occupied land (an aspect that — to go back to the question of how Chicanos/as can embrace this poem as their own — brings the poem very close to the politics and aesthetics of the Chicano Movement).⁴

I am aware that this reading may sound somewhat farfetched. Could Gaspar de Villagrà be that critical of the colonial enterprise, the very cause he supported as a captain, a judge, a witness in the trial against the Acomans, and even as a poet? Six years ago, in a different publication, I brought attention to the many ways in which Villagrà’s *Historia* can be read as a sound and relentless critique of the colonial bureaucracy and even of Juan de Oñate as a leader.⁵ One of the most significant strategies that Villagrà used to that effect was the interpolation of legal documents, that — as I also suggested then — are the true organizing element that keeps together the close to twelve thousand lines of the poem (Martín-Rodríguez 2005: 150-52). By virtue of their appearance in a new context, these documents — that are literally re-written in order to be inserted in the poem — acquire meanings in the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* that may not have been intended by those who first produced them. Such is the case, for example, of the letters from the King and the Viceroy inserted in Canto VII. While their original intention is simply to stall Oñate’s expedition, their placement in a context in which colonial authorities are constantly censored tinges the letters with irony and leaves little doubt about our author’s disregard for them. The same can be said of the act of possession of the land, that explicitly justifies that takeover in order to “civilize the barbarians,”⁶ but that is quickly rendered suspect when inserted just a few folios after Mómopil draws the complete map of the world for the Spaniards “como si bien cursado fuera, / En nuestra mathematica mas cierta,” (Villagrà 198). In that context neither Mómopil nor those he may represent appear to be such barbarians.

But the one interpolated document I would like to focus upon is the Franciscan friars’ opinion on whether or not attacking Acoma could be considered a case of just war, a text that Villagrà reproduces in Canto XXV. The friars, as should be expected in this context, ground their evaluation of the situation in canonical laws and practices. The biblical references in their document, inserted as they are in a poem that is also replete with biblical allusions, become both authorization (in the sense of permission) and *author-ization* (in the rhetorical tradition of basing one’s opinion on past authorities).

The problem, as their fellow Franciscan Angélico Chávez noted in 1974, is that the friars' authorization is based on a false proposition, because the authorities they cite are not appropriate to the case:

The father superior of the Franciscans, when consulted according to royal protocol, averred that Oñate had a right to reimburse himself and others for any damage suffered from the Indians 'as did Moses in the defense of the Hebrews when they were maltreated by the Egyptians.' An obvious if well-meant sophism it was, there being no parallel at all between the tyrant Pharaoh and these natives whose privacy had been invaded. (48)

Since Oñate's troops cannot be compared with Moses' people, according to Chávez, and even less so the Acomans with the Egyptian oppressors, the invoked authority renders the friars' authorization doubtful.

Gaspar de Villagrà's *Historia de la nueva Mexico* has been celebrated over the centuries more for its value as a source of historical information than for any merit it may have as a literary work. Villagrà's politics, in turn, have been deemed transparent as a justification and celebration of the Spanish conquest and subjugation of the native peoples. Yet, as I have suggested above (and documented elsewhere),⁷ textual ambiguities, contradictions, and other discursive strategies in his poem that tend to destabilize meaning may not be the result of lack of artistry but a deliberate strategy aimed to criticize some aspects of the colonial enterprise.

If, as George Santayana suggested "[t]he function of history is to lend materials to politics and to poetry" (5, 66), then the ambivalences I have noted in Villagrà's account of New Mexican history may in fact give us some keys as to how to embrace his poem and his text's politics from a Chicano/a and Latino/a perspective. By giving his readers both Spanish and indigenous *original victims*, and by leaving the political contradictions of his text unresolved, Villagrà offers Chicano/a and Latino/a audiences today a multiple, conflicted genealogy in which — as in Williams' case — the victims and the slaughterers are both part of their ancestry. As such, the *Historia de la nueva Mexico* can be read not so much as an epic vision of the conquest but as an anguished expression of the role of colonial violence in creating new boundaries, new histories, new peoples, and a whole new set of discursive and critical practices, destined to deal with ambiguity and contradictions in ways that would be as painful in 1610 as they were still in 1987 in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La frontera*, a fellow hybrid text that still searches for answers to foundational violence.

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NOTES

¹ As I suggest in my edition of the poem (Villagr  2010, n. 806), Villagr  could have read about the Philaeni brothers in Juan de Orozco y Covarrubias' *Emblemas morales* (1589), though the sources for the legend are as old as Strabo.

² It could be argued that death is also present in the story of the mysterious boundary between Aztl n and the southern lands, since the exorcism of the metallic mass requires the celebration of the mass, Christianity's ultimate commemoration of death and resurrection.

³ Cf. e.g. Villagr  293.

⁴ The idea of the U.S. Southwest (or Aztl n) as an occupied territory proved very popular among Chicano/a intellectuals and artists since the 1970s. Rudolfo Acu a's *Occupied America* remains a foundational text in that regard.

⁵ Cf. "Aqui fue Troia nobles caballeros," especially pp. 151, 177, 186.

⁶ O ate's language, as reproduced by Villagr , leaves little doubt in this respect, as the following quotes would attest: "subgetando las barbaras naciones, hallanando el passo   los Euangelicos Predicadores, assegurando sus vidas y personas, vengando las injurias que los vna vez recibidos recibieren, reprimiedo y refrenando el impetu, y bestial y baruara fiereza, de los sobredichos" (223); "causa y razon bastante, quando otra no vbiera para justificar mi pretension, demas de la qual, la enmienda, correccion y castigo de los pecados contra naturaleza, y la inhumanidad que entre estas bestiales naciones se halla" (224)

⁷ Cf. Villagr  28-31.