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Experimentation and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia (review)

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***Intercultural Utopias: Public Intellectuals, Cultural Experimentation and Ethnic Pluralism in Colombia***

**Duke University Press, 2005**

**By Joanne Rappaport**

Required reading for anyone interested in indigenous cultural activism and its relationship with the nation-state (and with transnational discourses of indigenous rights), Rappaport's book emerges from a context in which anthropologists of necessity increasingly engage not with "informants" but with "public intellectuals," the umbrella term Rappaport uses to refer to a wide range of indigenous activists, from regional, urban-based native politicians to bilingual educators, indigenous catechists and local shamans. Her book is a testament to the fact that knowledge production about people is something that all people participate in, and that knowledge is never disinterested. Her work is collaborative because the very possibility of entrée into the social networks she writes about was premised on her cooperation with their political programs, and because she believes strongly in the utopian struggle for interculturalism—defined as "a political philosophy aimed at achieving interethnic dialogue based on relations of equivalence and at constructing a particular mode of indigenous citizenship in a plural nation" (7)—that indigenous public intellectuals undertake.

The book—which despite its collaborative genesis mostly reads as quite a familiar style of ethnography, albeit one of workshops and meetings—focuses on the Nasa people of south-western Colombia (with some mention of the Guambianos) and explores the political and identity positioning and discourses of, first, Nasa intellectuals who operate on the borders between local communities and regional indigenous organization, and then of *colaboradores* (non-native collaborators and solidary people). A fascinating central chapter analyzes Rappaport's multi-stranded research program with two Colombian anthropologists and two Nasa intellectuals, and explores the difficulties of legitimating forms of knowledge based on different epistemologies

(crudely speaking, native and Western, although Rappaport eschews such crudeness, emphasizing that these epistemologies are in mutual dialogue and exchange). Interculturalism, even in the relatively benign confines of a research program, remained utopian.

The remaining chapters analyze the bilingual education program of CRIC (the main regional indigenous organization) and its political program of revitalizing *lo propio* (one's own); different representations of Nasa history, including the history of the education program itself; the role of shamans and "cosmovision" (an encompassing sense of spirituality, myth, history and territory) as a component of Nasa identity and in relation to Church discourses; and recent reforms that hand some juridical powers to local indigenous authorities, creating tensions between national and indigenous spheres of legal action.

Rappaport's theoretical points make an important contribution to current debates. She highlights the fact, recognized in general terms but little appreciated in ethnographic practice, that the "indigenous movement" is not only very heterogeneous—better conceptualized as a field of contention and debate than a coherent movement—but also actively comprises non-native collaborators (advisers, anthropologists, priests, activists). She is also penetrating on the issue of essentialism, emphasizing that indigenous representations of culture are fluid and contextual, defined as much by the future (in utopian guise) as by the past, self-consciously emergent, and harnessed to political objectives connected to establishing indigenous people as national citizens and culturally distinctive at the same time. She shows how Nasa ideas about Nasa people are open and dynamic, accepting and resignifying exogenous concepts—whether in the field of law or cosmology—and adapting native ones to new uses. Such a view of identity and culture resonates with the approach outlined by Stuart Hall in the late 1980s: Rappaport's contribution is to show how such understandings are current inside the indigenous movement. Reification and essentialization of native culture may take place—as we know, as much

at the hands of the state, or perhaps NGOs, as in the minds of indigenous activists—but it is one strand in a much more complex field of identity formation.

Finally, an organizing thread for the book is the intersection between a culturalist discourse of difference and ethnic revitalization, often practiced at a local level, by those who see themselves on the “inside,” and a rights-based discourse of sovereignty and autonomy, usually linked to transnational concepts and practiced by those on the frontiers between “inside” and “outside” and those who engage directly with the institutions of the state in seeking to carve out spaces for indigenous rights. Thus the bilingual educational program falls broadly in the first camp, while regional political leaders tended to be in the second. A strength of the book is that this distinction is never reified, but is teased out in different contexts: for example, the same tension could be found within the educational program itself, between different educators and curriculum designers.

Rappaport’s book is a rich, sophisticated and much-needed ethnography of how a “social movement” works in practice. At once depressing, due to the frequent mention of assassinated indigenous leaders, it also inspires with its portrait of indomitable spirit.

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*The Subversive Tradition in Spanish Renaissance Writing*  
Bucknell University Press, 2005  
By Antonio Pérez-Romero

The appealing title of Antonio Pérez-Romero’s study, reinforced by the book’s cover art—Antonio Gisbert Pérez’s 1860 *Los Comuneros, Padilla, Bravo y Maldonado en el patíbulo*—accurately define the discourse of, and reflect the consequences that often attend the countercurrents studied. Unfortunately, the 234 solidly researched pages do not necessarily

convince; the arguments for extensive cultural subversion in the selected texts are weakened in part by the author’s seeming condescension that relegates all disagreement to the arena of “elite” (*sic*) discourse, in part by overinsistence, and in part by refashioning earlier criticism.

The book consists of eight chapters and a conclusion: “Historical Discourse and the Subversive Tradition in Spain”; “Literary-Cultural Discourse and the Subversive Tradition in Spain”; “*Triunfo de las donas* and *La historia de Grisel y Mirabella*: Idealism and Aristocracy, the Gateway for Subversive Feminism”; “*Carajicomedia*: The Erotic Urge and the Deconstruction of Idealist Language”; “*La Celestina* and Inner Desire for Equality: The Search for Lasting Relationships as Existentialist Fulfillment”; “The Subversive Tradition and the Renaissance Revolt of the Masses: The War of the Castilian Communities”; “Alfonso de Valdés: The Subversive Tradition and the Creation of the New World Order”; “*Lazarillo de Tormes*: The Masters versus the Servants.” This list is not merely descriptive but highlights an approach both Marxist and “liberatory” (the author’s word, redolent of a liberation theology that I believe here serves as a critical undercurrent). The critical foundation *per se* is not in question; even though Marxist criticism no longer carries its earlier currency, it still offers a framework for social issues that inform many literary-cultural texts. What annoys is in large measure the author’s vituperative rejection of readings that disagree with his, or those that are merely “literary” and do not incorporate an understanding of the social/sociological concerns of the period. One footnote in the chapter dedicated to *Grisel and Mirabella* refers to Cvitanovic’s 1975 comment on a “new feminism,” but Pérez-Romero adds: “but this label does not include significant subversive socioeconomic features” (250). Even if a critic refers to feminism, for example, if it doesn’t offer a socioeconomic disquisition, the author dismisses it out of hand.

As prelude, Pérez-Romero utterly rejects postmodernism and subscribes to Christopher Norris’s view of its arrogance and exclusivity (14). His moral compass in matters cultural and