PREFACE: OCTOBER 10TH 1492

When we reach the sea we'll build a bigger boat and sail north to take Trinidad away from the Spanish crown. From there we'll go and take Mexico from Cortez. What a great betrayal that will be. We will then control all of New Spain. And we will stage history as others stage plays. (Aguirre, Wrath of God)

the fiction of hegemony

Bartolomé de las Casas tells the following story of the early conquest of the Americas. The Spaniards, when they learned that there was gold in a particular town or village [. . . made] their way there at dead of night, when the inhabitants were all in bed and sound asleep and, once they got within, say, half a league of the town itself, [. . .] read out the terms of this edict, proclaiming (and only to themselves): "Leaders and citizens of such-and-such a town of this Mainland. Be it known to you that there is one true God, one Pope, and one King of Castile who is the rightful owner of all these lands. You are hereby summoned to pay allegiance, etc. Should you fail to do so, take notice that we shall make just war upon you, and your lives and liberty will be forfeit, etc." Then, in the early hours of the morning, when the poor people were still innocently abed with their wives and their children, they would irrupt into the town, setting fire to the houses [. . .] and burning the women and children alive and often the men, too, before the poor wretches realized what was happening. (33)

The edict to which Las Casas refers, and which he partly paraphrases, is the Requerimiento, formulated by legal scholar Juan López Palacios Rubios in 1512. The text was to be read by the conquistadors to justify their colonizing project. It outlines the case for the Spanish Empire's
legitimacy, based on the papal donation of the New World to Castile in 1493, and offers its indigenous addressees the choice of consent to or violent subjugation by that Empire. "We ask and require," the declaration states, "that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it" (). Its audience should then "consent and permit that these religious fathers declare and preach to you the aforesaid" ()..

But in the case described by Las Casas, it is clear that the Requerimiento has nothing to do with a project to win native consent to their own colonization. The farcical notion that the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas might deliberate on an edict read at some speed in an unfamiliar language is here taken to an extreme absurdity. Asleep in their beds, at the dead of night, with the Spaniards half a league away, they are in no position to understand the choice that the Spaniards purportedly offer, to choose consent or resistance to imperial domination. Everything takes place before consciousness can take hold, "before the poor wretches realized what was happening."

For whose benefit then is this reading, these whispers in the dark? Patricia Seed argues that the Requerimiento draws heavily on the Islamic tradition of jihad, or holy war, and as such "often led to considerable incomprehension by
traditional Christian observers both inside and outside Spain" (88). Unheard by its notional addressees, and almost as incomprehensible even to those who pronounced it, the edict's manifest content is in some sense beside the point, just as "whether the Spanish conquerors believed in it or found it personally compelling or convincing was irrelevant" (Seed 88). The text appears to seek consent and so to build a more expansive community of believers, but those to whom it offers that possibility remain out of earshot, beyond the pale of any such community, and those who are already within the circle are there irrespective of any beliefs they might hold. Like the bible proffered before the Inca Atahualpa in Cajamarca (which he threw down to the ground because it did not "speak" to him but which, as Antonio Cornejo Polar observes in Escribir en el aire, would be equally illegible to most Spaniards), the Requerimiento is not a text to be interpreted; it has meaning only in the context of the "ritual," the "protocol for conquest" (Seed 88) enacted by the Spaniards in the dark.

The edict's reading was a habit for the benefit of the Spaniards, or rather for the Spanish state, less important for the way in which it secured the subjection of the indigenous (the conquistadors' own desire for gold would make sure of that) than for the way in which it brought together the conquistadors, huddled together in an alien landscape.
The reading helped bind the affect mobilized in their search for gold, organizing it as part of an ecclesiastical, imperial, and monarchical hierarchy before the men were let loose as a war machine "irrupt[ing] into the town."

The Requerimiento is therefore part of a project to consolidate internal bonds among the Spanish conquistadors after the fact of domination; it embodies them as agents of the state. It is the conquistadors who are to assent to this fiction of hegemony, this unconvincing attempt to gain indigenous approval. Everybody knows that the text itself is unpersuasive. The text is therefore not used to persuade but rather to construct a common habitus that lies beneath ideology, and beneath hegemony. The Spaniards will at least have been singing from the same hymnbook, irrespective of their beliefs about or consent to the claims made in the hymns themselves. What seems to be a hegemonic project is at best pseudo-hegemony, the appearance or formal ritual of hegemony rather than any meaningful attempt at articulating subaltern to dominance. This is "dominance without hegemony," in Ranajit Guha's words, entailing "the fabrication of a spurious hegemony" (Dominance without Hegemony 72) in which nobody believes, but which will serve (thanks to the notarization and records that the edict itself demands) to emplot Latin America within a history generated by the European state. The subaltern will, simply, be
eliminated, its culture excluded from the ambit of a Christian universe defined in terms of the centrality and rights of the Catholic state. The threat to those rights comes from within, and from the possibility that (as depicted in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, Wrath of God*) the conquistadors themselves might establish a counter-state on American soil. Behind the *Requerimiento* is the fear of betrayal, of sedition, by the men at arms who purportedly represent the empire abroad. This pact that is no pact looks not outward but within, to subordinate and incorporate these men's power into the imperial project.

the multitude

Most analyses of colonialism's contradictions focus on the relation between the colonizer and the colonized (or subaltern), in other words between empire and its outside. But we could go further back: an analysis of Columbus's first voyage reveals the tensions within the colonial project even before the discovery itself. Empire may encounter the subaltern at its limit, but it carries a multitude within. The 1492 expedition left mainland Spain in the early morning of August 3rd; Columbus set foot in the Americas on October 12th. Most attention has, understandably, been paid to the landfall--one of those "moments in history to which one can point and say, 'At this hour, and on this day, the history of
the world was changed forever.' Such a moment occurred at two o'clock on the morning of October 12, 1492" (Momaday 14). However, it is during the passage itself, in the events of October 6th and particularly October 10th, that the whole enterprise is most precariously in the balance, its openness and indetermination most evident.

Columbus's voyage could take place only following the national closure marked by the expulsion of Jews and Moors from the Iberian peninsula. After twelve years of seeking sponsorship and support, Columbus gained it just days after Ferdinand and Isabella rode into Granada in triumph in January 1492. 1492 was a year of great movements of peoples, "swarms of refugees" (Morison 148). Jews camped around the ports and on sea-going vessels were given the order to "leave port on August 2, 1492, the day before Columbus set sail" (149). As Spain territorialized on grand scale, Columbus's small fleet the Niña, Pinta, and Santa María constituted a seemingly insignificant line of flight westward. Something always escapes.

Some of Columbus's crew had reason to flee. Tradition portrays them as convicts motivated by the royal pardon they received for signing up (Fernández-Armesto 46). Morison plays down this account of a crew "composed of desperate characters, criminals, and jailbirds," but also reports that at least four of the complement had indeed been reprieved
from death row by enlisting (142). Even the full-time seafarers operated at the margins of the law. "Like many other mariners," Columbus's main associate, Martín Alonso Pinzón, who captained the Pinta while his brother Vicente took charge of the Niña, "occasionally engaged in piracy as well as legitimate trade" (Phillips and Phillips 138). Each ship's crew was exceptionally large, perhaps double what might be expected (Cummins 55-56). This imbalance may have caused concern. In any case, the crew certainly proved troublesome to Columbus from an early stage. It is reported that even before they set sail, at least two of the men on the Pinta "had been grumbling and making difficulties," and they are suspected of having sabotaged the ship at the Canaries (Columbus 39). Once his flotilla is underway, their admiral is increasingly concerned at the possibility of mutiny. Nor is he far wrong: Bartolomé de las Casas reports that as early as September 24th, when they were almost exactly in mid-Atlantic, some of his crew argued "that the best thing of all would be to throw [Columbus] overboard one night and put it about that he had fallen while trying to take a reading of the Pole Star with his quadrant or astrolabe" (qtd. Fernández-Armesto 76; see Bedini 695).

Only landfall will definitively resolve Columbus's crew's concerns, yet land is frustratingly elusive. From September 14th there are many sure signs of land, provoking a
veritable interpretosis: there are no innocent objects in the Atlantic traversed by Columbus's convoy. On September 16th, coming across "many patches of very green seaweed, which appeared only recently to have been uprooted[, a]ll considered therefore that they were near some island" (Columbus 42). Likewise, a live crab on September 17th could be taken to be "a certain sign of land" (43). On September 25th, both Columbus and the crew were certain that land had been sighted--and fell on their knees to give thanks to God--but "what they had taken for land was no land but cloud" (47). Hence, a little over a week later, the declaration that though there had been "so many signs of land," these had been but a distraction (49). Columbus rejects the idea that they should beat about to investigate further. As Phillips and Phillips put it, he

was determined to press on westward. [. . .] He probably did this in large part to maintain his authority over the captains and their crews. [. . .] Allowing side excursions in search of islands would diminish the aura of certainty that he had been at pains to protect. (150)

Previous voyagers (notably Bartholomew Dias rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1487) had been forced by their crews to abandon further exploration; it would have been no surprise had the same happened to Columbus.

As October progresses, the situation deteriorates. What Morison calls the "incipient mutiny" of late September (208) develops fast: "Columbus and the Pinzons needed all their
moral force and prestige to prevent outbreaks or even mutiny" (210). On October 6th, in what Fernández-Armesto suggests is an "acrid interview" (50), Martín Pinzón himself questions the route they are taking, suggesting they should veer further south, but Columbus countermands his suggestions. Fuson's version of the admiral's log has him reporting: "My decision has not pleased the men, for they continue to murmur and complain. Despite their grumblings I held fast to the west" (71). The same day, in response to the near-mutinous atmosphere, with the crew of the Santa María demanding that the fleet turn for Spain, he summons a council of the other two captains; both the Pinzón brothers support the decision to continue on (see Phillips and Phillips 150-151). October 7th brings another false sighting of land, and Columbus changes his bearing slightly to the south. On the 9th he tacks north. But by October 10th, "the men could bear no more; they complained of the length of the voyage" (Columbus 51).

In Morison's words, "October 10 was the most critical day of the entire voyage, when the enterprise came nearest to failure" (214), as "all the smoldering discontent of the men flared up into open mutiny" (215). Columbus "encouraged them as best he could": he held out "high hopes of the gains they could make" and "he added that it was no use their complaining, because he had reached the Indies and must sail
on until with the help of Our Lord he discovered land" (Columbus 51). Presumably it was only by reference to the multiple signs that Columbus could claim that they had already "reached" the Indies--though if the signs could have been believed they would have seen land long before. Perhaps this is also a reference to the fact that, by any measure, the fleet was now more than 800 leagues from Spain, and Columbus had repeatedly declared that land would be sighted at 750 leagues. Even the ship captains were turning against their admiral. "The mutinous crewmen began to rattle their weapons" (Phillips and Phillips 152).

The Admiral has to forestall panic among his crew, upon whom he depends. There is no-one more vulnerable than Columbus, as he himself will later lament loudly and persistently. His strategies for containment are wearing thin. Since September 9th (just three days after leaving the Canaries) he has been maintaining a double log, with "two reckonings, one false and the other true" of the distance traveled each day (Columbus 47) because he is worried that his crew might "take fright or lose courage if the voyage were long" (41). By October 1st there had been a discrepancy of 121 leagues between Columbus's "true calculation" of the distance they had traveled and "the lower figure [. . .] shown to the men" (48). By October 11th that discrepancy will have risen to at least 195 leagues, or almost a quarter
again of the distance that the men are told they have traveled. Yet this deception falters once even the phony log shows that the fleet has ventured so much further than Columbus had predicted.

the contract

On October 10th, Columbus makes a pact with his men. The compromise Columbus suggests is that "they would continue on their westward course for two more days (or three or four; accounts vary). If they had not found land at the end of that period, they would turn back" (Phillips and Phillips 152-3). The precise details of the pact are sketchy: it is not mentioned in the admiral's log and becomes a crucial part of the long-running court case years later in which the Crown tried to argue for the Pinzón brothers' share of the voyage's success (see Morison 216-220). Thus some versions of events claim that it is Columbus who has to be encouraged to continue, and others that the Pinzón brothers were fully part of the mutiny. However, it is clear that only this last ditch attempt at compromise keeps the voyage going on October 10th 1492, and that there are good reasons why even Columbus might be losing heart. At another, crucial point at which Columbus fears he has fallen into error--when, on his second voyage, he begins to suspect that Cuba is not in fact part of
the Asian mainland--he again attempts a contract with his crew:

he called upon the ship's scrivener [. . .] to record the oath of almost every man in the fleet that Cuba was a mainland and that no island of such magnitude had ever been known. [. . .] They further swore that had they navigated further they would have encountered the Chinese [. . .] and promised to abide by the opinion to which they had sworn on pain of a fine of ten thousand maravedis and the loss by excision of their tongues. 

(Fernández-Armesto, 75)

Columbus's men are to swear their agreement; if they break this oath, they are effectively to lose their place within this newly constituted imperial regime in that, their tongues excised, they are to be denied the use of language. The pact is clearly a fiction, secured by violence. Back on October 10th of the first voyage, the fictions underlying Columbus's control over his men are breaking down: he has given them a phony account of the distance traveled and has stated that they have reached land, but the crew are no longer prepared to swear agreement. They are restive and unruly, a multitude on the verge of overthrowing their master.

Late the following night, the fleet makes landfall. But the history of Latin America, of the Latin American multitude, and of the attempts to enforce pacts that would ensure sovereignty's survival, has already begun.