The Santa María
The Voyage Ahead

- Genre
- History
- Writing
- Reading
- Monsters
- Marvels
- Multitude
GENRE
“How Do We Read?”

• Many possible answers
• How do we read, or how should we read?
• What does reading do for (or to) us?
• What kinds of readers do we want to be?
“How Do We Read?”

• Reading is non-linear
• We read in clumps or batches: groups of letters, syllables, words, phrases, paragraphs...
• We can and do go forward and back, up and down
• Book as technology
“How Do We Read?”

• Read Three Times
• First: A preliminary foray, assessment
• Second: Read for flow, plot, narrative
• Third: Re-read for detail

• Read selectively and reflectively
A Preliminary Foray

• What kind of text is this?
• To what genre does it belong?
• What expectations does it raise?

• Chart the voyage ahead
A Preliminary Foray

- History
- Log-Book
- Biography
- Letters
- Narrative
- Account
- Archive
HISTORY
History as Events or Duration

- Histoire événementielle
- History as what happens: a series of events
- Longue durée
- History as what doesn’t happen: continuity through time
History as Events or Duration

• Is the “discovery” of the New World an event?
• What should we call it?
• What’s new about the New World?
• What begins (or ends) with the discovery?

• Did Columbus know he was “making history”? 
History as Archive

• A collection of texts, deposited intentionally or otherwise
• Material from the past
• Text as object
• Hybrid, many genres: visual, cinematic; object as text
• Archive as metaphor
History as Archive

• Fractured and fragile: a mirror crack’d
• Multiple voices, some in conflict
• Incomplete, full of gaps and lacunae
• Some voices more represented than others

• What kind of archive do we have here?
History as Genre

- An attempt to make sense of the archive
- Selection: concision and judgment
- Compensation: filling in or covering over gaps

- History is never commensurate with its object
History as Narrative

• History is itself historical: meta-history
• How we think about time has its own history...
• ...as has the archive...
• ...and the ways we try to make sense of it

• How has the history of Columbus changed?
History as Narrative

- In most Romance languages, history = story
- Historia, histoire
- Other terms: relación, crónica, informe
- History as a branch of literature
- History as emplotment: a narrative logic
WRITING
The Discovery as Literary Event

• Provoked (and provokes) literature
• Obsessively written about and debated
• Todorov, *The Conquest of America*; Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*
• The role of representation
“I named the first island that I found ‘San Salvador,’ in honour of our Lord and Saviour who has granted me this miracle. The Indians call it ‘Guanahani.’ The second island I named ‘Santa María de Concepción,’ the third ‘Fernandina,’ the fourth ‘Isabela’ and the fifth ‘Juana’; thus I renamed them all.” (115)
“like our trees in Castile in April and May” (59)
“As green as those in Andalusia in the month of May. But all these trees are as different from ours as day from night.” (66)
The Discovery as Literary Event

• Columbus’s texts are full of literary devices
• How to articulate absolute novelty?
• Columbus rewrites the map
• How to erase the signs of difference?

• The arrival of the book to the Americas
“I departed on a course for the Canary Islands, from which possession of your Highnesses I intended to set out and sail until I reached the Indies, there to deliver your Highnesses’ letters to their princes and to fulfil your other commands.” (38)
Writing as Communication

- Travels bearing letters to Grand Khan
- Columbus’s assumption of a literate addressee
- Writing to the sovereign: client to patron
- The letter as genre: reciprocity
Writing as Documentation

• What, where, when, who?
• The need to record what was said and done
• Later, everything would be disputed
• Need to put things “on record”
• Awareness of European audience
“The Admiral called the two captains and the others who had landed and Rodrigo Sánchez de Segovia, and demanded that they should bear faithful witness that he had taken possession of the island—which he did—for his sovereigns the King and Queen. He further made the required declarations, which are recorded at greater length in the evidence there set down in writing.” (53)
Writing and the Law

• Immense belief in power of writing
• Rituals of possession
• Bureaucracy, administration, legitimation
• A legal title for Spain and for Columbus
• The Requerimiento (also a history lesson)
• A hegemonic project
Writing and Speech

• A spoken declaration
• Allowing for the speech of the other
• “Y no me fue contradicho”
• Columbus’s dual log
Columbus’s First Journey
Writing and Speech

• Continual problem of communication
• Dependent on signs and gestures
• And yet confidence in interpretation
• Translation to text
16 September: “many patches of green seaweed.” (42) 18 September: “a great bank of clouds, which is a sign that land is near.” (43) 21 September: “a whale, a sign that they were near land.” (45) 30 September: “Four tropic-birds came to the ship, which is a strong sign of land.” (48) 3 October: “Petrels appeared; there was much weed. [...] There had been so many signs of land.” (49)
Columbus’s Conception of the Atlantic
Reading the Sea- and Landscape

• The Atlantic Ocean is far from empty
• Nothing is casual, a matter of chance
• Everything demands interpretation
• On land, there are constant signs of gold
• Reading the body of the other
Reading as Deferral

• Meaning is endlessly deferred
• Next day, next town, next voyage
• Both a strategy and a fact of life

• In Empire, meaning becomes unmoored
MONSTERS
“They were very well built with fine bodies and handsome faces. [. . .] They are fairly tall on the whole, with fine limbs and good proportions. [. . .] They should be good servants and very intelligent, for I have observed that they soon repeat anything that is said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians. [. . .] A very fine people. [. . .] I watched them carefully to discover whether they had gold.” (55-57)
“I have not found the human monsters which many people expected. On the contrary, the whole population is very well made.” (121)
A Monstrous Absence?

- Monsters were to be expected
- But Columbus also expecting civilization
- Is the New World a mirror?
- Do mirrors produce monsters?
A Monstrous Absence?

- Is Columbus monstrous?
- Does he become so over time?
- Are King Ferdinand and Isabela monstrous?
- Is Bartolomé de Las Casas?
- What about the crew?
MARVELS
“All these islands are extremely fertile and this one is particularly so. It has many larger harbours finer than any I know in Christian lands, and many large rivers. All this is marvellous.” (116) “Hispaniola is a wonder.” (117)
All This is Marvellous

- The marvellous stands in for gold
- The marvellous is also an experience
- Incommunicability, excess, affect
- Latin America will continue to produce marvels
All This is Marvellous

• Signs taken for wonders
• Or are signs and wonders at odds?
• Does wonder block interpretation?
MULTITUDE
A Motley Crew

• Columbus’s crew more interesting
• After all they “discovered” the New World
• Motley: patchwork, diverse, undisciplined
• Threatened mutiny almost from Day One
Columbus puts down a revolt on board
A Motley Crew

- Motivated by riches and freedom
- NB this was not a “settler colonialism”
- 1492: A year of reconquista and expulsion
- A line of flight from Spain
“Here the men could bear no more; they complained of the length of the voyage. But the Admiral encouraged them as best he could, holding out high hopes of the gains they could make. He added that it was no use complaining, because he had reached the Indies and must sail on until with the help of Our Lord he discovered land.” (51)
October 10, 1492

• Two days before Columbus day
• The most crucial day of the voyage
• Resolved through a pact
• Subject of further debate and litigation later

• A precarious social contract?
“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 farther they would have encountered the Chinese.”
A Motley Crew

• Which is more monstrous?
• The sovereign or the hydra?
• Is there a utopian dimension to conquest?
• How does Empire destabilize Imperialism?