



**Patricia Seed.** *Ceremonies of Possession: Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640.* Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xviii + 199 pp. \$57.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-49748-0.



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**Published on** H-LatAm (October, 1996)

Patricia Seed's *Ceremonies of Possession: Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640* marks a fresh entry into an academic conversation about the meaning(s) of New World conquest and discovery--a conversation that has reached out increasingly to fields of semiotics and discourse theory in recent years. While the germinal seed of this interest can be traced to passages of Edmundo O'Gorman, *La invencion de America* (1958), studies of discovery and conquest emphasizing humanistic analyses of discourse, text, icon, symbol, and performance have lately flourished among a new generation of literary scholars and cultural critics.[1] *Ceremonies of Possession*, however, is the work of a broad-minded historian, and thus stands as a potential (and much-needed) bridge between literary and historical approaches to this topic. *Ceremonies of Possession* also contributes to the field of "comparative colonial studies"--an increasingly interdisciplinary sub-field of the social sciences[2]--by tackling the question of how European colonialism(s) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were outgrowths of distinctive national-cultural traditions. Remarking on one of the book's more progressive objectives, Seed writes: "Homogenizing colonialism by insist-

ing that it is a single undifferentiated European project has thus prevented us from understanding how contemporary struggles ... have taken distinct political directions in different regions of the Americas" (p. 15). By countering this universalizing tendency, Seed has laid important groundwork for future scholars interested in examining the institutional and discursive relationships linking early colonial arrangements in the New World to the later systems of imperialism that flourished worldwide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Utilizing a comparative framework to treat the explorational activities and colonial legacies of five nascent nation-states of early modern Europe, Seed's slender but dense volume attempts to isolate essential differences in 1) each European society's initial approach to the New World, 2) the nature of their first contacts with Amerindian "others," and 3) the mechanics of consolidating and maintaining their respective overseas colonies. To do so, Seed tapped three "fundamental sources": "everyday life,'...common colloquial language, and ... legal code[s]"(p. 4). To her credit, Seed has reversed the usual priorities of histori-

ans by placing an emphasis on the two former sources and by reading law codes in ways that emphasize their linkages with vernacular customs, speech, and practices. One revisionist premise of the book is that these expressions of proto-national culture played much stronger roles than did commonly inherited traditions like Greco-Roman legalism and Medieval Christianity in determining the types of arguments and symbolism of authority deployed by each nation in the New World (cf. pp. 185-87). Thus by carefully examining rituals, practices, and texts of possession against the inherited traditions that conditioned them, Seed endeavors to fashion a kind of "comparative grammar" of early European conquest and colonialism. At its starkest level, Seed's book is reducible to the following formula: "Englishmen held that they acquired rights to the New World by physical objects, Frenchmen by gestures, Spaniards by speech, Portuguese by numbers, Dutch by description" (p. 179). After summarizing the basic arguments and methods of the five main chapters, I will discuss a few of the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

#### SUMMARY

Chapter 1 ("Houses, Gardens, and Fences: Signs of English Possession in the New World") attempts to map out a distinctively English cultural complex associated with the foundation and possession of territorial units. After noting how the first written accounts of English occupation in North America prominently featured descriptions of building houses, planting gardens, and erecting fences or hedges, Seed first traces the background of these practices, commenting on their meanings in medieval custom and common law. To recover the cultural logic of these meanings, Seed probes the etymological layers and historical usages of a half-dozen key words in the English language: "improvement" (p. 24), "garden" and "gardening" (pp. 25-27), the "wild/cultivated" dichotomy (p. 28), "planting" (pp. 29-30), "husbandry" (p. 30), "replenishing" and "subduing" (pp. 31-35). In particu-

lar, Seed shows how the latter pair, derived from biblical tradition ("Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it"--Gen. 1:28), was uniquely linked to agriculture and land possession in numerous folk incantations, "field rituals," and sermons in medieval England. Without using the terms "discursive formation" or "ideology," Seed nonetheless implies that a pervasive, deep-seated cultural symbolism, centering on metaphors of gardening, accompanied and legitimated English acts of delineating territorial spaces. In the New World, Englishmen would come to regard this symbolism as self-evident and universal in the face of conflicting claims with other European nations.[3] In the end, Seed argues that English proprietorship in North America was mainly based on "clear acts" (erecting fences, hedges, and houses) and customary understandings of those acts, rather than on legalistic theories of "discovery" or "just occupation" as contained in written documents.

In contrast to the folk-derived "clear acts" of English possession, French explorers enacted multi-faceted, time-consuming ceremonies of possession, which had evolved from highly theatrical rituals of the medieval French court. Using a combination of historicist and semiotic analyses, Seed looks at the transformation of French ceremonies in the New World, and considers their function within French colonial strategies of "captivating" native populations by consent and alliance. Having consulted a handful of accounts of French encounters with indigenous peoples along the coasts of Brazil, Florida, and the Caribbean, Seed begins Chapter 2 ("Ceremonies: The Theatrical Rituals of French Political Possession") by examining the most complete account on record: Sieur Razilly's landing on the Brazilian coast in 1612. Over the course of several months, Razilly and his companions staged elaborately orchestrated religious processions, interspersed by long periods of waiting, trading, and conversing with the local Tupi inhabitants to assay the "sincerity and good affections of the Indians." Once the Razilly had received am-

ple assurance of the Tupis' intention to embrace Catholicism and join the French, a third, strictly political procession was staged: "the standard of our King of France" was planted, the Tupis were informed of the terms of their vassalage to the king, and amid a din of trumpets, tambors, and musket-fire, an alliance was sealed. In the history of cultural encounters in the New World, this sequence of ceremonies is unique for its level of theatricality and its attention to the responses of the native people involved.

In a subsequent section of this chapter, Seed sketches out the inherited traditions that undergirded such ceremonies and gave them special prominence among the French as mechanisms of possession. First, Seed establishes how the semantic field of the word "ceremony" in French--simultaneously connoting qualities of "complexity, seriousness, and order"--differed remarkably from its perjorative primary meaning of "affectation" in other European languages (pp. 48-49). Second, she looks at the history of French coronation ceremonialism from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, noting that the scale and significance of French succession rituals was unrivaled in the rest of Europe (pp. 50-54). Citing French canon and legal theorists Hotman and Bodin, who held that France had a "'successive monarchy'... rather than a hereditary monarchy," Seed argues that it was actually the coronation event, publicly performed in the presence of the masses, and not divine disposition, that confirmed and legitimated the political power of the French royal house (pp. 51-52).

Along with strategies of political alliance based on native consent, public ceremonialism served as a key mechanism for establishing and maintaining French political power in the New World. In keeping with her overall purpose, Seed argues that a historically constructed cultural logic permeated both French symbolic modes of establishing authority (ceremonies integrating the participation and feedback of subject communi-

ties) as well as French strategic modes of maintaining power (e.g., trading luxury goods or forming military alliances based on voluntary consent).

Chapter 3 ("The Requirement: A Protocol for Conquest") examines a legacy of conquest unique to Spain. The *requerimiento* was a written statement that all Spanish adventurers and colonists were obligated to read aloud (usually without benefit of translators) before subjugating indigenous peoples. Composed in 1512 by the legal scholar Juan Lopez Palacios Rubios, the requirement has long been known to students of Spanish-American history not only for being a basic source on Spanish notions of conquest as "just war," but also for its abundance of textual inconsistencies, which occasionally border on the absurd. To cite one example, the text of the requirement states: "[W]e will not compel you to turn Christians. But if you do not ... I will enter forcefully against you, and I will make war everywhere and however I can, and I will subject you to the yoke ... of authority of...." (p. 69). Thus, besides its status as a canonical historical source, the requirement is also one of history's enduring conundrums. In this chapter, Seed seeks to provide a satisfactory solution.

Notable for its etymological plumbs into key legal, martial, and political concepts, and for its rigorously cited synthesis of extant scholarship on Christian and Islamic Spain, Seed's "archaeological" inquiry into the the origins of the requirement concludes that the text was influenced by Islamic and Jewish intellectual traditions to a far greater extent than previously realized. The perplexing features of the document--which was regarded in its day by some Spaniards as "ludicrously and tragically naive (Gibson, *Spain in America*, 1966), utilized later by Protestant commentators as evidence of the depravity of the Spanish soul, and today recognized by us as idiosyncratic, if not paradoxical--are, in fact, the product of a hybridization of cultural logics alien to the main

trunk-line of Western intellectual thought.[4] Seed demonstrates how the concept of *jihād*, a term meaning "fighting according to the proper legal principles" (p. 72), approximates the requirement's notion of "just war," and how one of those "proper legal principles," the *da a* or "double summons" preceding a battle, was an Islamic precursor for the later Spanish practice of reading a formal speech prior to subjugating native Americans. Furthermore, Seed effectively maps out several plausible pathways whereby these Islamic concepts--as well as important institutions like tribute-collecting (*jizya*) (pp. 78-83), census-taking (p. 83, n. 57), and ethnically segregated townships (*ahl al-dhimma*) (pp. 84-88)--reemerged in the sixteenth century as important colonial practices and policies in Spanish America.

Although the Muslim "core" of the requirement was seriously challenged by Las Casas in his debates with Sepulveda in 1550, it was not until 1573 that significant changes of wording severed the document from its Moorish moorings (p. 95). By that time, the major part of Spain's conquest of indigenous territories had been completed. Thus, in Seed's calculus of comparative colonialism, the requirement was the most pervasive instrument for extending Spanish political power in the Americas.

Chapter 4 ("A New Sky and New Stars: Arabic and Hebrew Science, Portuguese Seamanship, and the Discovery of America") examines Portugal's use of its own Muslim and Judaic intellectual past. Whereas Spain incorporated certain legalistic-political traditions in framing its overseas colonial policies, Portugal inherited the lion's share of Iberian Arabic-Hebrew scientific traditions--a circumstance owing both to historical conditions and necessity. Prior to the Christian reconquest of western Iberia in the mid-thirteenth century, Islamic traditions of religious toleration facilitated a climate of intellectual exchange between Muslim and Jewish scholars. One outcome of these collaborations was the production of a sizable body of

Arabic scientific literature written (with commentaries) in Hebrew. Later under Christian rule, this corpus of knowledge and its Jewish caretakers would prove vital to Portuguese seafaring advances.[5]

In the fifteenth century, the challenge of navigating the unfamiliar currents, winds and tides of the southern hemisphere (as well as its unknown nighttime skies), led Portugal to be the first Christian kingdom of early modern Europe to make use of trigonometry and the astrolabe, both of which they inherited from the Muslim world. Trigonometry, for instance, had been perfected for the purpose of orienting new constructions of mosques to face toward Mecca (p. 119). In the hands of Portuguese navigators, trigonometry became an indispensable tool for establishing the exact position of caravels as they tacked in and away from shore (sometimes for weeks at a time)--a new mode of sea-travel adopted by the Portuguese in lieu of "coasting" after they encountered strong head-winds beyond Cape Bojador (pp. 108-11). Improvements to the astrolabe, notably its conversion from a nighttime to a daytime instrument for measuring the height of the sun and fixing one's latitudinal position at sea, represented an even more spectacular implementation of Islamic knowledge (pp. 120-28). Later, such breakthroughs at sea were replicated on land in the form of new surveying techniques for delineating property boundaries and the limits of political jurisdictions. Rather than being based on landscape features (rivers, hills, trees) as they were in English and Spanish colonies, Portuguese land boundaries comprised imaginary lines expressed in terms of degrees (angles) and leagues (distance). This assertion of space over place--that is, of measurements that could be independently verified by precision instruments as opposed to boundary traditions preserved by human (and thus fallible) caretakers of local knowledge--constituted one of the triumphs of Portuguese scientific imagination.

Much of Seed's presentation in this section is narratively structured like other histories of science and technology, where multiple sub-plots of technical problems and solutions, ever fortuitously converging with prior information and designs, finally culminate in the "great" discovery or invention. Here, however, Seed is less concerned with those Portuguese feats known to schoolboys (Vasco da Gama's rounding of the Cape of Good Hope or Magellan's circumnavigation of the globe; or even the lesser-known discovery of Brazil or the first accurate astronomical description of the Southern Cross), but rather with how this legacy of scientific prowess translated into unique discourses of rightful possession. At first the Portuguese held that the mere fact of "discovery" or "first sighting" conferred possession, since these feats were accomplished by means of instruments and knowledge which they alone had developed. Later, the Portuguese would legitimate possession by producing highly accurate measurements of boundaries disputed with other European powers (i.e., "fixing by numbers"). Seed shows how this unique Portuguese legacy can be discerned from the Tordesillas Compromise of 1494 to present-day Brazilian property laws.

In Chapter 5 ("Sailing in the Wake of the Portuguese"), Seed looks at the epic rise of Dutch navigation and colonial adventurism in the seventeenth century as both a continuation and a rupture with Portuguese precedents. The existence of strong commercial ties between Lisbon and Antwerp fostered the transfer of Portuguese nautical expertise, arriving either in the form of navigational treatises or as first-hand knowledge acquired by Dutch sailors serving on Portuguese vessels. Not surprisingly then, the Dutch initially adopted the Portuguese-inspired notion that "discovery" alone, in the absence of visible signs of previous inhabitation, conferred the legal right of possession. In the over-competitive seas of the seventeenth century, however, "discovery" or "first presence" arguments would prove insufficient, especially as England and France (with

their large home populations) were actively promoting "settlement" as the yardstick of legitimate possession abroad. Instead, the Dutch would eventually come to adopt the novel view that "commerce"—that is, constant sailing and trading in a specific area—was the basis for legitimating their possessions.

As in her previous chapters, Seed again delves into the etymological sub-stratum and historical usages of key words with great success. After establishing the existence of a network of denotative relations between the Dutch words for "discovery," "discrimination" (i.e., "meticulous sighting") and "description," she goes on to highlight passages in Dutch-authored travelogues and geographies that suggest connotative equivalencies between "describing" and "claiming" (pp. 161-63). According to Seed, "description" was, in fact, more than a metaphor for the Dutch; it was a mechanism of possession. It was by "industries of description" that the Dutch broadcast their overseas claims and colonial aspirations to the rest of Europe, for the best maps (bearing Dutch place-names) and the most accurate written accounts of world geography were produced in Antwerp and Amsterdam in the seventeenth century (pp. 162-65).

#### EVALUATION

Because of its ambitious scope, *Ceremonies of Possession* presented its author with overlapping challenges in the handling of sources, research design, and finished presentation. The task of comparatively exploring how national-cultural traditions influenced certain apparati of early modern colonialisms required sifting through an incredible amount of secondary historical scholarship (produced in different national contexts and languages). Moreover, primary documents left by the agents and state bureaucracies of these colonial societies differed greatly in quantity and kind. In addressing these obstacles, Seed shows herself to be resourceful and creative, crafting a

vessel capable of holding a heady swirl of disparate documentation within a cohesive whole.

In dealing with the almost prohibitive abundance of existing scholarship, Seed condensed her questions of inquiry to a manageable set of related themes: ceremonies of original possession (acts of foundation, conquests, discoveries); ceremonies for maintaining possession (processions, boundary surveys); legal and political arguments for legitimating possession; and the "technologies" used for claiming possession (cartography, astronomy, nautical science, etc.). She often uses narrative modes to introduce these themes, drawing closely on her sources to recreate case scenarios that effectively sensitize modern readers to specific social realities in the historical past. Also, rather than apply identically controlled modes of analysis to the documentation available for each society, Seed let the uneven nature of her sources determine specific approaches for each chapter. Often *Ceremonies of Possession* seems more like a collection of similar but autonomous essays. The chapter on the Spanish requirement, for example, expends far more energy tracing the Islamic-Iberian genealogy of a single text; while the chapters on French processions and English "acts of possession" focus more on performances and constructions in New World contexts. Complicating the symmetry of her analysis further, the requirement was mainly a relic of the first half of the sixteenth century, confined to first-encounter situations between Spaniards and Amerindians, while the aforesaid English and French practices were used to establish, consolidate, and maintain possession over longer periods.[6] Thus Seed's comparisons sometimes suffer a kind of apples-and-oranges syndrome. To combat this idiosyncrasy, Seed devoted a few pages at the end of each chapter (and in the case of chapter 4, creating a separate appendix) for integrating her discussions and many excursions.

Despite Seed's gift for innovative problem-solving, other challenges were not so easily re-

solved. Underlying Seed's stated purpose of treating the "rationales and legitimation ... of imperial power as cultural constructions ... hav[ing] a certain *logic* with respect to the cultural, political, economic, ecological and social *history* of each nation" (p. 13, italics mine), there is a tension, perhaps endemic to all comparative-historical studies, between essentialist and historicist modes of inquiry and argumentation. In uncovering and plotting the "logics" of different variants of early modern European colonialism (which, with some qualification, are portrayed as unitary), Seed posits the existence of collective national behaviors and inductively reduces these to a set of essential differences. Although Seed tenaciously endeavored to contextualize each country's legitimating discourses, possession ceremonies, and acquisitional technologies as historically unfolding phenomena, limitations of space (and perhaps of time and energy) prohibited her from realizing full serial analyses. As it stands, Seed's convictions about the different "national logics" that informed the apparati of early modern colonialisms are stated more conclusively than her historical reconstructions of their genealogies necessarily permit.

What distinguishes *Ceremonies of Possession* among works by historians of colonial Latin America is the weight placed on language, discourse, and culture as dynamic agents, not mere epiphenomena, in the articulation of colonial power. Seed has wandered far from the legal-political and economic-structural paths that formerly charted the study of colonialism. At the same time, the present work complements these approaches by dealing almost exclusively with the "dominant" half of the European-Indigenous equation, widely exploring and explicating the cultural field of the conquerers. By widening the definition of culture to include "familiar language, gestures, and objects," Seed's book advances us beyond older, but still common interpretations of early modern colonialism as being intellectually inspired and ideologically cemented by notions of

universal Christianity or legacies of Roman imperialism. Some may complain that *Ceremonies of Possession* overindulges in topics that have little bearing on visible forms of social change, perhaps like a medieval map girded with monsters and chimera at its margins. Perhaps. To my mind, the most apt metaphor for Seed's book is that of a *portulans* or early coastal chart drawn from the first-hand experience of mariners. As Charles Olson wrote of Columbus' cartographer in his poem "On First Looking Out Through Juan de la Cosa's Eyes": "...before La Cosa, nobody/ could have/ a mappenmunde" So too here. As a map-making endeavor, Seed's book traverses over immense stretches of documentation--four-fifths of it outside her specific area of expertise. It remains to be seen if this book will inspire interdisciplinary scholars to further explore the differences among European colonialisms and chart the linkages that exist between the symbolic and material sides of this history. I'm optimistic.

#### NOTES

[1]. Works written or edited by scholars originally trained in literary and/or cultural studies include Tzvetan Todorov's *La Conquete de l'Amerique* (1982), Rolena Adorno's *Guaman Poma: Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru* (1986), Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (1986), Stephen Greenblatt's edited *New World Encounters* (1993), Jose Rabasa's *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism* (1993), Margarita Zamora's *Reading Columbus* (1993), Francisco Javier Cevallos-Candau's edited *Coded Encounters: Writing, Gender and Ethnicity in Colonial Latin America* (1994), and Walter Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (1995).

[2]. The literature of this field includes Nicholas B. Dirks' *Conquest and Colonialism* (1992), an edited collection of essays that attempts to articulate common themes across regions, as

well as an agenda for future comparative investigations. Monographic studies like Karen Vieira Powers' *Andean Journeys: Migration, Ethnogenesis, and the State in Colonial Quito* (1995) and Vicente Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (1988), although focused on particular regions, can also be included here because their projects have been deliberately designed in light of current, general debates about colonialism and resistance, and thus generate conclusions readily accessible to scholars working outside these geographical areas.

[3]. Evidence of the persistence of this symbolism can be found in the eighteenth-century naval logs of Capt. Cook and, to a lesser degree, in the U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 (pp. 35-36).

[4]. Here Seed evokes M.M. Bahktin and Homi Bhabha in discussing hybridization as a typical mental-linguistic phenomena in colonial and multi-lingual situations (p. 94).

[5]. According to Seed, "Jewish scholars were probably politically far more acceptable to Portuguese royalty than were Islamic ones," since Portugal's mission against Islam had been envisioned as an ideological and militaristic crusade. Portuguese scientific inheritance was further aided in 1391 after a series of pogroms against Jewish communities erupted across Castile (followed in 1412 by anti-Semitic legislation in Aragon), resulting in the migration of many Jewish scholars to Lisbon over the course of the fifteenth century--the heyday of Portuguese nautical science (pp. 118-19). A century later (1496-1506), ill-advised campaigns against Jews in Portugal would play a role in debilitating Portuguese nautical and scientific superiority in Europe (pp. 135-36).

[6]. Another observation on this point: In her attempt to economize, Seed settled on a shorthand approach whereby "characteristic" forms of ceremony and practice stand in as symptomatic of national tendencies. This creates certain problems. To reduce the Spanish colonizing complex to the

requirement, for instance, is to impoverish the full variety of localized forms of possession enacted by the Spaniards. Why does Seed analyze a text for the Spanish and examine accounts of "acts" and "processions" for the English and French, respectively, when accounts of Spanish town founding-rituals, including the planting of crosses and ceremoniously "walking off" streets and plazas, abound in the archives of Latin America?

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**Citation:** John A. Crider. Review of Seed, Patricia. *Ceremonies of Possession: Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=649>



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