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## *The Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez (1690) and the Duplicitous Complicity between the Narrator, the Writer, and the Censor*

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In 1690 a book containing an uncommon narrative managed to slip by the censors and was published in Mexico City under the title of *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* (*Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez*). Written by the well known mathematician, astronomer, and man of letters, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, it told the story of a Creole boy who in 1675 abandoned his native country of San Juan de Puerto Rico embarking on a voyage that over the next fifteen years would take him around the world. Offshore of Manila he was captured by English pirates who allegedly submitted him to the most denigrating bondage. Eventually they would set him free on the Amazon River delta giving him a frigate and part of the loot. Ramírez then sailed into the Caribbean Sea and was shipwrecked in the Bacalar Coast of the Yucatan. Having survived the ordeal Ramírez's story spread throughout Mexico gaining him an audience with the Viceroy who subsequently sent Ramírez to Sigüenza. Sigüenza, who was fascinated by the story, lost no time in setting it to paper and in getting his friend Francisco

de Ayerra, the censor from the Holy Office who like Ramírez was also a native of San Juan, to clear it for publication.[1]

Thereafter, by order of the Viceroy, Ramírez was sent to the Royal Fleet of the Windward Islands and vanished from all records. The *Misfortunes* suffered a similar fate. Soon after its publication it disappeared from all bookshelves until its first reprint in Spain in 1902. Since then, twenty editions have been published in Spanish. The only English translation (*The Misadventures of Alonso Ramirez*), done by Edwin Pleasants, was published in 1962 and it is plagued with errors.[2] Not surprisingly the first narrative of circumnavigation to have as a protagonist an American (non-European) subject is practically unknown to English-speaking readers. But even in the context of Spanish, Caribbean, and Latin American letters, critical works on the book are few and mostly wanting. What follows is an attempt to begin to address some of the fundamental questions raised by a work that I read as an informal treatise on American subjectivity. My observations make reference to the first part of the text, where I find a certain duplicitous complicity between the narrator of the story (Ramírez), the writer (Sigüenza), and the censor (Ayerra). Because of the grave errors contained in the 1962 English edition I have included as an addendum to this article my own translation of the first seven pages of the 1690 edition. Those pages contain Sigüenza's dedication to the Viceroy, Ayerra's letter of approval, and the first three paragraphs of the text proper. All the quotes in the article can be found in the translation.

### **An American incunabula**

The end of the seventeenth century was a period of crisis throughout the Spanish Empire. Hardly two years had passed after the censor Francisco de Ayerra had granted approval to publish the *Misfortunes* when, following a series of devastating floods, on the 8 of June of 1692, the poor in Mexico City revolted against the authorities under the slogan of "Death to the viceroy!" The massive popular uprising, which culminated in the burning down of the royal palace and of the town hall, brought to the foreground the major internal conflicts in the viceregal world and shook the very foundations of its society. It also cut short the Conde

de Galve's tenure as viceroy of New Spain and indeed, it led to severe depression in him, followed by illness, and by the untimely end of his short life.[3]

Sigüenza, for his part, was drawn into the streets and witnessed in horror the events as he tried to desperately save from the palace fire books, documents, and precious objects. On August of the same year he was to write a letter to his friend Andrés de Pez[4] making an apocalyptic account of the events and describing in all detail the flood of the city, a solar eclipse, and the plague that destroyed the wheat crop.[5] Reading the letter against the backdrop of the *Misfortunes* shows the weight of the events of the summer of 1692 and the resulting radical readjustments they propelled in the political arena of New Spain. That contrast was enunciated in the sharpest terms in Sigüenza's writings. If the *Misfortunes* had been a work somewhat critical of the authorities, written on behalf of a poor "Spaniard" in an uncharacteristic narrative form that surprisingly managed to get by the censors, the letter was nothing short of a fierce frontal attack on the lower classes. This time Sigüenza, as a member of the Mexican Creole elites, came to stand staunchly on the side of the imperial institutions against a populace that he saw as having lost all fear and respect for the authorities. [6] "I wish that God might want to open our eyes or close theirs from this time henceforward!" Sigüenza wrote after accepting the blame on behalf of the Mexican (Creole) Spaniards for having made evident to their societal foes "the most blamable carelessness with which we live among so many commoners, while at the same time we boast of being formidable." [7] The revolt was such a big scare that it forced Sigüenza to abandon the demands that only days before he might have been willing to make on behalf of his fellow Creole countrymen. It had become clear that the viceregal order was being undermined from below. This was no time for quarreling at the top. The Indians, mulattoes, blacks, and poor Spaniards had taken the streets and set fire to the palace. Regrettably, Sigüenza lamented, "there was no longer any other Cortés who could hold them back." [8]

The events of June 1692 profoundly shook Sigüenza and other forward-looking Creoles who, like him, surely saw in the popular uprising—and imagined, probably for the first time in their lives—the possible collapse of the viceregal order and the permanent undoing of their class privileges. That blow forced Sigüenza to reassess his apprehensions of the

authorities and the complaints levied against them, directly and indirectly, in the *Misfortunes*. Only thus can it be understood why a book containing such an unusual and interesting story was practically put away and vanished from all bookshelves until being rescued from oblivion three centuries later in 1902. In the end, this classic work of the American intellectual tradition suffered almost the same fate as the *History of the Indies* of Bartolomé de Las Casas. Yet, if Las Casas' work was censored by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Sigüenza's book was condemned by a more mundane force: it was essentially trampled in the streets.

It is clear that the *Misfortunes* would have never been given a license for publication, or even written in the first place in the wake of the events of 1692. Indeed, it is very doubtful that Alonso Ramírez would have been able to reach Mexico City had he landed in the coast of Yucatán three years later, and much less that he would have been received by the Viceroy or welcomed in Sigüenza's home. Given the political climate that prevailed after the terrible summer of 1692, very probably he would have been shot on site instead of rescued from his shipwreck. Even if, as it happened, he would have been rescued by the Mayans, almost certainly he would have been arrested in Tihosuco, jailed in Valladolid, and summarily executed without a trial in Mérida as a renegade or pirate.

A product of such precarious situation, the *Misfortunes* is a jewel without equal in the records of the social, intellectual, and literary history of America. We could see it as a work that comes to close a period of certain innocence. That is how Sigüenza would have seen it. If we are to go by his own retrospective assessment, the book was the product of a world where the Mexican Creoles lived with their eyes closed. But did they, or were they in the process of opening them to the world when the popular revolt forced them to think through things more carefully? As we will see, before the mea culpa that Sigüenza professed in light of the disturbances of 1692, he had not just spoken in the first person on behalf of Ramírez: he had also attempted to speak, through Ramírez, in the name of an entire generation of those whom he saw as his fellow countrymen. Hence, more than a text that closes a cycle, this book marks the beginning of another. It is worth to point out that in this sense this work is a true anomaly because it is the opera prima of a tradition that, because of the Riot of 1692, is

born and dies prematurely with the *Misfortunes*. This makes the book a sort of American incunabula and is what explains the "noted rarity," that critics have found so difficult to describe in the *Misfortunes* since its first reprint of 1902.[9] That is also why the text has been practically unclassifiable ever since.

The uniqueness of the *Misfortunes* is undisputed. The Riot of 1692 and its memory over the succeeding generations put an end to all possibility for a commoner—Spanish, Creole or from the castes—to be the main character of any narrative work in New Spain. For that to happen again it would require waiting until the rise to power of the Creole elites in the independence wars of the nineteenth century. Even then, the *Misfortunes* was to remain a foundational work of a tradition that was stillborn as the voice behind the discourse in the nineteenth century would emanate from the top end of the social pyramid down, and not, as I argue is the case in the *Misfortunes*, from the bottom up. There is no question that this work would have never come into existence without the constitutive contribution of the word, the knowledge, and the life experience of Alonso Ramírez. In fact, judging for the equally unique place it occupies in the oeuvre of the Mexican thinker, it can be argued that the rareness of the narrative is itself the result of the great ideological leap that Sigüenza took, sometimes knowingly and others unknowingly, after coming into contact with Ramírez.

### **Of a certain kind of crafty carelessness**

All along critics have been asking the question of who in truth was the author of this work and to what genre it could be said to conform. They seem to be bent on determining, once and for all, if it is Ramírez or Sigüenza the one who deserves credit for being the man behind the legend. [10] At the same time they have been trying to place it under the banner of either a peninsular precedent, in this case the Spanish picaresque tradition, or to an overseas one, heralding it as the immediate precedent for the Latin American novel.[11] To me the entire exercise seems rather pointless considering the circumstances that gave rise to the work. Here, more than one author, there is three-in-one. Evidently, the work would not have been possible without the contribution of Ramírez's experience, Sigüenza's pen, and the manner

in which the censor Ayerra overlooked his obligations. Of course, Sigüenza is the pivotal point in this trilogy. It was he who recorded Ramírez's account and the one who presumably conspired with Ayerra to get it published. That is why I find it more fruitful to move beyond standard discussions of authorship and genre and to go in search of the technique described by the sense of carelessness that Sigüenza might have denounced in the work a couple of years later, even if that carelessness was voiced through a discourse carefully crafted to entice its audience while tailored with precision to disguise it before the censors.

Let us be clear that, in his letter to the Spanish-born Pez, Sigüenza is not speaking of a great carelessness but of a self-referential carelessness for which "we" (the Mexican Creoles) are most blamable. I think that for Sigüenza the principal blame fell on himself as the most blamable of "us" all. A careful reading between the lines of the *Misfortunes* would certainly prove this point, showing how the text carries within itself, albeit veiledly so, the formidable ambitions of power of an American subject that is strategically negotiating his position towards the European within the framework of what is for the first time a view of the World that, if very problematic, is realistic, organized, and comprehensive.

Sigüenza gave eternal life to Ramírez even when what Ramírez was looking for was a good life in this Earth. And it was precisely Earth, and plenty of sea, what Ramírez gave Sigüenza, a man of broad universal and even cosmographic vision who had never traveled outside of Mexico. But behind the simple pleasures and the obvious consequences of their relationship, there were no doubt grave and unsuspected results to this encounter. Years later Sigüenza might have been able to measure some of those results collecting them inside that sense of blameable carelessness of which he accused himself. How much was Sigüenza truly to blame for that alleged carelessness and how much of it was a result of contamination for having given shelter to a vehement traveler?

It will be always impossible to pry apart Ramírez from Sigüenza: he is the writer's chimera. But it should certainly be possible to acknowledge, to a greater extent than critics have been willing so far, the very important role played by Ramírez in shaping the opinions expressed

in the book and, more importantly, in giving him credit for infusing Sigüenza's narrative with the knowledge and the know-how of a life spent traveling through the margins of society and the frontiers of empire. If as I will argue the *Misfortunes* was carefully crafted to question and challenge the institutions of empire to the point of disobedience, approaching the authorities through a strategy of trickery and deceit that was the very art of the subterfuge, it must be accepted that Sigüenza did not act alone. In fact, we should be careful not to assign a disproportionate protagonic role to Sigüenza and his people because the one who first shuffled and dealt the cards in this game was Ramírez.

But, what is the game here? How to understand the carelessness that Sigüenza named and the rarity that has baffled the critics? The first thing that must be clear is that we are not faced with an ideal, unitary, self-referential and, to say it in vulgar terms, European subject. Here there is that and much more.

### **Warnings for approaching a bicephalus subject**

This text was apparently designed as a bidented instrument. On one end, it seems to have given voice, encouragement, and maybe even a false sense of tranquility to the Creole reader. Here is a character whose sufferings and anxieties describe the social pathology of his entire generation. Certainly, a Creole reader would have found it easy to sympathize with Ramírez's frustrations at the impossibility of promoting his interest beyond certain spheres. On the other end, the *Misfortunes* gave the European reader the illusion of being in control by looking at the work from the perspective of the viceroy and exercising the dubious pleasure of being munificent which, in the exercise of oppression has always been the inseparable complement to cruelty.

Yet, this simple dichotomy hides a far more complex and dynamic movement of forces that never reach equilibrium. Initially we could say that this is a narrative work where one voice hides in another and where the word always responds to a sophisticated strategy conceived to mislead the reader and to shield the enunciating subject inside a dense cacophony of

voices. Similarly, it could be said that this is a work where the author covers his own tracks by trampling them under the bustle of a multiplicity of colliding intentions. All this would imply that the work is always giving a false semblance of itself and that, more than an author, there is an actor behind it. Again, this is only partially the case. We can certainly read the *Misfortunes* as a simulacra. But we must go even deeper yet, least we take away from the merits of all the people involved in the production and publication of the work, unfairly diminishing the abilities of Ramírez's as a the consummate storyteller he must have been, the sophistication of Sigüenza's writing, and the sheer boldness of Ayerra as a censor.

Even then, we should not set out to make an inventory of the individual qualities of these three figures. Instead, we should explore the mechanics of their complicitous relationships, not so much in order to explain how this work managed to be published but to understand the dynamics that shaped it. Doing so would begin to reveal a text that addresses the concerns of a politically bilingual subject who, unsuspecting to his master or superiors in the structures of empire, knows well how to speak by always addressing two very distinct audiences at the same time. The imperial dynasties of Europe might have claimed for themselves the icon of the bicephalus eagle as the symbol of their aspirations to universal rulership. But here, in the complex assemblage of voices that speak in the *Misfortunes*, is the truly bicephalus subject.

Approaching that rare bird is a dubious task. At a symbolic level it entails depriving the icon of its fixity. That is, in order to capture it in its full expression, we must set the bird free, convinced that the bicephalous subject is not an ideal but an actual character even when, in the attempt to remain always variable and adaptable to any circumstance, it manifests itself as a diffused and fleeting entity. As such the heads of this beast are to be imagined as constantly in motion and could be portrayed not just facing away from each other, as is customary, but facing each other, or both facing in the same direction, to the dexter or the sinister flank as the situation may require. They could even be represented facing back or, alternatively, one forwards and the other backwards as Janus, the ancient Roman god of doorways and keeper of thresholds. Making use of that image we can now understand better

the way in which Ramírez's voice comes together with and against Sigüenza's pen, and vice versa.

Sigüenza, who was always proud of being a direct descendant of the acclaimed Spanish poet Luis de Góngora, and who strived to imitate his ornate and affected writing style known as gongorismo, found his match in Ramírez whose accounts was a "labyrinth where . . . roundabout stories were entangled" in an "undeveloped set of dismally confused events." [12] What sort of text could be expected to grow out of combining Ramírez's gift for circumlocution and Sigüenza's passion for gongorismo? Here was a bicephalus subject who threatened to interlace its necks into a double helix of confusion and intelligibility. Luckily, if we are to believe Ayerra, the result was quite the opposite. In his letter of approval the censor praised Sigüenza for having found "the golden thread to the labyrinth where such roundabout stories were entangled." Yet a careful reading of Sigüenza's own words reveals that he was not certain of having found such a thread. What is more, he was unable to judge clearly the result of his engagement with Ramírez and his stories. And he was right for, in the end, he might have gotten more than he had bargained for.

Very uncharacteristically of him, Sigüenza found himself at a lack of words to name the work he would present to the censors. That is already evident in the opening sentence of the main body of the text, a sentence that entralls us with its magical cadence (more so in Spanish than in translation, of course) and seduces us with its somewhat dishonest proposition: "I want for the curious who might read this for a few hours to be amused with the news of what caused me deadly afflictions for many years." The sentence is carefully crafted to force us to focus our attention on its indirect object. By the time we finish reading it we are anxious to know all about the "deadly afflictions" that Ramírez suffered for so many years.

Diversion is one of the most ancient strategies in the arts of war and deceit. Curiously, in this sentence diversion is easily attained by inciting the reader to participate in one of the primal and most secretly engaging of human divertissements which is to witness the suffering of

other people. Like the matador who skillfully maneuvers the beast around his body and into the desired position with his cape, Sigüenza lures the reader with a quick and graceful movement of his pen. Thus, in setting out to discover the details of poor Alonso Ramírez's plight, we neglect to pay attention to the fact that Sigüenza, speaking through Ramírez, has put in our hands something he has chosen not to describe. What is contained in the demonstrative pronoun "this" in the phrase "I want for the curious who might read this"? Is it a thing at hand or something more abstract? Whatever this is—a doubt that only further reading perhaps may be able to dispel—, that pronoun is the pivotal point of a sentence that is an indefinite pronouncement of the strategy of dissimulation that gives life to the text, a text that is thus described by its own inability or unwillingness to name itself. From that very moment the unsuspecting reader has fallen into a trap and has, at the same time, begun to be complicit in the process of his own entrapment. As we shall see, that first sentence is a simulacrum of the inner logic and of the mechanics of the text as a whole.

The second sentence is even more revealing in its attempt to conceal one voice inside another and there is so much feigning in it that it can be seen as the very face of imposture. We are led to believe that we are still listening to Ramírez when he states unequivocally that it shall not be his intention to "draw maxims and aphorisms" that could "improve the reasoning process" of the reader. Yet, these are not the words of a man who could not speak straight. According to Ayerra, who presumably met Ramírez through Sigüenza or, at best, heard of him from Sigüenza, Ramírez was the personification of circumlocution. Judging by that characterization he would have been unable to come up with such a qualification. To me, as it surely was to Ayerra, that sentence belongs to Sigüenza. Inserted into a paragraph that is the very anticipation of a shipwreck, he put it together as a life raft of sorts to avoid going down with the ship should the censors detect foul play in the text. But that still leaves open the question of what was Sigüenza hoping to achieve by hiding behind Ramírez's figure. Was he trying to fool the censors by passing undetected and blaming all oversights on Ramírez, or was he using Ramírez as a shield to battle his own demons and to conceal his true intentions? And what were Ramírez's intentions anyhow? Did Sigüenza know them? Could he have gotten to be suspicious of them? Would he have been able to tell how far he

had been moved by the encounter with the globetrotter? If in the first sentence "this" is never clear, in the second there is no way of getting a fix on the "he who feigns them."

Faced with such possible questions the third sentence comes to make a profession of faith asking the reader "for commiseration so that, bringing the pity received into the company of the self pity I felt when I was suffering them, the memory of my trials at least will become tolerable." It is Sigüenza's attempt to dispel any suspicion as to his intentions and also to avoid possible blame as an accomplice to Ramírez. The sentence reveals the uneasiness with which Sigüenza must have approached Ramírez's accounts and it shows his determination to bring under control what was clearly a very unstable story that threatened to destabilize not just his retelling of it but the very thinking and beliefs of anyone who would come into contact with it. If on the one hand the sentence is an implicit acceptance on Sigüenza's part of his suspicions of Ramírez, on the other it is also a statement of his intention to bring order through reason to a story that otherwise could be approached only through varying degrees of credulity. Yet, if that was his intention, he managed to disguise it as a votive statement that consecrates the work in the name of the third theological virtue: charity. Be it as it may, covered under the religious habit or, as a Botticellian Venus, protected by the robe of reason, the truth is that all intention has been buried under the excuse of soliciting commiseration from the reader. That is, of course, supposing that it was not Ramírez's intention to bury the truth from the start, a misdemeanor to which Sigüenza would have had to plea guilty as willing or unwilling accomplice.

In any event, the concept of commiseration enunciated here redefines the Christian notion of brotherly love upon which charity is predicated. On a more mundane level, this profession of faith responded to a well-thought-out strategy of asking the viceroy for financial relief. Ramírez might have given Sigüenza a window to the world. Arguably he was also contagious and passed to him a fever that triggered visions and led him to imagine certain practices that were unknown in Mexico City, at least inside Sigüenza's circle. No doubt Sigüenza was receptive to all. But Ramírez also presented him with the opportunity to ask direct favor from the viceroy. As it will be plainly stated in the last paragraph of the

*Misfortunes*, Sigüenza was happy to be part of the Viceroy's entourage but he would have been happier to carry his favor in a more concrete manner, monetarily speaking.

Even then, there is much more behind this text than the simple attempt to carry favor in court. For a work that is pledging all allegiance to the doctrines of the Church, the reader is given much to think about and to question independently just in the first three sentences. Just in those three sentences, a careful reader would discover a certain special disposition for constantly shifting positions. In fact, each of those three sentences describe one of the three principal and complimentary movements that are at work within the text: diversion, feigning, and disguising. In a roundabout way, with all the grace of his gongorismo style, Sigüenza claims to be totally disinterested in introducing the maxims and aphorism that the authorities would certainly censor. But, he is showing his readers how to move in ways that did not fit the established protocols. Curiously, that special inclination to shifting position, be it as a strategy of survival or as a way to obtain advancement, had its most shining example at the time in the practice of changing colors upon which the art and trade of piracy was predicated.

As a sort of pirate ship, this text is already breaking all protocols. Doing precisely that which it states it will not do, it manages to outmaneuver the authorities in order to "improve the mind" of the reader. Eventually, as the story reaches its climax in the shipwreck, its subversive character will become more evident. As readers, we set out into the shipwreck of our minds and its conventions, and we will be increasingly disposed to fall into a trap that will force us to re-read the text itself, placing it under careful scrutiny the second time around. More than anything, in this sense, the *Misfortunes* can be considered a didactic book and it can even be read as an informal treatise on American subjectivity. But how is this trap set up, and who is its intended prey?

Already in the first paragraph an economy of complex exchange has been established. The reader is enticed to exercise his curiosity and promised to be entertained for a few hours with the description of the trials suffered by Ramírez over many years. In exchange the text

asks for the reader's sympathy so as to alleviate the suffering of its main character. Yet, on closer inspection, this last proposition has no validity in the context of the work. Ramírez might well have asked for sympathy every time he told his story. Supposedly he complained to Sigüenza about families in Mérida that always sought to have him finish his story before a meal so as not to have to invite him to the table. But, even when one demands sympathy from the reader, how are those sympathies supposed to be received by the person who the main character represents? In this particular case, by the time the work was placed in the hands of the Count of Galve, and following the precise orders given by him, Ramírez was already on his way out of Mexico preparing to ship out with the Royal Fleet of the Windward Islands. At that point, only Sigüenza could have hoped to be the beneficiary of any such commiseration and only then, as the text leads us to believe, in the form of a favor from the Viceroy.

But what about the other readers? How did Sigüenza hope to receive from them any pity worth something to him? Perhaps it was a different type of sympathy that he was looking to provoke in the Mexican reader. Yet, the only other type of sympathy that could be had here is the one derived from the reader's identification with the character. That form of sympathy is the one that would lead to a good understanding of his plight and to the reader's acceptance and identification with the cause or, in this case, with the true misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez. That is precisely the type of understanding that encourages a reasonable person to construct maxims and aphorisms derived from the experience at hand. Those would be precisely the type of sympathies that the censors were charged with discouraging by prohibiting the publication of any text that put into question in whatever way the institutions of empire.

Such a reading of the *Misfortunes* would transform the appeal for commiseration into an act of treason, and the sense of brotherly love upon which charity is predicated into a call to mutiny. ¿Could this be the "most blamable carelessness" of which Sigüenza would speak a couple of years later? Accepting the invitation to that reading would entail getting entangled in the story in the manner of the bicephalous subject, much in the same way as we are

already being shown through the complicit association of Ramírez's character and Sigüenza's figure. All of this brings forth again the question of how this book managed to be published. How are we to understand the way in which it was slipped passed the censors in a maneuver that at a minimum placed on the line the reputation and offices of Sigüenza and Ayerra? Tackling that question requires taking a closer look at the roles played by Ramírez, Sigüenza, and Ayerra in the strategic construction of the work.

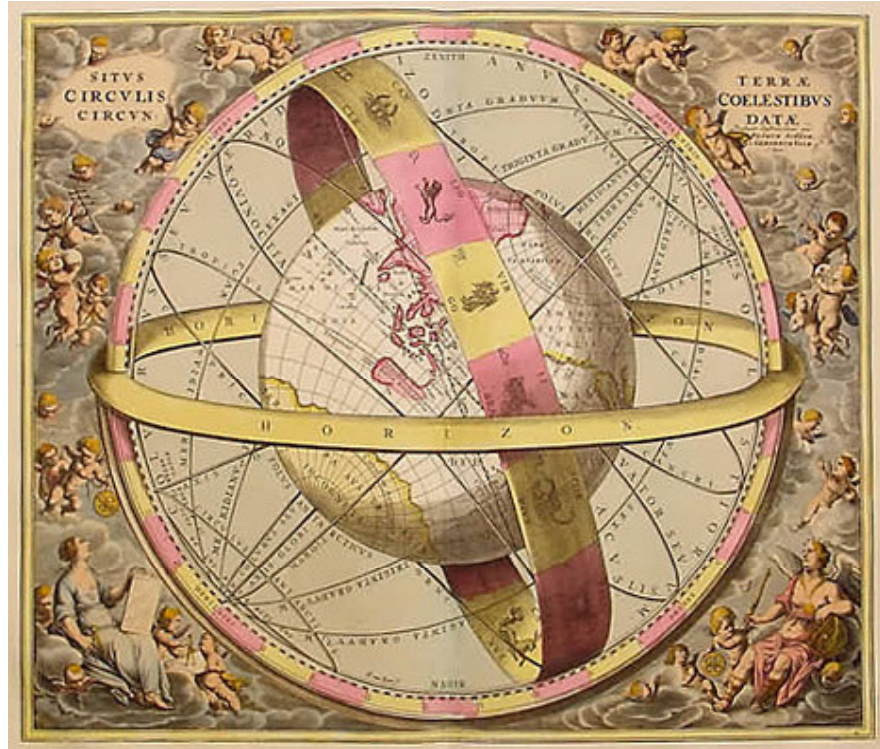
### **The censor's judgment, or the duplicitous complicity between multiple story tellers**

This book contains a partial description of the account Ramírez gave to Sigüenza. We will never know what details in that description were deemed by Sigüenza to be minor or problematic enough to be left out of the book. Much less will we ever know the details of a story of twenty seven years that Ramírez omitted or chose to keep from Sigüenza in the first place. We know, however, because the book so states, that Ramírez told his story repeatedly before he got to Mexico City. This means that the story grew, as all stories do, with every retelling and that Ramírez, in turn, grew as a storyteller cleaning up, polishing and giving luster to the history of his life and sufferings before it fell in the hands of Sigüenza. In the end, we can be sure that the *Misfortunes* is the only published version. But it was not the only version because, in its day, this story went from mouth to mouth, and it grew and would continue to grow in Ramírez's countless retellings to the end of his life. If it is easy to point out that Sigüenza took possession of the story by writing it down and that, as we will see, he ran with it a great distance, it is also possible to argue that in Ramírez's subsequent versions the story must have ended up catching and claiming as a prize not just Sigüenza himself but much more, including perhaps the very unique textual iteration of one of the intermediate versions that is the printed edition of 1690. Who can doubt that upon leaving Mexico in 1690 Alonso Ramírez would have boasted that his story was to be published in the viceregal capital, written by none other than the most towering academic authority of the day who was, at the same time, one of the principal figures in the viceroy's entourage?

In the end, Ramírez left Mexico with his story. But he left many stories behind, most notably the one to be published by the Heirs to the Widow of Hernando Calderón a few months after his departure. That account was profoundly transformed by Sigüenza. One of the most significant interventions was to give a linear chronological order to a story that according to Ayerra was all confused. Ayerra also states in his statement of approval that Sigüenza inserted into the account pieces of geographic and hydrographic observations which he had prepared before having met Ramírez. But if Ayerra was willing to give up some of the secrets to the construction of the narrative, Sigüenza's intention was clearly to conceal them. The decision to mask his reorganized, edited, and "improved" version of Ramírez's story as a testimonial account in the first person did not respond exclusively to aesthetic concerns. It was also part of a general movement through which the writer, exercising his power as chronicler, translator, and decipherer of the stories told to him by an illiterate subject, was also displaying a certain Creole will to power over the viceregal world at large. In the book the entire movement smells of conspiracy as Ayerra intervenes to plug any holes that Sigüenza might have overlooked. Yet, once more, a critical reader must tread carefully, keeping in mind that the illiterate and elusive Ramírez might still be the one voice that speaks more forcefully under the scaffolding placed by Sigüenza to hold up and to cover up certain inconsistencies in the story. Still, is it not also possible to suppose that there might have been a wider conspiracy and that in certain parts of the text, if not running through it as its very backbone, Ramírez, Sigüenza and Ayerra are one and the same in their aims and intentions?

It cannot be denied that this text is extremely open and dynamic and that it responds to a complex and very uncommon set of forces in movement. As in the map of "The Earth and its celestial circles" by Andreas Cellarius, originally published in the *Harmonia Macrocosmica* in 1661,[13] there are here two principal boundaries defining a central object. In the map, the rotation of the globe has been frozen to display the East Indies—the scenario of Ramírez's major troubles in the story—while the Earth is framed by the two great circles of the celestial sphere: the movement of the constellations in the heavens, and the horizon plane

that, cutting through the center of the planet, frames the trajectory of the stars in the sky. In the book, the story of Ramírez's voyage will revolve framed by a similar conjunction



Andreas Cellarius, "The Earth and its celestial circles," 1661.

between his fateful star and the limit and possibilities of his willfulness so that the cycle of hardships he is to endure will challenge and aim to eclipse the otherwise glorious feat of circumnavigating the globe. Yet, the fluctuations in intensity of the first cycle will not always correspond to the changing speed of displacement in the second, though both movements will be seemingly locked into a relationship of inverse proportionality at a symbolic level: the closer Ramírez gets to the great feat of rounding off the globe—and later to the unending recapitulation of the story—, the more intense will be the hardships he endures in the realization of what is seen evermore clearly by the reader as the inevitable failure of his enterprise.

As those forces check each other in a continuous succession of asymmetric encounters convincing the reader that poor Ramírez's star gravitates by being drawn ever closer to misfortune, this voyage of circumnavigation ends, as the title already forewarns, in a shipwreck. But, contrary to what the title may suggest, the book does not end there. Rather, it is at that point where the text begins to offer clues about its own complexities and about the profound contradictions between the story told and retold, and whatever might have been the true events that happened in the life of its protagonist. It is as if the book itself had run aground revealing some of the secrets to its assemblage through the fissures in its binding. If at first the two forces already defined, fortune and willfulness, appeared to conspire to submit Ramírez to the most predestined unhappiness, they would now suffer a radical transformation in their proportions and effects: in the Bacalar Coast Ramírez will be invested with the power of the most radical and outstanding individual action.

In the Yucatan Ramírez will attempt to crown the so far lackluster gest of circumnavigation trying to place the world upside down. After having followed him in his less than heroic voyage around the world, in which he drifted as a piece of cork without a course while being followed by his dark star, suddenly the reader is surprised to see the protagonist reveal a side of his personality until then unknown. In a moment of desperation Ramírez will take control of his actions and attempt to impose his will not only over what the text refers to as the fatality of his star, but also upon the lives of his crew and on a incommensurable, unsheltering, and incomprehensible landscape. The episode thus becomes the *mise en scene* of the Creole's will to own the country and to control the destinies of all its peoples and castes. That total transformation in Ramírez should lead the reader, specifically the Creole if not necessarily the Spanish one, to realize that until then he had approached the text with timidity, taking both Ramírez and Sigüenza at their word. He is bound to question who Ramírez really was, what did he actually do, and who did he wish to be after all. Thus, in the midst of the shipwreck, the predisposed reader will come to question the veracity of the story and to ask what the book is really about. This revelation will force him in that very moment to begin to re-read the text, to read it backwards from that point, and to place everything it says into question. As never before in a colonial text, the *Misfortunes* provokes

the reader with the possibility of taking the reins in the interpretation and deciphering of a text.

In this sense, the *Misfortunes* is an effrontery and it was clearly set up as a trap. Once inside, startled and with wounded pride the reader has no choice but to begin rereading the text between the lines. If at the start of the book Sigüenza asked his readers to suspend all judgment, now he is forcing them to reclaim it with a vengeance. As the scientist he was, he is placing the viceregal order in the hands of his readers and challenging them to experiment with it. "Go ahead, its yours," he seems to be saying. It is as if the reader had in his hands the *Harmonia Macrocosmica* displaying Cellarius' map and Sigüenza were asking him to turn it one hundred and eighty degrees so as to invert the orientation of the rotational axis of the Earth. Could this have been a manifestation of that most blamable carelessness that he would come to regret three years later following the revolt of 1692?

Ultimately, in the book, Ramírez's character will be unable to make his will triumph, to attain and maintain the equilibrium of the world he turned upside down with the complicit assistance of Sigüenza. This is by no means the unabashed enunciation of the European Ideal representatively embodied in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611) in the character of Prospero, who commands men, nature, and the spirits to exit the shipwreck and return victorious to reclaim the dukedom of Milan.[14] Neither is it the disingenuous morality tale in Defoe's *Crusoe* (1719) where deliverance from maroonage heralds a new age of prosperity in the Plantation and dispels English legal and religious anxieties concerning "racial mixing" that could lead to the corruption of Englishness or to bestowing some degree of Englishness—that is, of rights—upon the slaves in the plantation. To the contrary, there is a true and profound experience behind this text that speaks of an American deed and breeding. In any event, the European text that is closest to the *Misfortunes* in character and importance is perhaps *A New Voyage Round the World* which chronicles the trips made by the English pirate William Dampier between 1679 and 1691, coinciding with Ramírez's trip of 1675 to 1690.

In practice, having gone around the world no doubt led the shipwrecked Ramírez to understand—as did Sigüenza by coming into contact with him and his stories—that such a voyage inevitably results in the very possibility of the most radical transformation of the person and, in this case, of the American (colonial) subject who is the one that truly ends up standing on its head in this exercise. In a sense, this is the trap that takes the reader out of his cage: as the shipwreck that is announced in the title, this exercise is designed to run aground the reader's ship. The story that is initially advertised as a "pitiful pilgrimage" is going to set the reader in search of his own lost steps in a voyage of inquiry and self-discovery. At the same time, the text that Sigüenza describes by a plain "this" remains forever open as an inexhaustible quarry of re-readings any of which imply a greater degree of distrust and challenge of all that could be doubted.

All this should be clear to the reader even if the censors did not perceive it or, what is more likely, decided to ignore it. What will never be satisfactorily ascertained, is precisely that which keeps the book forever open, that is, the degree to which Ramírez suffered and tolerated the hardships to which supposedly he was subjected, and how far the events behind the text were censored and refashioned, both by him and Sigüenza, in their attempts to turn their respective versions of the story into an instrument for identifying and redressing, both symbolically and in actuality, the causes of their unhappiness and of their social and political misfortunes. This is proof that both were skilled at careening their respective versions of a corky story that never sinks and that, like a pirate ship, has surprised, confused, and deceived more than one reader.

That is why I argue that the truly "noted rarity" of this work lies in the duplicitous complicity between the teller of the story (Ramírez), the writer of the account (Sigüenza), and the book's censor (Ayerra). More than a secret compact between these agents what this relationship describes is a movement of triangulation where the distance between two points given or presumably known (A and B), and the opening of the angles that these points describe in relation with a third place (C), is constantly changing. That is why we can never understand the text solely from the perspective of one of its three co-authors. But if, even

when conscious of this, we would want to consider the possibility of fixing the exact location of more than one place at a time, we still would be unable to control the dynamic play between three agents that are never defined by the distance that separates them but by the gracefulness with which they move in relation to each other and by the cleverness with which they sometimes manage to be taken for another. Here we find the clearest manifestation of the ways of that whom I call the bicephalous subject. As in this model of triangulation were it is seemingly impossible to stabilize or close the triangle, the true head of the bicephalus subject lies always in a third place that is safest to the extent that it is more undefined and freer to the extent that it is more dynamic.

That is why the *Misfortunes* has been such a formidable challenge for those who have read it in the European way, that is, for those who have approached it as an American curiosity. In terms of use and abuse the same could be said for a certain Usonian<sup>[15]</sup> reading that has tended to see the text as an abnormality of sorts in the literary tradition of an ill-labeled "Spanish America." This work has never shared its delights with such readers. But for those who have approached the text without such doubts the *Misfortunes* has been quite a revelation. Indeed, this work can cause great fascination and the sort of loyalty and enthusiasm that one feels at being made privy to a well kept secret. But to get there we need to let ourselves go, and we need to want to go with those who invite us. In a somewhat preposterous way we need to want to set out in the direction of an assured shipwreck.

The invitation to navigate without being able to plot our position is a very untrustworthy proposal. That is why, more than a chronicle of a well announced shipwreck this text is an invitation to be shipwrecked. But it is not the type where each man is to be left to his own resources. Here, the movement of the bicephalous subject describes a mutinous attitude that would encourage a certain type of reader to approach the *Misfortunes* as an invitation to disobedience, inevitably turning him into an accomplice.

## **A discriminating text, a crafty trap**

The invitation to disobedience comes as a trap into which the predisposed reader falls without warning. Sigüenza is skillful. He sets the trap at the point of no return where, according to his carefully calculated manipulations in the order and structure of the story, a certain type of reader already should have come to identify with the protagonist on account of his terrible bad luck, and to sympathize fully with the anguish and suffering it brought him. Evidently, Sigüenza was primarily targeting an American public, and more specifically, a Mexican Creole reader. A European reader—or a Europeanizing reading of the text—would have overlooked such possibilities preferring the secret pleasures of witnessing the suffering of a subordinate in the socioracial hierarchies of the imperial order, approaching the text as a *divertissement* instead of as a treasure trove of new possibilities. (Similarly it could be said of those who still approach the *Misfortunes* with the same long-standing Eurocentric prejudices or, of those who read the work from a Usonian perspective which, in the context of modern hemispheric relations amounts to an even more perverse imperial gaze). Sigüenza was counting on precisely such a conditioned response on the part of a reader that according to protocol had to be treated with all deference. That is why the work is dedicated though not precisely destined for the viceroy. And that is how in the *Misfortunes* the bicephalous subject becomes the keeper of the threshold of intelligibility, separating one group of readers from another and giving them each a different measure of understanding.

But, how can one be deceived and another enticed in one same story? In this case it would be by choosing very carefully the right bait for the trap, by dangling in front of the reader the most wretched experience suffered by Ramírez during the course of his shipwreck and maroonage in the Coast of Bacalar. It would also be necessary to select the right trigger mechanism which is what Sigüenza did by choosing to strike the blow at the point of no return, when the reader is totally convinced of the veracity of the story at the conclusion of the great gest of circumnavigation. In addition, the precise opening for the mouth of the trap would need to be set. Here the role played by Ayerra was crucial as the trap was tailored to his own measurements. In his letter of approval the censor confessed that "if at first I went

into it [the narrative] with [a sense of] obligation and curiosity, in time, with such variety of subjects, temporal arrangement and structure, I welcomed as a priceless gift what was announced as a studious task." Ayerra knew all about the value of that priceless gift. He was not only a close friend of Sigüenza but also, as he himself acknowledges in the letter of approval, a fellow countryman of Ramírez. Between the three of them they saw a world that for the first time they as a group felt confident to claim as their own. This was not the World that Ramírez had sailed through but rather the world from where he set sail and to which he came back to moor, and once on land, to carefully survey with the instruments of knowledge he learned to manage during the voyage. Ayerra's proximity to Sigüenza and to Ramírez, which was surely as close in actuality as it is veiled in the text, makes him not only the first reader of Sigüenza's version but also its first accomplice.

Surprisingly, no critic to date has paid any attention to Ayerra's letter of approval and to the role it plays in the work. Ayerra's boldness in granting the license for the publication of the work, that, as I will show, bordered on the dereliction of his duty in his service to the Holy Office of the Inquisition, makes the letter a key component of the work. Let it be clear that Ayerra did not just turn a blind eye. His interest in the publication of the *Misfortunes* went beyond simply paying back a debt of gratitude to an old friend. In fact, he is one of the members of the triumvirate responsible for the authorship of the work since we gain access to the text by his grace and careful maneuvering in clearing the manuscript for publication. But it is even more important to recognize that we enter it through his gaze since he was and always will be the first reader and, as it is clear in his letter, is also the official usher who takes the next reader, and every reader after that, into the narrative with precise instructions that will lead some of them directly into Sigüenza's trap. Moreover, the letter is one of the three archways the reader must traverse in order to enter into the text. The other two are Sigüenza's dedication of the work to the Viceroy and the paragraph that begins the account as such.

In the letter Ayerra gives important clues for understanding the narrative. After all, the best accomplices are always careful readers. There he states that Ramírez's initial version of the

story was a "labyrinth where ... roundabout stories were entangled," an "undeveloped set of dismally confused events" to which Sigüenza gave "sense and understanding." This statement already belies the high probability of Ayerra having known Ramírez personally and possibly having heard some of his versions of the story. This is not difficult to imagine given his friendship with Sigüenza. In any event, what is important here is that Ayerra is practically giving faith of the way in which the two main sources of the work came together in a joint enterprise. On one side was Ramírez who seemed to have had a gift for circumlocution, a talent that might have helped him save his life more than once during his long voyage. Of course, Ayerra as a man of letters presents the trait as a defect, insinuating that Ramírez was the sort of person who got increasingly entangled the more he tried to explain himself. On another side was Sigüenza who unabashedly set out to reduce the dismally confused events in the life of Ramírez to a narrative order of his own making. The first one, if we are to believe Sigüenza, tried to reach happiness by being reckless. The second one, according to Ayerra, tried by being diligent. Whomever would try to pass through this crossfire would run the grave risk of being out in the open without any cover as between the two of them, with Ayerra guarding their backs, they have placed under their sights the entire continuum of human endeavor.

## **"If"**

Of course, before anyone else could enter the space opened up by this text, proper protocol required for the work to be offered to its "great reader," that is, to the Count of Galve himself. If Ayerra opened the back door to the rest of us, Sigüenza in his gongorismo style would make sure that the front door would open into a completely different type of work for the viceroy and his people. This much is already evident in the dedication of the work which contains the most cumbersome passage in the entire book. Beyond the intention of paying the bombastic homage that was common at the time, the paragraph is carefully crafted with the intention of deviating the attention of a certain reader, and more precisely of the authorities represented by the figure of the viceroy, towards the possible errors that could be contained in the technical descriptions that Sigüenza inserted in the text as useful

and complementary information to Ramírez's account. Fearful of "the high judgment," Sigüenza tries to direct the viceroy's attention far away from the exercise of turning the world upside down, and from the pleasures of the duplicitous complicity with which he is going to entice his Creole readers. Moreover, Sigüenza does not personally dedicate the work to the viceroy. Just in case anyone might find fault with it, he does so "in the name of [the source] who gave me the subject matter to write about it," that is in the name of Ramírez who at the time the book was published presumably was already on his way to an almost certain death.

This double play strategy is already at work in the counterpoint unleashed in the two aphorisms that cap the first sentence of the dedication and, thereby, also the book: "If happiness is often the consequence of temerity, and the fault that exculpates the error is rare..." A first reading of this leading line finds Sigüenza approaching the figure of the viceroy with caution and reverence. He does not want to err by thinking that the *Misfortunes* will receive approval simply on account of the praise given by the Count of Galve to his treatise, the *Libra astronómica y filosófica*, published earlier that same year. Of course, here Sigüenza is begging the question. All the meanwhile he is trying to err on the side of caution so as not to be shown committing the truly "unpardonable fault" of trying to outsmart the authorities in court. As part of his strategy of survival he is launching himself boldly in search of the viceroy's munificence, hoping to be deserving of it and of the happiness that could be derived from it. The boldest part of this enunciation is not the begging of the question but the begging that is implicit in his open desire to be the beneficiary of the viceroy's munificence. As it will become clear at the very end of the *Misfortunes*, even if behind the scenes he is biting the hand that feeds him, Sigüenza is openly asking for the financial support that would allow him to guarantee his happiness.

A second reading is already possible right from the start. Simply put, there are sufficient elements in the title to give the reader a sense of what the story might be about, chiefly among these, the idea of misfortune as the opposite of fortune, that is, of the attainment and possession of material goods the enjoyment of which forms the basis of the concept of

happiness. Curiously, though not surprisingly given Sigüenza's training, the phrase that sets the book in motion is constructed as a scientific or mathematical assumption where happiness is measured as a function of temerity. Moreover it is postulated in conditional terms: "If happiness is often the consequence of temerity." The reader could approach this statement as a warning. Was Sigüenza trying to set a moral tone to the work by pointing out to the reader that what follows is precisely an example of temerity leading directly into a tempest and, thus, to the most categorical infelicity? But what if we were to treat this phrase as a challenge? Is it not possible that Sigüenza might have wanted to incite his readers to adopt a temerous attitude and to throw themselves boldly into the story in search of an otherwise evasive sense of happiness? Regardless of what the case may be, this text requires the reader to take a leap of faith. In a way, the entire work stands on the conjunction from which it is launched, on that "If" that invites the reader from the very start to participate in the duplicitous complicity that acquires concrete shape in the relationship between, and in the continuous re-writing of the narrator, the writer, the censor, and the reader-re-reader.

### **Against literature**

By now it is clear that this work breaks with the forms of European and American literature of the day. It is not a *relación* or a novel, a biography, an essay, or a treatise. But it contains elements of all. Here a new tradition is founded based on the unsuspected compromising of the discursive practices of power in the colonial world. We are before a discourse that, fearful of the "high judgment" of authority, tries to define and set in motion a veiled way of judging the authorities. At least in prose, this work has no immediate ancestor or direct offspring. In truth, if Ayerra points to Ramírez's story as "a case that has not happened before," we could say the same about the text: this is the first great work of a new trajectory in American letters that arrived with much promise only if to die at birth due, as I argue, to the events of 1692. The radical transformative power of this text was such that it even convinced the inquisitor of its usefulness as a tool of interrogation, recruiting him in complicity, and turning him into the first major advocate for a work he was given the order to censor. Thus his opinion on "what can be useful to look into in writing" reveals the true

enliven disposition of the censor who strangely comes to see himself, so to speak, making inquisition on his own condition as a Creole who, like Ramírez, came from the Windward Islands.

Unlike the contemporary examples cited earlier (Shakespeare, Defoe, and Dampier) and distancing itself from Old World precedents going back to Classical Antiquity, in this text the island world is not the imaginary place whereupon the theater of all possibility is staged, the placeless site where the ideal is shaped in the most elaborate moral or utopian versions of the (nation)state, or the space of adventure where the human condition is defined from the perspective of a European subject who has free reign of action in an exotic realm where everything, as in the scriptural Garden of Paradise, was placed there by a god for the delight and edification of his chosen people. Quite the contrary, in the *Misfortunes* the island, specifically the fortified harbor town of San Juan, is a very real place that holds no promise and that must be fled at the earliest possible age. It is as if the island placed a curse on the native-born. Nothing could be farther from being a "chosen one," that is from being a member of any nation, ancient or modern, or from being entitled to citizenship rights in a city (state), real or imagined.

As such the *Misfortunes* is seldom a story in search of equilibrium and stability. Quite the contrary, everything Ramírez touches comes undone, even the ground upon which he stands. This does not mean that this is a story without a purpose, or a shallow narrative whose only aim is to destabilize all that may appear solid or certain. This text is more than an attempt to commit treason against tradition and in many ways it is richer than the ideological conventions it may seem to be challenging.

There is no doubt that Ramírez got to México at a good time. We know that when the traveler was received by the viceroy Sigüenza was indisposed and reclusive. Most probably he was depressed since, as we know, the viceroy decided to send Ramírez his way to cheer him up. Sigüenza knew well that condition, known back then as melancholia. In him it responded to his indignation at not being officially appreciated for what he thought himself

to be worth. Because of this we can infer with a good measure of certainty that Sigüenza was particularly receptive to Ramírez's stories. As the work reveals, he was able to recognize in him a great ability to navigate the ideological obstacles that American thought had to pass through. In other words, Sigüenza saw his reflection—or his shadow—in Ramírez. This realization was enough to spring him out of bed and into action. Otherwise it cannot be explained how in less than a month and-a-half Sigüenza was able to put forth—and sneak pass the censors—such a complex and politically refined work.

Yet, the truly noteworthy in this case is that Ayerra, the censor, also saw himself reflected in his countryman's ordeal. It is not surprising then that he would get excited to see in the work an interesting relationship between the search for happiness—at a personal and maybe even at a collective level—and the misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez, and that consequently he would choose to compare these to those of Aeneas as the founder he was of new civilizations. But as a censor, or as a censor of censors, he was also wise enough to compare Ramírez with Job, who is the best biblical embodiment of life as a succession of great misfortunes, the man who always chose to accept his lot and be subservient to the divine over individual benefit and convenience. However, Ayerra quotes from the 19th book, right at the moment when Job discovers the voice that will speak on his behalf, the voice of his redeemer. That is a moment of unparalleled hope, a turning point where the otherwise unfortunate Job has found someone to act in his favor by yielding the sword of judgment against his detractors. Who can deny that behind all appearances there is in the duplicitous complicity between Ramírez, Sigüenza, and Ayerra, an implicit denunciation and a claim to justice that is carefully enunciated on behalf of an American subject? A careful reading of the work would show that Ayerra was in haste when he judged the book to contain "nothing worth censoring."

### **About the translation**

This translation is based on my own transcription and correction of the original Spanish edition of 1690 and on my revision of all the subsequent editions in Spanish. At all times I

have proceeded with the translation without first consulting Pleasants' 1962 English version of the text which is plagued by grave errors and omissions and is practically unreadable.

While I have tried to be as loyal to the original Spanish edition in both content and form, I have nonetheless tried to adapt the language to modern usage and for purposes of clarity I have made corrections to the style and punctuation of the original.

Misfortunes[16]  
that  
Alonso Ramírez,  
a native of the city of San Juan  
Puerto Rico,  
suffered, both at the hands of English pirates who captured him  
in the Philippine Islands  
as well as by sailing on his own and without a course until  
running aground in the coast of Yucatan,  
in this way having managed to travel around the World.

Described by  
don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora,  
Cosmographer and Professor of Mathematics  
to the King Our Lord in the Mexican Academy.

[Published] under license in Mexico  
by the Heirs to the Widow of Bernardo Calderón, in the street of  
San Agustín. Year of 1690.

To the most excellent señor don Gaspar de Sandoval Cerda Silva y Mendoza [17]

Count of Galve,[18] (acting) lord of his majesty's bedchamber, knight commander of  
Zalamea,[19] alderman[20] in the Order and Cavalry of Alcántara, governor in perpetuity of

the royal castles, gates, and bridges of the city of Toledo, and of the castle and towers of [the city of] León, lord of the towns of Tórtola[21] and Sacedón,[22] viceroy, governor, and captain general of New Spain, and president of the royal chancellery of Mexico, etc.

If happiness is often the consequence of temerity, and the fault that exculpates the error is rare,[23] in order to presume to be the recipient of Your Excellency's approval I had abundant motives not to offset myself—so as not to commit an unpardonable fault—with all the praise that your understanding, more careful than discrete, has bestowed on the *Libra astronómica y filosófica*, which under the protection of Your Excellency's patronage I surrendered to the printers this same year. And if Your Excellency graciously lent his ears to the compendium given by he who was the sufferer, now that in a more wordy account I represent it before your eyes, how can I fail to procure for myself the same attention?

Alonso Ramírez closed in Mexico the cycle of hardships that took him around the world, being captured by English pirates in the Philippines, and shipwrecked in the coasts of Yucatán in this America. And as Your Excellency was sympathetic with his grief while he retold them [the hardships], who will doubt henceforth of whom might be the recipient of your munificence, if not he who would not know that Your Excellency tempers his greatness with his commiseration in such reciprocal conciliation as to match them, so that not even the clearest perspicacity can discern which [quality] comes first in Your Excellency: the greatness inherited from your most excellent ancestors, or the innate piety of not denying compassion to the sorrowful lamentations of all the pitiful who anxiously seek it? Thus encouraged by what I see of this [munificence] practically every day, and by the certainty that the gates of the palace of Your Excellency are never closed to the destitute, in the name of [the source] who gave me the subject matter to write about it, I dedicate this pitiful pilgrimage in honor of Your Excellency's kindness of disposition trusting, of course, as far as it concerns me, that in the high judgment to which I fearfully know you to submit matters of hydrography and geography, it will be worthy of your patronage and deemed of merit, etc.

I kiss the hands of Your Excellency

don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora

Approval of the licentiate [in canonic law] don Francisco de Ayerra Santa María,[24] chaplain of the King our lord in his Royal Convent of Jesús María in Mexico [City].[25]

Both to blindly obey your lordship's decree where you order me to censure the account of the Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez, my countryman, described by don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, cosmographer to the King our lord and his professor of mathematics in this Royal University, as much as for the delightful novelty promised by its plot, I found myself engaged in the reading of the work. And, if at first I went into it with [a sense of] obligation and curiosity, in time, with such variety of subjects, temporal arrangement and structure, I welcomed as a priceless gift what was announced as a studious task.

The subject of this narration [Alonso Ramírez] can be very proud that his misfortunes are today twice fortunate. Once, for being already gloriously suffered, which is what the muse of Mantua[26] extolled in Aeneas [as he spoke] to his Trojan comrades in a similar occasion: "Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit." [27] And then, because he was lucky to have the pen of this Homer—which is what Ausonius desired for his Caesar: "Romanusque tibi contignat Homerus—" [28] who with the good order of his narrations gave sense and understanding to the undeveloped set of dismally confused events, and crowned himself with applause by finding the golden thread to the labyrinth where such roundabout stories were entangled.

It is not the first time that, in his singular notions and extraordinarily laborious work, the author happily accomplishes what he undertakes with diligence, and as he has acquired so much [information] on the subjects of geography and hydrography, I am not surprised at the fulfillment of what under these principles was already half accomplished. All that he needed was for the subject matter to be substantive so that he could better it through his editing. And it was not a matter of leaving only as hearsay what can be useful to look into in writing, because this [Sigüenza's work] consigned to writing is preserved and that [Ramírez's account]

with the passing of time is forgotten, and it is worth to impress for future memory a case that has not happened before. "Quis mihi tributat ut scibantur sermones mei? Quis mihi det ut exarentur in libro stylo ferreo, vel saltem sculpantur in silice?"[29] Job wished for someone to write what he was relating so as to perpetuate it, and he could not be content with anything less than having the chisel engrave on [a surface of] flint all that he had learned to endure: "Dura quae sustinet non vult per silentium tegi," the Glossa says, "sed exemplo ad notitiam pertrahi." [30] The subject [Ramírez] found this "Quis mihi tributat..." of Job—and he found all he could have desired—in the author of this account, [an account] that containing nothing worth censuring, will be very advisable for the printing press to imbue with life eternal in the name of common knowledge and utility. Thus I judge it, clear it, etc.

México, 26 of July of 1690

Don Francisco de Ayerra Santa María

Summary of licenses

By decree of His Excellency lord Viceroy, Count of Galve, etc., of 26 of June of this same year of 1690, and by judicial order given this same day by the señor doctor don Diego de la Sierra, etc., diocesan judge and vicar general of this archbishopric, license to publish this account was granted.

Misfortunes

of

Alonso Ramírez,

etc.

I

**Motives he had for leaving his home country. Jobs [he had] and travels he made through New Spain. His stay in México until going over to the Philippines.**

I want for the curious who might read this for a few hours to be amused with the news of what caused me deadly afflictions for many years. And although it is common to draw maxims and aphorisms—that amidst the delightfully entertaining narration improve the reasoning process of whoever dwells in them—from events that only survived in the idea of he who feigns them, this will not be my intention here. Rather, even if my trials are over, I will ask for commiseration so that, bringing the pity received into the company of the self pity I felt when I was suffering them, the memory of my trials at least will become tolerable. By saying this I do not mean to over emphasize my sufferings so as to bring upon myself the ugly reputation of being pusillanimous. Therefore, leaving aside matters of small substance that could give others with less to grieve about plenty of reason to complain, I shall say the first things that happened to me as they are the most notable in the course of the events.

My name is Alonso Ramírez and my country is the city of San Juan de Puerto Rico, capital of the island that, these days under that name, and in antiquity under that of Borriquen,[31] [lies on the boundary that] separates the Gulf of Mexico[32] from the Atlantic Ocean. [The island of Puerto Rico] is renowned for the refreshment that those who suffer thirst sailing from the Old to the New Spain find in its delightful watering station,[33] by the beauty of its bay,[34] the unconquerable Morro castle[35] that defends it, the walls and bulkwards crowned with artillery that keep it secure, these [fortifications]—that can also be found in other parts of the [West] Indies—being of lesser utility than the spirit apportioned by nature to the children of that bountiful land that is invested with the privilege of being the object of the hostile actions of privateers.[36] This determined disposition of its natives is prompted by nothing other than their sense of dignity and fidelity since it is true that the wealth that gave name to it[37] because of the gold deposits that once existed,[38] today has been transformed into poverty, due to the absence of the original inhabitants to work them, and because of the force with which the tempestuous hurricanes cleared the cacao trees that in the absence of gold provided those engaged in the business, and consequently the rest of the islanders, with the bare necessities.

My parents were among those who felt under the grip of poverty in the strongest manner, and this had to be compelled because their actions were undeserving of it. But such has become the price of [living in] the Indies. My father was named Lucas de Villanueva, and although I do not know his [exact] place of birth, I am certain that he was Andalusian because in some occasions he was overheard stating the same. And I know for a fact that my mother was born in the very city of Puerto Rico, and her name is Ana Ramírez. I owe her Christian ways during my childhood the only thing that the poor can give their children, which is the advise that predisposes them to virtue. My father was a shipwright and as soon as I was old enough he taught me the trade. But acknowledging that there was no steady work and fearing not being able to make a living through this enterprise in the future, added to the hardships that although still a boy I had to suffer, I decided to steal my body away from my very own country in order to search for better opportunities in foreign ones.

## Notes

[1] As I have explained in *Undoing Empire*, the *Misfortunes* is a proto-national narrative that expresses the will to power of a Mexican Creole subject who is critical of Spain's inability to secure and protect the borders of its vast empire and who is already laying claim to the land on behalf of his social class and at the expense of the Indians, the blacks and the castas: "In the *Infortunios* Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora takes us on a path of innumerable possible and impossible deviations within the core and beyond the limits of coloniality, painting a critical picture of the world of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, and of the flota, in the final years of the seventeenth century." José F. Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire, Race, and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 136.

[2] See Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *The Misadventures of Alonso Ramírez*, trans. Edwin H. Pleasants (Mexico: Imprenta Mexicana, 1962).

[3] Gaspar de Silva y Mendoza (1653-1697), Count of Galve, was one of the youngest men ever to receive the title of viceroy. He took the post in May 1688 at the age of thirty five. In

September 1695 he asked the King to relieve him from the charge citing health reasons. He died on his return to Spain, in the harbor of Santa Maria near Cadiz, on the 12 of March of 1697.

[4] Andrés de Pez y Malzárraga (1657-1723), a Spaniard, was named by the Count of Galve admiral of the Royal Fleet of the Windward Islands. He was a cosmographer like Sigüenza. They also had an acquaintance in common in the person of Juan Enríquez Barroto, a Spanish student of Sigüenza's who in 1688 was the pilot and second in command in Pez's expedition to explore the Gulf Coast of Mexico looking for a French settlement supposedly established by La Salle. (Enríquez had led a previous expedition to the area two years before). Sigüenza wrote an account of that expedition using the maps and data collected by Enríquez. Pez carried that report to Spain, claiming it as his own and using it as an instrument for self-promotion in the Madrid court. Within months, thanks in great part to Sigüenza's writing and Enríquez's knowledge of the Gulf Coast, Pez managed to get himself knighted by the Order of Santiago.

A year after writing the letter to Pez Sigüenza sailed with him to Pensacola, which Enríquez had surveyed and named as Panzacola in 1686. That was to be Sigüenza's only trip beyond the shores of Mexico proper.

[5] See Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, "Letter of Don Carlos de Sigüenza to Admiral Pez Recounting the Incidents of the Corn Riot in Mexico City, June 8, 1692," in Irving A. Leonard, *Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, a Mexican Savant of the Seventeenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1929), 210-277. See also Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, "Alboroto y motín de los indios de México," in Irving A. Leonard, *Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, un sabio mexicano del siglo XVII*, trans. Juan José Utrilla (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), 224-270.

[6] I use the term Creole to describe the socioracial category of people of European descent born in the New World who occupied the highest echelons of colonial society directly under the people of prominence and authority of peninsular Spanish origin.

[7] Sigüenza y Góngora, "Alboroto" 252. "del culpabilísimo descuido con que vivimos entre tanta plebe, al mismo tiempo que presumimos de formidables." I am basing my translation on the pioneering work by Irving A. Leonard. However, he mistranslated the last phrase of the sentence. In his version the same passage reads: "the exceedingly culpable carelessness with which we live among so great a populace which, at the same time, we suspect of being dangerous." Leonard, "Letter to Admiral Pez," 251.

[8] Sigüenza y Góngora "Alboroto" 257. The entire passage reads: "But the blacks, the mulattoes, and all the commoners shouting: 'Death to the viceroy and to all those who would defend him!,' and the Indians [yelling]: 'Death to the Spaniards and to the gachupines (the Spaniards who have come from Spain) who eat up our corn!,' they exhorted each other to have courage—since there was no longer a Cortés who could hold them back—rushing into the plaza to join the rest in throwing stones." See also Leonard, "Letter to Admiral Pez," 257.

[9] *Infortunios* 1902, 14.

[10] The latest and most significant work in this respect is Estelle Irizarry's study. It is centered on a computer analysis comparing the *Misfortunes* with other contemporary pseudo-journalistic accounts by Sigüenza, trying to quantify the number of words and expressions that can be attributed to him or to Ramírez. See Estelle Irizarry, "Análisis por computadora: datos significativos," in Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*. Ed. Estelle Irizarry (Río Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1990), 51-65.

[11] Johnson is one who argues for the classification of the work under the Spanish picaresque tradition. See Julie Greer Johnson, "Picaresque Elements in Carlos Sigüenza y

Góngora's *Los Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez*," *Hispania* 64.1 (1981): 60-67. For the case in favor of the historical veracity of the work see J. S. Cummins, "Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez: 'A Just History of Fact'?" *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61.3 (1984): 295-303. Álvaro Félix Bolaños criticizes this debate by stating that "it limits the *Infortunios* within two models of Renaissance discursive narrative." See Álvaro Félix Bolaños, "Sobre las 'relaciones' e identidades en crisis: El 'otro' lado del ex-cautivo Alonso Ramírez," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 42 (1995): 133.

[12] Again, please see the addendum to the article for my translation of the original text.

[13] Andreas Cellarius, "Situs Terrae circlis coelestibus circumdatae," in *Harmonia Macrocosmica* (Amsterdam: Joannem Janssonium, 1661).

[14] Andreas Cellarius, "Situs Terrae circlis coelestibus circumdatae," in *Harmonia Macrocosmica* (Amsterdam: Joannem Janssonium, 1661).

[15] In every case I prefer to use the term Usonian to refer to that which belongs, or pertains to, the United States of North America, reserving the term American for use in its proper hemispheric context. I borrow the term from the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and have used it, and placed it in the proper ideological context, in my previous work. See Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire*.

[16] Pleasants translated "Infortunios" as "Misadventures." I believe that the literal translation of "Misfortunes" is more correct t as Alonso Ramírez sets out in search of advantage and not adventure. This is a narrative of mounting adversity and almost continuous disgrace which Ramírez early on attributes to the "fatality" of his "star," that is, to the fortune he has been dealt. As in the Spanish expression "correr fortuna" (to run into a storm), this narrative will unfold by turning into a sailing story about loosing course and running aground in a tempest, the event which symbolizes the very essence of unfavorable fortune, or misfortune.

Moreover, the term misfortune has the added connotation in English of referring to an illegitimate child which, of course, was Ramírez's stigma, a circumstance that gives an added layer of complexity to a story that has as one its many subplots the search for a father figure and for socioracial legitimacy.

[17] Gaspar de la Cerda Sandoval, Silva y Mendoza, or simply Gaspar de Silva y Mendoza (1653-1697) was the thirtieth viceroy of New Spain from 1688 to 1696.

[18] The town of Galve de Sorbe lies on the northern slope of the Alto Rey Mountains, north of Guadalajara and west of Sigüenza. Gaspar de Silva y Mendoza was the eighth Count of Galve and the last one in the Mendoza family to hold the title bestowed by Philip II on Baltasar Gastón Mendoza y de la Cerda in 1557. Today, the title belongs to the Royal House of Spain and to the House of the Dukes of Alba among other families.

[19] Zalamea la Real lies on the Buho mountains in the province of Huelva.

[20] The first edition misspells "seclavin" for "esclavín," that as the French "échevin" is a name of Teutonic origin meaning judge.

[21] Tórtola de Henares lies on the Henares River, north of the city of Guadalajara.

[22] Sacedón lies on the Tajo River, in the middle of the road between the cities of Guadalajara and Cuenca.

[23] Here Sigüenza fails to make the distinction between the failure in judgment, which is the Spanish "error," and the result of the action of "errar" which is the "yerro." By definition, in Spanish, an error is the very fault in judgment and that is different from the action that follows as a consequence of the lapse.

[24] Francisco de Ayerra (San Juan, Puerto Rico 1630-Mexico City 1708) was born and raised in San Juan where his father, Juan de Ayerra Santa María, a captain in the Spanish Army and veteran of campaigns in Flanders and Portugal, was sergeant major of the island and its fortifications. (See A.G.I. Contratación, 5789, L.1, F. 99-200). Like Alonso Ramírez, he left San Juan at an early age for Mexico. There he earned a degree in canon law and was ordained. He was a well known poet in his day and a close friend of both Sigüenza and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

[25] This was one of the 22 convents of Mexico City at the end of the 17th century. Six years before the publication of the *Misfortunes* Sigüenza had published a history of the convent at the request of the nuns. Founded under the patronage of Phillip II more than a century earlier, the entire enterprise was in much need of financial support in Sigüenza's time. See Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Paraíso occidental, plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos Reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico Real Convento de Jesús María de México* (México: Juan de Ribero, 1684).

[26] Virgil.

[27] "perhaps even this will be a joy to recall someday." Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1: 203. After having suffered the wrath of the queen of the gods, Juno, who asked Aeolus, god of the winds, to send them a storm, the Trojan ships were set off course and only seven were spared, coming to land in the coast of Libya. There, after having hunted seven stags—one for each of the crews--, Aeneas exhorted his comrades to persevere. Eventually, Aeneas would reach the Latium and found Rome. Interestingly, Ramírez will come to be shipwrecked in the Coast of Bacalar with a crew of seven men.

[28] As Cummings and Soons point out, Ayerra was paraphrasing the Gallo-Roman poet and statesman Decimus Magnus Ausonius who in his epigram "De Augusto" wrote to Emperor Gallienus: "Exulta Aeacide, celebraris vate superbo, rursus Romanusque tibi contingit

Homerus" (In these latter days a Roman Homer sings to you). See Cummings and Soons, *Infortunios* 75, note 9.

[29] "Oh that my words were now written! Oh that they were printed in a book, that they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock forever!" *Book of Job* 19: 23-24.

[30] "He does not wish to hide in silence the rigors he endures, but bring them to notice as exemplary." This is a quote from the *Glossa ordinaria*, the standard Latin medieval commentaries to the *Bible*.

[31] Also Boriquén, Borique, Buriquén or Burichena, Spanish corruption of the Arawak name given to the island by its pre-Columbian inhabitants. Since the middle of the 19th century the name Borínquen has found greater acceptance. See Adolfo de Hostos, *Diccionario histórico bibliográfico comentado de Puerto Rico* (Barcelona: Manuel Pareja, 1976), 181.

It is worth noting that the text refers to the island named Borriquen by its ancient inhabitants with the Christian name of San Juan de Puerto Rico. Columbus called it San Juan, name that would later be transferred to the main settlement upon its relocation between 1519 and 1521 on the western point of the inlet that guards the entrance to the great enclosed bay, a broad and secure sound located on the northeast coast of the island that because of its excellent conditions came to be commonly described by sailors and visitors alike as the "great harbor" or "puerto rico." During the 16th and well into the 17th centuries both names were interchangeable. Eventually, during the course of the 18th century, a definite and somewhat perplexing change occurred in the nomenclature whereby the name given to the island by Columbus was reserved exclusively to refer to the capital city, and the common name for the bay used to designate the entire island as Puerto Rico or Puertorrico. The first clear and reasoned enunciation of this change is made here, in the second paragraph of the *Misfortunes*, where the city is referred to as San Juan de Puerto Rico, and there is a direct allusion to the legend that the name of the island, that is "wealthy port" or Puerto Rico, was derived from the rich gold deposits which were found there by the

Europeans. Still the *Misfortunes* belongs the period of the perplexing transition. In the third paragraph, Alonso's mother, Ana Ramírez, is said to have been born in the city of Puerto Rico.

[32] The Gulf of Mexico or "seno Mexicano" was the name given to the Caribbean Sea during days of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (1535-1821). Similarly, the islands of the Antilles were known as the Mexican Archipelago.

[33] This is a reference to the western coast of the island where the galleon fleets and other vessels that crossed the Atlantic would make first landing to replenish their fresh water supply. To this day toponyms like Aguada (Watering Station) or Aguadilla (Little Watering Station) mark the spot. These town are far away from the city of San Juan which lies on the eastern side of the island.

[34] The bay of San Juan.

[35] San Felipe del Morro is a the fortress that sits on the northwestern point of the inlet of San Juan guarding the entrance to the bay. It was built during the 17th and 18th centuries following the plans drawn up by Giovanni Battista Antonelli in 1589.

[36] Already in 1578 the Council of the Indies had established the Junta of Puertorrico to design and build a system of fortifications to safeguard the Spanish possessions in America from the attacks of English, Dutch, and French pirates and privateers. The project, which identified the city of "Puertorrico" as the key piece in the defense of the West Indies, called for the construction of massive and elaborate defensive works in San Juan, Santo Domingo, Havana, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Nombre de Dios, Portobelo, and Río Chagre and it remains to this day the greatest construction project ever undertaken by a European imperial power.

The works secured the empire but were unable to guarantee the security and prosperity of the inhabitants of the new fortified citadels. All the contrary, with the exception of Havana

and Cartagena, that came to be important nodal points in the system of wealth extraction known as the Spanish Galleon Fleet, the other cities and towns suffered for centuries under the constant threat of pirate attacks without receiving any benefits. That was the case of the city and presidio of San Juan which was attacked three times before Ramírez's birth. On November 22 of 1595 the English privateer Francis Drake, commanding 8 galleons, 15 supporting vessels, and 1,500 men, bombarded the city but was unable to land due to the good aim of the ordinance fired from the Morro castle and the fort of San Jerónimo. Three years later, the Count of Cumberland, George Clifford, was sent by Elizabeth I to avenge Drake's defeat. Cumberland reached San Juan at the head of the largest expedition until then sent from England. He landed a thousand men and marched against the city which he took without much trouble two days later. The attack and subsequent siege of the Morro Castle lasted two weeks. On June 21 the English colors were raised over the castle. Two weeks later, however, due to an epidemic of dysentery, Cumberland was forced to abandon the island very unheroically. A quarter century later, on September 25 of 1625, under contract from the newly established Dutch West India Company, Boudewijn Hendricks was able to sneak 17 ships through the Morro and into the bay of San Juan. Hendricks destroyed the city, starting with the cathedral, but after five weeks of siege was unable to procure the Morro's surrender and forced to leave the island in a hurry and under heavy bombardment on November 1. The legacy of piracy in the Caribbean would be legitimated with the rise of the British empire and of the empire that inherited the English tradition of piracy in the Caribbean, that is, the United States of North America. San Juan would be attacked again in 1797 by the English under Ralph Abercromby who failed to take the city. In 1898, the city suffered heavy bombardment from the Usonian navy under the orders of Captain Sampson. This time the pirates won since that year Puerto Rico has remained a captive of the Usonian empire.

During Ramírez's times the pirate threat was very real and very much tied to the interest of the English crown. On August 31, 1664, when Alonso was less than two years old, the Governor of Puertorrico, Juan Pérez de Guzmán, wrote to Phillip IV informing him of the "privateer ships that had left Jamaica and were all around the coasts of the [West] Indies,

because they had subjected all the places to piracy, being close to twenty frigates, some with ten and others with twenty cannons." The governor added in his report that "in the islands of Nevis and Antigua that are part of the Windward [islands] there were fifteen well supplied English frigates with the intention of attacking Santo Domingo." A.G.I., Santo Domingo,157,R.2,N.51.

[37] The island of Puerto Rico.

[38] This false assumption continues to be an integral part of the "official" history of the country to this day. Simply put, the gold extracted during the first decades of the conquest was found in rivers and streams somewhat distant from the Bay of Puerto Rico. In any event, much more gold was found in Hispaniola and no place there is named "rich." There is indeed a Puerto Plata or "Silver Harbor" so called because of the deposits of the precious metal found inside the Monte Plata or "Silver Mountain" that rises above the small harbor. Evidently, it would be more glorious for certain people if the name of the country had been given by the so-called Conquistadors who with their high-sounding Spanish names entered Borriquen in search of riches, and not by the sailors and the all-anonymous "peoples of the sea" ("gente de mar," as they were officially known) who came to escape from Europe and in search of a better life in the New World.