

***Grandeza Mexicana* and the Lakes of Mexico City:  
Economy and Ontology in Colonial Technological  
Development<sup>1</sup>**

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According to Ángel Rama, Bernardo de Balbuena's work was the product of fantasy and not a realistic imitation of the world, and his poetry referred to a universe only apprehensible outside the bounds of historical reality (13–15). For José Pascual Buxó, by contrast, the singularity of the poem *Grandeza mexicana* (1604) lies precisely in the pedestrian character of its subject matter: "Ningún otro poema 'heroico,'" he says, "había . . . tomado por asunto, no ya los hechos faustos o infaustos de un varón esforzado, sino la febril actividad de un abigarrado conjunto social unido, sobre su radical disparidad, por una misma razón económica" (193) (No other "heroic" poem had . . . taken as its subject-matter, not the famous or infamous deeds of a man in all his striving, but rather the feverish activity of a diverse social order united, in all its radical disparity, around a single, economic cause). If for Rama, Balbuena's poetry pointed to something above and beyond its historical setting, for Pascual Buxó there is a displacement of imaginary heroism in favor of everyday economic activity.

More recently, Osvaldo Pardo has shown that *Grandeza* (as I will refer to the poem from now on) is influenced by the ideas of Giovanni Botero, a Jesuit statesman for whom commerce and art were the activities that exalted the stature of the "material, spiritual and political" life of cities (106). For Botero, what brought people together in a particular place was not authority—of whatever type—but the benefit ("utilitá") sought by each and all in their endeavors (Pardo 106). According to Pardo, these ideas are the "aesthetic and ideological" core of Balbuena's poem (104).

Pardo's interpretation opens another reading of what Rama sees as the disconnection of Balbuena's poetry from history. In this essay I will argue

that *Grandeza* speaks not of a reality outside of history, but, on the contrary, of a reality made possible by the functioning of an economy that was going to transform history. That is to say, the poem is about a *new history* determined not by factors readily recognizable as “historical” (wars, heroes, major events) but by the apparent naturalness of an economic system that seemed to function of its own accord, without identifiable origin or principles.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Balbuena was writing, Mexico-Tenochtitlan and its environs had been subjected to two important transformations in the so-called “encounter” of the two worlds. The first came with the Conquest, its destruction of the city and the annihilation of a large number of its inhabitants; the second came with the attempt to establish a hegemonic Spanish colonial state through a new urbanization as well as institutions that would impose order on and administer the conquered territory. Balbuena’s poem points to a third moment related to the development of an economic order, one which, despite having been established by the Spanish colonial state, surpassed it. In this sense Balbuena’s Mexico City is a new heterotopia: it points to the creation of a distinct place not just in relation to Spain but also in relation to the first colonial Mexico City that was founded in the name of Renaissance urbanism and the Spanish state (del Valle).<sup>2</sup> This Mexico City, defined by the economy rather than by state power, is clearly delineated in *Grandeza*. At the same time, and as I will show, the poem also expresses the ontological and historical surpluses that threatened economic development: the Indians and the water of the lakes amid which the city was built and which served, as Balbuena himself says, as its “mirror.”<sup>3</sup> Without ever linking the environment and the indigenous population, Balbuena’s poem erects both as opaque, indecipherable elements that obstinately remained beyond the margins of the city (in the case of the “savage” Indians) or far from its very center (in the case of the water) despite the changes brought about by a new economy. My proposal is to connect Balbuena’s thinking regarding these surpluses with the technology developed three years after the poem’s publication in an effort to manage the city’s resources (aquatic and human).

Although there is no direct connection between them, the drainage system, begun in 1607 to remove the water of the lakes, unexpectedly became the technical (and aseptic) solution to a problem posed in the poetic sphere.<sup>4</sup> In my analysis, drainage was a central component of the general economy of resource administration that represented the culmination of the idea that both lakes and Indians were illegible elements that could not be assimilated into a commercial and capitalist economic rationality.

## Ontological Surpluses of Colonial Primitive Accumulation

For a supposed panegyric to Mexico City, *Grandeza* is an odd place to encounter what is perhaps the first statement in New Spain of the possibilities created locally by mercantilism. In the poem, the economy—through the social differentiation that different types of activities and consumption patterns gave rise to—brought about a new civilizing order. As a consequence, it generated unprecedented options for subjects' self-formation. For Balbuena, the greatness of the economic system that began with colonization lay not in the fact that its potential was determined by reality but in its capacity to go beyond reality and transform it. In the urban environment of Mexico City, Balbuena said, people could give free rein to their whims, their creativity.

Pida el deseo, forme variedades  
De antojo el gusto, el apetito humano  
Sueñe goloso y pinte novedades  
Que aunque pida el invierno en el verano,  
Y el verano y sus flores en invierno,  
Hallará aquí quien se las dé a la mano. (49)

(Let desire pronounce its wish, let taste  
Form every sort of fancy, let human appetite  
Dream greedily and imagine every novelty,  
For though it may ask for wintertime in the summer,  
Or for summer and its blossoms in winter,  
Here it will find someone who delivers it into its hand.)<sup>5</sup>

Balbuena writes this eulogy to Mexico City and ends up paying homage to mercantilism by praising the hectic newness of an economy that has the (ostensible) ability to change processes and natural phenomena.

This economic system guaranteed a hierarchical regime composed of two opposing, yet complementary, visual orders. One is a fetishistic approach by which Mexico City was no more than a constant flow of activity and objects that allowed neither reflection nor the fixing of one's gaze. Be it works of architecture, goods, or even the city's inhabitants themselves, Balbuena's constant enumerations confer on them the accelerated rhythm of his time: "Conversaciones, juegos, burlas, veras / Convites, golosinas infinitas, / Huertas, jardines, cazas, bosques, eras" (53) (Conversations, games, jokes, truths / Banquets, endless confections, / Orchards, gardens, hunts, woods, and fields). The agglutination appears to be brought about by the dizzying reality of a city as seen by a spectator, one for whom the sense of what is seen and experienced is deferred, as if waiting

for a moment of tranquility and remoteness that is never reached in the poem. Because of this persistence, objects and activities impose themselves categorically, exhausting all of their possible meaning in their very presence: the city is nothing more than what was seen, and what was seen was the totality of the city.

In spite of this incessant activity, Fernando Gómez calls attention to the emptiness of the city, its feeling of not being inhabited, in *Grandeza* (543). Mexico seems to be a packed city—so much to see, so much to do, and no end to the objects transported through its street—but also, in the end, a place without people. Men are brushed aside to make way for the paratactical accumulation of objects, occupations, and activities in a universe in which, beyond commercial dealings, there are no relations between human beings, who are transformed by Balbuena into the things they produce or the tools they use (“telas,” “vasos,” “esculturas,” “pincel,” “buril,” “moldes,” 43–44) (cloths, vessels, sculptures, paint brush, engraver’s chisel, molds) or else reduced to, or contained in, the name of the labor they perform (“hilanderos,” “plateros,” “lapidarios,” 43–44) (spinners, silversmiths, jewelers). In this way, not only are people absent from these pages but so too is work itself, which is only presented as finished products, as products in motion, or as the instruments before or after their use, but is not represented in the moment in which these products or instruments are made or used. Mexico City thus provides the script for a series of required activities, indifferent to both the human side that would perform pre-designated roles and to the material context of their existence. In this sense, the city’s rhythm imposed an ontological lack of differentiation: the complex series of activities that kept it afloat and made it into a place of exceptional energy endowed the sculptor’s chisel with a role that was as indispensable as that of its wielder.

It is precisely the lack of ontological differentiation of a universe (human and material) subsumed in the city’s enervating activity, and the fleeting nature of the gaze and thought, that guarantee the exercise of a new visual perspective complementing the fetishistic one I discuss here. With this gesture, Mexico displaces the primacy of the metropolis, becoming the position from which to see the rest of the viceroyalty. Balbuena makes the city *the* site of civilization and progress, the diametric opposite of the countryside, or of less urbanized places seen as monotonous worlds, homogenous in their lack of social classes and therefore in the variety possible in a class society: “Ser primero en el campo o ser segundo, / Tener bienes sin orden de gozillos, / Misterio es celestial, alto y profundo” (47) (To be first in the countryside or to be second, / To possess goods but lack the means to enjoy them, / Is a mystery celestial, both high and deep), he indicated, pointing out that only the presence of a market that allowed differential consumption gave sense to wealth. Paradoxically, since Balbuena approached Mexico City from Nueva Galicia, where he was

previously stationed, he puts forward the idea of Mexico City as the absolute center whose exceptional character denied the “goodness” of the rest of colonial space. In opposition to the remoteness of Spain, it is also a central place where all lines and places converge.

The most interesting aspect of this idea is that the economy and no other factor is what makes Mexico City the city of the present and the future. In the poem, the city becomes only the name of an economic possibility and not a cultural-historical density, because all meaning to this effect is wiped out by the territorialization of mercantilism. And emphatically it is not a historical entity, considering that Balbuena disconnects it from both the pre-Hispanic past and from Spanish influence. For aesthetic reasons—to focus on beauty, he says—he omits what he calls the “oscuro origen de naciones fieras” (obscure origins of savage nations), and he also leaves for another time the conquest, “los hechos heroicos” (the heroic deeds), of men who had forged an empire in a new land (30–32). In a modern gesture, Balbuena suggests the beginning of another history, *History* in the form of an economy that obliterated the cultural and historical currents that preceded it and gave it origin. The city has come into being from practically nothing: it is the product of what he repeatedly calls “a birth,” a “natural” process resulting from the movement of goods.

In this way, this poem is nothing more than a hymn to mercantilism that allowed a certain territory to be the place for the unleashing of an energy that, once it was freed from its historical origins, became universal and cosmopolitan. The impassioned spirit that permeates the poem resists this identification: the city and its inhabitants have an international character, worldly and uncontaminated by traditional regionalisms. The hustle and bustle of objects gave the city its character and not the other way around; Mexico City is blurred in order to become the neutral scene of a commercial epic.<sup>6</sup> The principal characteristic of this Mexico City was precisely that of being the junction, the meeting place, for the rest of the world, which would arrive in the form of merchandise from Peru, Chile, Arabia, Cambray, Sicily, Syria, China, India, Goa, Spain, Philippines, Egypt, Rome, Milan and Flanders, among other places (39–40).

In this enumeration we can see how, in the face of the city’s activity, Spain appears to have become another site among many in the system of economic forces it had set in motion.<sup>7</sup> Barbara Fuchs and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel have read the poem as an example of the globalization of the world begun by Iberian mercantilism, which, by using Mexico City as a “hinge,” succeeded in connecting European and Asian markets. This interpretation may not be exaggerated in light of recent studies pointing out that, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, “royal “ trade with the Indies and the profits derived from this source were controlled by other nations (Larraz 56–57). Spain may have given rise to a certain economy and may also have exercised political control over the territories, and yet the

same system that promoted that economy radically de-centered it in the name of the energy unleashed by the trade in merchandise and raw materials.<sup>8</sup>

If Spain is no longer central to the economy, and the history of the Indians and the conquest cannot be used to explain the economy's origins, Balbuena sees "interés" (which Pardo equates with the "utility" that Botero wrote about, 106) as the motor of economic development. For Balbuena, the creation of Mexico as a commercial crossroads owed to a disposition internal to all subjects, the exercise of a will for which "interés" (which can be understood as an inner inclination to possess something, material or immaterial, from the world) was a powerful spring to action. Behind the activities of the conquistadores, the work of the farmer, the trade of the salesman, the tasks of shepherds and scribes, behind all of this, according to Balbuena, was the desire for profit, or personal gain (26–29).

For Balbuena, the work carried out in the city defined subjects according to their occupation, achieving a kind of ontological and cultural emptying that imposed a totalizing colonization by fully equating the subject with his work. The indigenous universe, like the Hispanic one, or that of slaves and other ethnic groups, became subsumed in, or exhausted by, the type of labor undertaken. It is for this reason that, despite the presence of human beings in the poem, it has an unpeopled, dehumanized character: its subjects are displaced by the work they perform.

Notwithstanding the apparent success of this colonization, there are still unconquered areas in the poem—one consisting of the Indian of the frontiers that begin the poem and another of the tributary Indian with whom it concludes. This excess represents the universe undermining the economy. The "savagery" of the frontier Indian alluded to in the Introduction (those who lived in the "most remote" reaches of New Spain and engaged in practices that "nature" had not been able to civilize—in contrast to what the pursuit of profit had achieved in Mexico City) was directly proportional to his lack of participation in the colonial economy (15–16). Yet in the very center of the urban order, there remained another remnant.

In the poem's final verses, a human figure finally appears: that of the "indio feo" (ugly Indian) whose tribute filled the king's fleet. The strangeness of this figure—who works not of his own free will, as Balbuena insists that the city trades were carried out, but at the "pleasure" and will of the king—is an uncomfortable conclusion to the poem (93). This non-voluntary work contradicts what Balbuena had just written: that the "bárbaras gentes" (barbarians) inhabiting this territory had already established what he calls "trato afable" (benign dealings) with the sovereign (92). This insertion reveals the contrary: that there were people who were forced to work.

Moreover, this ontological-aesthetic excess (the ugliness that scars the poem's light construction) works against the ontological domestication

exerted by the city's trades. These Indians continued being Indians, in spite of their work. In contrast to how Balbuena refers to subjects (indigenous or not) in the rest of the poem, as "lapidarios," "escultores," "alquimistas" (jewelers, sculptors, alchemists), he does not refer to these subjects as simply "tributarios" (tributaries). Their work did not fully define them—it did not encompass the totality of their meaning. Ontologically, they surpassed economic determination. In the final section, I will return to this life that remained outside of primitive accumulation, but first I want to touch on water, the other feature that disturbs the poet's enthusiasm.

### **And Yet, the Water of the Lakes**

In his essay about the coexistence of dissimilar and irreducible spaces as a characteristic of our century, Michel Foucault insists that all cultures contain real sites, formed with the founding of a given society, that function as a "counter-space" in relation to the universe constituted by that founding. These sites, he says, are a sort of utopia come true in which all other spaces are challenged and inverted. Foucault uses the name "heterotopia" to refer to such places that, despite being real, have an abstract function (they are connected to all others, transforming them), and this function makes them seem to exist outside of space. In this vein, the lakes that surrounded the island of Tenochtitlan, lakes that remained after the founding of colonial Mexico City, are a heterotopia that evoked another time and another society, questioning and denying the integrity of the colonial space of New Spain.

In *Grandeza*, water, removed from the pre-Hispanic hydraulic complex of which it was part, is the medium that enabled the mercantile flow that makes Mexico City an axis of the new economic order.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging the city's canals, Balbuena asserts that through them, "Entra una flota y otra se despide, / De regalos cargada la que viene, / La que va del precio que los mide" (26) (One fleet parting from the other / Laden with gifts the one that arrives, / And with the measure of their worth the one that sets sail). Here the water of the pre-Hispanic canals, and the canoes that plied them, have functions similar to those of the sea and the ships that, since the age of exploration, have represented the potential for economic development through the exploitation of sites replete with untold wealth.

Balbuena reassures his readers that little of the semiaquatic landscape of the old Tenochtitlan remained: "Pues no ha cien años que miraba en esto / Chozas humildes, lamas y laguna; / Y sin quedar terrón antiguo enhiesto . . . / Esta grandeza y maravilla ha puesto" (90) (For not one hundred years before, here stood / Wretched huts, mud, and lagoon; / Now, not a clod of earth from thence still standing . . . / Rises today this grandeur, this marvel). If, as Balbuena notes, the lake and the Indians' huts had been

replaced by the “grandeur” of the new city, the frequent floods during the rainy season and the indigenous peoples’ silence in response to the city government’s requests for help in understanding how to manage the hydraulic system they had built must have been reminders of the fragile foundation of Mexico City’s “greatness” (del Valle). In this sense, the water played an important role in the colonial city founded upon it: it served as a mirror that, in the manner of Foucault’s heterotopias, reflected back to Mexico City a distorted image, unrecognizable to itself. The water remained and the techniques the colonial government employed to control it were inadequate; the urbanization of the city, which inspired Balbuena, came to a halt in the face of this water it did not know how to manage. Although Balbuena utilizes the water of the lakes as a vital medium in the functioning of mercantilism, its excess each rainy season showed it was not the tranquil surface that ships loaded with riches glided over but instead a devastating force that regularly threatened to swallow up the city.

If “interés” is a leitmotiv in the poem, the city’s semiaquatic nature is another. In spite of the poem’s optimism, Balbuena seems to recognize that so many goods and so much activity created an unsustainable weight. As he repeats many times, Mexico City had been built on “un delgado suelo . . . una delicada costra blanda” (a fragile soil . . . a delicate, soft crust). In fact, to explain how the city had not caved in under its own weight, Balbuena conjures up nymphs that, from the depths of the lake, multiply foundations to keep pace with the buildings being erected on the capital’s surface.

Bien que a sus cimbrias el delgado suelo  
 Humilla poco a poco, que en el mundo  
 No hay más firmeza ni menor recelo.  
 Cuelga el primer cimiento hasta el segundo,  
 Que de columnas de cristal fabrican  
 Las tiernas ninfas en su mar profundo;  
 Y no por eso su altivez achican,  
 Que cuanto más la tierra se los traga  
 Más arcos y cimborios multiplican. (34)

(Though beneath its towers the thin soil  
 Sinks little by little, in the world can be found  
 No greater firmness nor lesser caution.  
 The first foundation rests upon a second,  
 Fashioned of crystal columns  
 By the tender nymphs of its deep sea;  
 Nor on this account do they omit any splendor,  
 For the more edifices the earth swallows up,  
 The more arches and vaults they raise high.)



In these stanzas, however, Balbuena implies a battle between the lake and the city in which the arches and heavy towers on the surface are poetically defended by fragile glass columns.

The mirror, says Foucault, allows us to see ourselves where we aren't. That is what his utopia consists of: saying we are in a place where in reality we are not. Nonetheless, the mirror is also a heterotopia to the degree that it is a real place that contravenes the space where we find ourselves. In this way, the water of Lake Texcoco is the mirror that could remind Creoles and Spaniards that they were not in the Hispanic Mexico City but in a space founded long before and administered with knowledge alien to them.

The Mexico City that confronted this image had to admit that neither the water of the lakes, nor the Indians who would have been able to manage it, lent their services to mercantilism in an "affable" way. On the contrary, the colonial authorities' failure to control the hydraulic complex and thereby prevent flooding suggests that the water was still part of another system. The management of that system had required the carrying out of technological-religious rites in which the old Gods were invoked (Arnold), something the colonial authorities were neither able to do themselves nor willing to allow others to undertake.<sup>10</sup> Thus the water of the lakes formed an uncomfortable mirror, reflecting and negating the city's order—and belying Marx's assertion of the inability of any space to resist the economy once captured by it (291). To the contrary, there remained areas indecipherable to the colonial gaze and impenetrable to colonial knowledge. Such spaces escaped the hegemony of modern visual and epistemological regimes.

### **The Drainage System, or the Economy of the Economy**

Beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, the colonial city suffers several floods: one just a few months after *Grandeza* was written and a more severe one in 1607. At that point, the Spanish authorities decide to undertake the so-called "desagüe" (drainage) of Mexico City, a massive engineering project that spanned the colonial period (and beyond) and over time was expanded in order to remove the water of the region's lakes. In this last section I analyze the relationship between the excesses suggested by Balbuena's poem and a drainage project that "managed" local resources to ensure the economy's proper functioning.

To connect the pitfalls of Balbuena's foregrounding of labor as a social discipline that would determine the proper place and identity of the inhabitants of the city to the drainage project, I will address a more general project that in the seventeenth century promised to draw subjectivity out of activity. Referring to the work of Baltasar Gracián, Bradley Nelson analyzes

the reorganization of subjectivity at the moment in which it disassociates itself from a transcendental order through the transference of the regulatory character of presence (the “substance” of the subject) to a modern paradigm that emphasizes activity. If the hierarchic feudal system was based on the purity of blood (conferring on the individual the status befitting what he or she *was*), then the system that subsequently emerged made performance and taste the new (rational) means by which social position was acquired. The deployment of taste and knowledge as new parameters of social hierarchy in this system are linked to the redemption of man’s “nothingness” through multiple activities that give shape to the subject’s new being.<sup>11</sup> Thus, as Nelson says, the modern subject emerges not from a reflection about a self-conscious entity, but precisely the contrary, from a “lack of being” compensated by *activity*: The self of the modern subject would be an “aesthetic effect,” the result of activities that occupy the (vacant) space of ontology (82).

As Nelson shows, in the case of Gracián, self-representation is politically motivated: power, rather than truth or substance, is its object (94). In this sense, Nelson reads this lack of steadfastness as a process linked to the will to power, and he contrasts it to celebratory readings in which emptiness (how can it be interpellated?) represents a limit to the power of the State (90).<sup>12</sup> In Nelson’s analysis, this process results in an obfuscation of violence to the extent that the subject who uses it does not exist ontologically. Thus, violence appears to be the outcome of an abstract system, de-linked from any subject. Questions such as death, hunger, and violence itself are displaced in the name of “good taste” for which “truth” and “substance” are supplanted by questions relative to “taste and form.” Consequently, the perversity of this system, which denies all recourse to questioning and interpellation, lies in the infinite possibility of the reiteration of violence and in its transformation into an esthetic problem: that of “competing and *insubstantiated*” points of view (Nelson 96, his emphasis).

As we saw in Balbuena’s poem, labor is precisely what allows a reformulation of subjects, a situation that translated into a new social order. The subject was defined by the labor he performed, and his situation in the urban hierarchy depended on that as well. Nevertheless, the savage and tributary Indians represented aesthetic and ontological residues unaltered by economic activity and, therefore, constituted an opaque and inassimilable space for a system that sought to equate being with doing.

It must also be remembered that this surplus was postulated at a moment of crisis in which there was a growing perception that the missionaries had failed at removing the Indians from their old ways of being (their immersion in idolatrous worship) and converting them into Christian subjects. Frustration with the failure of this transformation is expressed repeatedly, beginning in the late sixteenth century, by commentators such as Diego Durán, Bernardino de Sahagún, and Jerónimo de Mendieta. Faced with a

similar situation in Spain, where the prospect of integrating Muslims and Jews into the model of Christian life was in doubt, the decision was made to expel these groups that represented a challenge to the State's power of interpretation and interpellation (de la Flor 233–34). In the case of New Spain, however, there was no place to expel the Indians.

Along with the Indian, whose ontological being surpassed economic determination (the “savage” Indians, for their part, were not even touched by it), there is also the water, ordered in a particular hydraulic system that the Creoles and Spaniards had not been able to understand. Drainage arises then as a possible double solution to these two illegible spaces that threatened the socioeconomic system.

Despite the epidemics that had decimated the indigenous population, and despite the fact that this group was indispensable to the functioning of the economic system that the Creoles and Spaniards depended on, the Indians represented an overabundance that, due to their numbers and nature, did not fit into the classification system imposed by the economy. Ralph Bauer has pointed out that the dilemma of Creole modernity lay in the fact that, unlike their Protestant contemporaries, the Creoles had not been able to exclude or *annihilate* the social sectors they had conquered and upon whose work they depended (178, my emphasis). According to Bauer, the Creoles' ambivalence toward the Indians (and Castas) and their fear of what might happen to these groups in the event that imperial power came to an end, explains the social stability of a colonial system that was all the while resented by the Creoles due to the way they were treated by envoys from the metropolis (162).

Thus the drainage channel was an indirect, possible solution—since its construction inflicted a high cost on the indigenous population, with many drowned or crushed by the mountains of stone they had to remove and many others suffering violent disruption of their subsistence as a result of technology that robbed them of the water on which they depended.<sup>13</sup>

The displacement of power from the metropolis to the local government made it possible to transfer the war of conquest to areas that, at least at first glance, would seem less problematic. It is the local colonial government, the city government of Creoles and Peninsulars, that in the name of saving their city from future floods pressures successive viceroys to continue and to expand the engineering project that was, nonetheless, perennially carried out in an intermittent and inept way (Gibson). The project's forced labor and its violent interruption of indigenous life belie any pretense of seeing the colonial state as hegemonic. In the seventeenth century, force continued to be the mechanism employed to manage resources. In this case, and as has already been suggested, it would be difficult to ascertain that this colonial project had its origin in Spain. On the contrary, the project was related to those efforts to create a local hegemony that might have been colonial but

was nonetheless more invested in the internal order of Mexico City than in a Spanish imperial, global project.

Perhaps here is where we can find the difference between the process of primitive accumulation in the colonies and in the metropolis. For those in charge of directing the colony locally, it was not sufficient to appropriate the means of production from the inhabitants in order to compel them to assume a wage-earning job. Nor was it sufficient that the work was largely forced or coercive. In the colony, it was a question of ending life itself when it was seen as excessive. Francisco Gudiel, who in 1555 was the first to propose drainage to end the water problems, was a barber dedicated to bloodletting, and in the seventeenth century the engineer who oversaw the drainage project was praised with medical metaphors that spoke of the need to purge and clean the city of its “excesses.” The balance, in this rendering, depended on the opening of veins that would allow the harmful material that constantly plagued the city to flow out (Boyer 121). To protect the life of some, it was necessary to bleed other lives away.

If the ontological emptying failed in the colonies and the Indians did not abandon their idolatry in order to become Christian, or if they continued to represent a kind of existence that did not conform to the definition of labor, there were alternatives. Not via the direct and obvious death in war, but through the mechanism of an “innocent” solution (technology) to a problem suggested elsewhere (a poem). Of course, from the perspective of the drainage project’s proponents, the only problem that required a solution was that of the floods, and from Balbuena’s celebratory spirit the city marched on, despite the pressure of the water below the thin soil and the “ugliness” of some of its inhabitants. As we have nonetheless seen, poetry and technology are perhaps more closely related than might be expected—although my intention here is not to blame Balbuena and his poetry for the drainage project but to link a Creole and Peninsular social imaginary (the water and the Indians are a preoccupation in many works of the period) to technological measures that, at first sight, seem absolutely alien to an economy trying to displace history.

If one of the advantages of the unsubstantiated thought and action Nelson writes about is the creation of a situation in which it is impossible to question a violence that would seem self-generated and dissociated from any subject—an action in the abstract, a simple mechanism of power—in this analysis I have tried to connect that violence with specific political projects. The drainage project’s negative impact on indigenous life can be seen as a secondary product, a question of collateral damage. But it is also indirectly a possible solution to the problems that disturbed Creoles and Peninsulars living in the capital of New Spain. In this sense, drainage guarantees for these groups the continuity of the economic system. In facing a failure of the institutions that sustained it (a state that did not understand pre-Hispanic hydraulics and a church that did not transform and truly convert the Indians),

the drainage project renounced hegemony and opposed the ontology of presence (undesirable and beyond control) with the violence of a technological “development” that would supposedly resolve urban problems.

This economy discarded what it neither could, nor wanted to, live with, that is millions of cubic liters of water and, along with the water, the life of the many Indians who died working in Dantesque conditions. This recalls George Bataille’s remark about forms of consumption lacking the capacity for recovery that mark different societies in different ways. If for Bataille war and exorbitant luxury are two forms of excess that must be utilized unproductively in order to prevent a society from atrophying, then drainage was the colonial policy that made it possible to dissipate the excess of life besieging the colony: an excess that according to Bataille would have constituted the most dangerous risk for the functioning of any economy (24). In the same way, the excess of riches in Balbuena’s poem can be read as an instance of a Baroque that consumes itself in sparks and glitter in an attempt not to break with the existing order—by a redistribution of wealth, for example. It was better to exhibit and consume wealth in an extravagant fashion than to convert it into a better life for all the city’s inhabitants.

As Bataille says, an economy must dispose of everything (life, surplus energy) that doesn’t help it grow, if it does not want this superabundance to end up destroying it. In Bataille’s analysis, ontology (life-force) is subsumed in the economy (22–23). In an example that recalls what Nelson signaled regarding the transformation of ethical problems into aesthetic questions, Bataille assures that the way we judge an economic system that balances production and dissipation of energy depends on particular points of view (39).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps for that reason there are still people who feel it is important to emphasize the technological feat represented by the drainage system, despite the cost of carrying it out. Of course, what Bataille does not take into account is the fact that controlling an economy not only involves consuming surpluses that do not help a society grow but also expending those whose use in other ways would threaten the existing order.

Since the members of the municipal council (*cabildo*) were not ready to end the status quo, it was necessary to get rid of that surplus energy, using a mechanism of blind self-preservation (Creoles and Spaniards save themselves, their city, and the economic system that benefited them), which involved both the most absurd and extravagant consumption and the establishment of a system that was the opposite of indigenous sacrifice. Here, instead of the symbolism and rituals accompanying indigenous forms of killing, death becomes unmarked and banal, the result of “work accidents.” It was also an ethnically selective expenditure (Indians were the ones who worked on the drainage system), established as a secularized and technological mechanism, apparently free of all historical controversy.

It is in this sense that the drainage system, with the politics of water at its center, is the economy of the economy, that is, the system for managing

resources that made possible the consolidation of the mercantilist-capitalist economic system in the capital of New Spain. And yet the frequent floods that continue to devastate Mexico City today are a reminder of another time and another space that perhaps persist, despite the violence and continuation of a systematic colonization.

## Notes

1. This work is an extension of “*Grandeza mexicana: Agua y mercantilismo en la formación del estado colonial*,” which I presented at CASO in June 2007. A different version of this essay will appear in Spanish in *Revista Iberoamericana*, Volume LXXVIII No. 241.
2. According to Michel Foucault, from whom I take the concept, many colonies were created with the intention of forming an ideal place in relation to the “disorder” of the metropolis the colonizers came from.
3. The Mexica founded Tenochtitlan in 1325, on an island surrounded by six interconnected lakes: Zumpango, Xaltocan, San Cristóbal, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco. The Spaniards established Mexico City on this same spot after the Conquest in 1521.
4. From the middle of the sixteenth century, flooding was a constant problem in Mexico City. Some of these floods (such as those in 1604, 1607 and, above all, the one in 1629) were very severe. The drainage system was the measure taken to resolve the problem (Mathes). In the nineteenth century, the project was picked up again, at which time the so-called “Gran canal del desagüe” was completed, connecting the old colonial project to a new one designed to remove the water of Lake Texcoco from the region (Agostoni). Since then, one of the public works of the local governments of Mexico City and the neighboring states has been the maintenance and expansion of the deep drainage system that takes the water (waste water and rain, indiscriminately) and dumps it in the Gulf of Mexico (Aréchiga Córdoba).
5. I thank Pablo J. Davis for his help translating Balbuena’s quotations.
6. See Fuchs and Martínez-San Miguel for an interesting study of the genre of the poem and the way epic motives in it are transformed into “economic abundance” (689–90).
7. In the penultimate stanza and in what is a late (and unconvincing) desire for anchorage, Balbuena returns to Spain and to granting it possession of New Spain despite the fact that in previous stanzas he had marked this territory as independent.
8. Again, a sound opinion if it is considered that the treasures coming from the Indies were used not to expand Spain’s domestic economy, but to pay for its foreign interventions (Tortella and Comín 150–51).
9. In the pre-Hispanic period and due to specific geographic and climatic conditions (the water in three of the lakes was salty and the lake region was in a central depression with no outlets to the exterior), the water was controlled by means of a complex system in order to protect the city and the floating agricultural plots (chinampas) from possible flooding. It was also important to assure sufficient water for human consumption through the construction of aqueducts. Within the city there was a system of irrigation ditches and canals whose water levels were controlled by locks and gates. The city was connected to the surrounding shore by wide roads

constructed over the water, some of them more than nine kilometers in length. There were also levees (the longest was sixteen kilometers) that, in addition to protecting from flooding, had various other functions, such as controlling the levels of water within the city and separating freshwater from saltwater (Palerm). In the sixteenth century, at the time of the Spaniards' arrival, Mexico-Tenochtitlan was a semiaquatic city with some streets only on water, others on land, and still others half on land and half on water.

10. Philip Arnold shows how the water in the region, including that of the lakes, was managed by the indigenous population through a series of technical-religious rituals, which articulated and gave meaning to the Mexica occupation of the basin.
11. Bradley Nelson analyzes the processes that, in the areas of ontology and epistemology, gave rise to the modern subject. Here I concentrate solely on the ontological question.
12. Žižek's reading in Nelson's article.
13. Due to the fact that Mexico City was founded on the lowest depression of a closed basin, the drainage system at first consisted of building a tunnel in the mountains several kilometers long, which would allow the water from the lakes to the north of the city (Zumpango and Xaltocan) to drain out and would divert all the water from the Cuautitlan River (this river flowed into the lakes to the north) away from the region. In his study of the life of the Nahuas after the Conquest, Charles Gibson asserts that labor practices on the drainage system were considered extremely harsh. The Indians were tied to posts on the shore of the lake and forced to dredge the bottom while they were suspended over the water. According to Gibson, even in the late colonial period, Indians lived in fear of having to work there (237–40). Gibson points out that, in addition to the drainage project's enormous cost in lives, time, and money, it also brought about an "extremely fast and severe" decay of all the villages and towns that were losing water in this way (6). Some historians indicate that throughout the colonial period, directly or indirectly, the coercive work on the drainage system took the lives of close to a million Indians (Boyer 44–45).
14. Georges Bataille wrote *The Accursed Share* in the context of the Marshall Plan. The book can be understood as a sophisticated analysis of why the United States should save Europe by investing its surplus there as a means of also helping create a shock absorber in Europe against possible Russian expansion. If its superabundance was not used rationally, Bataille reminds the United States, it could lead to catastrophe. What Bataille is seeking is the reestablishment of the international status quo—the continuation of the power differential between the different nations of the world—in spite of the catastrophe of the war. It did not occur to him that the United States could squander its economic surplus in other places, for example.

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