

## Languages of Slavery in the Spanish American Wars of Independence (1810-1825)

‘Three Hundred Years of Slavery’ was an insurgent catch-phrase used to condemn the colonial era.

Extract from Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Mythmaking in Spanish America, 1810-1930*, Duke University Press (Durham, 2008), pp. 26-8.

... The legitimacy of independence thus derived in part from the legitimacy of the pre-conquest civilisations that had governed America before the arrival of the Spanish. Spanish rule, in contrast, was nothing more than an unjustified ‘usurpation’, and Spain a ‘vile usurper’.<sup>1</sup> The colonial period itself was dismissed as a time of darkness, three centuries of barbarism. As the historian Hans-Joachim König has shown, the phrase ‘three hundred years of slavery’ became a slogan of the independence movement in many parts of Spanish America.<sup>2</sup> The Peruvian national anthem, composed in 1821, for example condemned the colonial era’s ‘three centuries of horror’, while in his opening address to the Buenos Aires Patriotic Society in 1812 the insurgent lawyer Bernardo de Monteagudo lamented that ‘for the space of more than three hundred years humanity in this part of the world has groaned with no comfort other than suffering, and no consolation other than waiting for death, and seeking in the ashes of the tomb asylum from oppression’.<sup>3</sup> The phrase’s importance as a slogan is

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<sup>1</sup> For ‘usurpation’, see Bonilla, ‘Clases populares’, 29; Explicación de la Función al cumple años del gobierno de la América del Sud, Buenos Aires, 1812, AGI, Diversos 2; *Gazeta Ministerial del Gobierno de Buenos Aires*, 17 March 1813; Proclama de los insurgentes del Cusco, 1814?, Aparicio Vega, *El clero patriota*, 126; El ciudadano Juan Ramon Balcarce . . . , 31 Dec. 1815, *La revolución de mayo*, ed. Mallié, II:563-4; *Los Andes Libres*, Lima, 18 Sept. 1821, *Periódicos*, ed. Tauro, I:294, 296; Un americano, *A los ciudadanos militares*; Lagranda, *Consejo prudente*; Anonymous letter to Pedro Vicente Cañete, AGI, Diversos 3; *Correo Mercantil*, Lima, 4 June 1822; José María Salazar, ‘Canción nacional’, *La guirnalda*, ed. Ortíz; Manuel Ferreyros, ‘Lima Independiente’, 1822?, and Bosquejos de la tiranía y el Perú libre; both in *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 247-9, 401-4; and Chiaramonte, ‘Formas de Identidad’, 83. ‘Vile usurper’ is from Y. V. and J. P. A., ‘Contestación de los hijos del sol a la sombra de Atahualpa’, 1822, *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 356-7.

<sup>2</sup> König, ‘Símbolos nacionales’, 396-7.

<sup>3</sup> José de la Torre Ugarte, ‘Canción Nacional del Perú’, 1821, *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 293; and Monteagudo, ‘Oración inaugural’, *La revolución de mayo*, ed. Mallié, V:7. Monteagudo echoes Juan José Castelli’s 3 April 1811 manifesto (Manifiesto de Castelli, Oruro, 3 April 1811, AGI, Diversos 2), which spread through the region in manuscript form: see the documents seized from José María Ladrón de Guevara and Vicente González in November 1814, AGI, Diversos 3. For other examples, see Francisco Xavier Iturre Patio, Proclama del más perseguido americano a sus paysanos, 9 August 1810, *La revolución de Mayo*, ed. Mallié, I:410; Acta de Independencia Absoluta de Cartagena, Cartagena, 11 Nov. 1811, *Documentos para la Historia de Cartagena*, ed. Arrazola, 185–91; Proclama de Santa Fe a los habitantes del Perú, 1812?, AGI, Diversos 2; *La Aurora de Chile*, 13 August 1812; speech of Antonio Suárez, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 25 May 1813, AGN (BA), Sala X: 44-8-29; Cabildo de Cuzco to Marqués de la Concordia, Cuzco, 17 Sept. 1814, *Conspiraciones y rebeliones*, ed. Villanueva Urteaga, I:216-20; *El Censor*, Buenos Aires, 25 July 1816; Patriotic Sermon delivered in Villeta, 28 Dec. 1819, AGN (B), Fondo Enrique Ortega Ricaurte, caja 184, carpetas 674-7; *Lima libre: drama alegórica en un acto*, 1821; and Manuel López Lisson, ‘Loa en memoria del

demonstrated indirectly by the efforts royalist propagandists took to debunk it. Colombian royalist José Antonio Torres y Peña satirised the insurgents' constant repetition of the expression, complaining that it was used even by men whose own fathers held lucrative colonial posts, and who therefore could scarcely claim to be victims of Spanish oppression.<sup>4</sup> (I will return to the ambiguities of insurgent rhetoric later in this chapter.) As in Mexico, evidence that colonial rule had truly been three hundred years of slavery was found particularly in the mistreatment of the indigenous population. The abuse had begun with the conquest, as the 1819 constitution of the United Provinces of South America affirmed:

Since the Spanish seized these countries, their preferred system of domination was extermination, destruction and humiliation. The plans for this devastation were put into action and have continued without intermission for the space of three hundred years. They began by assassinating the monarchs of Peru and then did the same with the other princes and primates they encountered.<sup>5</sup>

(Preconquest America thus consisted of legitimate monarchies governed by princes, rather than savage tribes ruled by chieftains, as many royalists claimed.) For revolutionaries in South America as in Mexico, independence was therefore a resumption of ancient rights lost in the conquest. A 'national song' published in a Lima newspaper in 1822, a year after the city's conversion to the insurgent cause, expressed that view clearly:

Now revives the beloved *patria*  
of the Incas, the sons of the sun,  
the empire of the great Moctezuma,  
[and] the ancient nation of the Zipas.  
Indian heroes, all America  
salutes you with hymns of love,  
and offers you, in just homage,  
the broken sceptre of the cruel Spaniard.<sup>6</sup>

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primer aniversario de la batalla de Ayacucho', 1825, both in *El teatro en la independencia*, ed. Ugarte Chamorro, II:53, 271; *Columbia: canción patriótica americana*; Salazar, 'Elegía'; Fernández Madrid, 'La prisión de Atahualpa', *Elegías nacionales peruanas*; and *Canción patriótica*.

<sup>4</sup> Torres y Peña, *Memorias*, 33-4. See also Manuel Pardo, 'Memoria exacta', *Conspiraciones y rebeliones*, ed. Villanueva Urteaga, I:258; Berístain de Souza, *Diálogos patrióticos*, 2; López Cancelada, *La verdad sabida*, viii; Carta Pastoral . . . [de] Don Manuel Abad Queipo, Valladolid, 26 September 1812, *Colección de Documentos*, ed. Hernández y Dávalos, IV:439; Berístain de Souza, *Discurso eucarístico*; and Zavala, *Ensayo*, I:54. After his arrest by royalist forces in 1811 the Mexican insurgent Miguel Hidalgo was specifically asked why he had claimed that Spain 'has kept America enslaved for three hundred years'; Declaración del Cura Hidalgo, 7 June 1811, *Colección de Documentos*, ed. Hernández y Dávalos, I:17.

<sup>5</sup> *Manifiesto*.

<sup>6</sup> *Correo Mercantil*, Lima, 18 May 1822.

An independent Peru was therefore a revival of the Inca empire, independent Mexico the same as the Aztec empire, and independent Colombia a resuscitated version of the prequest Muisca 'empire', whose rulers, the Zipas, enjoyed a sudden elevation in status, becoming the equals of the Inca and Aztec monarchs in insurgent discourse. Moreover, just as Mexican revolutionaries described independence as avenging Montezuma, so insurgent writers further south labelled Spain's defeat the revenge of Lautaro and the Inca Atahualpa. 'And now it is known across the land/That the cold ashes of the Incas/Revive in the tomb and, roused,/Proclaim San Martín their avenger', wrote the insurgent Colombian poet José Joaquín de Olmedo, thus labelling the insurgent general José de San Martín an avenger of the Incas.<sup>7</sup> At last the unquiet ghosts of the Incas and Aztecs could be laid to rest. 'Sated now with Iberian blood sleep/The shades of Atahualpa and Montezuma', as the Venezuelan scholar Andrés Bello put it in 1826.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> José Joaquín de Olmedo, 'Brindis a San Martín', *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 327. Olmedo also credited Bolívar with avenging the Incas: see José Joaquín de Olmedo, 'Marcha', 1825, *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 487. For more vengeance see *El observador americano a sus paisanos*, 23 Dec. 1813, AGI, Diversos 3; *El Sol de Cuzco, Documentos*, eds Blanco and Azpurua, X:127; König, *En el camino*, 131-5, 236-41; Fernández Madrid, 'La muerte de Atahualpa', *Elegías nacionales peruanas*; 'Glosa', Ayacucho?, 1820; Y. V. and J. P. A., 'Contestación de los hijos del sol a la sombra de Atahuallpa', 1822; and F. S. M., 'Himno', 1825; all in *La poesía de la emancipación*, ed. Mira Quesada Sosa, 195-6, 356-8, 488-90; *Los Andes Libres*, Lima, 7 Aug. 1821, 18 Sept. 1821, *Periódicos*, ed. Tauro, I:269, 294; *Correo Mercantil*, Lima, 25 May 1822, 5; Miller, *Memoirs*, II:215; *Gaceta de Colombia*, Bogotá, 15 Jan. 1826; and Villanueva Urteaga, 'La idea de los Incas como factor favorable a la independencia', 157.

<sup>8</sup> Andrés Bello, 'La agricultura en la zona tórrida' *Repertorio Americano*, tomo 1, *Repertorio Americano*, I:14, 8, 17 (for quote); and Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 172-80.