This is a comparative history of the making of the nations and cultures of the New World. (Henceforward, I shall refer to these as new collectivities or founding cultures.) It does not, strictly speaking, present new data, since it relies on much previous scholarship. Besides its extremely ambitious, perhaps even reckless objective, the book’s originality is to be found in its comparative approach as well as in the type of question it addresses to the past and present of these collectivities. My aim has been not only to cover almost the entire chronological and spatial field open to study but also to raise the most fundamental questions pertaining to the growth and history of these collectivities: how is a culture, a collective imaginary, born? How is the symbolic appropriation of territory, of Self and of the Other, produced and reproduced? How do founding myths appear? What aporias and contradictions does an elite culture face as it establishes itself in a context that only the European discoverer construes as a new beginning? How does the colonial tie impinge on new continental identities and how does it evolve as they come into their own? What can be gleaned from a study that compares the routes along which founding cultures travelled and the patterns that they each developed? And what useful lesson does one draw from the state of crisis in which many of these cultures seem to be today? Clearly, my inquiry adopts a twofold logic: routes and representations. In other words, I address both the historical paths of these new collectivities and the discourses that they generated to fuel their imaginary.

The sheer scale of such a project would normally have required gargantuan erudition and a perfect mastery of the intellectual traditions underlying the collectivities considered. Meeting neither one nor the other of these criteria, I nonetheless felt unable to resist the huge
temptation posed by such an enormous intellectual endeavour. Fully aware of my limits, I embarked on it, attempting with apt questions and hypotheses to understand that which even a whole lifetime of work could not satisfy. I only hope that I have successfully sketched out an approach and opened up avenues for others who, one day, will write the complete synthesis that I knew was beyond my scope.

In the course of my work, I have received help from countless people; I cannot possibly mention them all here. Still, I would particularly like to underscore my debt to the many colleagues and interlocutors I met during the dozens of presentations that I delivered during conferences, seminars, and colloquia in the countries that I was studying. These exchanges were invaluable opportunities to submit ideas and research conclusions for appraisal by wide-ranging specialists. I have both profited intellectually from these occasions and won encouragement to pursue my project. I am equally indebted to my assistants and students (notably Maria Térésa Perez-Hudon, Susanna Iuliano, Josée Gauthier, and Carole Roy), who collaborated in one section or other of my research; to the numerous correspondents on the World Wide Web who replied, patiently and at length, to my requests; to colleagues (in particular Yvan Lamonde, Bernard Andrès, Josée Igartua, and Ronald Rudin) with whom I have for some years conducted the Forum d’histoire des imaginaires collectifs (of the Institut inter-universitaire de recherches sur les populations); and finally to the staff of Les Éditions du Boréal and McGill-Queen’s University Press, who handled my book with their usual courtesy and professionalism.

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