

**Approaches to Teaching  
the Writings of  
Bartolomé de Las Casas**

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Edited by

*Santa Arias*

and

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Approaches to Teaching  
World Literature

*Joseph Gibaldi*, series editor

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The Modern Language Association of America  
New York 2008

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Approaches to teaching the writings of Bartolomé de las Casas /  
edited by Santa Arias and Eyda M. Merediz.

p. cm. — (Approaches to teaching world literature ; 102)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-87352-944-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-0-87352-945-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Casas, Bartolomé de las, 1474–1566—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Casas, Bartolomé de las, 1474–1566—Criticism, Textual.
3. America—Discovery and exploration—Spanish—Study and teaching.
4. Indians, Treatment of—Study and teaching. 5. American literature—Colonial period, ca. 1600–1775—Study and teaching. 6. America—History—To 1810—Study and teaching. I. Arias, Santa. II. Merediz, Eyda M., 1964– III. Series.

E125.C4A55 2008

970.01'6—dc22 2008024220

Approaches to Teaching World Literature 102  
ISSN 1059-1133

Cover illustration of the paperback edition:  
*Bartolomé de Las Casas*, by Marta Gutiérrez. 2007.  
Mixed media on paper: oil on computer-altered image

Published by The Modern Language Association of America  
26 Broadway, New York, New York 10004-1789  
www.mla.org

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## INTRODUCTION

The writings of the Dominican intellectual Bartolomé de Las Casas are essential to understand the cultural and political history of the colonial period in the Americas. He is often considered the most significant Spanish religious and secular figure of the early years of the European colonization for his emphatic political interventions and his persuasive texts in defense of native populations. Las Casas's image, ideas, and personal history have transcended time and space. As a key transatlantic and hemispheric historian and advocate of Amerindian rights, this sixteenth-century friar still provokes much reflection and dialogue in the political and cultural arena, particularly in the study of imperialism and forms of colonialism and in the denunciation of human rights violations.

In recent discussions in postcolonial studies, Las Casas has been underscored as a decisive figure who articulates both sides of the imperial project, capable of being either an agent of hegemonic power or an antihegemonic force. For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*, he serves as the example of political and cultural ambiguity when he describes Amerindian populations: "Las Casas can only think of equality in terms of sameness" (116), and he ultimately supports dominant Eurocentric ideology that aims to impose Christianity and European culture on the Amerindian populations. In contrast, Robert Young's chapter "Las Casas to Bentham," in his *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, emphasizes how anticolonialism begins within colonialism itself. For Young, Las Casas was the precursor of European anticolonialism when he questioned the moral and legal foundations of the conquest (75). Young's reading of Las Casas is insufficiently political, while Hardt and Negri applied to the sixteenth century an ideological apparatus that does not allow for nuances. Nevertheless, these two interdisciplinary studies document once more how Las Casas has been inscribed critically as a foundational figure in the long history of resistance to imperialism and colonialism.

In academic scholarship, the significance of Bartolomé de Las Casas's ideas has been a recurrent topic in the humanities and social sciences. There have been many conferences in Europe and Latin America commemorating the quadricentennial of his death in 1566, and later, quincentennial conferences were held based on his supposed birth date in 1474. The publication of Helen Rand Parish and Harold E. Weidman's research correcting Las Casas's birth date (placing it in 1484 ["Correct Birthdate"]) provided another occasion to call together Lascasistas from around the globe to reflect on and debate the friar's significance to contemporary thought and history. Many more academic or religious meetings have taken place since 1984: Las Casas is relevant for many constituencies and is part of the intellectual history in a number of national traditions.

In Latin America, political and social movements have been inspired by Las Casas, as in the case of the rise of the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico in the early 1990s. The bishop of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Samuel Ruiz García (named to the same post that Las Casas held in the sixteenth century), served as mediator between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government during the initial indigenous uprisings. As Benjamin Keen has suggested, “the Mexican government decision to ask a Lascasian bishop—the only public figure who enjoyed the trust of the Mayan peasantry—to intervene in the Chiapas conflict suggests the continuing vitality and relevance of Las Casas’s doctrines in the Modern World” (2). Ruiz is now retired but still speaks in public forums on the economic violence that the Mexican neoliberal government exercises. In a press conference published by José Antonio Román Enviado in 2005, Ruiz stated that because of high unemployment and extreme poverty, members of the indigenous communities are forced to leave the highlands and migrate illegally to the United States. Just as Las Casas did in colonial times, Ruiz uses every opportunity to offer a strong political critique of what he calls the new evil, the forced migration that is decimating Latin American indigenous communities.

Samuel Ruiz is one among many voices raising social consciousness in Latin America that already in the 1960s recognized Las Casas as the father of liberation theology because of his resounding call to emancipate indigenous communities from injustices and exploitation. Gustavo Gutiérrez and Enrique Dussel, key scholars in religion and philosophy respectively, have drawn on the Lascasian message to formulate a theory and praxis that are profoundly rooted in the Latin American colonial experience (Gutiérrez, *Teología* and *En busca*; Dussel, “Nucléo” and *Historia*). From the margins to the centers of power, Indian subjects continue to confront human rights violations, abuses of power in their communities, and even death in the long journey moving away from home, local discrimination, and social injustice. Poverty, inequality, and forced migration have not ended in Latin America, making it impossible to dismiss Las Casas’s original message and legal demands.

Analogies with present-day situations, such as the complexities of neocolonialism in Latin America or even the injustice of today’s wars, are a natural gateway to introduce Las Casas in the classroom. Nevertheless, teaching the literature of the colonial period is, above all, an interdisciplinary task. This volume pledges faith in that premise by collecting in its first section, “Teaching Las Casas across the Disciplines,” complementary essays from scholars in literature, history, anthropology, and religion. Las Casas is also worth considering in discussions of early modern political theory, geography, and philosophy. Essays in subsequent sections of this collection guide the teaching of Las Casas from the multiple perspectives and intersections necessary to grasp the significance of his work. Lascasian texts are among the best examples of the interdisciplinary Hispanic intellectual tradition of the Renaissance, which blends humanism and scholasticism and helps us understand the “modernity” that defines the early modern period.

Las Casas commands much attention because of his multidimensional personality, his strong agency, and the intellectual depth he brings to some of the most polemical debates about human nature and actions. During his lifetime, he used his favored position at the court of Emperor Charles V to cast serious doubt on the ethics of colonization and its human, physical, and cultural destruction of the New World. The abuses that he graphically portrayed in his treatise *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (*Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*) called for justice and contributed to the spread of what has become known as the “Black Legend” of Spanish transatlantic history (anti-Hispanist and anti-Catholic sentiments advocated by sixteenth-century Protestants and emerging rival nation-empires). Therefore, we devote a whole section, “Teaching Las Casas’s *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*,” to the Lascasian text most widely used in the literature classroom and in a variety of disciplines and national traditions. An enticing account in many ways, the *Brevísima relación* offers one of the most dramatic views of colonial violence and trauma. It is an essential and heartbreaking description that captures the many voices that joined Las Casas in testifying to the forms of aggression that took place during the first centuries of European domination. The *Brevísima relación*, in its many editions, is also a crucial text for tracking the importance of translation and political manipulation, since it has been widely translated, illustrated, edited, reprinted, and commented on since its first publication in 1552. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new editions in Latin America, Europe, and the United States fueled anti-Spanish sentiments, which served as the basis of nationalist movements for independence in the Spanish colonies and even as ammunition for the Spanish-American War of 1898. The essays in this section address the historical background surrounding the production of the text, look at the critical questions that it generates, and explore suggestive relating topics. They also help instructors make accessible the rhetorical techniques and persuasive language found in the *Brevísima relación*.

Because much teaching of Las Casas centers on the *Brevísima relación*—a text that, in many ways, is decidedly not representative of Las Casas’s work as a historian, ethnographer, and canon lawyer—the following section, “Teaching Other Lascasian Texts,” incorporates other forms taken by Las Casas’s critique of the aggressive European practices in the New World: numerous letters, treatises, *memoriales* (petitions to the crown), and several voluminous and complex historical accounts that focus on the illegality and immorality of the Spanish conquest and colonization process. To address crucial issues in the teaching of the life and writings of Las Casas, we adopt a comparative approach and consider the *Apologética historia sumaria* (*Apologetic History*), *De unico vocatio-nis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* (*The Only Way of Calling All People to a Living Faith*), and other treatises, such as the *Apología* and *Reglas para confesores* (*Rules for Confessors*). His monumental *Historia de las Indias* (*History of the Indies*) is not featured independently here, but instead it serves as a basic source for many essays throughout as they touch on events and

historical accounts narrated many times over and from different angles. The *Historia's* prologue, nevertheless, is discussed in detail in an introduction of Las Casas for historians. In addition, several essays work directly or tangentially with a selection of his *Remedios* and *Memoriales*. Such a comprehensive corpus is particularly illuminating, since it reveals both continuities and changes in Las Casas's ideology, but despite the importance of the petitions, these texts are often neglected or poorly integrated in the classroom. This volume attempts to correct that oversight.

Las Casas's writings generate rich discussions on broader issues pertaining not only to Renaissance humanism and political culture but also to national movements in Latin America, democratic processes, human rights, and the dynamics of globalization. Thus the section "Teaching Las Casas in the Broader Ibero-American Context" puts his contributions in dialogue with his contemporaries as well as with those who have used and abused his ideas in later centuries. Las Casas's writings are noteworthy: he presented in detail an exegesis of the Columbian enterprise, provided a comprehensive ethnography of the native cultures of the Americas, and elaborated a fervent critique of the evangelization process and of Spanish colonial rule, as well as constructed an apology for and a defense of his own actions as protector of the Indians.

The essays show first how Las Casas needs to be taught alongside historical figures such as Christopher Columbus, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía), and many other secular and ecclesiastical historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To understand the confrontational nature of the cultural contact, we need to look at how this Dominican historian manipulated his sources and established ardent oral and written dialogues with intellectuals of his day. His production was embedded in a network of contingent discursive practices that are often overlooked in common teaching designs. Furthermore, studies of the circulation and reception of Las Casas's texts at different times and in multiple regions are useful in the classroom. His work was of great influence during the independence periods: first, during the early nineteenth century, when most of Latin American territories achieved their sovereignty from Spain (1810–24), and later, toward the end of the century (1895–98), when Cuba and Puerto Rico were still struggling to achieve their independence from Spain. According to Simón Bolívar in his "Carta de Jamaica," Las Casas was the most "sublime" historian of his period (56), while decades later José Martí recommends to the youth of Latin America reading Las Casas because of his compassion and combative spirit ("El padre").

The essays here further develop Las Casas's interventions and subsequent appropriations in other positive and negative genealogies. His intellectual influence presents instructors with a predicament when his ideological transformations and the multifaceted, apparently contradictory nature of his thought are ignored. Besides being singled out as the promoter of the Black Legend, the other politically controversial aspect of Las Casas's life is his promotion of

the African slave trade to replace the dying masses of Indian labor. Complementing a brief introduction to the subject at the beginning of the volume, this section amply contextualizes the institution of slavery, elucidating Las Casas's role in the arrival of African slaves in the Americas and discussing his place as a foundational figure in Caribbean discursive practices about race. Other essays tackle his ideas' contribution to the birth of liberation theology and to the emergence of literary movements such as *indigenismo* or the more recent testimonial-documentary genre and use the productive conversation between literature and film to address the controversial representation of Las Casas on both sides of the Atlantic.

The last section, "Teaching Las Casas from a Comparative Perspective," examines Las Casas in English, French, American, and Luso-Brazilian studies curricula. These essays look at the history of translations and printings, how to teach his writings using archival material and rare books, and the absence or partially acknowledged influence of Las Casas in the literary cultures of a range of national traditions.

Las Casas's life and works concern academic inquiry today as much as they influenced individuals and institutions during Spanish colonial rule and in national and transnational settings. His firsthand accounts of the history of the conquest and his legal treatises serve as an integral part of a variety of intellectual genealogies. As this volume makes clear, Las Casas was a product of his times; he was a Christian humanist who questioned, resisted, and attempted to reform Spanish policy in the Indies within a European legal, moral, and Christian framework. Beyond his active political life, Las Casas's writings ultimately presented a polemical defense of self-governance and property rights for Amerindians and advocated for restoration and restitution. Moreover, he narrated and described some of the most important events in the development of capitalism and articulated the most pervasive discourses on human rights and anti-imperialism across the centuries.

By addressing the increasingly interdisciplinary inclusion of texts from the Hispanic tradition in the global curriculum, this volume clarifies historical and critical issues and explores Las Casas's place and legacy in the intellectual culture of the Americas and Europe. Teachers in the field of colonial studies face the challenge of making historical figures, texts, and inquiries intelligible for contemporary students. It is not an easy task to navigate the permeable border between fiction and history, nor is it always possible to establish the rich connections between past and present in the classroom. For teachers of Bartolomé de Las Casas's writings, however, the endeavor is not only feasible but necessary.

steady in their faith and in their patience' (545). The deployment of *sermocinatio* in the *Brevísima relación* tells Prince Philip that Indians are martyrs and Spaniards, savages (in their own words, so to speak), thereby supporting the ideological purpose stated in "Purpose of the Present Summary" and dramatizing Las Casas's larger argument in favor of the conversion of the native peoples and against conquest and servitude.

## NOTES

Quotations from the *Brevísima relación* are taken from André Saint-Lu's edition (Cátedra, 2005).

<sup>1</sup> All translations from the Spanish are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Modern treatments of rhetoric in Spanish such as Marchese and Forradellas; Azaustre and Casas; and Mortara Garavelli are also helpful for undergraduates and graduates. Instructors in English-language courses should lead students to modern guides in English (Barilli and esp. Kennedy). On Las Casas's rhetoric in particular, see Abbott; and S. Arias, "Bartolomé de las Casas's Sacred Place."

## Confronting Stereotypes: The *Brevísima relación* as Homily, Not History

Cynthia L. Stone

A unifying theme of Survey of Spanish American Literature I, a third-year course for undergraduate Spanish majors, is the presentation of colonial-era chronicles not simply as historical sources but as texts structured by specific goals, which, in turn, influence the selection of particular topoi, narrative genres, and rhetorical strategies. Over the course of the semester, we cover major texts from pre-Hispanic times through the early nineteenth century, three hours of which (two seventy-five minute sessions) are dedicated to the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

An important goal of the course is to encourage students to critically evaluate common stereotypes about Indians and Spaniards, including the "noble savage" and the "cruel conquistador." Las Casas presents an interesting quandary from this perspective, since a pivotal metaphor from his most famous and most accessible work, the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, involves the characterization of the Amerindians as defenseless lambs at the mercy of Spanish wolves. Readers commonly react to these stereotypes by either accepting them uncritically or dismissing Las Casas's denunciations as exaggerations and slanderous inventions directly responsible for the Spanish Black Legend. Yet, for those of us who specialize in this period of immense cultural ferment whose repercussions are still evident today, neither extreme does justice to the complexity and richness of Las Casas's writings and his enduring legacy in Spanish American letters.

A solution to this quandary is to avoid treating the *Brevísima relación* in a survey format. The reasons I prefer not to exercise that option are several. First, most Holy Cross students are Catholic, and close to a third of Spanish majors in my classes are heritage speakers. Nevertheless, they, like most United States students, have internalized anti-Catholic and anti-Hispanic prejudices. Teaching the *Brevísima relación* tends to bring these unquestioned assumptions to the surface, where they can be critically evaluated. Second, the *Brevísima relación*'s combination of rhetorical strategies is amazingly effective at provoking outrage, and, to my mind, anything that stirs undergraduates from a general sense of disconnection regarding colonial-era texts is to be cherished.

Still, I postpone discussion regarding the above polemic until the end of the second class. Otherwise, the most vocal students tend to divide unreflexively into two camps—those all too ready to blame the Spaniards for the problems currently faced by the nations of Spanish America and those who feel the need to dismiss Las Casas for lack of historical accuracy in his denunciation of Spanish abuses.

My pedagogical strategy hinges on a comparison between excerpts from the *Historia de las Indias* and the *Brevísima relación*. We begin, accordingly, by

returning to the Renaissance definition of history that was introduced during the preceding week's discussion of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*: in the words of Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, "es la historia narración de verdades por hombre sabio, para enseñar a bien vivir" 'history is a true account by a man of wisdom with the purpose of instructing in righteous living (24).<sup>1</sup> The first point is that Las Casas, as a learned man of the cloth, corresponds to the Renaissance model of the historian as philosophical moralist better than Bernal Díaz. Second, Las Casas is no less qualified than Bernal Díaz to provide eyewitness testimony, as the Dominican amply demonstrates in his writings. Relatively speaking, however, the requirement that history provide moral and religious truth gives added weight to the evidentiary truth of Las Casas's account.

The first selections from Las Casas's *Historia* are introduced through part of a chapter from José Juan Arrom's *Imaginación del Nuevo Mundo*, which presents Las Casas as "iniciador de la narrativa de protesta" in Hispanic literature ("Bartolomé de las Casas"). Several brief excerpts that Arrom reproduces and analyzes include the anecdotes of the mastiff Becerillo (*Historia* 2: 389; bk. 2, ch. 55), the lies of Indians and Spaniards (3: 331; bk. 3, ch. 145), and the Indian messenger (1: 445; bk. 1, ch. 115). A supplementary online reading on the use of killer dogs in the wars of conquest that references Becerillo serves implicitly to call into question the charge of fabrication used against Las Casas (Grodsinsky).

The primary antithesis in the Becerillo story revolves around the personification of the dog—who is given a share in the booty equal to that of a crossbowman and addressed as "Señor perro" 'Sir Dog'—versus the dehumanization of the nameless "mujer vieja" 'old Indian woman' whom Becerillo ultimately mistakes for a wall and urinates on. The use of dramatic irony implicates us as readers in the cruel joke Becerillo's owner plays on the unsuspecting old woman. (We know that she is given a letter only to provide better sport by allowing the mastiff to chase her down before tearing her to pieces, but she thinks she is being given an important mission.) The surprising, happy ending, in which the Spaniards grant the old woman her freedom "por no ser más crueles que el perro" 'so as to not exceed the dog in cruelty' (2: 389), manages to illustrate succinctly the conquistadors' loss of humanity while also foregrounding Las Casas's characteristic blending of irony and black humor. Rather than exaggeration, the predominant tone here is understatement, which is highly effective in suggesting the matter-of-fact attitude of the seasoned torturer and also provides a good counterpoint to our later reading of excerpts from the *Brevísima relación*. The ironic definition of the experienced "cristiano" (Christian) as someone who knows how to lie convincingly and the inversion of stereotypes about the relative intelligence and prudence of the "indios" (Indians) as opposed to their supposedly more civilized masters are the highlights of the other brief selections discussed in class.

In preparation for the second day on Las Casas, students preview the story of the 1518–35 rebellion of the Taíno chief Enriquillo, in what is now the Dominican Republic (for a good summary, see Wagner and Parish 74–78; an alternate

Spanish version is Losada, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* 162–65), as well as a general profile of missionaries in the Spanish Indies (Rosati).<sup>2</sup> Depending on time constraints, the last few minutes of class are devoted to reviewing these materials.

The reading assignments for the next class session include Raquel Chang-Rodríguez and Malva Filer's selections on Enriquillo in the anthology *Voces de Hispanoamérica* (from the *Historia* 3: 259–70; bk. 3, chs. 125–27), two excerpts from the *Brevísima relación* (the prologue and the chapter on the conquest of the island of Hispaniola [71–73, 80–82]), plus a reproduction of the famous 1511 Hispaniola sermon by the Dominican friar Antón de Montesinos as remembered by Las Casas (*Historia* 2: 441–42; bk. 3, ch. 4).<sup>3</sup> I also provide an interview with Gustavo Gutiérrez on the topic of Lascasian influences on theology of liberation as optional reading (Gutiérrez, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas*).

To focus attention on the generic conventions that shape the Lascasian texts, I supply students with a list of rhetorical figures and tropes classified by Quintilian under the Greek term *enargeia* and ask them to identify corresponding passages from the *Historia* and the *Brevísima relación* with a view to comparing the uses made of them in the two works. Among the main components of *enargeia* are *descriptio* (vivid description, including ocular demonstration, invented dialogue, and personification), *accumulatio* (the piling up of words and concepts, through climax, synonymy, asyndeton, exemplum, congeries, etc.), hyperbole (a species of amplification that can either exaggerate or attenuate), irony (encompassing antiphrasis, paralipsis, *contentio*, etc.), and antonomasia (the substitution of a descriptive phrase for a proper name or of a representative individual for a class of persons).

The personal motivation informing Las Casas's most polemical writings is aptly summarized in the *Brevísima relación* as the awareness that to remain silent in the face of the atrocities the friar has witnessed is tantamount to becoming an accomplice: "deliberé, por no ser reo, callando, de las perdiciones de ánimas y cuerpos infinitas que los tales perpetraran, poner en molde algunas" 'I therefore concluded that it would constitute a criminal neglect of my duty to remain silent about the enormous loss of life as well as the infinite numbers of souls dispatched to Hell in the course of such "conquests," and so resolved to publish an account of a few such outrages' (80–82; *Short Account* 6). Indeed, Las Casas's first draft was composed in 1542 for oral delivery to the court councils in an attempt to convince the emperor to halt the ongoing wars of conquest (*Brevísima relación* 21–22).

Las Casas's concomitant rhetorical challenge is to excite in his readers a similar sense of outrage, by bringing the subject matter so vividly before their minds' eyes that they imagine themselves to be witnesses to the events described and, as such, likewise compelled to moral action. In this sense, enargetic rhetoric is well suited to the biblical imperative to provide visible testimony of God's presence. Here the topos of the eyewitness is more prophetically charged than in Bernal Díaz, collapsing, as Santa Arias observes, the spatiotemporal distance

between the reader and the events portrayed (*Retórica* 75–76). Las Casas's verbal pictures not only create the illusion of immediacy but also convey a deeper understanding of what is represented, the invisible significance of divinely sanctioned authenticity.

When stressing the major points of comparison between Las Casas's style of presentation in the *Historia* versus the *Brevísima relación*, note five rhetorical figures especially: antonomasia, *contentio*, irony, hyperbole, and *descriptio*.

First, the use of antonomasia: In the *Historia*, Las Casas provides proper names for historical figures, using baptismal ones for the cacique Enriquillo and his wife, Doña Lucía; surnames for the Spanish *encomendero* Valenzuela and the lieutenant governor, Pedro de Vadillo; and Taíno names for those Indian rebels who reject Christianity, such as Ciguayo. In contrast, in the *Brevísima relación*, Las Casas pointedly excludes names in the chapter on Hispaniola, referring simply to “los cristianos” (the Christians) and “los indios” (the Indians). Moreover, while the *Historia* includes a brief verbal portrait of the protagonist, Enriquillo,<sup>4</sup> the predominant descriptive mode in the *Brevísima relación* is an intensification and accumulation of associations through the reduction of individuals to occupational titles such as “capitán” (captain) or “alguazil” (law enforcement officer) and through the use of epithets like “tiranos” (tyrants), “inhumanos” (inhumane), “extirpadores” (extirpators), and “capitales enemigos del linaje humano” (principal enemies of the human race [80–82]).

The *Brevísima relación*'s lack of individualization and in-depth characterization is one of its most problematic aspects for modern readers. My goal is to help students perceive it as a rhetorical strategy Las Casas uses in some, but by no means all, of his writings. The rationale here is to underscore that, no matter the specific circumstances, the same dynamics repeat themselves throughout the wars of conquest. In the *Brevísima relación*, Las Casas focuses on the universal dynamics of human interaction in times of war, how those who commit acts of violence (unless in self-defense) are complicit in their own dehumanization.

Although Las Casas is frequently cited as an originator of the topos of the “noble savage,” this attribution is only partially accurate. In the *Historia*, for instance, it is Enriquillo (despite the childlike diminutive conferred on him by the Franciscan friars) who exemplifies the virtues of prudence, articulateness, and self-control associated with the Renaissance ideal of the fully autonomous adult male. Indeed, the exposition of the rights of the Amerindians to self government due to their exemplary political and moral development (as perfectly as Las Casas considered humanly possible without the guidance of divine grace) is more central to his writings overall than the qualities of docility, humility, obedience, and peacefulness highlighted in the *Brevísima relación*.

The second point to underscore for students is the use of *contentio* (comparison through contraries): In the *Historia*, the main contrast is between Enriquillo and Valenzuela, but there are also significant secondary distinctions made within the separate categories of Indians and Spaniards. Enriquillo, for instance, is contrasted with other Indian rebels, such as Ciguayo, who stage

unprovoked attacks on populations of Spanish civilians, while Valenzuela is contrasted with the members of the Audiencia of Santo Domingo (who give Enriquillo a favorable disposition to his legal case, albeit without the means of enforcing it), with captain Hernando de San Miguel (who negotiates a peace treaty with the cacique, though ultimately inconclusively), and with friars such as the Franciscans (who teach Enriquillo Christian doctrine and how to read and write in Castilian), as well as with Las Casas himself. These secondary contrasts are notably absent from the *Brevísima relación*, where the full force of pathos is brought to bear on the binary opposition between Indians and Christians: the Indians represented as “corderos metidos en sus apriscos” ‘lambs in the fold’; the Christians, sardonically, as “feroces bestias” ‘ferocious beasts’ (81, 82). The generosity and humble lifestyle of the Indians, moreover, is contrasted with the covetousness, wastefulness, and ecological devastation wrought by the Spaniards: “lo que basta para tres casas de a diez personas cada una para un mes, come un cristiano y destruye en un día.” ‘What a European will consume in a single day normally supports three native households of ten persons each for a whole month’ (80; *Short Account* 14).

A key distinction between the literary genres of history and homily involves just such a flattening out of particulars in the interest of emphasizing universal truths. In the category of homiletics, the *Brevísima relación* corresponds to the ministerial sermon delivered to believers, as opposed to the missionary sermon addressed to nonbelievers. Along these lines, it resembles Fray Antón de Montesinos's 1511 prophetic exhortation to the Spaniards of Hispaniola to bestir themselves from the stupor into which they have fallen and recognize the mortal sin in which they are living: “yo que soy voz de Cristo en el desierto desta isla [os aviso que] todos estáis en pecado mortal y en él vivís y morís” ‘I, the voice of Christ in the desert of this island, [I declare unto you that] you are all living and dying in a state of mortal sin’ (*Historia* 2: 441; bk. 3, ch. 4; see note 3 of this essay).

Accordingly, I draw students' attention to the division of the *Brevísima relación* into a prologue and a series of chapters set in diverse locales where the ravages of conquest are shown to repeat themselves over and over. Both the prologue (where the *thema* to be expounded on is first presented) and the final chapter on New Granada end with the word *amen*. As André Saint-Lu suggests (Introduction 17), the chapters are expository variations on the scriptural passage in the book of Luke in which Jesus's disciples are likened to lambs among wolves. The underlying theological proposition implies a world radically divided between the forces of good and of evil, in which God and Satan vie for the souls of unrepentant sinners (for more on this oppositional rhetoric, see Avallé-Arce). In other words, the rhetorical appeal of the *Brevísima relación* is more to the emotions than to the intellect, while the *Historia* presents a relatively balanced appeal to pathos and logos.

The third point of comparison concerns other characteristic uses of irony: once again there is a certain economy of expression and controlled understatement

in the *Historia*, as when Enriquillo tells the *encomendero* who has assaulted his wife, impoverished his people, and abused him both verbally and physically, “Agradeced, Valenzuela, que no os mato; andad, id y no volváis más acá; guardaos” ‘Be grateful I spare your life, Valenzuela. Go now, leave and return no more to these parts. Take heed,’ or when the act of taking up arms in self-defense is pithily summarized as “alzarse y ser rebelde,” rising up and rebelling (3: 261; bk. 3, ch. 125).

The *Brevísima relación*'s irony is more graphic and heavy-handed. In addition to the antiphrastic “Christian,” which appears in most every sentence, the brief passages we analyze in class include ironic references to sacrilegious methods of torture (“de trece en trece, a honor y reverencia de Nuestro Redemptor e de los doce apóstoles, poniéndoles leña y fuego” [Stringing their victims up] and burn[ing] them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Savior and the twelve Apostles’ [81; *Short Account* 15]) and to the great benefits conferred on the Indians by European letters (“otros . . . cortábanles ambas manos y dellas llevaban colgando, y decíanles: ‘Andad con cartas’, conviene a saber, lleva las nuevas a las gentes que estaban huidas por los montes” ‘Some they chose to . . . cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: “Take this letter”—meaning that their sorry condition would act as a warning to those hiding in the hills’ [81; 15]). Class discussion tends to revolve around Las Casas’s inversion of religious preconceptions—most Indian converts are better Christians than those who boast the name Christians; the *buen cristiano* is defined by acts, not heredity—and also his development of the Aristotelian conception of civil society along with the Thomistic conception of natural law into a theory of natural rights (Hanke, *Aristotle*; Pagden, *Fall*; and García).

Instructors will also want to track the use of hyperbole: the ironic understatement of the *Historia* contrasts with the unremittingly emphatic tone of the *Brevísima relación*, achieved through the prolific use of grammatical superlatives (“sumario brevísimo,” “vastísimo y nuevo mundo,” “tierras grandísimas,” “gravísimos pecados mortales,” “cosa . . . convenientísima,” “perros bravísimos”; ‘briefest of summaries,’ ‘most vast and newfound world,’ ‘exceedingly great lands,’ ‘gravest of mortal sins,’ ‘a matter of utmost convenience,’ ‘most ferocious dogs’), extreme descriptors (“destrucción,” “terribles y eternos suplicios,” “inmensa copia de sangre humana,” “cosas arriba dichas y otras infinitas”; ‘destruction,’ ‘terrible and eternal torments,’ ‘copious amounts of human blood,’ ‘aforesaid matters and infinite others’), and quantitative and qualitative amplifications (“mil cuentos de gentes,” “cincuenta años y más de experiencia,” “tantos y tan grandes y tales reinos,” “tan sin piedad y tan feroces bestias”; ‘peoples by the scores of thousands,’ ‘experience of fifty years and more,’ ‘so many kingdoms, each and every one of such greatness,’ ‘so merciless and of such bestial ferocity’ [72–82]). When the charged language is combined with the abundant use of congeries, as when Las Casas refers to the conquests as “inicias, tiránicas, y por toda ley natural, divina y humana condenadas, detestadas y malditas” ‘iniquitous, tyrannical, and condemned, detested, and accursed by every natu-

ral, divine, and human law’ (72), the overall impression created in the reader is one of sustained verbal assault.

It is important to distinguish between the use of exaggeration for dramatic effect, without intent to deceive, and the deliberate misrepresentation of historically verifiable figures and events. Las Casas’s rhetorical excesses are consistently of the first type, not the second. Indeed, taken individually, the above examples do not differ substantially from the use of hyperbole by Las Casas’s contemporaries, as when the historian Francisco López de Gómara refers to the discovery of the Spanish Indies as “la mayor cosa después de la creación del mundo, sacando la encarnación y muerte del que lo crió” ‘the greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it)’ (qtd. in Elliott, *Old World* 10). Rather, it is the cumulative effect of so many in such a condensed narration that contributes to the impression of “aglomeración saturada” ‘saturated conglomeration’ (Veres 5). Which leads to the question of why Las Casas overplays his hand, so to speak, in the *Brevísima relación*—why he is not more circumspect in his use of this trope. No less an authority than the classical rhetorician Quintilian suggests a possible rationale:

Hyperbole only has positive value when the thing about which we have to speak transcends the ordinary limits of nature. We are then allowed to amplify, because the real size of the thing cannot be expressed, and it is better to go too far than not to go far enough. (469; bk. 8, ch. 6)

The task Las Casas sets for himself in the *Brevísima relación* is not only to convince his readers of the validity of his moral and theological arguments but also to persuade them of the unprecedented nature of what is happening in the Spanish Indies, so they feel compelled either to join with him in putting an end to the abuses or to cover their ears and decry the shamelessness of such allegations. In giving voice to the unspeakable—the incomprehensibility of extreme violence—Las Casas crosses the boundary of decorum into the realm of absolutes.

Finally, there is Las Casas’s use of *descriptio* (vivid description). The concise characterization in the *Historia* of individuals (e.g., Becerillo, Enriquillo), of places (e.g., Hispaniola as a *locus amoenus* before the conquest), and of events (e.g., the rapid sketching of action through sequences of verbs such as “tomóse . . . suénase . . . provéese . . . juntáronse”; ‘returned . . . proclaimed . . . provided . . . set forth’ [3: 261; bk. 3, ch. 125]) contrasts with the excruciating enumeration of the physicality of torture in the *Brevísima relación*: the detailing of body parts (smashed or severed heads, disemboweled entrails, amputated hands, roasting feet, screaming mouths), of types of people slaughtered (the aged, pregnant women, infants, caciques), of particular techniques favored by diverse executioners (stabbing, dismembering, drowning, burning on gallows or lashed to grids of rods).

The figure of ocular demonstration (Cicero’s *sub oculos subjectio*) involves not just the recounting of events but the actual showing of them before the eyes

of the mind. It thus constitutes a reality of its own making, which becomes self-evident and readily reproducible. In this sense, Theodor de Bry's images illustrating the 1598 Latin edition of the *Brevísima relación* simply take Las Casas's verbal pictures to the next logical stage of rhetorical intensification. (The de Bry engraving we tend to concentrate on in class is that of the thirteen naked men and women hanging from a gallows and slowly burning, along with the infant whose brains are about to be dashed against a wall [*Narratio regionum* 10]; for more on this topic, see Conley.)

The virtue of the preceding point-by-point comparison between Las Casas as historian and as preacher-prophet is that, when the class finally gets around to discussing the Black Legend, we can concentrate on the crux of the matter: namely, whether the publication of the *Brevísima relación* in 1552 was Las Casas's greatest mistake (in accordance with the thesis of Rómulo Carbia, among others); or whether, considered retrospectively, its positive contributions (to the development of protest and testimonial literature, to the theology of liberation, to the doctrine of natural human rights) outweigh the negatives of its propagandistic use by Spain's enemies to defame the Spanish national character. An alternate approach, for those who prefer to put a somewhat different spin on the debate, is whether those who disagree with their government's policies do well in openly voicing their objections so as to influence the course of foreign policy, both in the short and long term, or whether to do so is intrinsically unpatriotic.

#### NOTES

I follow André Saint-Lu's editions of the *Brevísima relación* (Catédra, 2005) and the *Historia de las Indias* (Ayacucho, 1986). All translations from the Spanish are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>1</sup> This summation is from a retrospectively oriented historiographic treatise by Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, first published in 1611.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the life of Las Casas, see the essay by Rolena Adorno in this volume. The best full-length study is still the 1967 biography by Wagner and Parish.

<sup>3</sup> Available online at [www.puc.cl/sw\\_educ/historia/conquista/parte3/html/index.html](http://www.puc.cl/sw_educ/historia/conquista/parte3/html/index.html), path: sermón de Montecinos.

<sup>4</sup> Enriquillo is described as "a tall, impressive man, finely proportioned, his face neither handsome nor homely. It was the face of a serious and stern man" (Casas, *Indian Freedom* 189).

## Images and War: The Representation of Violence in Colonial Times and Today

Gustavo Verdesio

The importance of the illustrations that accompany Theodor de Bry's editions of Bartolomé de Las Casas's *Brevísima relación* (*Narratio regionum indicarum*) is undeniable. As some scholars (notably Tom Conley and José Rabasa [*Writing Violence*]) have pointed out, their dialogue with the text alters the message contained in the original Spanish version. Also, as Conley has suggested, many European audiences' primary images of the colonial encounter came from the editions produced by de Bry and his sons. The drawings of indigenous bodies and foreign, exotic landscapes lent the texts they accompanied an aura of authenticity and gave readers a sense of firsthand contact with unknown peoples and places (103). These images were, for many readers, not only the first ones they had seen depicting colonialism and the distant lands where it took place but also the most authoritative ones.

The illustrations in the texts reproduced by the de Bry publishers were part of an apparatus of propaganda that advanced the cause of the Dutch Protestants (who had been in conflict with the Spanish since 1566)<sup>1</sup> by showing pictures of the crimes and barbarous acts performed by the Spaniards, their Catholic enemies. Among other functions, the images sometimes exaggerated the facts described by the original text or reorganized the information in ways that would make the Spaniards look even worse to unsympathetic European eyes. Therefore, images play a didactic role in the presentation and representation of the role of the Spanish forces in the colonization of the Americas. This essay focuses both on the political uses of the images included in the de Brys' editions (especially the 1598 Latin edition) and of those that inspired them (the watercolors that illustrate a 1582 French manuscript version of the *Brevísima relación* [*Tyrannies . . . perpetrées es Indes*]) and on the way in which images of violence are used today in the mass media.

In a seminal chapter of *Writing Violence*, Rabasa compares the different ways in which the watercolors from 1582 and the engravings from 1598 (*Narratio regionum indicarum*) depict the massacres perpetrated by Spanish subjects in the Americas. After a careful analysis of both sets of images, he concludes that neither seems to show an interest in portraying the massacres as the original text describes them. Instead, both try to offer a picture that "feels right" to the audience to whom they are addressed (236). The pictures "feel right" because they present the Spaniards as more cruel than what the written text depicts, thus becoming part of a concerted effort among Protestants to promote an anti-Spanish sentiment and therefore delegitimize the Spanish conquest.

At this point, it is useful to ask oneself what constituted cruelty at that time or, better yet, what sort of moral economy served as background for the French Protestant portrayal of Spanish barbarism (242). That is to say, the question is