

The Intellectual Legacy of Bartolomé de Las Casas¹

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Judgments had to be made, if one was to write at all, and it is the process of judgment that tells so much and makes the texts so revealing.
—Karen Ordahl Kupperman

Hispanic culture has immortalized Las Casas in the contrasting mythical poses of righteous litigator “Defender of the Indians” and gentle religious “Apostle of the Indies.” Yet his autobiographical account suggests that he thought of himself in the more modest image of “everyman.” He interpreted his historic achievements not as exceptional but, quite the contrary, as attainable by anyone willing to submit reality to the test of honest intellectual reflection followed by (this is the key) actions consistent with the results of that reflection. Upon closer examination, one begins to suspect that the self-image crafted by Las Casas in his final historical work, the monumental *Historia de las Indias* (completed c.1559, published 1875), was conceived largely to explain his life, extraordinary by any measure, as a product of the exercise of the ordinary human faculty of reason. No genius or heroism was necessary, Las Casas seems to be saying, to understand that the conquest of the Indies was inhumane and unjust by any definition, and that participating in it could only lead to contradiction of the precepts of the Christian faith, the same faith and precepts by which the Spanish justified the subjugation of the native peoples of the Indies.

This essay revisits the autobiographical account of Las Casas’s decisive years in the Caribbean, seeking in those chapters the writer’s understanding of the significance of a life lived in, and transformed by, an unprecedented historical catastrophe. A life that began as quite ordinary, but that would eventually become the principal instrument of change in the way the Spanish, and Europeans in general, viewed their impact on the New World.

Combining the methodologies and scholarly resources of intellectual history and literary analysis in order to reconsider Las Casas's place in the history of Hispanic culture, these pages aim to highlight his seminal contribution to the emerging trans-Atlantic intellectual culture of the sixteenth century. In arguing that Las Casas's transformation was of the intellectual kind, I do not mean to diminish the importance of his religious convictions or the fundamental role the Dominican Order played in his life and work. My aim is to examine, through close textual reading of Las Casas's own words, his interpretation of how he became a force for change in the world.

The late Edward W. Said, whose work has left an indelible mark in these pages, emphasized the importance of an active humanism, understood not as the possession of a body of knowledge, but as a useable praxis.² He spoke of humanistic intellectual activity in contrast to the attributes of the ideal humanist or the artifacts that constitute the academic disciplines of the humanities, never losing sight of the importance of connecting humanistic practice to the world in which we live. In so doing, Said articulated the relevance in our contemporary context of the kind of thinking Las Casas practiced in the sixteenth century and which he came quite literally to embody in the autobiographical account of his experiences in Cuba. In the pages that follow, I will keep in sight Said's definition of the humanities as "the critical investigation of values, history, and freedom" (14) as I explore the extraordinary life and writings of a humanist who lived in a time and place far removed from our own, though much closer than ours to humanism's beginnings. In the process this essay will suggest, always indirectly to avoid prescriptiveness, ways in which history and literature, and the Hispanic historical and literary traditions in particular, can stimulate reflection—and motivate action—on the crises of the present.

A brief summary of Las Casas's historic achievements belies his own modest interpretation. During the period from 1514 (when Las Casas initiated his public critique of Spanish colonialism) to 1566 (the year of his death in Madrid), they included successfully advocating both for substantial reforms of abusive colonial practices and for a moratorium on conquests; actively opposing the wars of conquest in Nicaragua; debating before a royal council on behalf of the full humanity and rights of the Amerindians and against the unjustness of the conquest; championing the peaceful evangelization of the natives and founding the town of La Vera Paz, an experiment in peaceful and collaborative coexistence between Spaniards and Indians; lobbying for the New Laws of 1547 to rein in the abuse of Amerindians by the conquistadors; serving as Bishop of Chiapas and, upon his definitive return to Spain, as Defender of the Indians (an official title) at the Royal Council of the Indies. At the same time, Las Casas was an indefatigable reader and writer on matters of European theology, moral philosophy, history, and law, as well as Amerindian history and culture.³ Yet

in the account of his years in the Caribbean, Las Casas appears to have been less interested in recounting his successes than in explaining how he became the person that the historical moment required. He focuses not on his accomplishments but on the intimate aspects of his transformation from colonist and *encomendero* to critic of the conquest and advocate for the rights of the Amerindians.

That story is woven into the history of the conquest of the Cuba. Las Casas, who had been residing in neighboring La Española (Haiti), participated in one of the early incursions into the island as chaplain of the invading troops under the command of Pánfilo de Narváez. He was awarded a handsome *encomienda* for his service and decided to resettle there.⁴ According to the autobiographical account, between 1512 and 1514, after a period of study, reflection, and introspection, Las Casas came to the realization that he had been complicit with the abuses of the conquest. He furthermore realized that he was living in a state of moral contradiction by keeping the *encomienda* he had been awarded for his chaplaincy, despite treating his Indian laborers kindly.⁵ In 1514 he took up his public criticism of the colonial system from the pulpit and simultaneously repudiated his *encomienda*, announcing to the startled congregation that he had returned the Indians to the Crown. Scholars have interpreted this turning point in Las Casas's life from a religious perspective, calling it his "first conversion," while pointing out that the definitive change, his so-called "second conversion," did not take place until 1522 when he entered the Dominican Order.⁶ According to Isacio Pérez Fernández, entering the order constituted a fundamental reorientation of Las Casas's life: the colonist-priest became the evangelist-friar. In a recent contribution to the strong canonizing tendency in Las Casas scholarship, Anthony Pagden follows suit, comparing his "brief but dramatic journey from colonizing priest into Indian apostle" to St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.⁷ The spiritual interpretation preferred by Pérez Fernández, Pagden, and others focuses on the religious institutional aspect of Las Casas's activism against Spanish colonialism at the expense of the earlier intellectual process that the writer himself describes as decisive. It ignores the implications of the fact that both critique and advocacy were initiated prior to his incorporation into the Order of the Dominicans, and continued after he became a friar.⁸

According to Las Casas, the definitive change (the only change, in fact, that he recognized as such) took place in 1514, eight years before he joined the Dominicans.⁹ And he describes it as the product of sustained study and reflection on an ethical question. How should the individual Spaniard conduct himself in the face of Spain's devastating conquest of the Indies? The intellectual process that led him to the answer would also lead Las Casas to radically reorient his activities of cleric and *encomendero* to the public criticism of the colonial system and advocacy of Indian rights. To

overlook the significance Las Casas himself attributed to that process is to miss the unique contribution he made to the nascent transatlantic intellectual culture.

Who was Las Casas before arriving in Cuba? We know that he was born in Sevilla, circa 1484. His father was a merchant who, rumor has it, was descended from Jews. Next to nothing is known about his mother, whom Las Casas oddly never mentions in any of his writings. In 1502 young Bartolomé joined his father to travel to the Caribbean with Nicolás de Ovando's expedition to La Española. Ovando had been commissioned by the Crown to put an end to the Columbus viceroyalty and organize the extraction of gold for the royal coffers. The senior Las Casas was making his second trip to the Indies, after accompanying Columbus on his voyage of 1493–94. His son was traveling to the New World for the first time in the largest expedition yet assembled, consisting of thirty-two ships carrying some 2,500 colonists, most of whom were, according to the historian, noblemen and persons of means and influence. There is no evidence to support a religious motive for Las Casas's trip to the Caribbean. In all likelihood, he accompanied his father to look after the family business interests. In La Española he participated in a campaign against renegade Indians organized by Ovando and captained by Diego Velázquez, future governor of Cuba. In 1506 Las Casas returned to Sevilla, traveling from there to Rome, where some biographers claim he became an ordained priest, and finally to Salamanca. He was back in La Española in 1510 in which year the new governor of the island, Diego Columbus, granted him a tract of land in Concepción de la Vega together with an *encomienda*. Two years later, Las Casas headed to Cuba as chaplain of the troops under the command of Narváez, where at the massacre of the Indians of Caonao he experienced firsthand the horrors of a war of conquest. Once the Indians had been "pacified," as violent subjugation was euphemistically referred to at the time, Velázquez awarded Las Casas a handsome *encomienda*. Within a year, however, the priest-colonist would renounce his grant of Indian laborers, returning them to the Crown as he began his public criticism of the conquest. In 1515 he left Cuba for Spain to inform the King about the devastation that conquest and colonization had brought to the Caribbean islands.

While it is true that Las Casas was already a full-fledged *Indiano*—conquistador, colonist, and *encomendero*—before arriving in Cuba, he perfected those estates through his Cuban experience. He was at the zenith of economic success and official recognition when, to the shock and dismay of his fellow countrymen, he repudiated his involvement in the exploitation of the Indians from the pulpit, admonishing his congregation to do the same. The remarkable account of that transformation is unprecedented in the historical literature of the sixteenth century. There is no better way, then, to begin an inquiry into the process Las Casas described as the source of his

transformation than with a detailed analysis of the dynamic self-image the writer crafted in order to tell the story of that experience in the *Historia de las Indias*.

Las Casas narrates the early days of the colonization of Cuba and his personal experiences in the island from no less than three different points of view. The testimonial first-person singular, the second-person plural, and the omniscient third person constitute distinct perspectives on the historical events. The position of greatest objectivity belongs to the second-person plural, the voice Las Casas assumes to narrate the island's history prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. The autobiographical account Las Casas weaves into the history of the conquest of the island begins in first person, but the testimonial I-witness who narrates the protagonist's experiences up until the episode of the massacre of the Indians of Caonao gives way at the precise moment of the slaughter to the omniscient third-person voice, which condemns the conquest and the protagonist's participation in it. Each of the voices is representative of a traditional historical narrative point of view. The uniqueness of Las Casas's narrative technique lies not in the voices themselves, or even in the multiplicity of narrative points of view, but in the alternation among three different voices by the narrator to express distinct dispositions toward the historical matter. The deployment of a variable narrative point of view is not intended primarily to include the voices of others in the historical account (as in quotation or paraphrase of another person's words or opinions), but to express the historian's attitudes and judgments, especially when he is speaking of himself as protagonist.

Stephen Greenblatt argues that the individual's capacity to impose a form upon himself, to control his or her own identity, for which he coins the term *self-fashioning*, manifests itself for the first time in early modern European culture, in the wake of profound changes in the social, psychological, intellectual, and aesthetic structures that regulated the production of identities. Among the various strategies of *self-fashioning* Greenblatt describes, perhaps the most significant to my argument is the antagonistic differentiation of the subject through a confrontation with an Other depicted as hostile, dangerous, alien, contrary, and so on.

Thinking about Las Casas's account of his experiences in Cuba as a kind of self-fashioning helps to explain its most unusual aspects, including the dynamic portrayal of the self, the subject's agency in determining his own identity, and the construction of a textual self as Other (an otherness that is not objective but exists only in a rhetorical sense) in order to represent the transformation of the autobiographical subject. The Other in question is not in fact alien. It emerges from within the writing subject and is made manifest in the diverse narrative points of view, and especially in the antagonism toward the former self voiced by the third-person narrator. Ultimately, the Other functions as a figure of the ethical contradiction Las

Casas discovers at the heart of the Christian colonialist subject. The same oscillation between the first- and third-person narrative voices that produces the split in the autobiographical subject is evident in the contrapuntal narration that weaves the testimonial denunciations in the heat of the action with the detached criticism of the omniscient third person who judges the conduct and examines the conscience of the cleric-*encomendero*. These two narrative voices, which at the level of the narration produce the splitting of the subject, ultimately represent two different and conflicting historical agencies. There is the priest-colonist who ministers to the Indians and chastises the conquistadors for their excesses from the pulpit, but there is also the critic and advocate whose intellectual agency is made manifest in the public announcement of the devolution of his *encomienda* and the simultaneous, and equally public, initiation of his criticism of the conquest and the colonial system.

To speak about oneself in the third person, as if one were speaking of another, says Phillippe Le Jeune, gives rise to tensions in the autobiographical narrative beyond the simple distancing one would expect from the use of an indirect discourse. The autobiographical third person produces a figurative splitting of the subject, revealing the duality inherent in the grammatical person and thereby the tensions experienced by the subject in the process of creating a new identity. Put another way, it produces the sense of being and not being oneself, experienced simultaneously, in Las Casas's account of his diverse historical actions before and after the transformation he underwent in Cuba. I am not referring simply to two different ways of acting but to different and antagonistic identities that are constituted in contrast and tension with each other through the counterpoint of narrative voices.

It may strike the reader as strange that Las Casas shifts from first to third person to narrate his experiences in Cuba. The testimonial first-person narrator typical of the *relación de méritos y servicios* predominates in the historical narratives of discovery and conquest whenever the events narrated involve the narrator's firsthand experience, especially when the events in question highlight his virtues and meritorious actions. But in the unusual case of Las Casas's account of his residence in Cuba, rather than merit and virtue, the narrator relates his demerits, his mistakes and insufficiencies, his complicity (despite the best of intentions) with the very conquest he denounced. The narration of his failures and defects comes with a change to a more objective and critical narrative point of view.

Beginning with the massacre at Caonao, the "Cleric Casas," seen now from the perspective of the third-person omniscient narrator, stands out for his growing inefficacy in the face of the vicious "pacification" perpetrated by the conquistadors against the defenseless Indians. We see him intervening when five Spanish soldiers fall upon the Indian porters accompanying the army while they are resting, simply because they heard the sounds of their

fellow Spaniards slaughtering the villagers nearby. The cleric manages to convince the soldiers to stop their attack against the porters, but is unable to impede their departure to join their comrades in the slaughter of the residents of Caonao. Shortly thereafter, we find him reassuring the Indians, who have hidden from the attackers in a hut, that it is safe to come out, that the violence is over and there is no longer anything to fear. One of the Indians does indeed come out of his hiding place, only to be disemboweled by a Spanish soldier who happens to walk by. The dying man, trying to flee holding his bowels in his hands, comes upon Las Casas, who can think of nothing better than to offer spiritual assistance:

Dícele allí algunas cosas de la fe, según que el tiempo y angustia lugar daba, mostrándole que si quería ser bautizado iría al cielo a vivir con Dios; el triste, llorando y haciendo sentimiento, como si ardiera en unas llamas, dijo que sí, y con esto lo bautizó, cayendo luego muerto en el suelo, remitiendo los demás a la misericordia de Aquél que los había criado y veía la injusticia con que aquél y los demás eran tan cruelmente lastimados. (115)

(He tells him a few things about the faith there, as time and his anguish would allow, pointing out that if he wanted to be baptized he would go to heaven; the poor man, crying and expressing his pain as if he were burning in flames, said yes, and so he baptized him who then dropped to the ground dead, commending the others to Him who had created them and saw the injustice with which that man and all the rest were so cruelly harmed.)¹⁰

Once the Indians had been “pacified,” they began returning to the village, to the delight of the conquistadors, who were anticipating the distribution of Indian laborers known as the *repartimiento*. Las Casas had this to say about his role in convincing them to return, to the inevitable abuses that he knew awaited them:

Pero, ¿para qué fin, si pensáis, los españoles de que se viniesen a poblar [los indios] todos se regocijaban y el padre clérigo para qué en traerlos y asegurarlos tanto trabajaba?, cierto, no para otra, al cabo, sino para que poco a poco, en las minas y en los trabajos los matasen, como finalmente los mataron; puesto que aqueste fin no pretendía el padre; y los españoles no pretendían directamente matarlos, sino servirse dellos como de animales, posponiendo la salud corporal y espiritual de los indios a sus intereses, codicias y ganancias, a lo cual seguirseles la muerte no era dubitable, sino necesario. (118)

(But, what was the point, if you think about it, of the Spaniards rejoicing at the return of the Indians to the village and of the father cleric's efforts to bring them back and reassure them? Certainly, for no other purpose than that they be killed off bit by bit in the mines and other labors that finally finished them off. Of course, this was not the end the father [priest] intended, nor did the Spaniards intend to kill them outright, but to use them like animals, postponing the Indians' spiritual and physical health for their own profit and gain; all of which could not but necessarily end in their death.)

Narrating the massacre of Caonao and its aftermath with biting irony, Las Casas's third-person voice reveals the cynicism of the Spaniards, the criminality of the colonial system, and the disastrous consequences for the Indians of the cleric's well-intentioned complicity with the conquest.

The remarkable confession of complicity represents the ethical limit between the cleric-*encomendero* and the subject transformed by his experiences in Cuba. It should be clear by now that what differentiates them is not ideology. Both are faithful Christians genuinely concerned about the well-being of the Indians and committed to their evangelization. The decisive difference between the priest-colonist and the Las Casas who emerges from his experiences in Cuba is evident in their respective positions on the realities of Spanish colonization. The cleric-*encomendero* takes a position within the colonial system, participating fully in its institutions (albeit with certain scruples), and therefore is complicit with the peculiar brand of imperialism invented by the Spanish, an imperialism that joined charitable proselytizing with devastating political subjugation and economic exploitation. And this is so despite his reprimands from the pulpit against abusive conquistadors, reprimands that targeted individual conduct rather than the immorality of the system as a whole. The other Las Casas, the critic and reformer, situated himself in a position on the margins of the colonial system.

The decisiveness of that move—from the center to the margins—becomes evident in Las Casas's description of the moment when his transformation was completed. Narrating from the third-person omniscient point of view, he tells how the cleric was immersed in his customary preparations for a sermon he was to give on the day of Pentecost when he was struck by several verses in the book of *Ecclesiastes* condemning the exploitation of the poor and meek by the powerful. A reading that provoked serious misgivings about the misery and servitude suffered by the Indians working for the Spaniards in the *encomiendas*.¹¹ He went on to tell how he had spent several days deep in thought, considering what he had read, comparing it to passages in other texts, both sacred and profane, and with the sermons of Fray Antón Montesinos and the other Dominicans of Hispaniola

who preached against the immorality of the *encomienda*; how he had examined his own conscience in relation to an argument he had had with one of those friars concerning his own *encomienda*, whom he had refuted “con frívolos argumentos y vanas soluciones” (283) (with trite arguments and futile solutions). After several days of intense and prolonged reflection, he reached a determination: “Determinó en sí mismo convencido de la misma verdad, ser injusto y tiránico todo cuanto acerca de los indios en estas Indias se cometía” (283) (He determined within himself, convinced of the truth, that everything that was done [by the Spanish] with respect to the Indians in these Indies was unjust and tyrannical).

As Las Casas tells it, then, his transformation was not the result of a sudden spiritual illumination or of his incorporation into the Dominican Order, but of a sustained intellectual reflection. A reflection on texts read and reread, and on debates and discussions centered on an ethical-political question: What should the individual do in the face of the fundamental injustice of the colonization of the Indies? Las Casas’s transformation shares in the introspective character of a spiritual conversion. But the radical change he experienced in Cuba differs from a conversion in that it was the product of intellectual activity. The contrast with the paradigmatic Christian conversion experienced by Saul of Tarsus, who on his way to Damascus to kill the disciples of Jesus heard the redemptive voice of the Lord, is instructive. From that supernatural illumination issuing from the grace of God, without any effort on Saul’s part, he was “reborn” as Paul the Apostle. Las Casas must have had the Pauline example in mind, as he set out to describe his own transformation. But that allusion functions not analogically, as some scholars argue, but rather dialogically—in tension and contrast—marking the difference between a mystical spiritual conversion mediated by extraordinary divine intervention and the “ordinary” transformation Las Casas describes, accessible to any human being through the exercise of the faculty of reason.¹²

While it may now be evident that Las Casas’s transformative experience in Cuba was fundamentally of the intellectual kind, doubt lingers about the nature and significance of the so-called “second conversion.” According to Isacio Pérez Fernández, Las Casas’s incorporation into the Dominican Order was the decisive factor in the radical reorientation of a life centered on advocating for the peaceful colonization of Indies toward outright anticolonialist preaching. In order to understand how Las Casas himself viewed joining the order, it is instructive to consider chapter 160 of the third book of *Historia de las Indias*. There he explains that while awaiting a reply from the King to his reports on the abuses of the colonization, he used to converse with the friars of Santo Domingo, and in particular with Fray Domingo de Betanzos, who repeatedly encouraged him to join the order. Betanzos, seeing that the cleric remained undecided, asked him a pointed

question: Who would be there to receive the King's reply if in the meantime Las Casas were to die? Forced to face the reality that his labors on behalf of the Indians would certainly falter with his own demise, "comenzó a pensar más frecuentemente en su estado y al fin determinó de hacer cuenta que ya era muerto, cuando las cartas o respuestas del Rey allegasen; y así, pidió el hábito con instancia y se lo dieron con mucho gozo y alegría de los frailes [. . .]" (590) (He began to think more often about his situation and finally determined to assume that he was already dead, when the letters or responses from the King arrived; and so he asked for the habit and the friars gave it to him gladly.) As if to leave no room for doubt, Las Casas adds that it was the friars themselves who referred to the cleric's incorporation into the Order as a conversion.¹³ Like the earlier decision to return his *encomienda* to the Crown, this one was also the product of reasoning. Joining the Dominicans, according to Las Casas, represented an important change in his religious status, from parish priest to friar. A change however that was motivated by practical considerations and affinities with the members of the Order. Taking Las Casas at his word, one must conclude then that he did not consider it a conversion, the product of a spiritual illumination. Neither did it constitute a change in his position with respect to the colonial system. On the contrary, entering the Order of the Dominicans, which provided in the pulpit the first public space in the Indies for censuring the abuses perpetrated by the conquistadors and *encomenderos* against the Indians, was a reasoned decision made to complement and enhance the critical position Las Casas had taken in Cuba eight years earlier.

The intellectual reflection that led him to that position was also the cause of a series of actions coherent with the results of that reflection: repudiating the *encomienda*, taking up the criticism of the colonial system, and announcing publicly both the renunciation and the process of reasoning that had led him to act. Las Casas explains it thus, in the third person:

acordó, para libremente condenar los repartimientos o encomiendas como injustas y tiránicas, dejar luego los indios y renunciarlos en manos del gobernador Diego Velázquez, no porque no estaban mejor en su poder, porque él los trataba con más piedad que otro y lo hiciera con mayor desde allí adelante, y sabía que dejándolos él, los habían de dar a quien los había de oprimir y fatigar hasta matarlos, como al cabo los mataron, pero porque, aunque les hiciera todo el buen tratamiento que padre pudiera hacer a hijos, como él predicara no poderse tener con buena conciencia, nunca faltaran calumnias diciendo: "al fin tiene indios; ¿por qué no los deja, pues afirma ser tiránico?", acordó totalmente dejarlos. (283)

(in order to freely condemn the *repartimientos* or *encomiendas* as unjust and tyrannical, he decided to turn over his Indians to the Governor, Diego Velázquez, not because they were less well off under his care, because he treated them with more compassion than anyone else and would have done so even more from then on, moreover he knew that by renouncing them they would be given to another who would oppress and exhaust them to death, as in the end they did kill them. But because even if he treated them as well as a father would treat his children, since he preached that they could not be held [in *encomienda*] in good conscience, there would be no end to the calumnies, saying—“At the end of the day, he has Indians; why does he not let them go, since he affirms it is tyrannical?”—he decided to renounce them completely.)

The crux of the passage is not the ethical political judgment that the colonial system was tyrannical, because Las Casas had already described the intellectual process that had led him to that determination. In these lines one can see how the same reflection that had resulted in the criticism of the *encomienda* led him now to recognize the contradiction in which he was living. He realized, simply put, that in criticizing the institution of the *encomienda*, the benign cleric-*encomendero* was at best inconsistent and at worst a hypocrite who participated in and benefited from that which he censured in others.

In the decision to renounce his *encomienda*, Las Casas confronts the fundamental ethical question of his autobiographical account: What should one do when reasoning leads to a judgment that contradicts our actions? The key phrase in the passage cited above is “para libremente condenar” (to freely condemn), because in those words there is an implicit recognition that with the freedom to criticize comes the ethical responsibility to submit one’s judgments and actions to the judgment of others. In the case of the autobiographical account in the *Historia de las Indias*, the others in question are not only his fellow colonists. In fact, Las Casas’s principal judge and antagonist is the third-person narrator, who relentlessly exposes the cleric-*encomendero*’s shortcomings.

Carlos Thiebaut argues that the question of identity is fundamentally ethical. According to the Spanish philosopher, asking “Who am I?”

requires answers [from us] that once given do not leave things as they were, and seem to lead us elsewhere. Those answers not only situate us but also commit us. Thus the question of identity acquires an ethical character not easily evaded. In fact, to ask ourselves about our identity is not just to ask who we are but also what and how we should be. [. . .] And that questioning involves not only [our] being, or [our] manner of being, but also a way of knowing. [. . .] To inquire about who we are

is, therefore, to aspire to an ethical form of knowledge and self-recognition. (33)

For Las Casas, the answer to the ethical inquiry into his own identity is found in an equally ethical manner of thinking, characterized by the internal dialogue he took up with himself in Cuba (“comenzó a considerar consigo mismo”), together with all of the resulting consequences of that self-reflection.

Before delving into the larger significance of that intellectual activity, we should revisit the question that still was pending when the religious/spiritual interpretation of Las Casas’s “conversion” was rejected. Why did the writer situate his transformation in Cuba, not in La Española upon entering the Dominican Order, nor at any other place and time during his long years of activism on behalf of the Amerindians? The fact is that his involvement in the colonization did not end, strictly speaking, when he left Cuba, although it was substantially modified at that point. Between 1519 and 1521 he was still involved in commercial endeavors in Cumaná, to help meet the tax obligation he had incurred with the Crown for the rights to his ongoing mission of peaceful evangelization. The historical evidence suggests, then, that Las Casas’s transformation was more of an evolution, over a period of about a decade. But that is not how he represents it in the autobiographical account linking the change to his fateful intellectual reflection in Cuba. The coincidence of two decisive actions during his years there, the repudiation of his *encomienda* and the initiation of his public criticism of the colonial system, suggest that the writer considered them parts of a homology. Both the devolution of the *encomienda* to the Crown and the initiation of what was to become a lifelong role as public critic of the colonization constitute moves from the center to the margins in the semantics of the transformation. By renouncing the *encomienda*, Las Casas positioned himself outside the system; by taking up the word against colonialism, he assumed a marginal stance with respect to the discourses of power.¹⁴

The shift from the center to the margins is made manifest at the formal level of the narration in the variable points of view and at the level of discourse in the transition from the preacher’s moral censure of individual conduct to the intellectual’s systematic criticism of the colonial enterprise. In both moves, the question of identity has become an ethical inquiry into the process of knowing and of recognizing self, an inquiry determined by the new location of the subject. The literary representation of that new eccentric position assumed by the subject in the autobiographical account of his Cuban experience subordinates strict historical fact to the didactic truths of Renaissance history understood as *magistra vitae*.

This is perhaps not the place to undertake an in-depth investigation into the place Las Casas occupies in the intellectual culture of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, in order to avoid the pitfalls of anachronistic interpretation, it is necessary to situate, even if only in broad strokes, Las Casas's intellectual activity in the context of early modern European thought. The author of the *Historia de las Indias* delved broadly and deeply into the humanist culture of his time.¹⁵ This is evident first of all in his adaptation of the didactic historical discourse predominant in the Renaissance to the realities of the colonization of the Indies. He was more interested in the dynamics of the protagonist's transformation than in the static medieval *exemplum*. The brutal realities of the Caribbean conquest and colonization, characterized by the violent imposition of a colonial system on the native population and the total collapse of Christian morality among the Spaniards, must have seemed to Las Casas to demand more than faith alone had to offer. The ethical question the cleric-colonist posed to himself sprang from the recognition of the personal and collective moral ruins of the conquest. What should one do when it is no longer possible to appeal to the precepts of the faith professed by all, because no one conforms their conduct to those precepts; because acting according to those precepts within the colonial system can only lead to contradiction? What should one do when moral judgment leads only to choosing the lesser evil? The perversity of that choice did not seem less significant to Las Casas than that of the contradictory political principle that joined colonizing violence to benevolent evangelization. Both led to the ethical scandal in which the cleric had participated in Caonao where, despite the best of intentions, he had baptized the disemboweled Indian and in the next breath persuaded the others who remained in hiding from the Spaniards to return to the village, knowing full well that the *repartimiento* awaited them.

Las Casas's self-image in the account of the conquest of Cuba suggests that his representation of the autobiographical subject is informed by neo-Platonic ideas about the dignity of Man, *magnum miraculum* because of the human capacity to improve, to change for the better. Domingo Ynduráin has seen in that capacity the individual's freedom, understood by the humanists as a privilege exclusive to humankind, based in the faculty of natural reason and realized in consort with the will acting in the world (457–58). Las Casas's interpretation, however, radicalizes the evolutionist aspect of the neo-Platonist conception of the human capacity for betterment. Instead of an incremental model of change, he represents a radical transformation against the grain of the accepted norms and practices of his fellow colonists, product of the exercise of reason and will.

What defines Las Casas's transformation, in the final analysis, is the antagonistic splitting of the subject as he thinks and writes about himself in the *Historia de las Indias*. That splitting of the unitary subject into critical

self-reflection harkens back to the Socratic conception of thinking. As Socrates tells it in the *Theaetetus*, to think a matter through (*dianoesthai*) is

a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering . . . this is nothing else but *dialegesthai*, talking something through, only that the mind asks itself questions and answers them, saying yes or no to itself. Then it arrives at the limit where things must be decided, when the two say the same thing and are no longer uncertain, which we then set down as the mind's opinion. Making up one's mind and forming an opinion I thus call discourse, and the opinion itself I call a spoken statement, pronounced not to someone else and aloud but silently to oneself. (qtd. in Arendt 91–92)

The Socratic manner of thinking, according to Hannah Arendt, is dialogical. It consists of the conversation the mind carries on with itself, posing problems, raising doubts, answering, and questioning itself about the answer. Socrates crafts his image of intellectual activity based on the model of conversation between self and other, because precisely in the splitting of the mind as it talks to itself—becoming two-in-one, as Arendt puts it—does a difference arise within the subject that makes reflection possible. The difference resulting from the splitting of one into two in the process of thinking also makes manifest the ethical dimension of intellectual activity. Undertaken in the solitary dialogue with oneself, as if with an other self (*allos authos*), the Socratic manner of thinking from the margins of one's self is not of the kind that produces new knowledge or judgments—except, of course, about oneself. Its sole purpose is self-criticism, its only goal to achieve the harmony of the subject with himself. And yet it is the necessary starting point for judging and acting coherently and with integrity in the world.

In the account of the conquest of Cuba, Las Casas left us with an image of the intellectual activity that led an ordinary man to confront within himself the fundamental ethical contradiction that defined the catastrophic times in which he lived. The concrete historical consequences of the resulting transformation are legendary in our own day. Yet nothing of that vast and remarkable legacy is of greater importance than the image of the cleric-*encomendero* who, amidst the holocaust of the Indies, found his own redemption in a manner of thinking. To the question, “Why did Las Casas situate his transformation in Cuba?” we could now answer simply: because there he began a lifechanging dialogue with himself.

Paraphrasing Masao Miyoshi, Edward Said expressed the deep concern that the humanities

have fallen into irrelevance and quasi-medieval fussiness, ironically enough because of the fashionability of newly relevant fields like postcolonialism, ethnic studies, cultural studies, and the like. [. . .] a whole factory of word-spinning and insouciant specialties . . . that in their jargon and special pleading address only like-minded people, acolytes, and academics.

The humanities, he goes on to lament, have become “harmless as well as powerless to affect anyone or anything” (14). But then Said reminds us that humanistic practice was never about withdrawal to the ivory tower:

There was never a misinterpretation that could not be revised, improved or overturned. There was never a history that could not to some degree be recovered and compassionately understood in all its suffering and accomplishment. Conversely, there was never a shameful secret injustice or a cruel collective punishment or a manifestly imperial plan for domination that could not be exposed, explained, and criticized. (22)

Surely the image of Las Casas in the account of his transformative years in Cuba has something to teach us about what manner of thinking it takes to put truth to work in the world.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in Spanish in Scarano and Zamora, 2007. It has been substantially revised to respond to the aims of this volume.
2. See Said’s *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*.
3. The most comprehensive (and still very useful) critical bibliography on Las Casas’s works is Lewis Hanke and Manuel Giménez Fernández’s *Bibliografía crítica y cuerpo de materiales para el estudio de su vida, escritos, actuación y polémicas que suscitaron durante cuatro siglos*, Santiago de Chile, 1954. For digital resources on Las Casas, see Cervantes Virtual, <http://portales.mx.cervantesvirtual.com>.
4. An *encomienda* was an allotment of Indian laborers awarded by the Crown to a conquistador for meritorious service as a way of encouraging the settlement of newly conquered territory.
5. Las Casas received a royal grant of Indians together with prime agricultural land for crops and pasture near the Arimao River.
6. See, for example, Isacio Pérez Fernández, 53; Álvaro Huerca, 69; and Demetrio Ramos Pérez, 247–57.
7. See Pagden, *European Encounters* 70, and, more recently, Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism* 64–65.
8. Las Casas was, after all, only one of many religious, especially among the Dominicans and the Franciscans, who criticized the immorality of the conquistadors from the pulpit.

9. The account of Las Casas's lifechanging experience in Cuba is found in chapters 21–32 and 79–83 of book 3 of the *Historia de las Indias*.
10. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
11. *Ecclesiastes* 34. The verse in question reads, "Unclean is the offering sacrificed by an oppressor. [Such] mockeries of the unjust are pleasing [to God]. The Lord is pleased only by those who keep to the way of the [sic] truth and justice. The Most High does not accept the gifts of unjust people. He does not look well upon the offerings." Cited by Castro in English translation, 64. The original Latin citation appears in the *Historia de las Indias*, 3:92.
12. Santa Arias maintains that Las Casas himself was the first to tout the spiritual *exemplum* of his "conversion" (129). The passage she quotes from the *Historia de las Indias* to support her interpretation of Las Casas as a promoter of his own exemplarity begs to be read as ironic, however, if the reader but takes into account the biting sarcasm of its conclusion: "y todos los demás comenzaron a tener otro nuevo concepto dél que tenían de antes, desque supieron que había dejado los indios, lo que por entonces y siempre se ha estimado por el sumo argumento que de su santidad podría mostrarse" (and all the others began to see him in a new light since they learned that he had given up his Indians, which from then on always has been considered the best argument that could be made to prove his saintliness) (quoted by Arias 129; my emphasis). The ironic thrust of the passage is aimed at the sad state of affairs in a society that saw in the restitution of Indians by an *encomendero* an act worthy of canonization.
13. "y por diversos fines los frailes y los seglares se gozaron [de la pedida del hábito]; porque los frailes, especialmente, por el bien de la conversión del que amaban con caridad" (590–91).
14. On the importance of the margin as a discursive position in the writings of Las Casas, see Zamora, 1994 and 2008.
15. Benjamin Keen offers a good introduction to the Renaissance-humanist elements in Las Casas's ideology in *Essays on the Intellectual History of Colonial Latin America*, 57–69.

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