

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MONSTERS IN PARADISE: THE REPRESENTATION  
OF THE NATURAL WORLD IN THE *HISTORIAS* OF  
BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS AND GONZALO  
FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO

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Comparative Literature and Spanish

In the years following Columbus's landfall, European efforts to describe the physical reality of a hitherto unknown hemisphere led to profound epistemological changes. As recent studies by Cañizares Esguerra and Barrera-Osorio have shown, early Spanish accounts of New World nature reflect an unprecedented emphasis on empirical methods of acquiring and systematizing knowledge of the natural world, contributing to the emergence of natural history and ultimately the Scientific Revolution. Sixteenth century texts were not, however, "scientific" in a modern sense. Empirical observation was shaped by scholastic and humanistic philosophy, and mingled with wondrous images derived from classical and medieval sources; these various discourses combined in ways that were colored by the authors' ideological perspectives on the justice of the Spanish

conquest. This dissertation examines the interaction between proto-scientific empiricism and inherited epistemologies in descriptions of the natural world in the histories of Bartolomé de Las Casas and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo.

While contemporary historians of science acknowledge the importance of these works, they rarely engage in detailed textual analyses. Literary critics, on the other hand, only infrequently concentrate on the role of proto-scientific discourse. Rabasa has studied several natural images in both authors, Myers and Carrillo Castillo have examined the role of empiricism in Oviedo, and Wey Gómez and Padrón have studied geographical representations, but few studies have focused exclusively on Las Casas's and Oviedo's portrayals of the natural world in its totality.

This dissertation analyzes how the tension between discursive modes produced contrasting images, paradisiacal and stable in the case of Las Casas and liminal or "monstrous" in the case of Oviedo. Chapter One outlines the intellectual formations of both authors; Chapter Two examines spatial and geographical constructs; Chapter Three centers on flora and fauna; Chapter Four concentrates on food and agriculture; and Chapter Five looks at concepts of Nature as active agent. In each of these areas, Las Casas's and Oviedo's attempts to describe unfamiliar and often anomalous New World natural phenomena stretched, altered, and at times subverted existing concepts of the natural world in ways that would have implications for future notions of American nature.

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2010

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the members of my committee for their insightful comments; their input made this thesis far stronger than it otherwise would have been. In particular, I would like to thank my advisor, Regina Harrison, who encouraged me when my determination was failing, and helped me to give form to my thoughts. Without her patience, guidance and knowledge, this thesis would never have come to be.

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## Introduction

Near the beginning of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, José Arcadio Buendía and his followers stumble upon a strange sight. After spending weeks arduously traversing a dismal, enchanted forest in a region prior to original sin, they awake one morning to see before them an old Spanish galleon, inexplicably run aground in the midst of the rainforest. The dusty hull and masts of the old ship remain intact, but its rigging is festooned with orchids and its hull is crowded with a forest of flowers. Bathed in the morning light, the scene is infused with an aura of primal mystery and strangeness (96-8). When I first read the novel in the 1970s, I saw in the old ship swamped by exuberant greenery a compelling testament to the power of nature to triumph over human technology. Although it would be decades before I picked up the novel again, the image stuck with me. Many years later, when I reread *Cien años* as a graduate student in Latin American literature in the 1990s—by that time from a somewhat more knowledgeable perspective, thanks to a considerable amount of coursework in history and literary studies—the old ship with its mantle of flora again struck me powerfully, albeit in a somewhat different light. I had already decided that I wanted to write my dissertation on some aspect of the representation of the natural world in sixteenth century accounts of Europe's discovery and conquest of the New World, and the image struck me as an apt metaphor for what seemed to me to be a central tension in the works that interested me. Ships in early modern texts often symbolized the quest for knowledge; here the old ship--like European systems of knowledge in the context of the New World--found itself cast ashore upon a strange new reality. The gray, weathered beams of longstanding epistemologies served as the framework for European descriptions



of the New World, but they were engulfed and transfigured by tropical vegetation which threatened to burst apart their seams.

During the early years of Spain's presence in the Americas, the physical spaces, flora, fauna and human inhabitants of the Crown's newly acquired possessions had to be described and catalogued, and their potential uses evaluated. But explorers, conquistadors, friars and government officials seeking to describe unfamiliar lands and creatures constantly confronted the inadequacy of categories which had evolved in a European context, and they frequently complained of the inability of language to accurately convey the nature of the marvels they were witnessing. In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Walter Mignolo analyzes the distortions which arose from European efforts to fit New World realities into inherited epistemological systems. The problem was particularly acute when European authors sought to describe indigenous cultures; Western epistemologies were intimately linked to alphabetic script, and indigenous systems of organizing knowledge, based on alternate forms of representation such as pictographic writing, were thus suppressed or distorted when described in terms of European systems of knowledge (see especially 186-202). Descriptions of the natural world presented a somewhat different but related problem; while the object of study in this case lacked the element of human culture, concepts of nature and systems for organizing knowledge of the natural world were culturally constructed and frequently ill-suited for describing new realities in a meaningful way. The need for accurate accounts of the natural world led to a heightened emphasis on empirical description, as well as a new interest in particularities, while attempts to classify unknown plants and animals in relation to authoritative texts only highlighted the inadequacy of longstanding

epistemologies. The incongruity between the physical reality of the New World and the discourses used to portray it produced texts which were marked by a jarring and at times almost hallucinatory sense of strangeness. Empirical descriptions which seem almost modern in their concern for accurate detail were juxtaposed with portrayals of creatures so odd they seem to have been drawn from medieval tales of wonder. Moreover, the inability of established systems of knowledge and classification to account for the new reality called into question the foundations upon which those systems were built, threatening to undermine their legitimacy and ultimately opening the way for epistemological changes which would enable the flowering of natural history as a discipline and later serve as a cornerstone for the Scientific Revolution.

I am not the first to see the García Márquez's old ship as a metaphor for colonial texts. Roberto González Echeverría, for example, views it a symbol of the deliberate unraveling in modern narratives of the assumptions implicit in colonial histories. The juridical discourses upon which those histories were founded have lost their validity in twentieth-century fiction, and become as irrelevant as a ship on dry land (42). Yet incongruous as it may seem, the old ship is nonetheless present and even prominent in a twentieth century novel; likewise, the epistemological upheaval arising from the tension between New World nature and Old World discourse had implications which would reverberate for centuries. The identification of ships with the quest for knowledge has a lengthy history. The famous image on the frontispiece of Sir Roger Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* (1620) shows a ship sailing through the pillars of Hercules, over the motto "*Multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia*" ["Many will pass through and knowledge will be the greater"] (Voigt 2). The image points to the importance not simply of seafaring in

general, but of voyages to the Americas in particular. As both Lisa Voigt and Jorge Cañizares Esguerra note, Bacon's ship most likely derives from an earlier Spanish illustration depicting an almost identical image, the frontispiece to royal cosmographer Andrés García de Céspedes's *Regimiento de navegación*, published in 1606 (Cañizares Esguerra, *Nature* 17-18, Voigt 2). In both cases, the pillars of Hercules imply a Spanish identity for the ship; Gibraltar (one of the two pillars) a Spanish possession at the time, and Charles V had adopted an image of the two pillars as one of the motifs of his Holy Roman Empire (Cañizares Esguerra, *Nature* 16). As Cañizares Esguerra points out, it is thus paradoxical that Bacon's image has come to be associated with the Protestant, Enlightenment narrative of the history of science which has been virtually hegemonic since the eighteenth century (14). Still widely accepted among many historians, the Enlightenment perspective accords a privileged position to mathematics and physics, tracing the origins of the Scientific Revolution to discoveries by Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton (3-4). According to this view, "the mathematization and mechanization of the cosmos in the seventeenth century ultimately led to secularization, industrialization, and capitalism: the birth of the modern world" (23). Spanish achievements in areas such as cartography and natural history were largely concrete and practical, and thus were marginalized by historians who emphasized the primacy of mathematical abstraction in scientific achievement, a tendency Cañizares Esguerra attributes to the anti-Iberian and anti-Catholic bias of Protestant thinkers of the Enlightenment (23).

Along with scholars such as Antonio Barrera-Osorio, Cañizares Esguerra has challenged the Enlightenment narrative, arguing that Spanish colonial policies

contributed significantly to the development of science by fostering approaches which encouraged empiricism. Both authors emphasize the pragmatic nature of early Iberian science; colonial Spanish writers sought less to revise overarching theories about the natural world than to provide their sovereign with accurate information as to the particulars of New World nature. Barrera-Osorio describes the process through which a culture of empiricism and collaborative methodologies arose from practical activities such as colonial agriculture, navigation, and instrument-making. Although such practices arose independently, the Crown encouraged them and eventually set up institutions to regularize them and to collect and systematize information (7-8). The *Casa de Contratación*, set up to control navigation routes, came to serve also as a clearing house for knowledge about New World Nature, particularly potentially useful products. *Relaciones geográficas* compiled the information acquired through thousands of surveys sent out to local officials in the Americas. In addition, authors were commissioned to write books describing and cataloguing New World nature. Cañizares Esguerra includes these same practices in his studies, but focuses on varying textual manifestations of early Iberian science. In *Nature, Empire and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World*, he analyzes two alternate representations. The first, “chivalric epistemology,” associated the collection of knowledge with heroic enterprises and portrayed cosmographers as knights. This view (evident in the image of the ship passing through the Pillars of Hercules), was intimately linked to imperial expansion, and as such was immensely appealing to other European countries, which frequently adopted the same discourse in their own narratives of exploration and conquest. The second model employed descriptions of the natural world in patriotic discourses; largely associated with

a somewhat later period, this view deployed images of the sublimely beautiful American natural world as a means of countering the condemnation by other European countries of Spain's colonies and, later, of Spanish American nations. In *Puritan Conquistadors*, Cañizares Esguerra analyzes the pervasive presence of demons in a wide variety of texts during the seventeenth century. The European obsession with demons characterized both English and Spanish texts, transcending distinctions between Protestant and Catholic; throughout the Americas, demons had installed themselves not only in Amerindian culture but in the very fabric of nature itself.

As Cañizares Esguerra notes, the abovementioned themes are far from the only ones which may be found in colonial Latin American representations of the natural world. As he points out, science as we know it emerged as a discipline only in the early eighteenth century; during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, empirical approaches embraced fields such as astrology, alchemy and curiosity collecting (3). Moreover, descriptions of nature were frequently couched in language derived from a wide variety of literary and philosophical traditions. While the questioning of textual authority was a key hallmark of the Renaissance, the reliance on textual models had by no means been completely abandoned, and the texts which influenced early writing on the Americas were many and various. As I began to research my topic, I realized that the sense of strangeness so evident in colonial Spanish texts arose not only from the tension between Old World discourses and New World nature, nor even simply from the conflict between empiricism and textual authority, but also from the dissonance among the various intellectual and artistic traditions which mingled—at times disharmoniously—with nascent science in descriptions of the natural world. European culture itself was in a state

of flux during the sixteenth century. The scientific, philosophical and literary perspectives which shaped descriptions of New World nature were not uniform, nor were they simply different aspects of a single hegemonic discourse; instead, they reflected currents which were multiple, shifting, and at times contentious. They combined in varying configurations to produce radically different images of New World nature.

I will have much more to say about each of these currents throughout the course of this study, but it will be helpful to outline them schematically (and, for the sake of brevity, in oversimplified form) before proceeding further. In universities, humanism had arisen as a challenge to entrenched scholastic approaches. Inspired by the discovery of hitherto unknown classical texts and new, more accurate translations of some that had been previously known (many of them done by Jews and Arabs in Moorish Spain and found by astonished Spaniards during the *reconquista* of the Iberian peninsula), humanists sought to resurrect classical forms of knowledge, freeing texts from their medieval commentaries and insisting upon—and often writing—more precise translations to replace the existing versions. Focusing on the fields of knowledge classified as “humanities” (including grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy), humanists placed a high value on elegance and beauty in their own works, and in nature. At the same time, scholasticism maintained a central and evolving role. Natural philosophy—the branch of scholasticism that included much of what we now consider the sciences--provided the context for most studies of the natural world. Based on Aristotle’s works on nature filtered through Christian doctrine (most notably in the works of Thomas Aquinas and his teacher Albertus Magnus), natural philosophy envisioned an ordered and rational universe governed by relations of causality. It was a highly rational

approach, rejecting superstition and seeking always to understand the underlying causes for apparently anomalous phenomena. During the Middle Ages, the emphasis was on universal causes, and the empirical study of particulars was subordinated to the attempt to explain them, *a priori*, in terms of known causes. (Albertus was something of an exception here, engaging in empirical studies and even experiments.) During the Renaissance, however, the study of specific natural phenomena—including anomalous ones whose causes were not apparent—gained in importance, with a view to discovering their causes through a process of *a posteriori* reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Despite their differences, humanism and scholasticism shared a number of important commonalities. Each in its own way celebrated the infinite diversity of creation, and both perceived it as being arranged in a hierarchical scale from the lowest to the highest creatures, with gradations shading between the lowest members of one level to the highest of the one below it, as Arthur Lovejoy explains in *The Great Chain of Being* (24-66). Both saw the natural world as imbued with meaning, which could be “read” by those who understood its underlying interrelationships; the contemplation and study of nature could thus lead to a deeper understanding of its Creator. Finally, Renaissance humanists and scholastics shared an oddly ambivalent attitude towards classical texts; on the one hand, classical scholarship encouraged a new interest in empirical experience and a willingness to question inherited knowledge, but on the other, greater access to a wider range of sources fostered a reverence for ancient texts. Writers on the Americas thus frequently cited

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief, readable discussion of humanism and scholasticism in Renaissance universities, see Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*. While he provides a useful summary, Grafton’s vision of an enlightened humanism versus a benighted scholasticism is somewhat oversimplified. For a more detailed and nuanced approach, discussion of humanism and natural philosophy in the Renaissance, see Schmitt et al, *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* 113-137, 201-235. Like many other scholarly studies, both works tend to underemphasize the role of Spain in Renaissance scholarship, although Schmitt et al. do mention Domingo de Soto.

classical sources as authorities, but at the same time based their own legitimacy on their role as eyewitnesses.

In Spain, Renaissance philosophy underwent its own unique flowering at universities in Alcalá, Valladolid and, especially, Salamanca. Scholars of the “Salamanca School” focused on jurisprudence, theology, and international relations (the school’s most prominent member, Francisco de Vitoria, is often considered the founder of international law). Lectures by Vitoria and his associates provided a forum for vigorous discussion of the moral and legal aspects of Spain’s presence in the New World, and provided a philosophical context for debates as to the nature of the Indians.

Meanwhile, outside of the universities, a lively vernacular literature flourished. In *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park trace European attitudes towards wonder, beginning with medieval travelogues describing exotic lands and creatures. Travelogues continued to be popular in the Renaissance, as did chivalric romances, and the advent of the printing press allowed for their wider dissemination, often translated into many languages. Marco Polo’s influential account was actually committed to writing by Rustichello of Pisa, a writer of romances to whom Polo narrated his experiences; the resulting work thus introduced the language of the marvelous into the travelogue genre, a fusion which would be reflected in many subsequent works, including John Mandeville’s fictitious (if widely believed) account of his travels (Daston and Park 33) as well as numerous descriptions of the Americas. Travelogues also incorporated material from classical sources such as Herodotus and Pliny, who had populated the margins of the known world with monsters and mythical beings. The marvels recounted in travel narratives were rendered more credible by the fact that the narrators stressed



their status as eyewitnesses, claiming to have seen first-hand all of the bizarre phenomena they recount (Daston and Park 63).<sup>2</sup> Despite its often positive depictions of exotic lands, the discourse of wonder was intimately tied to Europe's imperial project; in *Marvellous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt explores the use of the marvelous in European claims to possession of the New World, in a variety of contexts, beginning with Columbus.

Likening it to “the ‘startle reflex’ one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed,” he then goes on to ask, “but what does it mean to experience wonder? What are its origins, its uses and its limits?” (14) Yet while Greenblatt examines the use of wonder in representations of the New World, he does not delve into its lengthy and complex history. This Daston and Park have done admirably, analyzing the relationship between wonder and knowledge from the middle ages through the enlightenment. Wonder became a form of possession because it was much more than simply a response to the unknown; throughout its long history, it became intimately connected to knowledge. Wonder found its way into New World chronicles not only by means of travelogues and classical texts, but through natural philosophy. Medieval natural philosophy scorned expressions of wonder as reflections of ignorance; marvelous phenomena (such as magnets) were regarded as the product of a complex of accidental causes, indecipherable to human reason but comprehensible to God. As Renaissance natural philosophers expanded their area of interest to include particulars as well as universal causal laws, the study of anomalous phenomena became acceptable, and wonder came to be seen as an impetus to

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of the medieval travelogue and its evolution, see Campbell, *Witness*. Campbell stresses the centrality of the role of the eyewitness authors in travel narratives as a literary genre, and examines the continuation of the tradition by authors writing about the New World, notably Columbus and Raleigh.

understanding rather than an expression of ignorance (109-126). Regrettably, however, while Daston and Park recognize the importance of the New World in stimulating the new interest in particulars, the focus of their study is almost exclusively limited to European texts, and they have little to say about Spanish chronicles (and when they do mention Fernández de Oviedo, they Italianize his name to Ferrando) (148). Closely related to the discourse of the marvelous was that of the miraculous; at times the two are almost indistinguishable (Daston and Park 16), but while marvelous phenomena might have hidden causal explanations which could be understood through study, miraculous phenomena were attributable to God's direct intervention in the natural world.

Classical pastoral poetry, meanwhile, had long exerted a major influence in both medieval and Renaissance art and literature, and the *locus amoenus*--with its babbling brooks, soft breezes, and singing birds--had become an easily-recognizable *topos* which occurred in both secular and religious contexts, merging in the latter case with biblical images to become the Earthly Paradise. Well into the Renaissance and even beyond, the Earthly Paradise was believed to be an actual physical space, located somewhere on earth. The mild climate and lush vegetation of the Caribbean islands readily suggested paradisiacal images, and the language of the *locus amoenus* and the Earthly Paradise formed the basis of many early descriptions of the Americas.

Finally, developments in cartography and navigation influenced Renaissance Europeans' perceptions of nature, and the way they represented New World. New discoveries--both textual and geographical--altered perceptions of space. The rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography* inspired maps based on a mathematical grid of latitude and longitude, an innovation which paralleled the use of mathematical

perspective in painting and led to a more abstract notion of space. But as Ricardo Padrón has argued convincingly, the transition was neither abrupt nor absolute, and older forms of spatial representation may, in fact, have played a dominant role in textual representations of the Americas. Padrón presents a convincing case for the importance of linear itinerary maps; at the same time, others (Flint, Wey Gómez) emphasize (equally convincingly) the role of largely symbolic, religiously focused *mappae mundi*, which place the Earthly Paradise somewhere in the East. Geographical controversies also factored into early descriptions of the New World. While the sphericity of the terraqueous globe was not in question, there was much dispute over the inhabitability of the tropics and the existence of populated antipodes, questions which the newly discovered territories answered in the affirmative.

These various currents combined in differing configurations to produce radically different images of New World nature; the particular combination each author employed was determined both by his intellectual background and by his ideological perspective. Sixteenth century accounts of the natural world in the Americas were written in the context of heated debates as to the nature of the New World and its inhabitants, and on Spain's proper role in relation to the new hemisphere. In very general terms, a division arose between those who saw the role of Europeans principally as that of peaceful Christian missionaries, and those who believed that the indigenous peoples were by nature inferior and could justifiably be enslaved. Neither side doubted that the Indians were in some way human, and neither side questioned the overall legitimacy of Spain's presence in the Americas or the right—even the duty—of Europeans to convert the Indians to Christianity, but beyond those commonalities, there was little agreement.

From this dynamic discursive mix, there arose a variety of models for depicting American nature, including but not limited to the discourses of chivalric epistemology, patriotic sublime, and demonology analyzed by Cañizares Esguerra. In what follows, I will examine two more images, each of which had roots classical, biblical, and medieval texts as well as in the empirical description of the natural world, and each of which was produced, in part, by the tensions between empiricism and inherited discourses. Each was associated with an ideological perspective, and each would persist in some form for centuries to come. Appearing prominently in the works of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first of these two images depicts the Americas as a reflection of the Earthly Paradise. For Las Casas, a Dominican friar who dedicated his life to combating abuses against the Amerindians, the New World differs from the Old primarily in being better; there is nothing sinister, exotic, or irremediably “other” which sets the Americas apart as ontologically different from Europe. Las Casas condemned Spain’s actions in the New World, and his vision of the paradisiacal nature of the Americas formed the basis for his argument that the ideal New World climate had produced human beings capable of rational social organization; while the conversion of Amerindians to Christianity might be a legitimate end, the conquest and subjugation of indigenous peoples could not be justified for any reason. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, in contrast, defended Spain’s role in the New World; while he criticized the brutal excesses of many Spaniards in their dealings with the Amerindians, he did not question the right of his countrymen to subjugate the Amerindians. Oviedo’s vision of New World nature likewise stood in contrast to that of Las Casas. He described creatures which frequently deviated from European norms, sometimes to the extent that they might be categorized as “monsters.”

Writing as an official court historian, Oviedo found American nature beautiful, fascinating and filled with potentially useful species; it is thus important to clarify here that the word “monster” did not in the sixteenth century imply the same fearsomeness that it does today. In his 1610 dictionary *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco defines “monstro” as “cualquier parto contra la regla y orden natural, como nacer el hombre con dos cabeças, quatro braças y quatro piernas” (812). The principal characteristic of monsters, then, was that they contravened what was considered natural. For Oviedo, the monstrousness of American nature did not imply that it was in any way undesirable, but simply that it in some way transgressed the natural order of things; the failure to conform to European norms did not necessarily negate either the beauty or the potential utility of the creatures of the Americas—be they animal, vegetable, or human—but it did mean that they could legitimately be subjugated and exploited by Spain.

Writing primarily during the early and middle decades of the sixteenth century, the two authors knew and intensely disliked one another, and each wrote to at least some degree to counter the work of the other. Yet despite their differences, a shared commitment to empirical description lent a degree of commonality to their works. Both spent a substantial portion of their lives in the Americas, and both based the legitimacy of their works on their capacity as eyewitnesses. The opposition between them was thus not absolute; while the affective aspects of their descriptions diverged widely, they frequently included many of the same physical details. The dissimilarities in their descriptions were rooted not only in their ideological perspectives, but in their intellectual backgrounds; each author’s works reflect the influence of multiple currents, and each drew from a

different and contrasting set of discourses, which he combined in various ways to produce his particular vision of the New World.

Las Casas is best known as for his tireless efforts to curtail the Spaniards' brutal treatment of the Indians, but he also wrote extensively on ethnography and natural history. Shortly after his arrival in the New World, Las Casas was granted an *encomienda* (a group of Indians "commended" to a Spaniard, ostensibly for protection and religious conversion as well as labor and tribute but in practice as virtual slaves), but after witnessing the brutality and injustice of the system, he gave up his own *encomienda* and embarked upon a career of opposition to the system. A Dominican friar for much of his life, Las Casas was steeped in the doctrines of natural philosophy and the juridico-theological debates of the Salamanca school. His *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (hereafter the *Apologética*), a carefully constructed defense of the Indians, included extensive ethnographic material and a lengthy description of New World nature (especially that of the island of Hispaniola), designed to provide the foundation for a proof, in the scholastic tradition, that the Indians could not be natural slaves. A companion volume dealing principally with historic events in the New World, the *Historia de las Indias* (hereafter the *Historia*) reflects the same perspective, although it only rarely deals directly with the theme of nature. Defenders of the system of *encomienda* invoked Aristotle to argue that the Indians were natural slaves and, as such, should remain under the control of the Spaniards. Basing his argument on a theory of environmental determinism (which was almost universally accepted at the time), Las Casas sought to prove, through a meticulously constructed chain of causality, that the paradisiacal climate and vegetation of Hispaniola (and, by extension, of the New World

in general) must necessarily have produced human beings with perfect bodies and hence beautiful souls, capable of forming complex polities which ruled out their classification as “natural slaves.” At the same time, he sought to link American nature to that of Europe, canceling the exoticism which might serve as a justification for conquest. While Las Casas’s background was primarily scholastic, his use of poetic language to evoke the edenic atmosphere of Hispaniola and his frequent references to classical texts reveal a familiarity with humanist scholarship as well. At the same time, his empirical descriptions of specific phenomena indicate a recognition of the importance of the particular, reflecting both the changing focus of natural philosophy in general and the significance Las Casas placed upon his status as eyewitness. In addition, his descriptions of flora and fauna frequently highlight the fecundity of the Americas, a reflection of his hopes that the abundance offered by New World nature might yet provide a way for Spain to profit from her new territories without continuing the brutal exploitation of indigenous population; thus, while his work was primarily rhetorical in nature, Las Casas nonetheless showed something of the practicality which characterized early Iberian science.

The majority of Las Casas scholarship has focused on the juridical and historical aspects of his work, or on his life and activism; relatively little has been written about his descriptions of the natural world and less still about the empirical aspects of his work, but those studies which have been produced have contributed significantly to my thinking. José Rabasa has written extensively on what I will identify as a central image in the *Apologética*, that of the natural garden in the paradisiacal *Vega Real* (always capitalized by Las Casas) at the heart of the island of Hispaniola (“Noble Savage,” *Inventing* 164-

179). Rabasa stresses the importance of the *Vega* as the foundation of Las Casas's causal argument, but also connects it to the figure of the noble savage and identifies both as forms of utopic practice as defined by Louis Marin, arguing that they "function as neutral terms that manifest the semantic field from which the opposition between nature and culture, civilization and savagery emerged" ("Noble Savage" 121). Santa Arias likewise connects the paradisiacal garden to utopian discourse, as well as to one of Las Casas's utopian projects, his successful experiment in peaceful conversion at Vera Paz. While semantic readings and utopian practice fall outside of the scope of my work, I share with Rabasa and Arias a recognition of the central role of the paradisiacal *Vega* in the *Apologética*. Cañizares Esguerra includes an interesting segment on Las Casas in *Puritan Conquistadors* which, while not focused specifically on nature, nonetheless has some bearing on my work. A common theme running through both Iberian and Protestant texts during the colonial period, Cañizares Esguerra argues, is that of the satanic epic. European colonizers took on aspects of both classical and biblical heroes or appear as knights, heroically fighting to liberate the New World from the clutches of Satan (35-82). For Las Casas, however, the conquest was "an inversion of the satanic epic, in which America was a prelapsarian paradise, the conquistadors were demons, and the colonial regime was a stage for hell" (73). This image lived on not only in the Black Legend perpetrated by northern Europeans hostile to Spain, but in critiques by later generations of creoles of the colonial regime, or of newly arrived peninsular Spaniards. For Cañizares Esguerra, then, Las Casas's paradisiacal imagery serves as a foil to his portrayal of the conquistadors as demons. Two other works which include discussions of Las Casas's representation of the natural world both focus on geography. In *The Spacious Word*,



Ricardo Padrón adds another dimension to the beautiful *Vega*, analyzing the way Las Casas uses it to extend the perfect climate of Hispaniola to include the entire western hemisphere, thus enabling him to include the Americas as a whole in his causal argument. In *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies*, Nicolás Wey Gómez discusses Las Casas's geographical perspectives as revealed in the context of the friar's biography of Columbus in the early chapters of the *Historia*, as well as in his methods of editing Columbus's diaries. Again the theme of paradise emerges, but here is linked to a detailed analysis of medieval and Renaissance theories of climate zones. In light of empirical evidence, both Las Casas and Columbus rejected prevailing theories that the "torrid zone" around the equator was uninhabitable; Las Casas went on to argue (as I shall discuss further in Chapter 2) that the torrid zone was, in fact, the most temperate (and thus paradisiacal) of all.

Each of these studies, then, deals in some way with the rhetorical figure of the Earthly Paradise in the works of Las Casas. Yet Las Casas did not construct his paradisiacal image solely with the poetic language derived from classical, biblical and medieval texts, although all of these played an important role. Nor was his Eden a purely geographical construction, although geographical aspects of the image were certainly significant. Las Casas built his paradise meticulously, using not only literary language and spatial concepts but also detailed empirical descriptions of particular phenomena. With the exception of one short article by the naturalist Victor Manuel Patiño, studies of Las Casas's depictions of plants, animals, and specific landscape features are virtually nonexistent. Patiño's discussion, while excellent, does not relate the more concrete aspects of Las Casas's representation of the natural world to his overall rhetorical

scheme. Las Casas was not only a defender of the Amerindians, he was also a student of the natural world who in many ways could be considered an early natural historian. My study incorporates a close textual analysis of many of Las Casas's empirical descriptions of specific phenomena, situating them within the author's broader portrayal of the New World as Earthly Paradise and examining the interaction between scientific and literary discourses in his work. Las Casas's background in natural philosophy provided him with a rational approach to the study of the natural world, and the tendency of Renaissance natural philosophy to include the study of particulars encouraged him to construct his vision of edenic nature not solely with language drawn from literary sources, but with portrayals of observed natural phenomena.

Studies which deal with (or at least touch on) Oviedo's empirical descriptions of American nature are much more frequent than in the case of Las Casas. As court historian, Oviedo wrote his *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (hereafter the *Historia general* or, when there is no possibility of confusion with Las Casas's *Historia de las Indias*, simply the *Historia*) at least in part to catalogue the riches of Spain's new possessions, so he includes numerous empirical descriptions whose focus is practical and whose tone is naturalistic. What follows is not an exhaustive list of critics who have written on Oviedo, but a brief summary of those which have most influenced my own thinking; I will have much more to say about each of them in subsequent chapters. Antonello Gerbi's classic *Nature in the New World* situates Oviedo in the historic evolution of representations of American nature in historical texts, with an eye to the influence both of earlier writers and Oviedo's own intellectual development in the author's work. Barrera-Orsorio devotes a portion of a chapter to Oviedo's work as the

earliest example of a book on American nature commissioned by the crown. Royal officials in the New World were instructed to send information to Oviedo, at the time based in Spain. Oviedo then faced the daunting challenge of organizing the information in a coherent scheme, which he attempted to do by modeling his work after Pliny's natural history. Oviedo thus wrote for practical ends, but he also employed an elegant style learned during his stay in Italy, where he was exposed to humanist culture (106-113). Jesús María Carrillo Castillo's *Naturaleza e imperio: La representación del mundo natural en la Historia natural y general de Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo* stresses Oviedo's humanist background, which led him to produce painterly descriptions using the technique of *ekphrasis*, the description of a physical object designed to produce a complete image in the mind's eye; Oviedo's descriptions thus served both aesthetic and practical ends. Kathleen Ann Myers's *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America: a New History for a New World* includes chapters on a number of different aspects of Oviedo's work; of these, the most important in relation to Oviedo's representation of New World nature deals with the illustrations Oviedo included in his work, further illuminating the role of the visual in Oviedo. Myers examines the role of visual epistemology in Oviedo, noting how his illustrations mark a shift away from medieval art, which sought to portray the symbolic meaning of things, and towards a Renaissance model, which employed realistic detail in an effort to convey the true nature of its subjects (66-7). Oviedo frequently complains that words are inadequate to describe what he was seeing, and his drawings are an attempt to convey the reality of the New World more accurately. Meyers also includes reproductions of all of Oviedo's illustrations, an extremely valuable contribution, since they were previously unpublished in their entirety.

José Amador del Rios, the first to edit and publish Oviedo's work in 1856, replaced Oviedo's somewhat crude drawings with more skillful renditions in the style of the nineteenth century and subsequent editions have followed suit, but these cleaned-up illustrations lose the freshness of Oviedo's work and do not convey the close relationship between vision and text in the original. A sampling of Oviedo's illustrations will give some of the flavor of Oviedo's attempts to represent his subjects. Some of his illustrations are quite realistic (see figure 1); others, however, show physical characteristics in a stylized manner more akin to earlier styles (see figure 2). In addition, while Oviedo at times clearly tried to produce drawings in accurate perspective, his understanding of the principles of perspective is clearly rudimentary (see figure 3).

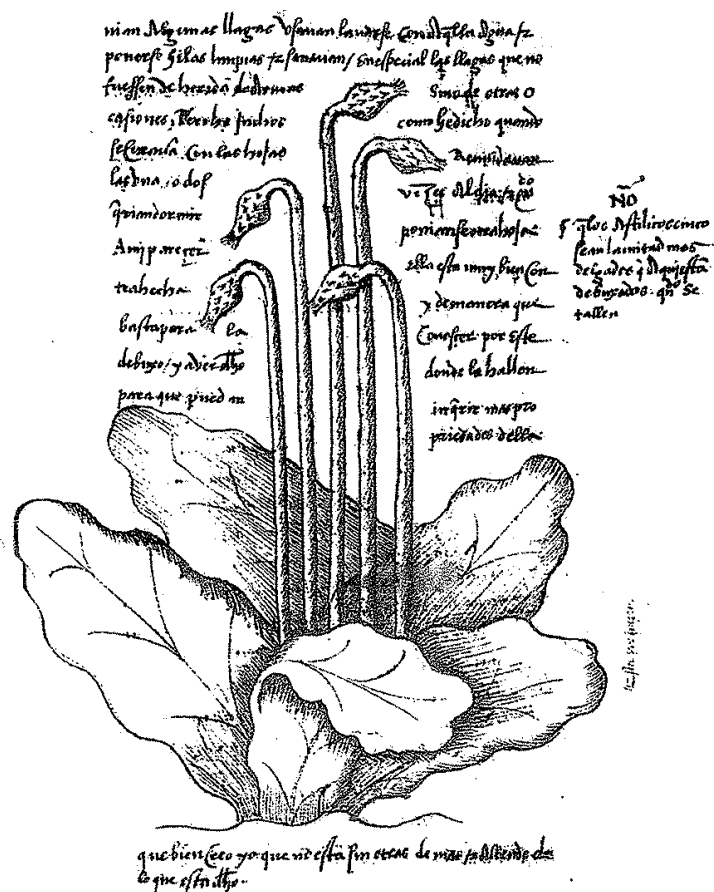


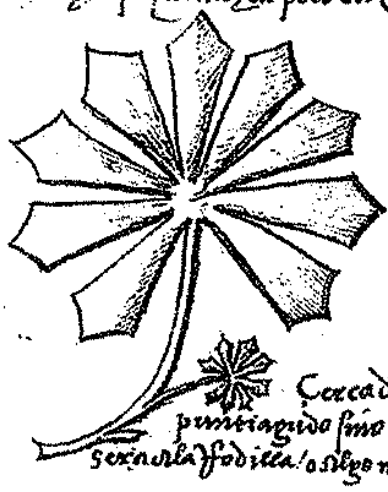
Figure 1. *Coigaraca* plant (daisy family).

Source: Kathleen Myers, *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America* 228.

das de yucas: y a vn en algũ p̃ dta terra firme. q̃ la plantaq̃  
 sellama yuca, son vnas vrras nudofo dlo mas dltas q̃ vn ombre  
 y otras mucho menores / ornefas como dos dedos y algunas mas  
 y otras menos. por q̃ en esto del orossoz y dta dltima es segula  
 terra es fertil oflaca: ya vn tam bie haze dltas q̃ la plantaes de di  
 uersos generos. p̃uore dltoma yuca parefior en la hoja dltanamo  
 o como una palma de vna mano del ombre. dltos los dedos ten  
 didos saluo q̃ dltas hojas mayor se mas gruesa q̃ la del canamo se  
 cada hoja es de siete / o de nueve puntas / o de partimientos. la vna  
 es muy nudofo como hecho. y la toz dlt ofla como pardo blanquifo. y dltas q̃ la morada  
 se la hoja muy verde se parefior muy bien en el campo del que esta  
 criada se bien criada se limpia la exceda en q̃ esta.

¶ Ay otra generacio de yuca q̃ lae Ra  
 mas vi el feuto no es diferente dta  
 q̃ es dho de fuso. Saluo en la hoja por q̃  
 don q̃ es dlti mismo de siete / o de nueve  
 de particiones cada hoja es de otra he  
 chura: se por tanto puse la forma de  
 la vna se de la otra aqui deburadas.  
 non obstante q̃ en las mismas mane  
 ras de hojas, dy particulares y defencia  
 das fuerres o generaciones de yuca: y vnas tienen mas ver  
 dor q̃ otras se otras mas fceja Rama se otras mas o menos  
 blancor en el bastago. o dltas se otras diferencias en la forte  
 za q̃ aqui haze en poco dlt Casa de gressi.

¶ Para sembrar esta  
 planta qual quiera dltas que he  
 cho hazen vnas montones de  
 terra arredandos / por orde fclinos  
 como en el reyno de toledo pone  
 las vinas / y en especial en dta  
 dltid q̃ se pone las Cepas de fompas.  
 Cada montõ tiene ocho o nueve  
 pies en arredondo se las haldas del



¶ Cerca del otro: se lo alto del montõ no es  
 puntiagudo sino quasi llano se lo mas alto del  
 se arla fclita / o dltas mas se En cada montõ pone dejes

Es hoja mas no entre esta.

Figure 2. Yuca leaves.

Source: Kathleen Myers, Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America 205.

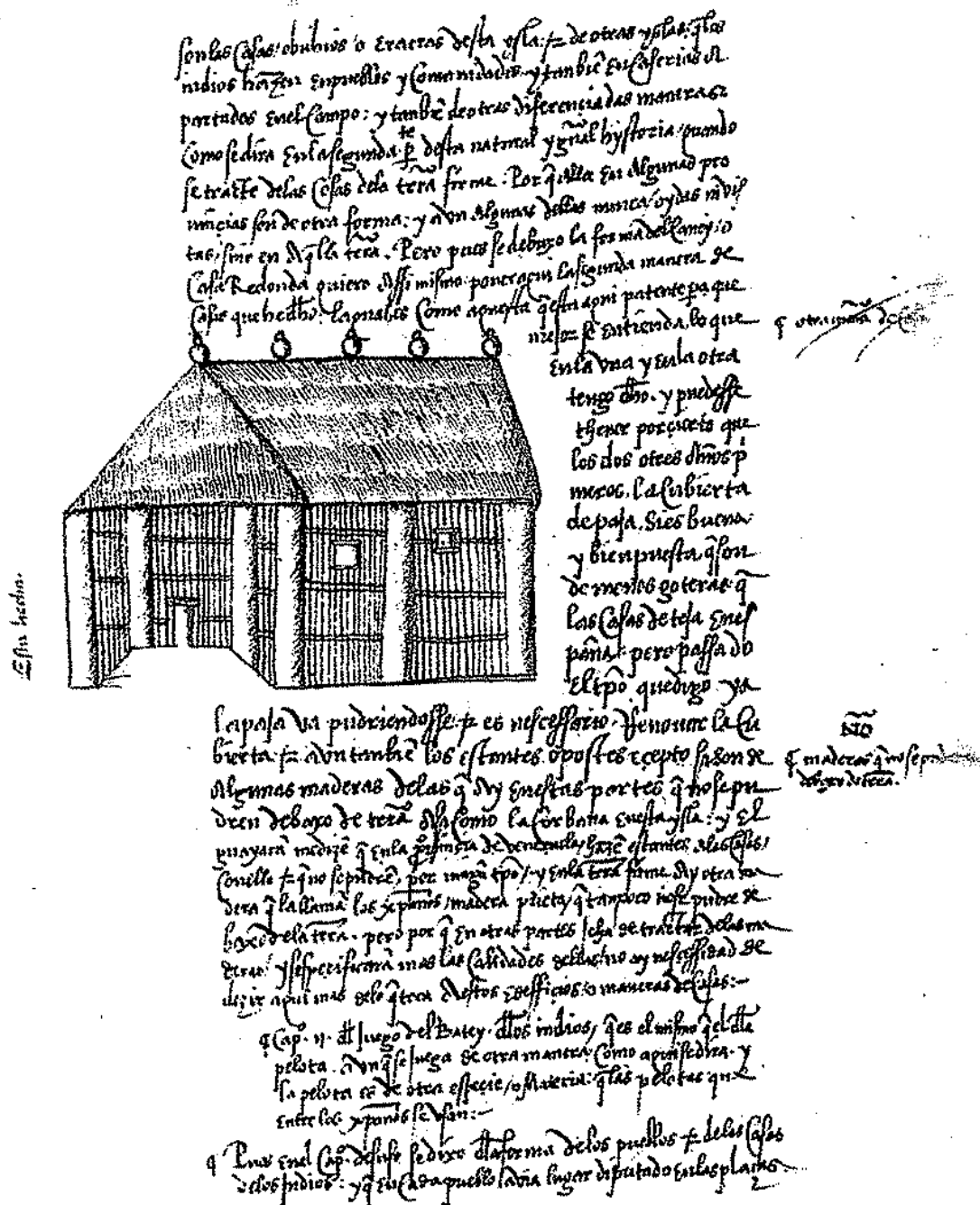


Figure 3. Caney.

Source: Kathleen Myers, Fernández de Oviedo's *Chronicle of America* 196.

A final important study related to Oviedo's sensual perception of American reality is that of José Rabasa in *Inventing America*. Rabasa emphasizes how Oviedo consistently tries

to convey the exoticism of American nature, focusing in particular on Oviedo's use of all the senses in order to convey the otherwise ineffable nature of the fruit.

Oviedo's generally enthusiastic descriptions of the natural world are often contrasted with his attitudes towards Amerindians. Oviedo—who, in addition to his role as official court historian was also an *encomendero* (holder of Indians in *encomienda*) and, during different periods, inspector of mines and garrison commander—had a far less positive view of indigenous peoples than did Las Casas. His reputation as an enemy of the Indians (disseminated tirelessly by Las Casas) is at least in part, although not totally, deserved. His economic stake in profits derived from indigenous labor doubtless had something to do with his tendency to defend the legitimacy of institutions that facilitated the exploitation of the Amerindians, but his humanist admiration for refinement and elegance, as well as his belief in the providential role of the Spanish monarchy likely also played a role. He often portrays the Indians as brutishly stupid and depraved, frequently condemning them as sodomites, cannibals, promiscuous adulterers, idolaters, and transgressors of a host of other Spanish norms; at the same time, however, he also has harsh words for Spaniards who wantonly kill or mistreat them and shows some sympathy to those Indians he sees as victims. Both Spaniards and Indians were portrayed in such a negative light in Oviedo's *Sumario* (a briefer account containing much of the material of the first part of the *Historia*) that Stephanie Merrim characterizes it as a “universal history of infamy” (85), and the fact that Spaniards and Indians alike have fallen into depravity suggests that there is something debasing about New World nature itself, marvelous as it may be. Perhaps because his primary focus is on a somewhat later period (late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries) Cañizares Esguerra has relatively little to

say about Oviedo, but he does devote several short sections in each of his books to various specific points in Oviedo's work. Of these, the most relevant here deals with Oviedo's suggestion, in the *Sumario*, that there might be something in the constellations of the New World that made both the "tigers" and the people shy and cowardly (*Puritan* 71). (I will have more to say about Cañizares Esguerra's other discussions of Oviedo in later chapters.)

For Oviedo, then, both New World human beings and their environment were fundamentally different from their Old World counterparts, a degree of exoticism that often made them appear aberrant. He stops short of claiming that New World nature is distinct from the Old in its essence: both hemispheres are governed by the same God, and the natural order cannot therefore be fundamentally different in the Americas; moreover, there are clear parallels between creatures in the two hemispheres.<sup>3</sup> Yet since his study focuses on particulars, he is constantly faced with creatures which do not conform to European norms. Oviedo's model, Pliny the Elder, found fantastical races (such as dog-headed people) in far off lands, and while Oviedo does not invent any such creatures, his use of Pliny as a model contributed to his tendency to portray American nature as exotic and bizarre. He had already written and published a chivalrous novel, so he was well versed in the language of the marvelous which characterized both chivalric fiction and

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<sup>3</sup> There is some disagreement among writers on Oviedo as to the extent to which he saw the New World as "new." Gerbi emphasizes Oviedo's belief in the unity of the terraqueous globe (262-4), noting that Oviedo identifies the Antilles with the Hesperides referred to in ancient texts. Merrim, on the other hand, sees Oviedo's fascination with the novelty of what he sees as the most salient feature of his account (77-8). I do not think these two views are necessarily contradictory, since it is possible for the entire world to be unified at the level of universal principles and diverse at the level of particular phenomena. Nonetheless, there is a noticeable tension in Oviedo's work around this point, and, as I shall argue later in this study, the newness and exoticism of the Americas often threatens to undermine Oviedo's belief in the unity of the world. David Lupher has also commented on the tensions in Oviedo's work between unity and difference, citing Gerbi (263-4) as a proponent of Oviedo's belief in newness, and Pagden and Elliott as examples of scholars who stress Oviedo's emphasis on difference (251-5). He favors the former view, in part, I suggest, because his study focuses on the influence of Roman texts on New World writing.



medieval travelogues, and he used it to good effect in many of his descriptions. Moreover, the fact that many of the creatures he describes defy categorization according to Pliny or any other European model lends them a monstrous quality by virtue of their violation of classificatory norms. He frequently compares a plant or animal to multiple European types, suggesting a subversive liminality which threatens to destabilize existing categories. Here, another look at Covarrubias will be useful. In addition to conjoined twins, the *Tesoro de la lengua* gives as an example to illustrate the meaning of the word “monstro” an anecdote from Herodotus, in which the author describes the birth of a hare to a mare, presaging the defeat of the army with which the mare was travelling (812). Here, the monster is not simply an abnormal birth, but a cross-species one. The hare is not deformed, but it is a monster because it violates classificatory boundaries. Both Covarrubias and Oviedo reject superstitious interpretations of monsters as portents, but Oviedo’s work is pervaded by the underlying suspicion that the liminality of New World creatures may ultimately undermine European classificatory systems and thus portend the end of established ways of perceiving and describing nature. It is worth noting here that liminality often plays a creative role. Victor Turner has analyzed how, in rites of passage, a state of liminality marks the transition from the former state (often childhood) to the new (adulthood) (48-9). Oviedo’s ambivalent attitude towards the monstrous aspect of New World nature suggests an implicit appreciation for its creative potential. The challenge it poses to existing epistemologies may, on the one hand, appear threatening; on the other, however, it opens possibilities for—even requires—new ways of apprehending the natural world

As in the case of Las Casas, my study of Oviedo builds on the work of existing critics, but I add a new dimension. Like Las Casas, Oviedo moves back and forth between empirical descriptions and an array of discursive modes, but the final effect is far different from that produced by the friar. My study emphasizes the interaction between empirical description, humanism and the discourse of wonders derived from Pliny and medieval travelogues in the construction of a monstrous or liminal image of New World Nature in Oviedo's *Historia*. Both the need to provide the crown with accurate descriptions and Oviedo's own humanist background encouraged him to produce detailed empirical descriptions, but the exoticism of the New World, combined with Oviedo's use of Pliny as a model, cause him to portray many aspects of the Americas as monstrous. In addition, because Oviedo sought to justify Spain's presence in the New World and its right to exploit indigenous labor, his monstrous New World is open to colonial control and possession. Monstrosity might be pleasing and even titillating to readers and possessors, as were the bizarre curiosities collected and proudly displayed by wealthy elites during the Middle Ages and Renaissance;<sup>4</sup> nonetheless, it precludes relations of mutuality between colonizers and colonized, and implicitly sanctions the exploitation of the "monstrous" New World and its inhabitants.

Oviedo's role in advancing scientific discourse thus arose not only from his empirical descriptions themselves, but from the challenge they posed, through their monstrosity or liminality, to existing epistemological structures. As with Las Casas, my study of Oviedo is based upon a close textual analysis of Oviedo's representations of various aspects of the natural world; at each point, I compare the perspectives of the two authors. While some comparative studies have been done (see for example Rabasa

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the the medieval fascination with collecting curiosities, see Daston and Park, 68-88.

*Inventing* and Myers “Las Casas versus Oviedo”), no one has yet undertaken a comparative study of the two authors across all aspects of their respective representations of the natural world. In each author’s work, a unique vision of the natural world arises from the tensions between empirical description, textual sources, and ideological perspectives. A study of these tensions can reveal much, not only about the two authors themselves but about the relative roles of various discourses—empirical and otherwise—in the early history of science.

In what follows, I will examine the contrasting images of the natural world in texts by Las Casas and Oviedo (principally Las Casas’s *Apologética* and Oviedo’s *Historia*, although I will at times include material from other works by the two authors) beginning with their overall geographical and landscape descriptions and proceeding through their representations of plants and animals in general, to food species and agriculture, and finally to Nature as an active agent. As a rule, I will not focus directly on ethnographic material, except to show how the two authors’ discussions of New World nature reflect their attitudes towards the Amerindians. I make an exception in the case of agriculture, since that category spans both ethnography and natural history, and discussions of food crops constitute an important part of both authors’ descriptions of New World flora. For each of the abovementioned aspects of the natural world, I will focus on specific textual passages, examining the various intellectual and cultural currents that fed into each author’s descriptions, and suggesting interpretations within the context of the overall works. All of the various aspects of the natural world reflect, on the one hand, Las Casas’s vision of a perfect, ordered and harmonious paradise, and, on the other, Oviedo’s exotic, monstrous world. Las Casas and Oviedo neither originated nor

culminated the production of these contrasting images of the tropics; rather, their works represent one phase (albeit a particularly interesting one) of a process that began long before their time and continued long afterwards. I thus begin, in Chapter 1, with a brief look at earlier writers on New World nature who served as precedents for Las Casas and Oviedo. Then, since each author's work was shaped by a long and complicated life, I include brief biographical sketches of each, with emphasis on those aspects of their intellectual formations which would prove to be important in their contrasting ways of perceiving, understanding, and describing the natural world.

Having provided the necessary background, I then proceed to analyze the two authors' conceptions of the natural world, on each of a variety of levels. The first and perhaps most elemental among these lies in their perceptions of space, and their representations of the geography and landscape of the New World, which I discuss in Chapter 2. In both Las Casas and Oviedo, I argue, the gridded Ptolemaic space often considered to be typical of the Renaissance plays only a minor role; both authors do at times include geographical coordinates, but older spatialities predominate. Las Casas begins his *Apologética* with an extended description of the island of Hispaniola, whose ideal nature then stands as the fundamental cause at the root of his Aristotelian proof of the Amerindians' rationality and capacity for civic organization. The description is highly ordered, proceeding through a series of three *vueltas* or circuits around various parts of the island, each more beautiful than the last, culminating in the paradisiacal *Vega Real* at the heart of the island. Although Las Casas never claims that the *Vega* actually *is* the Earthly Paradise, he builds his description of it using all of the standard paradisiacal *topoi*. He then generalizes the landscape and climate of the *Vega* to include all of the

Americas; the *Vega* thus serves as the meaning-generating center which informs the entire work. In much the same way, the location of Paradise on medieval *mappae mundi* informs the space of the maps, giving meaning to their symbolic space. Las Casas does not specifically refer to *mappae mundi*, but I suggest that the space underlying his account has much in common with these early maps, an assertion borne out by his insistence that the New World is actually part of Asia, where the Earthly Paradise was located on *mappae mundi*. If Las Casas's space is ordered, imbued with meaning, and the central piece in a carefully reasoned chain of causality, Oviedo's space is quite the opposite. There is no clear spatial focus, and a sense of space in geographical descriptions is most commonly generated by textually tracing a path through space. Narratives sprout from geographical descriptions, branching and bifurcating; the overall impression is chaotic and indeterminate. A *mappae mundi*-like image occurs in Oviedo as well, in the form of a map which appears on Columbus's coat of arms. Oviedo mentions it several times, as being like a horseshoe or a hunter's lure; unlike Las Casas's closed, perfect space, it is an open and incomplete form. Overall, then, Las Casas's space is stable and stabilizing, whereas Oviedo's subverts order and stability. Oviedo's assertion that the Antilles are actually the Hesperides referred to in ancient texts also has implications for his overall perspective: he argues that the Hesperides were once ruled by Hesperus, an early king of Spain, and that the Amerindians are therefore not pagans who have never heard the word of God but rather lapsed Christians who may thus be legitimately conquered. Just as Las Casas's space provides the basis for his defense of the Amerindians, Oviedo's space suggests that they are enslavable.

A similar dichotomy characterizes the two authors' representations of plants and animals, which I discuss in Chapter 3. Las Casas's descriptions fit within his overarching image of a paradisiacal landscape, although many are soberly empirical. Some creatures are idealized to the point of appearing almost mythical, but they never actually cross the line into the realm of fantasy; these plants and animals often occur in the context of the descriptions of the *vueltas*, where their role is to contribute to the overall paradisiacal image of the island of Hispaniola. In separate chapters on various categories of plants and animals, creatures are described more prosaically, usually with some indication of their usefulness to man and often with the inclusion, typical of natural philosophy, of some sort of investigation into the causes of their various characteristics. The presence of creatures useful to man is a component of Las Casas's overall causal schema, but in the interest of empiricism, the presence of harmful creatures (which do not help to build his case) cannot be denied. Despite his ideological commitment, Las Casas is a serious scholar and thus committed to providing a full and honest account of what he has seen; harmful creatures are therefore not excluded, but Las Casas does his best to defuse their fearsomeness. Although he seeks to be thorough in his discussion of flora and fauna, Las Casas does not attempt to provide a comprehensive encyclopedia of American nature. In contrast Oviedo, following Pliny, tries to include as complete a catalog as possible. His discussions of flora and fauna are far more extensive than Las Casas's, but like the friar's, they include both careful empirical descriptions, and depictions of creatures which can only be described as marvels. Oviedo wrote both for the king and for a hoped-for wider audience, expecting that his *Historia* might achieve the same wide distribution as his *Sumario*. He thus sought both to provide a useful inventory, and to impress his

readers with the wonder and beauty of the New World. His most straightforward empirical descriptions are credited in some recent studies (for example Barrera-Osorio) with providing an early model what would become the science of natural history. At the same time, his humanist's eye is evident in more elegant descriptions, which seek to describe as thoroughly and beautifully as possible the object in question, as the work of the divine master artist. Yet underlying these positive modes of discourse, a more sinister tone frequently emerges. Oviedo is still fascinated with the newness of American nature and its difference from Europe, as well as with the marvelous world reflected in chivalric romances and travelogues. His creatures are often exotic chimeras combining more than one form, and he repeatedly exclaims over the impossibility of describing them, suggesting that they defy classification according to European categories. They thus take on a subversive aspect, threatening to undermine established ideas on the natural world.

In Chapter Four, I trace these same contrasts in relation to food and agriculture. Food is the nexus linking human culture to the natural world, and as such is a particularly important aspect of nature. Las Casas focuses on the bounteous fertility of the New World, which produces wild food in abundance and enables agriculture to produce stunning yields with little labor. Moreover, the food is healthful—healthful food is one of the Aristotle's six essential causes for a well-formed body—and the Amerindians consume it in moderation, complying with one of the accidental causes for healthy members and organs. The fact that *yuca*, the staple food of the islands, is both poisonous and a root crop is problematic for Las Casas; root crops were considered inferior foods both by Aristotle and by pre-Linnaean botanists. Las Casas does not ignore the negatives, but instead presents a series of mitigating factors which effectively neutralize the dubious

aspects of the indigenous diet. Oviedo again dwells on the liminality of American creatures, a particularly significant factor in relation to diet given the fact that as Mary Douglas has shown, liminality is the basis for many food taboos across a wide variety of cultures. Cannibalism was a key issue for both writers. The practice was greatly exaggerated in colonial texts, where it became a symbol of the barbarity of indigenous peoples, a point of view accepted by Oviedo. Las Casas again seeks to defuse the issue by contextualizing the practice in relation to both Christian and ancient pagan practices.

Chapter Five extends the discussion to Nature's role as active agent. In the case of Las Casas, I examine a narrative section from his *Historia*, in which he tells the story of a plague of ants which threatened to destroy agriculture on the island of Hispaniola. Las Casas sees the plague as punishment for the colonists' crimes against the indigenous peoples. The concept of nature as enforcer of norms is part of Las Casas's ordered view of nature, where not only natural objects but natural events have meaningful causes. But God rarely acts directly in nature. Instead, like Aristotle's prime mover, he operates through causal relationships he has established in the natural world. In this case, the incredible fertility of the island—which Las Casas earlier describes as one of its most important blessings—is turned against the colonists, allowing the ants to multiply with the same prodigality that previously had produced such bountiful harvests. Thus, once again, Las Casas's nature operates in a rational manner. In the case of Oviedo, I examine two visions of nature's agency. The first is the playful, creative *Natura*, a personified nature who acts as God's handmaiden in the creation of living creatures. *Natura* is a pagan figure borrowed from Pliny, and Oviedo, a Christian, makes it clear she is allegorical. She functions as a sort of humanist ornament in the text, whose purpose is to



highlight the beauty and capriciousness of nature. The second vision, however, is a more destructive one. Oviedo's closes his *Historia* with a book dedicated to hurricanes and shipwrecks. In an earlier part of the work, Oviedo describes two hurricanes and connects them to demons inhabiting the New World, noting that such storms have ceased since Christian relics have been brought to the island. Yet in the last book, where he describes two more hurricanes which occurred at a much later date, he can no longer make the same claim. These storms are devastating, and prayer seems to be of little avail. In the various shipwreck narratives, the saints frequently intervene to save pious victims, but they seem powerless to allay the storms. The ocean is a liminal space, swallowing ships and subverting epistemological certainties. Bacon's proud ship of knowledge seems here to be torn apart by American nature. In one particularly poignant image, Oviedo describes a shipwrecked scholar who, as he struggles to survive, sees his books floating uselessly on the waves. Like Garcia Márquez's ship run aground in the rainforest, Oviedo's shipwrecks in the end suggest the uselessness of Western knowledge in the New World.

## **Chapter 1: Antecedents**

Before turning to an analysis of Las Casas's and Oviedo's texts, it will be useful by way of background to look briefly at some of the most important antecedents to their writings in other authors' accounts of colonized lands, and then to outline the most salient aspects of the lives and works of Las Casas and Oviedo as discussed in some of the voluminous literature concerning each writer. From the outset, empirical knowledge about the Americas was filtered through a complex web of discursive tendencies inherited from medieval and classical texts, and the choice of discourses used reflected a range of ideological perspectives. Las Casas and Oviedo were not the first to write about America nature; by the time they wrote, a number of earlier explorers and conquistadors had already established precedents, combining tropes drawn from a variety of philosophical and literary traditions in an effort to describe the physical reality of the New World, and molding their discourses to reflect their differing views as to the nature of the Amerindians and Spain's proper role in the Americas. Las Casas and Oviedo were influenced by these earlier accounts as well as by their own life experiences and intellectual formations; a survey of all of these influences is thus essential to an understanding of the two authors' views of the natural world.

Even before Columbus's arrival in the Americas, descriptions of indigenous peoples drew from differing currents in European thought in order to reflect different ideological perspectives. One of the earliest examples of a dual image of a colonized land may be found not in descriptions of the Americas but in portrayals of the Canary Islands, which, as Eyda Merediz has pointed out, provided an important precedent for works on the Americas. As Merediz demonstrates, the moral and legal debates over Spain's role in

the Americas echoed earlier debates over the same questions in relation to the Canaries. And, not surprisingly, contrasting images of the indigenous Canarians emerged—in this case, not from Spanish writers but from two of the best-known Italian humanists of the period. Merediz highlights the opposing accounts of Giovanni Boccaccio (who describes the islanders in positive terms) and Francesco Petrarch (who describes them as savage and bestial). Citing Theodore J. Cachey's article "Petrarch, Boccaccio and the New World Encounter," Merediz notes that rather than representing a single, unified humanist approach, Petrarch and Boccaccio draw from two opposing currents in Renaissance thought—one merging humanism with mercantilism and the other condemning primitivism—to produce a "bifurcated model which continued to characterize succeeding European encounters with other cultures" (24-5).

The first accounts to deal specifically with the Americas were, of course, those of Christopher Columbus. The literature on Columbus is extensive, and I will make no attempt to give an exhaustive survey here; rather, I will limit my comments to those aspects of Columbus's writings which are most relevant to the study of Las Casas and Oviedo.<sup>5</sup> Columbus is an important figure for all subsequent writers, but particularly for Las Casas, who, as editor of the only extant version of Columbus's diary of his first

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<sup>5</sup> A number of studies on Columbus have informed my thinking here. Nicolás Wey Gómez's monumental *The Tropics of Empire* is of particular interest because it includes a great deal of information on Las Casas and his concepts of geography as reflected in his work on Columbus. Wey Gómez's central thesis--based in part on a careful reading of Las Casas's *Historia de las Indias*-- is that Columbus deliberately sailed south as well as west, defying prevailing geographic theories as to the uninhabitability of the tropics, and relying instead on the minority, most notably Albertus Magnus, who held that the tropics were not only habitable but temperate. Valerie Flint situates Columbus in medieval geographical traditions, including the belief, reflected in *mappae mundi*, that the Earthly Paradise lay somewhere in the Far East. Mary Baine Campbell relates Columbus to the tradition of medieval travelogues, identifying the latter as the source for many of the tropes which are found in Columbus. Margarita Zamora's collection of essays treats a variety of themes, of which the most interesting for my purposes are one on Columbus's belief that he had discovered the Earthly Paradise, with particular reference to descriptions by John Mandeville; and one discussing Las Casas's role in editing the *Diario*. Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes the role of linguistic practice in Columbus's claim to possession of the territories he discovered. Antonello Gebi discusses Columbus's description of the natural world.

voyage, was intimately involved in the production of the text. In parts, Las Casas quotes the Admiral directly, while in others he summarizes using a third-person narrative. His version is generally regarded as reliable, especially since many of the portions he quotes also appear in the biography of Columbus written by his son Fernando, who had independent access to his father's journal, and are also corroborated by recently-discovered letters by the Admiral (Flint xvi); Margarita Zamora, however, argues that Las Casas intervened in the text to such an extent that it should be considered "a rewriting, not a transcription" (47). Of particular interest is the fact that Las Casas generally highlights descriptions of the edenic landscape and its gentle inhabitants by quoting directly from Columbus, while narrating more exploitative themes in the third person (Zamora 46). These landscape passages draw heavily from the recognizable *topoi* of the *locus amoenus* and the Earthly Paradise, both of which also figure prominently in Las Casas's own work. When Columbus arrives on the island of Hispaniola, he begins (after emphasizing difference on previous islands) to describe everything as like Spain, but better (Gerbi *Nature* 8)—a rhetorical strategy which will be frequently employed by Las Casas. In addition, Columbus makes ample use of hyperbolic expressions (Merrim 65) and what Mary Baine Campbell calls "the inexpressibility topos" and the "trope of multiplication:" "there are 'innumerable islands,' 'incomparable' harbors, islands 'of a thousand shapes,' birds, herbs and trees 'of a thousand kinds' " (179). All of these strategies, whose source Campbell locates in medieval travelogues, find an echo in Las Casas's own writing (as I shall discuss in subsequent chapters). Columbus went much further than Las Casas in claiming, in the account of his third voyage, that the Earthly Paradise was quite literally located on the South American mainland; Las Casas, while

suggesting repeatedly that the New World is *like* the Earthly Paradise, makes no claims as to its actual physical site. Nonetheless, Las Casas's descriptions are so closely related to those of Columbus that it may be said—to whatever extent Columbus's work is his own and not Las Casas's--that Columbus passed on to Las Casas a series of rhetorical strategies borrowed from medieval geographical theories and travelogues.

But other discourses, far less lascasian in style and content, are also present in Columbus's writing. Stephen Greenblatt stresses the Admiral's repeated references to taking possession of the new territories (52) and in a fascinating study, Peter Hulme notes how the Admiral shifts back and forth between two competing discursive modes. The Oriental discourse, based on Marco Polo and other medieval travel writers and associated with the paradisiacal descriptions discussed above, is eventually displaced by a Herodotean discourse of savagery, cannibalism, and gold. Hulme associates the first with Genoese mercantilism and the second with Castilian expansionism; it is interesting to note that this distinction parallels that which occurs over time in medieval travelogues, which tended to view the East as monstrous during the early Middle Ages, when military crusades were in progress, and as fabulously fertile, wealthy and beautiful during the later medieval period, when peaceful conversion and commerce were the goals (Daston and Park 26-32).<sup>6</sup> Columbus thus appears to have vacillated between different types of travelogues as models in accordance with his uncertainty as to the ultimate goals of his voyage. The opposing discourses in Columbus are, of course, of particular interest to me, since they are similar to my own edenic/monstrous dichotomy; it is evident, then, that

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<sup>6</sup> Also see Campbell for a longer discussion of the historical evolution of medieval travelogues. Gerbi also comments on Marco Polo's generally positive attitude towards difference (*Nature* 6).

from the beginning, both poles of the opposition were present in descriptions of the Americas.

Columbus's approach to American nature—idealized rather than realistic, imbued with a sense of divine mission, and filtered through marvelous images borrowed from travelogues—contrasts sharply with that of two writers who accompanied him on his second voyage. In his study of Oviedo, *Nature in the New World*, Antonello Gerbi includes background chapters on a number of earlier descriptions of New World nature, beginning with Columbus and continuing through a series of other early writers, including two who accompanied Columbus on his first voyage, the medical doctor Alvarez Chanca and the sailor Michele da Cuneo. Both wrote letters recounting their impressions of the New World in a manner that might be described as approaching empirical. Dr. Chanca was impressed by the diversity of American plant life, which he saw as novel and different at the level of genera and species, but nonetheless recognizably similar to European forms and part of the same overarching natural scheme (Gerbi, *Nature* 24),<sup>7</sup> and he was particularly interested in the potential usefulness of various plants. His portrait of the Indians, however, is “superior and scornful” (Gerbi, *Nature* 25). He sneers at their diet, which includes snakes, lizards and spiders, and laughs at their body painting (Gerbi, *Nature* 25-6). If he avoids Columbus's tendency to describe indigenous peoples in terms of textual precedents, he is unable to transcend his own cultural perspective enough to see in unfamiliar customs anything other than the basest barbarism. Michele's approach is similar: he delights in testing and experiencing

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<sup>7</sup> It is somewhat misleading to speak, as does Gerbi, in terms of genera and species, since the Linnaean system of classification was still more than two centuries away. Nonetheless, sixteenth century writers were able to recognize that families of organisms were related by virtue of certain shared traits but different at a more specific level; they thus grasped the basic concept of genera and species, even if they lacked the more rigorous terminology of later centuries.

everything he finds, and Gerbi credits him with the first attempt at producing a systematic natural history of the New World (*Nature* 32), beginning with plants and proceeding through animals and human beings. But again, his attitude towards indigenous peoples betrays his assumption of his own superiority, which finds expression in brutality. He narrates as a supposedly amusing tale his rape of a “cannibal” woman, who at first resisted his advances but, after being beaten into submission, displayed a remarkable degree of sexual ingenuity (Gerbi, *Nature* 34).

Dr Chanca and Michele are later joined in their empirical approach by Martín Fernández de Enciso, who in 1519 published the first book in Spanish to include extensive information on the Americas; in fact, his *Sumario de geographia*, ostensibly a world geography, dealt primarily with the Americas.<sup>8</sup> Himself a conquistador, he believed that war against the Indians was just, asserting that their idolatry abrogated their right to sovereignty over their lands. He stressed his credentials as a participant in events in the New World, citing as a source--along with a list of classical texts-- “the experience of our times, which is the mother of all things” (Gerbi, *Nature* 78). He was instrumental in persuading King Ferdinand to allow the departure of an armada (led by the infamous conquistador Pedrarias Dávila and whose passengers included Oviedo) which had been delayed to allay the concerns of supporters of the Amerindians; Enciso assured the king that God has assigned the Indies to Spain, just as he had given Israel to the Jews and that it was therefore just to seize the land and kill or enslave the Amerindians if they resisted (Hanke, *All Mankind* 35). Enciso wrote for the young Charles V, who was “heir, not only of the Roman Empire (it was actually in that same year, 1519, that he was elected emperor of the Holy Roman Empire), but of the mythical dominions of Jason and

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of Enciso, see Gerbi, *Nature* 76-91.

Hercules, and those of the Goths and King Pelayo;” he was therefore “predestined by God to rule over the whole world, including the non-Christian peoples” (Gerbi, *Nature* 79). His descriptions of the New World thus take on the character of an inventory of the Charles’s possessions, causing him to stress the practical utility of the creatures he catalogues, although not to the exclusion of the fantastic (such as the hyena which changes its sex from one year to the next and bears under its tongue a stone which confers prophetic powers) (Gerbi, *Nature* 85). His hostility to the Indians and defense of violent conquest caused him to be an enemy of Las Casas, and although he might seem to have a good deal in common with Oviedo, he is not mentioned in Oviedo’s work, an omission Gerbi attributes to a personal and political feud.<sup>9</sup> Despite Oviedo’s lack of recognition, Enciso may, in many respects, be seen as a precursor to Oviedo, who shares not only his interest in inventorying American nature, but also his belief in the imperial destiny of Spain.

In Dr. Chanca, Michele, and Enciso, then, an emphasis on first-hand experience goes hand in hand with a harsh assessment of the Indians, a combination that will repeat itself, to at least some degree, in Oviedo. Empiricism did not, however, lead uniformly to negative views of indigenous peoples. In letters written in Latin to Lorenzo de Medici, dated from the first years of the sixteenth century, the Florentine humanist Amerigo Vespucci described the coast of Venezuela and Brazil in glowing terms<sup>10</sup>. As a pilot on voyages to the mainland, Vespucci had the opportunity to witness the New World first-hand, and even spent twenty seven days living with a group of Indians in order to learn

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of Gerbi’s hypothesis as to the reasons Oviedo ignores Enciso, see Gerbi, *Nature* 89-91.

<sup>10</sup> Authorship of some letters attributed to Vespucci is disputed. Letters published in 1504 and widely translated may not, in fact, be genuine (Gerbi, *Nature* 45). My comments refer to the undisputed letters, but the disputed ones are similar in tone.



their customs. Although he is critical of their cannibalism and fondness for warfare, he sees in their communitarian lifestyle echoes of the Earthly Paradise, although, unlike Columbus, he never claims to be near the actual site of Eden. And, as Gerbi notes, Columbus's Paradise is the biblical Eden, while Vespucci's has more affinity to Dante (*Nature* 39).

Vespucci's empiricism is thus filtered through the lens of Renaissance humanism. The intervention of a humanist lens is also evident in *De orbe novo* (often known as the *Decades*), a collection of letters by Peter Martyr d'Anghiera, a Milansese humanist living at the Spanish court<sup>11</sup>. Consisting of eight *Decades*, each composed of ten chapters, *De orbe novo* was the first history of the period from Columbus to 1525. The first *Decade* was published in 1511, and others at intervals during succeeding years; the entire collection was published in 1530. Martyr never set foot in the new world, basing his accounts instead on the testimony of others—a practice for which Oviedo roundly condemned him, defining his own eyewitness narrative in opposition to Martyr's. Alberto Salas notes that Martyr appears to have thrived in the intellectually stimulating atmosphere of the court, where a steady stream of conquistadors and explorers returning from the New World provided him with a wealth of information (35); this comfortable and sheltered existence, Salas suggests, deeply irritated Oviedo (36). But contrary to what Oviedo would have us believe, Martyr was in fact quite scrupulous about the material he accepted, and Oviedo could find few concrete errors of which to accuse him (Salas 36). Moreover, as Las Casas pointed out, no historian writing about the first years of the

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<sup>11</sup> For discussions of Martyr, see O'Gorman *Cuatro historiadores* (11-44), who focuses on Martyr's role as historian, and particularly his discussion as to whether the Americas were a continent or an island; Salas (17-64), who focuses on Martyr's role as the first historian of the Americas; Gerbi (*Nature* 50-73) who gives a general summary with emphasis on Martyr's representation of American nature; and Brading, (16-18) whose brief discussion stresses Martyr's humanist approach.

discovery had actually experienced what he wrote of, and since Martyr had spoken repeatedly with Columbus, it mattered little whether he was based in the Americas or in Spain (*Historia*, I:21, prologue). Reflecting his humanist background, Martyr depicted the American landscape and peoples in terms borrowed from classical literature on the Golden Age. He extolled the Indians' communitarian lifestyle and lack of money, although he also commented on their penchant for warfare. The connection between the New World and antiquity is so strong that Gerbi comments that for Martyr, the New World seems to provide "a miraculous confirmation of the traditions and myths of the Greeks and Romans" (*Nature* 60); at the same time, however, the Americas prove false classical assumptions as to the uninhabitability of the tropics and the lack of population in the antipodes (Gerbi, *Nature* 65). There are some dangerous beasts on the mainland, but by and large the physical environment is as beautiful as its inhabitants, especially in the islands, and the astonishing fertility produces outsized crop plants (Gerbi, *Nature* 71-2). Both the theme of unbelievable fertility and the association of the islands with classical images of perfection will make their appearance in Las Casas, but in a very different context. Although, as David Brading notes, Martyr became increasingly critical of Spanish depredations in the later *Decades* (17), he wrote not to influence policy towards the Indians but simply to delight, astonish, and inform his readers.

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, by the time Las Casas and Oviedo began writing in the second decade of the sixteenth century, a number of precedents had already been set. But the two authors under study here reflect an even more complex mixture of discourses, influenced to some degree by earlier discussions of the Americas but to an even greater degree by their own intellectual formations and their purposes in writing

their texts. In the sketches that follow, I will not attempt comprehensive biographies of Las Casas and Oviedo, but rather outline those developments in their lives which most impacted their thinking, particularly with regards to the natural world. Likewise, I will mention some of the major works of each author, but without attempting a complete catalogue.

Las Casas was both an activist and a formidable scholar.<sup>12</sup> He appears to have had a background in canon law, although it is unclear whether he had a university degree in the subject. His contemporaries referred to him as “licenciado” or “licenciado en leyes,” and Las Casas did not dispute the appellation, but there is as yet no concrete evidence to confirm beyond doubt that he did, in fact, have a degree. Whatever the source of his knowledge, it was extensive and respected by scholars at the time. (Adorno, “The Intellectual Life of Bartolomé de Las Casas: Framing” 26) Citing Kenneth Pennington, Rolena Adorno explains how Las Casas interpreted medieval juridical theory in novel ways. Fundamental to his thinking was the idea of *dominium*, the legitimate secular power exercised by a people. He based his argument on the canon law tenet “*Quod omnis*

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<sup>12</sup> The 1967 biography of Las Casas by Wagner and Parish and Manuel Giménez Fernández’s shorter sketch are still useful as general summaries of the friar’s life, although they are somewhat dated and suffer from errors of chronology due to the mistaken dating of Las Casas’s birth in 1474 rather than 1484; the correct date was established by Parish with Harold Weidman in 1976. Parish has continued to do extensive archival research involving previously unknown documents, with the goal of producing a badly-needed updated biography; to date, she has published two important volumes incorporating her research. Her *Las Casas as a Bishop* analyzes a petition written by Las Casas to Charles V outlines Las Casas’s goals in accepting the bishopric of Chiapa in 1542 and 3. With Weidman, she studied documents showing Las Casas’s role in a series of ecclesiastical juntas which took place in Mexico between 1535-1546, as discussed in *Las Casas en México*. Despite its short length, Parish’s introduction to the English translation of Las Casas’s *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* (*Bartolomé de Las Casas: The Only Way*) provides an extremely useful updated biography. Rolena Adorno’s *Polemics of Possession*, “The Intellectual Life of Bartolomé de Las Casas,” and “The Intellectual Life of Bartolomé de Las Casas: Framing the Literature Classroom” include good, short accounts of Las Casas’s life with an emphasis on his intellectual development over time. Two recent biographies--Paul Vickery’s *Bartolomé de Las Casas: Great Prophet of the Americas*, which focuses from a Christian perspective on Las Casas’s spiritual evolution and prophetic role, and Daniel Castro’s *Another Face of Empire*, which critiques Las Casas’s role as Christian missionary and thus cultural imperialist--suffer from an over-emphasis on the authors’ ideological perspectives, and offer no factual information that is not already available in other texts.

*tangitdebet ab omnibus approbari*” [What touches all must be approved by all]. The principle had originally been formulated to guard against the imposition of bishops against the will of the populace, but Las Casas applied it to the New World to argue that rule by a foreign power could not legitimately be forced upon a sovereign people (Adorno, “The Intellectual Life of Bartolomé de Las Casas: Framing” 26-27). More relevant to my study, although less commonly discussed, was his extensive background in natural philosophy, almost certainly acquired during his years in the Dominican monastery, of which I shall have more to say below. The urgency with which he viewed the ever-worsening plight of the Indians caused him to subordinate his scholarship to the goals of his activism in that all of his writing contributes, in one form or another, to his defense of the Indians; nonetheless, the polemical aims of his work never caused him to become less thorough in his research, less meticulous in his thinking, or less scrupulous in his documentation of sources. Both the *Apologética* and the *Historia de las Indias* may seem diffuse and sprawling to modern readers, but their unwieldiness stems from the fact that Las Casas wanted to leave no intellectual stone unturned on his effort to stem the tide of violence against the Indians.

Las Casas’s interest involvement with the New World began in his early childhood, when, at the age of eight, he witnessed Columbus’s return from his first voyage and saw the Indians, exotic birds, and strange artifacts the Admiral had brought. Las Casas’s father sailed with Columbus on his second voyage, bringing upon his return a young Indian slave as a companion for his son; the two boys formed a lasting friendship, which doubtless contributed to Las Casas’s later commitment to defending indigenous peoples. The young Bartolomé arrived in the New World in 1502 at the age of

eighteen to farm the land Columbus had given his father on the island of Hispaniola and help in his father's provision business. By the time he returned to Seville in 1506, he had been profoundly shocked by the atrocities he witnessed in the New World. He was ordained as a priest in Rome in 1507 before returning to Hispaniola, where he celebrated his first mass in 1510. He then accompanied Pánfilo de Narváez to Cuba as chaplain on what he believed would be a bloodless mission of pacification and conversion of the Island, but again he became a horrified witness to atrocities when (after a peaceful campaign of nearly two years duration), some of Narváez's men fell upon and massacred a group of unarmed Amerindians. He later helped Narváez mend relations with the indigenous population, and in return for his services was given land and Amerindians in *encomienda*. Although, unlike most *encomenderos*, he treated his indigenous workers well, he did not yet challenge the overall system of *encomienda*.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1510 the first Dominicans had arrived in the New World, and at the end of 1511, with the backing of his superiors, Fray Antonio Montesinos preached a sermon saying that *encomenderos* had no hope for salvation unless they freed their Amerindians.<sup>14</sup> Las Casas was not immediately convinced, but he watched with growing dismay the rapid destruction of the island of Cuba and the decimation of its population. Then, searching for a text for his sermon on Pentecost of 1514, he came across a passage in chapter 34 of the Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which stated that offering sacrifices taken from the poor was like killing one's neighbor, and that even repeated sacrifices by the unjust would not expiate their sins. The passage provoked a profound conversion: he saw the injustice of the entire *encomienda* system, and decided not only to

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<sup>13</sup> Information in this paragraph is summarized from Parish *Introduction* 9-18.

<sup>14</sup> Montesinos was one of many who held views similar to those Las Casas would become known for. For a discussion of the indigenist movement in the New World and its relationship to Las Casas, see Friede.

preach against it but to give up his own *encomienda* as well. On the Feast of the Assumption, he told his outraged parishioners that they faced eternal damnation if they continued to hold or distribute Amerindians; shortly afterwards, he left for Spain to deliver to the King an account of the devastation he had witnessed, and the first of what would be a series of plans for a more just system.<sup>15</sup> Helen Rand Parish summarizes the plan as follows:

1) Rest first, to stop the native mortality rate; 2) Peasant colonists instead of soldiers and slavers; 3) For Hispaniola, peasant/Indian cooperatives to improve farming and increase yield; 4) For Cuba, safe Indian towns with exploiters excluded, and run by their own chiefs with Spanish priests for churches and hospitals, and an overall Spanish administrator for each island to guide the new Indian economy. The dispossessed Spanish encomenderos would become stockholders in these towns, contributing to them and sharing in the profits.

(n. 21-2)

In its entirety, the plan detailed every aspect social organization and financing, including the amount of profit Spanish associates might expect to receive; the salaries for all personnel, right down to butchers and muleteers, the length of the workday for the Amerindian laborers; and provisions for the subsistence of the families of Amerindians working for a rotating period in the mines (Bataillon “*Clérigo*” 368-9).<sup>16</sup> Throughout the period from 1516-1520, Las Casas would offer various plans and revisions aimed at reforming the economy of the Antilles and later the mainland. The plans’ communitarian

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<sup>15</sup> This paragraph is summarizes information from Parish, *Introduction* 16-21.

<sup>16</sup> For a full discussion of the plan, see Wagner and Parish 20-22, and Bataillon *Bartolomé* 52-69 and “*Clérigo*” 368-371; for discussions of the plans in general, see Bataillon *Bartolomé* 45-137 and “*Clérigo*” 353-442.

spirit gives them a utopian aspect,<sup>17</sup> but in fact, they were eminently pragmatic, designed to take into account the realities on the ground and the interests the various parties involved. They varied in specifics, but all sought to establish a system which balanced protection of the Amerindians on the one hand with profits for Spanish colonists and the Crown on the other; they ameliorated, but did not abolish, forced labor on the part of the indigenous population. Another common aspect—this one especially interesting in relation to the natural world—is that while they generally included a mining component, the plans emphasized agriculture. Farming was a far less harsh form of labor than mining, and allowed for a more egalitarian social structure; in addition, Las Casas’s own practical experience lay primarily in farming. An ongoing interest in agriculture, as we shall see, will play a role in Las Casas’s descriptions of nature. None of Las Casas’s plans were fully implemented, although his final plan, for a stretch of Venezuelan coastline known as Cumaná, was approved in a greatly diminished and compromised form. This last plan differed from the others in that in addition to agriculture, trade was an important component, and its fundamental goal was to create a peaceful space where friars could do their pastoral work among the indigenous people. Negotiations in with Crown officials reduced the scope of the plan, and when it was finally approved in May of 1519, the size of the territory had been drastically reduced and slave ships were not prohibited. The plan, as implemented in 1521, was a disaster; slaving proceeded apace, and the enraged Amerindians responded by killing the friars living at established outposts (Parish, “Introduction” 25-6).

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<sup>17</sup> Bataillon posits the influence of More’s *Utopia* in a plan based on social units or “*familias*” consisting of a Spanish peasant family and six Amerindian families, and Victor N. Baptiste proposes influence in the other direction, suggesting that More had seen a copy of an earlier lascasian plan, although his evidence seems somewhat tenuous.

The fiasco at Cumaná marked the end of the Las Casas's attempts to formulate plans which would mutually benefit Amerindians, Crown and colonists. He blamed himself for compromising with power, believing that the disastrous outcome of his last plan was God's punishment, and in 1522 he entered the Dominican order. Parish states that during the next twelve years, he effectively "slept" (Parish "Introduction" 28) in terms of activism, and Wagner considers Las Casas's decision to enter the monastery to have been a mistake (Wagner and Parish 70); nonetheless, the period was a fertile one in connection with the friar's scholarship and writing, and it is questionable whether the *Apologética* and the *Historia de las Indias* would have been such rich and fascinating texts had their author not had those years of reflection. He spent the first four years in study, pursuing a course which required him to read the works of Thomas Aquinas (a Dominican) and almost certainly included Aquinas's writings on natural philosophy, as well as those of other Dominican scholars such as Aquinas's teacher, Albertus Magnus, the most scientifically-oriented of the scholastics and one of Las Casas's most frequently-cited sources. It was this background in natural philosophy which provided the foundation for Las Casas's representation of the natural world. The Dominican order was instrumental in formulating natural philosophy, and thus in determining the framework for the study of the natural world in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.<sup>18</sup> St. Dominic himself was a Spaniard working in France; the order he founded originated at the beginning of the thirteenth century in conjunction with of the Church's efforts to combat the Cathar heresy, a Manichean-type movement which was spreading in the French countryside. The Cathars were based in the middle class and were often highly educated;

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history of the Dominican role in the formulation of natural philosophy, see French and Cunningham, esp. ch. 4-8.



the Dominicans thus initially confronted them in the realm of ideas, in public disputations (French and Cunningham 111-13). For the Cathars, the natural world was evil and the product of a malevolent deity; the Dominicans (and the Catholic Church in general) saw it as part of God's creation and therefore good. Nature—specifically, the nature of the natural world<sup>19</sup>-- thus became a central focus in debates between Cathars and Dominicans. The Cathars used Aristotle in their arguments, and the Dominicans began to incorporate the philosopher into theirs as well, studying his *libri naturae* even at a time when they were banned in some French universities (French and Cunningham 120-132). Aristotle's focus on the natural world as governed by a chain of causality thus became a central pillar of the Dominicans' philosophy; in their Christianized version of Aristotle, God achieved his purpose in the world by acting through Aristotelian causality. And since nature was God's work, the contemplation and study of nature could lead one closer to God. Even after the Cathar heresy had long since been crushed, these same themes persisted, refined and elaborated by Albertus, Aquinas and others. Disputation became an important means for university students to hone their argumentative skills, and works on nature were often compiled with an eye to their use in disputation (French and Cunningham 178). In Las Casas's writing, then, both the stress on causality and the use of the natural world in argumentation had their origins in Dominican natural philosophy.

Las Casas began writing what would become the *Historia de las Indias* and the *Apologética* (initially part of the *Historia*) while he was in the monastery, but events called him out of seclusion and although he continued to work on them sporadically, he did not finish either work until late in his life. In 1534, he successfully intervened and

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<sup>19</sup> "Nature" in twelfth century schools was used in the sense of "the nature of things;" it was during the period of the debates with the Cathars that it also came to be used to refer to the natural world (French and Cunningham 40-1).

brought about a peaceful solution to a 15 year guerrilla war led by the Christianized indigenous leader Enriquillo. The experience inspired him to write his first book, *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* (translated by Parish as *The Only Way*), outlining what he believed to be the only means of bringing the indigenous Americans to Christianity (summarized here by Parish): “Go among the poor; go without power, without purse, without provisions; go with charity and respect for those encountered—speaking peace first, then truth, then goodness, staying if invited, departing if not wanted” (“Introduction” 34). In addition, he declared that all the Spaniards had gained in the New World had been stolen, and must be returned (Parish “Introduction” 35). In 1538, Las Casas put his ideas into practice among the indigenous people of Guatemala, who had fiercely resisted Spanish encroachments; the project would ultimately prove successful, although Las Casas himself was called away. The territory, which had been known as “The Land of War,” was rechristened “Vera Paz.” During the next phase of his life, Las Casas made use of his ecclesiastical status in order to advocate for Amerindians, culminating in an appearance in court in 1540, where he read the text of what would later (1552) be published as the *Brevissima relación de las destrucción de las Indias* and a document his reasons for opposing *encomienda*. The meeting resulted in the passage of the New Laws of 1542 which immediately terminated *encomiendas* held by public officials, gradually phased out *encomienda* as an institution, and regulated the treatment of Amerindians during the course of new expeditions of discovery (Wagner and Parish 114-15). It was with the hope of enforcing the New Laws that Las Casas accepted the bishopric of Chiapa in 1544. But it was not to be. His clergy and parishioners refused to go along, and in 1545 Charles V, in the face of a firestorm of criticism from

*encomenderos*, revoked a key provision of the New Laws. The inheritance of *encomiendas*, which the New Laws had prohibited, would now be permitted, thus guaranteeing that existing *encomiendas* would continue in perpetuity. Las Casas responded by secretly distributing to the most trusted of his friars a *Confesionario*, a series of twelve rules for confessors which in effect directed the friars to deny absolution to dying *encomenderos* unless they not only freed the Amerindians they held in *encomienda* but also made complete restitution (as their economic circumstances permitted) to the indigenous population for all of the wealth they had amassed in the New World, since all of it had been obtained illegally.<sup>20</sup> The *Confesionario* thus sought to force compliance through ecclesiastical means of the New Laws provision which had just been revoked; moreover, by implicitly challenging the king's right to grant *encomiendas* and authorize conquests, Las Casas had essentially committed treason.

When Las Casas returned to Spain in 1547, he faced charges of treason and heresy, leveled at the instigation of Juan Gines de Sepúlveda, a humanist intellectual acting on behalf of pro-colonial forces at court. Las Casas succeeded not only in defending himself, but in blocking the publication of Sepúlveda's book *Democrates Alter* (a treatise defending the conquest as a just war, translated in Spanish as *Democrates Segundo*), and presenting his own treatises to the Council of the Indies (Parish "Introduction" 47). In response, the king convoked a debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda at Salamanca, to be judged by a panel of fourteen legal experts, officials, and theologians (this last group including Melchor Cano and Domingo de Soto, associates of the late Francisco Vitoria). The core issue turned on the legality of subjugating the

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the role of confession and restitution in the sixteenth century church and its relationship to Las Casas's *Confesionario*, see Harrison. Harrison stresses the relationship between the spiritual and the economic, noting that restitution played a central role in the sacrament of confession.

Amerindians by force in order to facilitate their conversion to Christianity (Hanke, *All Mankind* 67). On the first day, Sepúlveda spoke for three hours, summarizing the points of his treatise *Democrates Alter*; Las Casas then read for five days from his lengthy *Apologia*. Here his familiarity with canon law and his skill in disputation served him well. Sepúlveda outlined four principal reasons as to why war against the Amerindians was justified:<sup>21</sup> First, just war could be waged in order “to subject by force of arms men whose natural condition is such that they should obey others, if they refuse such obedience and no other recourse remains” (Losada “Controversy” 284); a second reason was “to banish the portentous crime of eating human flesh, which is a special offense to nature, and to stop the worship of demons instead of God, which above all provokes His wrath, together with the monstrous rite of sacrificing men” (Losada “Controversy” 287); the third was “to save from grave perils the numerous innocent mortals whom these barbarians immolated every year...placating the gods with human hearts” (Losada “Controversy” 292); and lastly, “war on the infidels is justified because it opens the way to the propagation of the Christian religion and eases the task of the missionaries” (Losada “Controversy” 299).

Las Casas rebutted each of these points in detail. The *Apologia* is too lengthy and complex to summarize adequately here, so I will focus on two key points (I will also have more to say about the second of Sepúlveda’s points in Chapter 4).<sup>22</sup> Las Casas’s answers

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<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Losada “Controversy” 282-302.

<sup>22</sup> For more detailed accounts of the debate, including Las Casas’s point-by-point refutation of Sepúlveda, see Hanke *Aristotle and* Losada “Controversy” and *Bartolomé*. For good summaries of the debate, see Brading 79-101; Wagner and Parish 170-183; and Jauregui and Restrepo. For background on the debates, Hanke’s *All Mankind* is useful; it was conceived as an introduction to an English translation of Las Casas’s *Apologia* but was published separately. Other works which discuss Las Casas’s intellectual formation in relation to the debates include Adorno “Intellectual,” Carro, Martínez, and Lupher. Carro’s article situates Las Casas within the Spanish juridico-theological renaissance of the Salamanca school to the extent (mistaken, I believe) that he sees Las Casas as largely derivative; nonetheless, his extensive discussion of

to the first, third and fourth of Sepúlveda's arguments were based upon the notion that the Amerindians' *dominium*, or right to govern their own lands was legitimate, and that the papal bull of 1493, which granted the Spaniards dominion over the islands and mainland, granted them only ecclesiastical, not secular authority. Once converted, the Amerindians might freely submit to the crown, but that submission could not be accomplished through conquest. Second—and most relevant to my study, since it is the core argument of the *Apologética*—Las Casas refuted the idea that the Amerindians could be considered, according to Aristotle's criteria, as natural slaves; in order to do this, he argued that the Amerindians did not fit the definition of barbarians. Las Casas outlined four categories of barbarians, which he also included in an epilogue at the end of the *Apologética*. His discussions are lengthy, and what follows is a summary. The first form of barbarian was essentially a degenerative category; it included individuals who for reason of passion, madness or other causes, had ceased to be rational and become fierce, cruel, and harsh, like wild beasts (II:637; epilogue, ch. 264). Second were linguistic barbarians, who either spoke a different language or lacked writing, although they might be in all other respects civilized (II:638; epilogue, ch. 264). Third were those who through evil customs or their own perverse inclinations were not governed by reason, had no laws or governing political, and lacked communication and commerce with other peoples (II:641; epilogue, ch. 265). The last category simply included all non-Christians, however wise and prudent they might otherwise be (II:645; epilogue, ch. 266). The Amerindians could not be considered to be of the first type, because it referred to an accidental condition, rather

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the Salamanca school is useful as background. Martínez takes the opposite approach, detailing Las Casas's influence on thinkers of the Salamanca school. Lupher traces the extent to which different attitudes towards the ancient Romans and the Roman Empire helped shape the debate. His discussion of the positions of the theologians of the Salamanca school is particularly helpful (56-102).

than to the nature of entire peoples (II:653; epilogue to the epilogue). The second type applies, but it is a relative category; as Las Casas notes, from the point of view of the Amerindians, the Spaniards could also be considered linguistic barbarians (II:654; epilogue to the epilogue). The Amerindians could be considered part of the fourth class, but not of the part of that group which was hostile to or had rejected Christianity; they were non-Christians simply by virtue of the fact that they had never been exposed to Christian teaching (II:653-4; epilogue to the epilogue). The third category was the only one which included barbarians by nature, who might be considered natural slaves. The Amerindians clearly did not belong to this category because they had kings and kingdoms and well-regulated societies (II:653; epilogue to the epilogue). The *Apologética* is, in effect, an extended proof of this last point, and Las Casas included material from what would become that work in his refutation.

In a summary of the arguments prepared for the judges by Soto, the latter refers to a “second part” of Las Casas’s *Apologia*. Losada argues that that second part refers to a draft of the *Apologética* (“Controversy” 280); whether or not that was in fact the case, it seems clear that Las Casas’s thinking in the *Apologética* reflects the themes of the debate. In 1552, Las Casas returned to work intensively on his writing projects.<sup>23</sup> He settled in Seville, where he had access to the library of Hernando Columbus, the Admiral’s illegitimate son; most of the first part of the *Historia de las Indias*, as well as his

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of Las Casas as historian, see Salas 177-312, which focuses primarily on the *Historia de las Indias* and Las Casas’s concept of the role of the historian; O’Gorman *Cuatro* 87-124, which focuses on the *Apologética* with an emphasis on Las Casas’s concept of the essential unity of mankind based on the rational capacity of all human beings; O’Gorman *Estudio preliminary* XV-LXXIX, which focuses on the structure of the *Apologética* and the timeline of the work’s composition; and Beckjord ch 3, which depicts Las Casas’s *Historia de las Indias* as essentially a sort of counter-text opposed to Oviedo’s *Historia General*; while much of this opposition is certainly legitimate, Beckjord’s approach obscures the originality of much of Las Casas’s thinking and her emphasis on his “orthodoxy in content and form” (87) stems in part from insufficient attention to Las Casas’s life and works as a whole.

summary of Columbus's diary, is based on his work there. Much of the rest of the *Historia* is based on personal experience (especially concerning the island of Hispaniola), the testimony navigators he knew personally, and documents available to him (Wagner and Parish 198-200). It was during his time in Seville that he realized the error of his previous recommendation that black slaves be substituted for Amerindian labor, and it was there also that he decided that the ethnographic and natural historical material which makes up the *Apologética* merited a separate work—in part because, he observed somewhat comically, it had grown “muy difusa y poco menos que infinita” (*Historia* I: ch 67). Separating the two texts allowed him to focus in the first part of the *Apologética* on the natural world and his Aristotelian proof of the Amerindians' capacity for civic organization, and then to move on to a comparative ethnographic study in the second half (replete with references to Europe's own barbaric past); the *Historia* could then be structured primarily along narrative lines, thus avoiding the constant organizational conflicts which plagued Oviedo. The *Apologética*'s extensive information on Hispaniola is derived from his own experience, while information on other regions comes from reports by friars (Wagner and Parish 202), many of whom spoke indigenous languages; he also includes copious comparative information on ancient cultures, gleaned from his reading. For purposes of comparison with Oviedo—who includes narrative history, ethnography and natural history in the *Historia general*—I will treat the *Apologética* and the *Historia de las Indias* as two parts of the same work, although I will focus primarily on the *Apologética*. Based on internal allusions, Henry Raup Wagner and Parish estimate the dates of completion for the *Historia* at around 1561 and for the *Apologética* at around 1563 (196).

While finishing his historical works Las Casas engaged in one last battle. In 1555, the Peruvian *encomenderos* offered to pay King Philip eight million gold ducats for the right to hold their *encomiendas* in perpetuity. Las Casas countered by delivering to Philip an offer, made by the Inca leaders who had given him power of attorney, to top any offer made by the *encomenderos* in a bid to buy back the freedom of their people. The council which was to consider the *encomenderos*' offer dissolved amid widespread corruption, and in the end the *encomiendas* remained in the hands of the crown, but the incident inspired Las Casas's two last works, *De Thesauris (Los tesoros del Perú)* and *Doce dudas*. In these two treatises, Las Casas went beyond his earlier positions in calling for the complete restoration of indigenous rule in Peru; Christian faith could be offered peacefully and respectfully after the restoration, but never imposed. Philip was intrigued by the idea (which also involved the promise of an annual tribute to the cash-strapped king), but due to Las Casas's death in 1566, it never became reality.

Las Casas's historical legacy has been disputed throughout the centuries that followed his life, and a few words about recent perspectives will be in order.<sup>24</sup> While many on the Latin American left (particularly those involved in liberation theology) see Las Casas as a prophetic and liberating figure,<sup>25</sup> some recent scholars have taken a more critical stance. David Brading argues that in turning to the Crown in his efforts to rein in abuses by *encomenderos*, Las Casas ultimately helped strengthen the position of the former vis a vis the latter, effectively helping to prevent the formation of a feudal landed aristocracy in the New World and at the same time revealing his own "absolutist bias"

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of earlier controversies, especially the accusation that Las Casas was responsible for the Black Legend through which other European nations portrayed Spain as a particularly brutal and dictatorial colonial power, see Comas.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez.



(72). Daniel Castro goes even further, adding to the critique advanced by Brading the criticisms that Las Casas acted *for* the oppressed rather than *with* them (5), and that his often idealized portrayals of the Amerindians served to strip them of their humanity and agency and to convert them into “beautiful, helpless victims deserving only of pity, and only capable of attaining full humanity and cultural autonomy through the intercession of chosen members of the dominant group” (35-6). These observations are not without some foundation in truth. But I question whether the formation of a New World feudal aristocracy would have in any way benefitted indigenous peoples; in fact, there is ample reason to believe that such a development might have made their lot even worse. Moreover, to assert, as does Castro, that Las Casas should have questioned the basis of royal power and that “his silence considering the origins and function of the state is oddly disconcerting” (37) seems to me to demand that Las Casas rise above his times to a degree that would scarcely have been possible. Since my own work focuses more on Las Casas’s discursive strategies than on the outcome of his efforts, I will largely avoid passing judgment on him. Nonetheless, I should note that underlying my work is a recognition both of his considerable accomplishments and of his limitations.

If Las Casas’s writings on the natural world can best be understood in the context of his lifelong struggle to defend the Amerindians, Oviedo’s descriptions of nature must be seen in the context of his role as a dedicated official of the Crown. The association of personal virtue with loyal service to the Crown was typical of the intellectuals of the day (Carrillo Castillo 34-5), and Oviedo’s sense of identity was tied to his role in serving the monarchy. His *Historia general* was written in line with his responsibilities as Crown historian; although the book reflects his own native curiosity, his aestheticism, and his

delight in the newness of American nature, he never lost sight of his role as royal chronicler. His humanist perspective led to an anticlerical streak, and in Rome he had seen first-hand some of the corruption and venality of the Church of the day. As his respect for the institutional Church declined, he saw in the Spain's imperial mission an ever more elevated purpose (Pérez de Tudela XXVIII); Spain's role as imperial power thus took on providential overtones. Over time, Oviedo developed a more jaded view of human beings in general; his early negative portrayals of the Amerindians grew somewhat more nuanced but at the same time, he expressed increasing disillusionment at the greed and brutality of his countrymen (Coello de la Rosa 5). Moreover, as Ktheleen Ann Myers points out, his attitudes evolved over time; a later version of the *Historia* describes indigenous customs more objectively and in greater detail ("Las Casas versus Oviedo" 152-3). Nonetheless, his overall portrayal of the Indians is less than positive, and was used by Sepúlveda in debates as to the defensibility of subduing the Indians by force.

But while Oviedo's initial enthusiasm for Spain's imperial mission was tempered over time, he never questioned the legitimacy of Spain's role in the Americas. His involvement with the Spanish court began just twelve years after his birth in 1478, when he entered the service of King Ferdinand de Aragón in as page to the king's nephew; by 1493, he had become *mozo de cámara* in charge of clothing for Don Juan, the king's son.<sup>26</sup> Like Las Casas, he witnessed and was deeply affected by the triumphal return of Columbus, but unlike Las Casas (who watched the event on the streets of Seville), he was present at the event as a member of the court. Ferdinand and Isabel had recently brought

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<sup>26</sup> For more detailed biographies of Oviedo, see Myers *Fernández*, esp. 12-25, although some biographical information is dispersed throughout the book; Gerbi *Nature*, esp 129-144, although again, biographical details appear in other chapters as well; and Pérez de Tudela y Bueso, whose lengthy introductory study to Oviedo's *Historia* remains the most detailed biography available..

together a confederation of kingdoms to form a unified nation, and in 1492, Spain had conquered Granada, the last remnant of Muslim power on the peninsula. For the young Oviedo, then, Columbus's return was not just an opportunity to view amazing new wonders but one in a series of events demonstrating the greatness of Spain.<sup>27</sup>

Oviedo's life at court came to an end with the sudden death in 1497 of the young Don Juan; shortly thereafter, he embarked in 1499 on what would be a three-year stay in Italy, moving from city to city in response to the fluid political situation in Italy. He immersed himself in humanism and made the acquaintance of a number of prominent humanist intellectuals, including the geographer and scholar Giovanni Battista Ramusio (who would later translate and publish Oviedo's *Sumario*), the poet Jacopo Sannazzaro, the scholar Giovanni Pontano, (Gerbi, *Nature* 165-70), and the artists Leonardo da Vinci and Andrea Mantegna (Gerbi, *Nature* 183). His interest in Italian authors would last a lifetime,<sup>28</sup> and his humanist training is very much in evidence in his writing, which often reflects a thoroughly humanist desire to present his readers with something beautiful, elegant, and pleasing.

Oviedo returned to Spain in 1502, and over the next eleven years held a variety of positions at court, most of them related to writing. Around 1505 he was asked by Ferdinand to chronicle the history of the Spanish monarchy; a task which would lead ultimately to the three-volume *Catálogo real* (Myers *Fernández* 14). Completed finally in 1532, the *Catálogo* traced the genealogy of Spanish royalty in such a way as to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Crown's aspirations to universal monarchy (Carrillo Castillo 75). The post of royal chronicler was generally held by multiple writers at any

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<sup>27</sup> Information in this paragraph is from Myers, *Fernández* 14-15.

<sup>28</sup> See Gerbi 173-6 for a list of Italian authors Oviedo read.

given time, since Ferdinand did not want to rely on any single individual for so important a role. Around the turn of the century, Ferdinand had begun to hire chroniclers who were either foreigners, or Spaniards who had studied in Italy; all shared a humanist orientation. Peter Martyr was among the chroniclers serving at the same time as Oviedo, as was Antonio Nebrija, author of the first Spanish grammar. (Carrillo Castillo 44). During this same period, Oviedo married twice, but his matrimonies were marked by tragedy. His first wife died in childbirth, while his second wife and his children would later die in the New World; later in life he would marry for a third and final time.

In 1513 Oviedo was offered a portfolio of appointments—including *veedor* (inspector of mines) and *escribano general* (judicial notary) in Darién, in what is now Panama. He sailed in 1514 as part of an expedition led by Pedrarias Dávila. The expedition was opposed by Spanish defenders of the Amerindians to such a degree that it was delayed until a panel of theologians could consider the case (it was here that Enciso made his case against the Amerindians, as mentioned above). The armada finally sailed after the drafting of the *Requerimiento*, a document which was to be read to the Amerindians before any armed conquest could begin; ignoring the fact that few, if any, of its listeners spoke Spanish, the *Requerimiento* demanded that they recognize the authority of the Church, the Pope and the Crown, or face military reprisals. Oviedo had the dubious distinction of being the first to read the document in the New World (Hanke, *All Mankind* 35-36), although he noted ironically that he read it to an empty town; shortly thereafter, he received his first *encomienda* (Meyers *Fernández* 114). In Darién, Pedrarias soon proved to be unusually ruthless and brutal even by the standards of conquistadors; as governor, he abused Amerindians and Spaniards alike, and executed the explorer and

former governor Núñez de Balboa. Oviedo returned to Spain within a year to protest to protest Pedrarias's misdeeds to the king; Ferdinand died shortly after hearing from Oviedo, who then took up his cause with Charles V. The new king was at first unresponsive, but in 1519 moved to replace Pedrarias as governor (although, since the replacement died, Pedrarias retained control until 1525), and offered Oviedo the governorship of a nearby territory. Oviedo asked for one hundred knights to help him rule, and when his request was denied, turned down the position (Myers, *Fernández* 16). It was while he was in court in 1519 that he made the acquaintance of Las Casas, who was there to promote his plan for Cumaná. In his *Historia general*, Oviedo notes sarcastically that “andaba por allí un padre reverendo...procurando con Su Majestad e con los señores de su Consejo de las Indias.” Las Casas, he says, won support by promising large profits along with conversion of the Amerindians, but his plan was really nothing more than a “fantasía” (II:199; bk. 19, ch. 5). For his part, in his *Historia de las Indias*, Las Casas describes Oviedo as “muy bien hablado, parlador, y que sabía muy bien encarecer lo que quería persuadir, y uno de los mayores enemigos que los indios han tenido y que mayores daños les ha hecho, como se dirá, porque más ciego que otro en no conocerla verdad, quizá por mayor codicia y ambición...” (III:311; bk. 3, ch. 139).

It was also during this stay in Spain that Oviedo published his chivalric romance *Don Claribalte*. In later years he would express contempt for the genre (Gerbi, *Nature* 204), and the fact that he would write a novel in that style must be seen as a reflection of just how deeply chivalric ideas were embedded in his psyche during his early years in the New World. It is also noteworthy that, unlike most chivalric romances, the novel includes few supernatural elements; instead it seeks to create a sense of the marvelous not through

inventing imaginary beings but through describing ordinary acts and creatures in terms that suggest the fantastic. In some respects, the *Claribalte* thus prefigures Oviedo's writings on nature in that in these latter works as well, Oviedo evokes the marvelous through his descriptions of real creatures, avoiding, for the most part, portrayals of supernatural beings (Merrim "Apprehension" 169-171).

Over the next several years, Oviedo divided his time between Spain and the New World, continuing to serve as *veedor* during most of the period until 1532 (Myers *Fernández* 17-18). During one of his stays in Spain, he wrote his first work on American nature, *De la natural historia de las Indias* (generally known as the *Sumario*), completely from memory. Dedicated to Charles V, the book celebrates the natural marvels of the New World as part of Charles's growing empire. O'Gorman suggests that Oviedo's shift from chivalric romance to New World nature was motivated by changing popular tastes: Erasmus, whose work had recently become influential in Spain, had expressed his contempt for fiction, and in the mean time, curiosity about the New World had burgeoned; the change in genre may thus have been governed by Oviedo's desire for fame (*Cuatro* 48). At the same time, however, the *Sumario* retains the sense of marvel which characterizes chivalric romances; as Merrim notes, it may have been Oviedo's attraction to the miraculous and strange that enabled him to perceive the novelty of New World nature ("Apprehension" 171); the chivalric novel's emphasis on the marvelous thus acts as a sort of lens which filters Oviedo's otherwise empirical descriptions. Carrillo Castillo suggests an additional reason for Oviedo's publication of the *Sumario*, noting that the book may have been in part a tactical move aimed at securing for its author the post of court historian of the Indies (74-5). The work succeeded in all respects: after its

publication in 1526, it enjoyed wide distribution, both in Spanish and in translation, and in 1530, Oviedo was granted the coveted post of *cronista de las Indias*, even helping to define it in such a way that he might remain in Santo Domingo to receive reports from other locales, rather than travelling personally throughout the continent (Carrillo Castillo 75-77).

In addition to his new post as historian, Oviedo was given a post as garrison commander (*alcaide*) of Santo Domingo; he would hold both positions until his death. He returned to Santo Domingo in 1533 and began a somewhat more stable existence, with a staff and library in Santo Domingo, although his life would still be punctuated by periodic returns to Spain. He had already compiled extensive notes and perhaps a draft of his *Historia general* and soon began interviewing witnesses in order to acquire more material, but the process of writing and publishing the *Historia* would prove to be both lengthy and complicated, occupying the next sixteen years (in addition to the decade or so he had already spent amassing material). Oviedo himself paid in 1535 for the publication of the first edition of the first part of his history. In 1542, Oviedo planned to travel to Spain to see to the publication of the entire *Historia*, including Parts II and II, but his journey was delayed until 1546 due to battles in the Caribbean with French corsairs. When he finally arrived, he found that Las Casas was planning to block publication of the book; Oviedo could manage only the republication of Part I, with minor revisions, in 1547. He continued to revise the work over the next two years, finally depositing it in a monastery for safekeeping in 1549 (it is this final version which was

finally published in the nineteenth century, and republished in the modern edition used in my own research and that of most recent scholars).<sup>29</sup>

Both the original process through which the book was written—by compiling reports from multiple sources—and the extensive revisions made by Oviedo over the years contributed to the work's rather disorderly, multi-layered style.<sup>30</sup> Oviedo often records the perspectives of several witnesses without judging which among them merits belief. Comparing Oviedo unfavorably to Las Casas, Salas notes that Oviedo did not weave together or critically assess his sources (120-1), but simply added in new information to his accounts of events as he received it. In many cases he switched verbal tenses, indicating that he wrote parts of his account while an event was in progress, and updated it later, when it was already past; the result is a “desorden temporal” which creates a chaotic feel to the account (Salas 116). Sarah Beckjord defends Oviedo, noting that his methodology reflects a recognition of the unreliable nature of testimony (62). She suggests that Oviedo consciously rejected the humanist model of the historian as *sabio*, a knowing but distant figure capable of judging the truth (57). Instead, Oviedo is an involved narrator, and his witnesses are presumed to be involved as well; the only way to get at the truth is to let them speak for themselves, thus “preserving a connection between voice and perspective” (63). A second source of tension within the text lies in the fact that Oviedo's perspectives changed over the period during which he updated his accounts. Myers has done extensive research on the earlier versions and revisions in Oviedo's work (*Fernández* 82-97, “Imitación”), and stresses the importance of viewing the *Historia* as a work that was constantly in process. She notes (citing Pérez de Tudela)

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<sup>29</sup> This paragraph summarizes information from Myers *Fernández* 19-22.

<sup>30</sup> For discussions of the *Historia* and Oviedo as historian, see Myers *Fernández* esp. 36-40; Carrillo Castillo esp. 31-142; Salas 71-173; O'Gorman *Cuatro* 47-70; and Beckjord 43-85.



that over time, Oviedo appears to have moved away from his early triumphalist attitude to the conquest and towards a perspective that emphasized the description of the essentially new and different nature of the New World (*Fernández* 84). The revisions thus reflect not only additional information, but also a distinct point of view regarding the subject matter. The revised passages include not only new material from witnesses or Oviedo's own observations, but new textual references as well (Myers *Fernández* 85). Oviedo's relationship to textual authorities is an uneasy one. On the one hand, he sees himself as the Pliny of the new world, and strives to imitate his model; at the same time, however, he sees the fact that Pliny and other ancient writers were unaware of the New World as proof of the superiority of the moderns. As Myers notes, he thus engages in a humanist rhetorical strategy known as "*aemulatio*, or an imitation that competes with and attempts to surpass its model" (*Fernández* 89). A final important aspect of the *Historia* lies in the fact that Oviedo included a number of illustrations embedded in the text (as I have discussed in the Introduction), giving the *Historia* a visual dimension lacking in other texts.

The disillusionment which Oviedo experienced with respect to Spain's mission in the New World—coupled, most likely, with frustration over his inability to publish the *Historia*—led to a retreat from writing on the Americas during the final phase of his life. He returned to Santo Domingo, where he completed two works on European themes. Based on a series of imagined interviews, his *Batallas* consists of biographical sketches of illustrious Spaniards whom Oviedo had met. In a similar vein, his *Quinquagenas de los generosos e ilustres e no menos famosos reyes, príncipes, duques* consists of a series of 50 poems focusing on the chivalric feats of Spaniards in Italy (Myers *Fernández* 24).

While his love of chivalry apparently continued unabated, his enthusiasm for the New World appears to have faded over time, doubtless due in large part to the situation around him. By the time of his death in 1557, Hispaniola was in crisis, its gold depleted and its indigenous population largely dead. While Oviedo never followed Las Casas in criticizing Spain's role in the New World, neither could he, in the last years of his life, continue to glorify it.

## Chapter 2: The Center and the Rhizome

Spatial concepts are perhaps the most fundamental aspect of any representation of the natural world, organizing the various components and giving coherence to the whole. Maps are the most obvious representations of space, but written geographical descriptions and even artistic renditions of landscapes, be they verbal or visual, may also encode spatial conceptualizations. While space is commonly regarded as devoid of ideological content, a mere passive background within which actions take place, much recent scholarship has focused on the construction of space as a cultural artifact reflecting the norms of a given society and epoch. Yet the perception that space is neutral often masks its functioning in a given text, and only under careful examination do the underlying notions embedded within it become apparent.

In recent decades, an interest in space and spatial representation has spread across disciplines, including literary studies. A variety of theoretical works in various fields have provided the foundations for the study of space in literary texts.<sup>31</sup> Among them, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* has exerted a particularly widespread influence. For Lefebvre, the unique space of a given culture is produced by the social practice of that society. It may reinforce the hegemony of the ruling class, or at various junctures in history, be supplanted by the space associated with new conditions. The recent emphasis on spatial representation has also fostered a renewed interest in

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<sup>31</sup> Writing, like Lefebvre, in a Marxist vein David Harvey pays particular attention to the dialectical nature of the production of space, emphasizing "the understanding of processes, flows, fluxes, and relations over the analysis of elements, things, structures, and organized systems" (49). Space is contingent and impermanent, arising at every juncture from the interaction between the physical world and changing human practices. Michel de Certeau also stresses the dynamic aspect of space, distinguishing between fixed, static "place" and the fluid "space" produced by human activity, which, he argues, "is practiced place" (117). Most recently, *The Spatial Turn*, an anthology edited by Santa Arias and Barney Warf, offers both an introduction outlining development of spatial theory and a series of articles applying that theory to different historical contexts.

landscape, often viewed as a particular form of spatial practice; W.J.T. Mitchell, for example, equates landscape with Lefebvre's "lived space" in that it is expressed and experienced in terms of images and symbols rather than explicit verbal or mathematical constructions (ix-x).<sup>32</sup>

Among historians and literary scholars, colonial Latinamericanists were among the first to focus on the cultural dimension of space, and to regard it as something other than a purely objective physical entity with an existence independent of human perception. First published in 1958, Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman's *La invención de América* profoundly influenced an entire generation of scholars, to the extent that the idea that American space was "invented" rather than "discovered" has become accepted almost as a given. O'Gorman argued that the geographical concept of the Americas as a distinct hemisphere and a New World arose not from the physical reality of the space in question but from efforts on the part of Europeans to incorporate the hitherto unknown territory into existing geographical schemata; America was thus construed during the period following its "discovery" in terms of fifteenth and sixteenth century concepts of the earth. Perhaps even more important, O'Gorman linked the invention of American space to colonial ideology, showing how America had been conceived from the beginning as geographically secondary and subordinate to Europe.

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<sup>32</sup>Overall, Mitchell's anthology *Landscape and Power* also points to the plural and fluid nature of the origins of landscape images, and their often hidden encoding of power relations. Another important text analyzing the ideological implications of landscape is Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, which traces the historical changes in representations of the country (as a place of "peace, innocence and simple virtue" or of "backwardness, ignorance and limitation") and the city (as a place of "learning, communication, light" or "noise, worldliness and ambition") throughout the history of English literature (1). For Williams, what appear to be innocent depictions of urban or rural landscapes in fact encode the shifting attitudes arising from evolving economic conditions. Also writing in a historical (if somewhat more anecdotal) mode, Simon Schama traces the roots of a series of landscape images from various stages of Western culture. He emphasizes the complex, multiple nature of historical antecedents for landscape representation.

New World space was not objective and ideologically innocent; on the contrary, it was inseparable from Western history, philosophy, and imperial aspirations.

A number of more recent studies have also looked at the construction of colonial Latin American space.<sup>33</sup> In “Bartolomé de Las Casas’s Sacred Place of History” Santa Arias examines Las Casas’s depiction of the Americas as a paradisiacal, utopian space; her essay focuses on the affective, symbolic dimensions of spatial constructs, as well as Las Casas’s spatial practice in his peaceful conversion experiment at Vera Paz. Scholars such as Walter Mignolo and David Woodward have emphasized the advent of gridded, mathematically measurable Ptolemaic space not only in facilitating voyages of exploration, but in the mindset through which Europeans justified their domination of the New World. But while Ptolemaic mapping undoubtedly played an important role in the Western imperialist project, it was still in its infancy during the period of discoveries and conquests. As Ricardo Padrón points out in *The Spacious Word*, to date the most comprehensive study of space in colonial Latin American texts, the new forms of mapping were limited during the sixteenth century to a rather narrow group of professional cosmographers, while other forms of spatial representation—including topographical itinerary maps, portolan navigational charts, celestial maps, and religiously-focused *mappae mundi*—still dominated in the culture at large (46-53). Padrón argues that an overemphasis on Ptolemaic mapping obscures “the complex heteroglossia of early modern geographical discourse” (*Charting Empire* 47), and cautions against the

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *Mapping Colonial Spanish America*, an anthology of articles relating to a wide variety of contexts in colonial Latin America. The authors of the essays in this volume examine “how space influenced the way colonial Spanish America was created discursively, historically, culturally, politically, and legally. America (as a space or a place) was an image that prevailed during the times of conquest and colonization, and was influential in many colonial discourses that attempted to define the newfound lands and the people who inhabited them” (16).

overly mechanical application of Lefebvre's ideas to colonial Latin American space, an approach which has tended to view the transition to Ptolemaic space as too abrupt and complete. Although Las Casas and Oviedo at times include Ptolemaic coordinates, the spatiality in their work harks back, for the most part, to earlier periods. As can be seen from Figure 4, Oviedo's concept of the shoreline of Tierra Firme had little in common with a mathematically precise Ptolemaic map.

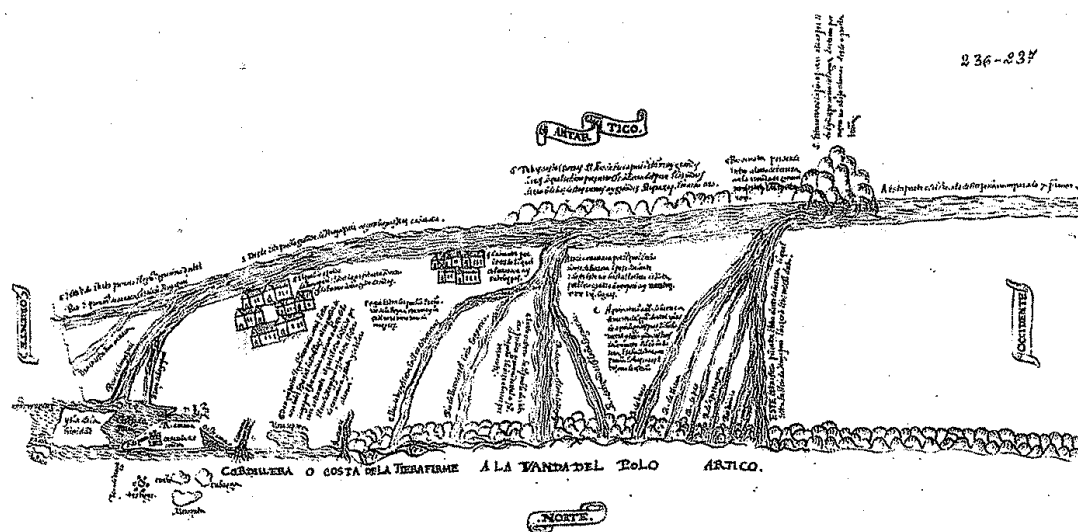


Figure 4. Map of Tierra Firme.

Source: Kathleen Myers, *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America* 244.

In *The Spacious Word*, Padrón traces what he refers to as the “prose cartographies” underlying various colonial texts, including Oviedo’s *Historia* and Las Casas’s *Apologética*. Defined as “a specific type of geographical writing designed to assist the reader in forming a geographic image” (92), a prose cartography may draw upon a complex variety of maps and spatial concepts. For Padrón, two types of maps, in particular, played an important role in sixteenth century texts: itinerary maps and portolan charts. Unlike Ptolemaic maps with their isotropic space, precise coordinates and mathematically determined distances, itinerary maps plotted a series of routes between

known places; the space in between was simply empty and irrelevant, and not drawn to scale (59). This was “geography organized as a journey, a linear route through space” (60); rather than giving the reader “an abstract, idealized, and static point of view, the itinerary addresses a reader who is embodied, earthbound, and dynamic” (61). Space was seen not as a two-dimensional expanse, but as an interval between two points (82); as such, it could be perceived as temporal as well as spatial (97). Portolan charts were transitional forms used in navigation. With distances drawn to scale and compass roses radiating a series of rhumb lines which could be used to plot a course, portolan charts created a two dimensional space which is generally seen as a transition to the purely abstract Ptolemaic space of later maps. At the same time, however, they populated the coastlines with dense lists of toponyms, harking back to an earlier space focused on a linear path along the coast (61-2). Although Padrón himself does not specifically make this connection, the itinerary map, and to some extent also the portolan chart, can be likened to what Michel de Certeau refers to as space as “lived place.” For de Certeau “space” is created by the movement of an active subject, whereas “place” is static and inert (118).<sup>34</sup> In Las Casas’s and Oviedo’s histories, American space is “lived” by tracing the routes described in the texts. Since both authors based their legitimacy on their presence as eyewitnesses, the sense of actual physical passage through the regions being described played a fundamental role in their discursive strategies. But while de Certeau associates such “lived” space with resistance to domination, Padrón demonstrates how it can be equally effectively deployed in texts which support colonial authority.

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<sup>34</sup> De Certeau’s terminology with respect to “space” and “place” is somewhat at odds with Padrón’s. For Padrón, “space” is abstract, and it is “place” that is navigated by a subject on an itinerary map (*Spacious Word* 58). Nonetheless, Padrón and de Certeau share the notion that the place/space traced by the passage of a moving subject is distinct from, and more embodied than, abstract space.

Padrón's insights into the heterogeneity of early modern spatial concepts shed a great deal of light on the representation of space in colonial era texts. Equally important is his contention that a variety of types of maps—including itinerary maps, portolan charts and climatic zone maps—served as cartographic antecedents to the geographical descriptions in both Las Casas and Oviedo. At the same time, Padrón is highly critical—with only partial justification—of interpretations emphasizing the affective, symbolic aspects of space in colonial texts. As he argues convincingly, much scholarship has treated religiously oriented *mappae mundi* as the sole expression of medieval spatiality, to the exclusion of other forms of cartography; such approaches have led to an oversimplified and stereotypical opposition between the more intuitive “symbolic cartography” of the Middle Ages and the mathematical, gridded space of the Renaissance (52). But recognition of the importance of other forms of mapping—both in the Middle Ages and in colonial Latin America—does not in itself necessitate the denial of the role played by symbolic space within medieval and colonial era texts, and Padrón does not present a convincing case for the rejection of *mappae mundi* as important antecedents for colonial Latin American space. Columbus had in his library a heavily annotated copy of French theologian Pierre d'Ailly's *Ymago Mundi*, a medieval geographical work which included *mappae mundi*, and Nicolás Wey Gómez has shown in detail the importance of the work not only to Columbus but also to Las Casas's discussion of Columbus in the *Historia de las Indias*. It thus seems reasonable to argue that a wide variety of forms of mapping—including but not limited to *mappae mundi*—underlay the prose cartography of Las Casas and, I suggest, had an indirect but significant influence in Oviedo as well.



Here, a second look at Lefebvre, as well as at the connection between spatial depictions and landscape, may prove helpful. Lefebvre recognizes three aspects of space—perceived (through spatial practice), conceived (or “represented,” through maps or other intellectually constructed formulations), and lived (or “representational,” affective associations, symbols, and artistic images)—which cannot be studied in isolation; all are part of the space produced by a given society (39). For Lefebvre, maps fall into the category of “representations of space,” or consciously articulated constructs, be they visual, verbal or mathematical. “Representational spaces,” on the other hand, emerge from the interaction of human lives with their environment; “redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (41).<sup>35</sup> Landscape, as Mitchell argues, falls within this latter category. Unlike representations of space, which are regularly supplanted by later representations as history progresses, representational spaces persist, forming deep and often unconscious layers of associations and symbolism which infuse space with meaning. In addition to the “representations of space” (i.e. maps) examined by Padrón, I hope to shed some light on the “representational spaces” (landscapes and symbolic maps) in Las Casas and Oviedo.

Although *mappae mundi* were maps of a sort, as fundamentally symbolic images they would fall into Lefebvre’s category of “representational” spaces rather than “representations of space.” They came in a variety of forms, but all shared an emphasis on symbolism, with little concern for scale or the accurate depiction of geographical

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<sup>35</sup> Lefebvre’s terminology is somewhat unfortunate, since the word “representations” is usually used more broadly, to encompass not only what Lefebvre refers to as “representations of space” but what he refers to as “representational spaces” as well. Here, I will use his terminology only to explain the concept, and then revert to more common usage.

features. Rather than serving as guides for navigation, *mappae mundi* were essentially theological maps of both space and time, which inscribed the redemptive history narrated in the Bible in spatial terms and mapped biblical sites alongside medieval ones (Scafi, ch. 5). Perhaps the commonest type of *mappa mundi* was the “T/O map,” formed by a circle with a T inscribed within it. East was at the top of the map, with Asia occupying the segment of the circle above the horizontal bar of the “T.” Europe and Africa occupied the lower portion of the circle, on either side of the vertical bar of the “T.” The tripartite division also stood for the holy trinity, and the circular form suggested perfection, unity, and wholeness. Jerusalem was generally in the center, and the Earthly Paradise was commonly depicted as a circle or rectangle at the top (easternmost) edge, somewhere in Asia but at the same time, outside of space and time. As Alessandro Scafi puts it, “as an event/place, paradise was a place simultaneously in the past and in the present, believed to exist still, somewhere on earth in a virtual present” (125). Narratives and images of various types might be associated with different sites on the *mappa mundi*, but Paradise was the central trope which gave form and meaning to the space depicted by the map, and initiated the sacred history inscribed in it.

In the same way, a paradisiacal image forms the symbolic core of Las Casas’s *Apologética*. Described in terms of tropes traditionally associated with the Earthly Paradise, the island of Hispaniola—and, most particularly the *Vega Real*, or Royal Meadow (always capitalized in the *Apologética* to emphasize its status)—acts as the central image around which the rest of the work is structured. In the first part of the *Apologética*, Las Casas attempts to prove, through an argument based on a scheme of environmental determinism borrowed from Aristotle, that the Amerindians could not be

inferior to Europeans since the mild climate and edenic landscape of the New World produced well-formed bodies which in turn had a favorable impact on the development of the mind and soul. The creation of an idealized space is thus fundamental to Las Casas's overall argument. Just as the Earthly Paradise bestows meaning on the *mappae mundi*, the *Vega* imbues with meaning the entire chain of causality through which Las Casas constructs his defense of the Indians. Given the key role of paradisiacal imagery in the *Apoloética*, it will be worth examining its construction in some detail.

For Las Casas, the landscape of the island is paradigmatic, standing for the landscape of the New World in general. It is the only extended landscape description in either the *Apologética* or the *Historia de las Indias*, and shorter passages describing other regions frequently refer back to it. Las Casas begins by situating the island according to its Ptolemaic coordinates, but then quickly shifts into more literary language. The description is organized in a series of three "vueltas," or circuits through the northern, southern, and central parts of the island, culminating in the fourth *vuelta* which deals with the beautiful *Vega* in the center. Padrón interprets the *vueltas* in terms of an itinerary map recording Las Casas's personal experience of the island and thus establishing his credibility as "the long-suffering traveler whose sufferings beg for our trust" (*Spacious Word* 177). I would dispute the characterization "long suffering," since the overall impression is overwhelmingly positive and passages in which Las Casas suffers as a result of his journey are very few; nonetheless, I am in agreement with Padrón's general point: Las Casas describes his journey from one point to the next as if walking from one spot to another in his mind's eye, and notes repeatedly that he has actually traversed routes he describes; the effect is to give the reader a strong sense of

immediacy and of the actual physical sensation of the place, thus establishing beyond doubt Las Casas's credentials as eyewitness. José Rabasa offers another reading, noting that Las Casas repeatedly points to the sites of former Spanish settlements abandoned after the decimation of the indigenous population; the *vueltas* thus "incorporate a narrative of destruction into the geographic description" (*Inventing America* 277). These scenes of destruction are clearly an important aspect of Las Casas's description. While the *Apologética* is primarily a philosophical defense of the Amerindans, it also incorporates a forceful denunciation of Spanish atrocities, and the beauty of the island forms an effective backdrop against which to highlight the harmonious society which might have been had the colonists acted differently, and to condemn the destruction of the society that existed before the Spaniards' arrival. Nonetheless, the negative elements present in the *vueltas* cannot overwhelm the predominant tone of wonder and even jubilation Las Casas employs to describe the island.

Valid as Rabasa's and Padrón's points are, they overlook what is perhaps the most striking feature of the *vueltas*. Throughout his journeys around the island, Las Casas repeatedly emphasizes the landscape's perfection in a rising crescendo of lavish praise, building towards the climactic description of the *Vega*. He makes repeated use of hyperbole and strings together chains of superlatives; to cite just a few of the many examples, one valley is so "lleno de alegría, hermosura, fertilidad y amenidad, que no me ocurren palabras con que encarecer y engrandecer la dignidad de todo ello" (I:16; bk. 1, ch. 2) while the entire province is "temperatísima y amenísima" (I:16; bk. 1, ch. 2); the coastline of another province is "fertilísima y deleitabilísima," and its interior "graciocísima" (I:15; bk. 1, ch. 2). One of Las Casas's favorite techniques is to extol the

virtues of one province and then begin the description of the next by saying it is even more beautiful than the last. In the province of Cubao, for example, "son infinitos los ríos y arroyos, sin los que están dichos de las dos sierras o cordilleras, que caen y hacen riberas muy fértiles . . . para las labranzas de los indios . . ." (I: 21; bk. 1, ch. 3), but the province of Ciguayos is "más capaz y fertil y graciosa que la precedente de Cubao" (I: 22; bk. 1, ch. 3). In this way, Las Casas creates a sense of spiraling expectation leading up to his description of the *Vega*.

As will be evident from the preceding examples, fertility is a recurring theme. Las Casas repeatedly refers to the abundance of the Amerindians' crops and the infinite numbers of cattle and pigs (initially imported from Europe but quickly acclimatized) that roam in various areas. Native plants and animals abound, and he describes some of them as almost miraculously beautiful; at the same time, he often repeats how well European crops and livestock have thrived on the island. (I shall have more to say about wildlife and agriculture in later chapters.) Many of the descriptions liken Hispaniola to Spain, only better: to cite one example, a small island off the coast is "como la isla de Gran Canaria, pero harta más fresca y fértil que aquella y más feliz" (I:15; bk. 1, ch. 2); the leaves of a food crop "parecen algo como los palmitos de los que hay en el Andalucía, puesto que son más angostas y más lisas y delicadas" (I: 25; bk. 1, ch. 3).

Interestingly, while much of the language is more poetic than scientific, there are passages within which Las Casas includes minutely detailed empirical descriptions which at first glance seem to have little to do with the construction of his overall paradisiacal image. In one region, for example, he describes cliffs so steep that they can barely be scaled, even by clinging to the vegetation growing on them; atop these crags are

tablelands covered by rough limestone rocks with points as sharp as awls that are impossible to walk on wearing shoes; instead, one must wear hemp-soled sandals, which last only a few days on the harsh stones (I:23; bk. 1, ch. 3). The description provides a stark contrast to the flowery language Las Casas uses to describe most of the island, and at first it is hard to understand why he includes it. The answer can be found, in part, in Las Casas's commitment to empiricism; he feels bound to include important facts, even if they seem to contradict his overall argument. But the description of the tablelands also reflects the influence of natural philosophy in Las Casas's thinking. In the Middle Ages, natural philosophy largely ignored phenomena which could not be explained by known causes, attributing them to "occult properties" understood only by God or to a confluence of "accidental causes" (Daston and Park 120-133). But by the sixteenth century, motivated in part by the need to explain the wealth of new information encountered in the Americas, natural philosophers began to take an interest in anomalous phenomena, investigating them empirically in order to discover their causes and remove them from the realm of the magical (Daston and Park 135-148). Las Casas thus seeks to demystify the tablelands, and at the same time to neutralize the fearsomeness, by investigating their causes. Beneath the rocky tablelands, underground rivers have formed large wells or cisterns. When Las Casas and his companions walk over a particularly large one of these, their footsteps echo as if they are walking over something hollow, which causes them no little fear. Undeterred, they investigate further. Reaching the mouth of the cistern, they lower a clay jar to take out some water, they find it is "la más dulce, delgada, fresca y fría y la más sabrosa que podía ser vista" (I:24; bk. 1, ch. 3). Below the sweet water, he notes, the water at lower depths is saline, most likely because saltwater enters from the

ocean and, being heavier, sinks (I:23; bk. 1, ch. 3). Las Casas then proceeds to explain that the sweet water in the wells must have its source in rivers which flow from the mountains surrounding the *Vega* and then go underground (I:24; bk. 1, ch. 3). Las Casas's empirical investigation thus explains away a frightening phenomenon, and at the same time gives him an opportunity to reiterate one of his favorite themes: that of sweet, pure water. He further develops the positive aspect of the seemingly forbidding tablelands by noting that they are dotted with holes of two or three palms in depth and slightly more in width, filled with red soil. This soil is of such incredible fertility that the *yuca* roots planted by the Indians, which in other parts of the island grow to the thickness of an arm or a leg, here grow so large that they fill the holes, and even half of one is so heavy that an Indian must carry it on his back; carrots planted here, he is certain, would grow as thick as the waist of a man (I:23; bk. 1, ch. 3). Here again, he takes a forbidding image and turns it around to reiterate another of his ongoing themes: the island is incredibly, even miraculously, fertile.

The *vueltas* thus serve both to de-exoticize the island, and to build towards the climactic image of the *Vega Real*. Since the beauty of the provinces toured through the *vueltas* is already superlative, the beauty of the *Vega* becomes super-superlative; Las Casas himself notes that since he has praised the other provinces in such glowing terms, it seems that there are no words left to adequately extol the *Vega* (I:47; bk. 1, ch. 8). He overcomes this linguistic obstacle with an abrupt and dramatic change in perspective. The localized narrative of passage through the provinces gives way to a sweeping, panoramic view of the *Vega* as seen from the highest of the surrounding mountain peaks. Padrón argues that Las Casas has here “become the disembodied onlooker implied by the surface

of the map” (178). Yet while the viewpoint in this passage may be elevated and generalized, it is by no means detached or disembodied. Las Casas’s words overflow with passionate enthusiasm for his subject, and his enraptured tones have more in common with pastoral poetry than the mathematical abstractions of a map. Las Casas is no less physically present here than he was during the course of the *vueltas*, and his emotional involvement is even more intense; his elevated vantage point simply serves to highlight the superlative nature of the *Vega*, not to separate him from it. The change in viewpoint thus serves primarily to set the *Vega* apart from—and above—the already edenic provinces Las Casas has described in the course of the *vueltas*. The description of the *Vega* is one of the most frequently quoted passages of the *Apologética*, but it bears repeating:

Está toda pintada de yerba, la más hermosa que puede decirse, y odorífera, muy diferente de la de España. Pintanla de legua a legua, o de dos a dos leguas, arroyos graciosísimos que la atraviesan, cada uno de los cuales lleva por las rengleras de sus ambas a dos riberas su lista o ceja o raya de árboles siempre verdes, tan bien puestos y ordenados como si fueran puestos a mano.... Y como siempre esté esta Vega y toda la isla como están los campos y árboles de España por el mes de abril y mayo, y la frescura de los continuos aires, el sonido de los ríos y arroyos tan rápidos y corrientes, la claridad de las dulcísísimas aguas, con la verdura de las yerbas y árboles, ¿quién no considerará ser el alegría, gozo y consuelo y regocijo del que lo viere, inestimable y no comparable? (I:49; bk. 1, ch. 8)



Clearly, the *Vega Real* is more perfect than any place actually in existence; it is portrayed as real, but at the same time somehow beyond reality. Rabasa characterizes the *Vega* as a “natural garden” (*Inventing America* 164-79; “Utopian Ethnology” 274-77), noting that Las Casas’s description suggests the “care and orderliness” of a garden, as opposed to a wild landscape (*Inventing America* 170). But for Rabasa, the “natural garden,” along with the parallel construction of the Amerindian as “noble savage,” form a system of “ideal primitivism,” which reveals the opposition between nature and culture as a construction and thus undermines justifications for European dominance in the New World (*Inventing* 173). While Rabasa’s analysis of the *Vega* as garden is an extremely important one, it is somewhat at odds with his notion of “ideal primitivism” and his assertion that it seeks to destabilize existing concepts of nature. The garden evokes Eden and thus suggests a prelapsarian innocence, but innocence cannot be equated with primitivism. What Las Casas seeks to do is to create a space which is the antithesis of savage nature, and thus to incorporate the New World within the old, stable spatial order on an equal footing with the Old World. In doing so, he invokes images which hark back to medieval, classical, and biblical sources, affirming rather than negating established landscape tropes. Santa Arias notes that “By finding Paradise in the New World, a rhetorical and ideological operation takes place: the neutralization of the Other space, the Other World, ‘el Nuevo Orbe’” (“Sacred Place” 127); Las Casas accomplishes this, however, not by undermining established ideas about nature but by adopting “a contestatory strand that uses the same images that justified the imperial project” (“Sacred Place” 125). Arias goes on to connect Las Casas’s paradise image with utopian discourse and practice, a purpose it certainly served in Las Casas’s life as an activist; in relation to

his portrayal of New World nature, however, its function as a meaning-generating focal point is most relevant.

It is worth recalling here Las Casas's role as editor of Columbus's letters, in which the latter suggests that the Earthly Paradise may be located on the South American mainland. Las Casas never makes such a literal claim for the *Vega*, but his description consists of nothing less than a series of tropes normally associated with the Earthly Paradise as it was construed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In their respective histories of the trope of the Earthly Paradise, Jean Delumeau and A. Bartlett Giamatti trace the evolution of the idea from its roots in both Christian and Classical traditions. Each of these traditions was itself composed of a variety of strands. In classical literature, depictions of the Golden Age and Elysian fields as sites free from human suffering blended with the *locus amoenus*, a garden or idealized wild landscape which usually served as a background for love (Giamatti 25-47). Both of these themes later merged with biblical accounts of the Garden of Eden and with Paradise as the place where virtuous souls awaited the resurrection (Delumeau 23-69). Although the image of the Earthly Paradise underwent a variety of permutations over time, the core elements remained quite stable, and all are found in Las Casas's description of the *Vega*: the lush, fragrant vegetation, the sound of the babbling brooks of sweet water, the trees planted as if in a garden, the cool breezes, and the eternal springtime are all characteristics of the Earthly Paradise, and would easily have been recognized as such by readers in Las Casas's day. Other elements of the Earthly Paradise not present in the passage cited above—such as sweetly singing birds, abundant food and prodigious fertility—can be found in other parts

of Las Casas's account, in descriptions of the *Vega* itself and of the surrounding provinces.

Several somewhat less obvious features of the Earthly Paradise also figure prominently in Las Casas. Both Delumeau and Giamatti note that the word "paradise" came from an Old Persian word referring to an enclosed orchard or royal park (Delumeau 4, Giamatti 11) and the Hebrew word derived from it signified "verdant enclosures" (Giamatti 11). The notion of enclosure often formed part of medieval and Renaissance versions of paradise, and finds an echo in Las Casas's description of the *Vega* circled by the three successive *vueltas*, as well as by the mountains surrounding the meadow. Moreover, the Earthly Paradise was frequently represented as being atop a high mountain (Delumeau 5, Scafi 174-5); while the *Vega* is not at the very summit, it is a high valley surrounded by peaks, and the *vueltas* produce a sense of ascent. The idea of the Earthly Paradise as a perfect and lofty garden surrounded by circles of somewhat lesser perfection was well-established before Las Casas's time, finding perhaps its most famous expression in Dante's *Purgatorio*. Thus, while Las Casas stops short of literally identifying the *Vega* as the Earthly Paradise, sixteenth century readers would easily have been able to make the connection.

Another interesting, if somewhat indirect, allusion to the Earthly Paradise comes in Las Casas's discussion of the underground wells of pure water mentioned above. In most medieval accounts of paradise, four rivers flowed from a fountain in the garden. These were commonly identified with the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, and either the Ganges or the Danube, which were supposed to have gone underground after leaving paradise and resurfaced at their visible points of origin (Delmeau 40-41). Las Casas's

explanation that the rivers originated above ground in the *Vega* thus connects to yet another paradisiacal trope. Since Las Casas was writing here in a more empirical vein, this connection may not have been intentional, but it is significant that the explanation which would first occur to him is that of rivers which originate above ground and then go underground (as opposed to seepage or rivers originating underground), and that he would immediately assume the area surrounding the *Vega* as their source; such an assumption suggests that, even when offering an apparently more scientific hypothesis, he still had the Earthly Paradise in mind.

In chapters following the description of the *Vega*, Las Casas presents his case for the perfection of the island as a whole, based on Aristotle's contention that the suitability of a place for human habitation was determined by the confluence of the universal cause (the sky, including the angle of the sun and the length of days and nights, which determined the overall climate) and five particular causes (whether or not the place was covered with water; the fertility of the soil; the presence or absence of poisonous snakes or other beasts; the disposition of mountains and valleys; and the quality of the air) (I:83-85; bk. 1, ch. 17). Favorable conditions arising from various particular causes could mediate the unfavorable influence the excessive heat or cold arising from a less-than-perfect superior cause, rendering a place acceptable for habitation. Likewise, a favorable disposition with respect to the sun could overcome problematic particular conditions. A place where both superior and particular causes were favorable was not only suitable for human habitation, but "así es verisímile que debe ser el paraíso terrenal" (I:86; bk. 1, ch. 17). Predictably, Las Casas then proceeds to show that Hispaniola is just such a place.

Having established the perfection of Hispaniola, Las Casas goes on to extend that perfection to the Americas as a whole, describing the mainland only in the broadest terms and referring back to Hispaniola as the paradigm which the entire region follows.

Although he recognizes that there are some locales that, due to the local effects of some particular cause, are less than ideal, he categorizes these as “monsters” and accidents of nature, which do not contradict the overall perfection of the region any more than the existence of the occasional person with six fingers violates the general rule that human beings have five fingers (I:108; bk. 1, ch. 21).

As Padrón points out, Las Casas’s extension of the edenic qualities of Hispaniola to the entire hemisphere entails the erasure of the boundaries believed in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to divide the world into five (or, according to some variations seven) climatic zones (179). According to the commonest scheme, originated by Parmenides, the two polar zones were supposed to be uninhabitable due to their frigid climates, while the scorched torrid zone between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn was uninhabitable by virtue of its extreme heat; only the northern and southern temperate zones had climates suitable for human habitation, and there was considerable doubt as to whether there was habitable dry land in the antipodes, or southern temperate zone. But a second scheme, which had its origins among Hellenistic philosophers and found adherents among some medieval thinkers, most notably Albertus Magnus (like Las Casas, a Dominican, and one of Las Casas’s most frequently cited sources), the region between the tropics was not “torrid” but in fact the most temperate and fertile of all (Wey Gómez 96). In *La historia de las Indias*, Las Casas devotes several chapters to explaining why it was reasonable for Columbus to believe that he would find land not only to the west but also to the south. In

this context he cites Albertus's explanations as to why the equatorial regions are habitable; among these is the fact that since the approaching sun warms and the receding sun cools, the places where the lengths of the day are closest to equal and the angle of the sun is least exaggerated are the most temperate (I:40; bk. 1, ch. 6). Las Casas thus essentially redefines the terminology of the climate zones, arguing that not only are the tropics not torrid, but, because they lack extremes of cold and heat, are in fact more temperate (and thus more paradisa) than the zones normally defined as temperate. It is significant that medieval climate zone maps rarely showed the eternally temperate Earthly Paradise, because it fit neither within the temperate zones characterized changing seasons, nor within the supposedly scorched torrid zone (Scafi 165). By effectively erasing climactic zones in the western hemisphere, Las Casas incorporates all of the Americas into a single paradise-like zone of eternal springtime.

In the following chapter, Las Casas argues that the New World is, in fact, part of Asia, specifically "*India extra Gangem*" (India beyond the Ganges), the term generally used at the time to refer to the region we now call Southeast Asia (I:109; bk. 1, ch. 22). He bases his proof on a comparison of the America climate, flora and fauna with descriptions of India in classical texts. While he notes the absence of elephants (I:110; bk. 1, ch. 22), he insists that the presence of green parrots--which, according to Solinus and Pliny, are found only in India—is sufficient proof that the Americas are in fact India (I:111; bk. 1, ch. 22). Interestingly, Delumeau identifies the parrot as one of the elements linking America to paradise in the Western imagination. Parrots were referred to in the sixteenth century as "birds of paradise," and were thought to be the only animals which had not lost their capacity to speak as a result of the fall. Moreover, because of their long

life spans, it was believed that some still-living birds might have been present in Eden (112; bk. 1, ch. 22).

As the eastern and southern edge of the Asian continent, Southeast Asia is the place where Columbus would have landed had America in fact been Asia, so Las Casas's argument is not entirely implausible. Since a substantial part of the Pacific coast of the Americas had already been explored, it would have been necessary to posit a northern land bridge in order to join the continent with Asia, something Las Casas does not explicitly do. But it is clear that geographical accuracy is not Las Casas's primary concern; rather, he is concerned with the symbolic and philosophical implications of equating "these Indies" with "the true Indies" (I:109; bk. 1, ch. 22). First, since India had long been an independent entity, the enslavement of its population would be difficult to justify. Second, the Earthly Paradise was generally supposed to be in Asia, and T/O maps commonly placed it at the top or easternmost extreme of the map, in what would be the eastern edge the Asian continent. While Las Casas may not have had this idea in mind, the connection would be evident to readers of the time and would reinforce the paradisiacal connotations already produced by the description of the *Vega*. Finally, it is significant that India *extra Gangem* not only east, but south. In his recent study *The Tropics of Empire*, Nicolás Wey Gómez cites Las Casas, among other sources, in support of his argument that Columbus intentionally sailed south as well as west, seeking not the northern Cathay (China) but the southern India, which was rather vaguely defined at the time but distinct from Cathay by virtue of its tropicality. Columbus thus hoped to prove not merely that it was possible to reach Asia by sailing west, but that the "torrid" zone

was—as Las Casas, and before him Albertus and others argued--temperate, habitable and populated.

Based on Columbus's postils to the works of the Pierre d'Ailly and other scholars, Wey Gómez suggests that the Admiral sought not only the gold and other riches of Asia, but the supposedly docile and cowardly inhabitants of the tropics. D'Ailly elaborated in detail the commonly held belief that southerners were intelligent but lacking in fortitude, a condition which resulted from the fact that their bodies compensated for their hot environment by cooling and thinning their blood, making them submissive and suitable for slavery. (Wey Gómez 289-90). Columbus annotated a section of d'Ailly's *Ymago mundi*, saying that "the inhabitants of the south are greater in intellect and prudence, but they are less strong, audacious, and spirited; and those who inhabit the north are more audacious and of lesser prudence and fortitude" (Wey Gómez 289). Wey Gómez points out that Columbus's descriptions of the New World in his *Diarios* are marked by a fundamental contradiction: as an explorer, he wanted to show that the tropics were not torrid but in fact temperate and habitable, but as a colonizer he wanted to represent the people of the Americas as the docile, cowardly products of an overly hot environment. The goal of Las Casas—who, as editor of Columbus's diaries, was of course intimately familiar with the Admiral's ideas--was to emphasize the first part of this dichotomy and effectively undermine the second (401). It is in this context that the erasure of the climate zones takes on particular importance; the temperateness of the Americas was the foundation of Las Casas's defense of the Amerindians.

Overall, the space that emerges from Las Casas's descriptions is a highly stylized and ideologically freighted one. A "representational space"—specifically a landscape—



forms the center of an image which functions in a manner akin to the space of a medieval *mappa mundi*. Just as the Earthly Paradise formed the symbolic heart of the T/O maps, the *Vega* endows Las Casas's space with meaning. After the perfection of the place is established, the reader's perspective is gradually expanded outwards, to include first the entire island of Hispaniola, then the Americas as a whole, and finally, with the assertion that "these Indies" are in fact part of Asia, the entire globe. The *vueltas* serve to center the image of the *Vega*, which in turn radiates its meaning to successively wider circles, encompassing all of the Americas in its zone of eternal temperateness. This is a centered, rational space, in which there are no loose ends and no accidents. It is governed by a strict causality which forms the basis for the rest of the *Apologética*. Interestingly, it has much in common with Lefebvre's notion of "absolute space," the dominant spatiality of the classical epoch and the Middle Ages. Absolute space was centered around a natural site which was consecrated by the construction of a temple or other sacred structure, becoming the ceremonial core of the society around it; even after this spatial formation had lost its prominence as a means of structuring society, it survived as a "representational space" (48-9). In centering the *Apologética* around the paradisaical *Vega*, then, Las Casas is not simply building an argument internal to the work itself, but also linking it to a tradition which had persisted in the European imagination for millennia.

The spatiality of Oviedo's *Historia* could not be more different. Here, the old order is fragmented and the unified whole is replaced by a sometimes chaotic multiplicity. Space is de-centered, and the causal relationships that are so prominent in Las Casas are here conspicuous by their absence. Unlike the *Apologética*, Oviedo's *Historia* does not have a unifying spatial theme, and landscape descriptions are rare,

brief, and lacking in encoded meaning. Nonetheless, spatial symbolism is not absent in Oviedo's work, although it was most likely not intentional. One repeated image is of particular interest. In the first chapter of the first of the fifty books which make up the *Historia*, Oviedo speculates that the New World is as large as Europe, Africa and Asia combined, explaining that this is possible because of its arched shape, which resembles to a hunter's lure or a horseshoe. (I:15; bk.1, ch.1). Later, in the *proemio* to book 16, he again mentions the hunter's lure and also compares the figure to an open mouth in profile. This open, curved shape reflects the coastline of the Americas as represented on many maps of the time, where the coastline of North America was generally represented as bending and stretching towards the east to form a larger and more concave Caribbean. The shape itself is thus not Oviedo's invention, but the metaphors he uses to describe it, and the significance he gives to it by repeating it in different sections of the *Historia*, indicate that he attributes to the shape a symbolic importance which goes beyond mere description. Padrón notes that the curving form, with its open end facing Europe, converts the American coastline into "the western littoral of a nearly enclosed Spanish *mare nostrum*" (147). Oviedo later argues that Labrador is in fact linked to Europe by a northern land bridge (IV:337; bk. 39, *proemio*), thus making the image of an enclosed European Atlantic complete (Padrón 147).

In this way, Oviedo links the New World to the Old in a way that naturalizes Spain's claim to the Americas. This claim is reinforced by Oviedo's claim that the Caribbean islands are actually the Hespérides referred to in ancient texts. By means of a lengthy and circuitous argument based on a variety of classical sources, Oviedo argues that the Hespérides were so named because they were a possession of Hespero, the

twelfth king of Spain, who ruled in 1658 BCE; in returning the Indies to Spain, God was thus restoring the Crown's "derecho tan antiquísimo" to rule over the Americas (I:17-20; bk.2, ch.3). Las Casas attributed Oviedo's claim to an effort to flatter the king, and scornfully debunked Oviedo's assertion by pointing out, among other reasons, that had the Caribbean islands really been known in ancient times, Roman historians would surely have recorded the fact, and that moreover, at such an early date, even the Greeks did not have sufficiently advanced navigational technology to reach the Americas, so it was completely implausible to assume that the far less advanced ancient Spaniards could do so (*Historia de las Indias* bk.1 ch. 15-16). Charles V, however, was excited by the possibility. By showing that Spain had a claim to the New World that predated Columbus, the claim could offer the Crown ammunition in its struggles with Columbus's heirs; even more important, it could cement Spain's claims to the Americas on a firmer basis than the papal donation of 1493, which could theoretically be revoked at any time (Lupher 216).

While Padrón's interpretation of the hunter's lure and the open mouth highlights one important aspect of the figures, the similes nonetheless beg further interpretation. The Spanish noun *señuelo* can be used metaphorically to mean anything that lures by way of deceit, and the image of the open, hungry mouth carries a slightly sinister connotation as well. If Oviedo on the one hand tries to incorporate the Americas into the Iberian sphere, he also suggests that there is something in the New World which threatens to subvert that very attempt at unity. A final example of the horseshoe/hunter's lure form reinforces its destabilizing aspect. Oviedo alludes to the shape yet again in the context of

his narrative of Columbus's voyages, where he gives a detailed description of Columbus's coat of arms, which he also illustrates (see figure 5).

**Segundo.**                      **fo**                      **L.**

licos hizieron señaladas mercedes: y en el  
pecial le confirmaron su preuilegio en la di-  
cha Barcelona. a. xxviij. de Mayo de mil y  
ccc. xliij. y entre otras de mas de le hazer  
noble y dar titulo de almirante perpetuo de  
estas Indias a el y a sus sucesores / por via  
de mayorazgo. y que todos los que del de-  
pendiesen: y a vn sus hermanos se llama-  
sen donde dieron las mismas armas reales

de Castilla y de Leon mezcladas y repa-  
radas con otras que assi mesmo le concedie-  
ron de nuevos: aprouando y confirmando de  
su auctoridad real las otras armas anti-  
gas de su linaje. E de las unas y las otras for-  
maron vn nuevo y hermoso Escudo de ar-  
mas con su Timbre y deuisa / en la manera  
y forma que aqui se contiene: y se ve pa-  
tente.



**E**l escudo cō vn castillo de oro  
en cāpo de goles o sanguino cō  
las puertas y vñtanaz azules: y  
vn leō de purpura o morado ē  
cāpo de plata cō vna corona de  
oro: la lengua sacada y rāpāte: assi como los  
reyes de castilla y de leō los trach. y aq̄ste  
castillo y leō hā de estar en el chieph o cabeça  
del escudo: el castillo en la parte dreccha. y el  
Leō en la siniestra. y de alli abaxo las dos

partes restātes del escudo todo: hā de estar  
partidas en mātēl: y en la parte dreccha vna  
mar en memoria del grande mar oceano: las  
aguas al natural azules y blancas: y puesta  
la tierra firme de las indias / que rodea quasi  
la circunferencia deste quarto / de rābola par-  
te superior y alta del abierta / de manera  
que las puntas desta tierra grande mues-  
tran ocupar las partes del medio dcha y tra-  
montana. E la parte inferior que significa

b ij

Figure 5: Columbus's coat of arms.

Source: Kathleen Myers, *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of the Americas* 190.

In the lower right quarter, he says, there is a figure showing the ocean, with almost the entire circumference occupied by the South American mainland and the top part open, with the space in the middle filled with islands, “de la manera que se pueden significar estas Indias” (I:32, bk.2, ch.7). The spatiality of the *mappae mundi* may be glimpsed here, but in a distorted form. The map oriented like a T/O map, with east in the uppermost position. But instead of the closed circular form of a T/O map, the figure has an open horseshoe shape, and at the top, where Paradise might be found on a T/O map, there is only empty space. The figure thus suggests a sort of exploded or ruptured T/O map, with a hole where meaning-generating Earthly Paradise would normally be. Since the figure represents only the Caribbean and not the entire world, the analogy with a *mappa mundi* is not complete. But the form of the T/O map—and particularly its orientation, with east at the top--was established enough that a map following the same format would be recognizable.

The sense of openness and decenteredness pervades all of Oviedo’s *Historia*. Unlike Las Casas, Oviedo did not separate historical narrative from geographical description, and the two often appear to fight for primacy as the organizing axis of the work. While there are separate chapters dealing with flora, fauna, foods, medicinal plants and other biological and geographical themes, descriptions of various elements of the natural world often erupt unexpectedly in the context of a historical discourse. Moreover, Oviedo can rarely resist showing off his erudition by inserting references to classical or other sources wherever possible. Narrative branches from narrative, and the offshoots sometimes give rise to new narratives of their own.

In his analysis of the geographical descriptions in the second and third parts of the *Historia*, Padrón notes that this meandering form reflects the linear, premodern geography of a plane chart (150). Although Oviedo includes Ptolemaic coordinates, his description moves along the coastline from one place to the next in a manner which recalls the toponyms arrayed along the coastline of a portolan chart, with historical narratives branching from the various points along the way. The movement from place to place along the coast thus serves as the underlying principle which strings the various narratives together. To this, I would add that the conflation of temporal and spatial organization harks back to the merger of time and space in the *mappae mundi*. But instead of following an orderly sequence of events informed by a biblical notion of redemptive history, Oviedo's space/time seems to branch and bifurcate freely, with no sense of progression towards some final goal.

To a postmodern reader, such a structure calls to mind the notion of the rhizomaceous text, as formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.. A rhizome is essentially an open form which branches and sprouts from the nodes, much like Oviedo's narrative. It is opposed to a tap root, which grows straight and implies a logical progression, or to a tree. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from a tree root, which plots a point, fixes an order" (7). Moreover, "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*... The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and...' This conjunction carries enough force to uproot the verb 'to be'" (25).

Oviedo's style derives its rhizomaceous quality in part from the fact that the author continually revised his text. Like a rhizome, it was constantly in process, always adding another "and." Meyers, who has studied in detail the changes in the various extant versions of Oviedo's history, sees the repeated revisions as one of the most important aspects of Oviedo's writing. It reflects, in part, Oviedo's effort to reconcile two competing modalities within his work: first, his commitment to empirical observation, and second, his reliance on authoritative texts and dedication to *imitatio*, the early modern bent for modeling works after those of established authors (84). The result was a text which was multilayered and somewhat disorderly. Unlike Las Casas, who managed to reconcile discrepancies between empirical reality and his overarching vision by finding a positive interpretation for anomalous phenomena such as the underground wells, Oviedo wrestled constantly with the tension between New World reality and Old World textual authority.

To Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome's indeterminate quality is liberating, but Oviedo sees it as somewhat threatening. Interestingly, he narrates an anecdote which includes his own rhizomaceous metaphor, in the context of a conversation between Columbus and Queen Isabella on the failure of trees in the Caribbean to produce tap roots. Columbus complains that in the Caribbean islands, the trees do not sink their roots deep into the soil, but instead their roots "se extienden e multiplican, e esparcen tantas raíces, o más, que tienen ramas" (I:91; bk. 4, ch.1). After hearing Columbus's description, Queen Isabella remarks that "En esa tierra, donde los árboles no se arraigan, poca verdad y menos constancia habrá en los hombres" (I:91; bk. 4, ch.1).

For Oviedo, the rhizome is associated with a duplicitousness inherent in the very soil of the New World. If he finds himself writing in the style of a rhizome, it is not because he chooses to but because the lack of order is imposed upon him by the diversity and chaos of his subject matter. The incompleteness and openness implied by the rhizome is analagous to that suggested by the horseshoe/hunter's lure. Both images imply that Spanish domination is justified and needed in order to complete the fragmented circle and bring the anarchic rhizome under control. But at the same time, the images reflect an underlying fear that the reality of New World nature may be incompatible with Old World geographical and cosmographical notions, potentially undermining them by exposing them for the constructs that they are.

The space of Oviedo's *Historia* thus provides a stark contrast to the ordered space of Las Casas's *Apologética*. Rooted at least in part in medieval *mappae mundae*, Las Casas's paradise-centered space serves as the basis for his defense of the Amerindians. Given our postmodern fascination with flux and flow, this closed, circular space seems rather static. Moreover, there is something hierarchical in the series of *vuelatas* and the culminating *Vega*, and the environmental determinism upon which Las Casas's argument relies seems rigid and archaic. Yet it is precisely the closed, totalizing quality of the image that Las Casas uses to demonstrate the perfection and wholeness of America, and the fundamental injustice of the conquest and enslavement of the Indians. Oviedo, on the other hand, constructs images which in a postmodern context might suggest a liberating open-endedness. The horseshoe shape, with its empty space where the Earthly Paradise might be found on a *mappa mundi*, seems to challenge the rigid stability of Las Casas's encircled garden. And, with his rhizomaceous narrative that traces the coastline while



branching and digressing freely, Oviedo creates an open, fluid space that constantly breaks and reconfigures the linear progression through space and time, a characteristic which appeals to postmodern sensibilities. From a sixteenth century perspective, however, this subversive quality of the rhizome, portrayed by Deleuze and Guattari in a positive light, would have been perceived as dangerously destabilizing. For Oviedo, the openness of the horseshoe and the anarchic quality of the rhizome signaled a need for control, serving as an invitation to, and justification for, conquest.

It is interesting to compare the spatial constructs in Las Casas and Oviedo with the cosmological metaphors proposed by Severo Sarduy in his study of the Baroque. For Sarduy, the spatiality of the Renaissance is characterized by the perfect, stable circularity of the orbits of the spheres; with Copernicus, the earth is displaced from the center, but the basic circular form is preserved; finally, in the wake of Kepler's observation that the orbit of Mars described not a circle but an ellipse around the sun, the circle was finally decentered and replaced by the baroque, unstable form of the ellipse. Although Las Casas and Oviedo wrote before Kepler and were not aware of Copernicus, it could be argued that Oviedo's space reflects a similar sort of decentering of the stable, essentially circular space reflected in Las Casas and the T/O maps. Las Casas succeeded in incorporating the New World harmoniously into the spatial concepts of the Old World, but Oviedo's space is marked by instability and doubt. As will become clear in the following chapter, this same dichotomy characterized the two authors' descriptions of New World flora and fauna.

### **Chapter 3: Natural Wonders: Flora and Fauna**

If Las Casas seems more inclined than Oviedo to revel in the depiction of the edenic landscape of the New World, it is Oviedo who seems most in his element when it comes to portraying individual plant and animal species. While Las Casas includes a significant quantity of information on flora and fauna, Oviedo's voluminous chapters on the subject are truly encyclopedic in scope. As was the case in their descriptions of landscape and space, both authors' accounts of plants and animals drew upon a number of different philosophical, theological and literary currents, and the tensions between the various discursive modes at times gives the texts an almost hallucinatory quality. And here again, as in the passages discussed in the previous chapter, descriptions of the natural world reflect their divergent perspectives not only on nature in general, but also on the human beings of the Americas and the justice or injustice of the conquest.

Overall, Las Casas's descriptions are governed by a belief in the universality of nature, with respect to plants and animals as well as human beings. God's laws of cause and effect operate in the same way everywhere, and while Las Casas does not exclude the anomalous, his aim is generally to minimize exoticism. Oviedo, on the other hand delights in the particular. He does not explicitly deny the unity of the natural world—in fact, at least on the surface, he believes the two hemispheres are part of the same natural order—but his descriptions are so full of wonder at the novelty of the New World that they disrupt any possible sense of unity, dissolving in a cascade of particulars.

Las Casas's descriptions of plants and animals must be seen in the context of his construction of the island of Hispaniola as an Earthly Paradise, and his subsequent series of causal proofs of the capacity of the Amerindians to form civil societies. Yet his

descriptions are not simple or stereotypical; if, in his description of the *Vega*, he uses a series of standard *topoi* in order to ensure that the paradise motif is clear, here he blends empiricism with idealism to reinforce his theme in subtler ways. In so doing, he draws upon a variety of discourses. Scholasticism, specifically natural philosophy, still provides the overall framework and many of the descriptions are clearly intended as evidence for claims he makes in his chapters on causality. In demonstrating the paradisiacal nature of some of the creatures of Hispaniola, however, Las Casas also uses the language of wonder, more typical of travelogues as well as of Columbus. In addition, he incorporates a considerable number of empirical descriptions, which seem to prefigure, just as much as do Oviedo's works on nature, later natural history. In Las Casas, these sections may, in part, be a result of the fact that he had read Oviedo and, since he considered his work at least in part to be a correction of Oviedo's errors, felt a need to mirror and even outdo the latter's work. But Las Casas also displays a genuine interest in portraying his subjects accurately; this may have stemmed, in part, from the trend in Renaissance natural philosophy to take a new interest in the particular as a means of inferring general causes.

While he includes chapters on various categories of plants and animals, Las Casas makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive catalog of species; rather, he includes individual discussions of only those creatures which seem to him noteworthy or exemplary in some way. He focuses primarily on Hispaniola as paradigmatic of the Americas as a whole. Many of his descriptions are minutely detailed, but others are sweeping and general; he sometimes concludes a series of descriptions of specific creatures with a leap to the general, allowing those he has described to serve as paradigms for a category, whose members he describes as being amazingly abundant and

varied. After describing a number of wild trees, for example, he concludes his chapter by noting that “Hay otras infinitas especies de árboles silvestres, a muchos de las cuales tenían puestos nombres los indios y de otros creo que no curaban nombrarlos, muy diferentes en hoja y en madera de los de España” (I:80; bk. 1, ch. 15). In the *Vega*, he says, “Hay grande copia de pescado” (I:52; bk. 1, ch. 9) and “aves infinitos, los aires llenos dellos” (I:53; bk. 1, ch. 9). The overall effect of such passages, which hark back to Columbus’s “trope of multiplication,” is one of incredible natural bounty and edenic plenty.

Las Casas introduces his section on herbaceous plants with a particularly interesting passage of this type: “Cuanto a las yerbas, son inmensas las que hay en esta isla y de especies diversas, y que creo que de gran virtud medicinales, porque son muy hermosas y pintadas, como con tijeras cortadas muchas dellas, que luego parece haberlas naturaleza por su virtud señalado” (I:81; bk. 1, ch. 16). Two important points emerge here. First, these plants are the intentional creation of a loving and careful God. Just as the trees mentioned in Las Casas’s description of the *Vega* appeared to have been carefully placed by hand, these plants seem to have been delicately cut out with scissors; there is nothing savage or random about them and they suggest a garden rather than an untamed forest. The notion that God’s hand (operating through nature) was everywhere evident in the natural world was one of the central tenets of natural philosophy; as Roger French and Andrew Cunningham explain,

... natural philosophy was concerned with studying nature as *created by God*, and was both evidence of some of the attributes of God and also a route to a closer knowledge of and spiritual communion with God. Natural philosophy was a study

in which the central concerns were the detection, admiration and appreciation of God's existence, goodness, providence, munificence, forethought and provision for his creation (4).

A second key point, evident in Las Casas's insistence that the plants' beauty must signal medicinal properties, is the legibility of nature. Beauty is not simply there for beauty's sake, or even solely to attest to the goodness and wisdom of God, but to point to a virtue of a plant or other object. God has not only endowed plants with qualities useful to man, he has indicated their usefulness with signs which may be deciphered. Michel Foucault refers to such evidence of correspondence as "signatures;" he quotes Paracelsus to explain:

It is not God's will that what he creates for man's benefit and what he has given us should remain hidden . . . And even though he has hidden certain things, he has allowed nothing to remain without exterior and visible signs in the form of special marks – just as a man who has buried a horde of treasure marks the spot that he might find it again (1994:26)

According to Foucault, attitudes towards nature were dominated up until the end of the sixteenth century by a vision of nature as a web of correspondences linking various aspects of the natural world and imbuing them with meaning.<sup>36</sup> Both the notion that nature is God's handiwork, and the idea that the Creator has structured his work in such a way that it may be read by human beings, are important components of Las Casas's representation of the natural world. Las Casas does not, as a rule, attempt to interpret

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<sup>36</sup> Brian Ogilvie notes that Foucault based this analysis on "a narrow sample of sometimes idiosyncratic thinkers," and that some of his "followers" have applied his ideas "more broadly than the evidence warrants" (16). While I am well aware of the dangers of overusing Foucault, I am convinced that in this case, his ideas do indeed apply.

their specific signatures.<sup>37</sup> Just as he has not yet learned the languages of the Amerindians, he has yet to learn to decipher the codes of American botany. Nonetheless, in referring to the beneficial qualities that must be there, he adds to the general sense of a place that is bountiful, ordered, and meaningful. In addition, he indirectly suggests that once their language can be understood, the plants might provide an alternative source of profit as exports, apart from gold or pearls.

A number of Las Casas's descriptions of animals occur within the context of the *vueltas* around the island, where they contribute to the image of the Earthly Paradise. Although Las Casas is clearly describing real creatures which he has seen or heard, he does so with a strong element of wonder, and the creatures border on the marvelous. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park point out, natural philosophers generally viewed marvels with ambivalence or disdain, considering them a reflection of the ignorance on the part of the beholder as to the natural causes of phenomena he or she was witnessing (109-110). Las Casas's wonders, however, are not exotic or ineffable; rather than fantastic beings, they are natural creatures so beautiful or huge or in some other way excessive that they constitute wonders. In addition, since they are often described in contexts that allude in some way to the divine, they move at least partially away from the philosophically questionable realm of the wondrous towards the realm of the miraculous. The suggestion of miracles adds to the paradisiacal quality of the Hispaniola which, as we have seen, is central to Las Casas's argument. One of the most beautiful passages describes the enormous fireflies of the island:

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<sup>37</sup> For a more specific discussion of the Doctrine of Signatures, including a key to the deciphering of various features, see Peter MacPherson.

Hay en ella unos gusanos o avecitas nocturnos que los indios llaman cocuyos, la media sílaba luenga, y en Castilla llamamos luciérnagas, o quizá son escarabajos que vuelan, las tripas de las cuales están llenas de luz; son tan grandes que con uno vivo en la mano, y mejor si son dos, se pueden rezar maitines en un brevario de letra menuda, y yo los he rezado, según creo, como con dos candelitas. El pellejuelo que tienen en la barriga es transparente, y cuando vuelan o les alzamos las alillas resplandece la luz que tienen; luego en anocheciendo salen y están los campos y los montes, en mil partes, como si estuviesen llenos de candelillas.... Tomado uno se toman muchos, porque acuden muchos adonde ven como preso a uno. Muertos y estrujados con las manos, y puestas aquellas tripillas por el cuerpo, como hacían los indios, y más si fuesen pegadas sobre vestidos, queda todo el cuerpo reluciente como luz esparcida, puesto que dura poco, pero siempre dura cuando vivos. (I:16; bk. 1, ch. 2)

The passage is carefully constructed to maximize the miraculous quality of the cocuyos. The lexical instability evident here (*gusanos*, *avecitos* or *escarabajos*?) is usually more characteristic of Oviedo than Las Casas and is typical of medieval and Renaissance narratives of wonder, where it serves--as it does here--as a device to suggest the impossibility of describing the creature in question in terms established categories. But this description does not undermine those categories; these insects are clearly “luciérnagas,” even though their miraculous qualities might challenge Las Casas’s powers of description. As he does in many descriptions, Las Casas includes the indigenous name as well, with careful attention to the correct pronunciation; here, however, the Amerindian name reflects less a belief in the inability of the Spanish

language to express American reality (as we shall see is the case with Oviedo) than a recognition of the legitimacy of indigenous naming practices. The reference to the breviary associates the light of the insects with the divine, and the fireflies' habit of flocking to their imprisoned brethren makes them seem not only intelligent but compassionate. The mention of the firefly light smeared on human bodies evokes an image of luminous beings, while also showing that the fireflies are not only beautiful, but useful. At the same time, the passage has an empirical bent; Las Casas is still concerned with causes and has clearly experimented with reading by firefly light, and with crushing the creatures to extract their luminous material; the fact that this substance loses its luminosity quickly when it is not inside a living insect is an additional empirical detail that adds to the overall marvelous effect, since it suggests that something inherent in the living insects is necessary to maintain the light's brilliance. Finally, since the passage occurs in the context of a *vuelta* through a province Las Casas portrays as "temperatísima y amenísima, mucho más que otras de esta isla," the presence of the fireflies contributes to the overall positive image he seeks to create. Oviedo also describes the fireflies enthusiastically, and includes some details that Las Casas does not, such as a physical comparison to give an idea of the fireflies' size; they are "tan grande como la cabeza del dedo pulgar o algo menor" (II:84, bk. 15, ch. 8). He also notes that both Spaniards and Indians wore the fireflies when they made war at night, so as not to lose sight of each other in the dark, and that Indian guides would put fireflies on their heads to serve as a beacon the others could follow. But despite its wealth of detail, Oviedo's description is in fact less accurate than Las Casas's, since he locates the source of the firefly's light in its eyes as well as their abdomens, noting that it "tiene los ojos resplandecientes



comocandelas” (II:84, bk. 15, ch. 8). At the same time, since the description occurs in the context of a catalog of insect species rather than that of an edenic landscape, its wondrous quality is somewhat lessened. Finally, since Oviedo does not connect the *cocuyos* to the divine, his portrayal lacks the miraculous quality of Las Casas’s depiction of the insects; for Oviedo, they are simply one more curiosity.

Another example of Las Casas’s use of the wondrous/miraculous may be found in a description of a bird, also in the course of one of his *vueltas* around the island:

En estas muy altas sierras se crían unos pajaritos de diversas colores, hermosos a lo que tengo entendido por lo que se me ha dicho, pero yo no lo he visto sino oído y bien oído, los cuales cantan a tres voces cada uno solo; digo que cantan por sí a tres voces que, cierto, es cosa de maravilla, no juntas todas tres voces, sino una tras otra diferentes y consonas como tiple y tenor y contra, pero tan presto todas y tan claras y dulces que cuasi parecen tres juntas y tres sujetos o órganos que las producen...Yo los he oído algunas veces en aquellas muy altas sierras, y testifico que es cosa para provocar a los hombres que los oyesen a dar muchas y magníficas gracias a Dios en oyendolo. Para gozar de aquel canto, luego se ha de asentar el hombre y con silencio pararse a oír, porque en sintiendo cualquiera estruendo luego callan y por ventura se esconden (I:21; bk.2, ch. 3)

Again, the wondrous blends with the divine, creating a miraculous effect. The fact that the bird sings in three voices at once—coupled with the fact that the voices correspond to those of a human choir—seems to suggest a chorus of angels, and the bird’s musical feat seems almost impossible until Las Casas explains that the effect is produced when the creature sings each part in rapid succession, showing again his interest in explaining

causes even while describing something he clearly views as marvelous. The fleeting, ethereal nature of the bird adds to the sense of wonder, and we can almost see Las Casas standing still in rapt attention in order to listen to it without causing it to flee. And again, the presence of the bird heightens the sense of edenic purity and sublimity which Las Casas builds throughout the chapters portraying the island.

Not all of Las Casas's descriptions of flora and fauna fit the mold of the above-cited passages. In fact, the majority, which are included in a series of chapters headed "recursos naturales" rather than in the context of the *vueltas*, are quite prosaic. The structure of these chapters in some ways echoes Oviedo's organizational scheme in that they are divided according to plants and animals of different types, but it is significant that Las Casas begins each chapter title with the general category "Recursos naturales." These descriptions are not included as part of an inventory of the king's possessions, for the sake of aesthetic pleasures, or to heighten a sense of the exotic, as are the creatures in Oviedo's compendium; they are part of Las Casas's overall argument as to the favorable nature of Hispaniola (and by extension the rest of the New World) for human habitation. Yet despite his polemical aims, Las Casas's descriptions are precise and clear. He depicts unfamiliar plants and animals both by comparing them to familiar ones in Spain (often finding them superior to their Spanish counterparts), and by describing details of morphology and habit in ways that at times sound surprisingly modern. Where the species are the same or similar to those in Spain, he sometimes simply includes lists or very brief comments, but when they are different, he describes them in painstaking detail. In general, descriptions are followed up with an account of the plant or animal's usefulness, with emphasis on the latter.

Las Casas is particularly interested in establishing the similarities within general classes of creatures, a tendency which is in line with natural philosophy's emphasis on general principles. In some cases, he even senses generic similarities which were not generally recognized in the sixteenth century. Marine mammals were categorized as fish at the time, but Las Casas notes the similarity of manatees to dolphins and whales (although he also includes tuna in this group), and comments that the meat of manatees seems more like beef or veal than fish (I:58; bk. 1, ch. 10). And despite the fact that they taste like chestnuts, peanuts (which are in fact a leguminous plant like beans), "tenían su cáscara o vaina en que nacían y con que se cubrían muy diferente que las avellanas, porque era de la manera que son las haba...cuasi de la manera que están las vainas de las arvejas o de los garbanzos en Castilla..." (I:61; bk.1, ch.10).

In one of the few sources available on Las Casas as naturalist, Víctor Manuel Patiño argues that in many cases, Las Casas's descriptions are more accurate than Oviedo's (184-5), allowing a knowledgeable reader to identify the plants or animals he talks about with greater frequency than is the case with Oviedo, who writes longer descriptions with an excess of detail that sometimes obscures rather than clarifies the identity of the creature he is describing (172). By way of example, Patiño compares the two authors' treatment of palm trees. Oviedo describes several types, only two of which can be identified through his descriptions. Las Casas begins with general principles, establishing a broad morphological distinction among palms: some (which are like the majority of palms in Spain) have pinnate leaves, while others (like the smaller Spanish *palmitos*) have palmate leaves ("como una mano abiertos los dedos"). While Oviedo had established the same distinction in the *Sumario*, Patiño notes, in his *Historia* he mentions

only the pinnate type (172). Las Casas follows his comments on morphology with observations on habitat: the palmate-leaved type thrives in infertile areas, while the pinnate-leaved trees grow only in fertile areas where abundant water is available. Having established the characteristics of the class in general, he then proceeds to describe in detail just one type of palm, which serves as an example of palm trees in general. His descriptions include details of size, color and texture which allow for the identification of the tree (Patiño says it is a *roystonea oleracea*), including at every point comments on the tree's uses. He begins with the trunk, which, when hollowed out, can be used to make pipes to bring water into houses; next he describes the leaves, which can be used as shelter from the rain and sun, or for roofing huts or even houses in towns; lastly, he discusses the tree's edible fruit. At the end of the discussion, Las Casas concludes that the trees "son, finalmente, para mil provechos y cosas buenas" (I:79; bk.1, ch. 15).

The significance of Las Casas's emphasis on the utility of New World plants and animals emerges clearly in a chapter entitled "Isla Española. Justificación teórica de sus excelencias. Causa universal." His purpose, Las Casas explains, is to prove, by means of a chain of cause and effect, the overall "salubridad y templanza" of Española, which "por el aspecto y figura del cielo, esté alguna tierra favorecida y dispuesta por su templanza y mediocridad para la habitación humana, y para los animales y arboledas y frutos de que los hombres tienen para vivir necesidad" (I:83; bk. 1, ch. 17). The presence of useful plants and animals is proof of the healthfulness of the region and thus a necessary aspect of Las Casas's ideal landscape, which ultimately provides the basis for his defense of the rationality of the Indians.

The same purpose guides Las Casas in dealing with the necessity of including poisonous or otherwise dangerous creatures in his account. Las Casas is scrupulously honest, and would thus not omit such unpleasant realities, despite the fact that they risk undermining the paradisiacal nature of his vision. Instead, he tries to minimize their negative aspects or to find some advantage that they offer. In the cases of the shark and the crocodile, he makes no attempt to minimize the creatures' threat to human beings; it would simply not be possible without lying. He describes both in considerable detail, including the fact that all manner of things (including bits of earthenware jugs) have been found in the bellies of sharks, and that the crocodile is the only creature with a movable upper jaw. At the same time, he attempts to mitigate the fearsomeness of the animals by telling of the ways that each can be killed, as well as by mentioning that the shark is edible and has on numerous occasions saved sailors from hunger, while the crocodile has a potent musk (of which he himself has a piece) in its gills and around the sexual organ of the male.

A particularly delicate issue for Las Casas—one which, as I will argue in the following chapter, becomes even more pressing in relation to food crops—is that of poisonous creatures. On his list of particular causes that can make a place uninhabitable even if its distance from the sun should make it fit for habitation, number three is “cuando está ocupada de serpientes o malas bestias” (I:84; bk. 1, ch. 17). Las Casas recognizes that the island has many large snakes, but insists that they “ni tienen ponzoña ni hacen mal” (I:56; bk. 1, ch. 10). But after describing a type that, while large, is harmless and easily killed, he cautiously observes that “otras culebras hay en los remansos de los ríos, pero pocas, que son verdes, los cuales creo que son ponzoñosas,

puesto que la fama es que en esta isla ninguna cosa de ponzoña hay” (I:56; bk. 1, ch. 10). No poisonous snakes are native to Hispaniola, so it is likely that Las Casas is basing his comment here on what he has read in Oviedo (who claims that there are poisonous snakes on the island); he feels compelled to raise the issue in case Oviedo may be right, but he downplays the importance of the of the (supposed) snakes (“pero pocas” and “creo que”), and casts doubt upon his own statement by citing “la fama” that there is nothing poisonous on the island. He is then able to claim with a clear conscience, in his “justificación teórica,” that the island “carece de bestias fieras y ponzoñosas” (I:84; bk. 1, ch. 17). Oviedo notes that although there are many snakes on Española, “es común opinión de los vecinos desta isla, naturales della, e aun de todos los españoles que ha mas tiempo que por aca viven, que no son ponzoñosas” (II:35, bk. 12, ch. 8). Later, however, he adds:

También hay en esta isla Española y en las otras sus vecinas o comarcas, y en las de este golfo, culebras que son verdes y delgadas y muy ponzoñosas, con los cuales hacen los indios caribes la hierba con que tiran las flechas. Estas tales culebras se cuelgan de los árboles por sí mismas, asidas a las ramas con la cola, e desde allí, al que pasa le pican o muerden do quiera que pueden herir, y son muy malas y enconadas (II:37; bk. 12, ch. 8).

Not only does he emphasize the existence of the snakes with a vivid description, he highlights their aggressiveness and danger to human beings.

A similar contrast can be seen in the two authors’ treatments of the tree from which the Caribs extracted another type of poison for their arrows.<sup>38</sup> Las Casas gives a

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<sup>38</sup> Las Casas calls the trees by their Indian name “guao,” while Oviedo calls them “manzanillos,” and Las Casas’s description is so brief that it is difficult to establish with absolute certainty that the two authors are

brief description of the physical appearance of the tree, and then states tersely, without elaborating, that the Indians use it to make poison for their arrows. He adds that if the branches touch those passing through a forest of them, they cause their faces to swell and burn for many days afterwards, but he quickly adds that “comúnmente hace daño a las caras de los hombres que son muy blancos y delicados y flemáticos; a los coléricos y que tiran en el pelo a taheños y a los bermejos ningún daño hace. Y a mí me dieron muchas veces las ramas en la cara y nunca me hizo mal, porque no soy de los muy blancos ni flemáticos” (I:77; bk. 1, ch. 14). Finally, he notes that the trees cannot be found on the island outside of a limited area, except for “uno de cuando en cuando” (I:77; bk.1. ch. 14). He thus satisfies the demands of empirical honesty by including a description of the tree, but minimizes its fearsomeness by suggesting that it is not common, and that its ill effects are not universal.

Oviedo, in contrast, begins by stating in his chapter on the trees by stating in his chapter heading that the poison “por mayor parte, es irremediable” (I:291; bk. 9, ch. 12), and later characterizes the poisonous mixture of which it is a part as “hierba diabólica” (I:291; bk. 9, ch. 12). He describes the range of the tree (limited on Española but generalized throughout the Caribbean and common in parts of Tierra Firme), gives a detailed description of its physical appearance, and then goes on to say that those who inadvertently fall asleep beneath one of the trees awaken with headaches and swollen eyes and cheeks, adding:

E si acaso el rocío deste árbol toca en la cara, es como fuego, e levanta y abrasa los cueros en cuanto alcanza; e si cae en los ojos, o los quiebra o ciega o pone en

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indeed talking about the same tree. But since both cite the same uses and the same effects, it seems to me virtually certain that they are, in fact, referring to the same tree.

mucho trabajo e peligro de los perder. La leña deste árbol, encendida, no hay quien mucho espacio la comporte porque luego da mucho pesadumbre; e es tanto el dolor de cabeza que causa, que presto hace arredrarse los circunstantes que estovieron alrededor, tanto que sean hombres como otro animal cualquiera.

(I:291; bk. 9, ch. 12)

Like Las Casas, he notes the effects of the tree are not consistent, telling a story of a man who ate its fruit with impunity; but unlike Las Casas, he does not use this circumstance to mitigate the overall malevolence of the plant. While in essence, nothing in Oviedo's account contradicts Las Casas, the vivid details he includes paint a picture of a truly nasty plant, one that would be out of place in Las Casas's paradisiacal island.

As the foregoing two examples indicate, Las Casas's and Oviedo's descriptions of the same plants and animals often stand in sharp contrast to one another. But the contrast goes beyond mere emphasis and choice of detail. The two authors choose to include (or exclude) different creatures, and Oviedo's account is vastly longer than Las Casas's, in part because he describes more creatures and in part because his descriptions are longer and more detailed, often including lengthy anecdotes recounting experiences he or others have had with the creatures in question. Like Las Casas, Oviedo combined a number of different types of discourse in his work, but the currents he drew upon were very different. First, his choice of Pliny the Elder as textual model shaped his work in important respects. Oviedo both imitated Pliny and attempted to surpass him; he cited the Roman historian as an authority to back up his own assertions, but just as often pointed triumphantly to his model's errors and omissions. From Pliny he adopted the overall encyclopedic structure of the portions of his work dealing with nature, cataloguing plant



and animal species in books according to broad taxonomic categories (trees, herbaceous plants, water animals, birds etc.) and dividing the books into chapters on particular species or groups of species. It was at this more specific level that Pliny became completely inadequate as a model, and Oviedo repeatedly emphasized the newness of American nature, of which the ancients had no idea. Pliny also contributed to Oviedo's tendency to portray exotic beings in a monstrous light, although unlike his model, he did not encounter monstrous human forms.

It is also important to bear in mind that Oviedo wrote as court historian; his catalogue of plants and animals was thus at least in part an inventory of the king's possessions. He was as concerned as Las Casas with the utility of the plants and animals described, but for entirely different reasons. Antonio Barerra-Osorio situates Oviedo within a process that would eventually give rise to the natural history of later centuries. Oviedo's responsibilities included the compilation of information sent to him by officials from throughout the New World, who were required by royal decrees to provide him with reports (107). Since the king was interested primarily in sources of revenue, Oviedo's accounts had a utilitarian cast, which required careful empirical description (110). The process thus included both the collection of information and its organization into a coherent form, two processes which were key to the commodification of nature and ultimately to the Scientific Revolution (107).

This practical and empirical focus might seem to be at odds with Oviedo's humanist emphasis on aesthetics, but in fact the two are closely related. In a study of the origins of natural history, Brian Ogilvie writes:

The key epistemological attitude of humanism was a concern for the particular.

Scholastic natural philosophers, even those as sensitive to the variety of nature as Albertus Magnus, privileged demonstrative knowledge of universals. They admitted that particulars could be known by means of the senses, but they denied that such knowledge was demonstrative or scientific. (116)

For humanists, however, knowledge was apprehended through observation of the particular. As Kathleen Ann Myers notes, Oviedo's work reflects a shift in visual epistemology. Medieval scholars tended to view material things in terms of their symbolic value, and sight was thus considered a means of access to symbolic, rather than empirical, truth. In the Renaissance, emphasis shifted towards the acquisition of knowledge through the observation of nature, and thus to an emphasis not only on the eye but on the mind's eye (66-7). For Jesús María Carrillo Castillo, Oviedo's visual epistemology is rooted in his attitude towards the natural world as the work of God, the greatest painter of all (*Naturaleza* 167). In this way, the observation of nature takes on a connection to the divine, but not in a symbolic sense; the understanding of God is rooted in the sensual appreciation of the physical world. Oviedo thus seeks to allow his reader to experience as fully as possible the physical nature of the creature he is describing. His drawings are intended to accomplish this purpose, although he often laments his inability to represent things as they really are. In addition, in his textual descriptions he often uses the technique of *ekphrasis*, a rhetorical device dating back to the Greeks and revived by humanists. *Ekphrasis* involves the depiction of a physical object through an enumeration of details aimed at creating an image of the object in the mind's eye of the reader (Carrillo Castillo *Naturaleza* 206). In Oviedo's work, this aesthetic empiricism blends

with and complements the more scientific empiricism involved in the utilitarian cataloguing of useful species. Oviedo's visual epistemology was also related to the humanist attitude towards language, which posited a close identity between words and the objects they referred to. Oviedo thus included the indigenous names for the creatures he describes, but not out of respect for Amerindian cultures; rather, the names, like the recourse to visual representation, reflect a sense of the insurmountable difference between the New World and the Old, and thus the inability of European language to convey American reality.<sup>39</sup>

A final discursive tradition evident in Oviedo is that of the marvelous and even monstrous. This thread has its origins in part in Pliny and in part in the tradition of travelogues and chivalric romances, with which Oviedo was familiar through his own novel, *Don Claribalte*. As Daston and Park note, "sixteenth and seventeenth century monsters were part of a coherent and long lived cluster of wonders, persisting from antiquity through at least the Enlightenment" (10). Just as Las Casas's miraculous creatures were in fact real animals described in terms that created an aura of the miraculous, the majority of Oviedo's monsters were real plants and animals described in terms which link them to the discourse of the marvelous and monstrous; in a few cases, however, the creatures seemed to cross the line into the realm of the fantastic. As noted in the Introduction, perhaps the most central feature of the marvelous or the monstrous was their liminality, their transgression of categories. As Daston and Park put it, "to register wonder was to register a breached boundary, a classification subverted" (14). In his introduction to an anthology of studies on monsters, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points to the

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of how Oviedo's use of names reflects his sense of the ineffability of American nature, see Carrillo Castillo, "Naming Difference."

“ontological liminality,” or “the refusal to participate in the ‘classificatory order of things’” as a defining characteristic of the creatures (6). Sexual liminality was also a common theme. In his study of tropes of sexuality and indigenous third-gender subjects in colonial texts, Michael Horswell notes how in the early modern period, hermaphrodites were perceived as threatening because they transgressed the divide between male and female. He cites an emblem (illustration accompanied by moralizing text) produced by the same Covarrubias Orozco who authored the *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, showing an image of a hermaphrodite. The text below states, in part, “I am man, I am woman I am third,” and later, “I am a terror for those who believe me to be a horrendous and rare monster” (63). The image’s monstrosity lay precisely in its liminality, its refusal to conform to what was considered an absolute dichotomy.

Liminality could be threatening because violations of categories were in effect violations of nature, and suggestions of monstrosity thus had implications for American nature as a whole, including the Amerindians. While Oviedo did not espouse the Aristotelian environmental determinism which forms the basis of Las Casas’s argument, the belief that the character of human beings was a product of their environment was virtually universal in the sixteenth century. Oviedo believed that the principles governing nature were the same in the Old World and the New, but that environmental factors caused them to be expressed in different ways, producing different creatures. An environment which could produce aberrant flora and fauna could thus also produce human beings with a monstrous aspect, a suggestion which tacitly offered support for arguments justifying their enslavement.

The various aspects of Oviedo's thinking blend in various ways in his descriptions of plants and animals. His humanist delight in the particular, tinged perhaps with a touch of the marvelous, finds expression in his sheer delight in the newness of American nature and the seemingly endless variety around him. Cocks crow at different times of the night than in Europe (I:169; bk.6, ch. 10); cats mate without yowling as they do in Spain and mate all year long, rather than just in the spring (I:170; bk.6, ch. 10); and even the dogs don't bark (II:30; ch. 5, bk. 12). After describing the variety in the coats of the dogs, commenting on the Indians' customs with respect to eating them, lamenting the fact that the Spaniards had eaten up all of them on the island of Hispaniola, and expressing dismay over having inadvertently eaten one himself, Oviedo offers the following thoughts:

Mas aquestas diversidades e otras hace Natura en diversos animales e climas; e como dijo un poeta moderno que yo conocí en Italia...“per tropo variar, natura e bella.” Por tal variar es hermosa la natura. Así que, en diversas regiones, diferenciadas y extrañas cosas se hallan e se producen en un genero mismo de animales. (II: 31; bk.12, ch. 5)

Oviedo frequently shows his empirical bent through engaging in experiments; here, in order to determine whether the lack of a voice was due to the dogs' innate nature or to environmental factors, Oviedo brings one from Nicaragua to Panama to see if it will gain a voice. When it does not, he plans to bring it to Spain, since the greater distance involved might be significant. Unfortunately, someone steals the dog from him, which he regrets not only for the sake of his experiment but because it was a creature “el cual yo había criado y era muy doméstico” (II: 31; bk.12, ch. 5).

Oviedo's wonder at the particular extends even to the most insignificant of creatures. In the *proemio* to his chapter on insects, he comments on a mosquito:

y maravillarse mucho cómo en tan pequeña cosa puede haber alguna razón o potencia; e cuán inextricable o no comprensible es la perfición de los tales, porque dice que ¿dónde pudo colocar la Natura tanto sentido en el mosquito, dicho *zanzal* (que es el que canta), puesto que hay otros menores? ¿Dónde les puso la vista; dónde el gusto; dónde el olor; dónde de engendró tan terrible voz en comparación con tan pequeño cuerpo? ¿Con que subtilidad le pegó las alas e le hizo aquellas luengas piernas, y el vientre ayuno y deseoso de sangre humana, o con que artificio le aguzó el aguja, e aunque aquella es tan sutil que no se vee, es capaz para horadar la piel, e acanalada para chupar la sangre? (II: 75; bk. 15, *proemio*)

As he frequently does, Oviedo goes on to praise God as the artist responsible for the marvelous creature. But Oviedo's God functions differently than does that of Las Casas. Here, God's work does not have a symbolic meaning which can be ascertained; its significance lies simply in its intricacy and beauty. God, operating through the personified *Natura*, creates infinite variety, and the role of human beings is simply to appreciate God's handiwork, to understand how it is constructed and how it operates, rather than to try to read its hidden meaning. The sense of divine purpose and order, so dominant in Las Casas, is not in evidence here. It is the individual creatures, and not their relationship to the whole, which matter most to Oviedo.

Oviedo's frequent use of *ekphrasis* reflects his efforts to both perceive fully and convey to his readers the full wonder of divine artistry, as well as the impossibility of conveying in Spanish words the new and different reality of the Americas. In one of

many examples, He describes the giant ceiba trees at length, beginning his discussion with a lengthy discourse on big trees in general, referring both to his own experience and to Pliny. He then goes on to describe a particular tree:

Pasando con la gente que conmigo iba por una sierra muy alta y muy llena de árboles, en lo alto dello, topamos un árbol, entre los otros, que tenía tres pies o raíces o partes dél en triángulo, a manera de trébedes, e dejaba entre cada uno destos tres pies, abierto, más espacio que veinte pies, e tan ancha e alta cada lumbré destas, que una muy ancha carreta y envarada (de la manera que las usan en el reino de Toledo al tiempo que cogen el pan) cupiera muy holgadamente por cualquiera de todas tres lumbres o espacio que quedaba de pie a pie. Y en lo alto de tierra, más espacio que la altura de una lanza de armas, se juntaban todos tres palos o pies, e de allí arriba eran uno sólo, o un árbol o tronco, sin división alguna, el cual subía muy más alto, en una pieza sola, antes que desparciese ramas, que no es la torre de Sanct Román de Toledo (I: 290; bk. 9, ch. 11).

Oviedo describes the tree in such a manner that it is possible to visualize it. Like Las Casas, he compares it to familiar Spanish objects, but here his purpose is not to make the tree itself seem familiar, but rather to allow readers to form an image in their minds. The tripartite base of the tree is like a tripod, and between each of the parts of the tripod, a broad and heavily-laden cart could fit. Despite the fact that he also gives a measurement, the graphic description gives a much more vivid idea of the size, as does the comparison with a tower to indicate the height at which the branches separate from the trunk.

Oviedo then demonstrates his proclivity for first-hand empirical experience by climbing the tree; he reports that “era cosa de maravilla ver la mucha tierra que desde allí

se parecía hacia la parte de la provincia de Abraime” (I:290; bk. 9, ch. 11). He notes that there are two genera of the trees, one which loses its leaves and one which does not, and then goes on to describe in detail the soft wood of the tree, its seed pods, its fruit, and the cottony substance lining the pods, commenting that when the pods open to release the seeds, “con el primero viento, váse la lana (que ninguna otra cosa tiene esta fructa dentro de sí), y parece que ha nevado por todo aquello que la lana ha alcanzado a cubrir la tierra” (I:291; bk. 9, ch. 11). He concludes with an ethnographic note, explaining that the Indians of Nicaragua would plant two, three or four of the trees in the plazas where they held their markets, which was sufficient to give shade to one or two thousand people, graphically (and probably with some exaggeration) expressing the enormity of the trees. Las Casas also writes about ceibas, but typically, uses many fewer words. In a one-paragraph description laden with superlatives, he stresses the trees’ beauty and incommensurate size. His concern lies more with providing yet another example of Hispaniola’s almost miraculous fertility than with the particular plant itself.

Oviedos *ekphrases* are often accompanied by further information, often of a practical nature, reflecting the underlying purpose of providing an inventory for the king. He might include a discussion of an animal’s habits or food; a description of its geographical range; whether it is edible, and if so how it tastes, how it is killed, and how it is prepared for food. Finally, he often digresses to tell interesting anecdotes involving the creature he is describing. He begins his account of the *churcha*, a type of opossum, with a physical description, including its snout, teeth, and the various hues and texture of its coat: in size it is similar to a rabbit, in color to a fox, and its ears and tail are like a mouse’s. He then goes on to describe how it kills and eats chickens, or sucks the blood



from their throats, noting that he himself lost fourteen chickens to one of the creatures in a single night. He then continues:

Mas la novedad e admiración que se puede notar de aqueste animal es que si al tiempo que anda en estos pasos de matar gallinas, cría sus hijos, los trae consigo metidos en el seno desta manera que aquí diré. Por medio de la barriga, al luengo, abre un seno que hace de su misma piel, de la manera que se haría juntando dos dobleces de una capa, haciendo una bolsa; e aquella hendedura, en que es un pliegue junto con el otro, aprieta tanto, que ninguno de los hijos se le cae, aunque corra o vaya saltando. (II:51)

In case the description is difficult to understand, he includes an illustration showing the animal's belly full of young (see figure. 6). He goes on to describe how the mother lets the babies out of her pouch, how they run around "imitando a la madre a hacer mal," how they return to her if someone comes in response to the cries of the chickens, and how the mother puts them back in her pouch and flees. There are no marsupials in Europe, and the sense of wonder Oviedo feels for this strange beast is palpable. In case the animal seems too strange to be believed, Oviedo opens his concluding paragraph by reminding readers, as he often does, of his status as eyewitness: "Yo he visto algunas destas churchas e todo lo que es dicho" (II:51; bk.12, ch. 27).



early descriptions. An especially interesting example is a 1499 account written by Vincent Yáñez Pinzón, a commander of one of Columbus's ships on his first voyage (Parrish cites a 1671 English translation):

Between these Trees he saw as strange a Monster, the foremost part resembling a Fox, the hinder a Monkey, the feet were like a Mans, with Ears like an Owl; under whose belly hung a great Bag, in which it carry'd the Young, which they drop not nor forsake till they can feed themselves. (485)

The opossum's monstrosity clearly comes in part from its chimerical nature, but also from its unusual means of caring for its young; returning offspring to its belly is close to returning them to the womb, thus violating the boundary separating prenatal from postnatal life. Peter Martyr paraphrased Pinzón's account in his *Decadas*, and the opossum (along with the cannibal) served in several graphic representations as a symbol of the Americas. Oviedo had read Martyr, and since the image of the monstrous opossum appears to have been widespread, it is likely that Oviedo was familiar with it. His account may have drawn some of its aura of monstrosity from the opossum's notoriety, but it is also possible that he judged some of its reputed monstrousness to be exaggerated, and deliberately refrained from describing it directly as liminal form.

In the case of the *soldadura* cactus, however, Oviedo is quite explicit in highlighting the plant's monstrous, liminal nature. Before dealing directly with the *soldadura*, he refers to it in his discussion of another, smaller cactus, the *tuna*.<sup>40</sup> Noting the *tuna*'s similarity to the *soldadura* (which, because of its large size and branching habit, he classifies as a tree), he speculates:

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<sup>40</sup> Oviedo uses the word "tuna" to refer to both the fruit and the plant (prickly pear or *Opuntia* species); today "tuna" refers only to the fruit.

Ni estoy fuera de opinión que estos mismos cardos [tunas] se convierten en aquellos árboles; y ya que aquesto no sea, porque en la verdad la fructa es muy diferenciada, mas, en la vista, dan a entender que hay algund debdo por la semejanza grande que se tienen en las hojas y en las espinas. (I: 265; bk. 8, ch. 28)

Like Las Casas in his discussions of the palm trees and marine mammals, Oviedo shows a sort of proto-Linnaean sense of generic distinctions: the plants could not be precisely the same if their fruits were different, but neither could they be entirely distinct since their morphological resemblances were so strong. Yet unlike Las Casas, who seems to see in these relationships an expression of order, Oviedo seems disturbed by his inability to resolve the question as a case of either identity or non-identity, settling on the rather vague “algund debdo” and leaving an uneasy sense of liminality. In his description of the *soldadura*, the plant’s monstrosity emerges clearly:

Hay en esta isla Española unos árboles que son comunes e hay muchos dellos en estas islas, e muchos en la Tierra Firme, los cuales son espinosos e tales, que, al parescer, ningún árbol o planta se puede ver de más salvaje; e segund la manera suya no me sé determinar si es árbol o planta. Hace unas ramas llenas de unas pencas anchas e disformes, o feas, de muy mal parescer e talle, e muy gruesas y espinosas; las cuales ramas fueron primeros hojas e pencas cada una dellas, e de aquella hoja o penca nascieron otras, e de las otras, otras. E destas pencas endurecidas, o en tanto que se endurecen, procrean otras, alogándose, e de las otras, otras, e de penca en penca se convierte en rama. Finalmente, es de tal

manera este árbol...tan al proprio como de otros árboles se entiende, por ser tan desemejante de todos, que otro nombre me paresce que no hay tan al propósito de su salvaje y extremos nunca oídos ni vistos en otras partes, sino monstruo del genero de los árboles. (II: 8; bk. 10, ch. 1)

Since Oviedo does not consider other cacti monsters, this plant's monstrosity appears to stem not from its spininess but from its transgression of classificatory norms. It grows like a cactus plant, but its branches harden and become woody, like those of a tree. Its leaves sprout from other leaves, rather than from stems or branches as leaves are supposed to do, and then they harden into branches, which "normal" leaves do not do. The transformation of a member of one category (leaf) into a member of another (branch) threatens to undermine the basis of the categories themselves, as does the instability between the categories "tree" and "plant/cactus." What was a stable distinction becomes unstable and thus menacing. The plant's indeterminate growth pattern is also somewhat sinister; plants normally grow from specific points on stems and branches and do not normally go on elongating indefinitely by sprouting one leaf from another.

The iguana (or, as Oviedo spells it to more closely imitate what he says is the indigenous pronunciation, i.u.ana) presents another classificatory dilemma.<sup>41</sup> Oviedo explains that in the first edition of his *Historia*, he included it in the chapter on fish, but now it seems more appropriate to him to include it with terrestrial animals,

non obstante que, segund la opinión de muchos, a entrambos libros se puede aplicar, porque muchos hombres hay que no saben determinar si este animal es

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<sup>41</sup> Even today, the precise classification and evolutionary history of lizards (including the iguana) remains somewhat murky, and in Oviedo's day and long after, it was a subject of contentious debate. Peter Martyr, for example, notes its affinities to the Nile crocodile, while López de Gómara calls it a snake, although he goes on to say it is like a lizard. For a full discussion of the iguana controversy, see Gerbi, *Nature*, 418-22.

carne o pescado, e como cosa neutral, la atribuyen al uno y al otro genero, así de los animales de la tierra como de los del agua, porque así se aplica al un elemento como al otro e en cada uno dellos se ejercita e continua su vida. (II:32; bk. 12, ch. 7)

In this case, it is the animals' habits, rather than its form, that cause the problem. Many Spaniards eat the meat of the creature on Fridays, on the grounds that it is really fish. While Oviedo says, rather mildly, that "yo le habría por carne," he adds that he does not say this to urge anyone to change their habits. Although he tends towards thinking it is a terrestrial animal, what emerges most clearly in his description is a sense of uncertainty and classificatory confusion. Las Casas, on the other hand, recognizes no ambiguity in the animal's classification, scoffing at those who claim it is fish: "Cómenla en viernes por pescado; criándose en la tierra y montes como los otros animales, no sé donde lo hallaron que fuese pescado" (I:56; bk. 1, ch. 10).

The *soldadura* cactus and the iguana are monstrous by virtue of their classificatory ambiguity, but Oviedo's descriptions of them do not venture into the realm of the fantastic. Some of his creatures however, are so liminal that they do cross the line between reality and imagination. These are for the most part included in a chapter entitled into and in his "Libro de depositos," a compendium which merits comment in itself. It is a sort of verbal cabinet of curiosities, in which Oviedo includes all of the anomalous items which do fit within his organizational scheme for the rest of his books. As he says in the *proemio* to the book, "como en secresto o armario, se colmará este libro depositario, o sexto, porque después, más fácilmente, en los libros siguientes e distintos pueda escrebir e acomular las otras materias que fueren muchas de una especie e natura, o

cuasi” (I:141; bk. 6). The very necessity of including such a book is thus a recognition of the inadequacy of the categories, inherited from Pliny, around which the rest of the book is organized.

One of the creatures in the “Libro de depositos” is the “monstruo de las aves,” a bird which hunts on land and fishes in the sea. Oviedo has not seen it, but it is well known on Hispaniola and he has heard it described by reputable men who have held it in their hands. Its left foot is like that of a duck, while its right foot is like the talon of a goshawk or falcon. It swoops down to grab fish from the sea with its talon, then carries them off to a tree to eat, or eats them while sitting on the water with its duck foot. The source of the bird’s monstrosity is obviously its transgression of the land hunter/sea hunter boundary, but in this case, its dual nature has been translated into physical features. Oviedo himself finds it rather difficult to believe; for this reason he puts it in his collection of curiosities, although he also includes it in his book on birds, indicating that he at least tentatively accepts its reality (I:195-6; bk. 6, ch. 36).

Another of the creatures included in the “libro de depositos” is the “gato monillo,” which Oviedo describes thus:

... en la tierra austral de Peru, se ha visto un gatico monillo, destos de las colas luenguas, del cual desde la mitad del cuerpo, con los brazos e cabeza, era todo aquello cubierto de pluma de color parda, e otras mixturas de color; e la mitad deste gato para atrás, todo él, e las piernas e cola, era cubierto de pelo rasito e llano de color bermejo, como leonardo claro. Este gato era muy mansito e doméstico, e poco mayor que un palmo (I: 223; bk. 6, ch. 52).

Later, he recounts how, sitting on the shoulders of its owner, or wherever it was tied,

... cantaba como un ruiseñor o un calandria, comenzando pasito a gorjear, e poco a poco, alzando las voces, mucho más que lo suelen hacer las aves que he dicho, e con tantas o más diferencias en su canto, que era oírle una muy dulce melodía e cosa de mucho placer e suavidad escucharle; e aquesto le turaba mucho espacio de tiempo, e a veces, como suele hacer los que cantan (I: 223; bk. 6, ch. 52).

If the mixture of fur and feathers did not make clear the hybrid nature of the creature, the fact that it sings like a bird puts its liminality beyond doubt. As is the case with the monstrous bird, Oviedo himself has never seen the creature, but the credentials of those who have seem to have convinced him of the reality of its existence. It originally belonged to an Inca princess, who gave it to her sister, who was married to a Spaniard (an “hombre conocido”), who begged her to give it to him so that he could send it to the Spanish Empress. This was done, but some of the servants of the man to whom the animal was entrusted carelessly stepped on the unfortunate creature, killing it. Despite the fact that such a hybrid might seem improbable, Oviedo cites the existence of the griffin, attested to by no less a source than biblical book of Leviticus, as evidence that such creatures are, indeed, not outside the realm of possibility. He deeply regrets not having seen it, and says that had he even had the chance to see it after its death, he would have given his cape for some salt to preserve it so others could see it. He then goes on to speculate as to the creature’s origin:

Algunos quieren decir que este animal debía nacer de adulterio o ayunatamiento de alguna ave con algún gato o gata, como pudiese engendrarse estotra especie que participase de ambos géneros. E yo soy de contrario parescer; y tengo opinión (consideradas algunas cosas que deben pensar de la desconveniencia del sexo e



instrumentos generativos que hay de las aves a tales gatos), que tal animal no nació de tal adulterio, sino que es especie sobre sí e natural, como lo son por sí los grifos; pues que el maestro de la Natura ha hecho otras mayores obras e maravillas, el cual sea loado e alabado para siempre jamás. (I: 222-223; bk. 6, ch. 52)

Here, Oviedo dispenses with the problem of category transgression by deciding that the *gato monillo* is not, in fact, a hybrid form but a member of a new and hitherto unknown category. The existence of a multiplicity of forms is an aspect of Lovejoy's Great Chain of Being, within which every variant must exist in order to guarantee the perfection of the whole (50-54). Thus, unlike the monstrous bird and cactus, the *gato monillo* is not sinister, but rather an expression of God's infinite creativity. It is liminal in that it straddles the divisions between birds, cats and monkeys, but rather than a hybrid, it is its own, distinct form. Oviedo's refusal to consider the *gato monillo* a hybrid also speaks to his scientific bent; rather than assuming that a mating between a bird and a cat took place through some inexplicable means, he contemplates the actual physical obstacles inherent in such an event, and deems it (in rather amusing terms) impossible.

Oviedo's positive attitude towards the creature is, however, far from consistent. The *gato monillo* reappears at various points in Oviedo's work, where it seems to undergo a transformation into an embodiment of the insurmountable difference and strangeness of America nature, and in the end, the creature's unstable ontology seems to overwhelm Oviedo's initial delight. In a long discussion of the infinite variety of New World trees, Oviedo offers the following description of the vast and mysterious forests,

where one cannot see the sky for the dense foliage or walk thorough for the tangled and thorny lianas:

Y lo que en esto se puede decir es un *mare magno* e oculto; porque, aunque se ve, lo más dello se inora, porque no se saben, como he dicho, los nombres de tales árboles, ni sus propiedades...que solamente los gatos monillos los entienden e saben las que son a su propósito. (I:278; bk. 9, *proemio*)

The *gato monillo* has thus become the quintessential denizen of the forest, uncomprehended and incomprehensible. Likewise, in another chapter, Oviedo says of a wild fruit, “Yo la he visto muchas veces esta fructa y la he probado; pero parésceme que es más para los gatos monillos y no para hombres” (II:254; bk. 8, ch. 8). By the time the creatures appear in the book dedicated to animals, they have metamorphosed into monkeys, pure and simple, but because Oviedo continues to use the name “gato monillo” (or even just “gato”), they retain something of the aura of liminality. Here, though, the creatures whose boundaries they threaten are human beings. Oviedo says that the “gatos” will imitate much of what they see human beings do, such as using a stone to crack nuts. One that he kept in his house used to throw stones at him when he sat down to eat, until he shared his food with it; others clap their hands to demand food. They are comical, but somewhat malevolent, parodies of humans. When the large, black ones see a group of Spaniards passing through the forest, they cry out as if calling one another to arms (“se apellidan”). They come together quickly, leaping through the branches and shouting, and then begin to break off branches and hurl them at the Spaniards below. Oviedo knows of one man who lost four or five teeth in such an attack. This is not simply a case of imitating humans, but rather of role reversal. The monkeys have become the hunters and

the humans the hunted. The use of verbs such as “apellidarse,” normally used to describe human activity, adds to the sense that these creatures have somehow taken on human characteristics. (II:50; bk. 12, ch. 24)

The idea of role reversal, and the confusion of human and animal, is quite frequent in Oviedo. In his “libro de depositos,” he devotes a chapter to Nicaraguan *brujos* who can take animal form, recounting the story of a child which disappeared from its mother’s arms and was later found devoured (I:218-220; bk. 6, ch. 50). He then proceeds, in the next chapter, to the story of an Amerindian man who had fled to the hills, where he lived and hunted with three trained pigs. One of these was trained to track wild pigs, while another was trained to attack; after the prey was wounded, the Indian moved in to kill it with a sharpened stick. The pigs and their master would then share their meal. When they had no meat and could not find fruit, the Indian would dig roots to feed his companions, and at night he slept with them. One day a group of Spaniards killed the pigs, not realizing they were anything other than wild pigs. The pigs’ distraught master, who spoke Spanish, explained to them, “Esos puercos me daban a mí la vida y me mantenían y yo a ellos; eran mis amigos e mi buena compañía,” and told the names he had given each one (I:221; bk. 6, ch. 51). Realizing that they had destroyed his livelihood, the Spaniards brought him to town, where his story became known. While Oviedo appears to have some sympathy for the plight of the Amerindian, he condemns his living arrangement. After quoting and translating an Italian poem, which laments the fact that human beings have forgotten the fact that “el hombre es dedicado a la razón, en diferencia de los animales brutos que son carescientes della,” Oviedo continues:

Ved, pues, si en estos animales se muestra esto claramente; pues seyendo los puercos para ser monteados, se convirtieron, con la costumbre, en ser monteros e hacer el oficio que no les competía, e el indio, siendo animal racional e humano hombre, se convertía en puerco, o hacía su vida bestial, de la forma que es dicho. (I: 222; bk. 6, ch. 51)

Since the story involves a specific individual, Oviedo does not try to use the story as evidence that Indians in general are less than rational. Rather, he suggests that there is something in the malleability and fluidity of categories in the New World which allows for, or even encourages, such an inversion of the natural order.

Another example of this type of category confusion is the “peje [pez] reverso.” Oviedo mentions this creature in the “Libro de depositos” as an example of the wondrous diversity of nature, because its scales run backwards, pointing towards the head (I: 194; bk. 6, ch. 34). But it is in the chapter on manatees where he describes it in detail. The Amerindians use the fish to hunt manatees and large fish, raising them and domesticating them from the time they are small, then releasing them, tied to a cord, to attack the prey. The “peche revés,” which is equipped with backward-pointing barbs in the roof of its mouth, latches on to the prey and does not let go; when the exhausted prey finally beaches itself, the Indians gently detach the “peje reverso” and butcher the prey. Before sending a fish off on its mission, “toma el indio en la mano este pescado reverso e halágalo con la otra, e dícele en su lengua que sea *manicato*, que quiere decir esforzado e de buen corazón, e que sea diligente, e otras palabras exhortatorias a esfuerzo, e que mire que ose aferrarse con el pescado mayor e mejor que allí viere” (II: 65; bk. 13, ch. 9). When the Indians want to separate one of the fish from the prey, “lo hacen con dulces

palabras e dándole muchas gracias de lo que ha hecho e trabajado” (II: 66; bk. 13, ch. 9).

Oviedo scoffs at the idea that the fish can understand:

Es tan liviana esta generación de aquestos indios, que tienen ellos creído por muy cierto que el peje reverso entiende muy bien el sermón humano e todas aquellas palabras quel indio le dijo animándole, antes que lo soltase, para que se aferrase con la tortuga o manatí, u otro pescado, e que también entiende las gracias que después le da por lo que ha hecho. Y esta inorancia viene de no entender ellos que aquello es propiedad de la Natura... (II:66; bk. 13, ch. 9)

Talking to fish is another example of the Indians’ failure to properly comprehend natural categories. Like the Indian with his pigs, they mistake non-rational beings for rational ones and thus demonstrate the degree to which their own rational capacity has degenerated. The fish is “reverso” ostensibly because of the form of its scales, but on a deeper level, it is backwards because it is a sign of the perversion of the natural order.

For Oviedo, then, the blurring and confusion of categories is emblematic of New World nature, whether it originates in the liminal forms of the natural world or in the Amerindians’ inability to distinguish between categories. In both cases, the lack of clear classificatory boundaries points to the radical difference of the natural world of the Americas from that of Europe, and the failure of New World nature to conform to European norms gives it a destabilizing and therefore somewhat threatening quality, despite the pleasure Oviedo clearly takes in its novelty. As we shall see in the following chapter, the same concern with liminality characterizes Oviedo’s depictions of New World food crops. Likewise, Las Casas’s portrayal of an benign American nature carries over into his representation of food and agriculture, where the bounteous fertility of

Hispaniola, the healthful nature of the Amerindians' food, and the degree of cultural development required to grow and prepare indigenous staple crops all make up an important part of his defense of the rationality of indigenous Americans.

## Chapter 4: Eating the Exotic

Alimentary practices are as central to cultural identity as language or religion. Like language, food provides a means of distinguishing between members of group and outsiders; those who eat what we do, like those who speak as we do, are civilized, while those who eat what we do not consider to be food are as alien as those who speak unintelligible tongues. And, like religion, food mediates between human beings and the natural and supernatural worlds. By ingesting a piece of food, an individual literally incorporates a bit of the cosmos into his or her own organism, an act which in certain ritual contexts may also signify communion with the divine. Scarcity or abundance of food may be read as a sign of divine favor or disfavor. In virtually every society, then, food and the act of eating accumulate multiple layers of meaning, forming an important part of the symbolic system whereby a culture defines itself and its “others.”<sup>42</sup> This symbolic dimension further complicated the tensions we have already seen in colonial era texts between empirical description, inherited discourse, and ideology, since here the object of description was not simply a part of the natural world but an element of a human culture.

Sixteenth-century European chroniclers of the New World wrote within a symbolic system which had evolved over millennia, and the mention of a certain type of food or eating habit might evoke any one of a number of complex webs of meaning. Food symbolism was rooted in many of the same discourses that governed attitudes towards flora and fauna in general, but the fact that food involved perhaps the most fundamental form of interaction between human beings and their environment added new dimensions.

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<sup>42</sup> For discussions of the symbolic dimensions of food in a variety of cultures, see Wilkins, Harvey, and Dobson, eds.; and Flandrin and Montanari, eds.

In the system of botanical taxonomy inherited from medieval times, food plants were arranged in a complex hierarchy, and the consumption of plants from different rungs on the ascending ladder had implications not only for the physical well-being of the consumer, but for his or her socioeconomic status and spiritual development. Another set of traditions, rooted in Christian monasticism as well as the works of classical authors such as Aristotle, advocated temperance and simplicity in food and drink, and viewed food primarily as a source of nourishment rather than as a source of sensual pleasure; this set of beliefs found practical expression in rituals of fasting and communion. Biblical accounts of divine magnanimity (manna in the desert, the multiplication of loaves and fishes) provided additional sets of associations. An abundance of food—and the absence of any need to work for it—characterized both the biblical garden of Eden and the Golden Age of classical mythology. Meanwhile, the East had become associated with exotic spices and medicinal plants, providing the basis for the expectation that such plants should be found in the Americas. But perhaps the most potent set of meanings of all was that associated with cannibalism. Herodotus and Pliny had populated many of the exotic margins of the world with cannibalistic races, and the *topos* continued to figure prominently in medieval travelogues. The image of cannibals roasting dismembered human body parts became almost synonymous with the New World, and the widespread belief that some Amerindians were supposed to have consumed human flesh grew quickly into the single most important proof of their barbarity and the principal justification for war against them.

The topic of food in general was complicated by the fact that the Amerindians had their own systems of meaning and ritual associated with food, and the clash between the



mutually unintelligible systems of meaning often resulted in violence. Serge Gruzinski describes one such incident, in which a group of Tainos buried Christian images in their fields and urinated on them in the belief that this would make their crops more abundant; the response of the Spaniards was to burn alive the perpetrators of what they saw as the desecration of sacred objects (12). Moreover, as Regina Harrison has shown, the very language used to talk about foods is deeply rooted in culture. In a study of Andean and Western perceptions of the potato, Harrison notes that modern Western taxonomies reflect an analytical system based on morphological distinctions (i.e. alternate versus opposite arrangement of leaves) rather than the function of plants in relation to human life. Andean classifications, in contrast, are based upon a complex network of characteristics related to agriculture and consumption, such as seed viability, storage quality, culinary preference, and suitability for diverse altitudinal fields, among many other factors. Failure to understand the bases of Andean taxonomy has led to a lack of understanding on the part of many anthropologists, leading them to dismiss what is in fact a highly sophisticated system as “prelogical” or related to “magical belief systems” (187-88). While Harrison is speaking here about a more recent case of cultural incommensurability, the classificatory systems of sixteenth century Europe were equally ill-equipped for comprehending Amerindian alimentary practices.

For Las Casas, food was a critical link in the chain of causality through which he sought to prove the Amerindians capacity for self governance, since it was one of the most important ways the environment acted upon the bodies and souls of human beings. He continued through his accounts of New World food to build his paradisiacal image of Hispaniola, drawing heavily upon biblical images of fertility and plenty, as well as

temperance and moderation. Oviedo, on the other hand, often revels in the sensual delight of food, and edible items are the focus of some of his most enthusiastic accounts. At the same time, the classificatory instability evident in his treatment of plants and animals in general continue, becoming more threatening in the context of food. Both authors were concerned with the fraught theme of cannibalism. While not denying its existence outright, Las Casas tries to minimize its importance by framing it in ritual contexts or explaining it as an aberration with limited scope. Oviedo, on the other hand, often dwells upon the gruesome details, suggesting that the Amerindians consumed human flesh in part out of an enjoyment for its taste.

The two authors' descriptions of *pan cazabi*, the staple food of the indigenous people of Hispaniola, offer a fruitful starting point. The chapters covering the topic in Las Casas's *Apologética* and Oviedo's *Historia general* are among those where the two works most closely parallel each other in structure, facilitating comparison (Oviedo I: 330-233; bk. 7, ch. 2; Las Casas I:58-66; bk 1, chs. 10 and 11). At first glance, the two accounts appear to have much in common. Only minor differences occur in the two writers' accounts of the planting and harvesting of the *yuca* plant and the process for making it into bread. Both describe how cuttings from the plants are inserted in mounds of earth, and how they take root and grow. When the roots are harvested, according to Las Casas, they are first grated and then placed in a sort of woven sleeve, which is hung from a tree; the other end is then attached to a stick, which is used like a lever to stretch the sleeve and press out the poisonous juice from the ground *yuca* root. The resulting flour-like substance is sieved, and then spread on a clay griddle over a fire; after fifteen minutes or so it is flipped, like a Spanish egg tortilla. It is then allowed to toast in the sun,

and is boiled briefly to soften it before eating (*Apologética* I:63-5; bk. 1 ch. 11). Oviedo's account mentions all of the same steps, with the exception of the sieving process.

Upon a closer reading of the texts, however, contrasts begin to emerge. While the two authors concur in praising *pan cazabi*, Oviedo states simply that “este pan es bueno y de buen mantenimiento, e se sostiene en la mar” (I:232; bk. 7, ch. 2) whereas Las Casas declares “Este es el mejor pan que creo yo haber en el mundo después del de trigo, porque es muy sano y muy fácil de hacer, y pocas personas y en pocos días pueden aparejar cantidad para provisión de mucha gente, y sostienese mucho tiempo” (I:58; bk. 1, ch. 10). Likewise, although both extol the beauty of the *yuca* fields, Oviedo merely says that “paresce muy bien en el campo, desde que está criada y bien curada e limpia la heredad en que está,” (I:230; bk. 7, ch. 2) whereas Las Casas says that “es tan hermosa de ver de lejos y de cerca, que no nuestras viñas por mayo ni junio, ni otra alguna huerta ni labranza puede parecer más hermosa, mayormente cuando la labranza es grande que tiene veinte o treinta mil montones de luengo juntos y cinco o diez mil de ancho” (I:59; bk. 1, ch. 10). With respect to the *yuca* shoots which are planted in the soil, Oviedo characterizes them as “unas varas ñudosas” (I:230, bk. 7, ch. 2) and then continues with a detailed and essentially objective description of their leaves; Las Casas, on the other hand, describes them as “como los sarmientos de las vides cuando están tiernas y verdes con sus yemas, puesto que muy más gruesas y aún más hermosas y más verdes oscuras los sarmientos que digo de nuestras viñas” (I:59, bk.1, ch.10). In each of these examples, what is significant is not simply the fact that Las Casas is more effusive than Oviedo in his praise, but the way in which Las Casas consistently represents the indigenous crop as being like a European crop, or even better. The beauty of the *yuca* fields, for Las Casas,

has nothing of the exotic; it differs from the beauty of European vineyards only in its magnitude, not in its essence. Oviedo includes a few comparisons with Spanish crops, but they are far less frequent and more prosaic.

It is also significant that both writers describe the *yuca* fields as aestheticized landscapes, devoid of human presence. As Raymond Williams notes, “A working country is hardly ever a landscape. The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation” (120). Yet the reasons for this perspective are quite different in the case of each author. For Oviedo, the absence of the indigenous owners of the fields erases what might be seen as a challenge to the legitimacy of Spanish ownership of the land; as Williams explains, the aestheticizing gaze takes possession of its object (126). For Las Casas, on the other hand, the invisibility of human labor is part of a vision of America as a site of prelapsarian innocence. Labor was not a necessity in Eden or the classical Golden Age, and a description of Indian laborers in the fields would have detracted from the paradisiacal quality of the verdant fields of Hispaniola.

The contrasts between Las Casas’s and Oviedo’s perspectives become even clearer in light of the aspects of *pan cazabi* each author chooses to accentuate. Oviedo is obviously fascinated by the idea that the unprocessed *yuca* is deadly poison, and he devotes a number of paragraphs to the topic, beginning by explaining in the strongest possible terms that the juice extracted from the *yuca* “es tan pésimo veneno, que con un sólo y pequeño trago matara un elefante o cualquier otro animal o hombre viviente (I:232, bk. 7, ch. 2). He describes various ways in which the juice may be used after further processing, and ends with a paragraph indignantly recounting how the Amerindians use the unprocessed juice to commit mass suicide in order to avoid work:

E así, por no trabajar, como consejados por su cemí (o diablo), o por lo que se les antojaba morir, por medio de esta yuca concluían sus días. Acaesció unas veces convidarse muchos juntos a se matar, por no trabajar ni servir, e cincuenta en cincuenta, e más e menos, juntos, se mataban con tragos deste zumo. (I:233, bk. 7, ch.2)

While none of this negates Oviedo's overall positive opinion of *pan cazabi*--he has eaten and enjoyed the bread himself, and he clearly admires the Amerindians' ingenuity in rendering the toxic root edible--the repeated and graphic references to poison suggest something sinister, even unnatural. Toxic plants are generally not considered fit for human consumption, and the fact that the indigenous people eat what is by nature not food is a measure of their own exotic nature.

Las Casas, in contrast, devotes only a short paragraph near the end of his chapter to the *yuca* root's toxicity, and mentions indigenous suicides only as tragic evidence of the Amerindians' desperation. What interests him far more is the plant's capacity to feed large numbers of people with very little effort. He carries out a series of calculations to support his contention that twenty people working six hours a day for one month could produce enough *pan cazabi* to feed three hundred people for two years (I:65, bk. 1, ch. 11). It is, moreover, so easy to eat that "pueden comer suavemente mozos y viejos sin dientes, harto mejor, al menos los viejos, que el pan de trigo" (I:64, bk. 1, ch. 11). A simple food that can provide abundantly for a multitude of people of all ages recalls Biblical accounts of manna in the desert, and the religious overtones are strengthened by the fact that Las Casas repeatedly compares *pan cazabi* to *obleas*, the thin white wafers often used in communion. (Oviedo also comments on the similarity between *pan cazabi*

and *obleas*, but since the religious context is lacking, his comparison serves as a simple descriptive device with no symbolic connotations.) The paradisiacal references evident in Las Casas's account serve not only to exalt indigenous culture but to de-exoticize it; if the Amerindians' staple food is like communion wafers, they cannot be completely "other".

The theme of prolific abundance, so evident in Las Casas's discussion of *pan cazabi*, recurs consistently throughout the *Apologética*. In a chapter on one particularly fertile region of the island of Hispaniola, for example, Las Casas maintains that *yuca* roots, which in other parts grow to the thickness of an arm or a leg, here reach such a size that even when they are cut in half the Amerindians must carry them on their backs, and carrots sown there would surely grow to be as thick as a man's waist (I:23; bk. 1, ch. 3). In another province, Spanish pigs which have gone wild grow so huge that an Amerindian carrying just a quarter of one of them staggers under the weight of his load (I:23; bk. 1, ch. 3). Even the huge size of the fireflies (which I have discussed more fully in Chapter 3) reflects an almost magical fertility (I:16; bk. 1, ch. 2). Human beings were unusually fertile as well; Las Casas notes that the women often had four or five children, and not long ago a woman had given birth to quintuplets (I:35 184-5).

Julio Ortega has identified a "discourse of abundance" which appears in a number of early American texts, beginning with Columbus (edited, of course, by Las Casas) and reaching its peak in the work of the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, where it serves as a metaphor for the productive potential of *mestizaje*, or the mixing of the indigenous and Spanish races (76-78). The same hope for future racial harmony is also a factor in Las Casas's own discourse of abundance, but his more immediate concern lies in preventing

the extinction of the Amerindians by proving that they are not natural slaves. The prodigious fertility of the New World forms an essential part of Las Casas's central trope of the Earthly Paradise. Abundance was a key characteristic in both of the main strands that made up the Earthly Paradise image. Classical depictions of the Golden Age and the *locus amoenus* celebrated the pleasure derived from the consumption of bountiful and even excessive quantities of food (Curtius 183), and plentiful fruits and other foods, freely available without labor, made up a defining feature of biblical Eden. Abundance was also associated in the Bible with miracles, as in the famous scene in which Christ's disciples feed five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread (Mark 6:41), as well with signs of God's favor as, for example, in the book of Numbers, where scouts sent by Moses to investigate the promised land of Canaan return with a bunch of grapes so large they must be carried between two poles (13:23); this last scene bears a clear resemblance to Las Casas's prodigious roots and livestock.

But images of plenty are tempered in Las Casas with an emphasis on moderation and sobriety. While the Amerindians enjoyed an abundance of food before the arrival of the Spaniards, their temperance in its consumption was an important factor in Las Casas's proof of their rationality. After having established his central image of the Earthly Paradise, Las Casas proceeds to build his case for the perfection of the island and its inhabitants. First, he establishes that the island is favored by the universal cause for a healthful climate: its location places it in the proper relationship to the sky and heavenly bodies, causing neither excessive heat nor extreme cold (I:83; bk. 1, ch. 17). He then proceeds to demonstrate, using the information he has already provided in the chapters describing Hispaniola, the inapplicability to the island of five particular conditions which

could negate the positive effects of the island's positive celestial alignment and make it uninhabitable. First, the island is not underwater or swampy; second, it is not infertile or unfruitful; third, it is not inhabited by snakes or dangerous animals (here Las Casas does not mention the doubts he has as to this topic, which I noted in Chapter 3); fourth, it was not positioned with respect to mountains in a way that would cause excessive heat or cold; and finally, the air was neither too "sótil" (i.e. thin, as in high mountains) nor too "grueso" (i.e. thick and humid, as in swamps) (I:84; bk.1, ch. 17). He concludes the first book of his work by generalizing his assessments of Hispaniola, comparing the island favorably to England, Sicily, and Crete, extending his characterization of the island to include the entire Western hemisphere, and arguing that "these Indies" are in fact part of Asia (I:95-112; bk. 1, ch. 20-22).

In the following chapters, he goes on to apply to the people of Hispaniola (and thus, since he has just extended his characterization, to the Amerindians in general) the six essential causes enabling the full development of rational capacity ("plenitud de entendimiento") (I:115; bk.1, ch. 23):

... éstas son, la influencia del cielo, la una; la disposición y calidad de la región y de la tierra que alcanzan, la otra; la compostura de los miembros y órganos de los sentidos, la tercera; la clemencia y suavidad de los tiempos, la cuarta; la edad de los padres, la quinta, y también ayuda la bondad y sanidad de los mantenimientos, que es la sexta. (I:116; bk.1, ch. 23)

The third cause is further subdivided into two natural causes (disposition of organs and members, especially the head; and a good complexion or balance between the four humors), and four accidental causes (sobriety and temperance in food and drink,



abstinence from vice, moderation in care for temporal things, and avoidance of passions such as rage, sadness, or pain) (I:132; bk.1, ch. 24). Again, Las Casas elaborates at length on each cause; the sixth essential cause and the fourth particular cause, being food-related, concern us here. Food affects the balance between the four humors in the body. The predominance of heavy, cold humors leads to a preponderance of heavy spirits in the body and especially the cerebrum, impeding rational functioning; conversely, the dominance of light, warm humors favors subtle, airy spirits which allow reason to function freely (I:164-168; bk. 2 ch. 32). The wrong food, or an excess of food, likewise favors heavy spirits, while healthy food and drink consumed in moderation lighten the spirits. Taking the people of Hispaniola as his example, Las Casas argues that indigenous Americans are so sober and abstinent in their eating and drinking that the friars who have come to know their culture compare their alimentary habits to those of the desert fathers (I:182; bk.2, ch. 35).

Las Casas deemed the indigenous diet of Hispaniola to be a healthy one (I:182-185, bk. 1, ch. 35), but here he faced a challenge: the Amerindians' staple food, *pan cazabi*, was derived from a tuber, and root crops were considered in the Middle Ages and Renaissance to be ignoble foods. For one thing, as Harrison has noted, root crops were regarded as aphrodisiacs according to the Doctrine of Signatures, the principle of sympathetic magic underlying medieval herbals, whereby the properties of a plant were suggested by its external form; in the case of tubers, the lumpy, fleshy form of the crops suggested sexual organs. Moreover, plants which were not grown from seed were suspect (178), and, like potatoes, the *yuca* roots were propagated vegetatively. As Allen J. Grieco has explained in his study of pre-Linnaean botany, plants were arranged in a hierarchy,

which was linked to human social stratification. Albertus Magnus had ranked plants according to a scheme which placed trees at the highest level, since they were closest to the sky, and plants whose leaves emerged directly from the ground rather than from a stem at the bottom. Physicians and dieticians adapted this scheme to food, placing tree fruits at the top and root crops on the second to lowest rung due to their proximity to the earth (the lowest being “acrid” foods such as onions and garlic). Plants were believed to grow through an attraction exercised by the sky, which drew them upwards. Terrestrial elements traveled up through them, and were “digested” along the way; the taller the plant, the better digested were the earthly elements. Lower foods, being earthier, were associated with lower classes of people. Las Casas acknowledges that the staple foods of the Hispaniola “comúnmente no sean favorables al entendimiento, de sí mismos, por ser raíces y legumbres y otras cosas muy terrestres, o que tienen mucho de terrestidad (I:206; bk 2, ch. 39), but the Amerindians compensate for the unfavorable nature of their food by the moderation with which they consume it. Moreover, they generally season their food with *axí* (chile), a very healthy food which is neither too cold nor too hot, and tempers the humidity and earthiness of the roots (I:182; bk.2, ch. 35).

If, for Las Casas, the spiritual and psychological effects of food take precedence over its taste, for Oviedo aesthetic enjoyment is perhaps the most salient aspect of food. He includes an abundance of descriptions of American foods, most of which he has tasted with great gusto; as Antonello Gerbi says in a discussion of Oviedo’s love for food, “To the insatiable naturalist each fruit that he sinks his teeth into seems to be the best he has ever tasted” (418). Although it has already been much studied, Oviedo’s chapter on the pineapple is worth revisiting here. It is perhaps, out of the many instances of *ekphrasis* in

the *Historia general*, the most thorough and exuberant example of Oviedo's use of the technique. As Jesús María Carrillo Castillo notes, *ekphrasis* has as its aim "el elogio y exaltación de las virtudes de algo," which not only reproduces in detail its subject but also expresses "la idea de singularidad y rareza" (206-7). Oviedo's description of the pineapple is an extended encomium to the fruit, glorifying not only its sensual delights but also its uniqueness and difference, attempting not only to describe it visually but to convey its effects on the other senses as well. The description continues for nearly four pages in the most recent published edition, but a short segment will suffice to convey the tone:

Y si, por falta de colores y del dibujo, yo no bastare a dar a entender lo que querría saber decir, dese la culpa a mi juicio, en el cual, a mis ojos, es la más hermosa fructa de todas las fructas que he visto, y la mejor huele y la mejor sabor tiene; y en su grandeza y color, que es verde, alumbrado o matizado de un color amarillo muy subido, y cuanto más se va madurando más participa del jalde y va perdiendo de lo verde, y así se va aumentando el color de los más perfetos melocotones, que participan asaz del membrillo...y el gusto es mejor que los melocotones y más zumoso. (I:240; bk. 7, ch.14)

What emerges clearly here is not only the beauty of the fruit, but also its ineffability; as Meyers (199-203), Stephanie Merrim<sup>43</sup> (172-3), and José Rabasa (*Inventing* 141-143) have all noted, Oviedo's struggle to find the words to describe the *piña* is evidence of his recognition of the inadequacy of Spanish words to describe New World realities. Oviedo begins the chapter by acknowledging the impossibility of categorizing the fruit: "Hay en

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<sup>43</sup> Merrim writes of Oviedo's account of the pineapple in the *Sumario* rather than the *Historia general*, but the two descriptions are similar enough that the two descriptions apply to both.

esta isla Española unos cardos, que cada uno dellos lleva una piña (o mejor diciendo alcarchofa), puesto que, porque paresce piña, las llaman los cristianos piñas, sin lo ser” (I:239; bk.7, ch. 14). Throughout the chapter, as Rabasa notes, “Oviedo’s discourse on pineapples moves ‘back and forth’ from *piña* to *alcarchofa* without finding a final taxonomical anchoring point” (142); such classificatory instability, combined with a wealth of sensual detail, make of the pineapple “an allegory of the invention of the exotic as America” (141). In an effort to represent the pineapple more clearly, Oviedo includes a drawing (see figure 7), but instead of clarifying, the drawing adds to the lexical confusion.



Figure 7. Oviedo’s pineapple.

Source: Kathleen Myers, *Fernández de Oviedo’s Chronicle of America* 208.

Unlike pinecones, which have overlapping, woody scales, pineapple skins have scales that are fleshy and about one another rather than overlapping. In his written description contrasting the pinecone and the pineapple, Oviedo is quite accurate, noting first that the former are “de madera, o cuasi,” and then explaining that unlike those of a pinecone, the scales of a pineapple “no se abren ni se dividen por aquellas junturas de las escamas, como las de las piñones” (I:241; bk. 7, ch. 14). But the scales of the fruit in his illustration are not those of a pineapple; instead, they are woody and overlapping, like those of a pinecone! The drawing looks like nothing so much as a large pinecone sitting atop a pineapple plant with a tuft of pineapple leaves on top. The notion of “piña” has penetrated Oviedo’s consciousness to such a degree that that even as he argues that a pineapple is not a pinecone, he draws it as if it were one. The impossibility of clearly representing the fruit, even in a drawing, adds to the sense that it is so exotic that it cannot be defined.

Like the iguana and the tree cactus, the pineapple is another example of Oviedo’s, liminal forms. But liminality takes on an added dimension in relation to food. As Mary Douglas has observed in her study of food taboos, food creatures which transgress established categories are perceived as dangerous (Ch.3; see also Soler 46-54). In the biblical book of Leviticus, Douglas explains, “cloven hoofed cud-chewing ungulates” are considered the ideal food for pastoralists. Animals such as the hare and hyrax (rock badger) are forbidden as food because while they appear to be ruminants, they are not cloven hoofed. Likewise, the pig and the camel, also prohibited, are cloven-hoofed but not ruminant (54-5). Here it is worth revisiting the iguana which (as noted in Chapter 3 above) slipped back and forth across the boundary separating land animal from water

animal to such extent that many Spaniards ate it on Fridays as a fish. Habitat provides the basis for another set of taboos in Douglas's analysis. In the Bible, each element is home to its own class of life: two-legged, winged birds fly in the sky; finned scaly fish swim in the water; and four-legged animals hop, walk or jump on the earth; "those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world" (55). With its scales and a row of dorsal spines which resemble a fin, the iguana should properly swim in the water. But in fact, it walks on four legs on land and spends most of its time in trees, often near but not in the water. Oviedo is not an ancient Hebrew and he does not suggest that the iguana or the pineapple should be considered taboo as foods; nonetheless, his emphasis on their liminality—like that of *pan cazabi*, which through the toxicity of the *yuca* root transgresses the boundaries between food and not-food—suggests that there is something vaguely disturbing about them. Like so many other New World species, the pineapple has a "monstrous" aspect by virtue of its liminality, despite the admiration Oviedo feels for it.

In some cases, the boundary straddled by a food which Oviedo describes is that separating the edible from the inedible. Oviedo did not hesitate to taste unfamiliar foods when the opportunity arose, and his curiosity sometimes led to unexpected consequences. After describing the *tuna* cactus, Oviedo narrates the amusing tale of his first experience with the *tuna* fruits. As discussed in Chapter 3, Oviedo noted the morphological similarities between the *tuna* plants and the monstrous *soldadura* cactus; the resemblance was strong enough that it seemed to suggest some sort of kinship between the two plants, and even the possibility that *tunas* were immature *soldaduras*. By virtue of its association with the monstrous plant, then, the *tuna* was already slightly suspect. But the first time

Oviedo ate *tunas*, he says, “en verdad yo diera cuanto tenía por hallarme donde pudiera aconsejar y confesar mis culpas, e comunicar espiritual e temporalmente lo que convenía a la salud de mi ánima e de mi persona e inquerir el remedio para la vida (I:266; bk. 8, ch. 28). After eating tunas with a group of companions who had eaten the fruit on previous occasions and were familiar with its effects, he went off to relieve himself,

e oriné una gran cantidad de verdadera sangre (a lo que a mí me parecía), y aún no osé verter tanta cuanta pudiera o me pedía la necesidad, pensando que me podría acabar la vida de aquella manera; porque sin dubda creí que tenía todas las venas del cuerpo rompidas, e que se me había ido la sangre toda a la vejiga, como hombre sin experiencia dela fructa, e que tan poco alcanzaba a entender la compusición e orden de las venas, ni la propiedad de las tunas que había comido.

(I:266; bk. 8, ch. 28)

One of his friends finally enlightens him concerning the *tunas*’ propensity for producing a bright red color in the urine of those who ate them, but not before teasing him and increasing his fear by telling him how pale he looked. He concludes his story by expressing his relief at not having died for gluttony, adding that and saying that since that experience, he has many times refrained from eating what he saw others eat, even when he was greatly in need. The story can be read, of course, simply as a comical anecdote, or as a testament to the frightening misunderstandings ignorance can give rise to. At the same time, however, it also suggests that there is something exotic and potentially sinister in the *tunas*. While their harmful effects are only apparent and not real, something which produces such an intense and fearsome reaction in the body cannot be entirely wholesome; its status as food or not food is thus somewhat open to question.

The *tuna*, despite its liminality, is not evil. Tobacco, however, is clearly linked to the Devil. Although it is not a food, I include it here since it is a consumable product of the natural world. Jorge Cañizares Esguerra includes a discussion of tobacco in a chapter on demonology and the natural world (*Puritan* ch. 4). Most of the other examples he cites come from a slightly later period (late sixteenth or seventeenth century), when a belief that the Devil inhabited American nature itself became widespread among Europeans in the New World. Oviedo generally does not see demons in American nature, and Cañizares Esguerra does not mention him often in this connection. In the case of tobacco, however, Oviedo is noted as an early example of the association between the Devil and the herb (128).

Oviedo discusses tobacco in two sections. In the first of these, he describes appearance of the plant, how it is grown and cured, and the manner in which it was consumed. (I:116-117; bk 5, ch. 2) Here he seems to see tobacco use as contemptible, but the demonic element has not yet emerged. He describes how *caciques* fall unconscious on the ground and must then be lifted into their hammocks by their wives, and he associates tobacco use with drunkenness, commenting with disgust that “yo no puedo pensar qué placer se saca de tal acto, si no es la gula de beber, que primero hacen que tomen el humo o tabaco” (I: 116; bk 5, ch. 2). Tobacco use is thus associated with sinful behavior, but not yet diabolism. In the later section, however, in the context of a discussion of the rites of the Amerindians of Venezuela, the demonic connection becomes evident. Oviedo begins his discussion by saying that these people fear and obey the Devil, whom they portray on their jewelry and in wood carvings on their houses and with whom their *boratios*, or priests, communicate regularly. In order to learn the answers to important



questions—whether it will rain, whether the year will be a dry one, whether or not to make war—the *boratio* shuts himself up in a hut filled with tobacco smoke, which renders him senseless; he remains in the hut for up to three days or even more, and when he emerges, he tells the people what the Devil has said in answer to their questions (III:32; bk, 25, ch.9). It is important to note here that Oviedo does not suggest that the Devil resides within the plant itself; rather, the intoxication produced by tobacco smoke allows the Amerindians to communicate with the Devil. Unlike later writers, who often saw New World nature as demonic, Oviedo simply saw it as subversive. The aberrant, liminal quality of American nature might undermine reason and certainty, thus opening human beings (Spaniards as well as Amerindians) to demonic influence, but it was not, in itself, demonic. Nonetheless, since it is explicitly associated with the Devil, tobacco moves one step closer to the diabolism which characterized later texts.

Having looked at the general framework of Oviedo's and Las Casas's representations of food, we may now turn briefly to that topic which so obsessed early European writers on the Americas, the consumption of human flesh. Although my focus on the natural world has generally led me to exclude the ethnographic portions of Las Casas's and Oviedo's works, I make an exception in the case of cannibalism in light of the fact that the supposed practice of anthropophagy was fundamental to European perceptions of the New World as a whole, and, as such, influenced representations of the natural world as well as of human societies. In *Canibalia*, Carlos Jáuregui traces the evolution of the trope of the cannibal through centuries of Latin American history, beginning with its emergence in colonial texts. The actual extent of cannibalism in pre-Columbian America is still debated, although it was almost certainly far less widespread

than supposed in the sixteenth century; for Jaúrgui, however, the actual practice matters less than its construction and ideological function (22). Jáuregui traces the origins of the cannibal to failure of Columbus and other early explorers to find the expected cyclopes, cynocephali and other monstrous races which, according to travel literature, populated the space beyond the margins of the known world. Despite his inability to understand the language of the Amerindians with whom he spoke, Columbus believed that they told him they lived in fear of “canibales,” who hunted them for food; “cannibal” appears to be a corruption of an indigenous word for “fierce warrior” or possibly “tapioca-eater.” Columbus was skeptical at first, but soon came to believe in the truth of his own translation of the Amerindians’ words (49-50), and the image of the cannibal soon became the repository for all of the notions of the exotic “Other” the Europeans had inherited from classical and medieval texts (51-54). From the beginning, the image of the cannibal went hand in hand with that of the noble savage living a prelapsarian existence in a paradise-like land of plenty:

La retórica de la otredad está aquí regida por la lógica binaria del consumo colonial: los cuerpos *consumibles* que se prestan a ser “convertidos” económica, religiosa y culturalmente son representados idílicamente; corresponden al *otro* (con minúsculas) que recibe al conquistador, ofreciéndole, generoso, su dócil cornucopia. Por otra parte, el salvaje que, aunque deseado, resiste la consumición debe ser sometido, destruido o *pacificado* (para usar el eufemismo acostumbrado entonces); es el *Otro* (con mayúsculas) indócil y liminal. Los “sujetos” producidos son *inocentes* o *nocivos*; indios buenos o caníbales, respectivamente.

Ambos son cultura y económicamente *objetos* del deseo colonial y parte de una economía simbólica maniquea. (69)

The image of the cannibal, Jáuregui explains, quickly assumed a juridical dimension<sup>44</sup>. If the Amerindians were noble savages, their enslavement could not be justified, but the idea of cannibalism offered a moral pretext for slavery and *encomienda*. In 1503, Queen Isabella issued an edict defining which Amerindians could be captured:

doy licencia e facultad a todas y cualesquier personas que con mi mandado fueren, asy a las Islas e tierra-firme del dicho mar oçeano [...] para que sy todavía los dichos canibales resistyeren, e non quisieren reçebir é acoger en sus tierras á los capitanes e gentes que por mi mandado fueren a faser dichos viages, e oyrlos para ser dotrinados en las cosas de nuestra santa fee católica, e estar en mi servicio e so mi obediencia, los puedan captivar y captiven [...] y para que los puedan vender é aprovecharse dellos. (*Col. doc.* 3: 1579-1581; qtd. in Jáuregui 78)

Cannibals thus came to be defined as any Amerindians who resisted Spanish encroachments; the issue of whether or not a given group consumed human flesh slipped into the background. The edict came at a time when the indigenous population of Hispaniola, Cuba and Puerto Rico was collapsing, and a new source of labor was desperately needed; Isabella's edict thus opened the way for indiscriminate slave raids in as yet unsettled territory. The irony was not lost on Las Casas, who later, as Jáuregui notes, observed that the areas where indigenous peoples were accused of cannibalism coincided with those where the Spaniards met with resistance (27). The Dominicans, soon to be joined by Las Casas, protested, and the Crown felt pressure to further define

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<sup>44</sup> Except where otherwise noted, information in this paragraph summarizes Jáuregui 77-89.

just who could be considered cannibals or caribes (the two terms were used more or less interchangeably). In 1518, Charles I (who would in 1520 become Charles V) commissioned Rodrigo de Figueroa, a judge on Hispaniola, to conduct a survey to determine which islands were populated by cannibals. Figueroa issued the following judgement:

Fallo que debo declarar y declaro: que todas las islas que no están pobladas de cristianos, excepto Trinidad, é de los Lucayos, é Barbados é Gigantes é de la Margarita , las debo declarar é declaro ser de caribes é gentes bárbaras, enemigos de cristianos [...] é tales que comen carne humana, é no han querido ni quieren recibir á su conversación a los cristianos, ni a los predicadores de nuestra Santa Fé Católica. (*Doc. In.* 1:380; qtd. in Jáuregui 84).

The definition of cannibal, as Jáuregui notes, thus became a tautology: cannibalism was defined by geographical location, which, in turn, was proof of the cannibalism of the people who lived there (27).

Jáuregui's bifurcated image of the noble savage and the monstrous cannibal clearly bears a considerable degree of similarity to the contrasting images I have noted in Las Casas and Oviedo, although the noble savages of which Jáuregui writes differ from Las Casas's rational and civilized Amerindians in that they are defined by what they lack (cities, clothing, laws, etc). As I have already noted, Las Casas seeks precisely to show that the Amerindians do *not* lack the social organization Aristotle defined as *civitas*; thus, while Las Casas's Amerindians share with the "good Indian" side of Jáuregui's equation their association with an abundant and desirable natural world, they do not fit his definition of noble savages. In the case of Oviedo, however, the parallel is much closer.

Jáuregui's monstrous cannibal reflects the threatening liminality that lurks beneath the surface of so much of Oviedo's writing; as Jáuregui explains, "El canibal no respeta las marcas que estabilizan la diferencia; por el contrario, fluye sobre ellas en el acto de comer. Acaso esta liminalidad que *se evade*—que traspasa, incorpora e indetermina la oposición *interior/exterior*—suscita la frondosa polisemia y el nomadismo semántico del canibalismo; su *propensión metafórica*" (13). The liminality of the cannibal is at the heart of his capacity to serve as a symbol of otherness. This symbolic capacity is evident in Oviedo's account, and while the author himself did not dwell on its juridical implications, Sepúlveda made extensive use of information drawn from Oviedo's works in his debate with Las Casas.

Jáuregui points out that cannibalism was associated with the sins of gluttony and lust (25). Likewise, Oviedo sees cannibalism primarily as the result of an appetite for human flesh on the part of certain groups of Amerindians; only rarely does he mention it in the context of ritual. Again, his emphasis is on the sensual, and he includes a number of graphic descriptions of the ways in which various peoples cooked and seasoned their victims. This is an unnatural act, which highlights the monstrousness of those who practiced it. In his account of the splendid feasts of the Aztec ruler Montezuma, for example, Oviedo describes how the king is served, along with more than 3,000 dishes of different types of fowl, "algunos platos de muchachos tiernos, guisados a su modo" (IV: 219, bk. 33, ch. 46). In his discussion of the indigenous people of Nicaragua, Oviedo transcribes a long conversation between a cacique and a friar, during which the former explains his people's customs, including that of cannibalism:

... se corta la cabeza al que ha de morir, e hácese el cuerpo pequeños pedazos, y aquéllos échanse a cocer in ollas grandes y allí échase sal e axí, e lo que es menester para guisarlo. Después de guisarlo, traen cebollos de maíz, e con mucha alegría golosa, siéntanse los caciques en sus duhos e comen de aquella carne, e beben mazamorra e cacao. E la cabeza no la cuescen ni asan ni comen, pero pónense en unos palos que están fronteros de los oratorios e templos. Y ésta es la cerimonia que tenemos en comer de aquesta carne, la cual nos sabe como de pavos o puerco o de xulo (*id est*, de aquellos, sus perros)...y este manjar de la carne humana es muy presciado. (IV:377, bk. 42, ch. 3)

The cacique clearly regards the consumption of human flesh as something natural; it was nothing more than an unusually tasty morsel, eaten on festive occasions, but otherwise unexceptional. His failure to recognize the unnatural character of human flesh as a food is a clear indication of his moral and rational incapacity. Oviedo takes an almost prurient interest in the gory details, attempting—as, of course, he also does in his descriptions of less menacing aspects of the natural world—to create as vivid an image as possible in the mind’s eye of the reader. Here, however, aim is to convey not pleasure but horror and a sense of irremediable otherness.

Oviedo mentions certain instances in which Spaniards resorted to eating human flesh out of extreme need, but, as Álvaro Félix Bolaños points out, Oviedo categorizes this behavior as sinful without relegating the Spaniards in question to the category of “other,” while in the case of indigenous peoples, cannibalism forms part of the definition of barbarism by which they are exoticized (83). (I will have more to say about cannibalism on the part of Spaniards in the next chapter, since it is directly related to

themes I will treat there.) Cannibalism may also be interpreted, as Pagden points out, as “a simple but radical category mistake,” a confusion of food with non-food which indicates the Indian’s inability to perceive the proper hierarchical order in the natural world (85-86). In this regard, cannibalism becomes simply a more extreme case of the liminality we have seen in so many other contexts in Oviedo. While the liminality of the iguana or the pineapple is not, in itself, threatening, that same classificatory slipperiness, when expanded to the context of human beings as food or not food, becomes a monstrous violation of the natural order.

The topic of cannibalism was a thorny issue for Las Casas. For one thing, early in his career, he himself had been complicit in allowing accusations of anthropophagy to be used in justifying the enslavement of indigenous people. In the course of final negotiations over his plan for the peaceful colonization of Cumaná, he had signed a contract whereby he would be charged with determining which peoples ate human flesh so that these could be legitimately enslaved; writing later of the event, Las Casas indicates that he never intended to fulfill the obligation; nonetheless, the fact remains that he did sign the document (Bataillon “The *Clérigo*” 408-9). After securing approval for the project, Las Casas established a small outpost at Cumaná, leaving several friars there while he returned to Hispaniola to protest continued slaving in the region. When the friars questioned the Amerindians about cannibalism, the latter became suspicious and, fearing that the mission was a front for slavers, attacked it, killing one lay brother and several servants and causing the remaining friars to flee (Parish “Introduction” 26).

More important, cannibalism was a key component of the case presented by Las Casas’s adversary Sepúlveda in order to justify war against the Amerindians. According

to Sepúlveda, war could justly be waged against the Amerindians both to punish them for the practice and to protect potential innocent victims (Losada 286-292). For Sepúlveda, cannibalism was perhaps the clearest sign of the Amerindians' ontological inferiority; it was a crime against nature which could only be ended through military suppression by a superior people; cannibalism thus formed the basis for the contention that conquest was a civilizing mission (Jáuregui 97-99). Equally problematic for Las Casas was the fact that his fellow Dominican, Francisco Vitoria, shared Sepúlveda's opinion that war could licitly be waged against cannibals in order to protect the innocent, although he did not espouse the view that cannibalism should be read as an indication that Amerindians were barbarian by nature. In his 1538 lecture *On Dietary Laws or Self Restraint*, Vitoria defined cannibalism as being contrary to natural law and an abomination abhorred by all civilized peoples (Avramescu 114). For Vitoria, human beings belonged to God alone; even slaves remained human and could not legitimately be consumed as food. Cannibalism was thus not only cruel; it violated the order of nature (Pagden 86).

Fundamental to Vitoria's thinking was the idea that human beings are citizens of the world, governed by natural law (Carro 251); hence, the moral imperative to protect innocent victims required intervention regardless of sovereignty. To address the first of Sepúlveda's arguments, Las Casas argued that Spain did not have secular authority over the Indies and thus had no right to punish the indigenous people, since no Christian nation can have more authority over pagan nations than did Christ himself (Losada "Controversy" 288). The second of Sepúlveda's arguments was more difficult, especially in light of Vitoria's concurrence. Las Casas acknowledged the validity of the principle in general, but argued that it should not be applied if greater evil would result. Attempts to



protect innocent victims by waging war on the Amerindians would result in greater loss of life, and therefore greater evil, than allowing cannibalism to continue (Losada “Controversy” 294).

Cannibalism also presented obvious problems in the context of Las Casas’s defense of the Amerindians in the *Apologética*. Since the people of Hispaniola did not eat human flesh, Las Casas did not need to address the topic in the first two books of the *Apologética*, where his focus was on proving the ideal nature of Hispaniola and its people. But when he arrived at the third and longest book, dealing with ethnography, he could not avoid the issue. While my study focuses primarily on the first two books, which contain the vast majority of material on the natural world, I will venture briefly into the third book to discuss how Las Casas deals with the issue of anthropophagy. Las Casas recognized cannibalism in two contexts. First, in New Spain, human flesh was eaten only in the context of religious ritual. Sacrificial victims were slain in ceremonies which Las Casas often calls “pascuas” [Easter], generally following long periods of fasting and penitence, frequently referred to as “cuaresma” [Lent]; the flesh of victims was eaten in the belief that it was sacred. A particularly interesting example is that of the Totonacs. Before the sacrifice, the head priest (pontífice grande) delivered to the victims “un sermón exhortativo y consolativo,” telling them that they had been chosen to be sent as messengers to the greatest of their gods, the sun, “para suplicalle que tuviese por bien de envialles a su hijo porque los librase de tantas miserias y angustias y pesares.” The victims solemnly agreed to do as instructed. After their hearts had been removed, the victims’ bodies were cut into pieces and the following morning, they were eaten by the lords and others “según su reputación los merecían;” those so favored considered

themselves and their households to be blessed. (II: 210-11; bk 3 ch176). Las Casas stopped short of explicitly comparing the ritual to Christian communion, but the parallels are obvious; even the vocabulary (“pontífice,” “sermón”) recalls Christian ritual. Moreover, the sacrificial victims were instructed to ask that the sun god send his son to them, suggesting that the rite was, in fact, a sort of plea for Christianity. The horror of the practice was thus greatly reduced; the Amerindians might be putting their spiritual zeal into practice in the wrong way, but their motives differed little from those of Christians.

The second context for the consumption of human flesh was somewhat more difficult to defend. Like Oviedo, Las Casas believed that the Caribs who inhabited the islands of Guadalupe and Dominica, as well as portions of the mainland, hunted and ate human beings “como otros van a cazar venados” (II: 353; bk. 3, ch. 205). To explain the practice, he refers back to an earlier chapter, where he has already laid out the reasons why human beings in general may turn to cannibalism. Las Casas begins with a startlingly misogynous introduction which appears to be based on the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Sorceresses), written in 1486 by Henricus Institoris and Jacobus Sprenger, two Dominican Inquisitors. Las Casas here relates cannibalism in general to witchcraft, arguing that women, in particular midwives, are more easily deceived by the devil than men, quicker to believe, weaker in complexion, more curious, and looser-tongued; this portion is taken directly from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (116). Once seduced by the devil, midwives kill babies by surreptitiously inserting a needle into their heads, while other women kill the babies with spells while they are in their cradles. They then cook the infants until the flesh falls from the bones, drinking the resulting liquid and making an unguent from the thickest residue (I:466-7; bk. 3 ch. 90). This

section seems out of character for Las Casas not only because of its misogyny but because of its acceptance of superstition. Jáuregui notes that the image of the cannibal is often female, associated not only with witchcraft but also with lust and gluttony (56-59), but since this connection does not occur elsewhere in Las Casas, it is unlikely that it was what he had in mind here. The passage could be read as an indication that Las Casas was not immune from the obsession with demons which was just beginning to take root in the middle of the sixteenth century, but a more likely explanation is that, since the *Malleus Maleficarum* had been written by fellow Dominicans, he may have felt some obligation to include information taken from it, although he does not cite the work directly.

Whatever Las Casas's reasons may have been for raising the issue of witchcraft, he does not dwell on it for long; after a few paragraphs, he returns to a more congenial source for the bulk of his argument. According to Aristotle, he says, there are three principal reasons why people turn to cannibalism. The first is from a bad complexion (i.e. an unfavorable balance of humors) due to the alignment of the earth or heavenly bodies, a situation which may affect entire peoples in extreme climates; alternatively, in the case of individuals, it may be due to particular causes. A second cause is epilepsy or madness, which makes men bestial because it alters their judgment. The third way human beings may become cannibals is through learning the custom in childhood. In such cases, the practice usually originates in a situation of extreme need and then becomes generalized through the society. Las Casas then goes on to cite a number of examples from biblical and classical history where people have been driven to cannibalism, among them the siege of Samaria in the biblical book of Kings and the siege of Numantia by the Romans. A particularly extreme example is that of the people of Calahorra who, when besieged by

the Pompeians, not only killed women and children in order to eat them but salted them to preserve them for future meals, as if they were ham. Since the American physical environment is so favorable and epilepsy is not widespread, this third reason is the only possible explanation for cannibalism in the New World. Las Casas ends by speculating that the first instances might have occurred in the circumstances described at the beginning of the chapter, through the seduction of individuals by demons, and then spread. (I:471; bk. 3, ch., 90). In his discussion of the Caribs in particular, he suggests that the custom may have originated through an individual who suffered from some illness, or a situation of extreme hunger, or even from a person born with a bad complexion through an error of nature. He adds that Spaniards in extreme situations have also resorted to consuming flesh, citing Cabeza de Vaca's account of the ill-fated voyage of Pánfilo de Narváez and noting that the Amerindians who witnessed the Spanish acts of cannibalism were every bit as scandalized by the sight as were Spaniards witnessing indigenous cannibalism in other contexts (I: 354; bk. 3, ch. 205).

Once again, the governing principle behind Las Casas's account is causality. Since his entire argument rests upon the notion that the paradisiacal of the Caribbean must necessarily produce ideal human beings, the presence of cannibals in the region threatens to undermine his entire causal chain. His aim is therefore to show conclusively that the first possible cause, that of a bad complexion due to environmental factors, does not apply. The causes for cannibalism are neither universal (the sky and heavenly bodies) nor particular (the alignment of the earth, the disruption of climate by the presence of mountains, or other localized but still environmental factors). Rather, the causes to which he ascribes cannibalism fall into the Aristotelian category of the "accidental," through

which natural philosophy explained such anomalous events as children born with six fingers or toes. Occurrences attributed to accidental causes were aberrations which did not affect larger causal relations; as such, they could effectively be regarded as isolated and irrelevant.

A final aspect of Las Casas's treatment of the theme of cannibalism involves what Jáuregui calls "una de las más radicales resemantizaciones del tropo caníbal," In many of his discussions of the actions of the colonists, Las Casas inverts the cannibal image, portraying the Spaniards as the ravenous devourers and the Amerindians as the victims. While Las Casas does not accuse the Spaniards of literally eating the Amerindians, his language associates the *encomenderos* with bloodshed, butchery, and consumption. Jáuregui cites a series of short passages from a variety of the Las Casas's works; a few will suffice here to give the flavor of the friar's rhetorical strategy. Las Casas frequently uses the verb "consumir" to describe the Spaniards' actions towards the Amerindians; in the *Historia*, for example, he notes "viendo las gentes de la isla de San Juan que llevaban al camino para ser consumidos..." and later, "por ese tiempo y año de 1516, no olvidaban los españoles que tenían cargo de consumir la gente mansísima de la isla de Cuba" (qtd. in Jáuregui 165). Another frequently employed image is that of wolves devouring innocent lambs; the colonists behave "como lobos e tigres y leones crudelísimos de muchos días hambrientos" (*Brevéssima*, qtd. In Jáuregui 166) y como "lobos rabiosos, famélicos y crueles entre ovejas y corderos (qtd. in Jáuregui, 166).

Overall, then, Las Casas's aim in dealing with the theme of cannibalism was twofold: first, he sought to neutralize the image's potency as an index of Amerindians' supposed barbarism by explaining it in terms of religious devotion or rational causality;

at the same time, he inverted the image and turned it against the Spaniards, using what was by now a widely recognized trope to dramatize his condemnation of *encomienda*. With the brief exception of his discussion of witchcraft, he does not dwell on the gory details of anthropophagy, and does not entertain the possibility that the practice might reflect unnatural appetites, and thus barbarity, on the part of the Amerindians. Oviedo, in contrast, sees cannibalism as the result of a gluttonous taste for human flesh; it is thus one more example of the aberrant nature of Amerindian society, and, by extension, of the New World itself. Las Casas's and Oviedo's treatments of cannibalism are in line with their treatments of food in general. Las Casas sought to de-exoticize New World alimentary practices by depicting them in a favorable light in relation to European norms, and incorporating them into his overarching causal schema. Oviedo, on the other hand, focused on the particular, and the impressions he creates are of sensual delight, as in the case of the pineapple, or of visceral horror, as in the case of cannibalism. But whether delightful or exotic, New World foods serve, for Oviedo, to define those who eat them as "other," and thus legitimately conquerable and exploitable.

## Chapter 5: Natural Catastrophes: Nature as Agent

One final aspect of Las Casas's and Oviedo's representations of New World nature merits discussion here. Up until now, I have primarily focused my comments to the two authors' descriptions of the concrete, visible natural world. But representations of particular aspects of the natural world are intimately tied to concepts of nature in a broader, more abstract sense; ideas about nature, in turn, reflect social constructs as to what is or is not natural. Nature can thus function as a normative standard, distinguishing what is natural from what is aberrant. In the sixteenth century, nature could also be endowed with agency, acting either creatively or--often in response to violation of its norms--destructively. Sometimes it (or she) appeared as a personified handmaiden to God and sometimes it acted impersonally, through God's created structures in the natural world, or as means through which God exercised his (in the sixteenth century, God was always male) will in a more direct manner. These various guises were not always distinct, and one or more might be operative at once.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, just as the need to account for New World natural phenomena destabilized established norms at a more concrete level, it also challenged larger concepts of nature and what was natural, thus also affecting nature's role as agent.

Here again, the contrast between Las Casas and Oviedo is striking. Las Casas succeeds in extending the essentially rational causality of natural philosophy to incorporate New World reality, while in the case of Oviedo, the aberrance which seems to pervade New World nature ultimately threatens to undermine not only nature's role as a predictable agent but the epistemological foundations of Western concepts of nature itself. Both authors concur in attributing to God the ultimate power over nature, but there

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<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of nature's normative role in a variety of historical periods, see Daston and Vidal.

the similarity ends. Las Casas never personifies nature; natural philosophy saw two aspects of nature--*natura naturans* (God the creator) and *natura naturata* (the natural world, or creation)—and recognized no autonomous intermediary (French and Cunningham 140). While God might occasionally intervene directly (as in the case of miracles), his will was more commonly expressed through nature by means of the causal relationships inherent in natural structures. Since God's role was essentially to initiate a chain of causality which then functioned impersonally by means of natural laws which operated in the same way everywhere, Las Casas's view of the active role of nature could be adapted without serious disruption to New World contexts.

Oviedo's notions of nature as agent were, on the other hand, somewhat less transferable. He frequently refers to a personified female *Natura* as a creative agent. As a pagan trope originally derived from classical texts but frequently used by Christian writers, *Natura* was already a somewhat unstable figure. Derived ultimately from Pliny, *Natura* appeared regularly in medieval and Renaissance poetry, where she was responsible both for the generation of ignoble animals and the maintenance of species as originally created by God; however, since a truly autonomous nature would run counter to Christianity, her role was primarily allegorical (French and Cunningham 72-4). Oviedo's *proemio* to Book XV, on insects, credits *Natura* with the delicate artisanship involved in fashioning the tiny creatures, but at the same time reflects a certain uneasiness as to her role. Following Pliny, he treats her at times as an autonomous entity, but as a Christian, he also feels a need to qualify his use of the figure by reminding



readers of God's ultimate authority. He speaks glowingly and at length of insects as *Natura*'s marvelous handiwork,<sup>46</sup> but adds a disclaimer:

Pero acordándonos de cuanto poder es el Maestro que esa potencia da a la Natura, para lo que por su dispensación dél ella obra, y que el solo Omnipotente es de donde procede todo, e que es Dios el que da la vida y el ser a todas a las cosas criadas, y el que infunde e dispensa todos estos efetos e obras que Plinio atribuye a la Natura...Pues no a la Natura (como Plinio y los gentiles) quiera ningún católico referirlas gracias destas maravillas; sino al Maestro de la Natura...”  
(II:76; bk. 15, ch. 1).

Yet while God may be the ultimate creator, *Natura* gives to Oviedo's natural world a capacity for invention, playfulness, and delight in variability which might be lacking in a more strictly Christian account. She is a literary conceit, borrowed in good humanist fashion from classical sources; as such, she reflects both Oviedo's desire to present his audience with something beautiful and pleasing and his avowed commitment to modeling his work after that of Pliny. Both of these aspects of Oviedo's work are, in the end, casualties of his equally strong commitment to empiricism and to the destabilizing effects of New World reality. Likewise, Oviedo's confidence in God's direct intervention in nature also suffers a shock in the face of the apparent unpredictability natural forces in the New World. At times, he attributes demonic origins to storms and other phenomena, but in the end, even this explanation seems somewhat inadequate.

With respect to nature's normative role, we have seen in previous chapters how Las Casas seeks to de-exoticize (or, it could be said, to naturalize) aspects of the New

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<sup>46</sup> For a sample, see the passage on the mosquito quoted in Chapter 3 above; Oviedo continues for several more paragraphs in the same vein.

World of nature that might seem aberrant, and how Oviedo's interest in the particular frequently leads him to focus on the transgressive qualities of American plants and animals. In both cases, longstanding European ideas as to what is natural serve as a norm against which unfamiliar creatures must be measured, although the specific discursive currents upon which the two authors base their ideas of the natural are not the same. Just as American nature does not, for Las Casas, pose an insurmountable challenge to the essential causal relationships governing the natural world, neither does it fundamentally threaten the overarching moral order of nature. For Oviedo, on the other hand, the failure of New World creatures to conform to established norms represents an index of America's otherness; that difference serves through much of his *Historia* to justify Spanish domination, but at the same time gives rise to a nagging doubt as to the legitimacy of European models, which, as we shall see, emerges especially in the final book of his *Historia*. What we have yet to examine is the manner in which nature (or God acting through nature) responds to infractions against the natural or moral order; here again, the differences between Las Casas and Oviedo are significant. Both include narratives in which nature, although not personified, is the clear protagonist. In both cases nature's destructive fury is related to violations of the natural and/or moral order, although in Oviedo, that connection is in the end severed.

In his *Historia de las Indias*, Las Casas includes a narrative sequence describing a plague of ants, which all but destroyed agriculture on the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. (I turn here to the *Historia* rather than the *Apologética* since, as a predominantly descriptive and argumentative work, the latter includes little in the way of narratives which might show nature's active role.) The plague took place after a smallpox

epidemic in 1518-19 had wiped out most of the Amerindians who had survived the initial depredations of the Spaniards, leaving the colonists without a labor force to sustain the mining industry. They therefore found themselves forced to turn to agriculture, establishing plantations of *cañafistolos*, trees whose pod-like fruits produced a pulp widely used as a purgative and whose cultivation was not labor-intensive. The trees thrived, so much so that Las Casas says that the land seemed to have been made for the trees, and the trees for the land. Here he employs the same discourse of miraculous abundance we have seen in his descriptions of food crops in the *Apologética*. The trees produced so much fruit that “pudiera proveerse dellos todo lo del mundo poblado” (III:271; bk. 3, ch.128), and those growing on the beautiful Vega alone “pudieran sin duda bastar para proveer a toda Europa y Asia, aunque la comieran como se come el pan, por la gran fertilidad de aquella vega” (III:272; bk. 3, ch.128). The colonists were quite pleased with themselves [“ufanos”] since they no longer had any need of the Amerindians, but just as they were beginning to enjoy the fruits of their labor, there fell upon the plantations a plague of an “infinidad de hormigas que por esta isla y aquélla [Puerto Rico] hobo, que por ninguna vía ni modo humano, de muchos que se tuvieron, se pudieron atajar” (III:271; ch.128). The ants on Puerto Rico were bad, but those on Hispaniola exceeded them “en ser rabiosas, que causaban mayor dolor que si avispas al hombre mordieran y lastimaran,” and when they began to eat the trees from the roots, it was “como si fuego cayera del cielo y los abrasara, de la misma manera los paraban negros y se secaban; dieron tras los naranjos y granados, de que había muchas huertas y muy graciosas... y no dejaron que del todo no quemasen, que vello era una gran lástima”

(III:271; bk. 3, ch.128). After the desperate colonists held religious processions and chose a saint, St. Saturnino, to represent them before God, the plague finally abated.<sup>47</sup>

The biblical reference is clear in the image of fire falling from the sky, and the religious connotations are reinforced by the tone of lamentation which suffuses the narrative, as well as by Las Casas's contention that the ants were infinite in number and impossible to kill by human means. The segment is framed by the account of the smallpox plague that killed the indigenous population (which Las Casas interprets as punishment for the Spaniards and release from suffering for the Amerindians), and, in the following chapter, descriptions of two more plagues: first, African slaves recently imported to work on sugar plantations had escaped to the mountains, from whence they harassed and killed Spaniards; and second, feral dogs had multiplied, devouring the delicious feral pigs which had once roamed the island in large numbers and then turning on the calves borne by cattle on Spanish farms (III:276; bk. 3, ch. 129 ). In case the message is not obvious, Las Casas concludes his discussion of the ants by saying "cuando Dios quiere afligir las tierras o los hombres en ellas, no le falta con qué por los pecados las aflija y con chiquitas criaturitas: parece bien por las plagas de Egipto" (III: 273; bk. 3, ch. 128). For Las Casas, God has acted through nature to punish violations of the moral and natural order; "esta isla hallamos llenísima de gentes que matamos y extirpamos de la haz de la tierra y henchimosla de perros y bestias, y por juicio divino, por fuerza forzada, nos han de ser nocivos y molestos" (III:276; bk 3, ch. 128). While divine judgment was the ultimate cause of the plagues, it was the structure of the natural world which meant

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<sup>47</sup> The narrative summarized in this and the following paragraph (except where indicated) comes from *Historia de las Indias*, III:270-271, bk. 3 ch. 128).

that necessarily—“por fuerza forzada”—the dogs and other beasts with which the Spaniards had filled the island would turn out to be destructive.

In *La isla que se repite*, Antonio Benítez Rojo offers a Freudian interpretation of Las Casas's plague (69-104). For Benítez Rojo, the swarms of ants symbolize the swarms of African slaves recently brought to the island, thanks in part to the recommendation of Las Casas, who had secured a promise from the colonists that they would free their Amerindians if they could be replaced by African slaves. Basing his analysis on the parallel between ants and slaves, Benítez Rojo reads Las Casas's account of the plague as a partially fictitious narrative reflecting the author's guilt over his complicity in slave trade. Before examining Benítez Rojo's psychological interpretation of Las Casas's account, it will be useful to outline the reality of the friar's position on slavery.<sup>48</sup> Las Casas first formally advocated the importation of slaves in his “Memorial de remedios para las Indias.” Written in 1516, when the decimation of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean islands had reached catastrophic proportions, the document offered a set of practical measures which might ameliorate the brutal treatment of the Amerindians and halt the precipitous decline in population. Of the proposed remedies, the eleventh was that African slaves (not specifically blacks) be brought to the Americas to work in the mines, in order to ease demands on the Amerindians. By the sixteenth century, slavery already had a long history in Europe, dating back to classical times. Slaves came from a variety of ethnic groups, including Scythians, Carthaginians, Saxons, Slavs, Ethiopians, Germans, Poles, Moors, Spaniards, and West Africans. Slavery was fueled by a state of near constant warfare; some slaves were prisoners of war, while others were taken in

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<sup>48</sup> My summary is based on Merediz and Salles-Reese, “Addressing the Atlantic Slave Trade: Las Casas and the Legend of the Blacks” (178-180).

“razzias,” or slave raids. Others, confronting extreme poverty during the Middle Ages, sold themselves or their children into slavery. Slavery nearly died out in northern Europe after the eleventh century, but wars between Muslims and Christians perpetuated the institution in the Mediterranean region. Conditions were frequently less harsh than they would be in later periods. In Spain, around the middle of the thirteenth century, a set of relatively benign rules governing slavery were laid out as part of the legal code promulgated in the *Siete partidas* of Alfonso X. Slaves were permitted to marry freely, to own property, and to buy their own freedom; only enemies captured in war, children of slaves, and people who had voluntarily sold themselves could be sold as slaves. During the late Middle Ages, black African slaves—usually captured by a rival tribe and sold to Europeans—became more common, and by the middle of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had established a flourishing trade in African slaves. Slaves were first imported to the Americas in 1501; thus, by the time Las Casas wrote his “Memorial de remedios,” slavery had already taken root in the New World.

What Las Casas was advocating, then, was the expansion of an already widely accepted institution, one which at that time generally implied a considerably less onerous form of servitude than the form of slavery would soon evolve in the Americas. When he realized that the enslavement of blacks was as unjust as that of the Amerindians, however, he reversed his earlier stand:

Deste aviso que dió el clérigo, no poco después se halló repiso, juzgándose culpable por inadvertente, porque como después vido y averiguó, según parecerá, ser tan injusto el captiverio de los negros como el de los indios, no fué discreto remedio el que se aconsejó que se trujesen negros para que se libertasen los

indios, aunque él suponía que eran justamente, aunque no estuvo cierto que la ignorancia que en esto tuvo y buena voluntad lo excusase delante el juicio divino.

(III:275; bk. 3 ch. 129)

Despite Las Casas's clear retraction of his support for African slavery, he is still frequently considered a racist and blamed for the introduction of slavery in the New World. Drawing on studies by Isacio Pérez Fernández, Eyda Merediz and Verónica Salles-Reese trace the origins accusations against Las Casas back to the eighteenth century, when Cornelius De Pauw claimed in his *Recherches philosophiques* that Las Casas had formulated a plan to establish the slave trade in the Americas; the claim was then repeated by Guillaume-Thomas François Raynal, Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, as well as William Robertson and others (180). Interestingly, with the exception of Leclerc, these same writers were active perpetrators of the theory that America nature was somehow degenerate, immature, or otherwise ontologically inferior (see Gerbi, *Dispute of the New World*), and their efforts to portray New World inhabitants in a negative light apparently extended to defiling the image of one of the Amerindians staunchest defenders. Another source of the myth, Merediz and Salles-Reese note, was a 1601 report on Las Casas's then-unpublished *Historia* by the royal chronicler Antonio de Herrera, in which the chronicler notes that to alleviate the suffering of the Amerindians, Las Casas had advocated the importation of black slaves "as if they were not rational beings" (180). As with DePauw's claim, Antonio de Herrera's assertion was then propagated through later works.

These long-lived exaggerations of Las Casas's role in the slave trade appear to have had an influence in Benítez Rojo's interpretation of the plague of ants. Central to his

reading is an assumption that Las Casas was consumed with suppressed guilt over his support for slavery. While he accepts the reality of the plague itself (since it is corroborated by Oviedo), Benítez Rojo denies the reality of an object that serves as the key to his reading: the *piedra de solimán* which, Las Casas says, was placed by Franciscan friars on their roof; there it attracted vast hordes of ants, which devoured most of it. Although the ants that ate it died, more continued to arrive until the friars removed what remained of the rock (III: 272; bk. 3, ch. 128). *Solimán*, or mercury chloride, is a corrosive sublimate which Benítez Rojo notes was used in Las Casas's day as a powerful disinfectant and poison; attracting ants was not one of its known properties (97). Benítez Rojo labels the *piedra de solimán* a fictional element within the text (79), which he claims represents both a chunk of sugar (the reason for the importation of slaves) and Las Casas's own genitalia; it thus symbolizes Las Casas's sublimated guilt over his complicity in the importation of slaves and his fear of castration and damnation by a vengeful God (96-100).

The notion that Las Casas may have subliminally associated the ants with African slaves is not implausible; after all, Las Casas himself speaks of a plague of escaped slaves. And it is true, as Las Casas himself admits, that he felt remorse for his earlier complicity in the African slave trade. The rest of Benítez Rojo's argument, however, stretches the text too far. In the first place, inventing a wholly fictional element (as Benítez Rojo deems the *piedra solimán* to be) is entirely out of character for Las Casas. He makes abundant use of hyperbole and exaggeration, and may at times omit facts, but outright fabrication would contradict his concepts both of his text and of his own role as historian. Moreover, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the friars would have



tried to poison the ants using a common household substance, especially since Las Casas mentions the *piedra de solimán* in the context of a paragraph listing the various remedies tried unsuccessfully by the Spaniards in order to rid themselves of the ants; there is no real reason to posit a fictional origin for the *solimán*. As further evidence, Benítez Rojo cites Las Casas's statement that the ants arrived in a shipment of plantain plants, which Benítez Rojo claims were intended to provide food for the slaves, since Europeans would not eat the fruits. Furthermore, he argues, in attributing the plague to an identifiable earthly cause, Las Casas contradicts his own assertion that the plague was a case of divine retribution. But Malcolm K. Read, who rejects Benítez Rojo's argument, points out that Oviedo comments on the delicious taste of plantains, comparing them to figs (66); it thus appears that one European, at least, did eat plantains, so their importation may not have been intended exclusively for slaves, and the association with slavery becomes somewhat tenuous. More important, Read points out that from a scholastic perspective, natural and supernatural causes are not contradictory. He cites a sixteenth century scientist, Juan Huarte:

Ordinary people, on seeing a man of great wit and ability, immediately point to God as the author and think of no other cause, and, on the contrary, attribute anything that goes against this claim to vain imagination. But natural philosophers ridicule this manner of speaking; because, while it is pious and contains within it religion and truth, it is the result of ignoring the order and harmony that God placed in natural things the day He created them. (trans. and qtd. in Read 66).

For a natural philosopher, then, it is precisely by means of natural causes that God enacts his will, and positing a natural phenomenon as a cause in no way negates the role of God as the architect behind that cause.

One last element of Benítez Rojo's argument merits closer scrutiny. The most outstanding characteristic of the ants, he notes, is their growing numbers; their destructive power lies in their capacity for constant increase. For Benítez Rojo, this prodigious growth in numbers reflects the increase in the population of African slaves. But a close reading of the texts reveals another explanation, one which is more in line with Las Casas's discourse overall. Speaking of the ants' astonishing numbers, Las Casas notes that the colonists "hallaron dentro, en la tierra, tres y cuatro y más palmos, la simiente y overas dellas, blancas como la nieve, y acaecía quemar cada día un celemín [4,625 litros] y dos, y cuando otro día amanecía, hallaban de hormigas vivas mayor cantidad;" later, when the friars had put out the *solimán*,

Como si enviaran mensajeros a las que estaban dentro de media legua y una alrededor, convocándolas al banquete del solimán, no quedó, creo, una que no viniese, y víanse las caminos llenos dellas que venían hacia el monasterio, y, finalmente, subían en la azotea y llegaban a comer el solimán y luego caían en el suelo muertas; de manera que el suelo de la azotea estaba tan negro como si lo hobieran rociado con polvo de carbón...(III: 272; bk. 3, ch. 128)

The style of these passages, with its tendency to hyperbole, has an oddly familiar ring: it is the discourse of prodigious abundance through which, as we have seen, Las Casas expresses an important aspect of the paradisiacal nature of Hispaniola in the *Apologética*, as well as in his initial description of the *cañafistola* plantations. But here,

instead of an abundance of production, there is an abundance of consuming, dying and killing; the incredible fertility of the island has turned upon itself, destroying its own bounty in an orgy of destruction. God has taken one of the very qualities with which he most blessed the island and turned it against the colonists; rather than acting outside of nature, he has acted through the natural structures he himself has created. Like Aristotle's unmoved mover, Las Casas's God acts by initiating a chain of events in the natural world. *Natura naturans* works by means of *natura naturata*, inverting the paradisiacal abundance of the island in response to the Spaniards' violation of the moral, and thus the natural, order.

Oviedo speaks of both the small pox plague and the plague of ants, but his accounts are far different from those of Las Casas. The brief description of the smallpox plague comes in the course of a chapter enumerating the reasons for the catastrophic decline in the indigenous population; while Oviedo includes overwork, poor food and other abuses by the Spaniards as causes, he puts the majority of the blame on the Amerindians themselves. They are "gente...ociosa y viciosa, y de poco trabajo, e melancólicos, e cobardes viles e mal inclinados, mentirosos e de poca memoria, e de ninguna constancia;" moreover, many of them killed themselves "por su pasatiempo" in order to avoid work (I:67; bk. 3 ch. 6). While he stops short of claiming that God sent the plague as punishment, he implies that the Amerindians died from it due to flaws in their own nature. Oviedo tells of the plague of ants in the book which deals with insects; his description of the plague itself runs to less than a full paragraph, and although he mentions the destruction wrought by the insects, his account has nothing of the apocalyptic tone that characterizes Las Casas's narrative. He focuses the majority of his

discussion on the colonists' success in soliciting the intervention of St. Saturnino, which he sees as an exemplary tale of the devotion of the Spaniards, and the mercies which can be obtained from God through the intercession of the saints. He goes on to tell the story of the martyrdom of St. Saturnino, who was condemned by the gentiles of the city of Tolosa to be tied to the feet of a bull and dragged through the streets after he caused the idols of the city to fall silent. Oviedo concludes that the success of St. Saturnino's advocacy in the case of the plague of ants should be seen as a sign that God wants the idolatry of the Amerindians to be extirpated and that his own name and church be praised (II: 77-8; bk. 15, ch. 1). Like Las Casas, Oviedo attributes the plague to divine wrath, but here the transgressors are the Amerindians, and Oviedo's God bears little resemblance to the Aristotelian prime mover of Las Casas. As Leandro Tormo Sanz has pointed out, for Oviedo the term *cristiano* "no significa propiamente otro Cristo, seguidor e imitador de Cristo, ni aun simplemente bautizado, sino castellano, español o europeo, es decir miembro de la vieja cristianidad" (86). Oviedo's God is the God of imperial Spain, the supreme emperor whose primary interest lies in the expansion of his own church/empire. He may be the artist who is ultimately responsible for designing the marvelous and beautiful wonders of nature, but in his role as imperial deity he seems to have little to do with the playful and largely pagan *Natura*. And, while God acts through nature to reward or punish, the causal structure so evident in Las Casas is absent here. Oviedo's God is a monarch who demands that his authority be respected, rather a guarantor of the moral and natural order of creation.

In the final book of the *Historia*, however, both Oviedo's imperial God--and, more importantly for our discussion, nature itself--appear in a very different light. In

many respects, the disastrous narratives of shipwrecks and violent storms which make up the book serve to undermine the triumphalist narrative that animates the rest of the *Historia*. Here, nature seems to have broken free from the confines imposed by both God and *Natura* to show its sheer destructive fury, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. As Antonello Gerbi notes, the book seems to reflect Oviedo's gradual disillusionment with the imperial project:

... as we slowly make our way from the earlier to the later books, from the enthusiasm at the discovery and the intoxication of the conquest to the colonists' daily grind, nature too becomes less friendly, and the natives, more accurately and humanely judged, turn out to be at heart more hostile and intractable. The sovereign himself, so grandiosely allegorized at the outset, ends up being accused of petty greed and almost of deceit. And the fiftieth and last book closes the work with a grandiose and awe-inspiring flourish, a whole series of storms and shipwrecks and naval catastrophes, almost as if to conclude and circumscribe the New World with an ocean in turmoil, as if to bring home to us more clearly its perilous remoteness and to summon up the miraculous figures of the Virgin and Saints on the crest of the Atlantic waves. (246).

Eleven of the thirty chapters which make up the book appeared at the end of the first (1535) edition of the *Historia*, so the book in its entirety is not the product of the later, disillusioned Oviedo. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the seeds of the emphasis on destruction were already present in the 1535 version, and that the theme was amplified by the chapters added later (the manuscripts for several of these have been lost, but Oviedo provided synopses in his index, so the general outline of their contents is known). Gerbi

rightly emphasizes Oviedo's overall sense of disenchantment, but the manner in which that disillusionment found expression in Oviedo's attitudes towards nature, in particular, warrants further exploration. Nature has not simply become "less friendly;" it has also become less legible, less controllable, and more "other," to the extent that it threatens to undermine not only Spain's dominance over the New World but the discursive foundations upon which that dominance was predicated. The liminal but essentially non-threatening natural world embodied in the beautiful and tame (if exotic) "gato monillo" has undergone a complete transformation here into a space more akin to the later representations of the irremediably wild, hostile, rock-throwing "gatos" attacking Spaniards from the jungle treetops. Throughout the *Historia*, as we have seen, it is possible to ascertain an underlying doubt as to the possibility of encompassing American nature within a European framework, and the nagging fear that in the end, efforts to do so may bring about the collapse of the framework itself. In the shipwreck book, that fear is at least symbolically realized.

The significance of shipwrecks becomes even more apparent in light of the exuberant praise Oviedo bestows, in the early chapters of the *Historia*, on ships and oceangoing travel as a means of satisfying humankind's insatiable desire for knowledge, and as a source of useful and profitable natural resources. In the prologue to the first book, he notes that "todo hombre desea saber, y el entendimiento racional es lo que le hace más excelente que a otro ningún animal," adding later that those who participate in this noble endeavor "no cesan de inquirir en la tierra y en la mar las maravillosas e innumerables obras que el mismo Dios y Señor de todo nos enseña" (I:7; bk. 1, proemio). He goes on to ask:

¿Cuál ingenio mortal sabrá comprehender tanta diversidad de lenguas, de hábitos, de costumbres en los hombres destas Indias? ¿Tanta variedad de animales, así domésticos como salvajes y fieros? ¿Tanta multitud inarrable de árboles, copiosos de diversos géneros de frutas, y otros estériles, así de aquellos que los indios cultivan, como de los que la Natura, de su propio oficio, produce sin ayuda de manos mortales? ¿Cuántas plantas y hierbas útiles y provechosas al hombre? (I:8; bk. 1, *proemio*)

He continues in a similar vein for another paragraph and a half, noting that plants brought from Spain flourish so prolifically in the New World that ships return to Europe laden with produce. This bountiful cross-Atlantic acquisition of both knowledge and goods is made possible, of course, by ships. Even in the *proemio* to the shipwreck book, Oviedo explicitly exempts ships from blame in the misfortunes of those who sail them. As Sabine MacCormack observes, Oviedo, following Pliny, sees in ships the productive collaboration between man and nature. MacCormack cites a riddle from Pliny, which Oviedo also quotes, in which the Roman historian asks how it is possible that flax, a mere plant, can traverse long distances (he gives as examples the voyages between a number of different points, including Egypt and Italy) in short periods of time. The answer, of course, is that flax is made into sails (139-40). Always eager to outdo Pliny even as he quotes him, Oviedo adds “e muy mejor e con más causa lo dijera, si vinieran a su noticia tan apartadas mares y tan continuamente navegadas como estas mares, que es otra distancia muy mayor que la del Egipto y Italia;” moreover, he notes, sails can be made not only from flax but from hemp, or in other parts of the world, palm leaves, cotton, or even wool (V:306; bk. 50, *proemio*). Sails, and advances in sailing technology, have

made possible voyages which Pliny could not even dream of, and provided Oviedo and others of his epoch with knowledge of distant places Pliny knew nothing of. Yet while ships represent a close and fruitful link between human beings and the natural world, the sea represents nature at its most unpredictable. Oviedo cites the example Magellan's ship *Vitoria*, which, captained by Sebastián del Cano after Magellan died, was the first ship to circumnavigate the world. After returning to Spain, the *Vitoria* journeyed to Santo Domingo and back, then returned once more to Santo Domingo but was lost on its return trip to Spain, showing the hazardousness and unpredictability of ocean travel (V:306; bk. 50, *proemio*; MacCormack 141 ).

The destructive potential of the sea extends beyond its capacity to destroy ships. As Elvira Vilches has shown, the sea also posed a challenge to the certainty of fixed navigational and economic values. Basing her study on a variety of texts but emphasizing in particular Oviedo's *Sumario*, Vilches analyzes the formulation of the ocean--and with it the New World (especially Tierra Firme)--as a liminal space in colonial texts, where absolute values are relativized and subverted. When ships went beyond the Azores (the transitional point between the familiar and the unknown), the very values which made navigation possible suddenly became unreliable:

Las medidas de espacio y dirección fluctúan y dan prueba de que el océano perturba los instrumentos y reta los presupuestos de la navegación. La contingencia que impone alta mar se explica mediante la acumulación de indicios extraños: el cese del viento y del mar, los sargazos que aprisionan los navíos, la llama que cae del cielo, la desaparición repentina de los piojos que torturan a toda la tripulación. Entonces, la fluctuación de valores se interpreta como el síntoma



del espacio nulo e indómito. En este lugar se produce una cesura entre el océano de los archipiélagos (Madeira, Canarias, Cabo Verde, Azores) y la mar oceánica de las Indias que la convertiría al Atlántico en ese tercer espacio (641).<sup>49</sup>

The destabilization of norms so evident in the ocean extends, Vilches notes, to the Indies and their inhabitants, especially those of Tierra Firme. Oviedo's description of the disappearance of the fleas appears in a chapter of the *Sumario* entitled "*Diversas particularidades de las cosas*," a sort of compendium of miscellaneous oddities of the Americas. Oviedo proceeds from the fleas to a discussion of insects on the bodies of human beings (the Amerindians are not only infested with fleas but eat them), from there to comments on the general dirtiness of the Amerindians and cleanliness of the Spaniards, and then to a description of the Amerindians' homosexual and transvestite practices, which he refers to as "el pecado nefando contra natura." Important Amerindian men, he says, keep young boys who dress as women and wear women's jewelry; rather than occupying themselves with warfare or other masculine activities, these youths sweep and scrub and do other women's work (159-60). Here, then, the values that are subverted are not numerical but social and moral; the liminality of the sea thus becomes intimately connected with the "otherness" of New World nature. As Vilches puts it:

Y así las vacilaciones en medidas de distancia y dirección se encadenan con los cambios de clima, la vacilación de la brújula y la súbita desaparición de los piojos que tiene lugar en el paraje de las Azores. Todo ello remite a la naturaleza salvaje de las Indias, entendiéndose esta última como la determinante del barbarismo de

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<sup>49</sup> Vilches cites not only Oviedo but also Columbus (*Diario del primer viaje*, entries for Sept. 13-20) and Las Casas (*Historia de las Indias* (I:182-190; bk. 1, ch. 36-37) for this information, with the exception of the fleas, which are mentioned only in Oviedo (*Sumario* 158, ch. 81).

las sociedades amerindias, especialmente de la Tierra Firme, un mundo anterior a cualquier cultura (649).

Citing Walter Mignolo, Vilches notes how colonial discourse is characterized by the recognition of a universal order whereby Western, Christian norms are generalized to become a standard by which the degree of progress of other cultures can be measured (Mignolo 247, cited in Vilches 648). Yet when the measurements fundamental to Western culture fluctuate, the universality of Western norms is cast into doubt. One measure of the mutability of norms is the fluctuation in the value of gold. For Vilches, the numerical values upon which navigation is based are associated with the economic values of the accumulation of capital (639), and in the sixteenth century, fluctuations in the value of gold and money were cause for great concern. As early as 1508, it was noted that gold was worth monetarily less in Hispaniola than in Spain. Later, with the sudden surge in the availability of silver thanks to the mines in Potosí, the value of money began to fluctuate, with its purchasing power much lower in the Americas than in Spain. The situation led to much discussion and debate as to the causes of these fluctuations. Scholastics in Spain and the New World were able to see that the values of both gold and money were not intrinsic but were instead determined by conditions of scarcity or abundance (652-3). (Vilches does not mention Las Casas here, but since, like his fellow scholastics, he generally sought rational causes for phenomena, he would almost certainly have been of like mind had he entered into the debate.) The scholastics' explanations, however, were not widely accepted due to the generally accepted equation of gold with wealth and the belief in the intrinsic worth of gold; thus the fluctuations in the value of gold were, as Vilches explains, cause for consternation:

Cuando se sostiene que el valor de los metales es intrínseco, la depreciación del dinero es inquietante. De ahí que las discusiones sobre el alza de precios regresen al discurso de valores escindidos que se fragua en el Atlántico como síntoma de la naturaleza distinta del Nuevo Mundo y de las cosas nuevas y extrañas que el él se ha descubierto. (653).

The association of the fluctuations in gold prices with the nature of the New World was so strong that even Tomás Mercado, a Dominican economic scholar, concluded his account of the valorization of money “refiriéndose no a la dinámica del mercado en distintos lugares, sino a la influencia que ‘la calidad de la tierra’ y la ‘disposición’ de las Indias genera en el pecho de los peninsulares” (Vilches 653).

American nature, then, destabilizes not only the values associated with navigation, but the value of the newly acquired wealth of the Americas. It also destabilizes epistemological foundations of the colonial project, challenging the very possibility of knowing anything with certainty. In Oviedo’s shipwreck book, this subversive instability becomes active, destroying ships and with them triumphalist attitude towards knowledge so evident in the opening pages of the *Historia*. In *Manifest Perdition*, Josiah Blackmore offers a theoretical model which proves to be useful in the interpretation of Oviedo’s shipwreck book, emphasizing the relationship between event and text in shipwreck narratives. For Blackmore, shipwreck narratives reflect the unraveling of the imperial project; as he explains, “the shipwreck text, one of breakage, rupture and disjunction, precludes the possibility of a redemptive reading, and in this messy openness presents the greatest blow to the predetermined success of national expansion and its textural analogue” (xxi). The shipwreck as metaphor encompasses both

the event itself and its narrative retelling, undermining not only imperial ambition but also European systems of knowing. Since it implies a loss of bearings, “as a *discurso* (a route and a representation)...the shipwreck effects a forced abdication of knowledge on the part of the writer who would otherwise construct an authority of the European subject moving through (and dominating) extra-European spaces” (33). Moreover, “the world no longer exists as it did in the Middle Ages: new projects of knowing are at stake when the shipwreck writers work as received epistemological traditions crack and groan under the weight of expansion and empirical newness. Shipwreck is the sign of this epistemological break, of a previous world crashing against the shores of its own demise” (40).

Blackmore does not include Oviedo’s narratives in his discussion, in part because his interest lies primarily with Portuguese texts and in part because, he argues, the frequent intervention of saints in Oviedo’s tales puts them in the category of miracle tales, rather than stories of disaster. It is true that a great deal of praying goes on in Oviedo’s shipwrecks and the saints frequently respond, often by pointing a few last desperate survivors towards food or drink. Yet the response of the saints is far from consistent. While answered prayers may in some cases pluck individuals from the jaws of death, they do not prevent the shipwrecks themselves, or save the majority of the crew and passengers from perdition; thus, while the narratives may have a miraculous aspect in an individual sense, their overall thrust is to convey collective disaster. And, as Gerbi’s image graphically suggests, the saints and the Virgin hover “on the crests” of the waves, not in them; they may be able to assist survivors, but they are powerless to contain the violence of New World nature, which has now turned its savage fury against the Europeans. Blackmore also notes that the *Historia* opens on a triumphalist note (33), and

points out that Oviedo's shipwreck narratives are isolated in a book apart, at the end of the *Historia* where they do not disrupt the overall imperial narrative. But Gerbi, referring to the shipwrecks' positioning at the end of the work, notes that "this arrangement—the story opening with Columbus's felicitous voyage and closing with a fortissimo chord of shattering timbers, screams, and desperate entreaties and whistling hurricanes—is perhaps the only deliberate attempt at 'composition' to be found in the History" (246). Far from lessening their impact, the shipwreck narratives' positioning at the end of the work in fact highlights their significance, allowing them to serve as a catastrophic denouement to the entire expansionist narrative that began with Columbus; thus, they in fact constitute precisely the kind of disruptive text about which Blackmore writes.

The narratives themselves are full of images which point to their symbolic role as emblems of the shipwreck of empire, knowledge and control. As we have seen, Vilches identifies the fluctuation of values of distance and direction as a key index of the subversive liminality of oceanic (and American) space. Blackmore notes that a loss of bearings and sense of disorientation are key characteristics of shipwreck narratives, since they undermine "the centrality of controlled (maritime) itinerary as an agent of culture, political power and expanding nationhood" (40). This same directional confusion is typical of Oviedo's narratives. In one particularly dramatic example, Oviedo describes how a ship was lost on its way to Darién after it went off course due to the pilot's incompetence. The crew then departed in the only lifeboat, leaving the passengers to fend for themselves on an unknown shore. They were taken in and fed by the local indigenous people, and after fifty days departed in a crude boat they were able to make from the wreckage of the old ship, travelling "sin aguja ni carta de navegar ni piloto, e sin saber a

dónde iban ni a dónde debiesen ir” (V:311; bk. 5 ch. III). They promptly began to quarrel over which direction to take, some advocating east and some west; they set off in one direction, and, finding nothing, reversed course “e así se andaban, como gente desatinada, de unas partes a otras,” for ten months, all but fifteen of them dying along the way. The sense of disorientation is overwhelming. Not only does the lack of bearings leave the survivors without any means of determining a route, it undermines their social cohesion, reducing them to a state of anarchy. Access to knowledge, and with it, civilizing social order, have been stripped away.

Disorientation also figures in the longest of the narratives, the tale of the Licenciado Zuazo. The chapter opens with an outline of a situation which in itself reflects waning imperial control and the dissolution of unified purpose. One Francisco de Garay has been assigned the governorship of the province of Pánuco (which Oviedo describes as next to or part of New Spain), but Hernando Cortés has already occupied the area. Zuazo’s role is to try to resolve the dispute without bloodshed by convincing Cortés to abdicate. Power struggles such as this are one of the key factors in Oviedo’s disillusionment, not only because they threaten stability but because they undermine the image of nobility implicit in his notion of Spain’s imperial destiny. Once underway, Zuazo’s ship encounters a terrific storm, and he and his companions find themselves tossed by enormous waves, “sin saber adónde estaban, ni poder gobernar el navío, ni se poder aprovechar del aguja ni cuadrante, ni de otra cosa en que pudiese quedarles confianza de salud alguna, mas de solo remitirse a Dios e dejarle hacer, porque en él solo confiaban y no en el arte e diligencia de piloto e marineros...” (V:324; bk. 50 ch. 10). All of the instruments of navigation, the very technology which enabled overseas expansion,

have been rendered useless. Here we see an extreme example of the unstable values described by Vilches; when the sea turns violent, the compass needle does not simply fluctuate, it ceases to function in any meaningful manner. The ship breaks up on some reefs and craggy rocks to which the survivors cling, but many lives and all the cargo are lost. Zuazo suffers the worst material loss, because in addition to gold and silver and jewels, he has lost his books; the following day he sees them, floating uselessly on the water (V:325; bk. 50, ch.10). It is a poignant image of powerlessness of European knowledge in the face of American nature.

Zuazo finds a boat and eventually a tiny island; finally, taking turns few by few in the small boat, the survivors make their way to the spit of land. There they suffer from terrible hunger and desperate thirst, until, after five days, five huge turtles come ashore. The castaways manage to incapacitate the turtles by flipping them on their backs; they then kill and consume them one by one, drinking the turtles' blood to slake their thirst. After killing the first one, shipwreck survivors "se echaron unos sobre otros encima de la misma tortuga, como si les hubiera aparecido una taberna de muy buen vino, o aquella saludable ribera del río del Tajo, que es una de las mejores aguas de España" (V: 327; bk. 50, ch. 10). For Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, who advocates a material rather than symbolic reading of the shipwreck books, "la sangre de tortuga se transmute, de inusual y repulsiva, no sólo en familiar y atractiva bebida para colmar la sed de los desolados náufragos sino en un intento de acercamiento de las inhóspitas tierras americanas a la más añorada y conocida realidad local peninsular" (144). But the men fall on the turtle so greedily not because its blood has somehow become less repugnant or more associated with the familiar; rather, its attractiveness lies in the fact that it offers the only available

means of survival under desperate circumstances. Rather than drawing American reality closer to that of Spain, as Sampedro suggests, the act of drinking turtle blood immerses the castaways in savage American nature.

The clearly barbarous connotations of drinking blood is not lost on Oviedo, who, in order to avoid casting the act in too negative a light, explains that Zuazo had read that while most types of blood have a poisonous quality, “la de la tortuga es buena e aun apropiada para los leprosos, y en fin las tortugas son sanísimas e para muchas enfermedades, como dice Plinio” (V:327; bk. 50, ch. 10). Be that as it may, the reader is left with an image of the shipwreck survivors plunging their faces into the turtle to drink its blood, and the savagery of the image is reinforced in the next section of the narrative. After finishing off the turtles, the castaways discover another islet, populated by large numbers of nesting birds; there they suck raw eggs—one man consumes fifty or sixty without moving from the same spot—and cut off the heads of birds in order to eat them raw. The raw food causes many to sicken and die, until Zuazo remembers having seen the Amerindians’ method for starting fires; he does as he has seen them do, using driftwood on the island, and is subsequently able to cook the eggs and birds. Two important points emerge clearly here. First, in consuming blood, as well as raw eggs and meat, the castaways are forced to eat what is not properly food, and thus to engage in the same type of category transgression which characterizes Oviedo’s discussions of American foods, especially in the case of cannibalism. Second, they are able to cook the eggs and meat, and thus make them into proper food, only by imitating the Amerindians. In other words, a sort of role reversal occurs here: it is the Spaniards who lapse into a state of nature and



violate European dietary norms, and it is only through indigenous practices that they are able to make their food fit for civilized consumption.

As Lisa Voigt has observed, accounts of the immersion of survivors in indigenous culture often play a key role in narratives of shipwreck and captivity. For Voigt, shipwreck and captivity narratives “frequently assert the value of the captive’s cross-cultural experience and the expertise derived from it” (1). The cross cultural contact does not imply the acceptance of indigenous culture; indeed, former captives who spent long periods among indigenous peoples were sometimes seen as threatening because they blurred the clear boundary between Spaniards and Amerindians (12). At the same time, however, the fact that the incidents of shipwreck or captivity had actually taken place gave the survivor an authority derived from first-hand experience, thus reinforcing the emphasis on empiricism so evident in descriptions of the natural world. Moreover, while the authors emphasized the veracity of their accounts, the narratives were often structured along novelistic lines in order to give pleasure to readers in Europe, who consumed such narratives not only as sources of knowledge but as entertainment. As Voigt explains “early modern representations and uses of captivity thus point to epistemological as well as generic transformations that predate and prefigure those associated with what would come to be known as the Scientific Revolution and the ‘rise of the novel’: the privileging of experiential authority and the proliferation of prose fiction claiming to be both true and entertaining” (1-2).

Oviedo’s account of Zuazo’s misfortunes was clearly intended to have entertainment value. The descriptions of the storm and the hardships are constructed in such a way as to maximize their dramatic effect. And, while the first-hand experience

here is once removed (since it is Oviedo rather than Zuazo who narrates the account), Zuazo's direct empirical experience of the most savage aspects of the New World is precisely what makes the account both interesting and believable. Zuazo's experience plunges him into the unstable and destabilizing space of the ocean, where survival depends upon abandoning not only his now-useless books but his adherence to European norms, including his revulsion at eating what is not considered food. Oviedo sees that subversion as both threatening and fascinating. Although he is not prepared to accept the immersion in American nature as something positive were it not required for survival, there is in the text an implicit suggestion that the forced abandonment of European values opens the way for new forms of knowledge based on experience.

Further examples of the consumption of non-foods occur throughout the shipwreck book, including cases of that most radical of all category confusions, cannibalism—but here, on the part of Spaniards. The last few survivors of the Darién shipwreck, whom we saw earlier wandering aimlessly in their makeshift boat, eventually find themselves becalmed in the open sea, far from shore. Close to starvation, they decide to draw lots to choose a victim whom the others will kill and eat. They are rescued before they consummate the awful deed, but the episode makes it clear that in extreme conditions, Spaniards have the capacity to become cannibals. That possibility is confirmed in Oviedo's summary of the now-lost chapter 13; that chapter, he says, deals with “the desventurada ocasion de cierta armada, de que salieron treinta compañeros en Tierra Firme, y por falta de comida comieron unos a otros hasta que de todo el número de todos dellos treinta, quedaron solo tres vivos” (V: 488; indice). In the extreme conditions imposed by shipwrecks—in a liminal ocean where distinctions between food and non-

food, between Spaniard and Amerindian, become as unstable as the fluctuating compass needle—survivors in some cases resort to extreme measures in order to survive.

Oviedo also includes some instances of Spanish cannibalism in other parts of the *Historia*, always under desperate conditions where disorientation prevails. One particularly noteworthy example (also cited by Jáuregui) is the tale of Francisco Martín. Here, the natural force which causes the Spaniards involved to become uncivilized is the jungle rather than the sea, but the effect is the same. Martín tells his tale to a group of Spaniards, themselves lost, who come upon him in the jungles of Tierra Firme, where he has been living in an Amerindian village for the past year. At first, the group's captain mistakes him for an Amerindian:

... topó con un cristiano desnudo en carnes, como nació y sus vergüenzas de fuera, y embijado,<sup>50</sup> y las barbas peladas como indio, e su arco e flechas, e un dardo en la mano, y la boca llena de hayo, que es cierta hierba para no haber sed, e su *baperón* (este es un calabazo en que traen los indios cierta manera de cal, para quitar el hambre, chupándola). E mirándole algo desviado, pensó que era indio... (III: 22; bk. 6, ch. 6)

Martín tells a long and rambling tale of how he and his companions wandered, lost and starving, through the jungle, aided at times by friendly Amerindians. The Spaniards split into smaller groups, leaving behind those too weak or sick to travel. Their sense of disorientation and helplessness in the face of hostile nature closely parallels the experiences of the shipwreck victims. At one point, a group of Spaniards returns to some of the men they had left behind, only to find one of them slitting open an Amerindian in

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<sup>50</sup> With his body painted with a red paste made of the crushed seed of the *bija*, a tree of the bixaceae or annatto family which the Amerindians used as body paint.

order to eat him. The group who has returned flees in horror, but later they themselves decide to commit an even worse atrocity, involving a group of Amerindians who have befriended the lost Spaniards. Most of the Amerindians have gone ahead in canoes, promising to return with food, and leaving behind their bows and arrows and seven of their number in a gesture of trust and friendship. Rather than waiting for the promised food, the famished Spaniards decide to seize the seven Amerindians, tie them up, and bring them with them like livestock, to eat along the way. All but one of the intended victims escape, but the unfortunate one who is left behind is forced to accompany the Spaniards to a vantage point from which they can see the river, in case the Amerindians who had left in canoes should return. After waiting for four hours, they kill and eat their victim, roasting what is left to bring along for later (III:26-7; bk. 6, ch. 7). Oviedo cannot contain his outrage at the incident, commenting that “yo no puedo creer sino que entre estos pecadores, andaba el Diablo, o alguno de estos pecadores era otro mismo Satanás” (III:26-7; bk. 6, ch. 7). Here, the active agent is not precisely nature but rather the Devil himself; nonetheless, by robbing Spaniards of their rationality (Oviedo goes on to describe the Spaniards as “privados del entendimiento”), the jungle and its hardships effectively act in collusion with the Devil. The disorienting effects of the sea and the forest strip away moral and epistemological certainties, leaving Spaniards vulnerable to the influences of the Devil.

As noted earlier, the tendency among Europeans to perceive American nature as inherently demonic does not reach its fullest expression until the seventeenth century (Cañizares Esguerra *Puritan* 18); Oviedo often refers to evil in connection with the Amerindians, but the monstrosity he sees New World nature is most frequently a question

of anomalousness and liminality, rather than outright diabolism. In a few cases, however, the natural world is linked to the Devil. In Chapter 4, we saw how tobacco, while not in itself demonic, facilitated contact with the Devil by depriving human beings of their senses, in much the same way that the jungle and the ocean do. In the case of hurricanes the link to the Devil is much more direct. Here the demonic clearly comes into play, especially in the first part of the *Historia*. Oviedo includes two separate chapters on hurricanes, and since they were written at different times, it is possible to see the shift from the author's earlier, more triumphalist attitude to his increasing pessimism in his later years. A chapter in the "Libro de depositos" in Book I describes two hurricanes in 1508 and 1509, while a chapter in the shipwreck book describes two more which occurred less than a month apart in 1545. In the earlier description, Oviedo notes with satisfaction that since the Sacred Host had been placed in churches and monasteries, the hurricanes had ceased. He adds that "desto ninguno se debe de maravillar, porque, perdiendo el señorío desta tierra el diablo, e tomandola Dios para sí, permitiendo que en ella sea plantada e permanezca, diferencia ha de haber en los tiempos, e en los tempestades e tormentas..." (I:147; bk. 6, ch. 3). Although Oviedo does not directly state that hurricanes are the work of the Devil, the suggestion is clear, and it is reinforced by a passage in which Oviedo describes the raging storm by saying that "parescía que todos los demonios andaban sueltos" (V:147; bk. 6, ch. 3), and two other passages where he comments that the tangled, uprooted forests appeared to be the work of the Devil (V:148; bk. 6, ch.3). Hurricanes occurred because, in the absence of the Christian God, the Devil could use New World nature as his plaything. With the imposition of Christianity and Spanish imperial rule, however, God had seized control of the natural world, and violent

storms had ceased. Since at this point Oviedo depicts hurricanes as a thing of the past, the fearsomeness of the storms is tempered somewhat by a sense of wonder; one senses that, even as he describes the terrible damage wrought by the hurricanes, Oviedo is impressed by their power and majesty as well as their destructiveness. Moreover, the intensity of the storms serves to highlight the power of Christian religious institutions in taming New World nature; as Cañizares Esguerra comments on this chapter of the *Historia*, “the armies of demons stalking the seas were in retreat” (146).

In the chapter on storms in the shipwreck book, however, it is the sheer terror of the storms that predominates. A particularly disturbing detail for Oviedo lies in the fact that hurricanes come without thunder and lightning; their failure to conform to Spanish models makes them all the more threatening (V: 407; bk.50, ch. 27). These later hurricanes have proven Oviedo’s earlier optimism to have been entirely mistaken. The storms are if anything even more violent than the earlier ones, and nature is just as uncontrolled and uncontrollable as it has ever been. God, acting through his saints and the Virgin, can save pious individuals, but New World nature appears irredeemable. European knowledge and power have, to paraphrase Blackmore’s apt expression, crashed against the shores of their own demise.

Throughout the *Historia*, as we have seen, the subversive otherness of American nature has emerged in Oviedo’s descriptions, even when he is extolling the elegant works of *Natura* or of God as the supreme artist. European language and systems of knowledge may simply be incapable of accounting for a reality so different from the familiar one, and European religion and imperial dominion may be incapable of controlling that reality. The power of the ocean to destabilize measurements of distance, direction and

even monetary value may, in the end, engulf and overwhelm European cultural norms. In the shipwreck book, these nagging doubts burst forth in an explosion of destructive fury. The violence is without cause or meaning, and God appears to have neither the will nor the power to control it. This view, of course, stands in sharp contrast to the ordered, meaningful natural world we have seen in *Las Casas*. As is evident in the friar's discussion of the plague of ants, disasters are not random. They result from violations of the natural order, as it has been constructed by God. While the Spanish presence in the New World has been disastrous, it has not undone the overall order of nature; the hope that the damage can be undone has not been totally extinguished, and God has not lost control of the natural order.

## Conclusion

Oviedo's shipwreck book brings us back once more to García Márquez's galleon run aground in the rainforest. European systems of knowledge have crashed against ineffable American nature, undermined by a subversive liminality which has destabilized moral, economic, and epistemological values. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that while the old ship was transformed by American nature, it was not destroyed. As should be evident from the preceding chapters, the need to describe the physical reality of the New World fostered a new emphasis on empiricism, which stretched the limits of established modes of describing and explaining the physical world; at the same time, however, sixteenth-century discursive traditions and ideological perspectives molded empirical descriptions, leading to widely divergent images of American nature. Like García Márquez's ship, these images survived--albeit in varying guises--for centuries, influencing Western concepts of the Americas. It will be useful here to look again at Turner's concept of liminality as a step in rites of passage, a destabilizing of the certainties of one stage of life in order to allow for the emergence of a new phase. If, on the one hand, the effects of describing American nature corroded earlier certainties, they also gave rise to new and more modern ways of understanding the world. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest a linear progression from a benighted medieval outlook to an enlightened modern perspective. The new epistemologies which arose in the wake of Europe's encounter with the Americas were deeply implicated in the imperial project; science has never been innocent when it comes to relations of power. Instead, what I have sought to emphasize is the complex interplay between empiricism, inherited systems of



knowledge, and ideology in the representation of the New World in Las Casas's and Oviedo's texts.

Las Casas's descriptions were guided both by his ideological commitment to defending the Amerindians and his background in natural philosophy, which caused him to frame his descriptions of American nature in terms of relations of causality. In addition, his writing reflects the influence of the poetic language of the classical *locus amoenus*, as well as images of the Earthly Paradise codified in medieval *mappae mundi*. Las Casas drew upon these traditions in his description of the edenic *Vega Real*, which formed the focal point of his centered spatial representation of the island of Hispaniola and served as the basis for his causal proof of the Amerindians' civilized nature. At the same time, however, Las Casas included numerous cases of strictly empirical description, as in his account of the rocky tablelands of one part of the island of Hispaniola and the deep underground cisterns beneath them. Here, his emphasis is on accuracy, even as he seeks to integrate these phenomena into his paradisiacal narrative by stressing the fertile soils which may be found in the tablelands, and searching for causal explanations for the cisterns. Likewise, while his descriptions of plants and animals in some cases emphasize the almost miraculous beauty of the creatures in question, they also show an attention to realistic physical detail even when he encounters unpleasant or dangerous creatures not in line with his overall narrative. Las Casas's descriptions of food follow a similar pattern; he depicts the positive aspects of New World foods in glowing terms, highlighting their role in nurturing superior human beings; likewise, he neutralizes their negative aspects with rational explanations. On the vexed question of cannibalism, Las Casas again turns to causality as a means of reducing the fearsomeness of the practice, while at the same

time turning the image of the cannibal around in order to highlight the voracity of the *encomenderos*. Finally, in explaining a natural disaster (the plague of ants which destroyed the *cañafistola* crop on Hispaniola), Las Casas again assumes the perspective of a natural philosopher, showing how God operates through the causal relationships inherent in the natural world.

Throughout Las Casas's treatment natural phenomena, it is possible to sense the tension between the various discursive currents feeding into his account. Yet that tension never totally engulfs what is an essentially stable vision of nature. In the end, Las Casas succeeds in integrating anomalous elements into his overall paradisiacal vision and his causal narrative. In a general sense, both the edenic and causal strands in Las Casas's work would continue to weave their way through descriptions of American nature for centuries to come. It is not my purpose here to posit any direct influence; rather, I will simply note in very general terms a few of the many developments which arose from the same mingling of paradisiacal imagery, empirical description, and Aristotelian causality which we have seen in Las Casas. In its idealization of the American landscape and its inhabitants, Las Casas's work bears an undeniable resemblance to utopian discourses and images of the Noble Savage (Arias, Rabasa "Noble Savage"). It is important to bear in mind that Las Casas's Amerindians were precisely the opposite of savages, and that the critique of progress which informs both utopias and the Noble Savage is not an issue for Las Casas; nonetheless, a lascasian strand certainly may be seen in many later utopian accounts. Las Casas's emphasis on causality may be seen in the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590) of the Jesuit natural philosopher José de Acosta; while his view of the Amerindians was less positive than that of Las Casas, Acosta shared with him a

commitment to explaining apparently anomalous New World phenomena in terms of rational causes, removing American nature from the realm of the demonic (Cañizares Esguerra, *Nature* 26). Las Casas's discourse of fertility and abundance also found expression in many later texts, particularly in the Andean region, where authors such as the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega employed it in defense of indigenous culture<sup>51</sup>. The paradisiacal theme continued to appear in works such as Antonio de León Pinelo's *Paraíso en el Nuevo mundo* (1645-50), which situated the Earthly Paradise in the Andes and included a catalogue of marvels, but also analyzed the various Andean microclimates (Cañizares Esguerra, *Nature* 116-121). Finally, the tendency to combine paeans to the sublimity of American nature with scientific discourse survived into the nineteenth century, in the work of figures such as Alexander von Humboldt.

Unlike Las Casas, Oviedo often found it difficult to fit his empirical descriptions within the framework of established models. The concrete, practical information which his role as official court historian demanded was often at odds with the classificatory system borrowed from his model Pliny, and his attempts to describe anomalous New World phenomena frequently resulted in unstable, liminal forms which defied classification. These monsters, or freaks of nature, also had roots in Oviedo's background as the author of a chivalric novel, a literary genre closely linked to medieval travelogues which populated distant realms with fantastic creatures. Pliny was another source of the monstrous tinge in Oviedo's writing; while Oviedo sought mainly to imitate the encyclopedic structure and scope of his model's work, the Roman author's descriptions of exotic creatures also exerted an influence. At the same time, Oviedo's background in the humanist courts of Italy led him to produce detailed sensual descriptions aimed at

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of the discourse of abundance in the Andes, see Ortega.

creating a vivid image in the mind's eye of his reader. A final element in the mix was Oviedo's ideological perspective. As an *encomendero* and a believer in the providential imperial mission of the Spanish crown, Oviedo had an interest in portraying the Americas as both worthy of possession and sufficiently Other to justify their subjugation.

All of these trends contributed to a vision of American nature that was, at every level, unstable and at times subversive of existing epistemologies. In contrast with Las Casas's ordered, centered space, the spatial concept underlying Oviedo's work is open-ended and indeterminate; his focus on particulars leads him to trace linear paths through space, which tend to branch and diverge in unpredictable ways. His depictions of plants and animals, while full of carefully rendered empirical detail and generally enthusiastic in tone, are often characterized by a classificatory ambiguity which causes Oviedo, not infrequently, to refer to the creatures he describes as monsters. In the case of food, Oviedo's love of sensual experience leads him to describe a number of foods in glowing terms, although classificatory liminality is again a persistent theme. His generally less than positive assessment of the Amerindians leads him to focus in many cases on the consumption of items which are not, by European standards, food; of these, the most egregious case is, of course, human flesh. The Amerindians' supposed cannibalism is an index of the barbarism which justifies their enslavement, but Spaniards in the Americas have also been known to resort to anthropophagy in extreme circumstances, suggesting a sort of contagion. Spaniards are most frequently driven to consume human flesh not only out of near-starvation but also out of the disorientation caused by being shipwrecked or lost in the forest. Storms and impenetrable jungles here act as agents, subverting the

moral values which prevent human beings from eating one another at the same time as they undermine the mathematical values of distance and direction.

Just as Las Casas's paradisiacal vision of nature found echoes in later discourses, Oviedo's empirical, if unstable, descriptions also participated in currents which would continue to resonate in succeeding centuries. The model through which Oviedo produced his *Historia*—compiling editing, and organizing information sent to him from a wide array of sources—would persist not only in the creation of books but in the production of the voluminous *Relaciones geográficas* through which the Crown sought to compile and systematize information from the New World. Oviedo was thus central to Spain's contributions to natural history and the early Scientific Revolution (Barrera-Osorio 101-127). The more affective aspects of Oviedo's work also bear some relation to later developments. Oviedo's monsters could be slightly threatening in their subversiveness, but they were not outright demonic. Later in the sixteenth century, however, and to an even greater extent in the seventeenth, monstrousness took on a more sinister aspect and the belief that American nature was controlled by the Devil became widespread among those writing on the Americas (Cañizares Esguerra, *Puritan* 120-177). Later still, the idea that American nature was inherently immature or degenerate took on scientific dimensions. The anomalousness of New World phenomena in relation to Old World norms—which Oviedo saw as monstrous but not necessarily a sign of inferiority—came to be perceived in the eighteenth and nineteenth century by writers such as Comte de Buffon and Georg Hegel as an index of America's ontological defectiveness (Gerbi, *Debate* xv-xviii). Still later, in the world of literature, writers such as Roberto Fernández Retamar adopted the Shakespearean monster Caliban as a symbol of Latin American pride

in its otherness, heterogeneous identity, and anti- imperialism. Like Oviedo's monsters, Caliban is a liminal figure, crossing boundaries of race and cultural purity.

A detailed account of the legacies of either Las Casas or Oviedo would include enough material for many dissertations, and I will not attempt such an endeavor here. My intent in this necessarily extremely cursory summary of later trends has simply been to show that Las Casas and Oviedo did not write as isolated individuals but rather as participants in a variety of sometimes conflicting intellectual currents. Las Casas's and Oviedo's thinking molded the future developments of those currents, even as it was being molded by them.

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