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Rereading the New World Chronicles

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Rereading the New World chronicles, the *cartas*, *relaciones*, and *historias*, has become a very popular enterprise in the face of the upcoming Quincentennial. While many scholars are straining to hear the voice of the "Other," silenced by the sword of the conquerors and the cross of the missionaries, it is equally important to reevaluate the voices that resounded loud and clear from the New World during the 16th century. The conquest was an undertaking that encompassed multiple interests. Reassessing the countless times that the individual interests of the conquistadors themselves, the commercial, military and political interests of the Crown and the evangelizing and, of course, political interests of the Church intermingled in cooperation and in conflict is scarcely new. But Octavio Paz reminds us that history is a text in which some passages are written in black ink and others in invisible ink (23). By delving into the silence that the invisible ink represents, we advance in the reassessment beyond the explicit information presented or denied by the writers of the narratives to that which was ignored or deliberately concealed. The purpose of this study¹ is to construct a more complete reading of *La segunda carta de relación* of Hernán Cortés, by investigating and comparing it to the wealth of information, both explicit and implicit, revealed in the *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* of Bartolomé de Las Casas and the *Carta al Emperador: Refutación a Las Casas sobre la colonización española* of Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía). Gold, glory, greed and personal gain, utopian projects to protect the natives, encomiendas to protect the interest of those who protect the interest of the Crown: all of these are recurring themes in New World discourse. That the written word wielded power in the conquest of the New World is beyond controversy. The interesting question in relation to the four narratives under discussion here is how and why the written word of Hernán Cortés was so powerful that it engendered the wrath of Las Casas, the defense of Motolinía and the "true" history of Díaz del Castillo.

The relationship of a work to its intended reader is of utmost importance to a study of this type. In three of these narratives the addressee is the Crown; these three are petitions—petitions that only the Crown has

the power to grant. For Cortés it was supremely important in 1520 to gain the support of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. One of Cortés' aims was to inform the Emperor of the happenings in the New World. While doing this he would not ever lose sight of his own personal aspirations. Cortés had the aspiration to become a nobleman and thereby to gain access to the privileges that the nobility enjoyed. As to his success in this personal endeavor, history records that eventually he was named governor and captain general and finally Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca. But at the time of the writing of the second letter, Cortés had defied the Governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, and only Charles V could validate Cortés' mission of conquest in Mexico. Only Charles V could stop the sabotage of the conquest by Velázquez and his agent Pánfilo Naváez. And only Charles V could send the reinforcements and supplies that Cortés so badly needed to continue. Bypassing the Council of the Indies in an effort to avoid censorship, Cortés sent this missive and also the other *cartas* directly to Charles V.

In 1552 Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas attached an "Argument" and a "Prologue" to his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* which he had originally written some ten years earlier. This new edition he addressed to the Crown in the person of the Prince of Asturias, the future Felipe II, whose duties included overseeing the business of the Council of the Indies. Las Casas wrote not in his own behalf, but in behalf of the natives. By the time the work was actually sent to the Prince and published in Sevilla, these natives had suffered for more than thirty years in Mexico and longer in other parts from the tyrannies of the conquerors. Reminding the Prince that it is the duty of the monarch to protect those entrusted by God and his Church to the care of the kings of Spain, which Las Casas insinuates the present monarch is not doing, the Dominican priest begs him to persuade His Majesty, the Emperor Charles V, to stop what he sees as the violation of the natural and divine law: the maltreatment of the natives by the *encomenderos*. Cortés professes to act in the service of his king and for the good of Spain against those "traitors and bad vassals," of course referring to Velázquez and Naváez, who he says want to usurp the territories of the king (Cortés 75). Likewise Las Casas, from his own position as God's messenger, begs the Crown to receive and read his *carta de relación*, assuring the Prince that he pleads in the name of those who wish only to serve for the public good and prosperity of the state (Las Casas 73).

Later in 1552, Motolinía answered the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, also addressing Emperor Charles V. Recalling the long history of tribal wars and the cruel and "barbaric" Aztec domination of the other tribes in Nueva España before the conquest, Motolinía defends the actions of Cortés and begs the Crown to stop Las Casas from spreading

his abominations against Cortés. Motolinía argues that while as a man Cortés may have been a sinner, he was also a person of faith and good Christian works, a man who displayed a great desire to use his life and resources to amplify and augment the faith of Jesus Christ and to die for the conversion of the gentiles (95). Motolinía defends the *conquistadores*, *encomenderos* and *mercaderes* and asserts that these *cristianos* have done only what His Majesty himself has commanded. He discredits Las Casas in his letter to Charles V: "Por cierto, para con unos poquillos cánones que el de las Casas oyó, él se atreve a mucho y muy grande parece su desorden y poca su humildad." He wonders how His Majesty and his counselors have suffered "un hombre tan pesado, inquieto e importuno y bullicioso y pleitista, en hábito de religioso, tan desasosegado, tan mal criado y tan injuriador y perjudicial y tan sin reposo" for such a long time (58-59).

Years later, Bernal Díaz del Castillo addresses ordinary readers, among them his children and descendants to whom, having no other riches, he leaves his "true and notable" story. Díaz del Castillo wishes to establish the reputation of the common soldier and to assert his own claim to fame. He narrates many of the same events that we see in Cortés' story but he does so from the perspective of an eyewitness, a soldier who observed the events and insists that both his contribution and that of his fellow soldiers be acknowledged among the heroic deeds of the "valeroso y esforzado capitán don Hernando Cortés" (xxxv). He very systematically sets about establishing his authority. At age 84, after telling his readers that even though his eyesight and hearing are failing, he is careful to stipulate that he remembers everything as if it were yesterday. His narrative is filled with mental verbs,² i.e., thinking, believing, knowing, etc., to express his inner, mental processes, which provide stringent evidence that he was not only present at the events which he narrates but make the readers privileged to his very thoughts as he recalls the events he witnessed so many years ago. Referring to the moment when he and the other soldiers first glimpsed the wonders of "la gran ciudad de México," he alludes to the insufficiency of verbal language to express what they saw: "[V]imos cosas tan admirables no sabíamos qué decir"; then he draws his audience further into the wonder as he continues "o si era verdad lo que por delante parecía [...]" (160). What they saw defied the realm of truth as they knew it. By first establishing his own credibility as narrator and eyewitness and then by use of a multitude of explicit descriptions, he is able to persuade the reader that the reality of the events he describes and his authority to report them are not ever in question.

Switching from the content of the narratives to the mechanics of the same, let us consider briefly the relationship that the narrators establish

among themselves and their materials. W. E. Bull, Boris Uspensky and Emile Beneviste, among others, have shown how writers use the grammatical elements and structure of a language, particularly verb tenses, to establish this relationship and to place themselves within, or distance themselves from, the text. For example, the use of the imperfect, like the use of the present tense, allows the writer to describe from within the action and, equally important to this discussion, to place the reader at the center of the scene being described (Uspensky 74). All of the writers herein considered were very proficient in using verb tense in this way as a method of manipulating the text. Cortés mainly reports events as they happen, using the present tense. For events that have happened only a short time before he uses the imperfect. Díaz del Castillo positions himself within the text using the imperfect almost exclusively. On the other hand, the continual use of the preterit tense, which one observes in Las Casas and Motolinía, places these writers outside the events they are narrating because neither was present as the events they narrate took place. They must, as we shall see later, rely on other devices to establish credibility in their narratives.

But for the moment, let us return to Cortés. Writing only a few months after the initial entry into the city of Tenochtitlán, Cortés' letter to Charles V is a carefully calculated pose. He firmly plants himself as the witnessing eye on the inside of his narrative. He carefully constructs his sentences using the present tense to constantly remind the Emperor that he is there, taking good care of everything, and of course he often adds that he is doing all of this in the name of the Crown for the glory of God and Spain. He uses the preterit to report his contact with the natives. This serves to distance the Aztecs from the "important" activities and deny them significance in what is essentially their own story. Just as calculated as the manipulation of the text by the use of certain verb tenses is the tactic of eliminating the verb altogether which tends to make the sentence and therefore the subject of the sentence weaker and less effective. Using this device, Cortés describes the two hundred members of Moctezuma's advance party without a verb: "todos descalzados y vestidos de otro librea o manera de ropa asimismo bien rica a su uso y más que la de los otros" and then continues to narrate the sequence of events, alternating the imperfect tense with the present in order to keep himself firmly planted in the middle of the action. Cortés finally completes his description of the arrival of Moctezuma: "[E]l dicho Mutezuma venía por medio de la calle con dos señores, el uno a la mano derecha y el otro a la izquierda" (51) still using the imperfect, not to lend importance to Moctezuma, but to highlight one more time his own presence. All of this intricate development combined with the very depreciative *el dicho Mutezuma* displays Cortés heroically

and denigrates the Aztecs and their leader. Cortés clearly constructs a reputation for himself just as carefully as he constructs a picture of Nueva España. He intertwines the episodes that highlight his own capabilities as a military leader and also piques the interest of the Emperor with details of gold and other riches which Charles V so badly needs to finance the wars that he is waging in Europe. Of course, Cortés is well aware that his royal reader cannot afford to ignore this possibility, so by underscoring the needs of the Emperor in Europe, Cortés insures the Emperor's support for his own project in Mexico.

Reading Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* after Cortés' *Segunda carta de relación*, one is struck with the contrast in descriptions. The contrast seems to lie mainly in the style of the descriptions. Cortés merely presents sketches (for example, the description of Moctezuma and his chiefs given above). Bernal Díaz del Castillo, describing virtually the same scene, paints it with bright colors and adds intricate details: "se apeó el gran Montezuma de las andas, y traíanle de brazo aquellos grandes caciques, debajo de un palio muy riquísimo a maravilla, y el color de plumas verdes con grandes labores de oro, con mucha argentería y perlas y piedras chalchuius, que colgaban de unas como bordaduras, que hubo mucho que mirar en ello" (161).

Except for an occasional pronoun as in *nos recibieron muy bien*, the reader would think that Cortés was alone when he entered Tenochtitlán. He almost always uses "I" and "me," again drawing attention to his own importance: "muchos señores que allí me estaban esperando, y me dieron . . . , y me hicieron . . ." (50). All the action verbs are in the first person: *así lo hice, me partí, entré*, etc., excluding the common soldiers except to mention their numbers in order to point out the extreme odds that he, Cortés, is able to overcome. Cortés makes himself seem bigger than life and coincidentally in the years to come Motolinía confirms this by comparing Cortés first to Job and then to Jesus Christ (95-96). By using primarily the first person "I," Cortés paints a self portrait which relegates the others in his bands to mere numbers while Bernal Díaz del Castillo paints faces on Cortés' numbers, using "we" to incorporate the Spanish soldiers so that the reader has no doubt as to the valuable contribution of the soldiers who were at all times right there beside their captain.

Cortés' style is dry and precise and he concentrates on places of possible military value describing embankments and towers and entrances and exits. He also focuses on items of possible commercial value furnishing an extensive description of the market. Cortés demonstrates for Charles V the rich bounty of Tenochtitlán. Díaz del Castillo, whose style is more like a travelogue, concentrates on the people. He includes details and descriptions that make the Indians come alive. He endows them with human

characteristics. He shows a developed familial system of governing. He describes Moctezuma himself with gusto attributing to him majesty and greatness, almost always calling him *el gran Montezuma*. Why is there such a disparity in these two accounts?

Perhaps there is a disparity because Bernal Díaz del Castillo has nothing to lose. The events he is describing are long over. He reports that the Indians of Guaxocingo, Tlaxcala and Tlamanalco, among others, have warned the Spaniards to be careful because they might be killed once they have entered Tenochtitlán. He also calls the attention of the reader to the considerable bravery of men (such as himself) who are so brave as to dare to enter the city in the face of such warnings (160). Cortés, on the other hand, has to justify his actions. He has already killed many Indians and destroyed whole cities. It is in his interest to exclude details which portray the Indians as human beings with a developed civilization. For his own purposes he makes Moctezuma the "Other," the enemy. He ignores the greatness of the Aztec Empire. Describing the initial meeting with Moctezuma, Díaz del Castillo tells of the chiefs that *el gran Montezuma* sent ahead to receive them. Whereas Cortés reports almost with boredom that they arrived performing a ceremony of touching the ground and kissing it that kept him waiting almost an hour, Díaz del Castillo interprets this same ceremony as a sign of peace. Cortés needs to portray the Indians as warriors and barbarians, incapable of peace. Each man constructs for the reader a description that fits his own agenda. Díaz del Castillo sees no threat in the events he narrates. The Spaniards are being graciously received. Moctezuma sends his most important chiefs as messengers. The whole city, men, women, and children are shouting, not in anger, but in welcome. In short, Díaz del Castillo has no reason not to see the ceremony as a sign of peace. On the other hand, it is supremely important to Cortés that the sympathy of Charles V lie with the Spaniards and not with the Indians. Cortés recounts a conversation later in the day where Moctezuma tells him through an interpreter: "Y pues estáis en vuestra naturaleza y en vuestra casa" (52), but contrary to interpreting even this as an act of peace, Cortés continues to underline the engaños and conflicts among the natives. He cannot see signs of peace because peace offered by the Aztecs would have threatened the illusion he was trying to create for Charles V.

Cortés includes *algunas esclavas* on the list of money and clothes, as if the native women were not even alive. He likewise denies his native guides and interpreters personification. He mentions his interpreters only from necessity, never naming them or calling them anything other than *mis lenguas*. Unlike many accounts by Europeans who denied the native bodies their voices,³ these voices have no bodies. They are mere fragments. They have been erased, except for their voices; they are con-

trolled and manipulated. They are denied an integral project of their own. Even their culture is denied as they have become a part of the "body of the conquest." The most obvious example of this is the Indian woman Cortés met very early on in his expedition. She was very adept at learning languages and she was to become Cortés' main interpreter and his mistress. Díaz del Castillo and Las Casas, among others, often call her by her Indian name, "Malinche," and they, and even Motolinía, call her "doña Marina," the name the Spaniards gave her. History tells us that this refusal to personify Malinche is evidenced outside the text of his *Cartas de relación*. The son she bears Cortés is never acknowledged during Cortés' lifetime although that son is generally thought of as the symbolic beginning of *mestizaje* in Mexico. Several years after the initial conquest, Cortés gave Malinche to one of his lieutenants as a gift, a final depersonification of the woman who, to a large extent, made his success possible.

Neither Las Casas nor Motolinía was an eyewitness to the events under discussion, and therefore both had to use the preterite tense in their reporting. Because the preterite tense tends to distance the writer from the text, both use a combination of other devices to create an aura of credibility. Las Casas uses as his sources the letters of Cortés, his own considerable travels in the New World and testimonials of Indian origin. He is careful to punctuate his accounts with *según me dijeron* and *como ellos dicen*. Not only did his sources report, but those eyewitness sources reported to him personally. This device is effective although somewhat less effective than a first person ("I" witness) account.

Las Casas stresses the welcoming nature of the Indians as he recounts how Moctezuma sent "millares de presentes y señores y gentes y fiestas al camino, y a la entrada de la calzada de México, que es a dos legas, envióles a su mismo hermano acompañado de muchos grandes señores y grandes presentes de oro y plata y ropa." He does not elaborate on the entry of Cortés into Tenochtitlán. He passes from recounting the bloodbath that Cortés and his soldiers left in their wake on the trip from Chulula to the fact that, having entered the city and being graciously received by Moctezuma and his entire court, "según me dijeron algunos de los que allí se hallaron," Cortés had Moctezuma taken that very same day and put under the guard of eighty men after which they held him in shackles. He continues with the carnage (on the part of the Spaniards) that led up to "la Noche triste" in 1520. Las Casas' sentiments clearly lie with the Indians, always showing them to be peaceful, innocent until the Spaniards' dastardly deeds lead them to rebel. He describes the natives' capacity to maintain political order, refuting what Cortés has claimed. He uses the superlative form of adjectives to underline the positive characteristics and the

justification for the rebellion of the Indians: "por las causas justísimas," or the cruelty of the Spaniards: "las tiranías grandísimas" (109-111).

Whereas Las Casas used his extensive travels around the New World to establish his credibility, Motolinía tries to preempt the authority of Las Casas' account and render the Dominican priest's voice ineffective by depicting those same journeys as mere wandering and claims that Las Casas hardly stayed in any one place long enough to know what was really happening. Motolinía himself was in Mexico for many years, but he had not arrived when Cortés entered Tenochtitlán. He therefore proceeds as does Las Casas using the preterite tense to report, but he does not use the "according to what they told me," etc., of Las Casas. Instead, he relies on a *Sepa Vuestra Merced que* now and then to draw his reader into the narrative. Motolinía constructs his own narrative of the events in the New World by telling the king what is not true in the narrative of Las Casas. He uses phrases such as *y no [son] todas veces verdaderas* and *lo que así escribe no es todo cierto* when he alludes to Las Casas' claim that the Spaniards were mistreating the natives. Motolinía prefaces his own opinions with *ciertamente* and *por cierto*. However in the rare instance when Las Casas has stipulated something with which Motolinía agrees such as the fact that the encomenderos are obligated to teach the Indians with whose care they are charged, he hastens to assure the king that what Las Casas says *es la verdad*. Motolinía spends no time describing the scenery. He focuses on the horrible customs of the Indians invoking the name of *el demonio nuestro adversario* who was, he says, well served by the idolatry and human sacrifices that the Indians were perpetrating before Cortés was able to terminate these offenses and establish the holy Catholic faith (53). He praises Cortés' efforts to bring the natives to salvation. He refutes the charge of mistreatment and labels Las Casas' support of the Indians an "abomination." He explains at length that Cortés and the other encomenderos are fulfilling their duty and are taking very good care of the Indians. Motolinía asserts that at times he saw for himself that any error that was [inadvertently] made by the Spaniards was righted by Cortés through whom God had opened the door [for the missionaries] to preach his Holy Gospel. He calls Cortés *el Marqués*, subtly reminding the monarch that Cortés has already been rewarded and therefore legitimized by Charles V himself for his exemplary conduct of the conquest. He finishes by asking "¿Quién así amó y defendió los indios en este mundo nuevo como Cortés?" Apparently not quite trusting the Emperor to choose the "right" answer, he adds to the list of the virtues of Hernán Cortés and invokes the grace of the Holy Spirit as a final stroke (99-101).

Under the guise of being too busy to write about everything, Cortés pretends to save himself the trouble of more writing by leaving details for

the monarch to fill in with what he can imagine. Along the same line, Díaz del Castillo says that there are just too many marvellous sights, some of which he and the other soldiers didn't know whether to believe or not. Las Casas says that some of the events are just too horrible to recount and we have already said that Motolinía refers frequently to what "Your Majesty already knows." All of them are leading the Emperor to "read into" their narratives conclusions that will be beneficial to the individual writers.

Examples such as these in the four narratives are almost inexhaustible. For us, readers approaching the 21st century, the New World chronicles are still full of adventure. We find ourselves in awe of the enormous challenges faced by the Europeans who chose to explore and inhabit the New World and the horrors they inflicted on the civilizations they found there. The controversy about who was right and who was wrong, who lied and who told the truth has continued for centuries. Because there are so many perspectives, the conflict will never be resolved, but conscientious consideration by active readers will continue to produce interesting insights. Only by coaxing the power of the language to work its magic will the voices from the 16th century relinquish their the invisible ink to bridge the gaps and fill the silences. Rereading the chronicles as a comparative endeavor yields new dimensions so that 500 years after the first diaries were written, the New World Chronicles still appear to have intriguing and provocative information to reveal.

● NOTES

¹ I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss topics related to this project with Nicholas Spadaccini and for his scholarly advice.

² For a complete discussion of the use of mental verbs, see Hamburger.

³ See, for example, Jara and Spadaccini (15) who refer to the obliterating of the voices of native chroniclers on the part of Europeans and Pastor who discusses the silencing of native voices at length.

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The Intertextual Intrigue of Carlos Fuentes's *Aura*

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In his remarkable novella *Aura*, Fuentes recreates the gothic setting and tone of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, borrowing not only from James's plot and characters but also from the thematic emphasis on the moral pressures of the past. The parallels between these two works are striking, and several critics have studied Fuentes's debt to James. Ricardo López Landeira's "'Aura,' 'The Aspern Papers,' 'A Rose for Emily': A Literary Relationship" includes a thorough analysis, and in *The Archetypes of Carlos Fuentes: From Witch to Androgyne* Gloria B. Durán proves Fuentes's familiarity with James by citing a letter dated 8 December 1968 in which Fuentes refers to James's Juliana Bordereau as one of his inspirations for the character of Señora Llorente (204). Also, Georgina García Gutiérrez adds a long footnote on James's work in her study of *Aura* in *Los disfraces: La obra mestiza de Carlos Fuentes* (117-19). But the intertextual intrigue of *Aura* extends beyond the obvious connection to James, for there are other sources that help create the unusual motifs that fascinate the reader. Familiar with Faulkner, Poe, and Hawthorne, Fuentes creates a novella that draws the contemporary reader of Latin American fiction, a reader very likely alert to the intertextual nature of much twentieth-century Latin American writing.

Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," for example, is a key source. For just as poor Emily devises a way of consummating her relationship with Homer Barron, insuring their eternal love by poisoning him and then apparently sleeping with the body for over forty years, Consuelo lures Felipe into her dark desire to be reunited with her dead husband by arranging for the sexual union of *Aura* and Felipe, the strange doubles of the old hag and the dead general. Faulkner's piece focuses on the unhappy life of poor Miss Emily, a fragile Southern belle who—after years of neglect, parental severity and jealousy, town gossip, personal tragedy, hereditary madness, and secretive perversion—earns simultaneously the narrator's disgust and affection. In the story, the pervasive "patient and biding dust"; the "stubborn and coquettish decay" of the dim, shadowy Grierson house; the "close, dank smell[s]"; the "thin, acrid pall as of the tomb" invoke the