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Dialectics of conversion:
Las Casas and Maya colonial Congregación

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INTRODUCTION

The fifteenth-century arrival of Europeans along the coast and eventually inland into the American continents is mostly known to us through the writings of Europeans. This essay begins by recounting the story of one extraordinary Spaniard, Bartolomé de las Casas (Figure 1), a somewhat unwilling entrepreneur turned radical advocate of the Indians. Our sources are mostly his extensive autobiographical writings. Biographical or autobiographical narratives have a logic of their own that can seamlessly move into history, even a poststructural history. On a specific level all is writing here [1] in one form or another. What we know directly from the Indians, they have written, so to speak, into the land or have left in the form of images that remain as ciphers for us to read. Writing the histories of these kinds of historical phenomena demands a different kind of looking and writing, an ethnohistorical approach through which we combine archeology, art history, oral stories and the markings of the land itself. Therefore, the second half of this essay shifts in tone, method and perspective, so that we may read land and decipher images in an attempt to write a dialectical history of congregación: the strategy the Spanish adopted to convert Indians of the New World to Christianity. The origin of congregación begins with the thoughts of Las Casas, which he minutely records in written accounts. When it is implemented, however, conversion itself is fractured and redefined by the indigenous population it was meant to transform.

PART I. STORY LEADING TO A PLAN: NARRATIVE – BIOGRAPHY¹

In 1538, forty years after he had arrived in the New World, Bartolomé de las Casas finally won the right to attempt peacefully the conversion of Indians. When he first arrived in 1498, a member of Columbus’s third voyage, he was a twenty-four-year-old educated
entrepreneur curious and ready to begin the life of a Spanish gentlemen in the newly dominated colonies. He arrived on the island of Hispaniola (Dominican Republic) when Spanish conquistadores were infiltrating the neighbouring island of Cuba. In the village of Caonao in the central fertile provenance of Camaguey, Las Casas witnessed the everyday life of the indigenous people who were then brutally and treacherously massacred by his land-hungry unrestrained Spanish companions. This experience fundamentally changed his perceptions of both the Spanish and Indians and challenged him to find another way towards Spanish colonial rule.

After witnessing the Caonao massacre of 1514, Las Casas refused to accept a repartimiento (gift of land and Indian slaves from the Spanish crown) in Cuba and instead returned to Spain to plead his case before King Ferdinand and Cardinal Ximenes, two of the most powerful arbitrators in the affairs of the New World. Both king and cardinal were openly concerned by his report and in 1516 named Las Casas “Protector of the Indies”, empowering him to impose sanctions on colonists in the New World who perpetrated such acts as the massacre at Caonao. Las Casas, however, went beyond condemning violent conquest to speak out against the repartimiento system itself, claiming that the natives of the New World could be peacefully converted to Christianity, and thus become rightful citizens of the growing Spanish empire.

Armed with his new title, Protector of the Indies, Las Casas returned in 1516 to Hispaniola for the second of what would be eleven voyages between the New World and Spain. In these early years, his plan to end the repartimiento system, ostensibly ending

Figure 1. Don Barthélemy de Las Casas, Évèque de Chiapa, Protecteur des naturels de l’Amérique. From Ourves de don Barthélemy de las Casas, J. A. Llorente (1822). (Courtesy of the New York Public Library.)
slavery of Indians and the violent seizure of their land, was a complete failure in practice. Neither the church nor the loose political infrastructure of the newly forming colonies had sufficient power over the acts of conquistadores or colonists; nor were they in agreement on the parameters that should govern Spanish treatment of Indians. Were Indians human? Could they be Christianized? Should they be enslaved? These were questions that remained unanswered deep into the sixteenth century.

Unable to stop the repartimiento system, Las Casas shifted his strategy. For the next six years he would plead for a portion of the New World in which he could carry out an experiment of peaceful conversion. If this experiment were to be successful he could offer it up as a blueprint to be followed in new territories in the Americas being explored and colonized each year. Like Plato before him, attempting to realize the Republic on the coast of Sicily, Las Casas desperately wanted to prove that, far away from economic ambitions and violence, a new kind of society could form.

One of the obstacles to his plan was that Spanish colonists did not want to be labourers in the New World. If they were to make this voyage and leave the comforts and familiarity of the Old World behind, the least they expected was to become fincberos in the New World: landowners and entrepreneurs, a kind of new gentry. So who was to do the labour if the Indians were not to be enslaved and their land appropriated?

In 1518, in response to these questions of labour and land, Las Casas came up with his first specific pragmatic plan that was endorsed by Charles V, the new young king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor. This plan included the selection and transport of fifty Spanish colonists who were given financial incentives and Africans as slaves to begin a community that would include the indigenous Indians as neighbours and collaborators in the formation of a colony in Cumaná, a region on the north-east coast of Venezuela. These fifty colonists, Las Casas’s private knights, so to speak, were to be dressed in white with large red embroidered crosses to signal to the indigenous population that they were different from the earlier wave of colonists that had been so violent and ruthless. With a rich agricultural base and access to pearl fishing on its coast, Cumaná was to potentially provide this brave new world of Spaniards, African slaves and Indians with the economic self-sufficiency they would need to be successful and live in harmony.

When the Cumaná experiment ended in disaster in 1522, due in part to the naivety of the plan and the unabated greed of the colonists, Las Casas returned to Hispaniola dejected and defeated. In 1530, after eight years of seclusion in a Dominican monastery, Las Casas, now an ordained monk, returned to his lifelong struggle as Protector of the Indies, a struggle he would continue until his death thirty-six years later. It was during this next period that he would begin to use writing as a tool to document and influence the colonization process. His first published work of 1535, after this long period of seclusion, was De Unico Vocationis Modo [The only way to conversion]. Here he clearly articulated his theory that the only way to convert anyone to the Christian faith, and to do this as a Christian, was to convert them through peaceful persuasion.

In 1538, three years after the publication of De Unico, Las Casas would finally have his opportunity to successfully implement this theory in highland Guatemala. He had arrived in Guatemala on his way to Peru to stem the already notorious violent conquests lead by [2] Pizarro. While there he heard about a mountainous area called Tezululítlan. The Spanish conquistadores had given it this Aztec name, meaning “Land of War”, because it was the region where the Quiché Maya had been most resistant and unconquerable up to that
time. The warring resolve of the Maya to repel Spanish invasion combined with the steep mountain passes temporarily dissuaded even Pedro de Alvarado from further attempts at conquest. Alvarado had been a lieutenant under Hernán Cortés in the conquest of Mexico. Shortly afterwards, in 1524, he was given his own troops to move south and continue the conquest into southern Mexico and Guatemala, where he was eventually made governor. When no gold was found in these regions, Alvarado left Guatemala for Peru, at the time Las Casas arrived.

Tezulutlán was thus an extraordinary region where the Maya maintained much of their pre-conquest lives separated from the direct effects of colonization by the very terrain they inhabited. On 2 May 1537, Alonzo Maldonado, the temporary governor of Guatemala, granted Las Casas sole jurisdiction over this region for a five-year period. During that time no other colonists, conquistadores or Spaniards of any kind, other than the governor himself, would be allowed in Tezulutlán. This gave Las Casas the opportunity to introduce Christianity through a new method devoid of the physical violence or overt economic motives that had characterized contact up to this point. This experiment in Tezulutlán was to be fundamentally different from his attempt fifteen years earlier at Cumaná. Unlike Cumaná, with its easily accessible pearl fishing, Tezulutlán was isolated from the colonizing process, and, furthermore, Las Casas was seeking to engage directly with the indigenous Maya to transform them into a Christianized colony of Indians devoid of other Spaniards other than the Dominican monks who travelled with him.

With exclusive access to Tezulutlán, infamous to the Spanish as “The Land of War” [3], what specific strategies would Las Casas and his monks devise to Christianize and colonize the Quiché-speaking Maya inhabitants of the region? From the Dominican monks out to the mountains highlands of this region the only liaisons were Maya merchants [4], who, since the arrival of the Spanish, began to acquire and trade selected European goods, such as scissors, mirrors and bells. Knowing this, Las Casas and his monks, Luis Cancér, Pedro de Angulo and Rodrigo de Ladrada, decided to send along with these material goods a modified version of the central themes of Christian belief. They first wrote the story of Christ into coplas (rhyming Spanish couplets), and then translated these couplets into the Quiché language. Over a three-month period they taught the Quiché translation of the Passion of Christ to the Maya merchants, and set it to music using the indigenous drum and flute of the Guatemalan highlands.

The Christian ethos and message was thus packaged along with other European goods for the isolated Maya of Tezulutlán to consider at their own pace on their own terms. One of the Maya rulers from around the lake of Atitlán was particularly taken by these verses and the description of the monks by the travelling Maya merchants. These monks were distinctly different from other Spaniards, and this Christian story and mention of new gods, sung in their own Quiché language, made such an impression that the Maya ruler sent his own son back to Santiago de Guatemala with the merchants to meet Las Casas and the other Dominicans. With this began a new kind of contact, one that moved along trade lines and involved the slower process of language, translation and the space for curiosity. After a short visit with Las Casas and his monks, the ruler’s son returned to Atitlán with the Dominican monk Luis Cancér who spoke the Quiché language. After several months of living in this Maya region Cancér had Christianized the ruler to such an extent that when Las Casas himself arrived there in October of 1537 they baptized him Don Juan and together oversaw the construction of a Christian church.
The experience with Don Juan emboldened Las Casas in the next phase of conversion that would take place in the Maya town called Rabinal, and this is where congregación begins, in actuality. In Rabinal, Las Casas and the Dominicans introduced the Passion of Christ through the Quiché couplets set to music. They then expanded on this strategy to include medieval passion plays of the basic stories of the Old and New Testaments, to be performed by Maya inhabitants of Rabinal in the Quiché language. While introducing this new set of religious stories, Las Casas further persuaded the ruler of Rabinal to move his people from scattered mountaintop areas into a consolidated area in the valley of the region, where they would then build a Christian church with images of saints, to replace Maya temples and idols. The people of Rabinal, at first reluctant to leave their lands, eventually relocated their homes and small agricultural plots of land, know as milpas, around the newly constructed central church. This city plan, medieval in its format, and classical in origin, provided Las Casas with two simultaneous and inextricably intertwined “successes”. He was able to demonstrate that the Maya, and indigenous people of the Americas, could be peacefully converted into Christians (at least apparently so), and he could congregate them into small city units that would be monitored and taxed within the new expanding territories and logic of colonial Spain.

The concept of congregación had been written into the Laws of Burgos of 1512, the earliest laws intended to structure the colonization of the New World; it would be later written and codified to the New Laws of 1542. As a lived strategy it began here in 1537 with the Maya of Rabinal, Las Casas and his monks, and would remain into the twenty-first century as the underpinnings of postcolonial life in highland Guatemala. What had been named Tezulutlán (land of war in Nahuatl) by the soldiers of Spain, would in 1847 be renamed Verapaz (true peace in Spanish) by the Dominicans.

What took place between 1537 and 1538 would become on several levels a blueprint for the colonization of indigenous peoples of the Americas under Spanish rule. This would include diverse territories and peoples from Mexico and the Caribbean south to the tip of Brazil. The plan and its implementation were a performance of sorts, orchestrated by Las Casas with his now forty years of experience in the Americas. It was a plan devised to convert systematically indigenous people, religiously and economically, through city planning as an alternative to the chaotic and brutal warfare that had marked the first half century of the Spanish invasion into the New World.

PART II. COLONIAL DEBATES AND BOOKS: HISTORY – TEXT

In the first years of European contact with the Americas, Pope Alexander VI, in the Bull of 1493, granted Ferdinand and Isabella sovereignty over the newly encountered territories across the Atlantic, provided that they Christianized its inhabitants. How to Christianize the inhabitants and what this sovereignty actually meant, how it would be administered in terms of land and peoples found there, was not specified. One piece of this administrative challenge had to do with encouraging and compensating Spanish colonists, who were to be the first European settlers, a situation Las Casas had tried to address in 1522 with his colony at Cumaná. In the West Indies the Spanish crown granted these colonists
land and Indian slaves. Originally, the legal term used for these land and labour grants was *repartimiento* (distribution).

With growing concern within the Catholic church and Spanish crown over the human status of Indians and the spiritual consequences of cruelty towards them, slavery was officially banned and new laws of conduct were drafted, known as the 1512 Laws of Burgos. These laws were meant to remedy ambiguities that may have lead to excessive violence and death of the natives in the New World. In these laws we can clearly see the Spanish legal and theological council struggling to write specific guidelines that would nurture the Christianization of the Indians, as well as assure economic growth.

According to the Laws of Burgos, the greatest obstacle to the religious and economic transformation of Indians into true citizens of Spain was that “their dwellings are remote from the settlements of the Spaniards ... Because of the distance and their own evil inclinations, they immediately forget what they have been taught and go back to their customary idleness and vice”. To remedy this, the laws *proscribe* [5] a distinctly feudal paradigm in which land and Indians would be given to colonists in what would then be called an *encomienda* [6] rather than *repartimiento* grants. The very term *encomienda* was a historical term dating back to the fiefdoms of medieval Spain. This semantic shift from the use of the *repartimiento* to *encomiendo* was thus a distinct way for Old World Spain to indicate that in the New World they were not instituting slavery nor any kind of new system incompatible with Christine doctrine, but rather, at least in part, returning to an older method associated with the medieval estates. Under these new laws Indians were not to be enslaved, nor made into beasts of burden, but rather gathered around their new Spanish superiors, much like serfs around a feudal lord.

In section III of the Laws of Burgos we can see the writers awkwardly juggling diverse and disparate needs in the religious and economic conversion of the natives:

> [W]e order and command that the citizen to whom the said Indians are given in encomienda shall, upon the land that is assigned to him, be obliged to erect a structure to be used for a church ...; and in this said church he shall place an image of Our Lady and a bell with which to call the Indians to prayer; and the person who has them in encomienda shall be obliged to have them called by the bell at nightfall and go with them to the said church, and have them cross themselves and bless themselves, and together recite the Ave Maria, the Pate Noster, the Credo, and the Salve Regina, in such wise that all of them shall hear the said person, and the said person hear them, so that he may know who is performing well and who ill ...

In this section the writers further reveal their interest in how to teach the Indians daily the basic elements of Christian practice, prayer and church-going, within a highly structured labour schedule, with both regulated by the ringing of the church bell. These distinctly feudal arrangements on the one hand were meant to humanize the Indians, to socialize and Christianize them, but on the other hand they were meant to infantilize and subordinate them within a nascent capital economy. As Spain was extracting more and more raw materials including silver from the New World, thus growing Europe’s potential domination of capitalistic global markets as far east as China, they were simultaneously resorting to feudal labour relations and feudal domestic and civic planning to contain, control and subdue the native populations of their new territories, marking this as a
time of rapidly changing economic and social realities in which solutions were distinctly hybrid and anomalous.

The debate over the human and spiritual status of Indians began in the first decades of conquest, and continued for centuries. In the Laws of Burgos, the Crown, at least on paper, desperately sought to combat the dehumanizing reality of colonial domination. Indians had been so badly treated – forced to carry burdens that literally broke their backs, treated worse than animals – that one of the Laws of Burgos, Number 24, reads, “no one may beat or whip or call an Indian dog, or any other name unless it is his proper name”. Here we have a slight window into the tangled web of brutal impulses and a court thousands of nautical miles away feebly attempting to define a better world. What does it mean to have a law against colonists calling their colonial subjects dogs?

The Laws of Burgos were a success only in that they established a theoretical plan that Las Casas would later implement as congregación. As to the Christianization and treatment of Indians, however, the laws were a miserable failure in the first decades of contact and colonization, so much so that word quickly travelled back to Spain that thousands if not millions of Indians were dying due to the un-enforced new laws and unchecked Spanish cruelty. In 1530, response to such reports, Spanish students in Bologna had begun to protest that all war, even in self-defence, was fundamentally contrary to the Catholic religion.

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In the colonial New World Las Casas was not alone in his defence of the Indians. Among Dominicans there were several who came before and after him, such as Antonio Montesinos, who spoke out against slavery of any kind, or Saint Louis Bertrand, who was canonized in part for his divinely inspired methods of converting Indians to Christianity. What set Las Casas apart was his extraordinary ability and willingness to confront the papal court and the Spanish Crown, to confound and challenge them both to formulate and carry out an Indian policy that recognized Indians as human subjects. His descriptive writing about the brutalities of conquest and colonization coupled with his activist, pragmatic suggestions changed the very nature of experience in the Spanish New World. One does not speak in a vacuum, especially not in his position among the contentions of his contemporaries, whose greed and ruthless willing violence at times could circumvent his intentions. Nonetheless, his voice and perspective slowed the carnage and shaped a future markedly different from what it might have been.

Through his writings and public debates after the establishment of congregación in Rabinal, Las Casas became the central advocate for the humanity and protections of Indians. In his most widely read text of 1542, entitled A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (1992), Las Casas passionately defended the Indians as true beings of God, and the Spaniards as godless, cruel torturers. Throughout this text he stretches language as far as he can into a series of images through which he describes the horror of what he has witnessed; in doing so he also seeks to define the actions of the Spanish within what he calls the “eyes of God [and] the law.” He wants to expose not only the civic and social crisis at the outset of Spanish and Indian relations, but also to look deeply into what he experiences as an excruciating spiritual crisis. The extremely vivid and specific nature of Las Casas’s writing is best understood as a conscious rebuttal of earlier Spanish
accounts of a savage Indian in need of a civilizing process. In direct contrast to this Las Casas defines the Indian as an innocent being brutalized by Spaniards in search of endless domination.

[The Spaniards] forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could mange to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual’s head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mother’s breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks ... They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Savior and the twelve Apostles. (1542: 15)

For Las Casas it is the Indians who are lambs, sheep, noble while his fellow Spaniards have become wolves, tigers, savage lions, “not Christians”, he would later write, “but only devils”. Rhetorically Las Casas knows what he is doing here: intentionally inverting

Figure 2. Theodore de Bry engraving. From Narratio Regionum Indicarvm per Hispanos Qvosdam Deuastatarvm verissima (Destruction to the Indies), Bartolome de Las Casas (1598). (Courtesy of the New York Public Library.)

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the often used image of the Indian as devil and infidel,⁹ and instead characterizing his fellow Spaniards as the real devils prompted by greed and abandoned to violence, using fire to torture and destroy, audaciously doing so in honour, as Las Casas writes, “of Our Savior”.

In A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, Las Casas does not only visually describe, he also begins to sketch a theory of the epistemological status of the Indian in terms of Christian theology, civic law and the laws of nature, in this case as they were defined by Aristotle. First he looked to the gospels, specifically to Matthew 28:19, after Christ has risen from his tomb when he says to his Apostles:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

Las Casas must have felt that Christ was speaking to him through Matthew when he said, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations”. Certainly Las Casas was physically, so to speak, “at the end of the world”, the known world that is, and these Indians, Las Casas deeply believed, were children of God who simply did not yet, but could, know the one and true God.

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On the other side [10], on 5 May 1544, the Dominican provincial Diego de la Cruz sent a letter to Charles V in which he vehemently argued against allowing Indians to preach or even study Christianity, claiming that Indians are not “stable persons ... nor is their language sufficient or copious enough as to be able to express our faith without great improprieties, which could lead easily to serious error” (D.I.I., VII, 541 [11]). This extraordinary claim by de la Cruz that the Indian language itself was incompatible with Christianity was just one of hundreds of testimonies demeaning Indians, fuelled by religious and social claims of European superiority that were meant to guarantee full reign to Spanish domination over Indians as if they had no rights beyond that of a tree, a stream of water or a dog.

The debate on whether Indians could be Christianized, and how they and their lands should be handled, raged so vehemently within the court of Charles V, that on 16 April 1550 he suspended all acts of conquest in the New World until a proper debate could determine the manner in which these new lands should be occupied and the Indians treated. The ensuing debate took place in Valladolid, Spain, during the month of August 1550. The debate consisted of hundreds of pages of testimony with Las Casas in defence of the Indians and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in defence of Spanish superiority and the “just causes” for war and Indian servitude.¹⁰ In his argument, most of which is published in the 1550 text Apología del libro de las justas causas de la Guerra contra los indios, Sepúlveda proclaims against the Indians that: “In prudence, talent, virtue, and humanity they are as inferior to the Spaniards as children to adults, women to men, as the wild and cruel to the most meek, as the prodigiously intemperate to the continent and temperate, that I have almost said, as monkeys to men” (Sepúlveda 1951: 33). Again, as in the 1512 Laws of Burgos, Sepúlveda returns to this issue of Indians as animals. In this case, however, he
wants without censor to return to the notion that Indians are animals, not people. He is careful to speak metaphorically, yet only in the most slightly veiled way, claiming that the Indian is a subhuman unable to receive the gospels or govern themselves. He exhaustively argues against the Christianization of Indians and further contests, based on theological and secular laws, that war against them is both necessary and just. For Sepúlveda, the Indian cannot be converted and thus the only way to properly proceed in the New World is to dominate, subjugate and colonize the new land along with their inhabitants.

In terms of secular law, Sepúlveda relies heavily on Aristotle’s arguments in Book I of the Politics, in his distinction between those who were by nature born to rule, and those who were by nature born to be slaves. At the outset of the Politics Aristotle defines the natural-born ruler as one that can, “foresee by the exercise of mind”, and the natural born slave as one that can only, “with its body give effect to such foresight” (Politics: Book I, 2). Aristotle goes on to support his social theory with an ontological analogy observing that “a living creature consists in the first place of soul and body, and of these two the one is by nature the ruler and the other the subject” (Politics: Book I, 6). The master is thus akin to the soul, which, when properly situated, rules over the body, its slave.

To combat specifically Sepúlveda’s claim that the Indian is only a tool or body devoid of a mind or soul, and thus justly to be used or owned, Las Casas praises the Indians in terms of their own “governance, politics and customs”, and even goes on to state that these Indians “exceed by no small measure the wisest of all these, such as the Greeks and Romans, in adherence to the rules of natural reason” ([13]: I, 4). As to their ability to be Christianized, in one of his last and most articulate pleas, Las Casas would testify in these debates at Valladolid that:

The Indians are our brothers, and Christ has given his life for them. Why, then, do we persecute them with such inhuman savagery when they do not deserve such treatment? ... [They] will embrace the teaching of the gospel, as I well know, for they are not stupid or barbarous but have a native sincerity and are simple, moderate, and meek, and finally, such that I do not know whether there is any people reader to receive the gospel. Once they have embraced it, it is marvelous with what piety, eagerness, faith, and charity they obey Christ’s precepts and venerate the sacraments. For they are docile and clever, and in their diligence and fits of nature, they excel most people of the known world.  

([ca. 1551] 1974: 42–3)

In 1514 [14], when Las Casas renounced his ownership of Indian slaves and land given to him as repartimiento, he would enter the bewildering worlds of Christianity and an expanding Europe as they redefined themselves within the context of conquest, capital expansion and human crisis. He would testify in person and in writing, struggling to establish some way other than through violence and greed for humanity to recognize and encounter itself. His struggle did lead to a nominally less brutal conquest into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with Indians free from the burden of slavery and endless war but, nonetheless, subordinated to a Western expansion that would abruptly relocate them into alien communities, forced to contend with a world newly defined by their dominators.
PART III. POSTCOLONIAL MAYA: ETHNOHISTORY – IMAGE

According to the 1512 Laws of Burgos, and subsequently guided by decisions after the 1550 debate at Valladolid, Dominican and Franciscan friars used Las Casas’s blueprint of *congregación* to relocate the Maya of Mexico and Guatemala who had survived devastating disease and the brutal violence of the first conquistadores and colonists. As Las Casas had done in Rabinal in 1538, these friars oversaw the building of a central church and the movement of Indian homes into its vicinity, a configuration that is still visible and still structures daily life for the Maya who today live in the Mexican state of Chiapas and the highlands of Guatemala. Equally important to the sixteenth-century friars as the building of churches was the conversion of these new subjects of Spain to Christianity. With *coplas* similar to the ones used by Luis Cancér to convert the ruler of Atitlán, the friars began to teach the Maya the basic Christian belief that human beings are fallen due to the transgression of Adam and Eve, that life is thus inevitably defined by sin and suffering, and that salvation through the martyrdom of Christ, the mortal son of God, would bring eternal life elsewhere.

Violence, sacrifice, *negotiating different calibres of time* [15], all this would have had efficacy for the Maya, would match certain elements of their cosmologies and meanings. For the Maya, the cosmos was made up of three realms: the upper, middle and lower worlds. The gods, as is told in the *Popol Vuh*, made blood sacrifices of themselves, mixed with cornmeal to create human beings, who in turn could talk to the gods, count their days, and make sacrifices so that ongoing cycles of time would continue at infinitum. To count the days the Maya created several different kinds of elaborate lunar, solar and Venusian calendars and charts. The pre-conquest Maya preformed a range of sacrificial rituals, from the offering of food and self-mutilation to, at the far end, human sacrifice.

Christian concepts of sacrifice as a means of linking the human and divine realms would have appealed to the Maya. The Christian belief in one god, and a messianic concept of time, however, would have been alien and counter-intuitive to their understanding. Although the Maya did have cosmogonies, stories that tell of the origins of things, such as we find in the *Popol Vuh*; they did not believe in one overarching concept of time with one beginning and one ending, dependent on a single savoir. In an attempt to gloss over the violent clash of cultures and beliefs, especially when constructing new colonial towns, the friars named the towns with a saint name combined with a Mayan name, for instance Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, or San Juan Cotzal. This syncretism in naming, half-Mayan/half-Christian, half-familiar/half-foreign was not, however, so facilely reflected in how the Maya would interpret or use the concepts or images of the saint, the structure of the church or, for that matter, Christianity itself. In the Maya highlands of the sixteenth-century the saints, their many numbers and their association with fragmentation and healing deeply appealed to the Maya. In embracing them they appeared on some level to have converted. In reality, however, the Maya were surreptitiously metabolizing Christianity, as they shaped and redefined their own concepts of themselves, transcendence, and the nature of time.

*Congregación*, although devised by the Spanish and implemented by Las Casas as a kinder means of colonization than the outright massacres of the first decades of conquest, was still a fundamentally violent assault on Maya social life and beliefs. As an agricultural society sustained by *milpa* farming of family-sized plots of corn and beans, the Maya had
hundreds of years of deep and specific relations with their immediate landscape. Corn itself was a gift of the gods, a gift that arrived each year only after dying at the end of the harvest. Sacrifices were performed on auspicious days before and after the harvest to ensure the continuation of this cycle necessary for the continuation of life. Each family had its own milpa, which allowed it to be self-sufficient. In addition, there were certain places in the landscape – mountains, caves, streams and other bodies of water – through which the Maya believed they had access to supernatural gods and forces, and a complex nexus of time that linked the living to those who had died. To be forcibly relocated away from their ideologically defined landmarks was as brutal an attack as the loss of their autonomy, lost with the arrival of the Spaniards.

In their new colonially defined feudal towns, the Maya re-established their practice of milpa farming, which slowly gave them at least subsistence level resources and the means to pay taxes in kind. They also found new places through which to access their concepts of the past and cosmic forces. Ironically, some of the places the Maya would go and continue to go for such access were the colonial churches, many of them built in the early decades of the sixteenth century.

Concepción Sololá

In the very isolated highland town of Concepción Sololá in the Guatemalan highlands, four hundred years after Las Casas, the Maya still actively lay hands on the colonial church placed at the centre of their town (Figure 3). The filigree stucco on its facade has recently been repaired and painted, as have the heraldic golden lions around its central window above the door. An iron cross with a weathervane still stands atop the structure with its bell and four saints secure in their right places. A parish priest from the larger town of Sololá comes into Concepción occasionally to say Mass or offer rites for the dead. Most of the time, however, the Maya of Concepción perform their own rites, independent of any official Christian hierarchy or observation. They diligently clean and repair the colonial church and hand-carved wooden altars. Most of the altars and niches are filled with polychromed saints, yet others are equally maintained as barren frames whose saint images have long been missing.

In one delicately arranged altar, Saint Dominic stands in the centre with a bible in one hand and ceremonial rattle in the other. Saint Dominic is dressed in brocaded ecclesiastical robes while Mary to his right and Joseph to his left are dressed in cloth that the Maya weave for themselves and wear in this highland town. Similarly, in Santa Catarina Zunil, Maya women take the cloth they weave for themselves and place it on their saints. In the cloth they weave a mark of where they are from, their specific geographic location within Guatemala.

Distinctions in weaving patterns and colours change from town to town; they change significantly enough so that you can distinguish a woman from Zunil from another woman who might live in the adjacent town. On the saint this woven cloth, which contains multiple elements of identity, becomes part of a composite image, a montage of cultures in which issues of difference and domination converge. What or who is being converted here becomes a question in the present. Imagine a Maya woman looking into the white face of this saint, who is draped in cloth that is of the same weaving as her own. There is no
simple equation of mirroring or mimesis. What is being made present is the space between histories. Through this montage of sculpted saint and woven cloth the Maya evoke the unresolved incongruities of their postcolonial world as a way to enter or rather encounter the contingencies of such a world. The forced conversion of the Maya to Christianity was a process initiated within the early colonial history of Western domination. The infrastructure and artifacts of that process continue into the present as the Maya themselves still contend with the often violent economic and social domination reasserted from the West in the form of NAFTA or other foreign policies written for the benefit of first world global expansion at the expense of local economies and cultures.  

In the landscape of the mountainous regions of Mexico and Guatemala, the Maya continue to work out relations of domination and meaning within these colonial churches. In the centre of the church in Concepción, ten or fifteen feet towards the apse, is a series of stone tiles placed on the church floor perpendicular to the high altar (Figure 4). There are twenty tiles made up of two rows of ten. In front of the tiles and along the right hand
side are loose flower petals and over the entire surface you can see the debris of candles and stains from poured alcohol. As the Maya pray they are counting, twenty the number of tiles, twenty the number of day names in their Pre-Columbian 260-day calendar, which is part of an ongoing ritual of counting the days. The tiles are steps that lead beyond the visible. They are like the candle itself, which begins with wax and a wick. When lit, the candle extends to fire, then smoke, until eventually all material moves along a path to the invisible. The candle begins as mass, then it disappears, apparently consuming itself. Similarly, the tiles are the step-by-step material initiation into somewhere else which is entered through prayer and the sacrifice of materials. The transfer of materials into the invisible marks a pathway from this world to another. The Maya of Concepción enter the church and come to these tiles first. They lay down their flowers, drink and pour alcohol around them, and begin to talk. They talk as if to someone or something they know. They start slowly with a prescribed set of initial prayers in Spanish that may include fragments of the Our Father or Hail Mary intermixed with an address in their native language. A connection is made and they go further into the specifics of why they have come, usually pertaining to daily needs about land or loved ones. Here the conversation becomes very personal, sometimes extremely emotional. From the tiles they then move on to other areas of the church, where they make other contacts through disparate objects and images.

This is not a simple opiate, this drive to expend a significant portion of vital resources on counting the days of their ancient calendar or adorning saints. In the motions of prayer

*Figure 4. Twenty tiles in the church Concepción Sololá, Guatemala. (Photograph by Anna Blume.*)
– the preparation, long walk and final communion – the church is transformed, and the self is saturated in a momentary dialogue with power and compassion. The saint images and the structure of the church, linked to a past and still continuous line of domination, are absorbed into an evolving Maya belief. Prayer to such objects, and inside such structures, is an act of interlocking with forces that are often ineffable, and as constant as the rising and setting sun. Saints, churches, woven cloth and crucifixes contain different meanings and forces that the Maya arrange and configure into a performance of speaking or exorcism of longing. Such acts of power are exercised precisely through the material leftovers of colonial and postcolonial history.

In the apse of the church in Concepción the pitch of such an aesthetic pushes to the edge of the material world. Here, through repetition and syncopation of form, the Maya take material to the threshold of sensation. At first, if you look down the centre of the church to the apse, editing out the side walls, it seems simple and serene; it could be a church in a rural town in Spain. The twenty stone tiles where the Maya of this town perform specific rites present only a slight fissure in the overall familiarity. Yet, when you pass the last pilasters before the apse, with a sense of shock you see over thirty different life-size crucifixes leaning up against the wall. The high altar, traditionally set to envelop the spectator in a singular contemplation of the host, is flooded with images of Christ. The Maya here disrupt the imported hierarchy of stressed authority, replacing it with syncopated, subtle multiplicity. Each sculpted figure is a Christ that, when looked at closely, is slightly different from the next. One’s head is more severely tilted or arms extended longer; the other looks down and is shorter. With no single source of eminence, spirituality and hierarchy are fragmented and dispersed. Spirituality is visualized as a cacophony of ongoing sacrifices. This is not a sequential movement common in retablos or fresco cycles of the conception, birth, and death of Christ: an identifiable narrative. This conscious repetition of the image of the crucified Christ places the passion in motion, evoking the moment of the death of Christ as if he had not died yet or did not die once, as if the moment kept repeating itself out of the past into the present, over and over again. This kind of repetition of sacrifice is much more like the Maya’s Pre-Columbian concept of the Maize God, God of Corn, who dies each year with the harvest and returns again each spring.

Amid and through material brought in by the Spanish and subsequently by international commerce, the Maya rearrange the artifacts of authoritarian rule into arrangements that echo elements of their own ancient beliefs, taking apart hierarchy, like removing a veil and replacing it at will, and in this movement making a place for themselves to intervene in history’s course.

San Juan Cotzal

In the town of San Juan Cotzal in the eastern portion of the Cuchematanes mountains, the Maya tell a story about the images of saints in their church. One day in 1983 a group of soldiers from the local base came in to hunt subversives. Not finding any, they began randomly to kill members of the town. Soldiers such as these were mostly Maya themselves forcibly recruited from one region of the country into a counter insurgency militia to oppress the Maya of another region of the country. This strategy of manipulating the Maya
to participate in the mechanisms of their own oppression began with the dictatorship of Rios Montt in 1982. Montt was a newly evangelized Protestant Christian with a desire to modernize and integrate Guatemala within global trade and economy. For him the obstacles to this end were the socialist legacy of the 1950s and leanings of the intelligentsia as well as the traditional lifestyle of the Maya, which included the syncretic Catholic indigenous religious practices and small-farm milpa agriculture. Montt systematically set out to isolate and eliminate both communities. During his dictatorship thousands of mostly middle-class educated resisters were either disappeared or killed and over 200,000 Maya were killed.14

On that particular day in Cotzal in 1983, when they could not find who they were looking for, the soldiers abruptly went into the church and there smashed altars and cut wooden limbs off the bodies of saint images. After the soldiers left, the people of Cotzal gathered the images of saints and placed them, like refugees, up against the wall, some with missing limbs exposed and others just standing there looking out over the pews. Other broken saints were placed back up by the main altar and covered with bits of old cloth wrapped around their broken bodies. The shattered or cracked panes of glass for altar boxes were left as they were and saints with tattered limbs returned to them. It remained that way in 1988, five years after the violence. What might have been repaired was left as it was. In a particular way, the saints in this and many other instances had become part of the history of the place and the process of life. The Maya of Cotzal did not erase the violence done to their saints, leaving danger to loom conspicuously in their church, making it present not as a spectacle or catharsis, but as a place where the Maya of Cotzal come to negotiate the loss or terror that had been placed inside them. Saints had become their companions through time. In Cotzal, and throughout Maya villages since the colonial period, these imported Catholic images have become phantasmagorical sites of contested meaning that move out from the realm of religion into the brutal facts of everyday lives.

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At a site in the Cuchumatanes mountains in the early years of the sixteenth century, Spanish friars chose a particular plateau atop one range of mountains to congregate Maya families that lived or had recently fled high into this formidable region. Maybe because it was so beautiful there, nothing like they had ever seen in Spain, they decided not to give this town a particular patron saint, but rather all saints, naming this town, as it is known today, Todos Santos Cuchumatanes.

About 500 metres from the central church that the Maya built to the friars’ specifications is a house made of mud and straw with white lime-painted walls on the outside, not unlike the homes the Maya live in throughout the highlands. Off the main road, this particular house sits inconspicuously in a field of corn, a milpa. Inside there are no images; there are simply two yellow boxes, one with a small wooden cross. Inside the boxes are bundles of very old papers and texts written in Spanish. The Maya of Todos Santo who come to this place do not read these books; they are mostly older members of the community who were never taught to read or write. They come here daily, however, to pray before these boxes. Only on special feast days do they take them out and process them through the town, as if they were sculpted images of saints or the Virgin. The caretaker of the box, named Don Pasquale, told me that all the animals, land and spirits of the liv-
ing and the dead are in those books, all three realms of the earth, beneath the earth, and above the earth.

When I began to read the old Spanish, it became clear that these books and papers were actual land documents related to the initial congregación of this town, generated over the past four hundred years. From book to book, one could read the various negotiations that had taken place over land, some hostile, some fortuitous to the town. There were disputes between neighbours, and forced transfers of land parcels to the state or encroaching land owners. There were titles of ownership and titles to communal land intertwined and tied tight by a cord.

What mechanism or metabolic law within memory makes land documents into all saints, all beings, all things and all time? It is an idea older than the Spanish conquest that reads relations through land. When I told Don Pasquale that I thought the books were filled with land documents he told me, “Of course they are”. I am sure people have told him many things. But he knows something I do not know. Something about land in the minds of people that moves across time and its contingencies, something about continuities out of history’s debris.

NOTES

1. For a full and detailed account of the life of Las Casas in the Americas see Las Casas ([1561] 1951), Helps ([1873] 2003) and Antonio de Remesal (1620). All the incidents retold in this narrative are from these three sources.
2. In the sixteenth century, African slavery was an established norm to Las Casas, practised in Africa itself, especially in the Islamic territories just across the Strait of Gibraltar. Conversely, Indian slavery was repugnant to Las Casas because Indians were a new people to him that he believed were capable of being Christianized. Later in his life Las Casas would openly regret suggesting the use of African slavery in the New World. Throughout most of his time in Guatemala and Mexico, however, he was often carried in a chair over steep mountain passes and across rivers by a very tall African.
3. Although he began to write his magnum opus, Historia de las Indias [History of the Indies] in 1529, he did not complete or publish it until 1561.
4. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and in the subsequent colonial literature, congregación is also known as reducción. For description and analysis of the administration of congregación in the highlands of Guatemala, see “The Pursuit of Order: Congregación and the Administration of Empire” in Lovell (2005 [16]).
5. For an in-depth analysis of the specific use of theatrical models for the conversion of the Maya of Rabilan see Tedlock (2003).
7. This student rebellion is noted by Losada (1970: 249).
8. Las Casas first published this text in Latin in 1542, entitled: Narratio Regionvm Indicarvm per Hispanos quosdam deuastatarum verissima. The most populist and mass produced of these was the 1656 English edition entitled: The Tears of the Indians: Being an Historical and True Account of the Cruel Massacres and Slaughter of Above Twenty Million Innocent People Committed by the Spanish (1972). This long ideologically weighted title was meant to embolden the English to establish their own Protestant colonies in the new world according to their supposedly more compassionate Christianity.
9. See Elizabeth Boone’s (1989) excellent essay on European concepts of Indian, especially Aztec gods, with a specific section on the assumption that certain Indian gods were incarnations of Satan himself.
10. Sepulveda called in to stop student riots... [18]
11. The Popol Vuh was secretly written down in the sixteenth century in the Roman alphabet the Maya had been taught by Spanish priests. Ancient bark codices that the Maya had written in their own hieroglyphic writing were systematically burnt and otherwise destroyed by the Spanish, who wished to eradicate the extensive beliefs of their newly colonized subjects. For a history and translation of the Popol Vuh see Dennis Tedlock (1996).
12. Milpa agriculture consists of mostly corn crops with some additional vegetable farming, such as beans and squash. The Maya have subsisted on milpa farming for the past 3,000 years. Like weaving and language, milpa farming constitutes one of the three most significant continuities of Maya life in the isthmus.
13. For an in-depth account of the recent Maya struggle against NAFTA see Marco [19] (2002).
14. A full report of the violence that occurred in Guatemala during Rios Montt’s dictatorship was published in Guatemala, memory of silence = Tz’nil na’tabal (CEH 1998). As is stated in its introduction, “The CEH’s Report is structured in accordance with the objectives and terms of the mandate entrusted to it by the Parties to the Guatemalan peace process as expressed in the Accord of Oslo, signed in Norway, on 23 June 1994”.

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