

bands and wives who hanged themselves together with their children, because the cruelties perpetrated by one very great Spaniard (whom I knew) were so horri-  
 ing. More than two hundred Indians hanged themselves. And thus perished a  
 countless number of people on the island of Cuba.

That tyrant Spaniard, representative of the King of Spain, demanded, in the  
 repartimiento, that he be given three hundred Indians. At the end of three months  
 all but thirty of them had died of the hard labor on the mines, which is to say only  
 a tenth of them had survived. He demanded another allocation of Indians, and  
 they also perished in the same way. He demanded still another large allocation, and  
 those Indians also perished. Then he died, and the devil bore him away.

In three or four months, when I was there, more than seventy thousand chil-  
 dren, whose fathers and mothers had been sent to the mines, died of hunger.

And I saw other frightful things. The Spaniards finally decided to track down  
 the Indians who had taken refuge in the mountains. There they created amazing  
 havoc and thus finished ravaging the island. Where had been a flourishing pop-  
 ulation, it is now a shame and pity to see the island laid waste and turned into a  
 desert.

Background Info! ...

Bartolomé de Las Casas struggled for many years to persuade the Spanish monar-  
 chy to put a stop to the cruelties committed against the Indians. In the year 1550,  
 a debate was arranged between Las Casas and the priest Ginés de Sepúlveda  
 before the Royal Council of Spain in the city of Valladolid, and the central ques-  
 tion was: are the Indians human beings and therefore deserving to be treated that  
 way, or are they sub-humans and so deserving of enslavement?

### BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, IN DEFENSE OF THE INDIANS (1550)<sup>3</sup>

Illustrious Prince:

It is right that matters which concern the safety and peace of the great empire  
 placed in your keeping by the divine goodness be reported to you, for you rule Spain  
 and that marvelous New World in the name of the great Charles, your father, and  
 you strive for immortal glory, not just with the imperial power but especially with  
 the generous spirit and with the wisdom implanted in you by Christ. Therefore I  
 have thought it advisable to bring to the attention of Your Highness that there has  
 come into my hands a certain brief synopsis in Spanish of a work that Ginés de  
 Sepúlveda is reported to have written in Latin. In it he gives four reasons, each of  
 which, in his opinion, proves beyond refutation that war against the Indians is jus-  
 tified, provided that it be waged properly and the laws of war be observed, just as,

Source #3  
 up to the present, the kings of Spain have commanded that it be waged and car-  
 ried out.

I hear that it is this man's intention to demonstrate the title by which the Kings  
 of Spain possess the empire of the Indies and to bolster his position with arguments  
 and laws, so that from now on no one will be able to slander you even tacitly on  
 this point. I have read and reread this work carefully. And it is said that Sepúlveda  
 drives home various other points at greater length in his Latin work (which I have  
 not yet had the chance to see). What impression it has made on others I do not  
 know. I certainly have detected in it poisons disguised with honey. Under pretext  
 of pleasing his prince, a man who is a theologian offers honey-coated poison. In  
 place of bread, he offers a stone. Great prince, unless this deadly poison is stopped  
 by your wisdom, so that it will not become widespread, it will infect the minds  
 of readers, deceive the unwary, and arm and incite tyrants to injustice. Believe  
 me, that little book will bring ruin to the minds of many.

In the first place, while claiming that he wants to vindicate your jurisdiction  
 over the Indies, he tears to pieces and reduces your rights by presenting arguments  
 that are partly foolish, partly false, partly of the kind that have the least force.  
 Furthermore, if this man's judgment in this matter should be printed [and] sanc-  
 tioned with the royal license and privilege, there can be no doubt that within a short  
 time the empire of the Indies will be entirely overthrown and destroyed.

Indeed, if so many laws already issued, so many decrees, so many harsh threats,  
 and so many statutes conscientiously enacted by the Emperor Charles and his  
 predecessors have been ineffective in preventing so many thousands of innocent  
 men from perishing by sword, hunger, and all the misfortunes of total war, and  
 extensive areas of their highly civilized kingdoms and most fertile provinces from  
 being savagely devastated; if the fear of God and the dread of hell have not even  
 moderated (I shall not say curbed) the utterly ruthless and cruel spirits of the  
 Spaniards; if the outcries of preachers and holy men that they were barred from  
 the sacraments of the Church and were not forgiven in sacramental confession were  
 of no avail, what will happen when evil men (for whom, according to the old  
 proverb, nothing is wanting except the opportunity) read that a scholar, a doctor  
 of theology, and the royal historian has published books approving those crimi-  
 nal wars and hellish campaigns, and, by supporting arguments, confirms and  
 defends the unheard-of crime whereby Christian men, forgetting Christian virtue,  
 hold in slavery those people, the most unfortunate of all, who appear to have  
 escaped the ferocity of that most cruel race by chance rather than by the mercy of  
 the Spaniards? Furthermore [what will happen when they read] that he teaches that  
 soldiers may lawfully keep everything they take in these wars, even though they  
 undertook the campaign with the evil intention of looting, that is, of pillaging by  
 fire, sword, murder, plunder and violence, upsetting, overturning, and throwing

into confusion all laws, divine and human, and that they are not bound to restore such goods because the Spaniards who do these things and shed the blood of the innocent consecrate their hands to God (as I hear Sepúlveda has written) and merit Christ's grace because they prevent the worship of idols?

Whom will they spare? What blood will they not shed? What cruelty will they not commit, these brutal men who are hardened to seeing fields bathed in human blood, who make no distinction of sex or age, who do not spare infants at their mothers' breasts, pregnant women, the great, the lowly, or even men of feeble and gray old age for whom the weight of years usually awakens reverence or mercy? What will they not do if they hear that there is a man teaching that they are consecrating their hands to God when they crush the Indians with massacres, pillaging, and tyranny—that they are doing the same as those who killed the Children of Israel who were adoring the calf? They will give more trust to him, as to someone who tells them what they want to hear, than they would to the son of God himself if he were face to face before us and teaching something different.

If, then, the Indians are being brought to the point of extermination, if as many peoples are being destroyed as widespread kingdoms are being overthrown, what sane man would doubt that the most flourishing empire of the New World, once its native inhabitants have been destroyed, will become a wilderness, and nothing but dominion over tigers, lions, and wild beasts for the Kings of Spain? . . .

Therefore when Sepúlveda, by word or in his published works, teaches that campaigns against the Indians are lawful, what does he do except encourage oppressors and provide an opportunity for as many crimes and lamentable evils as these [men] commit, more than anyone would find it possible to believe? In the meantime, with most certain harm to his own soul, he is the reason why countless human beings, suffering brutal massacres, perish forever, that is, men who through the inhuman brutality of the Spaniards, breathe their last before they heard the word of God [or] are fed by Christ's gentle doctrine [or] are strengthened by the Christian sacraments. What more horrible or unjust occurrence can be imagined than this?

Therefore, if Sepúlveda's opinion (that campaigns against the Indians are lawful) is approved, the most holy faith of Christ, to the reproach of the name Christian, will be hateful and detestable to all the peoples of the world to whom the word will come of the inhuman crimes that the Spaniards inflict on that unhappy race, so that neither in our lifetime nor in the future will they want to accept our faith under any condition, for they see that its first heralds are not pastors but plunderers, not fathers but tyrants, and that those who profess it are ungodly, cruel and without pity in their merciless savagery.

Other than Las Casas there are no texts of this period that describe the experiences of the people Columbus "discovered." Eduardo Galeano here re-imagines their plight, drawing on numerous historical sources. Galeano, the Uruguayan people's journalist and radical storyteller, is known around the world for his books *The Open Veins of Latin America* and the trilogy *Memory of Fire*, from which the reading here is selected. In these passages, from the first volume of the trilogy, *Genesis*, Galeano narrates Columbus's voyages, turning some of the many myths about Columbus on their head.

## Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire* (1982)<sup>4</sup>

### 1492: THE OCEAN SEA

#### THE SUN ROUTE TO THE INDIES

The breezes are sweet and soft, as in spring in Sewille, and the sea is like a Guadalquivir river, but the swell no sooner rises than they get seasick and vomit, jammed into their fo'c'sles, the men who in three patched-up little ships cleave the unknown sea, the sea without a frame. Men, little drops in the wind. And if the sea doesn't love them? Night falls on the caravels. Whither will the wind toss them? A dorado, chasing a flying fish, jumps on board and the panic grows. The crew doesn't appreciate the savory aroma of the slightly choppy sea, nor do they listen to the din of the sea gulls and gannets that come from the west. That horizon; does the abyss begin there? Does the sea end?

Feverish eyes of mariners weatherbeaten in a thousand voyages, burning eyes of jailbirds yanked from Andalusian prisons and embarked by force; these eyes see no prophetic reflections of gold and silver in the foam of the waves, nor in the country and river birds that keep flying over the ships, nor in the green rushes and branches thick with shells that drift in the sargassos. The bottom of the abyss—is that where Hell starts to burn? Into what kind of jaws will the trade winds hurl these little men? They gaze at the stars, seeking God, but the sky is as inscrutable as this never-navigated sea. They hear its roar, mother sea, the hoarse voice answering the wind with phrases of eternal condemnation, mysterious drums resounding in the depths. They cross themselves and want to pray and stammer: "Tonight we'll fall off the world, tonight we'll fall off the world."