Using narrative theory as her critical lens, Sarah H. Beckjord, examines the treatises and historiography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to shed light on long-debated questions of authorial reliability and the nature of historical writing. The author examines the work of Juan Luis Vives, Fernández de Oviedo, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and demonstrates how they conformed to and simultaneously challenged the parameters of historical representation, generating discourses that brought to the fore questions about perspective, objectivity and, ultimately, the nature of truth. One of the underlying issues is an epistemological question about the limits of language and what Beckjord calls the “boundaries between historical and fictional discourses” (169).

In the first chapter, Beckjord places Vives’s work within the same intellectual tradition of compliance and transgression seen in the later chronicles of the New World. She illustrates how, despite never writing a historiography, Vives grapples with and also offers his own “preceptive literature,” or “rhetorical treatises written to convey or teach the maxims of writing history” (18 n. 11). Beckjord’s analysis of Vives’s corpus sheds light on the state of humanistic inquiry in early modern Spain, highlighting both the assumptions about the moralistic and didactic function of history that informs his work. The elements of these treatises that Beckjord highlights – the role of chronology in achieving objectivity, the reliance on witnesses, the issue of perspective, the possibility of using fictive language to further the didactic goals of history, and the notion of the historian as “soothsayer” – serve as touchstones for her analysis of subsequent New World chroniclers.
In the second chapter entitled “Conjecture and Credibility,” Beckjord examines the writing of Oviedo and points to a clash between the humanist ideals set forth by preceptive writers and the difficulties inherent in narrating the New World. She is careful to note that there is no direct mention of preceptive principles in either Oviedo or Las Casas, although their writing belies a keen awareness of that long rhetorical tradition. Beckjord illustrates how Oviedo’s rejection of superstition leads him to denounce the historian as soothsayer, which has implications for the question of authorial reliability since he argues instead for a need to establish the historian’s natural voice. In what is perhaps the strongest chapter of her study, Beckjord argues convincingly that this preoccupation drove Oviedo to alter the pedagogical goal of history: in order to help the reader learn to decipher the truth, the historian must include multiple and even contradictory viewpoints.

Despite the rivalry between Oviedo and Las Casas, Beckjord notes in the following chapter that both authors evince the simultaneous observance and rejection of established traditions about the writing of history. This chapter, entitled “Vision and Voice,” presents a thorough examination of Las Casas’s contributions to the prevailing notions of authorial reliability and perspective. For Las Casas, multiple and contradictory perspectives are akin to active deceit; it is the role of the historian to obviate contradictions and present a coherent narrative within the framework of Divine Providence and Redemption. At the same time, Beckjord points to the contradictory elements in Las Casas’s role as actor in his own historical narrative.

The fourth chapter, “History and Memory,” takes up questions about the role of the writer and the borderline between historical and fictional writing, a critical territory that seems to have been the inspiration for the book’s title. Yet it does not exhibit the same analytical
thoroughness as the rest of the book: the clear analytical parameters of the previous chapters are not as well defined and the author’s original contributions are overshadowed by the voices of other critics. Even so, Beckjord does an admirable job of underscoring the need for modern critics to understand the parameters of sixteenth and seventeenth-century historiographical traditions before drawing conclusions about the literary nature of the *Historia verdadera*.

This book sets out to examine colonial historiographies while illustrating how experimentation in those texts anticipates the poststructuralist theories that have revealed the limits of language and questioned the divide between historical and fictional writing. Given the sometimes heated debates surrounding the use of postmodern theories to analyze pre- and early modern discourses, it is surprising that the only explicit discussion of postmodernism is offered in a short section of the last chapter and centers mostly on questions of reception versus production.

Beckjord’s analysis is at its most compelling when it is centered on the New World historiographies. By including both Peninsular and New World writers, and official chroniclers and those writing on the margins, she succeeds in offering a significant contribution to the study of humanist inquiry, while raising questions about the constraints of language and the nature of truth within the field of historical writing.

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