THE POLITICS OF LIGHT:
AL-KINDĪ’S GEOMETRICAL OPTICS AND THE
VINDICATION OF THE AMERICAN TROPICS
IN BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS’S
APOLOGÉTICA HISTORIA SUMARIA (1527–1561)1

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The earliest ‘westerners’ known to have set eyes on the Bahamas and Caribbean Basin alternately marveled and shuddered at the nature and culture of an expanse where the sun shone more pervasively than anywhere in Mediterranean Europe. Upon his return to Europe in 1493, the most consequential of these early travelers, Christopher Columbus (about 1451–1506), hastened to inform the court of Aragon and Castile that his maiden voyage across the ocean to the parts of India (so reads Columbus’s peculiar passport) had led his armada to a place where the sun’s rays rose steeper and shone stronger than back home. This was not just a casual observation by a tourist dazzled by the tropics. Since at least the time of Herodotus (about 489–about 425 BCE), Mediterranean geography had culled such information from itinerants in order to establish at least the general latitude of faraway places like sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean. But as I am about to suggest, the Discoverer and other early naturalists to the New World also participated, with varying degrees of erudition, in a scientific and technical tradition that regarded sunlight and all other forms of celestial radiation as a divine efflux possessing generative power in the region of the elements. So it should be no surprise that discussions concerning the nature of what came to be called Indias Occidentales crucially alluded to the ‘aspect’ of the skies over that newly discovered orb; nor that such discussions — in as far as early modern culture thought of itself as nature’s culture — should have brought in tow the political lessons

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Mediterranean Europe was willing to draw from its encounter with the tropical peoples of the Americas.

This essay broadly concerns early modern Europe’s changing and contradictory certainties about the region of the globe we know as the belt of the tropics. I examine the remarkable view of Amerindian nature and culture to be found in a philosophico-technical treatise titled “Apologetic Summary History, Concerned with the Qualities, Disposition, Description, Heaven, and Earth of these Lands, as well as with the Natural Dispositions, Politics, Republics, Manners of Life, and Customs of the Peoples of these Western and Meridional Indies, Whose Sovereign Domain Belongs to the Monarchs of Castile”. This compendious ‘natural’ and ‘moral’ history of the Americas – history denoting something technical like a record or register – was composed by the humanitarian friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) as a complement to his equally hefty anticolonialist account of the early decades of European expansion to the Bahamas and Caribbean Basin, Historia de las Indias (1527–1561). Las Casas devoted over fifty years of his life to protecting native peoples against the abuses perpetrated by European colonizers and to contesting the terms of the conquest. He not only fought for the abolition of Indian slavery and of encomiendas – the system of forced labor that supported agriculture and mining in the overseas colonies – but even came to regard the Spanish occupation of the Americas as itself sinful and illegal. Consider one of Las Casas’s most memorable indictments of the conquest, which was pub-