

American Studies Dissertation

Mythology and Misrepresentation in the Historiography
of the Spanish Conquest of Central Mexico

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Introduction

A major theme of revisionist histories on Spanish Conquest of the Americas, beginning with the landing of Christopher Columbus in Hispaniola in 1492, has been the deconstruction of traditional historical narratives – or mythologies – that have shaped our collective conceptualization of the colonial projects. Revisionist histories have in recent decades emphasized the importance of both revisiting our understanding of Spanish governance, society and power in the colonies, as well as introducing indigenous perspectives as a means of dispelling distorted narratives perpetuated by imperial actors. On a micro-

labour of Native American slaves. This makes a single narrative of the Spanish Conquest inconclusive for academic study; the operation of the colonial economy in Peru, for instance, looked much different as a result of the native

in 1519 then found himself amongst the company of the infamous Conquistador Hernando Cortés, in

highlighting the Conquistador's piety ('after hearing mass, we set sail along the south coast...').⁷ The notion of Christian providence in a world populated by barbarous Natives is a key theme in revisionist readings of the Conquest historiography, and can account for the intersection of religion and imperial power in the Spanish Conquest mythology. For Díaz and many of his fellow Franciscans, the primary (if not superficial) purpose of Conquest was missionary, introducing Iberian Catholicism to Native Americans in an expedition 'undertaken by our own efforts, and without His Majesty's knowledge'.⁸ Therefore the Conquests were undertaken as feudal, rather than strictly imperial, ventures. The legacy of Spanish Catholicism as a mode of feudal power is well established in the early modern history of Iberia; Christian Knights descended upon Iberian Muslims as early as the eighth century in campaigns against Muslim outposts, the final of which in 1492 marked the virtual decimation of early-modern Iberian Islam, the same year as Col 2 & Ġ Col ε

historical phenomenon such as the Spanish Conquest – and a better understanding of how such phenomena has been understood over the centuries.’¹⁸ In other words, the inconsistencies and narrativization of historical fact in these accounts in of themselves are indicative of the cultural and ideological basis of myths and misrepresentations of the historiography, and by clarifying and exploring these myths, the period and its characters can be more fully understood.

Restall’s argument here illustrates what the previous section of this essay similarly concluded, which is to say that the pursuit of an objective historical narrative of the Conquest that is comprehensive of all disparate moving parts, both from the Spanish and indigenous perspectives, is virtually impossible. This is especially true given the foundational texts of the historiography were the accounts of agenda-driven individuals with conflicting recollections of events. Restall emphasizes the point that ‘there are always multiple narratives of any historical moment, but that does not mean that as interpretations they cannot tell us something true,’ and in this way the texts of Spaniards such as Díaz and Las Casas are valuable in the historiography. However in the absence of substantiated historical evidence from Spanish accounts, revisionist histories are able to recover and collect alternative sources to illuminate the mythologies and misrepresentations present in traditional historical thought on the period. One way in which revisionist histories are able to do this is through the recovery of indigenous sources, and in many ways this has been the prevailing theme of popular modern history texts on Conquest in the Americas, exemplified by Dee Brown’s iconic 1970 work of popular history *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.¹⁹ Brown introduces his secondary account of the period of North American Conquest between 1860 and 1890 stating ‘during that time the culture and civilisation of the American Indian was destroyed, and out of that time came virtually all the great myths of the American West...Only occasionally was the voice of an Indian heard, and then more often than not it was recorded by the pen of a white man.’²⁰ This is suggestive of a historiographical correlation between Conquest myths and the suppression of Native American voices, and while this is a phenomenon that’s impact on the canon of Native American history has been vast, Brown fails to acknowledge the pervasive spirit and culture of indigenous communities in the wake of Conquest. This is a historiographical phenomenon (or ‘myth’) that Restall calls ‘the myth of Native desolation,’ accounting for the idea that Native culture and society had been destroyed as a result of Spanish invasion. This sentiment is echoed in the accounts of Spaniard such as Las Casas, whose intentions, though largely benevolent, were obscured by the cultural and political perspective of the European world he occupied, as well as secondary historical works up into the twentieth century, such as Miguel León-Portilla’s collection of loosely-translated Aztec accounts of the invasion *The Broken Spears*.²¹ Restall concludes that the myth of Native Desolation ‘subsumes into “nothingness” the complex vitality of native cultures and societies during and after the Conquest.’²² This euro-centric methodology of study in Native American history means that indigenous perspectives have been largely filtered through the vantage point of the Conquerors, obscuring what one might call a more objective historical narrative of the Conquest as it was administered to sovereign indigenous powers.

Through *Seven Myths* Restall explores other misrepresentations of historical events in Conquest accounts and the predominant narratives that have grown out of them, informing our understanding of the period to the present day. Some myths account for the over-simplification of historical narratives. One such example is the ‘Myth of Completion,’ which Restall describes as the tendency of historical accounts

¹⁸ Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, p. xv.
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee

²⁰ Ibid., p. xv.

²¹ Miguel León-Portilla, Miguel, expanded and updated ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

²² Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, p. 130.

to reflect on the Conquest as a seamless and overwhelming domination of indigenous society by the colonial project; in the narrative of this Myth of Completion, the battles, political ploys, establishment of settlements (and ethnic violence) 'consequently become the milestones that mark the transition from barbarism to civilisation (in Spanish minds), the shift from pre-Columbian or pre-Conquest to colonial.'²³ In reality this narrative of

struggled to date and categorize these historical accounts in accordance with European academic traditions. As such the most widely read first-hand accounts of the Spanish Conquest come from those of the Spanish themselves, such as the works of Díaz, Las Casas and Columbus. Indigenous accounts themselves can be subjected to similar academic scrutiny, and the impact of Spanish perspectives on these accounts is another basis for the dissemination of historical myths and the misrepresentation. An example of this precedent in popular history is *The Broken Spears*, a collection of Mexica accounts of the Conquest. Author Miguel León-Portilla presents indigenous accounts of the Conquest in an effort to illuminate the limitations of Conquistador accounts, however the sources of many of these accounts are similarly limited given their documentation by Spanish chroniclers.²⁶ Many sources are taken from translations of sections from the *Florentine Codex*, a body of ethnographic research conducted by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the sixteenth century.²⁷ Sahagún collected the accounts of indigenous subjects and compiled them into an encyclopedic volume; indeed the Iberian conquerors were concerned with understanding the people they sought to conquer, a significant reason being the desire to conduct missionary work by fitting tenets of European Christianity within the pre-existing religion and social structures of the Mexica and their subjects. The *Florentine Codex* represents the largest and most-frequently referenced source of indigenous accounts of the Conquest, however the same limitations to the accounts of Díaz and Las Casas apply – that being the cultural and linguistic biases that inform the presentation of historical perspectives. For this reason a comprehensive historiography that accounts for indigenous perspectives is difficult to produce, therefore necessitating a re-framing of the predominant narratives of the Spanish Conquest history.

In spite of these limitations to texts such as *The Florentine Codex*, Native American sources provide insightful accounts of aspects of the Conquest the Spanish were reluctant to acknowledge, in one respect due to efforts to preserve the veneer of missionary benevolence, and in the other to dispel accusations of Spanish imperial brutality that became a popular criticism in the following century after the death of many of the Conquistadors whose accounts form the basis of the historiography. Therefore one area where Native American sources are critically valuable in deconstructing the Spanish Conquest as we conceptualize it is accounts of incidences of Spanish brutality in the course of their colonial campaigns. While the Spaniards brought Catholicism to the New World, they also brought disease and systems of feudal labour (slavery) in the form of *encomiendas*. The Spanish were aware of the devastating impact of the Conquest on indigenous populations, however, as with all assertions of objective fact in the Conquest historiography, debate exists around the actual figures. Las Casas himself admitted that over 15 million deaths had occurred as a result of the Spanish Conquest five decades after Columbus' landing, and while consensus existed over this figure for a time, the number of deaths at the hands of Spanish disease and brutality in relation to the population figure pre-contact has been disputed.²⁸ Further obscurity is present therefore in population figures, however it is clear that the decline was massive, and the Spanish Conquest indeed catalyzed the decimation of indigenous populations. Indigenous and revisionist histories provide some insight into how this population decline occurred. With the Spaniards came European cattle and crops, which exacerbated the environmental effect of Spanish settlement alongside foreign diseases introduced to native populations. Due to the Spaniard's resistance to eating an indigenous

significant environmental disruptions as well as disruptions in power and liberty in the lives of indigenous Americans. Moreover the movement of Native peoples across pre-existing territorial boundaries (these often being a result of environmental factors such as in the Andean vertical archipelago) displaced indigenous peoples from their communities and introduced diseases as microclimate changes deteriorated their immune systems.³⁰ The labour conditions of the *encomiendas* in the years following the Spanish usurpation of Moctezuma contributed also to instances of death through movement and enslavement, with the silver mines and plantations being just one chapter in the horrifying episode of human slavery in the west indies. Moreover disturbing accounts of suicide committed by the enslaved and the deaths of babies too malnourished to survive adolescence are reminders of the deep and indescribable tragedy of human slavery.³¹ It is therefore self-evident that the conditions of labour and the exploitation of human bodies in the Spanish Conquest, combined with the devastating impact of disease, would in fact lead to a huge physical decimation of Native American populations, rightly labelled by Stannard as an instance of American Holocaust.

Yet this population devastation does not correlate with a decimation of Native American life as established pre-contact, and neither does it indicate an orchestrated attempt to wipe out indigenous populations to make way for Spanish settlers. The Spanish rather absorbed and appropriated systems of governance, territorial power and economy that pre-dated contact between the European invaders and Native Americans. Conquistadors, in an effort to assert individual nodes of feudal power in the New World, usurped existing figureheads receiving patronage from Aztec subjects and, prior to the Crown intervention resulting in *encomiendas*, took over existing labour and trade networks. Moreover the Spanish did not act independently in their overthrowing of Aztec power. Such is the myth which Restall labels 'the Myth of the white Conquistador'; the idea that the Conquistadors, outnumbered by their native enemies, survived and triumphed against all odds in battle, emerging as victorious paragons of European Christianity.³² Such a myth fits within the Spaniard's self-assessment that their Conquest was guided by divine providence. However in reality the Iberian invaders leveraged pre-existing inter-tribal conflicts and anti-Aztec sentiment in Mexico to bolster their own military forces. To indigenous groups involved in these long-standing war-rivalries, "the Spanish were simply another group, albeit an alien one, seeking to gain political dominance in central Mexico."³³

shaped family dynamics across borders of territory, class, race and marriage.³⁵ Therefore the myth of the White Conquistador accounts for the over-simplification of the Conquest history along racial and ethnic lines, and necessitates closer readings of intersectionality and race in the revisionist histories of the Conquest narratives.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has been less an exercise in surfacing indigenous accounts of the Conquest and contrasting them to those of the Conquistadors and Franciscans, and more an analysis of how Conquest myths were disseminated, the reasons for their dissemination, and the impact this has had on the suppression of Native American voices in the long-lasting legacy of imperial subjugation that continues to the present day. The net effect of this suppression has been not the destruction of Native American culture and society, as writers such as Brown have argued in their re-visiting of indigenous American history, but more a deconstruction of the autonomous identity of Native Americans within the historiography. Revisionist histories have only gone so far in re-emphasizing the importance of Native

pervasive spirit of Native American culture and society, in spite of the continued intellectual, political and physical entrenchment of colonialism and white-supremacy in the collective consciousness of the west.

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