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-level, historical myths can be traced back to key figures in the documentation of the Conquest, not least because such written histories have survived and perpetuated in the field where indigenous perspectives have been largely lost, or more accurately, acutely suppressed (in significant part as a result of Spanish colonial rule itself). One such figure in the dissemination of these narratives is Bernal Díaz del Castillo; Conquistador, Governor of Santiago de Guatemala (modern day Antigua) and, in his own words, 'one of the first discoverers and conquerors of New Spain and its provinces.'[1] Chief among Díaz's achievements, recorded comprehensively in his autobiographical volume *The Conquest of New Spain,* is his status as a progenitor of a Spanish Conquest narrative, disseminated in historical research and curriculums across the world and influencing the way the Spanish Conquest and its most prominent figures are remembered to the present day. The case study of Díaz's account, the first piece in this essay's analysis of myths and misrepresentations in Conquest history, raises numerous questions over the legitimacy of primary accounts penned by the conquistadors, and how and why the American indigenous experience is missing from these accounts. Moreover, key moments in the Conquest narrative as told by Díaz and his contemporaries, for instance the meeting of Hernando Cortés with the Aztec premier Montezuma II, form the basis of a historical canon - truth elevated to legend by Iberian commentators with their own agendas and biases. It is these incongruities between historical myth and historical fact (to the extent that these can be objectively distinguished) that form the theoretical basis of an investigation into how history is told, what ways traditional historical thought affects the modern field of Mesoamerican Studies, and what implications revisionist histories have on our conceptualization of the Conquest.

Several key issues in the way this essay frames the period and its geopolitical characteristics require introduction here, the most important of which I will aim to address and develop further discussion around. Firstly, while the argument for revisiting the historiography of the Spanish Americas is applicable to the various conquest campaigns of the period, this essay will focus on the region of Central Mexico dominated by the Aztec empire, that being the area surrounding Lake Texcoco and the oasis kingdom Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City). The Spanish Conquest spanned vast territories across continental South America and its neighboring islands. Individual territories presented different problems to the Conquistadors, as the Spanish encountered different indigenous empires with their own economic infrastructure, religion, languages, social organisation and leadership hierarchies. Moreover the Conquistadors sought to leverage these frameworks of power to their advantage, inserting themselves into inter-tribal conflicts, hijacking systems of patronage and creating quasi-feudal nodes of power using the

[1] Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 15.

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 Andean 'vertical archipelago' (as outlined by anthropologist John Murra in his 1969 lecture series *Reciprocity and Redistribution in Andean Civilisations*)[2] than it did in Mexico, therefore necessitating different systems of governance between colonies. Moreover the common misconception that the Conquistadors were one cohesive military and diplomatic body fails to account for the colonies as individual nodes of feudal power. One striking aspect of Díaz's account is his emphasis on key characters and the inter-personal politics of the colonies; a case could be made for the study Cortés, Montezuma, Velasquez or the Spanish monarch Isabella respectively, however these actors collectively are demonstrative of a complex nexus of imperial power rife with internal conflict. This presents a broader question in our conceptualization of the Spanish Conquest as Díaz presents it – that being whether the Conquest can be described as one collective campaign to establish Spanish power in the Americas, or as a series of campaigns, initially organised independently of sovereign power, by agenda-driven individuals. This essay will develop these ideas to deconstruct traditional misconceptions of the Conquest, create a more concise picture of the Spanish Conquest, and look closer at why primary Iberian sources obscure this picture in light of revisionist histories.

While the account of Bernal Díaz is one part of a critical basis for this study, the work of Matthew Restall on the ethnohistory of Central America is equally important, particularly his 2003 work *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (giving this dissertation it's title)[3]. In *Seven Myths* Restall makes the case for seven critical misconceptions in the study of Spanish Mesoamerica that's legacy has altered the way the period is collectively remembered. These "myths" provide a conceptual groundwork upon which the entirety of the traditional historiography can be brought into question. In addition to Restall's *When Montezuma met Cortés*, which pays particular attention to Cortés and his role in the Conquest mythology, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* dissects the conquest's most influential figures, as well as reassessing the broader notion of Conquest and what features of the Spanish colonial project retrospectively contradict traditional historical thought on the period. Approaching concepts in historiography requires a focused methodology, due to the breadth of existing research and the multiplicity of academic vantage points one could take in the subject area. In this way Restall and Díaz provide two valuable perspectives on the period; the latter being a primary account of the Conquest and a foundational text in the historiography of Spanish Mesoamerica, and the former being a revision of the myths and misrepresentations of the Conquest disseminated by Iberian accounts. In response to the arguments made by Restall, this essay will identify critical misconceptions and key issues in the historiography and cross-examine them with modern readings of race, ethnography and sociological critique. Furthermore, this essay will examine what it means for traditional historical thought to be challenged in the present day, and how revisionist histories re-appropriate history by emphasizing the importance of indigenous voices in American Studies.

Origins of Conquest Narratives and Conflicts Therein

Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *The Conquest of New Spain* provides a foundational historical perspective of the Spanish campaigns that make it a valuable resource in understanding the origins of Conquest myths. The so-called 'True History' begins with the friar's departure for Cuba in 1514, from which he would travel to Mexico under the leadership of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in 1517. Díaz

[2] John V. Murra, *Reciprocity and Redistribution in Andean Civilisations* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2020).
[3] Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

in 1519 then found himself amongst the company of the infamous Conquistador Hernando Cortés, in many ways the central character in his work and in the broader mythology of the Conquest of Mexico. As such Díaz provides an indisputably valuable eyewitness account of a number of the military campaigns and the characters in the Conquest timeline, particularly Cortés, whom Díaz discusses at length and with great reverence in spite of his sparse critiques. Moreover Díaz's retrospective reflections on his experiences in Cuba and Mexico are interspersed with literary flourishes that give an indication of the way the Spanish conceptualised themselves as Conquerors. In the introduction to the Penguin classics edition of *The Conquest of New Spain*, translator J.M. Cohen remarks on the decision to omit passages whereby Díaz condemns the failure of previous Conquistador accounts to present an accurate picture of the Conquest; of particular note is the omission of personal criticism of Cortés' chaplain Francisco Lopez de Gómara, who had penned a similar account criticised by Díaz for 'undue adulation of Cortés' and alleged collusion with the Conquistador's son.[4] Clarifying the importance of foot soldiers (such as himself) and re-framing narratives of Spanish military action against Native peoples and of Cortés himself, Díaz's account was a response to pre-existing conflicts in the historiography, hence the original publication title, "the True History of New Spain." This suggests that conflicts in the historiography have been a feature of the Conquest of Mexico since the first widespread publications of eyewitness accounts and demonstrates the malleability of histories as the retrospective space between past and present grows. Díaz's account has since been regarded as an immutable historical document, perpetuated by historians throughout the centuries since its publication in 1632, and subsequently disseminating myths planted and grown through the echoes of Spanish accounts.[5] As such this section of the essay will approach *The Conquest of New Spain* with a similar skepticism to which Díaz regarded Gómara, by cross-examining Díaz's account with that of other Conquistadors and Franciscans, distinguishing between the predominant Conquest narratives of the historiography and those that conflicted with them.

The Conquest of New Spain is compiled from the writings of Díaz, the assembly of which was completed in 1568, some fifty years after the expeditions described. Díaz's memoir is therefore only somewhat reliable as a first-hand account. The literary character of Díaz's writing, as well as his desire to delegitimize rival Franciscans' accounts, therefore necessitates caution when studying the text, given the individualized nature of his historical perspective. *The Conquest of New Spain* nevertheless is valuable in ascertaining the ideas and values with which the Conquest histories have been disseminated, and at the center of the text is an insightful biography of Cortés and a detailed primary account of the events leading up to and during the sack of Tenochtitlán, a significant moment in the assertion of Spanish power in the Americas. The works of Díaz and other Conquistadors, such as rival Gómara, ride this line between historical fact and historical myth – subject to the limitations of their retrospective accounts and the personal agendas of their writing, be it political, inter-personal or ideological. Comparing *The Conquest of New Spain* to the revisionist histories of Restall and contemporaries in the field therefore requires a distinction of genre in historical writing and illuminates the ideological and narrative origins of myths and misrepresentations disseminated in the Conquest historiography.

One major theme of *The Conquest of New Spain* is that of the divine providence of Spanish conquest. Díaz's text is littered with affirmations of the Conquistador's divine mission, frequently citing the support of God for the success of the Spaniard's invasion ('there was never a time when we were not subject to surprises so dangerous that but for God's help they would have cost us our lives')[6] and

[4] Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, p. 44.
[5] Matthew Restall, *When Montezuma met Cortés* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), p. 89.
[6] Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, p. 278.

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 Columbus' first expedition to the West Indies. It is of little surprise therefore that the Conquistadors approached the Conquest of Mexico with a similar dogmatic fervor. David E. Stannard in *American Holocaust* highlights the dichotomous relationship of the doctrine of European Christianity with the persecution of non-Christians, including tribal indigenous groups such as the Mexica. Stannard remarks 'Much of Christianity's success in establishing itself as the state religion of Europe was due to the exuberant intolerance of it [sic] adherents…within the faith, non-belief was equivalent to anti-belief.'[9] To expand the borders of Christendom and '[spread] the gospel throughout the world meant acceptance of it's message by the world's people, once they had been located – and that in turn meant the total conversion, or extermination of all non-Christians.'[10] Díaz's account reflects this sense of Christian good vs. the evil of non-believers, particular in relation to accounts of human sacrifice. In the closing pages of the *True History*, Díaz remarks 'I must say that when I saw my comrades dragged up each day to the altar, and their chests struck open and their palpitating hearts drawn out, and when I saw the arms and legs of these sixty-two men cut off and eaten , I feared that one day or another they would do the same to me. Twice already they had lain hands on me to drag me off, but it would please God that I should escape from their clutches.'[11] The ferocity of Mexica human sacrifice is far from understated by Díaz, and in his memoir he often cites God's will as cause for his survival in the numerous battles he witnessed; Díaz, the good Franciscan and loyal servant to the revered Cortés, survived capture by the savage Indians by the grace of God, and in writing his memoir, he continues to serve to clarify the historical record, and shed light on the 'excessive daring with which I had to risk my life in the thickest of fighting. For great courage was at that time required of a soldier.'[12]

There is therefore a common theme in the Spanish perspective of the Conquest; that the Christian doctrine of the campaigns had the invaders in the right, and compared to the so-called savage Natives, the sword of Christendom was merciful and humane. However, as alluded to previously in this section, not all Franciscans and Conquistadors' shared Díaz's enthusiasm for holy Conquest. One such figure was the friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose account of the Conquest *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* was published in 1542, some twenty years prior to Díaz's supposedly definitive revision of events.[13] Much like Díaz, Las Casas has been entrenched in the historical canon of the Spanish Conquest as a singular voice in opposition to Spanish brutality in the Americas. Stannard remarks on the legacy of Las Casas in the historiography of Spanish Conquest, describing the Franciscan as 'the most passionate

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[8] *Ibid.*, p.15.
[9] David E Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 174.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 192.
[11] Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, p. 407.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] De Las Casas, Bartolomé, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

and humane European advocate for the Indians of his own time and for many years to come.'[14] As a humanitarian voice in the mire of Catholic missionary fervor, the finer points of Las Casas' attitude towards the Mexica and other indigenous groups have been somewhat obscured by the transcendent idea of Las Casas in the broader Conquest historiography. Las Casas has been attributed as a progenitor of Latin American independence by revolutionary figures such as Simón Bolívar, as well as the creator of the 'Black Legend,' the Anglo-Dutch Protestant intellectual movement which propagandized the Catholic Las Casas' work in an effort to condemn and delegitimize Iberian colonial claims in the Americas.[15] In reality, Las Casas represented a contestation of Spanish actions in the Americas on the basis of European Catholic moral doctrine. Introducing the Penguin Classics Edition of *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, Professor Anthony Pagden argues that 'Las Casas remained certain until his death that God had more terrible punishments in store for Spain, if the Spaniards continued with the wanton destruction of His people.'[16] In his will, Las Casas wrote "because of these impious and magnanimous deeds, so unjust, tyrannical and barbarously done in the Indies and against the Indians, God must certainly envelop Spain with his fury and his anger."[17] Therefore while Christianity plays a significant role in the primary accounts of Conquistadors and Spanish courtiers, the differing ideological positions of such accounts suggests that mythology and misrepresentation in the Spanish Conquest originated in the highly individualized first-hand accounts of quarreling Spaniards, the long-lasting effect of which is a conflicting historiography that is obscured from the human, as opposed to the canonical, figures at the centre of historical thought on the period.

Revisionist Histories and "Myths of the Spanish Conquest"

Given conflicts amongst the group of Conquistadors and Franciscans responsible for the foundational body of works in the Conquest historiography, objective historical truths are difficult to distinguish from the narrativization that has created a canon of Conquest mythology. The individuals that penned first-hand accounts of the Conquest provide valuable insights into the events that transpired (strictly from the Spanish perspective, yet this will be discussed later), and the ideological and personal biases that impacted their works informs current study of the period as a means of accessing the geopolitical and cultural reasons for the dissemination of historical myth. Revisionist histories are in large part responsible for the deconstruction of these sources of traditional historical thought, and the rapidly growing body of works in American Studies has enabled broader research and access to alternative perspectives and critical readings of imperial accounts. In *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, Matthew Restall outlines in a comprehensive analysis the misrepresentations of the Spanish Conquest history in the context of contemporary research; Restall utilizes a deconstructionist methodology to clarify the myths of Spanish Conquest that have impacted our collective memory of Iberian power in the Americas, and subsequently revise our understandings of Spanish identities, power, economy and cultural clashes with indigenous Americans. This idea of deconstruction and clarification of mythology and misrepresentations of the historiography is the foundational concept behind this research essay. Restall calls into question the way Spanish accounts are viewed in the context of the historiography, discussing the limitations of objectivity in contemporary works such as that of Díaz. Restall argues 'the impossibility of being completely objective need not be so discouraging…The concepts of a particular culture, the way they are expressed, and the relationship between those words and reality, can lead to genuine insight into an

[14] Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, p. 210.
[15] De Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, p. xiii.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.
[17] *Ibid.*

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.
[19] Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, (London: Vintage Books, 1991).
[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 a definitive "Spanish Conquest" derives from the efforts of Conquistadors themselves, and obscures the incompleteness of Spanish rule in the Americas. In Central Mexico, Spaniards wedged their own feudal power into pre-existing imperial systems of patronage and labour distribution introduced by the Aztec over their empire decades prior to Spanish arrival. Spanish settlers were artisans and professionals who were maladjusted to farm-work, particularly in the dry climate of the Central Mexican plains and lake basins. Spaniards were in fact reliant of indigenous labour, and indigenous communities continued to operate as individual, self-sufficient nodes - 'As a general rule, Spaniards did not seek to rule natives directly and take over their land. Rather they hoped to preserve native communities as self-governing sources of labour and producers of agricultural products.'[24] This illustrates a key misrepresentation in the Conquest historiography, whereby Native peoples experienced the Conquest from a much different perspective to that which the Spanish relayed back to the metropole. The indigenous perspective of this and other myths will be discussed further in the following section, however it is of note that Spanish motivations were complex, and Conquistadors were acting fully independently of the Crown for whom they supposedly Conquered (in addition to God) for almost the first half century of the period of Conquest as we understand it. Restall traces the Myth of Completion back to Conquistadors such as Columbus and Cortés, for whom the narrative of a complete Conquest of an indigenous empire (as opposed to the more accurate image of labour patriation for the leverage of individual feudal power) was advantageous, allowing for contractual obligations with the Crown to be fulfilled and subsequently for royal patronage and reward to be cultivated. Restall argues 'Spaniards insisted on the Conquest's completion not only for reasons of political expedience or because it conformed to a developing imperil ideology to which they were increasingly exposed; they also presumed events were unfolding in a way that was familiar to them within their own traditions.'[25] It is evident therefore that Spaniards conceptualised the conquest only from the vantage point of their own cultural traditions and experiences of Conquest (e.g. the Conquest of Iberian-Muslims), and their presentations of the New World were informed by the economic and political agendas of Conquistadors who sought to leverage their own individual power. Indigenous voices and perspectives, in the Conquest mythology, are notably absent from the narrative, and this essay will go on to discuss where indigenous perspectives fit within this web of Conquest myths and misrepresentations.

The Indigenous Perspective and the Legacy of Conquest Mythologies

Where Conquest Myths, as well as the idea of a singular Conquest itself, emerged from the accounts of the Conquerors, it is difficult to separate historical fact from fiction and assess the Spanish Conquest in a critical light. However the re-emergence, or rather the recovery, of Native American sources and perspectives are valuable means of re-assessing the historiography and creating a more balanced and concise picture of Spanish governance in the colonies, the impact of Spanish Conquest of indigenous life, and the ideological foundations of Hispanic imperialism in the Americas. Given the oral traditions of Mexica history, there is some degree of difficulty in acquiring indigenous accounts, and indeed the Spanish themselves, amongst which were present Iberian scholars and ethnographers,

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 65.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[25] *Ibid.,* pp. 75-76.

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 complied 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 diet, outline by Rebecca Earle in *The Body of the Conquistador*,[29] the Iberian expeditions created

[26] León-Portilla, *The Broken Spears*.
[27] Jeanette Favrot Peterson and Kevin Trerraciano, *The Florentine Codex: An Encyclopedia of the Nahua World in Sixteenth Century Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019).
[28] Charles C. Mann, *1491: The Americas Before Columbus* (London: Gantra Books, 2006), p. 133.
[29] Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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] Spanish victory in battle was reliant not on the superiority of their weaponry or communication, as Conquest myths have commonly suggested, but instead the allyships with rival indigenous groups that bolstered their military capability against the Mexica empire. As Stannard highlights, 'the first people the Spanish confronted, the Tlaxcaltecs, could easily have defeated the conquistadors, they saw in them instead potential confederates against their traditional adversaries.'[34] Therefore the military success of the Spanish has obscured the complex sphere of tribal conflict in central Mexico, with the historiography accounting for Spanish colonial success purely from the vantage point of the self-aggrandizing narratives of commentators such as Díaz. Moreover the white conquistador myth extends to a reading of race in the Conquest history. The inter-personal relationships between Spanish settlers and indigenous peoples, particularly procreation, meant that ethnic lines between Spanish and indigenous society began to dissolve as the decades after Conquest passed. The absence of intersectional readings in the Conquest historiography obscures these fluid categorizations of race, explored in the Andean world by Jane Mangan in *Transatlantic Obligations*, an analysis of the relationships between Conquistadors and indigenous women in particular and how these relationships

[30] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 89.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[32] Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, p. 45.
[33] Stannard, *American Holocaust*, p. 75.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

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 American identity as a separate and complex aspect of American history in of itself, and this is in large part due to the dissemination of a historical dialect in the Conquest historiography beginning with the Spanish themselves. It is therefore in the interest of scholars in American Studies to reassess the way Native American voices are presented and understood in the broader context of Conquest, and re-visit the collectively understood features of the Spanish Conquest that originate in the narrativization of history; in other words, re-visiting the historiography of the Spanish Conquest of the Americas with special attention paid to the mythology and misrepresentation of history in our collective cultural memory.

An aspect of 'this re-revisionism' as Charles C. Mann describes it, is the recontextualization of the Native American experience in the historiography of the Conquest.[36] Revisionist texts such as *The Broken Spears* frames the perspective of indigenous Americans as a subsidiary component of the Spanish Conquest history ('these writings make up a brief history of the Conquest as told by the victims').[37] This is indicative of a form of intellectual colonization that persists to the present day – as the Spanish attempted to subjugate Native Americans through their Conquest, and documented and distributed the collective cultural history of groups such as the Mexica in the language of the imperialists, then remembering Native American actors merely as victims and not independent moving parts of a broader ethnographic moment in history, then the voices of indigenous peoples continue to be suppressed in academia. It is important to recognize the brutality of Spanish Conquest and the physical and material mechanisms of Conquest however it is equally important to recognize the myths and misrepresentations that obscure Native American voices (the myth of Native Desolation being one such example). Moreover Iberian sources should be read with a critical eye on the context behind the writings themselves – personal agendas, biases, the ideological foundations of the Spanish mission and inter-personal relations of quarrelling Franciscans. In this way the myths and misrepresentations in the historiography of the Spanish Conquest of Central Mexico are a basis of study from which broader historiographical investigation can be conducted. The way colonial historical narratives embed the systems of colonization into the cultural memory of history and the subjection of Native American identity to the experience of Conquest (and subsequently the failure to recognize Native American actors as independent components of the Conquest history, with their own inter-tribal conflicts, agendas and cultural values and practices) obscures the

[35] Jane Mangan, *Transatlantic Obligations: Creating the Bonds of Family in Conquest-Era Peru and Spain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[36] Mann, *1491*, p. 132.
[37] León- Portilla, *The Broken Spears*, p. xxvi.

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.

Word Count: 6,070

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