"Contested Travelogue: Bernal Diaz del Castillo and the Fall of the Aztecs"
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summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Saragoza introduced his interest in travelogues as problematic but influential sources of history by engaging the class in their own experience as travelers and travelogue consumers. In 1763, the English author Tobias Smollett penned perhaps the first travel book on Provence. Published at a time when the Grand Tour was a mandatory rite of passage for the up-and-coming élite, the work pushed Provence into a state of prominence unsurpassed except by Paris, and far exceeding that of the neighboring, and equally (if not more) lovely, Languedoc. Quizzing the class on their recent travel history, he noted that the average length of time spent in the travel destination was about two weeks. If someone had spent as much as three months somewhere, they tended inexorably to become authoritative devotees of the region (however much they had actually learned or enjoyed about it), and all who heard them were immediately filled with an insatiable lust to visit this delightful land. Such is the power of travelogue.

"Contact zones"—a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt to describe areas in which two or more cultures intermingle—tend to produce dissimilar travel narratives, as Hernán Cortés's 1520–25 *Letters to the King* and the sharply contrasting *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico* by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who fought under Cortés, amply attest. To approach these contrasting narratives it is useful to examine the cultural understanding of the participants in the Conquest contact zone. According to Professor Saragoza, the people calling themselves "Spaniards" (for all that many of them were Africans, Jews, or Muslims) considered themselves to be people "who came too late" to the conquest table. As is the case with many ostensibly religious movements, material reward—in the form of land, title, wealth, or all three—had been a prime motivation for taking part in the Spanish *Reconquista*. This great cause being gloriously concluded in 1491, Castillo and others of his cohort missed out on the chance for astronomic advancement, not to mention raw wealth such as the spoils of Toledo, Granada, and elsewhere, and were forced to seek fame and fortune elsewhere. In addition to filling these aspirants' souls with thrilling tales of heroism and booty, the Reconquest led to a period of intense, even savage, religiosity, such that expeditions to the New World were initially approved for missionaries alone, and the conquest of and expansion through these territories was dominated by an extravagant display of piety (fully evident throughout Castillo's work). This was a *just* war, fought not for plunder but to bring God's word to the heathen indigenes. Central Mexico's recently discovered enormous veins of silver were certainly not to be ignored, given Spain's insatiable need for wealth, both to bankroll the Counter-Reformation and to finance the Empire's elaborate ongoing demonstration of its military, cultural, and religious superiority. Nevertheless, as with so many acts of warfare throughout history, this was to be known as a Good War.

What was the cultural understanding of the natives at the time? The inhabitants of a city larger than any in Europe, with tens of thousands of soldiers to Cortés's three or four hundred—what was going on in the Aztecs' minds? The Aztec Empire's warrior society was an intensely competitive, increasingly top-heavy military machine, in which valor

was measured not just by quantity of triumphs but by their quality as well: there was little glory in vanquishing a puny foe, but defeating an enemy's best warrior, and bringing him home alive to boot, could be the springboard to great professional success. From this perspective, the Spaniards excited their interest about as much as an earthworm would a lion's. However, the Aztecs' extreme bellicosity had by this time produced among other residents of Central Mexico a deep-seated disaffection, which Cortés recognized and capitalized upon immediately. The non-Aztec Mexicans' cultural understanding of the situation was, then, that they could help Cortés obliterate the noxious Aztecs and then send him and such of his pitiful army as remained back to wherever they came from.

Castillo's frame of mind, in contrast to the "boasting to the boss" mentality of our other "traveloguist" Cortés, was one of wounded annoyance and dissatisfaction—at getting none of the credit Cortés blithely claimed for himself, and none of the rewards conferred on other *conquistadores* either. His allotment had been a lonely colonial posting with no one to work the land attached to it—a situation, in Prof. Saragoza's words, not unlike getting assigned to such a miserable school that whenever colleagues hear about it they tell you, with depressing regularity, "Man, you're doing God's work there!"

Another factor in the creation of travelogues is their consumption: that is, what do people want to hear about? Spanish readers (or, frequently, auditors) would have wanted standard victory narratives, unblemished by any dubious goings on, while for Mexican citizens, particularly since winning their independence from Spain in 1821, tales of Spanish valor were not going to be well received; rather, a narrative more along the lines of "This is why we're a poor country—these evil foreigners came and took all our gold and silver and turned it into thrones and crosses and left us destitute and decimated!" would be far preferable. For William H. Prescott, author of the 1843 *The Conquest of Mexico* and devoted adherent to the Great Man Theory of History, Cortés was the sole, monolithic hero of the Conquest of Mexico—very much to the exclusion of the 300 Spaniards and countless natives who fought, and died, by his side.

A different mindset, or cultural understanding, inhabited post-colonial Mexico, when, after thirty-six years of dictatorship, during which Mexico essentially became a colony anew in the thrall of control of foreign investors, a constitution was adopted vigorously rejecting foreign influence: "Mexico is for Mexico!" It is a *very* different Cortés who appears in, say, the murals of Diego Rivera than the noble and courageous one depicted in paintings from the Spanish Golden Age. Modern *indigenistas* chose not to celebrate Spanish heritage, but the indigenous one instead. Things change again with the Chicano movement of the 1970s, Prescott and the Great Man Theory are no longer in the curriculum, and the narrative acquires new detail and texture, making it impossible to tell the story the same way: so the travelogue changes. Saragoza's students are disappointed to be told initially that Castillo's narrative is garbage, then disappointed all over again to be told the *counter*-narrative is garbage too. Everyone wants to hear about the heroism of the Indians who fought Cortés, but nobody wants to hear about the Indians who joined Cortés to fight the Aztecs.

A story-teller naturally wishes to please his audience, but in the case of the Conquest of Mexico he is thwarted in the attempt to adopt a coherent, consistently persuasive point of view. Did the Aztecs believe Cortés was a god? Maybe for ten minutes or so; certainly not after it was discovered they could be killed. Moreover, European invaders had been marching around the continent for some time and neither their mortality nor their lust for gold were news in central Mexico; Castillo himself reports that in 1519 when the Spaniards went ashore near Veracruz "just looking for water," they were *immediately* attacked by the indigenes. Another aspect of the traditional narrative was discredited when Cortés's legendary mastery of indigenous diplomacy was challenged by feminists, who claimed that a native translator named Doña Maria had been indispensable to his success.

Cortés does seem to have been a skillful handler of his forces, as his survival of three separate crises with them attests. First, he had to convince them to move inland, which after the skirmish in Veracruz they were disinclined to do; when he astutely sank the ships and rounded up all the weaponry, presenting his men with the option of staying where they were or following him, just as they wished, his argument proved compelling. Again when Governor Velázquez of Cuba placed Cortés and his men under arrest, motivated by a desire to claim sole credit for all the gold and silver, Cortés got off by describing the oceans of gold Velázquez would have if he allowed the *conquistadores* to pursue their quest, rather than sending them back to Spain in chains. Finally, in the *noche triste*, when the Spanish were forced to flee Tenochtitlan with huge losses of life, and, taking refuge with allies, the army teetered on the brink of mutiny, Cortés somehow managed to win them over again to the cause of conquest (and, of course, its lavish rewards).

Travelogues, then, travel themselves—through time, through space, and through constantly shifting modes of perception. Intriguing contributions to the literature about the Conquest of Mexico were made by Fernando Alvaro Tezozómoc, whose *Crónica Mexicana* (1598) and *Crónica Mixicayotl* (1609; in Nahuatl), written largely in defense of the Indians who sided with Cortés, had to travel through time and space all the way to 1949 Florence, Italy, to get published.

Decolonialism wrote the travelogue from its own perspective, with a greater focus on the exploitation of underdeveloped and/or postcolonial regions by the (white) First World to fuel its capitalist lifestyle. Yet in many respects it remained the same basic narrative recipe with a few new seasonings. Major shifts and upheavals tend not to enter the discussion, or the curriculum: neither California's dominance of the U.S. economy, nor OPEC's enormous influence over global politics and economy, nor the demise of American (and Western) hegemony are going to be making an appearance in travelogues, or textbooks, for some time to come.

Q&A

Q: What is the best account of the Conquest from the Indian perspective?
A: For something accessible and available, *Broken Spears*, but the problem is it's more Aztecs as victims—nothing about the tens of thousands who turned against them, or

why—I have to add that in my classes. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* is the best book in a way; it still uses Castillo but annotates extensively. And it includes a portion in the garden: Moctezuma doesn't tend his own garden; you can't even look at Moctezuma—it's such a highly stratified society. Moctezuma's gold-sandaled feet don't touch the ground; it's not some "kumbaya" society.

There's a federal system of education in Mexico, using one textbook in what we'd call high school which was recently pulled and destroyed, due to a controversy over interpretation in a couple of chapters; it reveals the intensity of dispute regarding "official" narrative. [The author] was part of the State panel, very unpopular: why are we still using the same script?

Q: How many of those tens of thousands died after the Conquest of epidemics?
A: Waves of epidemics in the central valley took place over the course of time. It basically took a hundred years for the toll to work itself out; it was around 1650 when the epidemic reached its historic conclusion. In the central valley of Mexico easily two-thirds, perhaps four-fifths, died; some of Cortés's allies died. Disease did most of the damage in the post-Conquest period. That's related to the Tlaxcala migration up to the New Mexico area.

Q: That's why the plan to vanquish the Aztecs then get rid of Cortés didn't work out: they died.
A: And of course the Spaniards co-opted them, paying them off to keep the peace; there were many conversions, although there was much debate about allowing Indians to become citizens of the Empire.