Preface

THE TIME LOOP OF MEXICO'S CONQUESTS

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The Conquest of Mexico is a time loop. "The Conquest" did not happen just once: it happened repeatedly, on different planes of time, space, medium, and interpretation; and it continues to happen. The quincentennial does not simply mark events that occurred in Mexico five centuries ago; it commemorates the replication, reiteration, and reimagination of those events across five centuries.

The war of 1519–21 in central Mexico, triggered by a Spanish invasion, was the first "Conquest of Mexico," but only in the early modern Spanish imagination. Historians have for too long slavishly followed Francisco López de Gómara's labeling of the war as la Conquista de México, thereby perpetuating his propaganda, turning his deliberate disinformation into fact; likewise, we have for too long succumbed to the narcotic temptation of the traditional narrative of that Conquista de México, eagerly seizing the shortcut offered by the *relaciones* of Hernando Cortés (who was bold only in mendacity) and lazily taking the title of Bernal Díaz's account as an early example of truth in labeling.[1] That war was a complex and conflicting set of efforts by dominant *altepemeh*, or city-states, to rebalance power in Mexico's central valleys, using Spanish invaders as allies. We take the wrong interpretive path the minute we refer to it as the Conquest of Mexico. The path to a better understanding is signposted by using the "Conquest of Mexico" or "la Conquista de México," if our reference is clearly to the traditional (or Gómara-based) narrative; or, if a simple reference to events is needed, the Spanish-Aztec War (or a variant of that moniker).

The Spanish-Aztec War ended in 1521 with the conclusion to the siege of Tenochtitlan. But on that date, the "Conquest of Mexico" did not end; it

began. For the next two and a half decades, the conquests were repeated over and again, as Spanish-indigenous companies brought warfare, enslavement, and disease to regions all across the overlapping areas that we call Mexico and Mesoamerica (and that Spaniards called New Spain). Their impact was more destructive than constructive. Many regions experienced multiple invasions (whether by entrada or epidemic or both), with "conquest" violence of some kind or another flaring up for centuries. The messy imposition and maintenance of colonial rule in New Spain was achieved overwhelmingly through just two interrelated factors: extreme violence or its threat, and the active roles played by indigenous leaders choosing peace, if possible, over war and slavery. The "remarkable achievement by any standards" of Spanish colonialism (as it was recently hailed) was, arguably, an indigenous feat achieved in the crucible of the time loop of "the Conquest of Mexico."[2]

Is viewing the colonial period as a protracted conquest period overly rhetorical? Perhaps, for some tastes, but few could object to the notion that the nineteenth century was a new conquest era for the Mexican people. Not "conquest" in the sense of the traditional narrative—swift, just, complete—but one that echoed the incomplete and violent invasions and incursions of previous centuries. The conscious parallels between the "Conquest of Mexico" and both the Guerra de Estados Unidos contra México (or Mexican-American War of 1846–48) and the Second Franco-Mexican War (1861–67) are contexts for two of the chapters in this volume.[3] Not only were hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, especially those of indigenous descent, victims of the conquest time loop when troops from the United States and France maimed and killed, plundered and burned; they also suffered at the hands of their own government and the local elites who, under the guise of liberal reform, destroyed the community protections and autonomies of the colonial period.

Meanwhile, in Spain and Mexico, as explored in half of the chapters to follow, the events of the Spanish-Aztec War in the sixteenth century were repeatedly reinvented to suit the purposes and interests of late-colonial and nineteenth-century intellectuals and elites. Not surprisingly, Mexicans viewed their historical heritage and the legacy of the "Conquest" in conflicting and "dichotomous terms" (as Christina Bueno puts it). For some, it was a simple question of taking sides, with Cortés as the symbolic figurehead of one side, Cuauhtemoc the other; but others sought to reconcile the two, embracing "nuance, ambiguity, and tension" and producing interpretations of the "Conquest" that were "marked by contradictions and inconsistencies."[4]

Equally unsurprising is the less ambiguous attitude of many in Spain. The tradition of glorifying the empire and the conquests that created it, perpetuated by the royal chroniclers of the colonial era, and symbolized by celebratory works such as Juan de Escoiquiz's 1798 *México Conquistada: Poema Heroyco*, survived ideological challenges to persist into the twenty-first century. Common to these variants is a highly presentist deployment of assertions and renderings of "Conquest" history to promote particular political, ideological, and intellectual agendas.[5]

Yet another time loop of "Conquest of Mexico" appropriations occurred in parallel, outside the Spanish and Spanish American world, beginning in the sixteenth century and stretching in various ways to the twenty-first. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth century there was no shortage of critical versions of the Spanish-Aztec War and subsequent invasion wars in Mesoamerica, primarily by Protestant authors and often in the form of non-Spanish editions of the *Brevísima relación de la destruición de las Indias*, by Bartolomé de Las Casas. But apologists for Spain's imperial record—especially since one of them coined the term "Black Legend" in 1914, and including historians writing through to the twenty-first century—have diverted attention from the many ways in which non-Spanish Europeans and Euro-Americans used the "Spanish Conquest" as a positive example.[6] The first English translator of Gómara's *Conquista de México*, Thomas Nicholas, argued that Spaniards had built a "greate" and "marvellous" empire through "the wisdom, curtesie, valour and pollicie of worthy Captaynes"—whom Englishmen should admire and emulate.[7] As Barbara Fuchs shows, the predominant English attitude in the sixteenth century was to look to Spain as a lesson in "mercantile and colonial possibilities."[8]

In other words, here was a way of looking at the "Conquest of Mexico" that was not ultimately about Aztecs and Spaniards, but about the English. Likewise, plays, operas, histories of various kinds, and works of art created on the topic of the Mexican "Conquest" in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries were also about those nations, their cultural achievements, their imperial designs, and their promotion of—or opposition to—contemporary invasions and wars. Numerous ambiguities and contradictions resulted, not to mention the outright butchery of historical facts.[9] But beneath all the reinventions, the fundamental view of the "Conquest of Mexico" was that it provided—as the libretto for Antonio Vivaldi's opera *Motezuma* put it—"a happy plot for new history books."[10]

The chapters of this volume resemble the test pits that archaeologists dig in ancient sites; it is clear that there is information and evidence everywhere, but methodological logistics necessitate a focus on representatives. As this volume and its editors demonstrate, "the Conquest of Mexico" has a metanarrative that is geographically diffuse, five centuries deep, and as alive as ever in the twenty-first century. Its history, some of it well-evidenced and investigated, much of it distorted, invented, and imagined, has been taken, reworked, and applied to local uses on both sides of the Atlantic for hundreds of years. In between the test pits dug and their findings presented in this volume, there are numerous examples that reinforce the conclusions drawn by the volume's contributors—plays written in seventeenth-century England, histories written in French and German in the eighteenth century, epic poetry composed in Bourbon Spain, operas written it Italy and France through the nineteenth century, novels crafted in numerous languages over the last two hundred years, paintings and sculptures, public monuments, feature films, and video games; the list goes on and on.[11]

No wonder that in Mexico today, *la conquista* is understood not simply as a past event that is still relevant but also as a living event that is alive in the present. As Kathleen Myers discovered in the course of conducting fieldwork along the Ruta de Cortés, the "Conquest" is the ultimate historical metanarrative for many Mexicans, creatively engaged to reveal and underpin "a sense of self, place, and community that is often stronger than the national concept of Mexico." By appropriating the story's leading characters and themes, and transforming them into "new cultural products," Mexicans of all education levels and occupations are fueling a perpetual conquest time loop, but one that serves their own cultural purposes.[12] In doing so, they are ensuring that the "Conquest" and its many time loops have a secure future.

Nor is it surprising that in the years surrounding the quincentennial of the Spanish-Aztec War, politicians and other public figures added impetus to the "Conquest of Mexico" time loop. In 2019, marking the moment when the Cortés-led company first landed at Veracruz, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador sent an open letter to the king of Spain and to the pope, demanding an "apology to the original peoples for violating their human rights, as they are known today, for committing massacres and enforcing the so-called Conquest with the sword and the cross."[13] A general election was then weeks away in Spain, where campaigning politicians on the left and right denounced the demand as "an affront to Spain" (conservative leader Pablo Casado's phrase).[14] As Rodrigo Escribano Roca shows in this volume, Spaniards had

been primed in the years leading up to the quincentennial to embrace a new nationalist version of the old imperialist narrative—from assertions of the kind made by a public television executive that the defeat of the Aztecs was akin to the defeat of the Nazis, to the insidious glorification of the "Conquest" in the hit television series *Carlos, Rey Emperador*.[15]

Later, in 2019, the Mexican president also made critical comments about Cortés; the official historian of the conquistador's hometown of Medellín protested that the president was indulging in "presentism" in "judging the events of five centuries ago by the standards of the twenty-first century."[16] This was missing the point, of course; the time loop of Mexico's "Conquest" is, by definition, perpetually presentist.

The "happy plot," in which "the Conquest of Mexico" is both an example of and a metaphor for the triumph of Western imperial civilization over indigenous barbarism, is alive and well in the time loop, sustained in the cultural mainstream. To wit, the British comedian John Cleese, whose outspoken moderate-conservative views might reasonably be taken as indicative of opinions by educated but misguided Westerners, recently defended European imperialism ("a lot of it was bad and a lot of it was good"). Insisting that some cultures are "better" than others, Cleese's reference echoed the relativist arguments used for centuries to justify the "Conquest"—just as his essentializing of indigenous cultures as interchangeable reflects a Western tradition stretching from early modern English plays and Italian operas to twentieth-century movies and twenty-first-century television series: "The Incas used to put young people on altars and pull their living, beating hearts out. *[Editor's note: that was more the Aztecs.]* That's a lot worse than boiling lobsters."[17]

NOTES

1. On Díaz (e.g., 2012 [1632]) and "truth," see Duverger 2013; Miralles 2008; Restall 2018, xxiv–xxviii; Restall 2021a.

2. Cervantes 2020, 355 ("remarkable"). Studies that expand and enhance our understanding of how colonial rule functioned in Mexico are too legion to cite comprehensively here, but noteworthy recent examples include Albi 2021; Benton 2017; Brian, Benton, and García Loaeza 2015; Carballo 2020; Castañeda de la Paz 2013; Conway 2021; Cuadriello 2004; Martínez Baracs 2008; Mundy 2015; Navarrete Linares 2019; Nesvig 2018; Osowski 2010; Owensby 2008; Townsend 2017; Villella 2016; and Wood 2003.

3. See the chapters in this volume by Kevin Terraciano and by Pablo García Loaeza, as well as the introduction by Peter Villella and García Loaeza. On the deep-rooted and prolonged perception, from both US and Mexican sides, of the parallels

between the 1519–21 and 1846–48 wars, see Greenberg 2012; Guardino 2017; Restall 2016b; and Restall 2018, 24–27, 70, 346–51.

4. Quotes from Bueno's chapter in this volume; see also the chapters by Villella, Terraciano, García Loaeza, and Escribano Roca.

5. A copy of Escoiquiz's *México Conquistada* is in the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence. See also Restall 2018, 25, 43–44, 56, 75, 196, 230, 244–45 and the chapters in this volume by Escribano Roca and Añón.

6. The term "Black Legend" was coined by Julián Juderías y Loyot; see Restall 2018, 51–52, 250–52, 443. See also the chapters in this volume by Fuchs and by Aaron Olivas; examples of twenty-first-century critiques of the Black Legend are Cervantes 2020 and Villaverde Rico and Castilla Urbano 2016.

7. A copy of Nicholas 1578 is in the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence. Restall 2018, 245–46, 443–44; Nicholas's name also appears as Nicholss and Nicholls (the latter favored by Fuchs, this volume).

8. See the chapter in this volume by Fuchs; also see Heaney 2018.

9. See chapters in this volume by Fuchs, Olivas, and Brian; and the passages in Restall 2018 listed in note 11 below.

10. Alvise Giusti wrote Vivaldi's libretto; see the chapter by Olivas in this volume, from which the "happy" quote is taken; also see Restall 2018, 351–53.

11. In addition to the references and bibliography in this volume, see Restall 2013; 2016a; and 2018. Sources that reinvented—as this volume terms the phenomenon—the "Conquest of Mexico" are used and discussed throughout Restall 2018, but see especially 24–53, 62–88, 102–14, 149–57, 188–98, 214–18, 225, 233–52, 277–83, 288–93, 332–37, 347–54, 441–44.

12. See Myers's chapter in this volume (from which the quotes are taken), but also see Myers 2015.

13. "Envié ya una carta al rey de España y otra carta al Papa para que se haga un relato de agravios y se pida perdón a los pueblos originarios por las violaciones a lo que ahora se conoce como derechos humanos, hubieron matanzas, imposiciones, la llamada Conquista se hizo con la espada y con la cruz" (statement made March 25, 2019, by Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, accessed at www.milenio.com/politica/amlo-pide-rey-espana-disculparse-conquista-mexico-video). See Restall 2020; the exchange between the Mexican president and Spanish king is also mentioned in the introduction to this volume.

14. Quoted in Reid 2019.

15. See Escribano Roca's chapter in this volume. As Escribano Roca notes, that executive, José Antonio Sánchez, was president of the station that first broadcast the series in 2015.

16. Tomás García, municipal historian of Medellín, quoted in Jones and Agren 2019.

17. Schulman 2020. The magazine contacted Christopher Heaney to "fact check" the interview, but in the end reduced Heaney's long explanation of all that was *not* factual in Cleese's remarks to the italicized and bracketed note included above (Heaney, personal communication, September 20, 2020). On that essentializing tradition, see the chapters in this volume by Fuchs and Olivas; also see Restall 2018, 102–6

(on the example of plays by John Dryden). On its manifestation in movies, examples are far too numerous to cite, but a good starting point is *The Road to El Dorado* (DreamWorks Animation, 2000); on "the Conquest of Mexico" in film, see Brian's chapter in this volume; and Restall 2018, 189, 248, 281–82, 444–45.

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