

Bringing the “Tigre” to Mesoamerica: Language Colonization and Colonial Hierarchies

Chris Harrop

Advisor: Dr. Kim Eherenman, Department of Spanish



Research Question

What is the cultural significance of the tiger in Latin America? How do the tiger’s associations with cruelty, barbarity, and violence inform our understandings of the region’s history and cultures, specifically with respect to Spanish conquest and colonization?

Timeline of Spanish Conquest in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica

1492: Christopher Columbus sails eastward in search of a faster route to Asia, landing instead on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. He makes 4 trips to the region between 1492 and 1504

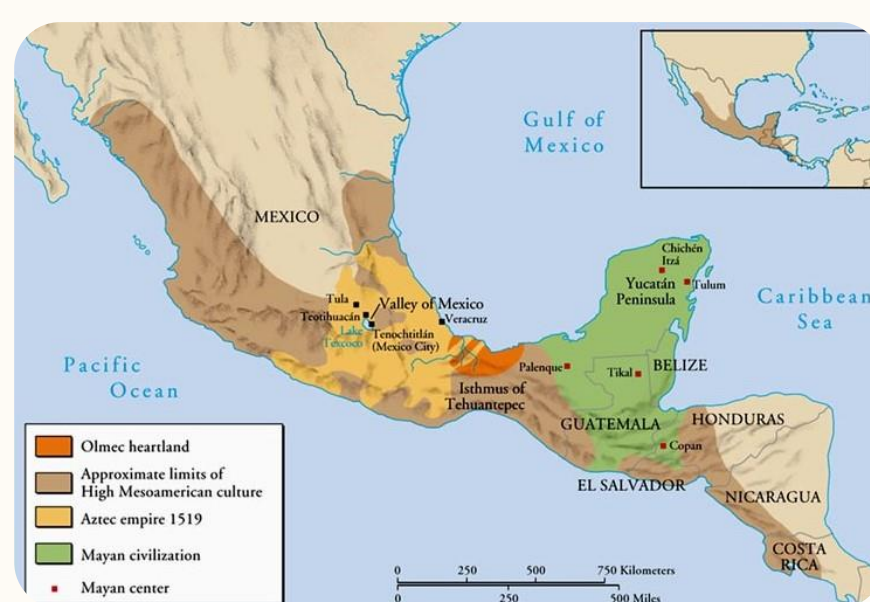
1494: Spain and Portugal sign Treaty of Tordesillas, determining where each country could colonize in the Americas

1496: Santo Domingo founded on Hispaniola

1510: Vasco Núñez de Balboa settles first colony in mainland Mesoamerica (Darién, Panama)

1519: Spanish expedition led by Hernán Cortes lands on the central eastern coast of Mexico, beginning the conquest of the Aztecs (complete by 1521)

1524-47: Spanish conquistadors including Pedro de Alvarado and Francisco de Montejo conquer the majority of the already fractured Maya empire



The Jaguar in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

- **Aztecs:** jaguars referred to as “ocelotl”
 - “regarded as the ‘bravest’ and ‘fiercest’ of all animals whose ‘cautious’, ‘wise’, and ‘proud’ disposition made it the ‘ruler of the animal world’” (Saunders 108).
- **Maya:** jaguars referred to as “balam”
 - “the term ‘balam’ was used as a symbol of strength, fierceness and valor...the jaguar appears to have signified predator status” (Saunders 110)



Aztec god Tepeyollotl, manifested as a jaguar (from Codex Borbonicus)



Image of Maya ruler from Temple III, Tikal Guatemala

Bernal Diaz del Castillo

Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España // The True History of the Conquest of New Spain (1568)

- **Purpose:** writing through the eyes of a common soldier to describe the conquest of the Aztecs and the actions of Hernán Cortes

“...en el camino se les soltaron dos tigres de los tres que llevaban, e hirieron a unos marineros y acordaron matar al que quedaba porque era muy bravo y no se podía valer con él” (del Castillo).

(translated: “...on the way, two of the three tigers they were transporting broke free and wounded a few sailors, and they decided to kill the remaining tiger because it was ferocious and they couldn’t match its strength”)



Argument

The use of the word “tigre” among Spanish colonial writers Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, Bartolome de las Casas, and Bernal Diaz de Castillo to reference the large jungle cats they encountered in Mesoamerica reinscribed indigenous conceptions of the jaguar’s cultural and political significances. Both the Aztecs and the Maya associated the jaguar with nobility, bravery, and fierceness. Nevertheless, in their writings, Oviedo, de las Casas, and Castillo imbue the symbol with associations of cruelty, barbarity, and violence. This process exemplifies colonial discourse in its invalidation of indigenous language, culture, and political structure, thus complementing the Spanish establishment of colonial power structures.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés

Historia general y natural de las Indias // General and Natural History of the Indies (1535)

- **Purpose:** writing for the public in Spain to document Spanish conquest and to portray the natural environment of the New World

“...porque nunca alguno de su linaje comió en tinelo ni llamado con campana a la tabla, ni tuvo otra regla sino devorar, e crueldad a natura...” Y en la verdad, tales animales no son para entregentes, segund son feroces e indómitos a natura” (Oviedo 42).

(translated: “...because never did one of its lineage eat in the dining room nor was called with a bell to the table, nor ever had a principle other than to devour, and cruelty by nature...And truthfully, these animals aren’t meant to be among people because they are ferocious and indomitable by nature”)



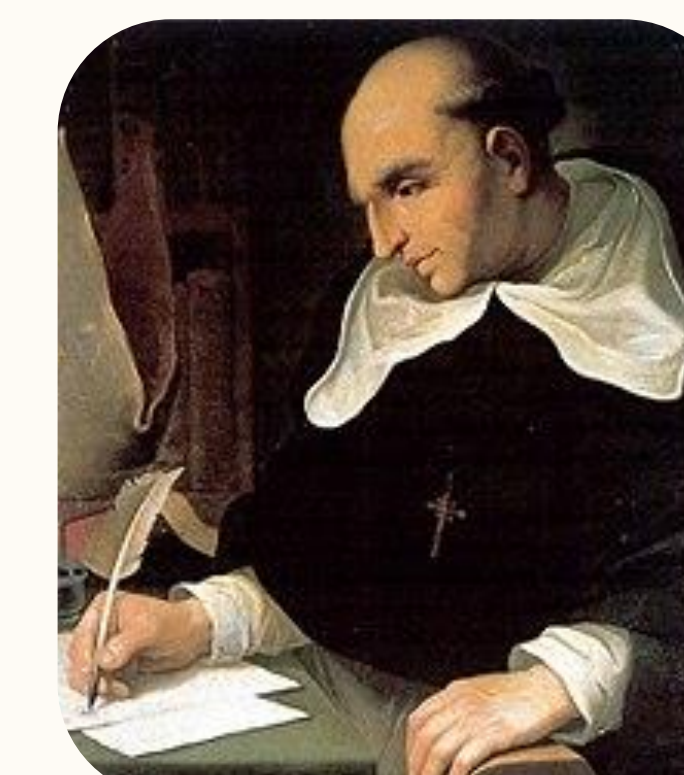
Bartolomé de las Casas

Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias // A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies (1552)

- **Purpose:** writing to condemn the violence of Spanish colonizers towards indigenous groups

““En estas ovejas mansas y de las calidades susodichas por su Hacedor y Criador así dotadas, entraron los españoles desde luego que las conocieron como lobos y tigres y leones crudelísimos de muchos días hambrientos” (de las Casas 14).

(translated: “Upon these tame sheep, endowed with the aforementioned qualities by their Creator, the Spanish descended like wolves, tigers, and lions made savage by many days without food”)



Colonial Discourse

Discourse: “system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledges, disciplines, and values upon dominated groups” (Ashcroft et. al. 42).

Colonial Discourse: organizes the relationships between colonizer and colonized whereby the colonizer “constitutes the field of truth” under the assumption of the colonizer’s more “advanced” institutions of culture, language, religion, history, etc.

- “creates a deep conflict in the consciousness of the colonized because of the clash with other knowledges (and kinds of knowledge) about the world” (Ashcroft et. al. 42).

“Not only was America invented and not discovered...but it was invented in the image of its inventor.”

—Edmundo O’Gorman, *History and Critique of the Idea of the Discovery of America*

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