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## ¿Un legado histórico?: Symbolic competence and the construction of multiple histories

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This paper argues that any approach to the teaching of history in the second language classroom must consider how history is constructed and what is at stake in such representations. Doing so opens up the possibility of developing students' symbolic competence through critical reflexivity at three interrelated levels: 1) language itself as wielding symbolic power in the construction and representation of history; 2) the subject positions available through language to negotiate or to alter these constructions; and 3) the larger ideologies and structures of power that operate on language use, historical constructions, and options for negotiating subject positions. Using an example from a textbook, I analyze how the history of the Conquest of the Americas is constructed while demonstrating that what is at stake is the reproduction of the colonial narrative and the negation of other historical representations. At the same time students are positioned as tourists and cultural consumers who are positioned outside of history. I then describe classroom activities that can be used to modify the textbook activities in order to interrogate meaning-making processes that recognize the emotional resonances and embodied histories of the students as they use language to critically engage in the contested spaces of history and memory.

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*"Ours is a present that is hurled into the future without regard for human attachments, needs, or capacities. A present that dishonors the past by erasing it with unprecedented speed and indifference"* (Brown, 2001, p. 142).

### INTRODUCTION

The role and the importance of teaching history has recently been highlighted in second language teaching as it is considered a significant part of cultural understanding. The MLA Report (2007) advocates including basic multidisciplinary knowledge of history and culture as part of the process of developing critical language awareness. As the discussion now shifts to how to teach this history, two important questions arise: What history should be taught, and from whose perspective? While I do not mean to suggest that these questions are not important, I do want to reflect on how they frame the discussion of the teaching of history, and, more specifically, how they may actually limit it.

Both questions acknowledge that there are multiple understandings of history. However, these multiple historical perspectives are frequently reduced to two: an "official," legitimate, or true history and the "unofficial," illegitimate, and suspect history. As a result, one history is privileged over the other. Nowhere is this reductionist tendency more apparent than in current debates surrounding the suspension of the Mexican American Studies Program in public schools in Arizona. In a recent interview on *Democracy Now*, an independently syndicated news program, John Huppenthal, the Arizona Superintendent of Public

Instruction and an advocate for the elimination of the program, stated: “If all you’re teaching these students is one viewpoint, one dimension, we can readily see that it’s not an accurate history, it’s not an education at all. It’s not teaching these kids to think critically but instead it’s an indoctrination.” He mentions the claim that Benjamin Franklin was racist because he owned slaves as an example of an inaccurate history because it is not situated in its historical context. Overall, he argues that teaching only the Mexican-American viewpoint as he defines it makes history suspect and inaccurate even though teaching only a European viewpoint is never questioned because it apparently does not promote resentment towards a race or class of people.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that the main limitation of the understanding and the teaching of history as teaching dichotomous viewpoints is that these histories are fixed. They are presented as monolithic constructs that are attached to a specific past time and place. In other words, as in the preceding example, history is understood as having a Mexican American viewpoint and a European viewpoint. As such, they are reproduced without critical reflection on how they are constructed and by whom, how they are transformed over time, and how they continue to operate in the present. The end result is not only the flattening of meaning but the positioning of students and instructors outside of history and outside of the language used to construct and to represent multiple historical meanings. As a consequence, it becomes easy to demonize one version of history, to dismiss it as inaccurate or its teaching as indoctrination. Finally, doing so mitigates the power relationship implicit in the construction and perpetuation of these viewpoints without critically reflecting on how one may in fact operate to subjugate the other. For example, in the case of Benjamin Franklin, a critical historical perspective might include a consideration of how constructions of racism have changed over time, who benefits from these understandings, who is responsible for these changes, and whether or not these understandings resonate differently with students in their own lives.

This paper represents an attempt to reframe the discussion by proposing that we ask different questions: How is history constructed and represented, and what is at stake in these constructions? Doing so will enable us as language teachers to go beyond the teaching of history as seemingly neutral lists of historical dates and facts that reflect fixed and static viewpoints and ultimately flatten meaning. In the language classroom we are not just teaching history but also language and culture. From the perspective I am proposing, history is no longer an add-on, something more that we must fit into an already overcrowded syllabus. Instead, it can significantly contribute to critical reflections on language and culture. At the same time it creates a space for students to develop historical agency, in other words “the ability to self-reflectively strategize the decentered and disarticulated aspects of subjectivity such that the individual is to assume the kind of agency that situates him or her as an active agent of and in history rather than its passive recipient” (Crawford & McLaren, 2003, p. 143).

I argue that asking these questions opens up the possibility of developing students’ symbolic competence through critical reflexivity. The concept of symbolic competence has as its primary concern the development of an awareness of the symbolic dimensions of language and other representational systems that reveal the underlying constructions of historical representations and their implications. According to Kramsch (2009), the word

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<sup>1</sup> I invite readers to watch the entire interview at:  
[www.democracynow.org/2012/1/18/debating\\_tucson\\_school\\_districts\\_book\\_ban](http://www.democracynow.org/2012/1/18/debating_tucson_school_districts_book_ban).

symbolic refers “not only to *representations* of people and objects in the world but to the *construction* of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, values through the use of symbolic forms” (p. 7, emphasis in original). A rupture is created between symbolic form and reality whereby the relationship is no longer naturalized and it becomes possible to interrogate how the form is used, and by whom, to construct history through discourse.

Kramersch and Whiteside (2008, p. 667) have defined symbolic competence as an ability to “reframe human thought and action.” Thus, symbolic competence implies an awareness of operating between discourse worlds, how they are constructed and the spaces in which they meet, as these are contested spaces, loaded with meaning-making potential and conflicting power relations. On a practical level, with regard to the teaching of history, I would like to suggest that the development of symbolic competence requires a level of critical reflexivity at three interrelated levels: language itself as wielding symbolic power in the construction and representation of history, the subject positions available through language to negotiate or to alter these constructions, and the larger ideologies and structures of power that operate on language use, historical constructions, and options for negotiating subject positioning. Ultimately, then, what is at stake is the possibility to open up lines of flight, deterritorialized points of escape, in which new multiplicities become possible (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in order to articulate new histories, to construct new subjectivities, and to ultimately speak back to power as students become historical agents.

I chose the topic of the Conquest of the Americas, and, more specifically, Mexico for my analysis given that it is content that is frequently included in Spanish textbooks at the same time that in my own teaching experiences I have been uncomfortable with how it is framed as I feel that there is no critical interrogation of how its meaning is constructed. Many textbooks simply include historical dates and events using passive structures and seemingly neutral language such as: “The Conquest of Mexico was realized in 1521.” This suggests that it was a past event that has no relevance to the present lives of the peoples of Latin America or to the students themselves. In one particular class, I chose to contrast this presentation with a reading, reproduced later in this paper, in which the indigenous peoples describe the Spanish massacre at during a religious ceremony in 1520. When one student complained about the violence that was described, I opened the discussion to consider whether or not such material should be used at all. The overwhelming response from students was affirmative, as they felt that the only way for them and for society to learn from past violence was to interrogate it in order to avoid the repetition of history in the future. In other cases, the textbook presentation of the Conquest and its aftermath reproduce a colonial narrative in that they are portrayed as a civilizing project that brought modernity to the backward indigenous peoples and resulted in a harmonious creation of a new hybrid culture. During one class in which students read that the indigenous peoples contributed chocolate and the Spaniards weapons and horses, a student commented that that did not seem very equal. In both of these examples I felt that students were rightly questioning the presentation of history, not from the perspective of one history vs. another, but in terms of how its meaning was constructed, what role power played, and ultimately how it related to them. It was due to these student concerns as well as my own that I undertook this present analysis. I do so with the intention of engaging in a detailed and critical analysis of how meaning is constructed through the framing of the Conquest and how to provide a space for the types of explorations that students themselves were pushing me toward. In other words, I wanted to explore how I could encourage them in their own desire to become historical agents.

The first question I posed is: How is the representation of the Conquest constructed in a textbook? I chose to analyze activities from a communicative language textbook titled *Nuestras culturas* (Barceló, 2009), an intermediate Spanish textbook designed for the university level. I explore my second question—what is at stake in these representations?—by exploring how the textbook activities function to reproduce the colonial narrative of the Conquest and to negate other historical representations and positionings while constructing students as historical tourists and cultural consumers. It is important to note that the textbook that I selected for this analysis does not differ significantly from other textbooks in its historical representations of the Conquest, at the same time that all of them respond to the needs of the textbook industry, demands by editors and reviewers, and the limitations of the textbook genre itself and current perspectives on the teaching of history. In this sense, it is not a unique case, thus my analysis can be applied to critically interrogate other representations. Finally, I describe modifications to these same activities that would allow for the development of critical reflexivity. More specifically, I demonstrate how through the use of juxtaposed historical texts, the critical interrogation of language, and an exploration of students' own historical remembrances, students can critically engage in the contested spaces of history and memory and develop symbolic competence.<sup>2</sup>

### **UN LEGADO HISTÓRICO: HOW IS THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAS CONSTRUCTED AND REPRESENTED, AND WHAT IS AT STAKE?**

The textbook activities I analyze come from the first page of Chapter 7, titled *Un legado histórico* “A Historical Legacy,” and the selected page is included in Appendix 1. The page contains the chapter goals, a large photo, and three questions about the photo. A cursory glance at this page immediately activates a knowledge schema (Tannen & Wallat, 1987) related to the Conquest of the Americas, and it might involve multiple levels of history based on students' previous experiences both in and outside of the classroom. Overall, the interactive frame that is constructed might be something like: Let's explore the consequences of the Conquest. However, the word *legacy* appears in the singular—*legado*—and it is prefaced with an indefinite pronoun, suggesting that this legacy has already been reduced to one. Indeed, the explanatory text on the subsequent page titled *Las posibles causas históricas de una actitud reservada* “The possible historical causes of a reserved attitude” explains this legacy:

*La actitud de recelo y de cautela de muchos hispanoamericanos frente al extraño puede considerarse quizás como un legado cultural del hecho histórico de la conquista* (Barceló, 2009, p. 147).

“The attitude of suspicion and caution of many Hispanic Americans towards the foreign can perhaps be considered a cultural legacy of the historical fact of the conquest”<sup>3</sup>

By analyzing the image and its intertextual references I will further explore the construction of this singular historical legacy and how this particular framing fixes meaning and constructs students as subjects outside of history.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas the focus of my analysis is framed within the notion of symbolic competence, there have been additional studies that consider more broadly the analysis of history and textbooks. For more information see, for example, Achugar (2008) and Achugar & Schleppegrell (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.

The picture represents a contemporary scene on a cobblestone street in an unidentified Latin American country. The first of the three women is a young indigenous woman. Her cultural identity is indexed primarily by her personal appearance; her skin is dark, and she has long, black hair that is braided. It is also indexed by material objects, such as her clothing, a brightly colored skirt and blouse, and the woven purses in her hand with “native” designs. She is engaged in the act of selling these purses to two other young women. They are dressed in travel clothing, loose-fitting cargo pants with long-sleeved cotton shirts, which index a tourist or foreigner identity. Both have long brown hair, and they are wearing several necklaces of the type typically associated with indigenous cultures.

The social and cultural identities of the three women are essentialized. In the case of the indigenous woman, the fact that her clothing and personal appearance actually index a specific Mayan cultural identity is irrelevant, as she is essentialized as representing a pan-American indigenous identity. In fact, there is an element of myth-making in the presentation of this generic “indigenous” identity; much like in Barthes’ (1972) analysis of the young boy on the cover of *Paris Match*, her history, origins, and particular identity have been erased in the second-order semiological chain of the exotic indigenous woman. The identities of the other two women are also essentialized; they are tourists. We do not know where they are from; however, based on their clothing, in addition to the overall content of the chapter, it is assumed that they are Westerners, either from the United States or Spain. However, it is important to note that their identity is not based so much on culture or ethnicity as on a transient, accidental identity that is predicated on a very specific moment in space and time, i.e. their current location in an unspecified foreign country.

The three women exist in a fixed, binary relation. The tourists are tourists because there is a native person who is authentic—an other, albeit an exoticized other. It is this difference that gives each their meaning but that also reduces them to stereotypes. Indeed, this relation and the stereotypes that result from it are further reinforced in the short story *Regalo de adios*, “The good-bye present”, that students read later in the chapter. It is told from the perspective of a woman who is sent to Guatemala to establish business deals and meets three young indigenous girls who braid cords for glasses and sell them to the tourists. They become friends despite the girls’ distrust, and the narrator learns to braid in the plaza with them as she buys them ice cream.

Other binary representations implicit in these essentialized identities include the following: indigenous culture/Western culture; past/present; traditional/modern; nonwhite/white; seller/consumer; and, mistrust/trust. Derrida (1972) argues that one pole of any binary relationship is normally the dominant, or privileged one, because the two poles exist in a relation of power. From the perspective of colonial history, the tourists occupy the privileged position in an asymmetrical relation of power as they are representatives of a modern, contemporary, white, Western culture with sufficient material resources to consume others’ cultures. Indeed, this power relation is further evidenced in the placement of the two tourists on the privileged left-hand side of the photo, where the gaze begins, and the indigenous woman on the right-hand side. In addition, the two tourists are gazing upon the indigenous woman from above, a position of superiority.

In addition to the relative positioning of the three women, there is another position that is significant, that of the viewer of the photo. None of the women in the photo looks directly at the viewer; their gaze is focused on each other. The viewer is thus the subject of the look; the three women are the object, and no contact is made. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) call this type of representation an offer, as “it ‘offers’ the represented participants to

the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (p. 367). In the case of this picture, as already stated, all of the identity options that are represented are static and fixed within a hierarchical binary. The subjects are not only essentialized, but they are also ahistorical. The picture writes them into history and the meaning of that history is wholly contained in the text such that they are simply represented as objects on display.

This visual text represents not just one meaning but an accumulation of meanings because it is intertextual. In fact, it conjures depictions of the arrival of the Spaniards to the New World. (Appendix 3 contains various historical representations of this “encounter.”<sup>4</sup>) In all of them, the Spaniards occupy the privileged left-hand side of the photo, just like the tourists in the textbook photo, and the indigenous peoples are positioned on the right-hand side. This positioning further privileges not just a Western gaze but a literate one as the eye reads from left to right. Furthermore, the Spanish conquerors are predominantly gazing upon the indigenous leaders from above. The power of the Spaniards is not only symbolic, as they represent a Western, literate civilization, but it is further reinforced by the presence of their weapons, swords, military regalia, horses, and ships. In contrast, the indigenous peoples bear cultural objects such as necklaces, statues, and ceramic bowls as gifts.

In their diaries and chronicles the conquerors describe these marvelous gifts that they received from the native indigenous peoples. For example, in his chronicles Bernal Díaz del Castillo<sup>5</sup> (1956) describes the presents Tendile, an Aztec noble, brought to Hernán Cortés in 1519 on behalf of Montezuma soon after the Spaniards’ arrival in San Juan Ulúa. He writes:

After welcoming us to the country and after many courteous speeches had passed he ordered the presents which he had brought to be displayed, and they were placed on mats over which were spread cotton cloths. The first article presented was like a wheel like a sun, as big as a cartwheel, with many sorts of pictures on it, the whole of fine gold, and a wonderful thing to behold, which those who afterward weighed it said was worth more than ten thousand dollars.... Then were brought twenty golden ducks, beautifully worked and very natural looking, and some [ornaments] like dogs, and many articles of gold worked in the shape of tigers and lions and monkeys.... Then there was presented crests of gold and plumes of rich green feathers, and others of silver, and fans of the same materials, and deer copied in hollow gold and many other things that I cannot

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is significant to note that Image 2 is included in the textbook as well in the context of a pre-writing activity that closes the chapter. The specific activity that accompanies the image asks students to comment on the causes and effects of the Conquest. This opens a space for students to consider multiple causes and effects. However, the writing prompt itself specifically states that “the conquest of the American continent was in large part determined by the alliances that were established between indigenous peoples and Europeans. Write an expository essay about the importance of these alliances in the Conquest of America. Use the technique of cause and effect” (Barceló, 2009, p. 166). In this case, the cause of the Conquest is already established; it was because of the alliances, and the effect as represented in the image was that the Spaniards received precious objects from the indigenous peoples. Meaning, therefore, is already closed.

<sup>5</sup> Bernal Díaz del Castillo was a Spanish soldier who participated in the conquest of the Aztecs under the command of Hernán Cortés. His book, *The true history of the Conquest of New Spain*, details the 119 battles he participated in, and he documents many aspects of indigenous cultures. Like many other Spaniards writing at the time, he also included lists of objects that would be of interest to the Spanish crown, particularly gold. For his service he was awarded a land grant and native labor.

remember for it all happened so many years ago. (translated by A.P. Maudslay, Díaz del Castillo, p. 74)<sup>6</sup>

While Díaz del Castillo was able to appreciate the exotic otherness represented in these objects, their value in gold was of primary importance from the perspective of the Spaniards. On the other hand, the indigenous peoples hoped to pacify the Spaniards in hopes that they would return from whence they had come. Of course, history tells us that this “encounter” between two worlds and two cultures as represented in these cultural offerings is no encounter at all from the perspective of the indigenous peoples as, in this case, it ends with the destruction of the Aztec empire and the enslavement of its surviving peoples.

Much like in these historical depictions, in the textbook photo an indigenous cultural artifact, namely a purse, occupies the focal center of the picture. The symbolic connection between the purse and the objects offered to the Spaniards is further reinforced in the textbook in a discussion question related to the short story previously mentioned. The question reads: “In the story, *Regalo de adiós*, the narrator approaches the girls, offering them candy and entering into a relationship with them based on these presents. What parallels do you find with the history of the conquest of the New World in this story?” (Barceló, 2009, p. 165).

The social relationship between the three women in the picture is predicated primarily on an economic transaction in which the indigenous woman is selling the purse to the tourists; in the short story it is based on the use of the candy in order to make friends with the girls, who also happened to be in the position of selling their braided cords. This positioning is not accidental as these are objects that are fetishized. According to Hall (1997), fetishism, “involves the substitution of an ‘object’ for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force” (p. 166). As an object, the fetishized purse and the braided cords erase historical and contemporary social relations, because, according to Marx (1967), commodity fetishism fixes its value in the commodity itself. As a result, it subordinates relations between people to relations between people and the object of consumption such that the political and social positions are removed from consideration. As Marx explains:

Since the producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange their products, the specific social character of each producer’s labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange. In other words, the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes directly between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. (p. 78)

As a fetishized object the purse substitutes for the multiple legacies of the Conquest with regard to indigenous cultures by disavowing this history. As Bhabha (1986) explains, disavowal “is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 3 for a visual representation of this encounter.

division” (p. 168). In other words, the fetishized object opens the possibility of looking into the legacy of the Conquest as a voyeur, a tourist in this case, because it is at a safe distance, and the focus of attention is the object itself and not the social relations represented. In fact, the purse gives the viewer an alibi to go on looking without having to question the history that is represented or, as I shall elaborate more later, the subject’s position vis-à-vis this history. The viewer can assume an ambivalent position with respect to this violent history as he/she does not have to deny the consequences of the past, yet, more importantly, he/she also does not have to engage with these consequences.

In the end, there is one legacy of the Conquest that is constructed in the picture, and it is represented in the fetishized purse. Indigenous cultures were not destroyed as the Westerner can still safely view them and even consume them. Indeed, the Conquest has become a benign process that civilized the indigenous savages and offered them modernity, reinforcing the idea of Latin America as an invention, according to Mignolo (2005), based on a colonial matrix of power that converted people outside of Europe into objects without history. A key part of this history includes the economic system of capitalism, and the only participation of the indigenous peoples is the selling of their culture as commodities in an international market. Loomba (1998) argues, we can understand colonialism as “the forcible takeover of land and economy, and, in the case of European colonialism, a restructuring of non-capitalist economies in order to fuel European capitalism. This allows us to understand modern European colonialism not as some transhistorical impulse to conquer but as an integral part of capitalist development” (p. 20).

In the act of “gazing upon” this picture it is possible to comfortably embrace this master narrative, to fix it as normal and natural. Of course, this is made easier when its contradictory and subaltern histories—i.e., the violence and exploitation that resulted towards indigenous people and that still continues—are not overtly denied but are simply displaced. In the process, the historic and contemporary power dynamics that are represented are minimized in that ostensibly both the indigenous woman and the tourists are equal participants in the action of selling the purse, in the construction of their own histories, and in the larger historical processes of the Conquest. As I have already made clear, this is not the case.

The tourists, as consumers of culture, have the money and the power to decide whether or not to realize the transaction whereas the indigenous woman is in the position of selling her culture. If the tourists walk away and do not buy the purses they will go home, and their lives will most likely continue as normal. However, the life of the indigenous woman will not. In fact, the consequences of the hundreds of years of the multiple legacies of the Conquest have left her culture economically and politically subjugated and exploited such that she will most likely continue to be the object of systematic violence.<sup>7</sup>

Up until now I have been speaking of a generic viewer. However, this photo is found in a foreign language textbook used to teach Spanish in the United States. Therefore, the

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<sup>7</sup> Whereas a complete exploration of these political, economic, and social consequences in terms of the systematic violence perpetuated against indigenous peoples in the Americas is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning a concrete example. According to the report titled “Guatemala Memory of Silence,” produced by the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), during the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996) more than 450 Mayan villages were destroyed, over 1 million people, predominantly indigenous, were displaced, and over 200,000 people, mostly Mayan, were killed in what amounted to a concerted government project of ethnic extermination. See [shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html](http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html) for more information and testimonies of the survivors and witnesses of this torture and violence.

viewers are actually American students and the context is one in which they are to learn how to communicate using the Spanish language. The process of establishing difference as already described privileges the perspective of the Western tourist and, by extension, of the students who are “gazing upon” the picture and who are interpellated (Althusser, 1971) as subjects. In fact, through the selection of these essentialized identities assumptions have already been made about who they are. More specifically, the photo suggests that they are Westerners, that they are white, and that they are middle class, or at the least they have the economic resources to be able to enjoy travel to Latin America and to purchase cultural items. Overall, the students are interpellated as linguistic and cultural tourists who are in the position of consuming culture and history, comfortable voyeurs of culture and not interrogators of meaning.

This photo conjures up similar texts that are used in the United States in tourist brochures or Internet travel sites to not only represent exotic destinations but to present a particular benign historical construction of the legacy of the Conquest. Images of indigenous peoples selling their brightly woven items or jewelry in markets are used to sell trips to Latin America. For example, one website advertises “an authentic souvenir-shopping experience in Central America,” where “shopping, sightseeing, and cultural experience are rolled into one when you visit the Guatemalan highland town of Chichicastenango on Sunday and Thursday market days” (Lyles, 2008). Similar images can also be found on Internet sites advertising study abroad programs through universities and private organizations (see Appendix 2 for examples). These images function to entice tourists and potential students by representing the marvelous cultural activities in which they can engage, namely visits to local markets to acquire “authentic” objects and to interact with the local “natives.” Therefore, the picture in this textbook must be read in relation to these texts and their meanings, i.e. representations of Latin America as tourist destination, its culture as objects, native peoples as amenable salesmen and women, and the students as cultural tourists.

Up until now I have been speaking primarily of the photo. In order to further understand what is at stake in this historical representation of the Conquest it is important to also consider the three questions that accompany the photo. The first question asks students to interpret the situation presented in the photo. The second question asks students about the friendships they make through their participation in recreational programs or sports and the third question asks them to consider whether or not it is easy for them to get to know people. One might legitimately pause and wonder: What do recreational activities and friendships have to do with the historical legacy of the Conquest?

The answer comes through the activities on the following page. On the top is a vocabulary list of five words that includes *la precaución/cautela* “caution,” *traicionar* “to betray,” and *recelo* “suspicion/misgiving.” The significance of these words in the context of the Conquest is revealed immediately afterwards in a short, historical text, which I have already mentioned. It explains that even though foreigners to Latin America are received with kindness, this attitude is nevertheless frequently accompanied with caution, *desconfianza*, towards the possible intentions of the foreigners, and that this is the cultural legacy of the Conquest. Consistent with the rest of my analysis, the perspective that is privileged is that of the foreigner, the tourist, as recipient of both the attitude of kindness and of caution. Furthermore, the historical power conflict between colonizer and colonized has been reduced to a question of a complicated friendship whose legacy is that complete trust on the part of indigenous peoples is not possible. The message is that tourists can still consume indigenous cultures but their intentions will be suspect, as perhaps they should be.

This analysis suggests that the varied expectations that may have been activated on the part of the students upon reading the chapter header that invites them to explore the consequences of the Conquest have already been reduced to one. As a result, the master narrative of the Conquest is naturalized, thereby masking the reality that it has been constructed by the larger society and perhaps unknowingly reproduced by the textbook authors and/or publishers through the recontextualization of the picture, the title, and the other activities in the chapter. Thus, the implication of this framing is that the layered simultaneity of discourse (Blommaert, 2005) that would encapsulate several layers of historicity and embodied experiences that contradict and complement each other has been collapsed into one: Indigenous peoples are mistrustful of others because of the Conquest.

### **“MÚLTIPLES Y CONTRADICTORIOS LEGADOS HISTÓRICOS”: CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYMBOLIC COMPETENCE**

Interrogating the construction and representation of history in the second language classroom requires a level of critical reflexivity on language and on the construction of discourse worlds, subject positions, and the larger structures of power that operate on them in order to learn how to operate on discourse worlds, or, to develop symbolic competence. The purpose of doing so is not to fall back into the construction of fixed historical viewpoints that are in competition, or even to demonize one viewpoint in favor of another. Instead, the goal is to open a space for students to reflect on constructions of history and what is at stake in them. Ultimately, doing so will allow them to become agents of history by critically reflecting on their own place in these constructions in addition to the emotional resonances they may have in their own lives.

To realize this goal, and as an initial attempt to think about the development of symbolic competence in the language classroom, I propose a three-step process: 1) critical reflexivity, or developing awareness of the existence of discourse worlds; 2) conflict engagement, or interrogating the operation of power and meaning-making through historicity and subjectivity; and 3) operating on discourse worlds, or reframing human thought and action. I will describe each of the steps and demonstrate their application through a series of classroom activities designed to supplement the textbook activities previously analyzed, using as my focus the teaching of the history of the Conquest. Finally, I conclude with a broader consideration of the application of these steps to other cultural and historical analysis.

#### **Step 1: Critical reflexivity, or developing awareness of the existence of discourse worlds**

Developing symbolic competence in the language classroom would first imply the necessity of facilitating students' awareness of the existence of discourse worlds through critical reflexivity. This implies, as Freire (2006) has argued in the context of literacy, not just learning how to read the word, as a functional skill-based competence, but of reading the world, a critical awareness of the relationship between the word and the construction of reality in response to larger ideological forces. This involves identifying the multiple meanings that are represented and constructed through discourses. It could also include a

consideration of perspective in text, including processes of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and recontextualization.

To modify the textbook activities, the instructor first presents the students with the photo of the indigenous woman and tourists, but without the chapter title, the accompanying questions, or the chapter goals. He/She asks students to individually look at the photo and then to write a caption to accompany it. The caption can be one word, several words, or an entire sentence, depending on the students' preferences. The instructor compiles these captions in such a way that they can be presented together on the blackboard, for example, or if it is for the next class period, on a written document. Then the students read these captions in order to compare and contrast how they have constructed meaning from the image and how their constructions differ through the language that is used. To facilitate this process I recommend that the instructor ask the following questions:

1. How are the captions different and how are they similar? Do they all include the same ideas? What does this say about how you interpreted the photo? Are these interpretations the same or are they different? What are the main differences?
2. Do any of the captions contradict each other? In other words, can they all exist simultaneously or do some of them represent conflicts? Which ones? Why?
3. Are there words that are repeated in several captions? If so, what are these words? Do they mean the same thing in every caption or do they change meaning? How do they change meaning? What makes their meaning change?

The final stage of this activity is to compare and contrast the student captions with the chapter header, *Un legado histórico*. Again, the instructor can facilitate this process with leading questions. The first question might be whether or not students are surprised by this textbook caption and why. This would be an important consideration as the photo may not necessarily have activated the same schema for all students, and therefore the question becomes why have they constructed different meanings. Another significant question is what historical legacy is being represented? Most likely, students would have slightly different answers, which would allow for an interrogation of the use of *un* "a/an" in the singular in the chapter header in contrast to the plurality of their own ideas. Finally, another question might focus on how this chapter header, in conjunction with their classmates' captions, would alter their own captions; in other words, would they change their captions after the discussion? This will allow them to critically reflect on how someone else's interpretation of the photo and the language used to express it modifies their own and why this is so.

Overall, these activities are designed so that students reflect on and become aware of the existence of different discourse worlds. More specifically, the activities I have described call attention to the fact that meaning does not reside in the photo, external to the students as subjects, nor does it reside in the textbook, but that instead it is jointly constructed and that they are participants in this meaning-making process. Indeed, the discussion "involves an awareness of how acts of reading, writing, and conversation *mediate* and *transform* meanings, not merely transfer them from one individual or group to another" (Kern, 2000, p. 23). This awareness simultaneously opens up the possibility of a level of reflexivity such that "we develop in them a much more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimension of human experience" (Kramersch, 2008, p. 391).

The activities also highlight the role of language in the construction of meaning. Implicit in the symbolic competence perspective is the idea that the relationship between the individual and language is bidirectional, the individual is positioned within language, and in using language the same individual must reflect on this positioning and its multiplicity through languages. A text only has meaning in relation to the individual who interacts with it; therefore, it is necessary to reflect on how this meaning is constructed and how it embodies culture, ideology, and power structures. In the case of these activities, students become aware that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the language they used in their captions and historical representation, and this is ultimately evidenced in the different layers of meaning that they have uncovered through their discussions. At the same time, there is a tension between the meaning that is constructed for them, through the chapter header, and their own constructions. As they will soon explore more in depth through further activities, this tension is a response both to meaning-making processes and to larger power structures.

## **Step 2: Conflict engagement, or interrogating the operation of power and meaning-making through historicity and subjectivity**

This step involves interrogating the operation of power and meaning-making through historicity and subjectivity. In other words, students actively explore the historical contexts of the formation and perpetuation/alteration of discourses and interrogate the multiple subject positions that are available through these discourses. With this awareness students simultaneously become aware of the conflicts that exist between these worlds that are multiple, dynamic, and constantly changing because they respond to larger structures of power that operate on them.

In my analysis of the chapter opener I reflected upon the intertextuality of the textbook photo, specifically with regard to Díaz de Castillo's descriptions of the presents Cortés received from the Aztecs and the contemporary representations of indigenous cultures through fetishized commodities. These resources can be used in the classroom activities as they open up an exploration of the sedimented layers of historicity and the multiplicity of subject positions within these layers. Doing so allows for a simultaneous consideration of power structures and how they contribute to the meaning-making process.

For the first activity, half of the class, working in small groups or pairs, receives one or several representations of the "encounter" between the indigenous peoples of the New World and the Spaniards (see Appendix 3 for examples of these representations). The other half, again working in small groups or pairs, is instructed to work with the textbook photo. All students receive the same questions, which are:

1. What historical moment does the picture represent?
2. Who is being represented? Describe the nature of their relationship. Does one group or person have more power than the other? Where does this power come from?
3. In each of the pictures there are objects being represented. What are these objects? What are the people represented doing with these objects? What role do you think that they serve? Why are they important?
4. What would you say is the legacy of the historical moment being represented?
5. When you consider these representations, with whom do you identify personally and why?

As a follow-up the different groups present their responses to the questions in a whole-class format. Overall, this discussion facilitates a consideration of the multiple layers of history that the visual representations invoke and the differing understandings of this history and its legacies, specifically regarding the authorization of one history as seen through a Western gaze. At the same time, the power structures implicit and explicit in this history are brought to the fore especially regarding who is responsible for the construction of the master narrative of the Conquest of the Americas.

As students start to become aware of these power structures and to enter this conflict it would be important to consider their affective responses. For example, some students may reject the comparison between tourists and the Spanish conquerors, especially if they themselves identify with the tourists, whereas others may interrogate the legacy of colonialism through the tourist industry. Indeed, this could lead to a consideration of how the textbook positions them as subjects, i.e. as cultural and linguistic tourists, and the implications of this construction. In the end, they are simultaneously reflecting on both the Western gaze represented in the photos in addition to their own construction as subjects of and in history.

The second activity utilizes a reading text in which the Aztecs describe the ceremony of *Tóxcatl*, a religious ceremony in honor of the god *Huiztilopochtli*, during which the Spaniards, led by Pedro de Alvarado, betrayed them and, entering the temple, massacred them in 1520.<sup>8</sup> I have produced below a segment:

Here it is told how the Spaniards killed, they murdered the Mexicas who were celebrating the Fiesta of *Huiztilopochtli* in the place they called The Patio of the Gods.

At this time, when everyone was enjoying the fiesta, when everyone was already dancing, when everyone was already singing, when song was linked to song and the songs roared like waves, in that precise moment the Spaniards determined to kill people. They came into the patio, armed for battle.

They came to close the exits, the steps, the entrances [to the patio]: The Gate of the Eagle in the smallest palace, The Gate of the Canestalk and the Gate of the Snake of Mirrors. And when they had closed them, no one could get out anywhere.

Once they had done this, they entered the Sacred Patio to kill people. They came on foot, carrying swords and wooden and metal shields. Immediately, they surrounded those who danced, then rushed to the place where the drums were played. They attacked the man who was drumming and cut off both his arms. Then they cut off his head [with such a force] that it flew off, falling far away.

At that moment, they then attacked all the people, stabbing them, spearing them, wounding them with their swords. They struck some from behind, who fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out [of their bodies]. They cut off the heads of some and smashed the heads of others into little pieces.

They struck others in the shoulders and tore their arms from their bodies. They struck some in the thighs and some in the calves. They slashed others in the abdomen

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<sup>8</sup> The original text can be found in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (2011). Sahagún was a Franciscan Friar who, after learning nahuatl, the Aztec language, spent almost 40 years, from 1545-1590, conducting an ethnographic research study in which he documented the Aztec culture. According to León-Portilla (1989), this text is the testimony of an Aztec informant that Sahagún recorded. This English translation was retrieved from [www.river-styx.net/aztec-codex.htm](http://www.river-styx.net/aztec-codex.htm).

and their entrails fell to the earth. There were some who even ran in vain, but their bowels spilled as they ran; they seemed to get their feet entangled with their own entrails. Eager to flee, they found nowhere to go.

Some tried to escape, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates while they laughed. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Others entered the communal house, where they were safe for awhile. Others lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again they [the Spaniards] would see them and kill them.

The blood of the warriors ran like water as they ran, forming pools, which widened, as the smell of blood and entrails fouled the air.

And the Spaniards walked everywhere, searching the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere, they searched every place.

When [people] outside [the Sacred Patio learned of the massacre], shouting began, “Captains, Mexicas, come here quickly! Come here with all arms, spears, and shields! Our captains have been murdered! Our warriors have been slain! Oh Mexica captains, [our warriors] have been annihilated!

The follow-up discussion activities are designed to interrogate the conflict as presented in this passage and its elimination from the representation of the legacy of the Conquest in the textbook photo and indeed from the chapter itself. For the first question, the instructor asks students to identify the vocabulary words that describe violence, such as: killed, murdered, armed, rushed, cut off, flew off, etc. The second question asks students and the instructor to consider their own affective responses to the passage. This is a particularly important question given that this description is violent and potentially emotionally disturbing for instructors and students alike. Therefore, in addition to acknowledging and opening a space to reflect on this emotional response, it may also be relevant to include a question about whether or not students think that they should be reading such material and what the purpose is. The third question asks students to consider what the legacy of the Conquest would be for the people described in the passage. Students compare this representation of indigenous peoples and of the Conquest and its legacies with the textbook photo in order to consider how the representations differ and why. They could also compare this passage to the representations of other Spaniards of the time, such as Fray Diego Durán, who passionately defended the indigenous peoples and their cultures. Finally, they can consider who benefits from the different representations of the Conquest and the subsequent colonial period, particularly those who have effaced the violence and choose instead to exoticize indigenous cultures.

As Kramersch (2008) explains: “Symbolic competence is the ability to perform and construct various historicities in dialogue with others” (p. 401). In other words, it implies the ability to interpret and to understand these multiple meanings on multiple timescales. In the case of the above activities students not only become aware of the existence of different discourse worlds in the texts but they also open up the sedimented and problematic layers of these histories as they exist from multiple cultural and individual positionings in order to enter the conflict that results.

### **Step 3: Operating on discourse worlds, or reframing human thought and action**

Once students have become aware of the existence of different discourse worlds and the power conflicts implicit and explicit in their construction and expression, they can learn not only how to interrogate their positioning within them but ultimately to reframe them. In doing so, they exercise their own symbolic power through symbolic form.

In this activity students begin by writing their own three questions in response to the prompt: What do you think that this photo says? It is important that they initially do not see the questions provided in the textbook. Given the realization of the previous activities as I have described them, it is very likely that these questions will vary widely as students reflect on what they have already discussed and apply it to their own framing of the photo. Once students have written these questions the instructor can show them the textbook questions and ask that students to compare and contrast them. This can be done in groups first or directly as a whole-class activity, and it can be facilitated with leading questions, such as: What do you think that friendship has to do with the Conquest? Could this notion of friendship be used to answer any of the questions you have posed? Why or why not?

My guess is that none of the students will mention sports activities or friendships, concepts that the textbook uses in its questions to frame the Conquest and the entire chapter. In other words, students have reframed the meaning of the Conquest and of the chapter through their own questions. As a result, students can critically interrogate why the textbook authors chose to frame the Conquest and the chapter in this way.<sup>9</sup> As this framing continues throughout the rest of the chapter, i.e., the question of mistrust in the forging of relationships with others, this discussion will provide a critical perspective from which to continue exploring understandings of otherness and their own emotional reactions to them.

### **Application**

As a final reflection I consider the application of the three-step model more broadly to the teaching of history and culture. The first step, critical reflexivity, implies an examination of the framing of cultural and historical representations prior to introducing them in the classroom. How do the language, the images, and/or the format of the materials contribute to the construction of meaning? What other meanings are disavowed in the process? After considering these questions instructors can consider what other texts, images, headlines, titles, etc., can be brought into the classroom to juxtapose with these materials in order to highlight not only the representation but how it is constructed. To consider the implications of these constructions necessitates engaging in the conflict that results. This second step implies a reflection on how these constructions position the students and the instructor as historical subjects and their respective affective responses to such positioning. This may additionally include a consideration of the students' own historical remembrances, either from a school setting or from their personal lives. By highlighting the power dynamics

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<sup>9</sup> Possible answers vary widely and include pedagogical factors, political reasons, ideological motives, or commercial interests. For example, it might be that the purpose of the framing was for students to think critically about their own reactions to "others" and how distrust can lead to simplifications and misunderstandings. Students might also consider the current marginalization of indigenous peoples in Latin America and recent political fights for human rights such as the figure of Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala or the new constitution in Bolivia that recognizes indigenous languages.

behind such constructions, i.e., whose interests they are serving, students can explore not only how the representations differ but why they do so. Finally, by understanding how the discourse world is constructed through language and other representations, students can reframe them. Of particular interest in the process would be a reflective activity in which students have to represent the historical moment in their own way, requiring that they select the language, the images, and the information to include.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have explored how textbook activities that are used to teach a historical lesson on the Conquest close meaning, flatten social relations, and limit the subject positions offered through its framing. Ultimately, historical and asymmetrical power conflicts are eliminated in the authorization of the Western master narrative of the Conquest in which the conquerors offered the indigenous peoples modernity through capitalism. The students are positioned as linguistic and cultural tourists, and the language they are learning is to be used to realize economic transactions with potentially distrustful indigenous peoples. In the end, both they and the indigenous peoples themselves become subjects without history; they are voiceless. Finally, I have contemplated alternative activities that could help to develop symbolic competence as students become critically aware of discourse worlds and engage in the conflict between them in order to operate on them. More specifically, the use of juxtaposed historical texts, the critical interrogation of language, and an exploration of students' own historical remembrances are all strategies, amongst others, that facilitate their ability to critically engage in the contested spaces of history and meaning making. In doing so, I argue, not only is the multiplicity of meaning opened up, but students can also develop symbolic competence.

The activities that I have described are ultimately based on language instructors supplementing, expanding, and critically interrogating the constructions of history through textbooks by creating and potentially including additional activities. Unfortunately, due to space limitations I have not considered the role of the textbook industry in the creation of historical meaning and the possibilities textbooks present for opening critical perspectives. An important next stage of analysis would also need to explore the textbook genre and how it contributes to the construction of history. Such an analysis might include focusing on the role of chapter openers or the roles of textbook editors in terms of the selection of images and activities. In this regard, returning to and building upon Kramersch's (1998) work I believe would represent a significant next step in exploring the teaching of history in order to open possibilities for the development of symbolic competence.

Through this analysis I have suggested that the most pertinent questions to be asked when teaching history in the second language classroom are not "what history according to whom?" but instead "how is history constructed, and what is at stake in any particular representation?" As such, in the case of the present example, the focus is not on considering the Spanish vs. the Indigenous perspective on the Conquest nor is it on demonizing one or the other and in the process stripping students of their own historical agency as subjects. Instead, such an approach not only shifts how we think about teaching history but the underlying perspective on history itself, from one that is understood as linear, progressive, singular, and objective to one that is multiple, conflictive, and shot through with potential meanings, and one in which the students are participants. As Benjamin (1989) explains:

It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past; rather, an image is that in which the *Then* and the *Now* come into a constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical—not progression but image suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images; and the place one happens upon them is language. (p. 49)<sup>10</sup>

I have attempted to explore this encounter between the Then and the Now, the Conquest and its legacies, not as simple temporal continuation but as a dialectical relationship. In doing so I have attempted to open a space not of historical closure and resolution wherein the present demonstrates the consequences of the past or the past explains away the present. Instead, in its constellation students can inhabit its tensions and in the process reflect on the symbolic dimensions of language. In the process meaning is never complete, therefore, by its very nature it invited an interrogation, analysis, and deconstruction of my own analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin explores the idea of the dialectical image in much of his work, and it has a wide range of meanings. It is perhaps most fully developed in his analysis of the work *Angelus Novus* in the ninth thesis of his 1940 essay "Thesis on the philosophy of history." Of it, he writes: "A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

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APPENDIX 1

Chapter opener from *Nuestras culturas*:

**Lección 7**  
**Un legado histórico**

**En esta lección vamos a...**

- aprender sobre actitudes posiblemente relacionadas con un pasado histórico.
- utilizar el imperfecto del subjuntivo para expresar persuasión, duda, emoción y negación en el pasado.
- estudiar el vocabulario apropiado para hablar sobre la conquista del continente americano y su legado cultural.



**¿Qué dice la fotografía?**

1. ¿Cómo interpretas la situación presentada en la fotografía?
2. Cuando participas de algún programa recreativo o de algún deporte, ¿te haces amigo/a de tus compañeros rápidamente?
3. ¿Te resulta fácil conocer gente? ¿Tienes muchos amigos?

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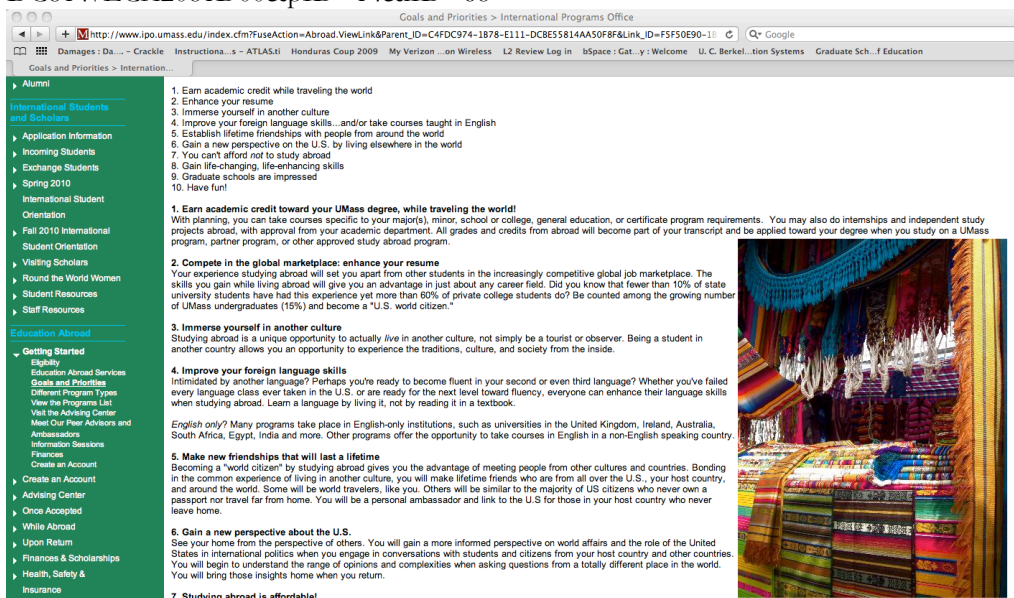
## APPENDIX 2

Representations of Latin American indigenous markets in Internet sources designed for tourists and for study abroad.

Image 1: Retrieved on May 2, 2010, from [www.feguatemala.com/shopping-handicrafts-in-guatemala-city.htm](http://www.feguatemala.com/shopping-handicrafts-in-guatemala-city.htm)



Image 2: Retrieved on May 5, 2010, from [www.ipso.umass.edu/index.cfm?FuseAction=Abroad.ViewLink&Parent\\_ID=C4FDC974-1B78-E111-DCBE55814AA50F8F&Link\\_ID=F5F50E90-1B78-E111-DC8147ECA2081D00&pID=14&IID=68](http://www.ipso.umass.edu/index.cfm?FuseAction=Abroad.ViewLink&Parent_ID=C4FDC974-1B78-E111-DCBE55814AA50F8F&Link_ID=F5F50E90-1B78-E111-DC8147ECA2081D00&pID=14&IID=68)



### APPENDIX 3

Representations of the ‘encounter’ between the Hernán Cortés and the Aztecs.

Image 1: “Interview Between Cortez and the Ambassadors of Montezuma,” *History of Hernando Cortez*, 1855, From The Library at The Mariners’ Museum, F1230.C8.A1. Retrieved on May 1, 2010 from [ww2.mariner.org/exploration/index.php?type=explorersection&id=200](http://ww2.mariner.org/exploration/index.php?type=explorersection&id=200)



Image 2: Meeting of Hernando Cortes (1485-1547) and Montezuma (1466-1520), miniature from “History of Indians” by Diego Duran (1579). Retrieved on April 25, 2010, from [www.scholarsresource.com/browse/classification/27?page=4](http://www.scholarsresource.com/browse/classification/27?page=4)

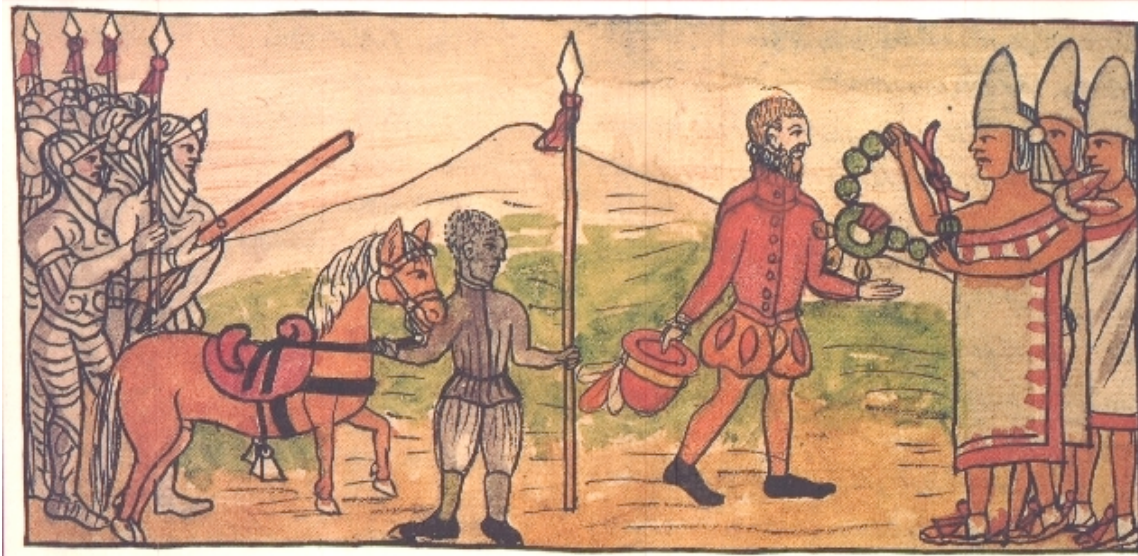


Image 3: “Columbus Landing in the Americas”, by Theodor DeBry, late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Retrieved on April 12, 2010, from [www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/justification/images2/essay1.jpg&imgrefurl=http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/justification/newspain/essay/&usq=\\_\\_IBgxi5f8XPnyGHA0P1iQRCVm898=&h=375&w=420&sz=67&hl=en&start=53&itbs=1&tbnid=D4eTz1ZP0-0Y6M:&tbnh=112&tbnw=125&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dspaniards%2BIndians%2BConquest%26start%3D36%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26gbv%3D2%26ndsp%3D18%26tbs%3Disch:1](http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/justification/images2/essay1.jpg&imgrefurl=http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/justification/newspain/essay/&usq=__IBgxi5f8XPnyGHA0P1iQRCVm898=&h=375&w=420&sz=67&hl=en&start=53&itbs=1&tbnid=D4eTz1ZP0-0Y6M:&tbnh=112&tbnw=125&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dspaniards%2BIndians%2BConquest%26start%3D36%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26gbv%3D2%26ndsp%3D18%26tbs%3Disch:1)

