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# The Cartography of the New World: Hernán Cortés's Literary Mapping of America

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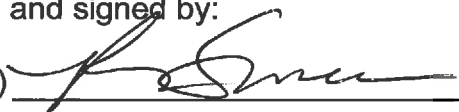
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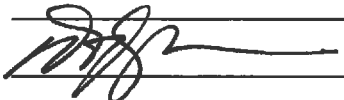
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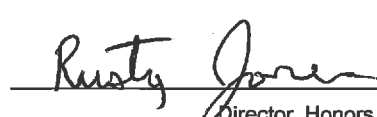
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*The Cartography of the New World: Hernán Cortés's Literary Mapping of America*

A Thesis

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Sarah June Tietz

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## INTRODUCTION

The Age of Discovery travel narratives from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, written by European explorers to the Americas, can be understood not only as narratives, but also as literary maps of the New World. Specifically, Hernán Cortés's Second Letter in *Cartas de Relación* exemplifies the ways in which literary cartography helped write the Americas into existence in Europe. Cortés's map does not reproduce the land he encounters, it creates the space known as America. His letters become a map in three ways. First, Cortés deliberately included descriptions of features of the land and natives that would impress the Christian Spanish King, Charles V, who funded his voyage and was seeking to establish an empire in the New World. Second, Cortés mapped out the space around him in an attempt to make sense of the foreign land, creating a cultural viewpoint through which the space was then seen. Last, Cortés used his literary map as a vehicle through which he exhibited power over the conquered space and people. *Cartas de Relación* is not merely a collection of informative letters, but rather, a map of the New World that brought the Americas into existence in the West.

Cortés did not discover the actual space of the Americas; he instead established the discourse of the New World. The discourse he helped to create was the New World as a place rightfully entitled to European empires, a discourse that views the Americas as a space that lacked culture and civilization. The narratives of Cortés and other conquistadors helped set the precedent for future Europeans to take over the land as their own and force the native people out of their homes. The natives, who, as we will see, possessed a highly sophisticated society with large and technologically advanced cities, were written instead as a people who lacked history and who did not know how to live

humanely. The complexity of the pre-Columbian society will not be recovered until centuries later.

The map of the Americas that Cortés produced is ideological and limited in its perspective, and it exerts unprecedented power over the land by writing it as property of the Spanish empire. The Americas are thus erased of their natural history and peoples, and are regarded merely as a place to be colonized by Europe. Cortés created an image of the New World that allowed Europeans to justify their conquering of a ‘savage’ people. *Cartas de Relación* will continue to shape the political and social actions of the West for several centuries after the Age of Discovery.

## HERNÁN CORTÉS

Because of the political context surrounding this letter it should be read as it was written, not as an accurate historical work, but as a brilliant piece of special pleading designed to justify an act of rebellion. Cortés was not describing the landscape of the New World to inform the Spanish Crown of his findings; he strategically wrote his letters to achieve political pardon. Cortés longed to be recognized as a great conqueror of the Indies, but had some obstacles to overcome before he could achieve this status. He was under the command of Diego Velázquez, who at the time of their first voyage, did not have jurisdiction from the Spanish Crown to conquer any newly discovered land. In 1518, Velázquez sent agents to the Court to persuade them to give him the title of *adelantado*, which would grant him the right to conquer and settle land.

Prior to receiving an answer from King Charles V, Velázquez sent Cortés out on an expedition in search of a fleet that had gone missing. However, Cortés sought to obtain as

much freedom as possible on this voyage in order to be able to conquer Mexico under legal jurisdiction from Velázquez. J.H. Elliot explains in his introduction to Cortés's *Letters from Mexico* that Cortés convinced his superior to insert a clause in the contract that allowed him, "in the event of unexpected emergencies, to take such measures as would conform most closely to 'the service of God and their highnesses'" (xiv). In other words, Cortés was now legally able to conquer and settle land, regardless of what decision the Court would make.

Essentially, this one sentence launched the conquest and establishment of Spanish Mexico. Because he had to justify his conquest to 'God,' the Pope, and 'their highnesses,' the King, Cortés's narrative became an argument to prove that his conquest had both Christian and nationalistic intentions. Cortés used the instrument of language to begin, and later to justify, his conquest. His narrative transformed into a literary map that produced the Americas as a place that required Spanish colonization, rather than a civilization that existed and functioned independently of Europe.

On May 27, 1520, Cortés and his army fled Tenochtitlan (modern day Mexico City). They had attempted and failed to gain control of the city. Not only did Cortés engage in illegal warfare, he lost. As a result, he could not go to the King and justify his rebellious actions by giving him jurisdiction over the great city of Tenochtitlan. Cortés was forced to aggressively downplay his defeat by highlighting the wealth and vast number of obedient servants in the city. While justifying his attempt at conquest, Cortés also asked King Charles V for the resources and manpower to re-conquer Tenochtitlan.

In the Second Letter, Cortés wrote to Charles V to tell him that he conquered and subsequently lost control of the city Tenochtitlan and its native people. He writes to the King here:

Although I trust in the Lord God that in nothing will [the Culuans] achieve their purpose, I find myself in great need of help, for each day the Indians who are our friends come...to seek our aid against the Culuans, their enemies and ours, who make war on them because they are our allies, and I am unable to help them as I desire. But, as I have said, I pray to God to assist our small forces and speedily to send us His help as well as that I have asked for from Hispaniola (158).

This narrative was carefully contrived by Cortés to downplay the fact that the land was not Spanish. In addition, Cortés sought help from the King to reclaim the city. Thus, he makes certain to overemphasize the value of the newly discovered space in order to convince the King that with some assistance, this profitable land will once again become his. An example of Cortés's elaborations can be seen as he addresses 'Your Highness,' and claims that the natives have offered to pay tribute "in gold and silver and jewels as well as slaves, cotton, clothing" to the Spanish King (69). Cortés's narrative to the King consequently becomes the means through which he is able to pitch his 'sale' of the New World.

*Cartas de Relación* was a political tool used by Cortés to justify his illegal actions as well as plea for help. But, more importantly, it mapped out a space that did not exist before Cortés's arrival. Like all cartographers, Cortés chose what to include in his map, and like all maps, it is a contested perspective of the space as it contains differing viewpoints, values, and beliefs. *Cartas de Relación* does more than argue for the validity



of Cortés's conquest, it maps out the West's understanding of America that, for the most part, holds to this day.

## LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY

The purposes and effects of narrative maps are analogous to those of conventional ones. In *Spatiality*, Robert Tally defines literary cartography as an act of writing that produces a map. Similar to the mapmaker, "the writer must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish" (45). Similarly, in *Maps of the Imagination*, Peter Turchi argues that the writer, much like the cartographer, maps out a story that cannot include every detail, thus, limiting the reader's perspective and understanding of the text (14).

The result of this cartographic narrative is, as Tally calls it, a form of 'world-making.' He explains that as writers "survey the territory they wish to describe, they weave together disparate elements in order to produce the narrative" (49). These elements can include parts of other narratives, places, or people, and even myths, legends, or inventions of the imagination. The literary cartographer searches for these external elements in order to complete the image he or she is trying to convey. As the writer produces this representation of a world, he or she also discovers the world created by the narrative; it becomes a map as it, for readers, is an image of the world, one that can be used in future narratives, surveys, or maps. In this way, literary cartography gives form to the world (Tally, 49-50).

Cortés acted as a cartographer, and his map created many qualities of the Americas that have been used in numerous future maps and narratives of the New World. For

example, in order to justify his conquering and enslaving of the natives, Cortés claims, “they are all cannibals, of which I send Your Majesty no evidence because it is so infamous” (146). Anthony Pagden, the editor and translator of *Letters from Mexico* verifies that none of the tribes Cortés encountered were cannibalistic. Cortés himself did not have any proof of his claim, the only evidence he could produce was the ‘infamous nature’ of the cannibalism among the natives. However, because it was written down and thus mapped out, it was taken as truth until scientific discovery could prove otherwise.

He further elaborates on the savageness of the Indians: “I was also moved to take those slaves so as to strike some fear into the people of Culua and also because there are so many people that if I did not impose a great and cruel punishment they would never be reformed” (146). In order to defend taking the natives as slaves Cortés emphasizes the need for their reforming. He had to enslave them in order to rid them of their cannibalism. Cortés’s characterization of the natives as cannibals, which he most likely pulled from his imagination or other stories, labels the Indians as a species that are less than human, or animalistic. Such a classification allowed Europeans to colonize a people they could claim were uncivilized.

The writing process is also an act of exploration, one in which writers guide their readers through a story, a place, or an idea. Literary cartography attempts to make sense of a place beyond its demarcations on an ordinary grid map. It gives the reader an idea of how the author understands, interprets, and relates to the place being described.

According to Turchi, this act of writing is a form of exploration that includes “premeditated searching” and “undisciplined rambling” (12). Cortés navigated the space of the New World with intentions to discover specific features, and he mapped out the

Americas while attempting to understand the foreign land. Thus, he guides his readers through his journey of contextualizing this space. However, like all maps, this map is from a specific cultural point of view, yet it was received as the only and true way of seeing the New World. Cortés's perspective of the Americas became the West's perspective of the Americas.

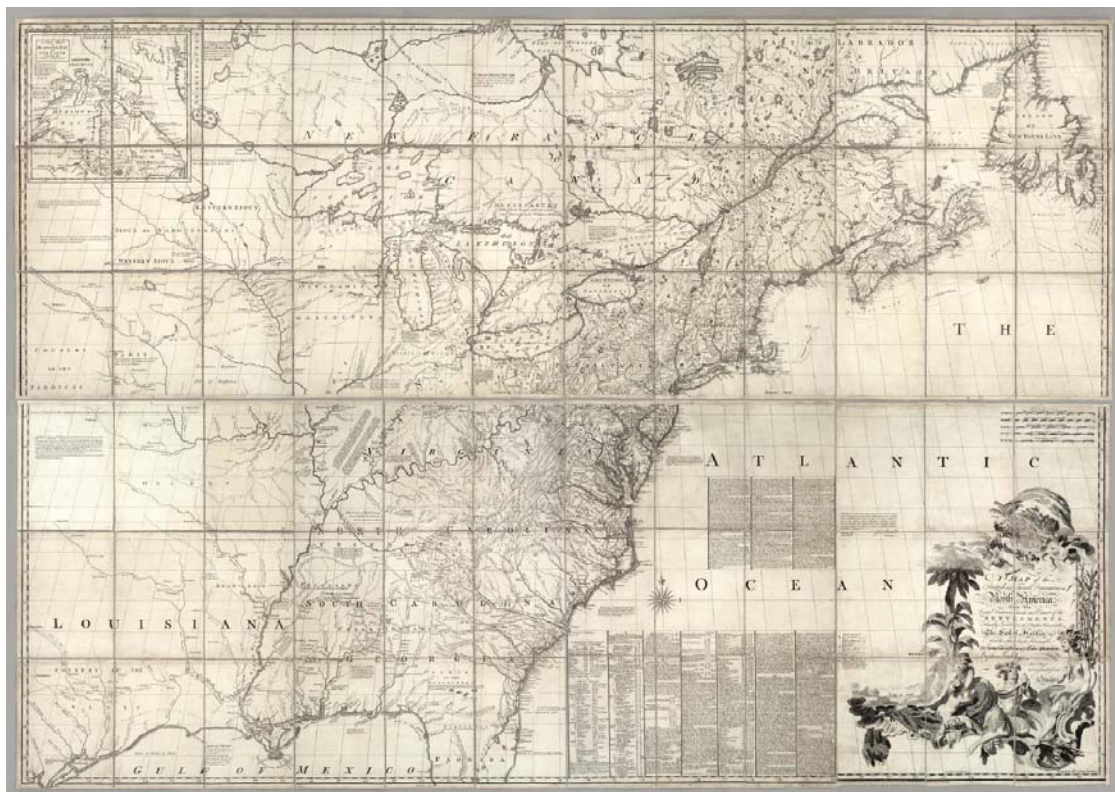
When Cortés describes the war he is engaged in in the province of Tepeaca he claims that "the natives have always been very warlike and rebellious" (146). Having only stayed in this province a few days, Cortés certainly did not know how a group of people had 'always' been. He made this assumption because the people of Tepeaca did not peacefully and willingly give themselves up to Cortés as 'vassals' of the Spanish empire. Cortés writes to the King regarding the people of Tepeaca: "perhaps such misfortune would never had fallen them if they had joined me on the first occasion" (147). Because the natives did not want to give up their land, their culture, and their freedom, Cortés labeled them as a violent people, which justifies his attack. The West then received his view of the Indians as violent, and Cortés's map was later used to justify colonization.

Like maps, literary cartography also tells a story. Ricardo Padrón, in "Mapping Imaginary Worlds," argues that literary maps are a way in which to give places "life and meaning," not just through mere descriptions, but by telling stories and assigning characters to help illustrate the space. Readers are then able to form a better mental image of the place they are reading about (258-259). Those who produce literary cartography are not always aware that they are creating a map. Tally points out that story-telling and mapping are interrelated, as storytelling requires mapping and a map also tells a story. These interrelations between the two generate new narratives (46). Cortés's unconscious

narrative mapping of the Americas created a new space readers could visualize, relate to, and imagine in their minds.

Such an effect is especially true for Cortés's map given the profound desire Europeans had for knowledge of the New World. Narratives of the Americas were sought-out because they were scarcely available. The space was so unknown and fascinating to Europeans that whatever they read in these narratives became reality for them. In this way, the idea and circulation of America was produced in Europe.

The narrative quality of literary cartography allowed Cortés to exercise power over Europe and the Americas. He told a story of the New World which in turn created a portrait of the natives, their land, and their way of life that was taken as truth. European perspective is similarly shown in the *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America*. Myra Jehlen, in "The Literature of Colonization," presents the details of this map that portrays the relationship between literary and traditional cartography. (See fig. 1).



*Map of the British and French Dominions in North America, 1755 (Fig. 1)*

John Mitchell, an American cartographer, drew this map in 1755 for the English Lords of Trade and Plantations to reinforce British territory claims (Jehlen, 29). Just like Cortés's map, it is directed at a specific audience and used for a specific goal. Jehlen explains that this map was purposely constructed to be viewed from the right to left, or East to West. This represents the political desires of the time, to expand westward. Mitchell's map intentionally exaggerates the extension of the west to show the possibility of "infinite expansion" (29). Cortés's literary map also highlighted aspects of the Americas to prove that Tenochtitlan could be conquered.

When describing the inhabitants of Tascaletca Cortés notes that, "they are such an orderly and intelligent people that the best in Africa cannot equal them" (68). By 'orderly and intelligent' Cortés refers to their ability to be productive slaves. We can see this through his comparison of the people to those in Africa, who were at the time slaves to the Europeans. He does not comment upon the orderly and intelligent nature of their sophisticated society, as that would be contradictory to his desire to use them as slaves. Cortés highlighted the docile nature of the natives in order to prove to the King that the people would be faithful and industrious servants to his throne.

The *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America* resembles literary cartography in the way that it mysteriously contains land that does not exist. Mitchell includes five islands on Lake Superior in his map that no one has ever seen (Jehlen, 29). As Matthew Edney explains in "A Publishing History of John Mitchell's Map of North America, 1755-1775," although it is not known exactly how or why these islands appeared on his map, it presents a problem as this map was used up until the

1930s to solve border disputes without anyone noticing the mistake (4). Maps are often considered to be the truth and an exact scientific way of viewing the world, when in fact they are all just cultural perspectives and ideals. *Cartas de Relación* presented the native peoples as savage, and therefore this document was exploited to justify the conquering of the Americas. Cortés's map, like Mitchell's, was used for centuries after it was produced and considered to be the only and true representation of the New World.

Cortés's map also includes a glaring error that is still considered common knowledge. After telling the native peoples that their worshipping of idols was wrong, Cortés claims that:

All of them, especially Mutezuma, replied that they had already told me how they were not natives of this land, and that as it was many years since their forefathers had come here, they well knew that they might have erred somewhat in what they believed [...] and as I had only recently arrived from there, I would better know the things they should believe, and should explain to them and make them understand, for they would do as I said was best (106-107).

The error here is that the natives were immigrants to the land. The common belief that the Indians came to America thirteen thousand years ago at the end of the Ice Age through the Bering Strait is still believed to be true. This theory was based on the fact that the large sheets of ice around the world allowed sea levels to fall drastically. A bridge of land then emerged due to the extremely low sea levels, connecting Siberia and Alaska. Further research by C. Vance Haynes has proven that thirteen-thousand years ago the land bridge was warm and ice free when the natives were thought to have made their journey.

According to the theory, the Indians then simply walked across this bridge and into what is now America.

In 1997 archeological research in southern Chile discovered that this was most likely not the case. Evidence was found that proved humans had lived in Chile at least twelve-thousand years ago. Since this is land is seven-thousand miles from the Bering Strait, and would have taken a significant amount of time to travel to, it was determined that all of the natives could not have come to the Americas via the Bering Strait, as it would not have yet been ice-free. Even more, artifacts from the Indians have been discovered that dated back twenty and thirty thousand years ago. Nonetheless, because Cortés quotes the Indians claiming they are not natives of the land, it adds to the resilience of this theory. Despite hard scientific proof, the myths used to justify taking the natives' land still persist.

The implications of this excerpt from Cortés's literary map allowed politicians and historians to justify colonization, because if the Indians are also immigrants, the Europeans are not really taking the land away from them. In addition, by attributing such language to the natives, Cortés makes the argument that they wanted to be told how to live and what to believe; he creates them as a people who long to be shaped and formed into what the West considers 'right' and 'normal,' when, as we will later see, this is entirely false. Cortés here justifies Christian conversion, slavery, and the taking of natives' land, all in one sentence.

Lastly, this *Map of the British and French Dominions in North America* literally erases the history of the natives, much like Cortés attempted to do in his narrative. It is not visible in this picture, but the map has a small legend that reads: "The Long and

Barbarous Names lately given to Some of these Northern Parts of Canada and the Lakes were not inserted, as they are of no use, and uncertain Authority.” By ‘lately given,’ Mitchell means that the Indians of the region named the places he mentioned (Jehlen, 29). In removing the native names of the land, Mitchell eliminates any connection or right the native people had to their territory. As we will see, Cortés also renamed already established cities and declared them as part of Spanish empire. Both Cortés and Mitchell rewrote the space of the Americas as land that was the property of Europeans. *Cartas de Relación*, with its many cartographic qualities, therefore becomes a representation of created space rather than just a written narrative.

#### CORTÉS’S AMERICA

Before exploring the content of Cortés’s letter we will look at the most recent archeological and anthropological research that provides a detailed account of what the society in the Americas was like before European colonization. Author Charles Mann followed archeologist Clark Erickson and anthropologist William Balée on a trip to South America to explore and study the land that was once populated by the native peoples. These two scholars have dedicated their research to disproving the myth that Indians lived in small, nomadic groups and had little to no impact on the environment.

Mann explains, in *1491*, that the native people were not nomadic; they lived in established and populous cities. The city Tiwanaku had around 115,000 people, including another quarter million in the countryside, about twice the size of modern France. The rival state, Wari, was packed with apartments that were built with up to six stories (22). Tenochtitlan had aqueducts that carried water from the mountains to the city. It was also



filled with lavish botanical gardens. Most astonishing was the fact that their streets were clean despite the fact that they were so crowded. Back in Europe the streets were covered in sewage and civilians would wade ankle deep in it (126).

Pre-Columbian land also included sophisticated, genetically engineered farms. Their most harvested crop was maize, which still has modern archeologists and biologists arguing over how the natives were able to develop this crop. Maize cannot reproduce itself because its kernels are wrapped in the husk, so they must have developed it from another species. And yet no wild species resemble maize. The natives would have had to perform a highly scientific and difficult form of genetic engineering in order to produce this crop. In addition to maize, they also grew squash, beans, and avocados (Mann, 18).

The native people were not, as it is often thought, ‘protectors’ of the land who did not disturb the natural environment. They had significant achievements in infrastructure and agriculture that were arguably more advanced than what existed in Europe. However, because Cortés also included aspects of the natives’ lifestyle that he claims were uncivilized and savage, they overshadow the civilized society the natives possessed. Cortés dramatizes the natives’ practice of human sacrifice as the “most horrid and abominable custom.” This, of course, is later used to justify Spanish colonization, because the natives could not possibly be humans if they partook in such a horrid and animalistic ritual. Although the natives living in and around Tenochtitlan, or in the “Mexica” empire, did perform human sacrifice, it was practiced in order to sustain the lives of everyone else on earth (Mann, 119).

These tribes believed in an “Alliance” of gods, led by Huitzilpochti, who was a “divinity essential to the fate of humankind” (119). He was linked to the sun in that,

according to two different stories, became the sun or supervised its workings. This god was vital to survival as all living things depend on the sun. Huitzilpochti had brothers with whom he was constantly in battle, and life could only exist when Huitzilpochti was in control and the sun was able to shine. When night came, the brothers would be back amidst their strife and Huitzilpochti would have to struggle against the moon and stars to rise into the sky. Each day of sunlight was a battle Huitzilpochti would have to endure and win. Because he could not succeed on his own every day, the natives would fortify Huitzilpochti with life-energy for his battles. This life-energy was obtained through human sacrifice. It was regarded as a good, necessary practice because the survival of the universe depended on providing Huitzilpochtli with enough life-energy to win his battles (Mann, 119).

On the contrary, Europeans used human sacrifice for a much less rational reason, and much more often. Criminals were burned, hung, and beheaded in front of huge, cheering crowds. Public execution was a form of entertainment in Europe. According to Cambridge historian V.A.C. Gatrell, between 1530 and 1630 England executed seventy-five thousand people. Their population at the time was only a tenth of that of the Mexica empire. If England was even half the size of the Indian empire they would have executed around 7,500 people a year. This is double the number of human sacrifices Cortés estimated the Mexica empire performs. The Mexica empire sacrificed humans to save the universe, while the Europeans executed those who disobeyed the law as a public spectacle. Cortés clearly could not, or chose not to, make the correlation between the similarities of both societies' practices. His ignorance resulted in the West's

understanding of the Indians and their customs as barbaric and opposed to the civilized practices in Europe, when in reality, they had more similarities than differences.

Cortés's narrative is complicated as he had to conceal the fact that Tenochtitlan and its people formed an organized and civilized society. In order for Europeans to justify their conquering of the natives and taking of their land it helped to present the Indians as savage and prove that their ways of living were uncivilized and unproductive. The Europeans came to help and save them from their barbaric lifestyle and to teach them a more sophisticated way to live. Thus, Cortés highlighted several aspects of the natives' way of living to make them appear as uncivilized as possible. However, Cortés also had to create the space of the New World to be appealing to the King who wanted to establish a profitable empire. Cortés therefore had to carefully select what he omitted and included in his narrative, just as cartographers do.

There are several points in his letter, which we will see, where Cortés does mention aspects of Tenochtitlan that would classify it as a civilized society. How, then, does one read *Cartas de Relación* and only recognize the parts that present the Indians as savage? Did the Europeans reading this work ignore the descriptions Cortés gives that attribute the natives to a civilized people? Or, perhaps it was an unconscious process in which the West, searching for evidence to prove the inhumanity of the Indians, did not allow themselves to see anything that would suggest that the natives were, in fact, similar to Europeans.

Nevertheless, the space of Tenochtitlan emerges from Cortés's literary map largely from the descriptions he gives that paint the Americas as a place favorable to colonization. Cortés strategically wrote his letter in order to impress King Charles V.

Cortés's style of persuasive writing closely mirrors tactics that maps also employ. In "Deconstructing the Map," J. B. Harley explains, "all maps strive to frame their message in the context of an audience," and "state an argument about the world and they are propositional in nature" (11). Cortés was clearly writing to the King with intentions of arguing for the value of this newly discovered territory. Cortés mapped out his surroundings, choosing which features to include and which to exclude, creating an ideological map of the land.

The general thesis of Cortés's letter was that King Charles V was already the emperor of the new Spanish empire, and that Cortés, with some help sent from Spain, would regain what was rightfully his. Thus, he talks of the native ruler, Mutezuma, as possessing, "all the things to be found under the heavens in this domain, fashioned in gold and silver that no smith in the world could have done better, and in jewels so fine that it is impossible to imagine with what instruments they were cut so perfectly" (108). Cortés included this detail to demonstrate to the King all that will rightly be his if he sends help to regain Tenochtitlan.

Cortés also emphasized the power Mutezuma held in order to prove to King Charles V that by taking control of this empire he will become the mightiest monarch in the world. When recounting the first meeting between himself and Mutezuma, Cortés describes in detail the great entrance Mutezuma made with over a thousand men watching, two hundred lords following him, and with two chiefs on either side of him (84). Mutezuma ruled closed to a hundred thousand people, and when Cortés wins this land back for Spain, King Charles V will have power over an entire population. Cortés also describes Mutezuma's dwelling as possessing a, "very large and beautiful house"

and a “very rich throne” (85). The more appealing it looks to hold the power Mutezuma does, the more inclined the King will be to send Cortés the help he desperately needs.

However, in addition to highlighting the wealth and power Mutezuma held, Cortés also wrote him as someone who, somehow, recognized King Charles V’s sovereignty. During this first encounter with Cortés and Mutezuma, the ruler delivers a monologue. Due to the complexity of the following speech, I will now quote at length:

For a long time we have known from the writings of our ancestors that neither I, nor any of those who dwell in this land, are natives of it, but foreigners who came from very distant parts; and likewise we know that a chieftain, of whom they were all vassals, brought our people to this region. And he returned to his native land and after many years came again, by which time all those who had remained were married to native women and had built villages and raised children. And when he wished to lead them away again they would not go nor even admit him as their chief; and so he departed. And we have always held that those who descended from him would come and conquer this land and take us as their vassals. So because of the place from which you claim to come, namely, from where the sun rises, and the things you tell us of this great lord or king who sent you here, we believe and are certain that he is our natural lord, especially as you say that he has known of us for some time. So be assured that we will obey you and hold you as our lord in place of that great sovereign of whom you speak; and in this there shall be no offense or betrayal whatsoever. And in all the land that lies in my domain, you may command as you will, for you shall be obeyed; and all that we own is for you to dispose of as you choose. Thus, as you are in your own country and your

own house, rest now from the hardships of your journey and the battles which you have fought, for I know full well of all that has happened to you (85-86).

This narrative presents many problems, the first of which being the Christian overtones of this speech coming from a pagan Aztec. This legend of a chieftain coming to rule a people who initially reject him bears a striking resemblance to the Christian belief that Jesus saved his followers. Mutezuma would not have had any knowledge of Jesus or of the Christian Bible.

Perhaps even more difficult to believe is the fact that Mutezuma essentially justifies the colonization of Tenochtitlan in a few sentences. He tells Cortés that not only are none of his people natives of the land, but that ‘foreigners’ brought them here years ago. Following the story Mutezuma tells, it is in fact Europeans who brought the Indians to the Americas and who are now back to reclaim the land that is rightfully theirs. If Mutezuma is the one relaying this fact, Cortés and European conquistadors could easily point to this Indian submission as an argument for colonizing land that does not belong to them.

Additionally, Mutezuma claims that he knew one day someone would come to conquer their land and take them as slaves. Considering the battle Mutezuma and his people fought against the Spanish, it is hard to believe they willingly submitted to Cortés. The great leader himself tells Cortés it is okay to take over his vast empire. He gives Cortés jurisdiction to ‘command as he will’ and tells him that all they own is his to have. To a Western reader it is easy to recognize and relate to the familiar Christian story while also envisioning a savage people who give up their rights and their land to a civilized society who will teach them the ‘right way’ to live.

Cortés was also aware that King Charles V sought land that was populated with native people who could be used as slaves. Thus, Cortés opens his letter by claiming that the natives “have offered themselves in the service of Your Highness as your subjects and vassals” (50). However, it is more likely that Cortés and his men manipulated or forced these people into obeying his commands, as is shown later in his letter. Referencing the people of Guasincango, Cortés writes, “I warned them that if they did not appear within the period I specified, I would march against them and destroy them as rebels who refused to subject themselves to the dominion of Your Highness” (71).

More evidence of Cortés’s use of force against the natives comes from the European friar, Bartolomé De Las Casas, who accused Cortés of slaughtering the entire population of the city Cholula in order to “terrorize the Mexican capital to surrender” and to “reduce the Indians’ determination to resist” (Pagden, 465). Cortés did not deny this, as he explained that the mass killing was a tactic used to make himself feared among the natives (465). Yet Cortés described these people as willingly submissive in order to further convince the King that he could successfully and easily build an empire in Tenochtitlan.

Concluding his letter, Cortés sums up his argument for the value of the new land: “I have seen no city so fit for Spaniards to live in, for it has water and some common lands suitable for raising cattle, which none of those we saw previously had, for there are so many people living in these parts” (75). Cortés wanted King Charles V to visualize this space, with land that could be cultivated and natives who could be used as slaves, as a place in which he could profitably expand his empire. These tactics Cortés employed to

overemphasize the magnificence of Tenochtitlan are attempts to offset the fact that he has actually lost power over the city.

Cortés's representation of the Americas becomes how Europe knows and understands the New World. According to Tally, most maps are in fact, "ideological, [and] they are imbedded within and often serve the interests of structures of power or domination" (25). Cortés was clearly writing an ideological map for King Charles V, who wanted to build an empire in the Americas. He writes the natives as a people who have willingly surrendered themselves to the Spanish Crown, are especially violent and rebellious, and do not understand how to properly worship the Christian God. Cortés does not try to understand the native rituals that are different from European practices. He exploits the otherness of the Indians for his own advantage.

#### CORTÉS'S PERSPECTIVE

This representation of space is produced partly as a result of Cortés's act of mapping out the world around him in order to better understand the unfamiliar and 'strange.' In almost all of Cortés's descriptions there are comparisons to Spain; Cortés could not understand or interpret the New World without references to his home country. For example, when writing about Tenochtitlan, Cortés claims: "the city is so big and so remarkable...for the city is much larger than Granada and very much stronger, with as good buildings and many more people than Granada had when it was taken" (67). Writing about this new land in relation to Spain allowed Cortés to understand and explain the foreign space. As a result, the King and readers of Cortés's narrative saw the land



only in comparison to Spain, not as a place that had its own unique culture and infrastructure.

It is likely that Cortés wrote about the Americas in this manner because he did not know how to represent the otherness of a world so different from his own. When Cortés arrives in the Americas, he expected to find a society similar to Europe's because that was all he knew. Cortés also failed to include concrete details of the city or its contents, shown through the vague terms he uses. For example, the adjectives 'big' and 'remarkable' do not tell the reader anything substantial about the New World. Cortés was unable to find the words to explicitly describe how or why Tenochtitlan was larger and stronger than Granada. The ambiguity and generalizations in Cortés's writing allowed his readers to 'fill in' for themselves what they would consider a land that was, for example, 'big' and 'remarkable.'

Cortés also placed judgment on the native's religious rituals, claiming them to be wrong and sacrilegious, when in reality they are just different from the monotheistic beliefs Cortés had. Instead of explaining and attempting to understand their customs, he labels them as immoral and in need of correction. When describing the city of Temixtitan, Cortés spends several pages elaborating on one of the places of worship and the many idols there. He tells his Christian audience: "the most important of these idols, and the ones in whom they have the most faith, I had taken from their places and thrown down the steps...and I had images of Our Lady and of our saints put there, which caused Mutezuma and other natives some sorrow" (106). Cortés strips these people of their religious identity and, more importantly, paints for the West a picture of a people who are

violating a universal Christian faith. The natives are not breaking any laws according to their own religious beliefs, but Cortés still presents them as a sacrilegious people.

The West is never able to appreciate or understand the otherness of the natives; they are only told that the natives are a people who live backwards because they did not have the same values the West had at the time. This in turn makes it much easier to colonize a people who do not know how to ‘properly’ live. Cortés continues to appeal to the Christian Spanish Crown as he explains:

I made them understand through the interpreters how deceived they were in placing their trust in those idols which they had made with their hands from unclean things. They must know that there was only one God, Lord of all things, who had created heaven and earth and all else and who made all of us; and He was without beginning or end, and they must worship only Him, not any other creature or thing. And I told them all I knew about this to dissuade them from their idolatry and bring them to the knowledge of God our Savior (106).

Cortés showed the West that the natives were a people who were constantly needing to be told what was right and wrong. They were always ‘better’ after instruction from Cortés and the Europeans, and their previous practices are almost always portrayed as barbaric. The Indians were never described independently of European instruction, and were thus viewed only as a people in need of reform. The framework Cortés used to describe the natives shaped the way the West viewed the Indians and justified colonization for several centuries after the Age of Discovery.

Pagden calls this form of observing otherness the ‘principle of attachment,’ or assimilating the new to something already known. The new, the natives’ practices of

worshipping idols, was interpreted as a corrupt Christian ritual, not as a ritual independent of Christianity. In “The Semiotics of Conquest,” David Damrosch notes the tendency for all European conquistadors to impose their own values on the otherness that they encounter. They pull things out of context, the native societies, and place them in the context of Western society, which causes Indian practices to appear immoral rather than different, changing their original significance.

Cortés also compared aspects of Tenochtitlan to Spain because it proved that this new land had value. If “the city itself is as big as Seville or Córdoba,” and if the city “square [is] twice as big as that of Salamanca” then the value of the land was legitimized and tangible (Cortés, 103). The King was able to understand exactly what this land could provide for him in terms of an empire. These statements from Cortés transform the space of the New World into a commodity. Ultimately, Cortés presents a view of the New World that propels the West to see the land through his perspective and the perspective of someone looking to establish an empire in the Americas.

#### THE POWER OF CORTÉS’S MAP

The perspectives in Cortés’s letters are so powerful because they arrive in Europe during the same time that a radical revolution is occurring in how Europe represents the world to themselves. Linear perspective developed in art and maps around one hundred years prior to the Age of Discovery. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, explains the brief history of the emergence of this perspective in paintings, dating back to the beginning of the Renaissance. Once it was realized that the image could outlive what it represented, it “then showed how something or somebody once looked – and thus by implication how

the subject had been seen by other people” (10). Eventually, the artist or image-maker was recognized within the image. The product became a record of how the artist had seen what he represented. The primary origin of linear perspective was a heightened awareness and increased consciousness of individuality and history (10).

The result of linear perspective is an image that has been recreated or reproduced. It has been removed from the place and time in which it originally appeared and it is preserved as this representation, in some cases for hundreds of years. The photographer or artist selects this particular image in a scene from an infinite amount of other possible images. Additionally, it is not just the image-maker that is responsible for creating a limited perspective. The perception of an image depends also upon the viewer’s way of seeing. For example, in an image with several people, the viewer will only be drawn to a certain person or two, for each individual’s different reasons (Berger, 9-10).

This theory helps us to understand why, after reading Cortés claim that the natives had sophisticated cities and farms, Europeans only took from it what they wanted to. Berger argues that the convention of perspective centers everything on the eye of the beholder. He explains that, “it is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light traveling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances reality. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world” (16). For Europeans, Cortés’s narrative is reality, not a cultural perspective of a foreign space.

Another effect of this perspective is its ability and tendency to privilege a certain group of people. Renaissance art deprived lower classes of their history, as they were not depicted in any art. According to Berger, “the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the

role of the ruling classes” (11). This is exactly what happened in Cortés’s narrative. His map privileged the West and erased the native peoples. It also justified his conquest. Linear perspective allows for the representation of the ‘other.’ It gave Cortés the power to represent the Indians as a people who live corruptly. Although Cortés’s map is just a representation of reality, it is real for him and for his readers.

This viewpoint is also commonplace for all maps, according to Harley, who explains that maps, “like art, far from being ‘a transparent opening to the world,’ are but ‘a particular human way...of looking at the world’” (3). Everyone who looks at a work of art, for example, will interpret and experience this piece differently. Based on their social and cultural backgrounds, images will have various meanings for various people. However, Cortés’s map of Tenochtitlan, and other explorers’ narratives, were viewed as the only interpretation of the New World.

Because Cortés’s literary map allowed him to exert power over the New World through his writing, the West was unable to see the land independent of its imperialistic value. The New World was ripped of its natural culture and created to be a land whose barbaric people desperately needed to be colonized. Another reason Cortés’s map was so influential was because the practice of cartography emerged during the Age of Discovery. Maps came into existence for the same reason modern art did, due to the development of linear perspective, which views space as quantifiable and “perceived from the point of view of a single, central observer” (18). The transformation of space into a commodity that could be “measured, divided...bought and sold,” Tally claims, “*required* new ways of seeing space” (18). Thus, maps were created to represent empires, not nature or reality.

Because these ‘discoveries’ of new land were being made during the fifteenth and sixteenth century, maps became the “primary way of viewing the world,” and “the way in which power was exercised” (Tally, 25). Jehlen also discusses the significance maps had during the Age of Discovery. Because of the recent invention of the printing press, writing and publishing began to gain unprecedented political and social importance. As an example, Jehlen references the voyage of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Thomas Jefferson, who had requested the funding for this journey from Congress, told the travelers that their journals were just as, or more, important than the actual trip (13). The expedition could not be validated and land could not be claimed for America unless it was documented in writing.

Maps were also powerful because they were one of the only ways Europeans could learn about the New World and what the political climate was like. However, the men who wrote these narrative maps had intentions other than informing the public of their findings. For example, Cortés’s plea for political pardon became the view through which Europe saw and understood the New World. His misclassification of the natives’ religious practices, human sacrifice rituals, and violent tendencies become the truth because Cortés has the power to write it down. He was at liberty to represent the Americas as he chose because almost no one in Europe had ever been overseas. This power gave conquistadors the ability to map out the New World in a way that would favor themselves and their empires, leaving the West with no choice but to take it as ‘truth.’

Cortés created the New World by yielding this power. The Age of Discovery began at the cusp of the Enlightenment, which sought for and claimed only one truth. It was

believed that there was only way to view the world. If Cortés went to the Americas and found the world he claimed to encounter in his narrative, it must be an accurate representation of the New World. Ultimately it did not matter if what Cortés presented was the truth or not, it only mattered that what he presented was received as the truth.

The explorers could also exert their dominance over the space by mapping out the land and claiming territories as their own. Cortés's mapping of the New World is what allows him to declare the land for Spain. On several occasions Cortés renames cities and claims them to be a part of the Spanish Empire. For example, speaking of a later expedition, Cortés describes a city named Cempoal, which he "renamed Sevilla" (50). Harley explains the significance of maps for the sixteenth century explorers, as he writes: "in colonial North America, for example, it was easy for Europeans to draw lines across the territories of Indian nations...the map allowed them to say, 'this is mine; these are the boundaries'" (14). Cortés's act of writing down the new name of this city is what legitimized it as a part of Spain.

In addition to the power Cortés was able to exert through linear perspective, writing was an even more powerful tool for him because the natives did not have a formal system of writing. Thus, it was easy for Cortés and other explorers to write their maps of the Americas. The fact the natives had no system of writing was considered by Europeans to mean that they were inferior and therefore had no right to the land. However, the natives in fact did have a civilized form of oral communication. Because Cortés was able to physically map out territories and name cities on paper he completely redefined the space of the New World and "forge[d] the identification of the Europeans with the continent" (Jehlen, 14).

In addition, because the natives did not write and therefore had no written documentation of their history or culture, the only records of life in the Americas are the texts of Europeans. History was then written from one point of view and the native people were erased from history almost completely (Jehlen, 57). By mapping out in writing what territory he claimed for Spain, Cortés colonized the land and partook in rewriting the history of the New World into Spanish Mexico.

At the end of his letter to the King, Cortés writes, “from all I have seen and understood touching the similarity between this land and that of Spain, in its fertility and great size and the cold and many other things, it seemed to me that the most suitable name for it was New Spain of the Ocean Sea” (158). This picture of Tenochtitlan that Cortés illustrates in his narrative establishes the city as a part of the Spanish empire. The Europeans who read his work do not get a chance to experience this part of the New World as a distinct place from Europe, they are forced to see it as a space that the West is entitled to conquer.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE AMERICAS

Cortés’s literary map allowed the Americas to be written into existence in Europe. As we know, Cortés did not discover the actual space of the Americas; he instead established the discourse of the New World. The discourse he helped to create was the New World as a place rightfully entitled to European empires, a discourse that views the Americas as a space that lacked culture and civilization. The narrative of Cortés and other conquistadors set the precedent for future Europeans to take over the land as their own and force the native peoples from their land.



Michel Foucault describes the process of creating a discourse in, “What is an Author?” He uses Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx as examples to explain that they are not merely the authors of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the *Communist Manifesto*, they “established the endless possibility of discourse” and “created the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts” (131). Their works did not just introduce the ideas of the unconscious and capital; they created the “existence, circulation, and operation” of these discourses by mapping them out in writing (124). Because of these authors hundreds of other texts were able to be written based on their theories. Their theories are now commonly referred to as “Freudianism” and “Marxism” because Freud and Marx were the first to create the discussion of the unconscious and of capital. Their texts become more than pieces of literature; they are the building blocks for a discourse that will continue to develop throughout the centuries.

Foucault makes the distinction between the author of a discourse and the author of a novel, who is rarely more than the author of his own text (131). Cortés is not just the author of *Cartas de Relación*, he is the author of the discourse that establishes the New World as America. The literary maps written by Cortés and other conquistadors during the Age of Discovery produced the image of the Americas for the Europeans. The discourse they created, similar to that of Freud’s and Marx’s, allowed for other texts to come into circulation, but it also allowed for the Americas to come into existence. Cortés and his contemporaries began the discussion of the natives as a barbaric people, a group of people that cannot be considered a society or a civilization, but people living ignorant of the ‘better’ and ‘right’ ways to live. Cortés told the West that the Indians would benefit from learning European ways of life and from receiving Christian salvation. Conquering

the savage is more easily justified than is a conquering of an established society. Cortés's text appropriates a group of people to create a nation and justifies the means of doing so.

The motivation for appropriation, according to Kathleen Ashley in "The Cultural Process of 'Appropriation'" goes "beyond the simple acknowledgement of borrowing or influence" and is "to gain power over" (3). Appropriation seeks to gain power over the original work by creating something new that is better or more productive. Cortés redefined history by producing a new and constructed image of something that already existed, Tenochtitlan, and, as a result, created Spanish Mexico.

Jehlen similarly notes the use of appropriation in the colonization of the New World. She explains that European conquistadors essentially 'marketed' the New World to sponsors and lieutenants who "aggressively redefine[d] their concept of the world to suit their notion of how it would be most profitably exploited" (30). Thus, explorers who wanted to be rewarded for their findings would be more inclined to write about the Americas as a rich, yet desperate place that could be profitably colonized.

## CONCLUSION

The struggles the early settlers of the Americas had resemble the issues we still face as a nation today. Àlvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish explorer, was one of the first Europeans to live among the native tribes. From around 1528 to 1536 De Vaca, two other Spanish men, Andrés Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and a black slave, Estevánico, traveled throughout North America, primarily in Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico. The group adopted the lifestyles of the natives and De Vaca developed sympathy towards them. He became openly critical of the European treatment towards

the Indians. In 1535 De Vaca became the leader of the Pimas and Opatas tribes, who traveled with him southwest into Mexico, visiting several different villages. In early 1536 De Vaca and his loyal natives encountered “Christians,” as he refers to them in *The Relation of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*. The Christians were led by Diego de Alcaraz and were searching for Indians to capture and for the riches rumored to exist in the villages.

The Spanish immediately demanded taking the Indians as slaves, to which De Vaca refused, and a vicious argument then ensued. De Vaca told his tribes to return home in order to avoid enslavement. However, the natives insisted that before they could leave, they had to deliver De Vaca, Dorantes, Maldonado, and Estevánico into the hands of another native tribe, as was their custom. Alcaraz, jealous of this treatment, begged their interpreter to tell the Indians that De Vaca and the others were Spanish who had long been lost, and that his group were the “lords of the land who must be obeyed and served, while [De Vaca was] inconsequential” (De Vaca, 69).

However, the natives believed that the Christians had lied, claiming: “[De Vaca] had come from the sunrise, they from the sunset; [De Vaca] healed the sick, they killed the sound; [De Vaca] came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced; [De Vaca] coveted nothing but gave whatever we were given, while they robbed whomever they found and bestowed nothing on anyone” (69). The Indians did not believe De Vaca was Spanish because they saw the Spanish as slavers, murderers, and thieves, while De Vaca was kind towards them. In contrast, the Spanish considered De Vaca Spanish because that was where he was born and his identity could not be changed. The once

clear distinction between who is European and who is native blurred as it became clear that the idea of identity is not a universal concept.

For the native people, identity depended on your actions. Spanish people were not necessarily those who came from Spain; they were a manipulative and violent people. Because De Vaca was not these things, he was not Spanish. On the contrary, to the Spanish it did not matter how De Vaca acted, he was born in and had ancestors from Spain; therefore he was Spanish. These two different values of identity that the natives and the Spanish had together define what it means to be 'American.' De Vaca is both native, as he acts kindly, but also Spanish as this was his country of origin. De Vaca is American.

Almost five-hundred years ago De Vaca showed us what America is, a contested space of people, perspectives, values, and beliefs. The result of these conflicting societies is what becomes America, and Cortés's map helped to establish this. The production of these literary maps made it possible for America to exist. However, the process of identifying America as a nation happened in Europe. Through the narratives being read in Europe, America became the space Cortés and the other conquistadors mapped out in writing. This had a lasting consequence, as today people still regard the claims Cortés makes in his letter as the truth.

These maps are the basis for which Europe was able to establish nations in the New World. Cortés described the Americas as a place that was inhabited by primitive peoples and that desperately needed to be civilized. Western expansion was justified when an entire race was regarded as inferior to western civilization, and who would be better off living a European way of life. Further, the natives were not seen as humans, but

as “resources” of the land who could help to build European empires (Jehlen, 91). America was founded through the ideological maps that Cortés and other explorers produced for the advancement of their own European countries.

The picture of the New World that Cortés produced contains, like most maps often do, lavish elaborations, a cultural viewpoint, and is therefore illustrative of power dynamics. Specifically, Cortés’s literary map of Tenochtitlan was an argument for the wealth and value of the city, which includes and omits features of the land to achieve its purpose. Cortés’s map also gave only one perspective of Tenochtitlan, yet is considered the only and true view of the city. Lastly, Cortés’s map created the New World as a place to be conquered and civilized by the Europeans, who, in the narratives, constantly claim the land as their own. This image of the Americas, mapped out and produced by Cortés and other conquistadors, allowed for America to be written into existence.

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