This past February 9, 2010 I was invited, along with other colleagues from the department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (MLCS), to participate in the University of Alberta’s yearly festival of Teaching. The aim of our poster session and presentation entitled “Teaching Visual Culture at MLCS” was to discuss some of the innovative strategies employed to integrate the teaching of visual culture in our multilingual department (where seventeen languages are taught).

I was asked to collaborate as a representative of the Spanish and Latin American studies section of MLCS where I specialize in the teaching of Latin American literary and cultural productions from the colonial time period with emphasis on New Spain, the geographic area known today as Mexico. The teaching of primary colonial Latin American literary texts in Spanish to undergraduate students presents various challenges. One apparent challenge is the older style of Spanish employed in the texts written by the various conquistadors, missionaries, soldiers, travelers, historians etc. The study of these colonial texts can be best addressed by teaching them through a selection of brief primary excerpts (with the inclusion of a vocabulary list), and contextualizing their historical, geographical, political, social, and literary production. Depending on the size of the class, one or two students can be assigned to do the background research on the author of the text and can be asked to provide their peers with the essential background information via a class presentation. These class presentations can then be posted on the course
website in the guise of a word document or power-point in order to disseminate the student’s research with their peers. Next, a set of questions can be created to accompany the text to test reading comprehension. Beyond the reading comprehension and oral dissemination of these fascinating alphabetic texts, learning about colonial culture only through these alphabetic texts in Spanish could be seen as telling only part of the story, but it would be one that was missing the rich visual materiality of culture present in this most fascinating and rich time period representing the clash of cultures: Amerindian and European.

One successful approach to making these alphabetic texts in Spanish come to life has been the use of movies. Although historical appropriations in film are meant in no way to replace the primary historical archive, they nonetheless can help students visualize the difficult processes of cross-cultural translation and mistranslation that took place between Europeans and Amerindians. The study of such films can also serve as a point from which to discuss popular cultures’ adaptation, translation, representation or misrepresentation of indigenous cultures and the historical past, and can be seen as a way to make the texts come to life, especially for a student audience that is constantly bombarded with a rich variety of media.

Finally, complementing the study of Spanish alphabetic texts with visual culture serves a crucial purpose. Students reading the colonial texts in Spanish may possibly gain the false impression that the study and history of the New World territories and its inhabitants begins (or comes into being) when documented and rendered alphabetically by Spanish conquistadors, missionaries, and travelers, and fail to ignore the rich materiality of culture and contributions from the side of the indigenous cultures before and after the conquest of their territories by Europeans. The study and recovery of the rich materiality of indigenous cultures and their alternative ways of encoding knowledge, memory, and history without the use of the alphabet (a western technology of encoding knowledge) must therefore be addressed in order to represent this time period in a holistic fashion, and may help students move beyond a Eurocentric conception of the conquest of the New world territories. The study of indigenous archeological artifacts, pyramids, textiles, pictorial manuscripts (codices) etc. must therefore be presented to students as another way of encoding history, knowledge, and memory. These alternative ways of encoding and preserving memory can serve as a way to complement,
contradict or expand upon the Spanish alphabetic versions of the conquest and may help students to begin to think critically about their own cultural baggage, question historical texts as sources of transparent “truth”, and move beyond their own Eurocentric world view.

**Visualizing the Conquest of Mexico Through Visual Culture**

What follows is a description of a successful set of activities I have carried out in my upper level Spanish literature and culture course “SPAN 441: Reading Colonial Culture” at the University of Alberta. These different assignments can of course be tailored to suit the appropriate Spanish language level of the student (be them at a high-school or university level) and can also be expanded to incorporate recent post-colonial theory. When studying the conquest of Mexico the aim is to expose students to both primary texts written in Spanish by the victors (Spanish conquistadors) and the vanquished (both alphabetic and non-alphabetic texts) concerning their representation of the Conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (present day Mexico City).

**Exercise 1: Alphabetic texts written by Spaniards: Vision of the Victors by Cortes and Diaz del Castillo**

My first set of assignments would have the students read alphabetic texts in Spanish written by the victors such as the *second letter of Cortes to Charles the V* (readily available online and in most libraries) and have them answer a set of questions related to the text. One or two students would then present a 15-20 minute talk providing important background on Hernan Cortes and historically and geopolitically contextualize the production of the letter itself. Anthony Pagden has provided a good introduction to Cortes’s letters in his English translation of the original Spanish text, *Letters from Mexico* (Yale University Press, 2001). Cortes’s second letter paints this Spanish conquistador as a mastermind of the conquest of Mexico and may give the students the false impression that this man almost single handedly carried out the conquest himself with a few men and that he could communicate in various indigenous languages with them. Student’s will therefore have to address how one of the aims of Cortes’s letter to Charles the V was to justify what was an illegal conquest of the Aztec capital which was undertaken against the orders of his Spanish superior. One strategy of justifying this
illegal conquest was by claiming that the Aztec or Amerindian subjects he encountered under the domains of Emperor Montezuma saw him as a tyrant and preferred to be ruled by the King of Spain. In a much more strategic fashion, in his letter Cortes had to fashion the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan as a city far more organized and advanced than some of the most prestigious European cities and in possession of gold in order to appeal to the Spanish King’s interest in incorporating such an Empire under his dominion. Nonetheless, how would one justify conquest against an Empire, which by all accounts appeared civilized? Cortes had to represent the Aztec capital as a barbarous Empire by recasting the Aztecs as the new Moors (recently conquered by Spain) and by indicating the presence of idol worship and human sacrifice, which could then justify conquest, as it would then ensure these new subjects, would be willingly converted to Christianity.

Next, students will also have to address some of the myths of the conquest, such as the myth of communication, i.e. that Cortes could directly communicate with the indigenous informants he encountered or even with Emperor Montezuma himself. Cortes in fact could not speak any of the indigenous languages and failed to give due and proper credit in his letters to his multilingual indigenous female interpreter, Doña Marina or Mallintzin whom he called his “tongue”, and without whom the conquest of Tenochtitlan and intelligence gathering would not have been possible. The historian Matthew Restall has addressed some of these conquest myths in his book Seven Myths of The Spanish Conquest (Oxford UP, 2004). To further emphasize the centrality of the role of the indigenous female interpreter Mallinztin in the conquest, it would also make sense to have students read another text written in Spanish, but from the perspective of a soldier. Bernal Diaz del Castillo’s chapter XXXVII (37): Cómo doña Marina era cacica e hija de grandes señores de pueblos y vasallos [...], from his revisionist chronicle on the history of the conquest of Mexico entitled Historia Verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España, serves as a great counterpoint to Cortes’ text. Diaz del Castillo’s text will enable the students to realize that without the help of many more soldiers, indigenous allies and multilingual interpreters, Cortes would not have been successful in his Conquest of the Aztec capital. What Diaz del Castillo’s text does is give due credit to those soldiers such as himself or interpreters such as Mallintzin in order to displace Cortes’ textual self-fashioning as superman Conquistador.
Exercise 2: Alphabetic and pictorial texts about the Conquest written by Amerindians: Visions of the Vanquished

The next set of assignments has the aim to provide a more holistic picture of the Conquest to the students. These sets of alphabetic and pictorial “texts” will demonstrate to the students that conquered Aztecs or indigenous tribes were not in fact silent about or passively resigned to the acts of violent conquest by the Spaniards. An indispensable text available since the 60s and which continues to enlighten students worldwide about Amerindian versions of the Conquest is Miguel León-Portilla’s seminal book, Vision de los Vencidos (available online). In his book León-Portilla has recovered the voice of the vanquished indigenous by including select excerpts from their alphabetic and pictorial (Amerindian codices) records on the Conquest of Mexico, which had been dispersed through various archives in Mexico and Europe. These heartfelt testimonies reveal the painful memories and traumas of Conquest experienced by the indigenous survivors. I usually ask the students to read the chapter entitled: “La Matanza del Templo Mayor en la Fiesta de Toxcatl” (available online) because it describes the planned surprise attack carried out by Spanish soldiers where they massacred most of the top religious Aztec priests and indigenous participants while they were conducting one of their most sacred ceremonies in the Templo Mayor. The alphabetic and pictorial texts, housed in what have been termed indigenous manuscripts or codices, demonstrate the fear and horror experienced by the indigenous participants during this massacre. Such unjustified and unprecedented killings of the Aztecs during their high ceremonies will help level the playing field for the students when they study the Conquest of Mexico. By this I mean that popular cultures emphasis on representing the Aztecs as bloodthirsty sacrificial savages can be balanced out by looking at the bloody-massacres carried out without provocation by the Europeans. To get the message across though a hands-on experience, I like to take my students on a little field trip to our library and rare books room so that they can view some of the facsimiles of indigenous pictorial manuscripts (codices) produce during the colonial time period, which document their perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico. In particular I have the students look at “Book 12: The Conquest of Mexico” which is the last book included in the Florentine Codex. This codice is the largest alphabetic and pictorial manuscript from the sixteenth century documenting Aztec culture and religion and was compiled and edited by the
Franciscan friar Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in collaboration with over four hundred post-Conquest indigenous students and informants. Such codices can enable students to visualize alternative versions of the conquest given that these drawings (acting like graphic novels) tell a story through images, i.e. they represent the way the Aztec wrote (a type of writing without words). Other codices may also be available for discussion, which represent the conquest and may be worth looking at such as the sixteenth century *Lienzo de Tlaxcalla*. If your library does not possess a facsimile or copy of these manuscripts, many of their images or information about them is available in scholarly journals or on the web.

**Exercise 3: Visualizing Conquest in movies**

Now that the students have been exposed to various versions of the Conquest of the Aztec capital both alphabetic and pictorial, European and Amerindian, it might be a good idea to have students watch one of the following movies in order to make these historical moments come to life or at least to help students visualize what has been going on in the texts. If the students seem particularly interested in the indigenous pictorial manuscripts or codices, I find that the movie “Tlacuilos” (meaning painter-scribes made in 1988) by Enrique Escalona is a great pedagogical tool to show students how scholars from different disciplines have been able to decipher and read the symbolic and abstract pictographs on the pages of the codices. This film performs a detailed reading of one page, the frontispiece of the *Codex Mendoza* which represents the historical and symbolic foundation of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan and demonstrates how these tlacuilos or Aztec painter-scribes who created it are able to integrate various narratives and stories into the space of one page, i.e. historical, time-keeping, symbolic, political, ecological etc.

Another film of interest worth watching is Salvador Carrasco’s “*La Otra Conquista/ The Other Conquest*” (2000) because unlike most other commercial North American films on the Conquest of Mexico, it actually makes the effort to try to retell the story of the conquest through the eyes of the indigenous vanquished and not through the victors. The film attempts to portray in a more culturally sensitive fashion, the logic behind indigenous rituals and their struggles within a colonial situation where they must
subversively practice their old religion and preserve the memory of their conquest through pictorial manuscripts (codices). It also demonstrates the difficult processes of cultural and religious translation and mistranslation, and the precarious role of indigenous interpreters. As such it can serve as an excellent complement to course discussions on the role of the female indigenous interpreter to Cortes, Mallintzin, the difficult process of converting indigenous people to Christianity, something that would certainly not happen overnight. The movie also makes attempts at realism by having Aztec characters speak Nahuatl (the Aztec language) as well as the imposed Spanish by the Conquistadors and as such can give students a better feeling for the difficulties of cross-cultural communication.

**Exercise 4: Getting Beyond our Cultural Baggage: Two maps of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan**

One of my main objectives in teaching colonial texts is to have students think critically across cultures, but how does one achieve this if we are all victims of our own cultural baggage, memories, experiences, and worldview? One obvious way which is already being achieved in any foreign language course is the learning of a new language which forces the student to rewire their brain and expands their cultural horizons as languages are culturally and conceptually charged and map space and the world in very different ways.

One deceptively simple exercise which I like to do in class, after having looked at the Cortes’ text and the Amerindian codices, is to ask students to draw a map of the local city. We then have the students vote and decide who has the best map. With the winner selected I then ask the students why that particular map won. Students might answer that it is because the map is drawn to scale and provides in a detailed fashion the names of the campus buildings, streets and can be used to easily navigate the city. We can then discuss why the other maps did not win and answers might be given to explain that they were perhaps too abstract and illegible, or only focused on the house of the particular map maker as the center of their world, or that their maps did not provide enough detail or names, or practical information and perhaps were too decorative. At the end of the class and to the dismay of the students I then proceed to declare that there is no winner. Here is where I then enter into a discussion about what a “map” means and to whom. The success of a map and its interpretation at the end of the day is culturally
dependent and also depends on the purpose that it serves. If I had asked them to draw a map which would help me get to from point A to B in the city, perhaps I would have selected the one with the most useful information and which provided the names of the streets, but if I had asked them which one was more aesthetically pleasing, perhaps they would have selected the one with the many abstract decorative elements or trees. At the end of the day what I hope to share with the students is that we cannot universalize conceptions of mapping space—especially if I point out that most maps that have been used in their high schools to this day (and this may have certainly changed) have incorporated the Mercator map (which incorrectly represents the size of the territories of different countries and thus may be read as having certain ideological implications). [If unconvinced or interested, students can then be directed to more theoretically challenging literature on the subject of map-making which may help them move beyond their own cultural baggage and Eurocentrism. Some very challenging but fascinating chapters can be found in Walter Mignolo’s book *The Darker Side or the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (University of Michigan Press, 2003); specifically those entitled “The Movable Center: Ethnicity, Geometric Projections, and Coexisting Territorialities” (219-58) and “Putting the Americas on the Map: Cartography and the Colonization of Space”(259-313)].

To conclude this paper, I leave the reader with an activity designed more specifically related to the materials viewed in class related to the conquest of Mexico. I am including the following maps and questions to accompany them.

**WHY DO TWO MAPS OF 16TH CENTURY MEXICO CITY LOOK SO DIFFERENT?**

*Figure 1* is a representation or “map” of Tenochtitlan as well and has been attributed possibly to Hernan Cortes, the Spanish Conquistador and was made in 1524. *Figure 2* is a representation or “map” of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City). This “map” comes from the Codex Mendoza created between 1541-42 by
colonial indigenous tlacuilos (painter scribes in Mexico).

Figure 1. Hernán Cortés. “Cortés’ 1524 Map of Tenochtitlan” Nuremberg Germany (Public Domain)

Figure 2. Post-Conquest Native Mexica Tlacuilos. “Codex Mendoza Frontispiece 1540” Oxford University (Public Domain)

Questions
. How is it possible that the same space, the city of Tenochtitlan, can be represented in two very different ways?
. Is the concept of ‘map’ universal across cultures? Explain.
. What type of information does each map provide about the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan? (E.g. Symbolic, Political, Sacred etc.)
. Is one map “better” than the other? Explain.

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