

## Bernal Díaz del Castillo and the Reimagining of Colonial Mythologies Jane Hanley

Hernán Cortés's 1519 encounter with Motecuzoma Xocoyotl is, perhaps, the premier example of an historical moment which has been transformed into an overarching metaphor of contact and colonisation between Western European and Indigenous Mesoamerican peoples. While the fact of the meeting is difficult to dispute, its terms have been the subject of constant debate from the immediate wake of the conquest right up until today. Bernal Díaz del Castillo began relating this encounter some fifty years after the fact in *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (*The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, commonly published in English as *Conquest of New Spain*), a curious mix of military memoir, historiographical commentary and travel account. In the twentieth century, this document began to occupy an increasingly central position in the historiography of the Conquest. What I wish to discuss is not the accuracy or usefulness of Díaz's *Historia verdadera* as a historical source so much as the reasons why it has been adopted and interpreted in particular ways. These reasons are important to understanding what kinds of stories are told about the past and why different ideas of history gain – or lose – authority.

In exploring the way ideas of history are created, this article discusses events that had serious consequences and a different significance for the peoples involved in them. The language and narrative tradition employed to approach these histories is itself mixed up in the history of conquest and colonisation. To some extent, the substratum of the following analysis is European history's invention of a world in its own image. It is perhaps not surprising that it is very difficult to entirely escape the tropes and figures that characterise the narration of European history. This article proceeds with due acknowledgement of the extent to which some approaches exclude the historical sensibilities and interpretive beliefs of Mesoamerican peoples.

The Motecuzoma-Cortés encounter is a fascinating case study because of its symbolic centrality in the way we understand meetings not between individuals but between civilisations. In some historical narratives, an inter-civilisation relationship comes to be defined by a specific historical episode. Francis Brooks writes, 'If that mythical moment – the birth of modern history – can be said to exist, it occurred on November 8 1519, when Motecuzoma Xocoyotl and Hernán Cortés came face to face'.<sup>1</sup> This is not an isolated statement but a common element in analyses of Spanish Imperialism. It is also echoed in sagas of the rise of European colonial powers more generally and the impact of European expansion on societies with little prior contact with Europe.

Olivia Harris argues that the mythologisation – even fetishisation – of the coming of white people is dominant only in Eurocentric histories, and does not define Indigenous peoples' histories. 'The coming of the white people has an almost transcendental status in the way the past is conceptualised' Harris notes, pointing out the year 1492 as a particularly salient example of this status. 1492 marks neither events relating to nationhood for any Europeans apart from the Spanish, nor the onset

<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Brooks, 'Motecuzoma Xocoyotl, Hernán Cortés, and Bernal Díaz del Castillo: The Construction of an Arrest', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 75:2 (1995) 149.

of actual processes of colonisation. It was not even the first appearance of Europeans on the American continent.<sup>2</sup> The importance of 1492 is instead attached to abstract definitions, such as the role of the explorer and discoverer as a force in European history, and as a moment of transition between historical epochs. The encounter is conceived as rupture, as transformation, and Cortés's story fits into this conception and myth-process as well. The image of Cortés in history plays a part in the establishment of the tropes of white-man-as-native-god, of the might of European steel, of the independence and ingenuity of European individuals over the incomprehension of native peoples. Cortés' story is bound to any number of subsequently definitive central myths of colonialism, some of which linger in readings of colonial history today. Such characterisations of the Spanish-American encounter and the search for essential causes are symptomatic of the very preoccupation with the Conquest as an emblem of European culture.

What kinds of stories do we have about the Conquest and what do their modes of reading tell us about the ways European tradition has mythologised colonial encounters? The earliest documented description of Motecuzoma's meeting with Cortés reached Europe in the letters Cortés sent to Carlos V, which were collected as the *Cartas de relación*.<sup>3</sup> Following the appearance of *Cartas de relación* several other works supporting or questioning Cortés's version of events appeared in Spain. Among the most substantial and significant for Hispanic colonial history were Francisco López de Gómara's *Historia general de las Indias* and Bartolomé de las Casas' *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*.<sup>4</sup> Cortés is unabashedly the hero of his own narrative in *Cartas de relación*, which was written at the time of the Conquest and responded to his immediate political need to justify his actions and confirm his position. Cortés's heroic story is subsequently reinscribed by López de Gómara, Cortés's official biographer, which then initiated the interplay between political utility and historical authority that has characterised so much Hispanic American historiography.

It was not until after the appearance of these and other works that Díaz completed *Historia verdadera*, and it was not until the mid-seventeenth century that a version of this alternative participatory testimony was published and was, therefore, more generally available. From this chronology and from the references within the *Historia verdadera* to other writers, it is clear that from its conception the document was profoundly implicated in already existing disputes over the story of the Spanish in America. The famed clarity and detail of Díaz's writing also draws on years of previous retellings and anecdotes to fix and order the commotion and disruptions of daily experience into a continuous autobiographical history. What the *Historia verdadera* offers is the story of the young Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a soldier who participated in various campaigns under different captains, most notable among them the entry into Tenochtitlán with Hernán Cortés. On another level, it offers us the commentary of the aging Díaz on what has already been said about these campaigns.

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<sup>2</sup> Olivia Harris, "'The Coming of the White People': Reflections on the Mythologisation of History in Latin America", *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14:1 (1995) 11.

<sup>3</sup> This chronology refers to a particularly European critical and historiographic tradition; stories of events in Mexico and surrounding realms were communicated through America and the Caribbean more rapidly and through more diverse channels than they were communicated back to Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias*, (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe 1941) (first published 1552); Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, ed. A. Saint-Lu (Madrid: Cátedra 2005) (first published 1552).

He was living through the consequences for the (Spanish) participants not just of the actions he describes but also the material and symbolic consequences of the alternative interpretations of these actions. Those interpretations were even then vying for space in the historical record; Díaz del Castillo's text was part of a documentary re-enactment of the struggle for resources, political authority and material power that was occurring across the Hispanic American world.

If Cortés's and Díaz's versions of events broadly agree, as argued by Rolena Adorno and others, what are the differences that influence the relative position of the accounts and how they are read?<sup>5</sup> Both narrators gave versions of the encounter in their stories; both, in fact, told their experience with a sense of the broader consequences of the story and some feeling for posterity. The differences, then, come partly from the different roles of the narrators in the action and how these influence both the conscious and unconscious elements of style and perspective in the accounts. Another difference affecting how the two stories are interpreted comes from readers' perspectives and feelings for history. John Ochoa believes a key characteristic of Díaz's story is the degree to which grand events are presented in a work that 'conforms to human scale'.<sup>6</sup> By this comment it is easy to see the interaction between the status of the encounter as an historical moment epitomising the drama and impact of imperial conquests – a status that potentially looms larger with greater spatial and temporal distance from the event – and the narrative and rhetorical characteristics that belong specifically to Díaz. Ochoa also describes Díaz as expressing the 'view of the common soldier', a common characterisation of Díaz.<sup>7</sup> Cortés, and López de Gómara, on the other hand, are perceived to have told a different kind of story. They created in Cortés a decisive individual and heroic leader. Consequently, Díaz is more easily imagined as a witness, whereas Cortés slips into the role of the self-promoter. After briefly comparing the features of the *Historia verdadera* to popular conceptions about what kind of storyteller Díaz was and what kind of story he told, this image of Díaz as soldier will be contrasted with the popular image of the character of Cortés.

*Historia verdadera* appeals for its sense of freshness and specificity, and the apparent transparency of its chronicling of detail. These characteristics have sometimes been attributed to Bernal Díaz's lack of formal education and unfamiliarity with the stylistic conventions of the time. Other commentators, such as David Boruchoff, suggest instead that this substitution of direct description for higher metaphor and allusion can be attributed to Díaz's confrontation with the new and other.<sup>8</sup> Manuel Durán goes so far as to suggest that the absence of pre-existing imagery and established literary convention actually demonstrates Díaz's superiority to Cortés and Gómara in this respect.<sup>9</sup> While Díaz may not be the literary virtuoso that López de Gómara demonstrates himself to be, it is precisely the directness and descriptive simplicity in Díaz's narration of events that come into play in analyses of his authority as an historian. Less evidence of sophistication leads to a greater claim to veracity. As one of Peter Carey's characters tells us in Carey's virtuoso simulation of

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<sup>5</sup> Rolena Adorno, 'The Discursive Encounter of Spain and America: The Authority of Eyewitness Testimony in the Writing of History,' *William & Mary Quarterly* 49:2 (1992) 210-28.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Ochoa, 'The Paper Warrior: Education, Independence, and Bernal Diaz's War to Stop Time,' *MLN* 114. 2 (1999): 354.

<sup>7</sup> Ochoa 342.

<sup>8</sup> David A. Boruchoff, 'Beyond Utopia and Paradise: Cortés, Bernal Díaz and the Rhetoric of Consecration,' *MLN* 106. 2 (1991): 341.

<sup>9</sup> Manuel Durán, 'Bernal Díaz del Castillo: Crónica, Historia, Mito,' *Hispania* 75:4 (1992) 797.

a testimonial narrative *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, 'It is history Mr Kelly it should always be a little rough that way we know it is the truth'.<sup>10</sup> However, the reading which elevates Díaz as a straightforward historical witness – if such a thing exists – discounts the complexity of his own relationship to this story. Comments like Ochoa's, which cite his 'humble narrative voice' and 'breathless tone of a recent witnessing' reinforce the reading of this work as a testimonial.<sup>11</sup> In a move which is strikingly reminiscent of that which sometimes occurs in commentaries comparing women's writing with men's, Díaz is often dubbed 'Bernal', while other players are referred to by their surnames. As with the perception of women writers, then, Díaz's writing is apparently uninflected by artifice. Instead it is purely sensory and positively anti-intellectual.

This tendency is remedied in contemporary discussions of the *Historia verdadera* which bring us back to a reading of Bernal Díaz in his political and material setting. *Historia verdadera* also serves the interests of the older Díaz, whose land-holdings and personal fortune depended on the justification of the Conquest. It is important to remember that it was not only Cortés who had a personal stake in the way events in America were interpreted in Europe. Though his life was more private than Cortés's, Díaz's fate also hinged on decisions made in Europe. Already, with these two readings of the *Historia verdadera*, it is possible to see its adoption into different frameworks, those of the naive witness and the testimonial history, and the self-justification of the strategic political actor. The former deals with the practical and probes the text for detail, evidence, and description, while the latter deals with motive, and begins to work on the levels of story construction, rhetoric, and reference. Still other modes of reading situate the *Historia verdadera* within post-colonial paradigms of transcultural identity and multi-sited narrative. In Lisa Rabin's fascinating comparison of an episode from *Historia verdadera* with similar episodes in other chronicles of the Americas, Díaz's narrative voice is seen to occupy a new liminal space which, in the very act of turning towards the legitimating tactics of official European history, reveals the resistance of experience and the aberrant reality of the New World.<sup>12</sup>

How is it possible for Bernal Díaz del Castillo to be all of these things? He is simultaneously fool and strategist, savant and rhetorician, both unlettered and allusive, a representative of the limited perceptions of the Spanish invaders and the possessor of newly American eyes. How does his supposed naivety relate to his evident bitterness towards the López de Gómara-Cortés alliance? The temptation – irresistible for many Bernaldiano scholars – is to play with biographical summary which defines Díaz through terms we can understand or, at least, believe we can understand: those of young adventurer, soldier, *encomendero*, and historian. For how Díaz experienced these multiple roles, we have only his word. For what these roles mean to us today, we can analyse the knowledge and experiences that affect the way we define them.

Contemporary readings of *Historia verdadera* often privilege the material-political reading, and thus the motives and position of the older Díaz. The excellent analysis by Adorno underscores Díaz's immediate ambitions and his stake as a

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the character expressing this sentiment turned out to have been lying himself. Peter Carey, *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000) 386.

<sup>11</sup> Ochoa 343.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Rabin, 'Figures of Conversion and Subjectivity in Colonial Narrative', *Hispania* 82:1 (1999) 40-45.

landholder in the perceived justice of the Conquest, a much needed tonic to some of the more mythic interpretations of the events of conquest which take the chronicles, particularly López de Gómara's, at their word.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis does, however, relegate the role of the young Díaz to mere character, creating an artificial distinction between historian and soldier, where the former has a deep personal investment in the overarching discourse surrounding the Conquest story, and the latter is reshaped to fit these political ends. The author is putatively of more significance than the soldier-as-character. Of course, Díaz earned his place in the historical record through his writing rather than his actions in the Conquest. However much *Historia verdadera* emphasises the encounters of his youth, it is his action in recalling and recounting that has an ongoing relevance to debates on colonialism and the making of history. The text itself is what creates Díaz as an historical actor and, in this sense, the function of the work shifts towards autobiography. The inscription of this self in historical narrative, then, is an adornment of events with the exchanges that take place between present feeling and past experience. Thus Díaz's relationship to his own life, his resentment of Cortés's public profile, his material circumstances, his desires, become a matrix for a public critique of Cortés as deceitful and for a 'just war' defence with a different foundation.

The contrast between the portrayals of Díaz and of Cortés as characters in historical narrative could not be starker. Analysis of the events of the Conquest and the politics of the encounter are inextricably bound up with what is known and believed about Cortés's choices, eccentricities, brilliance, and lies. Cortés is imagined as a force in history as an individual. Readings of Díaz as a soldier or Díaz as an historian implicitly underpin interpretations of *Historia verdadera*. The image of Cortés, however, shadows not only *Cartas de relación* or López de Gómara's *Historia general y conquista de México* and *Vida de Hernán Cortés*, but all stories of the Spanish-American Conquest, perhaps even all stories of conquest in subsequent centuries. Inevitably, therefore, to contest the story of Conquest is to contest the character of Cortés and the main historical sources that describe his actions, which are Díaz, López de Gómara and Cortés himself. While the popular image of Cortés may have emerged from these sources, it exists outside of them. This is the idea of Cortés as calculating, strategic, decisive, inspired and driven. This concept of Cortés the Conqueror comes from Cortés' own mythmaking. Díaz's text confirms some of these traits. At minimum Díaz represents a man with strong vision and a powerful capacity to sway and manipulate others. His deep understanding of the necessity of communication we can see in his own immediate and constant narrativisation of his own actions for his audience in Spain, as well as his consistent acquisition of variously effective translators to assist him with his negotiations. However, when subsequent historians and narrators of the Conquest choose a particular version of Cortés, they are choosing also a mode of interpretation of what took place between the Spaniards and the Aztecs.

Just as Díaz's own story-telling was a performance of events many years past, each subsequent reading which interprets and contrasts *Historia verdadera* with its predecessors and successors in Hispanic colonial history occurs under new circumstances. If Díaz is dismissed as less than convincing, and López de Gómara and Cortés are taken more or less at their word, the reading tends to reinforce the supremacy of the Spaniards, and the individual powers of Cortés in particular. This

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno 211-23.

was often the case through to the seventeenth century, while the chronicles of conquest were still part of the legitimating regime of the Spanish Empire and had a role in actual Spanish governance in America. In this setting, Cortés's confabulations are in many ways acting on the same level politically as at the time of composition: as a narrative underlining not only the effectiveness of the Spanish actions but also their ethical and legal groundings. The representation of the Conquest was embedded in the terms of the Conquest, and its justifications within the legal and moral structures of the time. With the secularisation of European society and the stirrings of Independence movements in Latin America, a different relationship to the colonial past emerged and different understandings of its stories became necessary. As a result, popular and scholarly understandings of the conquest have been utterly transformed since the sixteenth century. With the passage of time, other conditions of reception also came into play: historicity and distance negated the immediacy of self-interest that was present in the composition of these texts. Their political utility became a more diffuse and hence less obvious feature.

In the nineteenth century, with the rise of empirical scientific methods and anthropology, historical documents which made more persuasive claims to descriptivism and rationalism became more highly valued. In emerging secular democracies, political and material readings also began to take precedence over religious ones. This was accompanied by an increased interest in colonial history – possibly resulting from the increasing insecurity of colonial rule – and by the appearance of several English translations of *Historia verdadera*. These included those of Maurice Keatinge at the start of the nineteenth century and John Ingram Lockhart some decades later. On a more abstract level, the text could be interpreted as better reflecting democratic ideologies and the increasing political freedom, including the freedom to critique political leaders, available in many European countries. As Ramón Iglesia says, 'Bernal's viewpoint happens to coincide with that of a period which has striven to put all things on the same level, which has regarded genial individuals with suspicion, especially in the field of political and military action'.<sup>14</sup> Iglesia also suggests readers who have lived their lives substantially in peacetime tend to privilege the text's functions as a personal, peripatetic or ethnographic rather than military history, which elevates Díaz over López de Gómara, as this latter focuses more on qualities of leadership in a military environment. According to Iglesia, López de Gómara is discredited for this tactical, militaristic analysis, despite having written a history and chronology which roughly agrees with Díaz's own.<sup>15</sup>

Until the twentieth century, the 'Remón' edition of *Historia verdadera* was the definitive and widely available version.<sup>16</sup> It was challenged by the publication of the Guatemala manuscript, based on a draft left by Díaz and which he continued to edit until his death. This manuscript source was probably also edited by others after his death. By comparing the texts it is possible to see some of the divisions between Díaz's interests and those of Spain and the Spanish Church, which are mainly relevant to a political-material reading of the *Historia*. However, the increasing significance of the Guatemala manuscript also indicates something about what kinds of texts were of

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<sup>14</sup> Ramón Iglesia, 'Two Articles on the Same Topic: Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Popularism in Spanish Historiography and Bernal Díaz del Castillo's Criticisms of the History of the Conquest of Mexico, by Francisco López de Gómara', *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 20:4 (1940) 538.

<sup>15</sup> Iglesia 520-21.

<sup>16</sup> The 'Remón' edition was produced in 1632 by Father Alonso Remón based on the document Díaz had sent to Spain.

interest to twentieth century readers of colonial histories. In privileging the Guatemala manuscript, readers placed less emphasis on finished historical narrative than on the author's relationship to the story he told: his changes of direction, his self-contradictions, and his descriptive asides. The presence of divergent threads became more important as signs of the potential of the *Historia verdadera* to undo rather than reinforce dominant narratives of Conquest. Instead of following López de Gómara's silent assumption of the justice of the Spaniards' actions, or even being persuaded by Díaz's religious and anti-Indigenous 'just war' defence, some readers begin from a position which assumes the culpability of the Spanish and which regards Cortés's individual heroic status with scepticism.

*Historia verdadera* is a relatively popular text with paperback editions in various languages available for a general audience.<sup>17</sup> Its serious study, however, is largely within educational institutions and for scholarly research. Thus, the uses of Díaz's narrative in teaching and learning are often the sites of the first encounter of the contemporary reader with the text. Several trends are immediately evident in university curricula. *Historia verdadera* appears in both the literary and historical studies areas. In the former, the focus tends to be on the development of a specifically Latin American poetics and the emerging features of Latin American literature in the sixteenth century as a precursor to subsequent developments in the arts. This context for analysis is reflected in the work, among others, of Enrique Flores and Oswaldo Estrada.<sup>18</sup> In the historical studies area, the emphasis lies rather on America-centric colonial histories and post-colonial interpretations of the emergence of Latin American identities.<sup>19</sup> One thread which is also woven into the interpretation of Hispanic colonial texts in the late twentieth century is the waxing of scholarship on suppressed voices in history. It is worth noting the instances in which *Historia verdadera* is included solely for its coverage of Indigenous peoples in general, and specifically Cortés's collaborator and interpreter who is variously known as La Doña Marina, La Malinche, or Malintzín. She has become a hugely important figure in American gender studies and colonial history.<sup>20</sup> Relating *Historia verdadera* to Indigenous accounts of the time of conquest and colonisation is part of the surging popularity of scholarship on previously suppressed voices and perspectives. This becomes quite complex when looking at Hispanic colonial sources, however, in which supposedly Indigenous narratives were recorded and mediated by Catholic monks. These different frameworks for interpretation reflect the different conditions of consumption. With each respective account of these early Spanish American encounters the embodied experience is reimagined through the act of telling and the

<sup>17</sup> The analysis of these editions and their various exclusions, the stories the translators and editors choose to tell, makes for an interesting project in and of itself.

<sup>18</sup> Enrique Flores, 'El Silencio de La Conquista. Poéticas de Bernal Díaz,' *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 29:57 (2003) 143-50; Oswaldo Estrada, *La imaginación novelesca: Bernal Díaz entre géneros y épocas*, (Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> For example Alvaro Bernal, 'Los Primeros Registros Acerca de Nuestra Otrredad a Partir de Colón, Cortés y Bernal Díaz del Castillo', *Círculo de Humanidades* 10:21-22 (2002) 97-108; Alfonso de Toro, 'Staging of hybridity in the discourse of the conquest', *Atenea* 493 (2006) 87-149.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Sonia Rose de Fuggle, 'Bernal Díaz del Castillo Cuentista: La Historia de Doña Marina', *Actas del X Congreso de la Asociación de Hispanistas I-IV* (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1992) 939; Margo Glantz, 'Doña Marina and Captain Malinche', *Bilingual Games* ed. D. Sommer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 149-61; Gladys M. Iarregui 'Itoca Malintzín/Doña Marina: Biografía de una Mujer Indígena', *Beyond Indigenous Voices*, ed. M. Preuss (Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 1996) 43-48.

immediate conditions of narration. These conditions encompass economic and political motivation, memory and the passage of time, intertextuality, consideration of audience, and literary style. Each of these factors is mobilised to a different extent both in the composition of the account and in the act of reading and interpretation. Each condition is accorded greater or lesser importance depending on the section or aspect of the text under analysis and the situation of the reader.

Following my statements about what influences the interpretation of these kinds of documents and their political efficacy in diverse moments and settings, I should clarify my own interests and beliefs about this history. As my commentary suggests, several factors I have mentioned such as the emphasis on suppressed narratives and secular rather than religious ethics ground my own processes of interpretation. While fascinated by the religious mission for its impact upon colonial societies, I am not persuaded by it as a justification, and my lack of sympathy on that front extends also to economic imperialism and similar elements of the colonial project. These sympathies and judgements are determined by my experience and understanding of post-colonialism and its fraught, urgent and, as yet, unresolved question of responsibility and culpability in terms of the subjugation of native peoples. As a consequence, my relationship with colonial texts is driven by a critical interest in the material preoccupations of the participants, and the material consequences for both them and for subsequent generations. Some of these consequences are a result of the myths that have built up around the stories of those participants.

As I have discussed, the relative plausibility of Cortés's or Díaz's accounts is not in question here so much as the consequences of their different modes of storytelling and the persuasiveness of those modes under different conditions of reading. This implies a continuous interplay between what is popularly known (through existing narratives) and what is personally known (through experience). Both frames of reference affect the interpretation of the Motecuzoma-Cortés encounter and the choice and analysis of sources to support the interpretation. If the slant Díaz gives his story must be understood in the light of the author's reality and requirements at that time, then so too must these interpretations be. The dismissal of *Historia verdadera* as an unimportant source was related to the limited availability of the work, the narrative style and the received identity of the writer. Critique of colonial discourses and shifts away from religious bases for law and history changed the use of the text. Historians and interpreters began to pick up on and emphasise testimonial and material elements of Díaz's work, as well as aspects of Díaz's persona that are sympathetic to more egalitarian and democratic readers. The immediate intellectual and political climate is a significant factor in both the production and reception of stories of colonial encounter. This climate has intersected with popular narratives and ideas about the Conquest to change the reception, interpretation and consequent use of Conquest stories through the centuries leading up to and including the present.