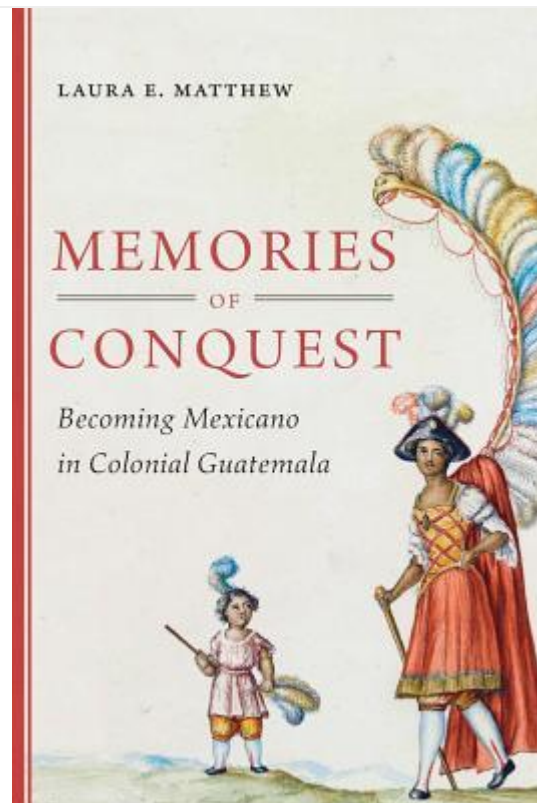


# {essays in history}

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## Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala



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Reviewed Work(s)

*Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala.* By Laura E. Matthew (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Pp. 304. Cloth, \$65.00. Paper, \$29.95.

Recent history of the Iberian conquest of the Americas has interrogated whether Europeans were able, in such small numbers, to establish control over multitudes of indigenous people during the sixteenth-century as the traditional narratives of conquest maintain. Yet, Laura E. Matthew's earlier and current research, has illuminated the important role that alliances with the indigenous peoples played in Spanish colonial expansion, particularly in Mesoamerica. In *Memories of Conquest*, Matthew asks if the reason that so many Mesoamericans allied with the Spanish had to do with treason and collaboration, misunderstanding and miscalculation, or something different altogether that would force scholars to rethink the conquest paradigm.

In order to answer this question, Matthew argues that Mesoamericans themselves must become the center of study, rather than Europeans. Studying history from the Mesoamerican point of view and employing their memories, reveals a longer, more complicated past than traditional conquest narratives allow and explains what they hoped to get out of a partnership with Europeans. Matthew's work is a case study of a diverse group of Central Mexican invaders who allied with the Spaniards and established a settler colony in the colonial Guatemalan city of Ciudad Vieja. She traces the long history of these Nahua and Oaxacan people as "Indian conquistadors" and their descendants from the pre-Columbian period through independence. In doing so, Matthew argues that the settlers, who came to be known as Mexicanos, followed pre-Columbian patterns of empire, alliance, and warfare; that they never saw themselves as subordinate or auxiliary to the Spanish during this process; and that in using their heritage as conquerors in the region, they developed a collective identity that allowed them to enjoy privileges under the colonial system that were not afforded to the Maya.

Chapters 1 and 2 present well-researched surveys of the diversity and earlier patterns of conquest in Central Mexico prior to the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Matthew does an excellent job explaining the factionalism prevalent amongst the various Nahuatl-speaking people of

Central Mexico and the ways in which they interacted with one another and with the Maya. The pre-Columbian relations among these ethnic groups were marked by patterns of conquest and colonization, though the outcomes of these relationships were not always linked with violence, but rather with trade and interpersonal networking. What Matthew demonstrates in Chapter 3 is how the migration and colonization of Guatemala was part of a long series of Mesoamerican conquests. She also shows that even though Europeans certainly influenced the mechanics of invasion and brought disease and new styles of weaponry, they did not “come and conquer,” overpowering the natives with their might, as the traditional conquest paradigm has argued. As indicated in the recollections and collective memory of the Mexicanos, the alliance was equal and mutually beneficial to both groups of conquistadors, Spanish and Indian.

In the remaining chapters, Matthew traces how, under the Spanish colonial system, the indigenous invaders and settlers of Guatemala developed overlapping, dual identities of conqueror and conquered, and in the process become “Mexicanos.” While their memory of conquest placed them in a higher status than the Maya in their minds, they still found themselves at the mercy of colonial politics. They would argue that they deserved privileges based on their heritage, but ultimately they needed the Spanish to recognize their special position. For example, Matthew charts how these diverse peoples, using their common identity as Mexicanos, came together to agitate for tribute exemption. To do this, they used various measures to determine their authenticity as Mexicanos, such as whom they married, how much outsiders reduced the purity of their community’s lineage, and their relative “Spanishness.” The Mexicanos did gain some inroads in doing this, and while they did not enjoy complete tribute exemption, they were given partial breaks, paying only a fraction of what those who could not authenticate their Mexicano heritage paid.

This tribute exemption promoted the Mexicano identity as desirable in Ciudad Vieja for the remainder of the colonial period, as indicated by their contemporary art and performances of civic pride in the form of festivals honoring the Indian conquistadors. In the concluding chapters, Matthew proceeds to explain how, even after colonialism, the Mexicanos of Ciudad Vieja continued to set themselves apart by beginning to

identify themselves as “ladinos” in the early colonial sense— that is, a group of Spanish-speaking Indians who were more “civilized” and more deserving of privilege than their neighbors who evaded the Spanish instead of working with them during the colonial period.

*Memories of Conquest* is thorough in its presentation of evidence supporting its arguments. The book’s greatest strength is that it utilizes traditional archival sources but reevaluates them with the Mesoamericans at the center of the narrative, instead of at the margins. Application of this more recent and innovative method of approaching traditional source material allowed for Matthew to bring Mexicanos, a group of people who did not have a place in the traditional conquest paradigm, into contemporary historiography. The Mexicano memory of conquest is one in which diverse groups of Mesoamericans came together in pursuit of their own interests and established a deserved space for them and their descendants. By studying the invasion and settlement of Guatemala as part of a much longer and more complicated process of conquest and settlement in Mesoamerica, this book contributes significantly to the current scholarly efforts to demythologize the history of the Spanish conquest and the exceptionalism of the conquistadors, who have been credited for so long as the only actors in this particular historical drama.

While *Memories of Conquest* is a strongly researched and well-argued scholarly work, it is not readily approachable for a reader unfamiliar with conquest historiography. Matthew assumes the reader has a great deal of knowledge about her subject material as well the recent trends in Latin American studies. More detailed footnotes or a richer introduction would have been helpful for those who needed the background information in order to make sense of the more complex nuances she presents. This, however, does not detract from the value of this work and its place in the larger corpus of conquest research. It should certainly be a welcome addition to graduate seminars that focus on contact and colonialism in Latin America.

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