

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# Measuring the Extent and Limits of Colonial Change in Mesoamerica

Peter B. Villella

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, US  
villella@uncg.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

**Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City.** By Vera S. Candiani. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. Pp. xxix + 376. \$60.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780804788052.

**Return to Aztlan: Indians, Spaniards, and the Invention of Nuevo México.** By Danna A. Levin Rojo. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 307. \$34.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780806144344.

**Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821.** By W. George Lovell. 4th ed. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 306. \$34.95 paper. ISBN: 9780773545274.

**The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City.** By Barbara E. Mundy. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 246. \$75.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292766563.

**Maya Ideologies of the Sacred: The Transfiguration of Space in Colonial Yucatan.** By Amara Solari. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 212. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292744943.

The archive is the historian's friend, the foundation of the historical discipline, but it can also mislead. As is typically the case for marginalized peoples, the historical study of indigenous, rural, and plebeian societies in colonial Mexico and Central America presents particular methodological and analytical challenges. The most relevant and accessible archival sources were produced by and for those in power—generally elite, urban, educated Spanish speakers—and thus quietly relay alien social categories and hegemonic cultural conceits. Scholarship derived from them can unintentionally reproduce colonial ideologies while remaining blind to many important social dynamics that were invisible to colonial overseers. However, scholars over the past thirty years have made great progress in this regard by subjecting such sources to innovative interpretive filters and combining them with renewed attention to previously overlooked historical materials. Five recently published books addressing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society and culture in central Mexico, the Yucatán, and Guatemala exemplify and extend this trend. Each seeks the vectors by which nonelite and non-Hispanic cultures and practices influenced the broader shape and trajectory of colonial society, a phenomenon only hinted at in Spanish-produced archives. Collectively, their work details a series of popular lifeways, beyond the Spanish urban centers, that were far more dynamic, complex, and intricately transculturated than previously acknowledged.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Charles Gibson's path-breaking investigations of the Nahuatl-speaking communities of colonial central Mexico demonstrated that the Spaniards appropriated and exploited deeply rooted indigenous political and social systems.<sup>1</sup> Yet Gibson's ultimate assessment, largely based on Spanish-language archival sources such as land and legal records, was one of inexorable transformation. Nahua, or

<sup>1</sup> See Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519–1810* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964).

“Aztec,” society provided the historical and geographical template for the construction of Spanish Mexico, but colonial economic and social processes first impoverished and then fragmented Nahua culture and civic society beyond recognition. The “Indians” that emerged from the colonial experience, then, were more of a rural peasantry than the heirs and active practitioners of a surviving pre-Columbian legacy. Citing Gibson’s research, the anthropologist Eric Wolf captured this assessment memorably: subjugated and beaten down by foreign overlords for three centuries, native Mexico was forced into “closed corporate peasant communities,” the time capsules of stagnation and backwardness that so frustrated nineteenth-century Mexican liberals.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, Gibson’s work laid the essential foundations for new research that eventually challenged some of his conclusions. In the late 1960s and 1970s, scholars began investigating nonelite populations with new attention, including the diverse peoples of the vast hinterlands, most of whom were culturally and linguistically distinct from the Hispanic urbanites whose perspectives shaped the most accessible sources. These efforts led researchers beyond classic synthetic accounts to the mass of mundane documents residing in colonial archives. To effectively integrate the copious, yet fragmented data derived from such sources, history as a discipline adopted a broader range of quantitative analytical methods such as demography, geography, and sociology, emphasizing groups and structural processes over the decisions and actions of powerful individuals.

It was in this environment that W. George Lovell first researched and published *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala* (1985). Rereleased in 2015 in an updated and revised fourth edition, it is a historical geography that targets the interactions and mutual influences of humans and the environment in the rugged Sierra de los Cuchumatanes of Guatemala. This is an ecologically and ethnically diverse region that Lovell selected not in spite of its remoteness, but because of it. By addressing what some models considered a periphery of a periphery of a periphery (a rural area in the Guatemalan highlands populated by non-K’iche’ Maya), Lovell brought some balance to a colonial historiography that remained heavily weighted toward urbanized, resource-rich areas such as central Mexico.

Lovell details extensively the various avatars of destruction that accompanied Spanish colonization in the Cuchumatanes, from resettlement to heavy tribute burdens to the expropriation of land and the spread of diseases. Nonetheless, his conclusions complicated the notion of utter transformation in native America. For centuries prior to the Spanish conquest, the people of Cuchumatán developed land use patterns reflecting both local geography and the need for defense. This resulted in a “core-periphery” social and spatial arrangement innately resistant to political unification and integration and, subsequently, subjugation by outsiders, whether K’iche’, Mexica, or Spanish (xii–xiv, 50–52). Furthermore, because the land was unsuited to export crops, the region escaped heavy investment from mercantilist Spaniards. This impeded the progress of colonization: as Spanish authorities closed in, local Indians simply moved away, preserving the region’s decentralized character (95–102).

Lovell’s conclusion is not that Cuchumatán went unaffected by the conquest and its associated maladies—indeed not until 1950 did the population return to its 1520 levels—but that the colonizers mostly failed to remake the region in their own image. Lovell notes that by the eighteenth century many local families had essentially reverted to “deep-rooted cultural preferences for more dispersed ways of living,” punctuated by renewed cultural independence in the form of “a revival of pre-Christian rites and rituals” (189). Indeed, amid the traumas wrought by the Spanish intrusion, in this particular corner of Guatemala Lovell encountered a remarkable example of persistence.

As indicated by the title, *Conquest and Survival* belongs to a broader historiographical transition between earlier scholarship that primarily emphasized the devastation of Spanish imperialism, and that which delineated its limits, the ways in which specific local communities navigated colonial domination both passively and intentionally. These later accounts highlighted the social, cultural, and political tenacity of colonial native communities, and firmly challenged the template of the “closed corporate peasant community”; indeed, in 1986 Wolf revisited his famous conceptualization and explicitly recognized its limitations.<sup>3</sup> These developments were exemplified by the so-called New Philology of James Lockhart and his students, who analyzed indigenous-language texts, synthetic and mundane, for internal evidence of social and cultural change.<sup>4</sup> Their systematic examination of indigenous sources revealed multiple links between

<sup>2</sup> Eric Wolf, “Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (1957): 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/soutjanth.13.1.3629154>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric R. Wolf, “The Vissitudes of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community,” *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 2 (1986): 325–329. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1986.13.2.02a00080>.

<sup>4</sup> See James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Rebecca Horn, *Postconquest Coyoacan: Nahua-Spanish*

pre-Columbian cultural and social foundations and colonial-era practices. As Lockhart argued with regard to central Mexico, “almost nothing in the entire [Nahua] cultural ensemble was left untouched, yet at the same time almost everything went back . . . to a preconquest antecedent.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, other scholars brought new methods of art-historical analysis to bear upon the rich pictorial materials produced by Mesoamerican artists and scholars.<sup>6</sup> Historians soon confronted vast amounts of ethnohistorical information that the officials who created colonial archives either misunderstood, deemed unimportant, or otherwise ignored.

Recognizing the potential for such data to dislodge narrow, Eurocentric accounts of the origins of Latin America, scholars quickly redeployed it to reassess colonial history according to (in the words of Matthew Restall) “multiple and complex indigenous perspectives,” beginning with native views of the conquest itself.<sup>7</sup> Going further, they are addressing how indigenous actions and knowledge helped determine not only the trajectory of the Spanish conquest, but also the mosaic of local cultures that emerged from it. The result is a flourishing of interdisciplinary research that continues to upend hoary presumptions of indigenous stagnation and passivity while detailing the precise contours of colonial power relationships and transculturation at the local level.<sup>8</sup> This has also reoriented colonial history away from grand holistic narratives that inherently favor hegemonic perspectives and toward more local and “pointilistic” accounts.

This is the historiographical context behind the fourth edition of Lovell’s *Conquest and Survival*. The new edition is welcome for many reasons. As many scholars have turned away from empirical approaches in favor of cultural interpretation, the hard data sets derived from social history and historical geography remain essential. The fourth edition, moreover, integrates many of the most relevant insights from recent

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*Relations in Central Mexico, 1519–1650* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Robert Haskett, *Indigenous Rulers: An Ethnohistory of Town Government in Colonial Cuernavaca* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Matthew Restall, *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550–1850* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Nudzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Susan Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the Kingdoms of Chalco* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991); S. L. Cline, *Colonial Culhuacán, 1580–1600* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986). The philological approach continues to provide new insights; see the recent special issue of *Ethnohistory* edited by Robert Schwaller, “A Language of Empire, A Quotidian Tongue: The Uses of Nahuatl in New Spain,” *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest*: 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Barbara Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones geográficas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Dana Leibsohn, *Script and Glyph: Pre-Hispanic History, Colonial Bookmaking, and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (Washington, DC: Dunbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009); Lori Boornazian Diel, *The Tira de Tepechpan: Negotiating Place under Aztec and Spanish Rule* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Eduardo de Jesús Douglas, *In the Palace of Nezahualcoyotl: Painting Manuscripts, Writing the Pre-Hispanic Past in Early Colonial Period Tetzaco, Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Ilona Katzew, ed., *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 50. See also Lisa Sousa and Kevin Terraciano, “The ‘Original Conquest’ of Oaxaca: Nahuatl and Mixtec Accounts of the Spanish Conquest,” *Ethnohistory* 50, no. 2 (2003): 349–400; James Lockhart, ed., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> On Spanish-American legal history, see Brian P. Owensby, *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Yanna Yannakakis, “Indigenous People and Legal Culture in Spanish America,” *History Compass* 11, no. 11 (2013): 931–947, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12096>; Ethelia Ruiz-Medrano and Susan Kellogg, eds., *Negotiation within Domination: New Spain’s Indian Pueblos Confront the Spanish State* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010). On social history, see Dana Velasco Murillo, *Urban Indians in a Silver City: Zacatecas, Mexico, 1546–1810* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Caterina Pizzigoni, *The Life Within: Local Indigenous Society in Mexico’s Toluca Valley, 1650–1800* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). On political history, see María Castañeda de la Paz, *Conflictos y alianzas en tiempos de cambio: Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, Tenochtitlan y Tlatelolco (siglos XII–XVI)* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, 2013); William F. Connell, *After Moctezuma: Indigenous Politics and Self-Government in Mexico City, 1524–1730* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011); Andrea Martínez Baracs, *Un gobierno de indios: Tlaxcala, 1519–1750* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008); and Bradley Benton, *The Lords of Tetzaco: The Transformation of Indigenous Rule in Postconquest Central Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On religious history, see Mark Christensen, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Matthew D. O’Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749–1857* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); William B. Taylor, *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico before the Reforma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010); David Tavárez, *The Invisible War: Indigenous Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). On intellectual history, see Susan Schroeder, ed., *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2011); Katzew, *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World*; Gabriela Ramos and Yanna Yannakakis, eds., *Indigenous Intellectuals: Knowledge, Power, and Colonial Culture in Mexico and the Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Mónica Díaz, *Indigenous Writings from the Convent: Negotiating Ethnic Autonomy in Colonial Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010); Peter B. Villella, *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Kelly S. McDonough, *The Learned Ones: Nahua Intellectuals in Postconquest Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014).

scholarship, especially those deriving from indigenous Guatemalan texts. Yet far from challenging Lovell's original emphasis on persistence, they carry his conclusion forward.

One such example is *Maya Ideologies of the Sacred*, by Amara Solari. Solari's particular focus is religion as practiced and perceived by the Maya of Yucatán, specifically the "spatial ideologies" that linked sacred meanings to places. Erudite, perceptive, and effectively illustrated, *Maya Ideologies of the Sacred* deploys a broad array of sources, including colonial Maya texts, codices, and cartography; frescoes and architectural ornamentation; and theological and evangelical materials produced by Spanish friars. Like Lovell, Solari highlights continuity into the colonial era, yet by foregrounding native action and cogitation she demonstrates how Maya perceptions of space continued to shape local religious practices well after the conquest. Her story, therefore, is not one of "failed" evangelization but of a subtle, ongoing negotiation between different notions of the "location" of supernatural presence.

According to Solari, the Franciscans of sixteenth-century Yucatán pursued conversion strategies that aimed to "convert" or "transfigure" pagan sacred spaces alongside souls, adapting rather than eradicating their spiritual resonances and redirecting them to vivify new Christian chapels and churches (7–19). This evangelical strategy, however, made no allowance for Maya conventions that imbued certain spaces with identities relaying crucial information to the Maya about the spiritual qualities of a given area. As the friars were generally blind to this particular mode of indigenous knowledge, they attached no particular meanings to the preconquest sacred spaces they attempted to appropriate for Christianity—and wrongly assumed the Maya did the same, even when the spiritual substance of a location remained indicated by its toponym (78–79). Thus, argues the author, the evangelical strategy of spatial transfiguration unwittingly "contributed to the continual process of Maya place-making" whenever and wherever Catholic rituals seemed to resonate with pre-Columbian beliefs (129).

Following adept interpretations of colonial Maya texts, the centerpiece of *Maya Ideologies of the Sacred* is an extended analysis of pre-Columbian and colonial art and architecture at Itzmal (Yucatán) as well as an assessment of how colonial Mayas understood the Catholic ceremonies occurring there. The author concludes with an emic contemplation of the Virgin of Izamal, today the patroness of Yucatán. Historically a place of healing and pilgrimage, colonial Itzmal continued to draw pilgrims during Holy Week, its sacredness transfigured but nonetheless established "upon a deep understanding of continuity" (154). Today, the pilgrim Virgin periodically leaves her sanctuary to cleanse and heal disease. By way of an extended process of spiritual negotiation, the sacrality of pre-Columbian Itzmal survives today within the Catholic icon herself (144–157).

An emphasis on the persistence of pre-Columbian spaces also animates Barbara Mundy's new work, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City*, a vividly illustrated tour of the bustling urban sphere of sixteenth-century Mexico City. Mundy's analysis of native and nonnative maps, texts, and images reveals that some pre-Hispanic patterns of urban life in Tenochtitlán were reestablished in the colonial capital, and that indigenous people remained highly involved and influential in postconquest urban affairs, not only as resident laborers and vendors but also as district authorities, engineers, and civil planners. Seamlessly integrating art history, ethnohistory, and archeological evidence, the book models the new interdisciplinary scholarship that foregrounds indigenous perspectives. While conquerors and outsiders reported the rise of a new imperial capital, writes Mundy, contemporary native sources "reveal the endurance of the indigenous city known as Tenochtitlán within the space of Mexico City" (3).

In highlighting Tenochtitlán's endurance, Mundy assesses the city less as a collection of buildings or a political jurisdiction, and more as a space defined by the visions of its leaders and planners and the practices of its ordinary inhabitants (9–18). Mundy begins with an urban history of Tenochtitlán during the fifteenth century, a foundation that subsequently allows her to underline overlooked modes of urban persistence during the critical decades of the 1520s and 1530s, when Spanish conquerors and officials rebuilt the city as their new capital. Importantly, Mundy's emphasis on the social construction of urban spaces leads her to emphasize the open areas—squares, avenues, and marketplaces (*tianguises*)—which are no less important than buildings to civic life. Referencing early colonial maps, she confirms the preservation of many aspects of pre-Hispanic Nahua life just beyond the edges of the rectilinear city center that was the nucleus of the Spaniards' power and cultural presence. With native peddlers still hawking traditional foodstuffs and wares in Nahuatl in officially sanctioned tianguises, the commercial life of Tenochtitlán hummed along, displaced and constrained but by no means extinguished (73–81).

The focus on indigenous spaces leads logically to their administrators: highborn Nahuas who wielded indigenous as well as colonial modes of authority. These are the true protagonists of the book, as they helped ensure that Mexico City developed as a multiethnic and multicultural city rather than a transoceanic bubble

of Hispanism. Mundy interprets the architecture of several postconquest buildings constructed by and for the native leadership, and reveals how, in their civic works, they expressed their own idealized self-image as a Nahuatl Christian nobility (113). She also highlights pictorial records demonstrating that residents continued to self-organize as members of pre-Hispanic *tlaxilacalli*, Nahuatl urban districts with discrete corporate identities. Finally, Mundy tells the important story of don Antonio Valeriano, an educated governor of the urban native population instrumental in implementing a series of public waterworks in the late sixteenth century, thereby reinforcing the status of Mexico City as an Indian as well as Spanish space (207–208). Mundy emphasizes the mnemonic role of place names; the Salto del Agua metro stop in today's Mexico City, traversed daily by thousands, marks the spot where don Antonio built the fountain for a new tianguis.

Just as Maya spatial ideologies influenced colonial Christianity, and just as preconquest Tenochtitlán influenced the development of postconquest Mexico City, so did fifteenth-century Nahuatl conceptions of the north influence the expansion of sixteenth-century Spaniards. Danna A. Levin Rojo's *Return to Aztlan* revisits early colonial Mesoamerican pictorial and alphabetic texts that reference Aztlan, the northern land many Nahuats considered their ancestral homeland. Specifically, Levin Rojo addresses how Nahuatl understandings regarding Aztlan both inspired the Spaniards' northward expansion and framed what they encountered in the process. In detailing how native knowledge shaped Spanish expansion, she rejects a "binary divide of conquered versus conqueror" in favor of "a particular intersubjective space" constituted by both Spanish settlers and their native auxiliaries (197). According to Levin Rojo, in such arenas colonizers might learn from the colonized (9–10).

The intersubjective space posited and addressed in *Return to Aztlan* was populated by Spanish explorers, missionaries, and fortune seekers in the wide lands north of central Mexico after the fall of Tenochtitlán, and the Nahuats whose knowledge they relied upon. By way of an interdisciplinary examination of European texts, archeological and anthropological evidence, explorers' accounts, and Mesoamerican painted manuscripts, Levin Rojo details the creation and influence of an "imaginary world" called Nuevo México in the sixteenth century—one that, despite its nonreality, helped shape contemporary motivations, perceptions, and actions. In this she adapts and redeploys Edmundo O'Gorman's famous thesis that regarded America as an "invention" of the first Europeans rather than ontologically real. In the specific case of Nuevo México, however, Levin Rojo perceives the process of invention as occurring not unilaterally but within a sphere of asymmetrical interactions between the cultural referents, geographic perceptions, and immediate longings of various native and Spanish groups. Indeed, challenging historiography to the contrary, she argues that Nahuatl narratives regarding their ancestral origins go further to explain sixteenth-century Spanish interests in the far north than the more well-known legends derived from European sources (1–2).

According to Levin Rojo, Nuevo México was originally invented between 1529 and 1542 as "a land of wonder" far to the north. This vision reflected both early Spanish reports from a real place they called "Cíbola" (Puebloan territories) and secondhand accounts by native captives and emissaries. In the 1560s, silver miners from Zacatecas launched prospecting expeditions which, due to their significant (if outsider) familiarity of Nahuatl lore, they explicitly portrayed as the search for the fabled Mexica homeland, presumably a place of great wealth. Finally, missionaries explicitly equated Cíbola with Nuevo México in certain accounts from the 1580s. Thus, argues Levin Rojo, when an official governor of "Nuevo México" was named in 1595, the province was already presumed to exist ontologically and linked in the contemporary imaginary with the Mexicas' ancestral homeland, a supposition encoded in its very name (79–86).

Like Mundy and Solari, Levin Rojo revisits a colonial history by way of indigenous texts and perspectives, thereby revealing misunderstandings and distortions that resulted from the previous discounting or ignorance of such sources. Perhaps most importantly, she challenges the conventional view that Spanish explorers were motivated primarily by belief in an Iberian legend about seven wealthy cities founded by exiled Christians (100–109). Instead, she demonstrates that not only Spaniards but also Nahuats were inspired by the desire to rediscover Aztlan. Creole and indigenous literature around the turn of the seventeenth century viewed the Spanish conquest of New Mexico not as the incorporation of a remote and alien civilization but as a long-awaited "return" to an ancestral home—literally, in the Nahuats' case, and patriotically in the case of the creoles. Indeed, she argues, it was precisely the push north during the 1580s and 1590s that inspired renewed interest in the Aztec pilgrimage story, evidenced by the numerous contemporary Spanish and indigenous chronicles treating that subject (192).

Like the books by Lovell, Solari, and Mundy, *Return to Aztlan* helps clarify the limits of conquest—or more precisely, how colonial processes resulted not only from the simple transplantation of metropolitan norms, but also from complex, unequal, and subtle interactions between colonizers and colonized. Vera Candiani's *Dreaming of Dry Land*, meanwhile, offers a distinct, though complementary set of lessons. A combination of

environmental history, social history, and the history of science, the book skillfully traces the motivations, planning, execution, and legacies of the massive misadventure in civil and environmental engineering known simply as the “Desagüe”: the ongoing project, begun in 1604, to prevent flooding by desiccating the Basin of Mexico. *Dreaming of Dry Land* differs in kind and provides a helpful contrast to the other works, given that the Desagüe was a spectacular expression of the colonizers’ will to utterly transform a major American social-environmental arena. It also reminds us that ethnicity is not the only axis by which to understand colonial society, especially in and near major urban centers, where native, mestizo, and Hispanic agriculturalists and laborers were often more culturally and politically aligned with each other than they were with the educated urban overclass.

The core of *Dreaming of Dry Land* is an intricate examination of the diverse social and ethnic groups involved in adapting human life to the basin of Mexico and vice versa. Pre-Columbian peoples were drawn by its rich productive capacity but in the process were forced to adapt their agriculture and lifeways to its idiosyncrasies, the most important of which was periodic flooding. The imperialistic Mexica managed the hydrology of the basin with a series of dikes and dams designed to both control flooding and contain the spread of brackish waters, a system that early Spanish administrators pragmatically preserved in many aspects. Yet the native population declined and the urban population rose during the sixteenth century, leading to deforestation, the expansion of grazing and European-style agriculture, and the devaluation of lacustrine lifestyles, all while the old hydraulic systems fell into disrepair. More frequent and more severe flooding was the result, prompting urban authorities to shift their ideals from aquatic containment to the establishment of “dry ground” in the basin.

Importantly, Candiani distinguishes between the Desagüe as a coherent vision of desiccation from the Desagüe as a lived, implemented, and practiced endeavor. While the former was thoroughly European and reflective of the urban elites whose properties suffered from floods, the latter was a complex creature involving people from every level of colonial society, their tools, their know-how, and, crucially, their interests. This includes the city leaders who dreamed of dry land, the classically trained and theoretically oriented engineers whom they deployed to plan the drainage (some of whom were regular clergy), the pragmatic field managers whose primary loyalty was to their city rather than any overarching vision, the rural laborers upon whose expertise they depended, and the native communities who balanced pressing labor obligations with the need to derive benefits from the endeavor. The author also details the interplay between European and local forms of hydrological knowledge and tactics, both indigenous and otherwise. The final chapters address the eighteenth century, in which military engineers loyal to the king (rather than local elites) commandeered the project. They attempted to implement new, more rational and empirical methods—only to run aground against a deeply entrenched system, already over a century old, around which both landowners and the indigenous peasantry had organized for generations. While they in no way shared the original dream, they had nonetheless become dependent on the Desagüe.

By approaching the Desagüe from the ground up, the author reveals its true complexity and multilaterality, thereby upending generations of scholarship hailing it more or less uncritically as an expression of “creole ingenuity.” Even as she details the massive upheavals occasioned by the Desagüe vis-à-vis the human relationship to land and water, Candiani, too, elucidates the limits of colonial change—in this case, by illustrating both how early colonial Spaniards largely accepted self-evidently efficacious indigenous hydraulic knowledge and technologies, as well as how such things factored into the later implementation of the Desagüe itself as a piecemeal and multiform enterprise rather than a unified and coherent endeavor. She also highlights the ways that native and rural communities often adapted it for their own purposes. Finally, like the other works, *Dreaming of Dry Land* reassesses colonial history by way of nonhegemonic perspectives. According to Candiani, the colonial urban gentry, nineteenth-century liberals, and twentieth-century techno-optimists all regarded the Desagüe as an unfinished and mismanaged but self-evidently benevolent and forward-thinking enterprise. However, from the standpoint of the common people involved, draining the ancient lake system of central Mexico was a destructive effort by self-interested urban elites to displace the costs of their land-based lifestyle onto the Indians and rural poor.

Nonetheless, *Dreaming of Dry Land* also offers a very different set of conclusions than the other books considered in this essay. The Desagüe itself is an iconic example of colonial-era transformation rather than endurance, survival, transfiguration, or return. It is true that in many aspects it failed to satisfy the original elite vision of desiccation—the American landscape itself “resisted” the colonizers’ efforts in this instance—but the end result can hardly be considered an example of persistence or continuity. Moreover, while the Desagüe was a native as well as creole “achievement,” we cannot understand this as evidence of native “success” at outmaneuvering or mediating colonial hegemony and oppression. Quite the contrary.

We might, therefore, consider Candiani's counterpoint as a poignant reminder to remain unsatisfied with the mere revelation that indigenous agency existed in colonial Latin America. Scholars of Spanish-ruled Mexico and Guatemala are fortunate to have a comparatively large and rich corpus of available ethnohistorical material from which to work, but there is danger in narrowing our focus on such materials to the point where the hegemonic role seems overly remote. While welcoming the boom in Mexican cultural history in the 1990s, Eric Van Young nonetheless warned against "the apotheosis of agency," whereby scholars might perceive any self-interested actions or thoughts by a colonized individual or group as a priori evidence of successful resistance.<sup>9</sup> The same principle should apply today vis-à-vis the recovery and interpretation of indigenous and plebeian sources and the non-European perspectives they embody. It is important to identify the limits of conquest and colonial change, to emphasize the struggles of those who bore the burdens of foreign domination and exploitation and their legacies. By doing so we can transcend the limitations of the archives and begin to perceive the daily experiences and contributions of nonelite peoples to the world as it emerged. Nonetheless, we should strive, both in the discipline as well as in individual research, to remain explicitly aware of and sensitive to that point where broad historical forces converge with, shape, and constrain the decisions of ordinary people. All five works examined here contribute well to this endeavor, and collectively illustrate effective ways that historians might approach, measure, and delineate the extent of colonial change as well as its limits.

### Author Information

Peter B. Villella received a PhD in history from UCLA and is an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He is the author of *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and various articles exploring the activities of native leaders and their influences on the broader intellectual dynamics of New Spain. His work has been supported by the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and several libraries and other institutions. His current research addresses the collaborations between learned indigenous, mestizo, creole, and Spanish historians and chroniclers in central Mexico during the seventeenth century.

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Van Young, "The New Cultural History Comes to Old Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1999): 243–244.

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