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More than Human Sacrifice: Teaching about the Aztecs in the New Latino South

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Abstract

This essay details an extended lesson I created to teach about Aztec/Mexica resistance to Spanish conquest in a sixth grade classroom within the context of the New Latino South. Rather than concentrate on the familiar tropes of human sacrifice and European exploration, I centered Aztec/Mexica philosophy, arts, and resistance in order to disrupt majoritarian narratives reified in Social Studies courses. Decentering and complicating the dominant narrative about Aztec/Mexica culture is one way educators can challenge dominant, and negative, discourse about burgeoning Latinx communities. I argue that in order for schools to help remedy deficit perspectives of Latinx people, especially in newer receiver contexts like the South(east), educators must be willing to find ways to explicitly teach against such narratives.

Introduction

This essay details an extended lesson I created to teach about Aztec/Mexica¹ resistance to Spanish conquest in a sixth grade classroom in the Midlands region² of South Carolina. Rather than concentrate on familiar tropes of human sacrifice and European exploration, I centered Mexica philosophy, arts, and resistance in order to disrupt majoritarian narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006) reified in middle grades Social Studies/History courses. Majoritarian narratives are the stories told by groups in power and “carry with them the layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them to discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). Majoritarian narratives are often accepted as convention and common sense (Delgado, 1989), in the case of Social Studies/History classrooms they reflect, and perpetuate, Eurocentric curriculum and viewpoints. The majoritarian narrative about the Aztec Empire commonly collapses their entire way of life into the ceremony of human sacrifice (Colín, 2014; Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015), thus erasing other cultural achievements and contributions, innocuously perpetuating

deficit-based understandings about Latinx cultures. Popular curriculum and teaching about the Aztecs are but one small example of how Eurocentric discourses devalue the achievements of Latinx cultures. I argue that in order for schools to help remedy deficit-based perspectives of Latinx, especially in newer receiver contexts like the South(east), educators must be willing to find ways to explicitly teach against such narratives.

I begin by sharing a brief recollection of my own schooling experience. Although I grew up in California, and not the South(east), which is the setting of this essay, the reflection demonstrates how the contributions of Latinx cultures have been traditionally diminished across the United States (Valenzuela, 1999). Next, I briefly outline the New Latino South to provide context and illustrate the necessity of challenging dominant, and negative, discourse about burgeoning Latinx communities (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). Then, I sketch how Aztecs are typically portrayed in popular imagination and school textbooks. I follow with an alternative vision of the Aztec Empire that decenters the majoritarian story by highlighting philosophy and the arts. Lastly, I describe the lesson I created and close with concluding thoughts for social studies teachers, especially in the New Latino South.

What We (Don't) Learn

I grew up and attended school in California's Central Valley. Row after row of vines, trees, and plants stretch as far as one can see. The “food basket” of the world relies on the unceasing skill

¹ In this essay, I use Mexica and Aztec interchangeable. Mexica was the name they used for themselves prior to conquest.

² The Midlands region of South Carolina covers the central portions of the state including the metropolitan area of the capital, Columbia.

and toil of hardworking farm laborers, many of them Latinx³ immigrants or of Latinx descent. In addition to cultivating the food that ends up on our plates, the fields of California also produced giants of civil rights history including Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Philip Vera Cruz, and Larry Itliong. These individuals, along with so many other seemingly ordinary individuals, blazed a trail of activism and civil rights leadership for exploited workers of color.

I never learned any of this in school. As a young individual of Mexican descent, with a family history of farm labor (including myself), I was clueless to the rich multicultural history around me. I never learned of the grape boycott. I never learned about the United Farm Workers of America. I never learned of the 1968 East L.A. Blowouts. I never learned of the Zoot Suit Riots. I never learned of the Mexican-American War. I never learned of the poetry and art of the Aztecs. In short, I did not know my culture had a history, a proud history at that.

While California still has work to do, it has taken steps to remedy stories such as mine. Recent efforts to expand ethnic studies programs, and the adoption of a new framework for teaching history and social science to promote critical inquiry symbolize rays of hope (Javier, 2017). Resolutions by cities like Los Angeles to celebrate Indigenous People's Day rather than Columbus Day are additional moves in the right direction. However, not all students, let alone all Latinx students, live in California or are privy to such justice-based reforms. As the next section demonstrates, the Latinx population in the U.S. South(east) has seen dramatic growth over the last two decades. Would Latinx students in current classrooms in the South(east) face an experience similar to my childhood recollections? What are those students learning about their Latinx culture? What impact does this have for Latinx communities in the New Latino South?

The New Latino South

One hears a new generation of Latino children speaking English and 'Spanglish' with regional Southern accents in the elementary schools, the

churches, on the streets, and at Latino soccer Saturdays in the park. (Villenas, 2002, p. 17)

The 1990s ushered in a decade of rapid growth for Latinx in the South(east) (Kochhar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005). South Carolina, where I teach sixth grade, led the entire US in Latinx population growth from 2000-2010 with a 148% increase (Cooper-Lewter, 2013; Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Areas with little to no experience of Latinx suddenly find themselves home to burgeoning Latinx communities. Scholars have coined the rapid growth of Latinx population in the South(east) the New Latino South (Carrillo, 2016; Kochhar et al., 2005; Salas & Portes, 2017) as these striking demographic changes continue to affect the area in profound ways.

After initial signals of welcome and support towards Latinx immigrants (Weise, 2015), the South is now home to some of the strictest anti-Latinx immigration policies in the US. Laws such as South Carolina State Bill 20 (2011) and Alabama House Bill 56 (2011) specifically target Latinx immigrant communities, making it harder for people to live and work in those states. Specific to South Carolina, Rodriguez and Monreal (2017) found state-level policy discourse constructs immigrants to be economic and security threats undeserving of state resources. These authors argue, "This category of knowledge [about immigrants] is used to affect and constrain the lived lives of immigrants in S.C." (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017, p. 781). Similarly, Lacy's (2009) examination of Latinx in South Carolina revealed a state atmosphere of anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination, and economic nativism. An understanding of this anti-Latinx immigrant discourse is crucial to understanding the general context schools operate within, and the need for teachers to disrupt nativist and racist ideals. When a teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina tells students to "go back to where you speak Spanish" (Patton, 2017) or classmates build a "Trump Wall" as a "prank" (Szathmary, 2016), it is clear much work lies ahead especially as Latinx student populations continue to expand in the New Latino South.

The Aztecs in Popular Imagination

I totally remember learning about those Aztec people. It was so cool. They were all about blood, violence, and killing each other. I mean human sacrifice...that is a middle schooler's

³ For purposes of this essay I use Latinx as an inclusive terms for Latina/o/s. When including direct quoted references I keep the author's choice of words.

dream! (University education student, personal communication, April 2017)

My teacher told us about them. She showed us a video of them ripping out the heart of a person. (Sixth grade student, April 2017)

I heard the first quote from a university education student in South Carolina who visited my class as part of observation hours. The latter quote came from a sixth grade student when I informed the class our next unit would be on Mesoamerica including the Aztecs. Although both conversations took place in South Carolina, similar exchanges were common when I was a middle school teacher in Los Angeles and other parts of California. They also mirror vague recollections of my own middle school experience where Mexica culture was presented as uniformly violent, savage, and ruthless, often a direct foil to the refined and humanist ideals of Renaissance and Enlightenment-era Europe. The image of the Aztec as bloodthirsty and brutal is so ubiquitous that it is taken as the only truth (Colín, 2014). Such a singular view is easy to accept when it is reproduced in curricular materials like textbooks.

A review of current and recently used textbooks from my school district in South Carolina proves useful to examining the representation of Aztec culture and history. *Contemporary Cultures: 1600 to the Present* (McGraw-Hill, 2014a) highlights the collusion of opposing Mesoamerican peoples with the conquistador Hernán Cortés to overthrow the Aztec Empire. The two found a common thread in opposition to the violence of the Aztecs, “one reason for their anger was the Aztec practice of human sacrifices. Most often to please their gods, the Aztec killed people whom they had captured in war” (McGraw-Hill, 2014a, p. 67). In essence, the text blames the religious practices of the Aztec for their eventual demise while implicitly suggesting the superiority and benevolence of European Christianity. Diseases such as measles and smallpox are mentioned as an afterthought, “another factor that helped Cortés defeat the Aztec” (McGraw-Hill, 2014a, p. 67). In the three-page discussion of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs there is not a single mention of Mexica arts, philosophy, or resistance. This is a similar thread throughout the materials examined.

The development of influential ideas, what one might call philosophy, is absent in the textbook treatment of the Aztecs. Whereas *Discovering*

Our Past: A History of the World-Early Ages (McGraw-Hill, 2014b) devotes a whole lesson to the “Greek Mind,” and in-depth sections outlining the “triumph of reason” and different philosophies during the Enlightenment, the Aztecs are depicted almost exclusively as a warlike people. The text does mention that Mexica priests recorded the religion, literature, and history of their people, but this duty was secondary to their primary role “of sacrificing captives to please the gods” (McGraw-Hill, 2014b, p. 462). Similarly, *Journey Across Time: Early Ages* (Glencoe, 2005) devotes a six-page section to Greek philosophy and history including profiles of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In a small subsection about the Aztecs three different references to human sacrifice (founding story, war, and religious ceremony) are included, but the sole mention of any advanced cultural life is a questionable nod to chocolate and a picture of a bowl and loom. Finally, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan receives a passing reference devoid of detail and explanation. In *World Explorers: Medieval Times to Today* (Prentice Hall World Studies, 2001) the Aztecs do receive credit for building Tenochtitlan, “the world’s finest city of the time” (p. 59) with its palaces, floating gardens, and pyramid-temples. However, “although Tenochtitlan was a peaceful place, the Aztec themselves were a warlike people...They also took thousands of prisoners of war to serve as human sacrifices” (Prentice Hall World Studies, 2001, p. 63). There is no investigation as to why the city was tranquil, or the tensions inherent in a culture that could be simultaneously militaristic and peaceful. For such a magnificent city the text does not include any information on arts, living standards, or other parts of daily life.

Aztec History: More than Sacrifice

This section is not to dispute the practice of human sacrifice among the Mexica, or mount an historical argument to the degree it influenced Aztec society. Rather, this section briefly introduces the reader to often-neglected parts of Aztec culture, specifically the development of a unique philosophy and its emphasis on the arts. In fact, the Aztecs expressed profound philosophical inquiry through the use of poetry and song (Colín, 2014; León-Portilla, 1990, 2003; Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015). The *tlacuilo* (“painter”) and *zuquichihuiqui* (“potter”) were honored and revered positions in the Aztec social order (León-Portilla, 1990). Absent in school curriculum, the revelation of these facts

challenge singular and essentialist (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) depictions of Mexican history that certainly influence people's perceptions of Latinx/Mexican culture, especially in areas like the South(east). Lacking positive cultural representation in schools, Latinx students in the New Latino South are isolated and alienated through the education process (Carrillo & Rodriguez, 2016; Straubhaar & Portes, 2016; Urrieta, Kolano, & Jo, 2015). Additionally, deficit views of Latinx culture are not challenged in the school curriculum.

By the end of middle school many students can cite Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, exemplifying the dominance of a Eurocentric World History narrative. They can explain the political ideals in the Magna Carta, the thoughts of John Locke, and the lasting literary contributions of Shakespeare (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017). In my time teaching in the South(east) I have yet to hear a student or teacher marvel at the poetry of Nezhualcōyotl or investigate the philosophical wisdom of the *tlamatinime*. In Mexica (Aztec) culture the *tlamatinime* (translated as 'he who knows things') were the wisest elders and teachers. Through songs, poems, and other art the *tlamatinime* preserved their scientific knowledge and posed questions about the nature of humanity. Describing a systematic philosophical questioning of the universe León-Portilla (2003) writes, "He (the *tlamatinime*) directs himself to the meaning and true value of things, seeking the *truth* about life and death, even speculating on the possibility of knowing anything at all of that afterlife" (p. 9). Although the Spaniards destroyed many records from the Mexica period, there remains a rich trove of materials one can use in the classroom. An example is the following short poem by Nezhualcōyotl translated by León-Portilla (2003) investigating an ever-changing world:

Does man possess any truth?
If not, our song is no longer true.
Is anything stable and lasting?
What reaches its aim? (p. 12)

Systemic education was an essential part of Aztec life meant to pass on intellectual heritage and develop cultural life (León-Portilla, 1990). The Mexica believed that the purpose of education was for man/woman to find themselves, their identity, and their "true face." Both inside and outside the home Aztecs used songs, poems, dance, and other instruction

centered on the arts to educate the whole child incorporating them into the larger community (Colín, 2014; León-Portilla, 1990). Rarely does one hear about this rather humanist and arts-based approach to education among the Aztecs (León-Portilla, 2003). Thus, without curricular recognition of the long history of Mexican emphasis on education, dominant discourse readily dismisses Latinx community and familial ways of knowing (Bernal, 2002; Gonzales, 2015) while reinforcing deficit discourses problematizing Latinx cultural practices (Murillo, 2002; Villenas, 2001). As the lesson below showcases, Latinx peoples have continually resisted the erasure of their indigenous and historical knowledge.

Lesson: Resistance and verbal battles. In designing the lesson about Aztec resistance, arts, and philosophy, my intention was to center the words of the Mexica people both past and present. By focusing on a primary source and bringing in supplementary materials, I aimed to create a counter-text (Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning, 2017) to the majoritarian/Eurocentric narrative featured in the textbooks above. To introduce the lesson I read from two children's books, *Animals of My Land: Animales de mi tierra/ Noyolkanyolkej* (Lima & Padilla, 2017)⁴ and *Cuauhtémoc: Shapes/ Formas* (Rodriguez & Stein, 2016). I also showed an animated short video in Nahuatl called *Cuando Muere una Lengua / When a tongue dies* (Hola Combo, 2013). My purpose in starting the lesson with these materials was twofold. One, they are clear examples that Mesoamerican groups are not merely a footnote in the study of World History. The cultures were never erased. They continue to struggle, thrive, and exist today. This alone helped students to move beyond simplistic depictions of Aztec culture centering an uncivilized and disappeared people who only performed human sacrifice. Second, these materials provided an engaging hook that set up the rest of the lesson making it approachable and meaningful for middle school youth.

The major part of the lesson focused on analyzing a small portion of *The Colloquies of the Twelve*, a bilingual Nahuatl/Spanish text dated to about 1564 written by Fray Bernardino

⁴ On the back cover this book claims to be the first trilingual book in English, Spanish, and Nahuatl printed in the US.

	Aztecs/Mexica	Spanish Conquerors
Geographic Origins		
Religion		
Art and Philosophy		
Thoughts About The Conquest		
Other		

Figure 1. Graphic Organizer

de Sahagún. The text offers a record of debates/verbal battles between Mexica religious and political authorities and a team of twelve Spanish friars in the early 1520's, shortly after the fall of the Aztec empire (Tlacatecco, 2012). *The Colloquies of the Twelve* is significant because it is an explicit act of resistance by the *tlamatinime* in response to Spanish efforts to destroy indigenous thought. León-Portilla (2003) asserts, "The particular importance of this document lies in the fact that the Nahuatl wise men are openly and freely discussing and defending their concepts in opposition to the Spanish friars" (p. 19). To focus on a close reading of the text I provided students with short excerpts from *The Colloquies of the Twelve* that I first read out loud to the class.⁵ Next, students reread the brief portions in pairs and worked collaboratively to come up with their interpretations of the text. The following is part

⁵ For an online version of the organizer I created for a close reading of the text visit goo.gl/TbvbXf

of an excerpt I used in the lesson translated by León-Portilla (1990):⁶

Calm and amiable,
 consider, oh Lords,
 whatever is best.
 We cannot be tranquil,
 and yet we certainly do not believe,
 we do not accept your teachings as truth,
 even though this may offend you. (p. 66)

After students analyzed each excerpt the class came together for a whole group discussion about the text, the Aztecs, resistance, and the importance of the arts and philosophy. One student remarked, "The *tlamatinime* were like super smart original protesters." Another commented, "The Aztecs had their own way of seeing the world that was just as good as the Spanish." To close the lesson students created dialogue poems (Tedick, 2002) to better understand that multiple viewpoints and perspectives of an historical event can exist. Before writing their dialogue poem, students completed a graphic organizer (Table 1) in which they compared the Aztecs and the Spanish. The two columns of the organizer modeled the eventual dialogue that would comprise their poems in addition to helping them reference class interpretations and discussions of *The Colloquies of the Twelve*.

As this was the first time the class produced dialogue poems, the final products varied in their length, detail, and intensity; however, the larger point was the explicit and intentional emphasis placed on the positive cultural legacy of the Aztecs. The dialogue poems were especially powerful because they undermined the privileging of dominant voices normally centered in History/Social Studies curriculums. Students created their own counter text, or as scholar Ernesto Colín (2014) might say "a palimpsest."⁷ As Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, my students represented through their poems a Mesoamerican perspective on history that is typically overlooked in narratives about the "New World." The structure of the poems, the centering of Aztec voices, stressed the dynamic

⁶ An additional Nahuatl/English translation of *The Colloquies of the Twelve* is found in de Alva (1980).

⁷ Colín (2014) describes a palimpsest as a context with multiple layers (re)written over an original text that both confronts the act of erasure and privileges the contemporary creative act.

creation and activity of these people, rather than the passive descriptions of European “exploration” often reproduced in textbooks.

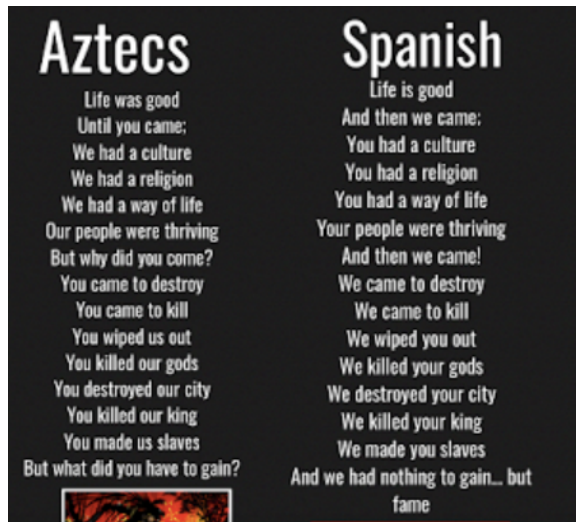


Figure 2. Student Dialogue Poem

Social Studies Dialogue Poem	
We live in Central Mexico.	We are now in Central Mexico
We live in The Valley of Mexico	We are overlooking The Valley of Mexico
We are Polytheistic.	We are Monotheistic
We made sacrifices to our Gods.	We send prayers to our God
We invited them in	We tricked them into inviting us in
We made beautiful temples.	We destroyed their precious temples
We made amazing sculptures.	We stole their amazing sculptures
We were excellent warriors.	We are excellent warriors
The fight lost us many	The fight lost us few
They took our families as slaves.	We gained many slaves
They destroyed our community.	We destroyed their community
They captured our leader.	We captured their leader
His name was Montezuma.	His name was Montezuma
Their leader was Cortez.	Our leader was Cortez
We are the Aztecs.	We are the Spanish Conquistadors

Figure 3. Student Dialogue Poem

Conclusion - “Windows and Mirrors”

As a child I was extremely embarrassed by my Mexican heritage. Even in California I was implicitly and explicitly taught that Mexicans were problems and drains on the state. Never did I learn about the positive contributions of Mexican-Americans or see my culture reflected in a positive way at school. Thus, I would often lie about my family's background. I remember how much I loathed when my dad acted as a translator or pronounced our last name in Spanish rolling the r in (Monreal) with vigor. I hid in embarrassment whenever he grabbed the microphone at a party and performed *La Bamba*. Huber (2010) explains how such internalization can be a response to racist nativist climates perpetuated through dominant public discourse. Given the context of the New Latino South, schools must be prepared to counter erroneous assumptions about Latinx newcomers that lead to isolation and alienation (Carrillo & Rodriguez, 2016; Straubhaar & Portes, 2016; Urrieta et al., 2015). In fact, they should intentionally cultivate a different lens built on the cultural strengths and resilience of Latinx peoples starting with curricular lessons like the one explained in this essay. I argue that in order for schools to help remedy deficit-based perspectives of Latinx people, especially in areas like the South(east), educators must be willing to find ways to explicitly teach against such narratives. In this way teachers can help turn cultural shame into cultural pride and resist hegemonic narratives (Colín, 2014). If not, schools will do little to prevent situations such as how I felt as a child. Unfortunately, my personal experience teaching and living in the South(east) suggests little urgency to counter such damaging subtractive schooling practices (Valenzuela, 1999).

Speaking about the different types of literature, textbooks, and perspectives available in a classroom Boutte (2016) argues that teachers and schools should provide materials that affirm students’ cultures. She explains that students should have “mirrors” that reflect their lived experiences, not just the representations of other (read dominant) groups, in a positive way (Boutte, 2016). Similarly, it was the duty of the *tlamatinime* “to place a mirror before the people that they might know themselves and become wise” (León-Portilla, 1990, p. 154). However, to have only “mirrors” is not enough. In areas like the New Latino South where demographics are shifting rapidly, schools need to provide

“windows” that offer opportunities to learn about the lives of other people. This might help decenter popular discourse about Latinx communities and peoples in the South(east) that leads to, and stems from, racist and restrictive state policy (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). By creating counter-texts and adding supplementary materials, social studies teachers can provide “windows and mirrors.” The lesson featured in this essay is but one small way teachers can center the cultural histories of their Latinx students while also meeting high academic standards (Ladson-Billings, 2009). It is essential to recognize that we as teachers have power and can find ways to act within and resist oppressive systems. I end by repeating a few lines from *The Colloquies of the Twelve*:

we do not accept your teachings as truth, even though this may offend you. (León-Portilla, 1990, p. 66)

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