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Past and Present Side By Side – A Native View on Colonial Mexico

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Abstract:

With the monograph *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500–1800* Peter Vilella provides an intellectual history of native Mexican historiography over three centuries. He maps the patterns underlying the historical narrative developed by indigenous authors starting shortly after the Spanish expansion, who drew on their ancestors' Aztec past in order to uphold traditional rights. Their arguments are grounded in a close analysis of the changing social and judicial status of Mexican native people. The author argues that interactions between colonial native, Spanish, and creole writers shaped this narrative in constant flux, which continues to inform current Mexican politics and imaginations.

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Villella, Peter B.: *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 368 pages, 120 USD. ISBN: 9781107129030

Abstract:

With the monograph *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500–1800* Peter Villella provides an intellectual history of native Mexican historiography over three centuries. He maps the patterns underlying the historical narrative developed by indigenous authors starting shortly after the Spanish expansion, who drew on their ancestors' Aztec past in order to uphold traditional rights. Their arguments are grounded in a close analysis of the changing social and judicial status of Mexican native people. The author argues that interactions between colonial native, Spanish, and creole writers shaped this narrative in constant flux, which continues to inform current Mexican politics and imaginations.

Recent years have shown an increasing interest in Latin American studies regarding the roles played by indigenous people in colonial societies. For colonial Mexico (then known as the Viceroyalty of New Spain) this has led to original works highlighting the ways in which both native elites and communities took part in negotiation processes that formed and continue to form social and cultural structures (e.g. Ramos & Yannakakis, 2014; McDonough, 2014). In this monograph Peter Villella, an Associate Professor of history at the University of North Carolina, builds on the pioneering work of James Lockhart (1992) and others by drawing on a large array of primary sources. He adds an important historical dimension to the current debates, which more often tend to focus on literary studies. Firstly, the book traces the development of a native Mexican elite, in tandem with their creation and adaptation of a historical narrative that drew on their Aztec forebears' legacy. Secondly, light is shed on mutual influ-

ences between these native authors and creole writers who used similar narrative strategies.

The arguments are developed via a sweeping narrative in broadly chronological order. Villella employs the term used in Spanish America for native leaders, *caciques*, as a useful umbrella concept for the various, diverse stages in indigenous literary activity. This allows him to circumvent the current but less conceptually clear use of Spanish *casta* attributions to identify certain writers. The author's use of the term "historical ventriloquism" to designate colonial writers ascribing their ideas to their pre-Hispanic literary subjects adds further conceptual depth.

The book identifies different but partially overlapping stages of *cacique* historiography between 1500 and 1800. In the beginning the increasing marginalization of traditional native elites following the Spanish campaigns in central Mexico is outlined, as are the main arguments of primordially of pre-colonial rights, fealty to the Spanish Crown and Christian orthodoxy used by *caciques* to defend their remaining privileges (cf. pp. 48-51). Of special interest is Villella's inclusion of population groups less frequently discussed than the former Aztec Triple Alliance, including the Tlaxcalteca and especially the Otomí "conquistadors" (e.g. pp. 89-96; pp. 210-223). An analysis follows of how a learned local elite was educated by the Franciscans but also contributed to the religious orders' extensive literary activities (pp. 96-102; pp. 140-148). The turn of the 17th century was a time of massive social and demographic upheavals in New Spain, which thus influenced the construction of a native historiography "that drew from both native and Spanish narrative traditions but was holistically distinct" (p. 115).

We then learn about the continuing influence of a hereditary native elite even beyond the 17th century; and about the ways in which not only male but also (more indirectly) female indigenous nobles as well as native communities could petition before the colonial administration, often successfully (pp. 155-156; pp. 191-192). Here the author brings to light the contributions of native authors to intellectual debates of the 17th century, less well known than their 16th-century counterparts. Coming into the 18th century, the consolidation of highly influential Christian symbols like the Virgin of Guadalupe provides a further link between native and creole patriotisms (e.g. pp. 204-210). The last chapter identifies different strains of creole literary activity, ranging from authors opposing native education to those upholding a glorious Aztec past (261 ff.). A common thread running through these rich native and creole historiographies is an indirect denial of the "*conquista*"'s significance through the creation of a (proto-)Christian timeline running from pre-colonial up to contemporary Mexico – the appeal of this unique Mexican "cacique-creole ideal of continuity" (310) guaranteeing its lasting post-Independence influence, as sketched in the book's conclusion.

This first overview of the *caciques*' history over three centuries maps the changing patterns that make

up their historical narrative, one that continues to shape modern-day Mexico. The version presented here runs counter to earlier, more pessimistic depictions of a late-16th-century decline in native historiography. Villella's important contribution to the research debates is not only to showcase the cultural impact of native authors on Mexican identity formation from earliest colonial times onwards. He also makes clearer the closely intertwined development of arguments and narrative tropes used by Spanish, indigenous, and creole writers. These colonial realities were much more complex and fascinating than clear-cut, black-and-white ethnic or social identifications could ever account for. The 'New Philology' (as defined by Lockhart) has made possible a much-needed break with the predominance of European viewpoints through the translation and analysis of colonial native writings. In this vein, the book's commendable inclusion of both Castilian-Spanish- and Nahuatl-language sources further broadens our picture of such entanglements in early modern Mexico.

Villella traces the complex connections between indigenous and creole historiography – hinted at in the title – via central works and authors. They include the impact of Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's "native archive" on the highly influential Franciscan Torquemada as well as on the polymath Sigüenza y Góngora (pp. 172-175). Nonetheless, at times one is left wanting for a more detailed deconstruction of parallels and differences between the *caciques*' and the creoles' reordering of the pre-Hispanic past. Clearly, including such an analysis with an even stronger focus on textual analysis would have gone beyond the scope of the book's framework. The author rather brings such research gaps into focus, hopefully inspiring further works in the process. His writing style is clear and easy to follow, making it a recommended read for those interested in Mexican history and literature as well as students of Latin American history more generally.

German Abstract:

Vergangenheit und Gegenwart Seite an Seite – Das koloniale Mexiko aus indigener Sicht

Peter Villella liefert mit der Monographie *Indigenous Elites and Creole Identity in Colonial Mexico, 1500–1800* eine Geistesgeschichte der einheimischen Historiographie Mexikos über 300 Jahre. Er zeigt jene Muster auf, die einem historischen Narrativ zugrunde liegen, das bereits seit der spanischen Eroberung von indigenen Autor_innen entwickelt wurde. Um traditionelle Rechte einfordern zu können, zogen diese Schriftsteller_innen die aztekische Vergangenheit ihrer Vorfahren heran. Ihre Argumente werden vor dem Hintergrund der wandelnden sozialen und rechtlichen Stellung mexikanischer Indigener analysiert. Villella zeigt wie der Austausch zwischen kolonialen einheimischen, spanischen und kreolischen Autor_innen dieses Narrativ formte, das weiterhin mexikanische Politik und Vorstellungen darüber beeinflusst.

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