

Chapter 1

The Arrival of the Europeans

Introduction

When **Christopher Columbus** and his men landed in the Caribbean after a long and arduous voyage, they were dazzled at the beauty of the islands they encountered and fascinated by the people who inhabited them. **Bartolomé de las Casas**, a Dominican friar who accompanied Columbus's expedition, provides a vivid and evocative account of the encounter between two different worlds. When Columbus leapt ashore to claim these lands for the Catholic rulers of Spain, the Indigenous people drew close to him and his men:

They approached the bearded men, especially the Admiral, as though by the eminence and authority of his person and his scarlet clothing they had known he was the leader, and raised their hands to his beard in wonderment (for none of them have beards), scrutinizing the whiteness of the hands and feet of the Spaniards very carefully ... As the Admiral and the rest looked at the simplicity of the Indians, they endured this with pleasure and delight. Indeed, the Christians gazed at the Indians, no less than the Indians at them, amazed at the gentleness, innocence and trust of people whom they had never met ... They walked among them and drew close, with such nonchalance and ease, with all their shameful parts uncovered, as though the state of innocence was restored or had never been lost ... We later perceived their natural kindness, their innocence, humility, tameness, peacefulness and virtuous inclinations, excellent wit, and readiness to receive our holy faith and to be imbued with Christian religion.

(Castillo and Schweitzer, 2001, p. 31)

This text is imbued not only with a sense of mutual wonder and delight, but with evidence of the misconceptions of European explorers and the difficulties which they encountered in decoding the attitudes, intentions and priorities of the Indigenous people of the New World. The misnomer “Indians,” first of all, reveals that the Spaniards were convinced they had pulled off the previously unthinkable feat of reaching India by sailing west; essentially, they were unaware of where they really were. The Europeans viewed the people they encountered as existing in an Edenic state of innocence, and interpreted the courtesy and hospitality with which they were received as signifying the readiness of Indigenous groups to abandon their own belief systems and be converted to European religion. At this point, since neither group spoke the language of the other, they would have communicated through gestures, and the opportunities for potentially disastrous misunderstandings on both sides are obvious.

This idyllic state of mutual enchantment was not destined to last. Writing only a few years later, Las Casas portrays the disastrous consequences of European contact for the Indigenous people of the New World:

As the greed of the Spaniards, as I have already said, urged them on so that they did not sow in order to have bread but rather to gather the gold which they had not sown...they ordered the men and women (who did not eat enough to work, let alone to live) to labor ... One told us (as though it were something praiseworthy, a great feat) that with the Indians given to him they had plowed many fields and made mounds of earth, and that he had sent them every third day or every other day to the hills to eat whatever berries and fruits they could find there. After that he would make them work two or three days more at this task without giving them anything to eat, not a single bite ... It was thus that, starving, with nothing to eat and working so hard, these people died so quickly and in greater number than in other places ... And as the Spaniards took healthy men and women to the mines and to other labors, only the old and infirm were left in the village without anyone to look after them; they all died of anguish and disease, and raging hunger. On some occasions, as I was walking in those days around the island, I heard them cry out from inside the houses, and when I entered to see them, asking what was the matter, they answered, “Hunger, hunger.”

(Castillo and Schweitzer, 2001, p. 32)

Many Indigenous groups were decimated, not only because of brutal and exploitative labor practices on the part of the European invaders, but

also because of diseases such as smallpox and measles which they brought along with them, against which Native Americans had no immunity. Population estimates of the Americas at the time of Contact range widely, from 8.4 million (Kroeber, 1963) to over 100 million (Dobyns, 1983); Russell Thornton (2004, p. 68) suggests 75 million as a reasonable estimate. It is impossible to ascertain exactly what mortality figures were in the years immediately after the first contact with Europeans, but what is clear is that certain groups were completely wiped out, others saw their population decline drastically, and others experienced a decline in numbers for a time but then experienced a degree of population recovery (Thornton, 2004, p. 69). It is equally clear, however, that Native Americans were enormously resilient and resourceful in resisting European attempts to eradicate or suppress their cultural and religious traditions. One of the most important ways in which this resistance took form was in the stories Indigenous people told, and tell, about themselves.

In this chapter, we begin by looking at representative Indigenous oral and scribal traditions. We then analyze the European motives for expansion in the New World, looking at the Early Modern emergence of the Atlantic world-system, and then go on to discuss Spanish imperial policy, and the Conquest of Mexico from both Spanish and Indigenous perspectives. After an examination of the extraordinary narrative of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the chapter ends with a discussion of the ways in which Native people adapted Spanish religious practices to their own belief systems in the wake of the violence of the Conquest, as embodied by the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Indigenous Narratives

In analyzing Indigenous traditional narratives, there are several things that it is important to keep in mind. First of all, to lump all the Indigenous groups of the Americas together under the label “Indians” is rather like making crude generalizations about “Europeans” in which the very considerable differences which exist between, say, Swedes and Italians, or Germans and Spaniards, are elided or ignored. It is vital to foreground the huge cultural and linguistic diversity of Indigenous groups, ranging from the Incas with their rich artistic traditions, to the Mayas with their advanced knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, to the Ute who subsisted on their hunting and gathering activities, to the ritual complexity of Pueblo

culture, to the sedentary farming activities of the Iroquois, along with many, many others. What really did exist in the Americas when the first explorers and settlers arrived was not an Arcadian Neverland of gentle passive creatures, lacking culture and living in a state of nature, nor a wilderness haunted by savage monsters, but rather an immensely varied population consisting of many widely differing cultures, with rich and vibrant traditions of their own.

Second, most of the Native American narratives that have come to us have gone through a complex process of mediation and translation. Arnold Krupat makes the valuable point that “in varying degrees, all verbal performances studied as ‘Native American literature’ whether oral, textualized, or written, are mixed, hybrid; none are “pure” or strictly speaking, autonomous. Native American written literature in particular is an intercultural practice” (Krupat, 1996, p. 21). It is also the case, however, that some Native critics feel that such a perspective characterizes Indigenous cultures as mongrelized, when in fact Native people perceive themselves as having maintained their culture through oral tradition (see Weaver et al., 2006). Whatever the case, it is true of any text (European as well as Native American) that it is vital to pay attention to the conditions in which it was produced and circulated. Some early European explorers and settlers recorded Native narratives as exotic curiosities or evidence of superstition; later, in the nineteenth century, “salvage” ethnographers studied them as part of what they perceived as the need to preserve so-called “primitive” cultures doomed to disappear.¹ For all these reasons, it is impossible for us to gain access to a “pure,” unmediated Indigenous voice from before European contact.

With these caveats in mind, however, it is indeed possible to point out features which are common to most Indigenous traditions. One is the belief in the interrelatedness and aliveness of all things: human beings, animals, earth, oceans, sky. Another is the idea that language not only reflects but actively creates and shapes reality. Still another is the notion that the self only has meaning as part of a community. In most Native American traditions, the sacred and the secular are intricately interwoven, and maintaining balance is vital for the survival of specific communities in specific landscapes.² Finally, in Indigenous thought human beings are seen, not as masters of nature, but as an integral part of a complex and infinitely beautiful ecosystem.

¹ For an excellent discussion of these issues see Murray (2005).

² See Joy Porter’s useful essay, “Historical and Cultural Contexts” (Porter, 2005).

It is a commonplace to state that Native American narrative traditions are entirely oral in nature. In the case of the Mayas, however, this was not entirely the case. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, Mayan culture possessed codices or folding books, made from the inner bark of fig trees. In them, professional scribes or *ah ts'ib* recorded dynastic struggles, battles, trade routes, prophecies, songs, and information about astronomy, agriculture, and religious ritual. These codices were read in double columns from top to bottom and left to right. Mayan writing was a combination of logograms (signs standing for parts of words or whole words) and signs relating to meaning and pronunciation. In the texts of many of the early Spanish explorers and missionaries, we repeatedly find evidence of the existence of these texts. A priest called Avedaño, on seeing a ceremonial column and mask, remarked: "I came to recognize it since I had already read about it in their old papers, and had seen it in the *Anates* they use, which are books of barks of trees, polished and covered by lime, in which they painted figures and characters to say the future events they had foretold" (quoted in Arias-Larreta, 1967, p. 136). Alonso de Zorita stated in 1540 that he had seen many books of this sort in Guatemala, "which recorded their history for more than eight hundred years back, and which were interpreted for me by very ancient Indians" (Zorita, 1963, pp. 271–2).

The arrival of the Spaniards was, however, catastrophic for Maya culture despite the fascination which Indigenous traditions held for many of the early missionaries. Present-day readers and scholars often find it hard to believe that extensive knowledge of another culture could fail to create a sense of respect for that same culture. Sadly, however, knowledge and respect often do not go hand in hand. For example, Diego de Landa, a Dominican priest, recorded in very considerable detail many of the histories and traditions of the Mayas, and indeed is one of the key sources of information about pre-Columbian Mayan culture. And yet he was convinced that the content of these manuscripts described heathen deities and worldviews which it was his obligation as a Christian missionary to eradicate once and for all (Arias-Larretta, 1967, p. 136). In a 1526 *auto-da-fé* he burned no fewer than 27 Mayan codices, in an act which has been compared to the burning of the Library of Alexandria. Only four codices have survived until the present day.

Among the Mayas, and also in the great Inca empire to the South, there was a rich tradition of performance. In his *Comentarios Reales*, the Peruvian Creole historian **Garcilaso de la Vega** describes tragic and comic performances staged by the *amautas*, the Inca priestly caste:

The *Amautas* did not lack ability, inasmuch as they were philosophers, to compose comedies and tragedies, which they performed before their rulers and members of the Court during the solemn feasts and ceremonies. The performers were not peasants but Incas and people of noble lineage, sons of chiefs, and captains, and generals; because the plot of the tragedies were about relevant matters, and were always about military deeds, triumphs, and accomplishments, and the heroic acts and greatness of the late kings and other heroic warriors. The plots of the comedies were about farmers, agriculture, and household affairs. They never dealt with low or vile subjects, but rather with serious and honest matters, with the observations and wit permitted in such a place. Those who acted particularly well were given jewels and tokens of great esteem.

(Vega, 1943, p. 121, my translation)

Further to the north, Native Americans in what is now known as North America had a rich variety of stories through which they made sense of the world and of their place in it. One important category was that of origin stories. For instance, the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred text in which we encounter an account of the origins of the Mayas, was probably destroyed by the Conquistadores in the flames of Uxatlán, but an anonymous Quiché transcribed what he could recall. In it, we encounter a description of the sky as an empty silent void over the sea, immobile and darkness and called the Heart of Heaven or Huracán,³ where Tepeu and Gucumatz, the Forefathers, were hidden under green and blue feathers. They come together and dream the world into being:

“Earth” they said, and instantly it was made. Like the mist, like a cloud, like a cloud of dust was the creation, when the mountains appeared from the water, and instantly the mountains grew. Only by a miracle, only by magic art were the mountains and valleys formed; and instantly the groves of cypresses and pine put forth shoots together on the surface of the earth.

(quoted from *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya*, in Castillo and Schweitzer, 2001, pp. 19–20)

Other groups, however, saw Creation differently. Among the Indigenous people of what is now the US Northeast as well as in Eastern Canada, there exist numerous variants of the **Earthdiver** story. In common with traditional stories from all over the world, they speak of a primeval flood. In

³ This is also the origin of the word “hurricane.”

some versions, the protagonists are beings living in the sky, and in others water birds or other creatures living on the surface of the water. Ultimately longing for a stable base of land, several of the animals dive to the depths in search of earth, but they drown in the attempt. Finally, one of the animals (sometimes Muskrat, sometimes Beaver or Loon) or one of the Sky people makes a final desperate attempt and comes up exhausted but alive with a bit of soil. This clod of earth is used to create the world.⁴ In some accounts, the world is created on the back of a giant turtle. What this story reveals is the Indigenous vision of the world as an ecosystem of infinite power and beauty cocreated by humans and animals living in harmony.

However, for the Hopi, the Pueblo, and many other groups in what is now the US Southwest, Creation was described as emergence from an underworld, with Earth viewed as a womb from which people emerge gradually, as in childbirth. Some versions of these accounts describe the Underworld as a place of dissatisfaction and social upheaval which provides the impetus for emergence. Others paint a picture of comforting authority and harmony. The Ácoma version describes two female human beings existing in the dark, who are given language and seeds by the deity Sus'sistinako along with images of all the animals which are to exist in the upper world. Finally, a tree lets in a little light, enabling them to create a badger who makes a hole big enough to let them out. On emerging into the light, they sing the creation song, bringing into being living things and creating the surrounding landscape. Later, the eldest sister is impregnated by a steaming mist and gives birth to twin boys. One of the boys is adopted by the younger sister, who later marries him, and it is this couple who proceeds to produce children who will become the Ácoma people (see Tyler, 1964, pp. 103–8).⁵

Another type of Indigenous story is the **Trickster** tale. The Trickster figure is also encountered among the ancient Greeks, Africans, and many other groups across the world. The Trickster is a liminal being who pushes at and subverts boundaries; the usual Western binaries of human/animal, hero/buffoon, male/female have no meaning in the Trickster's world. Laguna critic Paula Gunn Allen describes three different types of Trickster figure: the Heroic Transformer, who is usually depicted as a slayer of

⁴ See Reichard (1921) for an outline of the main features of Earthdiver tales. Paula Gunn Allen's excellent *Studies in American Indian Literature* (1993a) provides extensive bibliographical references for various types of Native American oral literatures. A useful account of Earthdiver myths can also be found in Dundes (1962).

⁵ For an account of Hopi traditional stories, see Nequatewa (1994).

monsters, an aggressive hero, or creator of order, who achieves power by action; the Cunning Transformer, usually a human or animal figure who attempts to gain power by outwitting his opponents in gambling or games or through marriage or sexual encounters; and the Overreacher, a figure who attempts more than he can achieve and consequently suffers humiliation or injury, though he lives to tell the tale (Allen, 1993b, p. 50). Often Trickster figures combine features of these types; heroes can be both courageous and sly, and even the bravest among them can make fools of themselves and others (see Carroll, 1984). Common to all of these types is the idea that one can only survive in a chaotic and often adverse universe by the use of subversive intelligence and the cathartic power of laughter.

One of the most commonly encountered Trickster figures is that of **Coyote**. Richard Gray, in his definitive *History of American Literature*, observes that Coyote in all his diverse incarnations is characterized by spontaneity, skill at disguise, and a talent for shape-shifting or metamorphosis (Gray, 2004, pp. 12–13). Coyote, like most of us, is a mixture of astuteness and buffoonery, noble aspirations and low lechery, the sacred and the profane, high courage and comical grandiloquence.

Some Coyote tales attempt to explain natural phenomena. For instance, in one account it is said that the Bluebird originally was a pale dun color, but that its feathers were transformed to blue by bathing in the blue water of a nearby lake four times over four days. Coyote spies on Bluebird, and is envious of its beautiful blue color. Bluebird teaches Coyote an incantation, and he leaps into the lake four times as instructed. On the fifth day, Coyote emerges bright blue, and he struts around wondering if anyone has noticed how blue he is. He then begins to run, looking back at his shadow to see if it too is blue, only to collide with a stump and fall onto the dusty ground. For this reason, all coyotes are the color of earth. A Coyote story from the Northwest accounts for the eruption of a nearby volcano. Coyote's own village has no fish, so he visits the nearby Shasta people, who receive him with hospitality and allow him to take all the fish he could catch and carry. Predictably, Coyote is greedy, and loads himself down so heavily that he gets tired. When he lies down to sleep, a horde of voracious insects descends upon the salmon, leaving only fish bones in their wake. He returns to the village, and the Shasta again allow him to load up with fish, but again he falls asleep and loses his cargo to the insects. The Shasta allow him to fish for a third time, but hide in the bushes when he departs. Coyote meets Turtle on the way, and greets him with scorn; he is so intent on the conversation that he is unaware of the return of the insects, which devour

the fish once more. Finally, Coyote and the Shasta depart in pursuit of the insects, but Turtle, who is slow and steady, tracks them to Mount Shasta, where the insects have vanished into a hole in the summit. There, Coyote suggests that the people start a fire to smoke them out, but this is unsuccessful because the smoke escapes through holes in the side of the mountain. Finally, when Coyote and the people manage to close all the holes, a rumbling sound is heard. An enormous explosion ensues, spewing out delicious cooked salmon. Coyote, the Shasta and the Turtle sit down to a banquet of fish. And thus began the eruptions on Mount Shasta.

Some Coyote stories tell of the difficulties encountered by Indigenous people in dealing with the duplicity and hostility of whites and in defining their own identity. One tells of two coyotes crossing a farmer's field; they do not know each other. When the farmer shouts that there is a coyote in the field, the first coyote turns back to the second to warn him to run. When they flee toward the trees, the farmer spies the second and shouts that there is another one. When they reach the trees, the coyotes introduce themselves. The first coyote says that he is called Wanderer, and that he too is a coyote. The second coyote looks askance at his companion, and tells him that he is called Sleek, but is not a coyote like his friend. After arguing the point, Wanderer tells Sleek that he will demonstrate what he means. He runs across the field, and the farmer shouts again that there is a coyote. Sleek then streaks across the field, and the farmer shouts that there goes another one. Complacent, Wanderer tells Sleek that the farmer has called them both coyotes. Sleek demurs, retorting that the farmer called Wanderer a coyote but that he is Another One. This story illustrates the fact that the coyotes (and presumably the Indigenous people of the Americas) are in danger of allowing the farmer (the white invaders) to tell them who they are.

European Expansion

However, European perceptions of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as indeed we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, were not always reliable and were often downright wrong. From the moment in which Columbus and his expedition made landfall in the Caribbean, European explorers and *conquistadores* saw America through the prism of narratives describing travel, not to the West, but to the East. Examples of such narratives include Marco Polo's *Book of Marvels* with its tales of islands rich

in gold, or Mandeville's apocryphal voyages, or Spanish chivalric romances such as *Amadís de Gaula* which tell of monsters, enchanted islands, and strange creatures. Columbus, who was a remarkably obstinate man with a rigid medieval worldview, held until his death the unshakeable conviction that he had discovered, not a New World, but the easternmost borders of Asia. His exploits had been preceded by those of Portuguese navigators, particularly Prince Henry the Navigator, whose explorations of the African coast were prompted by a complex mixture of motivations: the desire for access to precious metals in the African interior along with the Crusading urge to encounter the Christian kingdom of the mythical Prester John, with whom he hoped to regain Jerusalem (see Pagden, 2003, pp. 50–4). The motives underlying Columbus's own quest for a sea route to India, financed by Spain's Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, were a curious blend of Christian ideological zeal and a sharp eye for the commercial bottom line.

The Atlantic world-system

Given, then, the obsession of the European monarchies with the immense wealth of Asia, what impelled them in the years after Columbus's voyage to undertake expeditions to the New World? Certainly a major factor was the need for raw materials. Immanuel Wallerstein (2004) describes the emergence in the Early Modern period of the capitalist world-system, predicated on an international division of power that determined relationships between different regions as well as the types of labor conditions within each region. Wallerstein proposes four different regional categories: core, semiperiphery, periphery, and external, which describe each region's relative position within the world economy. Core regions, which are characterized by strong central governments, complex bureaucracies, and large armies, are those which gain most economic benefit from the core-periphery structure. Peripheral areas, however, are controlled politically and militarily by other regions, export raw materials to core regions, and rely on coercive labor practices. Examples of this in the Early Modern period might include certain areas of the Americas where Indigenous elites were decimated during the Conquest; coercive labor practices introduced by the Spanish and Portuguese colonizers included the neofeudal *encomienda* system and the importation of African slaves. Traditionally, core regions absorb much of the capital surplus generated by the peripheral areas. Between core and periphery, there exists an intermediate category of

semiperipheries, buffer zones which are usually either core regions in decline or peripheries struggling for advancement in the world economy. External regions are those who maintain their own economic systems outside the world economy. According to Wallerstein (2004), semiperipheries are characterized by tensions between the central government and local landowning classes and are exploited by the core but are themselves predicated on exploitative labor practices and political inequalities among their citizens. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that rather than looking to the conventional “gold, glory and gospel” accounts or narratives focusing on world-systems, it makes sense to conceptualize the colonization of the Americas as resulting from two different phenomena: a first phase spearheaded by military adventurers in the first half of the sixteenth century (the conquest of Indigenous nations and the subsequent efforts at evangelization), followed by a second phase characterized by what Philip Curtin (1998) has designated the “plantation complex,”⁶ as we shall see in Chapter 2.

Historian Carole Shammas has demonstrated that the lion’s share of European migration to the Americas prior to 1550 can be linked to the expeditions of military adventurers. In the Early Modern period, and coinciding with the growing power of European nation-states, one of the most popular literary genres was the chivalric novel, marvelously satirized in Cervantes’ immortal *Don Quixote*; these accounts of adventures in faraway lands address not only issues of ideology but also of personal glory. For Shammas, this phase of Atlantic migration arose more as the consequence of political and religious developments in Europe and the Near East than as a response to commercial imperatives. The failure of papal crusades to reconquer Jerusalem and the fall of Istanbul to the forces of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century threatened the *raison d’être* of the Christian warrior class in Europe. In Spain, the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella completed the Reconquest of the Iberian peninsula in 1492 and expelled those Muslims and Jews who refused to convert to Christianity, leaving many of their troops (drawn from the lesser Christian gentry of the Extremadura region and the Andalusian port towns) at loose ends. The opportunity for adventure in the New World thus must have had considerable appeal for these soldiers of fortune.⁷

⁶ For a lucid overview of these issues, see Shammas (2006).

⁷ Shammas (2006, p. 29) comments that up to 1550, around 60,000 Spanish, 15,000 Portuguese, and 41,000 Africans emigrated to the New World. African emigration (usually involuntary, since most were taken as slaves), however, grew fourfold from 1550 to 1600.

The Conquest of Mexico

One such was the redoubtable **Hernán Cortés**. Born in the village of Medellín, he sailed to the island of Hispaniola with Nicolás de Ovando, and was then chosen by Diego Velázquez to build a colony in Mexico. Velázquez, who subsequently became a bitter enemy of Cortés, was convinced that the latter would exceed his orders and subsequently attempted to stop the expedition. By the time he did so, however, Cortés and his fleet were on their way to Mexico. Landing at Veracruz, in a gesture that illustrates his courage and utter ruthlessness, Cortés burned his boats so that retreat for him and his men would be impossible. In November 1519 the Spaniards marched on Tenochtitlán, the capital, where they were graciously welcomed by the Aztec emperor **Montezuma**. Subsequently, Montezuma was taken prisoner, and Tenochtitlán was laid waste by the Spanish forces.

One eyewitness to these events was **Bernal Díaz del Castillo**, a soldier who fought alongside Cortés. Although Díaz characterizes himself as lacking in eloquence, his text reveals him as a keen observer with an eye for the telling detail, and his evocation of the principal characters in this real-life drama (and historical tragedy) is remarkably vivid. In his *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, he speaks of the important part played in events by **Doña Marina** (also known as **La Malinche**), the Native mistress of Cortés, whose role as translator and cultural intermediary was crucial to his success in the Conquest of Mexico. Cortés himself emerges as a brilliant tactician and as a driven and ambitious man of considerable physical courage, utterly lacking in scruples and determined to achieve his goals. Montezuma, the Aztec emperor, is portrayed as a ruler with considerable presence and dignity, treated with enormous respect by his courtiers but not, sadly, by the thuggish Spanish soldiers who eventually became his jailors; in one passage, Bernal Díaz describes Montezuma's extreme annoyance when his guards "commit a nuisance" (i.e., break wind) in his presence. Díaz also describes in vivid detail the beauty and prosperity of the imperial city of Tenochtitlán, which he and his fellow soldiers are about to destroy. He speaks of Montezuma's palaces and of his retinue:

There were dancers and stilt-walkers, and some who seemed to leap flying through the air, and men like jesters to make him laugh. There was a whole district full of these people who had no other occupation.

He had as many workmen as he needed, too, stone cutters, masons, and carpenters, to maintain his houses in good repair ... We must not forget the gardens with their many varieties of flowers and sweet-scented trees planted in orderly fashion, and their ponds and tanks of fresh water where the water flowed in at one end and out at the other, and the baths he [Montezuma] had there, and the variety of small birds that nested in the branches, and the medicinal and useful herbs that grew there in the gardens. They were a wonderful sight, and required many gardeners to take care of them. Everything was built of stone and plastered; baths and walks and closets and rooms like summer houses where they danced and sang. There was so much to see in these gardens, as there was everywhere else, that we could not tire of contemplating his great power and the large number of craftsmen employed in the many skills they practiced.

(Díaz, 2001, pp. 47–8)

What seems extraordinary to the present-day reader is that, despite being able to appreciate the beauty of the doomed city, the Spanish forces did not hesitate to destroy it and slaughter its inhabitants. Many more died from smallpox, a European disease brought by the invaders against which they had no defenses. After the Spanish victory, Bernal Díaz paints a haunting picture of the devastated capital:

We could not walk without treading on the bodies and heads of dead Indians ... the dry land and the lagoon and the stockades were piled high with the bodies of the dead. The stench was so strong that no one could endure it, and for that reason each of us captains returned to his camp after Guatemoc's capture; even Cortés was ill from the smells which assailed his nostrils during those days in Tlatelolco ... When Cortés went into the city, he encountered the houses full of dead Indians, and some poor Mexicans in them who were unable to move away. Their excrement was the sort of filth that scrawny pigs pass which have been fed only on grass. The whole city looked as if it had been ploughed up.

(Díaz, 2001, p. 61)

It is difficult to remain unmoved at a similar description from an Indigenous perspective, recorded by the Spanish friar **Bernardino de Sahagún**:

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas, and the walls are splattered with gore. The water has turned red, as if it were dyed, and when

we drink it, it has the taste of brine ... we have pounded our hands in despair against the adobe walls, for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.

(Castillo and Schweitzer, 2001, p. 69)

The aftermath of the conquest

In the decade following the Conquest of Tenochtitlán, Spanish exploration of the lands to the north of Mexico continued. **Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca** provides us with the earliest description of the peoples and landscapes of what is now the United States in his *Relación*, published in Spain in 1542. Cabeza de Vaca⁸ was one of the heads of the Narváez expedition, which set out in 1527 to explore the lands surrounding the Gulf of Mexico. The expedition seems to have been jinxed from the start: Narváez, its leader, was singularly incompetent, and many of his troops deserted en route. After this, two of his six ships were sunk in a hurricane, and the survivors suffered from hunger and ill-treatment among the Indians of the Florida coast among whom they eventually sought refuge. Finally, some escaped on rafts, which after many trials and vicissitudes were washed up on what is now known as Galveston Island. Ultimately, the only men who survived were three Spaniards (Cabeza de Vaca, Andrés Dorantes, and Alonso del Castillo) and Dorantes's slave Estevanico, an Arabic-speaking African from the Portuguese enclave of Azemmour. The four men were in desperate straits; they were cold and naked, and had lost all they possessed. They were helped, however, by the local Indians, who wept in sympathy with their plight; Cabeza de Vaca comments (rather ungratefully if truth be told), "It was strange to see these men, wild and untaught, howling like brutes over our misfortunes." Later, the Indians built a series of fires on the road to their village and bore the Europeans from fire to fire, pausing briefly at each to allow them to get warm and giving them fish and roots to eat. After this, Cabeza de Vaca spent several years wandering from the Texas coast and going as far as New Mexico, gaining a certain renown among the Indians as a healer. Initially, he told his captors that he and his companions had no idea of how to heal when they requested him to do so, but when they withheld food he decided to obey:

⁸ Rolena Adorno has demonstrated that the account of the origin of this surname (namely that an ancestor who had fought against the Moors had used a cow's skull to mark a strategic mountain pass) is apocryphal. For detailed contextual material, see the Introduction to her definitive edition, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca* (Adorno and Pautz, 2003).

Their custom is, on finding themselves sick, to send for a physician, and after he has applied the cure, they give him not only all they have, but seek among their relatives for more to give. The practitioner scarifies over the seat of pain, and then sucks about the wound. They make cauteries with fire, a remedy among them in high repute, which I have tried on myself and found benefit from it. They afterwards blow on the spot, and having finished, the patient considers that he is relieved ... Our method was to bless the sick, breathing upon them, and recite a Pater-noster and an Ave-Maria, praying with all earnestness to God our Lord that he would give health and influence them to make some good return. In his clemency he willed that all those for whom we supplicated should tell the others that they were sound and in health, directly after we made the sign of the blessed cross over them. For this the Indians treated us kindly; they deprived themselves of food that they might give to us, and presented us with skins and some trifles.

Cabeza de Vaca, *Narrative*, in Castillo and Schweitzer, 2001, pp. 38–9)

After this, and given the apparent success of his healing techniques, Cabeza de Vaca gained quite a following among the Indians. Some months later, however, he and his group encountered a group of Spanish slavers, who arrested him and enslaved more than six hundred of his Native followers. Taken to Mexico City, he returned to Spain in 1537, where he hoped to protest against the cruel treatment suffered by the Indians. Later he returned to the New World, this time to Río de la Plata in South America, but there he was removed from office and sent back to Spain in chains. His *Narrative* is a remarkable document, which provides not only important information about the customs and beliefs of the Indigenous groups he encountered in the course of his wanderings, but about his own complex relationship with the people he encountered.

As we have seen, the coming of the Europeans often brought disease, suffering, and extreme hardship to the Native peoples of the Americas. It would be misleading, however, to characterize the Indigenous people of the New World as mere passive victims of European perfidy and brutality. Often they were able to manipulate the invaders, for instance by encouraging the latter to build churches in sites where the Indians had buried statues of their gods, so that when they knelt to pray they were in reality worshipping their own deities. In many cases, they discovered common features in their own beliefs and those of the Europeans.

A case in point is the cult of **Our Lady of Guadalupe**. In traditional accounts, a young peasant boy called Juan Diego is walking from his village into Mexico City on the morning of December 9, 1531. On the hill of Tepeyac, he sees a shimmering vision of the Virgin, an adolescent girl surrounded by light. Speaking to him in Nahuatl, she asks him to build a church in her honor on the site; she tells him to gather some flowers, although it is winter and no flowers had ever bloomed there. Juan Diego finds some Castilian roses and gathers them into his cloak. He then speaks to the Spanish bishop Father Juan de Zumárraga, who asks him to prove his allegations with a miraculous sign. As he opens his cloak to offer the roses to the Bishop, there appears on the fabric of the cloak a miraculous imprint of the Virgin.

This story illustrates in graphic fashion the ways in which the two very different cultures and religions interacted and influenced each other. The turquoise color of the Virgin's mantle has been interpreted as representing the Indigenous deities Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl;⁹ for some, a cruciform image called *nahui-ollin* symbolizing the cosmos can be discerned under her robes. Others suggest that she was presented to the Indigenous people of Mexico by the missionaries as a Christian version of the Indigenous deity Tonantzin. Whatever the case, Our Lady of Guadalupe, often called "the first mestiza," has become a symbol of racial and religious syncretism, and of the power of cultures to influence and transform one another.

⁹ For a discussion of religious syncretism in Guadalupean imagery, see Harrington (1988).