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Re-membering Veracruz: A Decolonial Reading of Regional Colonial Cartography

Abstract: Upon the so-called discovery of the American continent, the Spanish crown wanted the means to document and surveil its new lands from afar. For this reason, the Relaciones Geográficas—questionnaires about the physical description of each colonial settlement in New Spain—were distributed, filled out, and sent back to the crown with the purpose of updating the Spanish world map. Recently and, I argue, relatedly, a different kind of colonial map, the Mapa Quetzalecatzin (1593), was made available to the public for the first time; as of yet no sustained scholarly analysis of the Mapa exists. In this essay I place it in context with indigenous and colonial maps produced for the Relaciones Geográficas to suggest the Mapa Quetzalecatzin is a kind of land claim. Its hybrid artistic style, the lands and physical markers depicted, the material qualities of the Mapa as object and the arguments it makes as a text, complicate our understanding of the colonial history of the region between Veracruz, Puebla, and Mexico City. Finally, reading the Mapa as a transaction provides a window into the kinds of strategies that indigenous peoples were forced to adopt in order to navigate a colonial system of land ownership.

Certainly Veracruz, in terms of both its colonial and postcolonial history, has not been forgotten. Scholars of the Atlantic world acknowledge the port’s major role in bridging the frontier into what would later become New Spain, as well as its continued involvement in the trade of silver, sugarcane, and cochineal, to name a few of the export products that made Veracruz invaluable for the crown.1 Antonio García de León calls Veracruz the “supernova” of the Atlantic world: while it opened the way toward the

American hinterlands and was the principal source of profit for both crown and settlers, it inevitably became a site of corruption and a reflection of the incipient capitalist world-order, ultimately providing its own means for independence in the form of mestizo uprisings. Veracruz then has come to occupy its place in Western history primarily because of its economic significance, with plenty of scholarship available for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sixteenth and seventeenth century scholarship is rich as well, but is largely focused on the port’s profitability and the political systems that surfaced after contact, which risks neglecting and even denying the region’s “pre-history.” Very little is said about the thousands of years of activity before its Atlantic significance was even a possibility. The goal of this paper is to re-member part of that relegated history by examining various colonial and indigenous maps and manuscripts, and thus present a more holistic and nuanced picture of the moment of contact and its subsequent events. Doing so does not mean expanding on the history of the founding of La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, but rather continue to uncover the Nahua history of the Spaniards’ arrival in Calchihuecan, and to understand coloniality as a paradigmatic shift in sixteenth century indigenous ontology rather than as an emergent condition of mestizos produced by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century capitalism.

3 García Valencia and Sandstrom (2005) have noted archeological findings dated as early as 7600 BC.
4 The goal for this paper is in line with Walter Mignolo’s critique of Aníbal Quijano, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Enrique Dussel: that colonialism yielded both economic and epistemic effects. In order to remedy these effects and eliminate coloniality, one must to try to think from within the colonial difference. See: Walter D. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 101, no. 1 (2002): 57–96.
One of the reasons why this Nahua history has not been fully uncovered is the actual difficulty of doing so. A limited amount of pre-colonial manuscripts\(^5\) remain—most were burned as Franciscan monasteries began to be established throughout New Spain and decreed the removal of idols in 1551. The few that have been found (148 \textit{Relaciones Geográficas}, which are written descriptions accompanied by maps that detail a geo-social space as objectively as possible, and around 40 indigenous codices, which for the most part relate origin histories in a pictorial manner)\(^6\) present another difficulty in their interpretation in the form of both epistemological barriers and material issues like fading and fragmentation. Solutions for the latter problem may be unavailable, but the epistemological barrier has already begun to come down. Historians like Elizabeth Hill Boone and Barbara Mundy both have a corpus of important studies focused on interpreting and recovering these manuscripts, and Walter Mignolo, following a long tradition of decolonial theory, has noted the ideological importance of these representations, especially those charged with the intention of reproducing the image of the New World.\(^7\) Mexican scholarship in this regard is just as rich.\(^8\) Importantly, these interpretations should not be

\(^5\) I use the term “manuscript” as a practicality, fully aware that this implies a Western perception of indigenous objects of knowledge; here I mean any kind of object depicting a pictorial narration of history.


\(^8\) Enrique Delgado Lopez, “Cartografía y Memoria En Las Relaciones Geográficas de Indias,” Boletín de Antropología 33, no. 56 (2018): 117–41; Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana
made with only a historical perspective: anthropological studies of the region provide clues as to the differences between indigenous objects that were intended to be durable, such as codices depicting important events in their histories, and colonial objects that have survived but perhaps were meant to be more transient, such as land claims, and thus provide clues as to the importance of intention and signification. Excluding the anthropological record creates a significant gap, especially considering, as James Lockhart and others have suggested, that the Spaniards chose to settle in pre-existing altepetls, or pueblos as they called them, taking advantage of the centralized mode of control such appropriation made available. Thus the pieces of this ongoing Nahua history are scattered across time, space, and disciplines, and in need of re-membering.

The notion of re-membering has been very productive in the field of Indigenous Studies. It entails an acknowledgement of the connection that Native peoples have to their ancestral lands and emphasizes the violence and dismemberment—in terms of land, bodies, and knowledge—that colonization brought to the Americas. Here, re-membering follows the definition Kelly McDonough provides: “Rememberings can be thought of as flexible actions within challenging contexts...They are strategic choices about what is to be


brought to the forefront and what is discreetly overlooked.”

In her study, McDonough focuses on letters and petitions from indigenous peoples to the crown written in Spanish, itself a performance of both elitism and willingness to be subjected to Spanish rule. The texts vary in nature, but McDonough emphasizes the main requests within them: sovereignty, recuperating stolen lands, be exempt from paying tribute, having a coat of arms, and the ability to ride horses and bear arms.

In order to present themselves as part of the indigenous nobility and thus worthy of these requests, writers had to emphasize their role in aiding the various colonizers landing in the Gulf shores, proving their loyalty but demanding reparations. By 1562, their need was so dire that the three rulers of the Triple Alliance (at this point aptly named Don Antonio, Don Hernando, and Don Cristoval), wrote a joint letter to the king swearing fealty and asking for rewards.

The rememberings (and forgettings) that McDonough emphasizes are strategic. The tlatoani or rulers of the Triple Alliance donning their Spanish names while asking for the return of their lands is also a way to re-member—to literally become members again, this time to the crown rather than the Alliance. But it would be a mistake to think that these rememberings are only present in documents written in Spanish, or, as a matter of fact, in documents written in the roman alphabet. Other scholars have pointed out the role of memory within mapmaking: Verdesio emphasizes that maps are a material representation of indigenous knowledge/memory, Delgado Lopez suggests that these written memories aided the Spaniards in the colonization of the New World, and Aguilar-Robledo blames the

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11 Ibid., 70.
12 Ibid., 77.
fall of the Spanish empire to their disregard of indigenous knowledge/memory once they had enough cartographic representations of New Spain. However, McDonough’s usage of memory and rememberings grants agency to the few Native peoples who survived the multiple epidemics beginning in 1520, and presents them as an oppressed group combating colonization in the only way that would legitimize them as “personas de razon.”

Mignolo has written extensively about the difficulties of writing the history of “people without history,” termed so by Fray Juan de Torquemada since native peoples “did not have letters or were even familiar with them, so they neither [sic] left records of their history.” The work of North American scholars like Mignolo, Boone, and Mundy, has been integral to an alternative understanding of the role of colonialism in undermining non-Western ways of knowing. This epistemicide, or systemic erasure, begins by the refusal to recognize non-written histories, centering Western traditions as the norm. Thus, the fetishization, exoticization, and collection of indigenous objects of knowledge, rather than their rigorous study and acknowledgement as a part of world history continues the work of erasure that began at the moment of contact. Here Boone’s definition of writing is helpful: "the communication of relatively specific ideas in a conventional manner by means of permanent, visible marks." The definition is useful if only to admit these manuscripts into Western scholarship, although it might be more productive to take these objects at

face value rather than ascribe them into “acceptable” categorizations, which can be another form of epistemicide. Nevertheless, Boone’s work has been integral in deciphering these histories and is an important base for future research.

Mignolo’s work, along with the broader canon of decolonial theory, has been taken up by historians and cartographers alike, notably in Raymond Craib’s work on cartography, power, and decolonization. Craib argues that the study of colonial maps for what they are, rather than pushing on their inclusion into the canon of colonial writing entails a process of writing/righting history that “might more productively be seen as simultaneous efforts to account for those neglected pasts and engage in a dialectic process of cultural recreation in the wake of generations of colonial rule and cultural, social, and political oppression.”16 Like Mignolo, Craib is concerned with the structure of colonality that results from the first moment of contact, the erasure that persists when the changes within maps themselves are overlooked. As he points out, maps not only represent territorial appropriation but also "set the terms of ontological and epistemological engagement” between colonizer and colonized.17 Elsewhere he writes about the relationship between cartography and imperial power: the map as a representation of the empire enacts an empirical shift from seeing land to possessing it, and the Eurocentric focus on spatial dimensions made internal conflicts invisible and reduced history to a network of imperial ideologies.18

The importance of spatial representations of power culminates in Luis de Velasco’s Relaciones Geográficas (hereafter RGs), a thorough questionnaire which he sent to the

17 Ibid., 33.
provinces of New Spain in order to reconstruct a world he had never seen and thus update the royal world atlas. Velasco asked a wide range of questions, from the climate and the positions of the stars to topographic descriptions, and finally, he asked for all RGs to be accompanied by a map. Work about the RGs has hitherto focused on the representation of colonial power and is often dependent on the categorization of the various kinds of colonial maps. These include classifications as indigenous, colonial, or European maps. The scholarship on indigenous maps is equally extensive, but very scattered. There is no established methodology to read and translate maps in Nahua. There are no generic conventions in these maps; the glyphs used are dependent on the artist and the purpose of
Figure 1. The Codex Quetzalecatzin. [Mexico: Producer not identified, 1593] Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017590521/.
the map, according to the artist’s understanding of said purpose. Few studies focus on the maps of the period as a complete corpus—that is, studying indigenous maps along with European maps, not in a purely symbolic or artistic sense, but according to the ideologies and arguments the maps themselves make. For this paper, three maps that illustrate the Indigenous-European spectrum are analyzed and taken to be representative maps from the Huasteca-Mixteca-Tolteca region of Mexico, which encompasses the states of Veracruz, Puebla, and Tlaxcala. The focus is on the Mapa Quetzalecatzin, a manuscript made public for the first time in November 2017, and dates from 1593. I compare it with the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 2, now part of a larger manuscript titled Historia Tolteca Chichimeca, and to Francisco Gali’s nautical chart for the Relacion Geográfica of Tlacopan (Veracruz), both produced in 1580. Focusing on the regional landscape rather than the objects themselves allow us to examine the thirteen years between 1580 and 1593 and thus describe the various developments that cause the Mapa Quetzalecatzin to be so representative of the hybridization of indigenous and European maps, including the displacement of native people, the wide scale geographic changes enacted, and the royal decrees that effected said changes.

Discourse on the Mapa Quetzalecatzin (hereafter Mapa, Figure 1) is limited, although its existence has been noted since at least the early twentieth century, with its first mention being in the corpus of Alfredo Chavero. A Mexican archeologist and collector, Chavero held both the Mapa and the Codex Huetzonxingo, donating the latter to the National Museum of Mexico before his death in 1906. Various sources trace the map to Chavero’s collection and, when mentioned, the Mapa is consistently compared to other indigenous documents, but no sustained analysis exists. John Glass and Donald Robertson
content that Chavero wrote about the Mapa in his *Pinturas Jeroglíficas* where Chavero briefly refers to a “Mapa Quetzala” in his collection.¹⁹ Glass and Robertson also note that the names on the Mapa coincide with some of the names presented in the Annals of Tecamachalco.²⁰ Camilla Townsend’s transcription of the annals confirms this, but even Townsend refrains from analyzing the Mapa.²¹ Another brief mention of the Mapa happens in Ana Rita Valero de García Lazcuaráin’s introduction to the Tetlacuilolli online project where she engages primarily with the Itzcuintepec Papers, although the project analyzes various other manuscripts.²² Here Valero, using C. A. Burland’s archive and research on the Selden Roll, mentions the existence of “A Short Note on the MSS Egerton 2896 and 2897” which compares the two Egerton items in the British Museum to “a small codex called Quetzalecatzin which, at some point, belonged to a Mr. Charles Ratton from Paris.”²³ To my knowledge, these are the only scholarly mentions of the Mapa.

Many ambiguities about the Mapa remain, but here is what is known.²⁴ The map is divided into two distinct parts with different purpose. On the left it has a genealogy beginning with Lord-11 Quetzalecatzin, depicted on the top left sitting among the mountains and lord between the years 1450-1460, until his last descendant Luis de León

²³ Unfortunately, the note is not available online. Valero suggests the note is from 1948. Egerton 2896 and 2897 are now known to be part of the Itzcuintepec Papers. Valero de García Lascuráin, “Introducción.”
²⁴ The “Mapa Quetzalecatzin Webinar” (2018) led by John Hessler at the Library of Congress, and his accompanying blog post, were integral to my interpretation of the Mapa.
dies in 1593, presumably the date when the Mapa was drawn. The bottom left corner counts the amount of years (149) the family has been responsible for this tract of land: the flags represent 20 units, while each dot represents one unit (Figure 2). Each descendant has a date next to them, presumably the year they came to power. These glyphs are consistent with the A-O Mixtec dating system (see Figure 4), beginning at the year 2 Reed on the top left of the Mapa. It seems that Don Pedro de León, at the center of the left side, ruled the longest for a total of 35 years.

The right side of the Mapa is an actual geographic representation of space, unconcerned with scientific objectivity and accuracy. Instead, it depicts two churches—Todos los Santos Ecatepec on the top (southwest of what is now Mexico City) and Santa Cruz Huitziltepec (southeast of what is now Puebla) on the bottom; a long road connects the two. Other ethnobotanical place names include Lizard Valley and Ocelot Hill on the top left of the map, and Hummingbird Hill on the bottom far right. The Atoyac River runs down the right side of the page next to an undulated fringe that frames the map part, which could either be a representation of the two mountain ranges that run the length of Mexico—Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental—or a simple frame to differentiate the map from the genealogy. There is a hill range between the two churches. Geographically this space corresponds to Cholula, but Cholula is an important site in the Historia Tolteca Chichimeca (hereafter Historia), appearing often in various documents and

25 Hessler uses the classification “ethnobotanical” to indicate that place names had both a cultural and a geographical meaning.
consistently represented by the glyph of a temple and pyramid on a hill.\textsuperscript{26} The Mapa does not have the same kind of iconography, but the accompanying label may be referencing older events at Cholula.\textsuperscript{27}

The territory and landmarks represented in the Mapa—specifically the Atoyac river, Tenochtitlan/Ecatepec, and possibly the location of Puebla as well as Cholula—correspond to Boone’s helpful diagram of the Mapa de Cuauhtinchan 2 (hereafter MC2, 1580), now understood to be part of the \textit{Historia} (Figure 3). MC2 narrates the origin-foundation story of the Toltecas seeking help from the Chichimecas to recuperate Cholula. The Chichimecas,


\textsuperscript{27} The label reads “huie[?]quaxipetztepe tonco.” The \textit{Gran Diccionario Nahuatl} lists “tonco” as small or petit. “Quaxi” or “quiaxi” refers to the dispossession of enemies. “Tepe” or “tepec” is the word for hill(s). The aggregated definition would be “hill where the little enemies were defeated,” which is consistent with the events at Cholula depicted in the \textit{Historia}. However, the dictionary also lists “cuaxipetz” as either a bald man or a smooth surface. More research is needed to definitively establish this hill range as corresponding to Cholula.
descending from the seven caves of Chicomoztoc, go on to establish seven altepetls that, regardless of the mythical nature ascribed to the document, are verified by archeological remains found throughout the Gulf area and central Mexico. John Pohl identifies the pictorial style coming out of this region (from the Veracruz lowlands to Puebla city, with some documents from central Mexico employing the same style) as “Mixteca-Puebla” to account for the fifteen different cultures that converged in the location. Moreover, Pohl describes the relationship between documents in the Mixteca-Puebla style and the Historia Tolteca Chichimeca, arguing that most leaders reference the origin story of Chicomoztoc as a way to establish a legal claim of antecedence on specific lands. In the Mapa, there is a small glyph next to Don Pedro that resembles a simplified version of the seven caves (Figure 4). The road that stems from Don Pedro could possibly be a road to Veracruz, specifically Córdoba, but there is no definitive evidence for this other than speculation based on geographical references.

Elizabeth Hill Boone has established a categorization of Mixtec and Aztec documents, where most can be classified as res gestae or as cartographic histories. The res gestae maps depict a linear progression of events connected by sets of footprints that guide the reader through the narrative, and often present origin or foundation histories; such is

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29 Pohl, pp. 137.
the case with MC2. Cartographic histories, on the other hand, focus on spatial dimension while events and temporal measures are subsumed and arranged around the location. The Mapa Quetzalecatzin is a combination of both: the temporal aspect is relevant on the genealogical side, while the geographic side includes representations of the different tollan, or indigenous communities. These are characterized by the two tlatoani (rulers, or overseers) along the map and the headcount of their residents—depicted, literally, by heads with flags (indicating a twenty-count) on top (Figure 5). However, tollan are not events per se, so the Mapa seems to be employing both of Boone’s strategies in what she calls a “blended structure,” common to many Lienzos and Mapas traced back to the Mixteca-Puebla region and style.

A possible conclusion here is that the Mapa Quetzalecatzin is a cartographic history in the Mixteca-Puebla style that blends in a res gestae form to claim precedence in the settlement of the land between Ecatepec and Huitziltepec. It is quite possible that the Mapa’s role was to serve as a semi-legal document in the claiming of these lands, and intended for either the governador or the asiento of the region. Furthermore, the Mapa seems to be creased in three different places—vertically along the middle and twice horizontally. C. A. Burland, in his analysis of the Selden Roll, notes similar creases in most

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30 Boone, Stories in Red and Black, pp. 70-86.
31 Pohl, pp. 82.
land claim documents, which supports the theory of these being legal documents intended to be sent to people in power—a small clue nevertheless supported by historical context, since the crown exacerbated their gifting of encomiendas around the 1580s.

The difficulty of interpreting documents such as the Mapa lies in their very hybridity as colonial documents which share native knowledge in terms the colonizer could understand. As Raymond Craib argues, colonial maps are so important because they depict “the messy complexity of early colonial reality” for the Spanish purveyor that can sometimes be undermined in studies of the moment of contact. The Mapa then is an excellent specimen to examine not only the mixed styles of the Mixteca-Puebla region, or the convergence of cartographic histories and res gestae structures, but rather to examine the work of translation within the Mapa, and the object’s transactional nature as a legal document. Thanks to the comparison with MC2, the Mapa presents a translation of that history in simplified terms—at least in legible terms where events and history are separated from the geography, rather than creating a layered narrative where the two intermingle, as does the longer Historia and all five Mapas de Cuauhtinchan. But that history is subsumed under its function as a transaction, even if we are as yet unable to trace the shifting ownership of those lands. In other words, there is no way of knowing whether Don Pedro de León’s lands remained in his family or if they were broken up into small encomiendas, which is most likely.

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33 García de León, *Tierra Adentro, Mar En Fuera*: 135.
34 Craib, “Cartography and Decolonization,” pp. 15.
The late sixteenth century is extremely important to understand the conquest of what is now Mexico because the effects of decades of colonization and settlement were just beginning to enact an extensive shift in demographics, governance, and geography. Most importantly, it reflects the decline in native populations. Alfredo Delgado Calderón, in his study of Southern Veracruz region which reaches the present state of Puebla, illustrates the point in comparing the high number of tributaries in 1536 (1093 families or individuals out of a possible 4372) to the 194 tributaries in 1597. Similarly, in the Huasteca region (which encompasses northern Veracruz, including the site for La Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, and the states of Hidalgo and Tlaxcala) Juan Manuel Pérez Zevallos estimates a total population of 120,000-150,000 Huasteca people at the time of contact (1519), with numbers close to extinction by 1554. This is not only due to disease, as it was previously believed, but also to exploitation of tributaries on the part of the Spaniards, leading up to native insurrections in the 1600s. By 1599, Veracruz was moved from its previous site at Calchihuecan to where it currently stands, across from the island of San Juan de Ulúa, establishing itself as both port and military fortification. These two factors taken together, as Patrick Carroll has noted, caused a greater demand for enslaved peoples coming mostly from West and Central Africa, primarily Angola. A reliable port and an increasing demand for exploitable hands made Veracruz the most important port in Mexico.

37 Ibid., 59.
About twenty years before the displacement of Veracruz toward the south, Francisco Gali was touring New Spain and aiding in the formulation of responses to the Relaciones Geograficas questionnaire. At least three maps in the RGs corpus are attributable to him, but it is suspected he aided in more than six of them. It is Gali’s map (1580, Figure 6) which accompanies the Relación Geográfica of the Veracruz area. It is a detailed and precise cartographic map, accurate enough to be used for navigating the coast of the gulf.

Figure 6. Francisco Gali’s Map of Tlacotalpa. From Morato-Moreno, “The Map of Tlacotalpa by Francisco Gali, 1580: An Early Example of a Local Coastal Chart in Spanish America,” p. 7.

and includes labels for rivers, nearby settlements, including pueblos, churches, and bigger cities. Likewise, Gali was able to answer the nautical and astronomical questions asked in the RGs, including the positions of stars at specific times, which was integral to the development of the longitudinal system. As Mundy points out, Gali crowded most of the towns along the shoreline, indicating that his map is to be read as a nautical chart rather than a map for inland travel.

Craib notes that “the more troubling aspects of such efforts [colonial mapping] is not their supposed historical and spatial infidelities. It is, rather, their potential for social and political exclusion.” The historical record confirms that the exclusion Craib points to also encompasses erasure, abuse, and extermination. It is likely that Gali’s attention to shoreline measurements influenced the decision to move the port of Veracruz further south, a suggestion that had been made in the 1560s but not carried out until 1599. Gali’s process merits an important distinction from the process followed by the artist of the Mapa Quetzalecatzin: it entailed mapmaking as opposed to mapping. The distinction, proposed by Verdesio, acknowledges those cultures that had no need for durable, material representations of the land and yet are able to engage in mapping if needed. Gali as a mapmaker engages in objective, scientific, measured production of territorial representations that require him to study and, in a way, “discover” the coast of the Gulf of

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41 Aguilar-Robledo, “Contested Terrain: The Rise and Decline of Surveying in New Spain, 1500-1800.” Mundy and Boone have also pointed to the importance of nautical charts to establish longitude.
42 Craib, “Cartography and Decolonization,” pp. 25.
43 García de León, *Tierra Adentro, Mar En Fuera* pp. 86.
Mexico; the creator of the Mapa produces a mental map based on his or her knowledge and habitation of the region. Mapping inherently includes lived experience while mapmaking captures profitable spaces.

The repercussions of the colonization efforts of the sixteenth century are permanent in the epistemological ways this paper has outlined, but also materially—in the geography of the region itself. During Nuño de Guzmán’s asiento, Huasteca and Mixteca territories were divided into 40 provincias destined to shift into Spanish hands.\(^45\) By 1533, the granting of cattle and sheep estancias to the Spanish nobles coming to the New World erased many of the indigenous place markers so that, around 1593—when indigenous people’s numbers had recuperated after the last epidemic of the 70s and they began to write land claims for their rightful territory—the asiento could not verify any claims because of the lack of physical markers.\(^46\) In an impressive study of the Veracruz area, Andrew Slyuter tracks the geographic changes effected on the land before and after the conquest, and argues that most of the sheep and cattle estancias that the crown offered were made possible thanks to the intricate pre-existing systems that the Totonacs had already established.\(^47\) His argument is that colonization re-conceptualized what it means for landscape to be useful in the Western sense, based on arability, transformability, and profitability. A concrete example of these profit-based geographical changes is the extinction of red cedar in the Northern Veracruz area as early as 1571.\(^48\) Thus the maps and textual documents of the region, whether of native or Spanish artistry, produced an

\(^{45}\) Sandstrom and García Valencia, *Native Peoples of the Gulf Coast of Mexico*, pp. 73.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 75.


\(^{48}\) García de León, *Tierra Adentro, Mar En Fuera*, pp. 135.
epistemological transformation in the Western perception of the world and suggested the availability of land for useful transformation while erasing native histories and agrarian systems.

The thirteen years between MC2 and Gali’s map of Tlacopan in 1580 and the Mapa Quetzalecatzin in 1593 saw social, political, and geographical changes to the structures of power that subdued the native peoples of central Mexico. The three representations exemplify the indigenous, colonial, and European categorizations that scholars have employed in the past and examines them collectively to ultimately complicate the narrative of colonization. Translating the Historia Tolteca Chichimeca into a land claim illustrates the transactional nature of these documents, where epistemologies have to have an economic value in order for them to survive erasure, whether materially (by fading away or getting lost) or by relegating these knowledges to a status of pre-history. Gali’s map, arguably of a more transnational record since it is confirmed that the map reached Lopez de Velasco, erased the social conflicts within the region and presented it as a navigable, observed, and known place in terms Spaniards would understand without need of a translation. The “messy complexities” of colonial life are still largely a mystery, but a cross-disciplinary approach that is able to take various kinds of primary sources into account begins to demystify the nascent coloniality as it was being created through the epistemic and material dispossession of native peoples.