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## *El Desmadre: The Colonial Roots of Anti-Mexican Violence*



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On August 3, 2019 a white supremacist walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas and murdered 22 people and injured dozens more. Shortly before the attack, he posted online comments complaining about a “Hispanic invasion.” He later told authorities that he was specifically targeting “Mexicans.” Just a few days before the El Paso massacre, another shooting in Gilroy, California left 3 dead and many more injured. The murderer in this case had online postings about invading “hordes of mestizos” and recommended that people read a white supremacist favorite “Might is Right” which, among other things, exalts the racial superiority of Anglo Saxons.

The following week, just four days after the El Paso massacre, Mexicans were once again targeted and terrorized. This time it was not by civilians but by ICE agents. Around 680 people were rounded up in Mississippi in what was touted as “the largest single state immigration enforcement operation in our nation’s history.” Adding to the calamity of the event, in many of the areas where the deportations took place it was the first day of school, thus leaving many children stranded without their parents.

The sequence of events is heartbreaking. The suffering is palpable. Yet, there is an odd clarity and undeniable familiarity to it all. The barrage of attacks, which happened within ten days of each other, all clearly and specifically targeted Mexican and Latino communities. The killers were explicit as to who they intended to murder and the ICE raids had the same population in mind. It is familiar because all of this has happened countless times before.

### **The Search for Context**

In the wake of the El Paso shootings, there have been several news articles and opinion writings seeking to place the attacks within a broader historical context. Although these articles are generally correct in their analysis, we need to widen the historical lens. For example, many news commentators have condemned Trump for essentially causing these attacks. While Trump has his share of responsibility in the murders by encouraging and emboldening white supremacists with his anti-immigrant and specifically anti-Mexican hateful rhetoric, Donald Trump is hardly the author of these sentiments. A few journalists have declared that the real origins of these attacks are the anti-immigrant policies which resurged in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet others with a broader historical approach have correctly pointed out that anti-Mexican violence has a long and hardened presence in this country spanning well over a century. Texas alone has an astounding and horrific history of lynchings, massacres and overall terrorism staged against Mexican people.

Even references to 1848, while an important landmark, do not go far enough.<sup>[1]</sup> Granted, the US war on Mexico was an act of aggression against the Mexican people. In the decades following the official end of the war it was not uncommon for Mexicans now living in the Southwest United States to be lynched, harassed, relegated to second class status, and treated as foreigners in their ancestral land. This violence directed at Mexicans was totally predictable since the new White authorities wanted to send a clear message to the newly conquered people that there was a new racial hierarchy which would reign over the land and should not be challenged.

However, even the Mexican American War was a relatively recent manifestation of much older ideas. Since October of 1492, when Christopher Columbus unwittingly landed in The Bahamas and stumbled onto The Americas, European colonizers and their allies have waged an uninterrupted war on the original peoples of the Western hemisphere. This war has relied on very similar tactics throughout the last five centuries. At the core of those strategies are tools generally aimed at instilling fear and dismantling Native cultures in order to subjugate and domesticate the Native populations. This ongoing wave of violence and its wake of chaos for Native peoples is what I am terming El Desmadre.

### **The Anniversary of the Real Hispanic Invasion**

There is a great historical irony in the El Paso shooter complaining about a “Hispanic invasion” and subsequently carrying out a massacre on his Mexican targets. The so-called “Hispanic invasion” is real -it’s just not what most Americans envision when they hear that phrase. In 1519, merely 26 years after Columbus’ devastating landfall in the Americas, Hernán Cortés set sail for what today is mainland Mexico on behalf of the Spanish crown. This original and very real Hispanic (Spanish)<sup>[2]</sup> invasion started the inland penetration of Mexico in August of 1519. <sup>[3]</sup> The foreign military excursion was specifically targeting the most powerful group in the region -the Aztecs. However, the so-called “Aztecs” did not call themselves by that name -they referred to themselves as “Mexica” (me-SHEE-ka). The Spanish soon began referring to the people of the mighty nation as “Mexicanos.” On the road to Tenochtitlan (modern day Mexico City), the Spanish left their indelible bloody mark of massacres, terrorism, and yes, “family separations.” Exactly 500 years later on August of 2019, the violent events in the United States clearly echo the events of 1519 by continuing the Desmadre unleashed by the real “Hispanic invasion” where Mexicanos and other Native peoples were ultimately slaughtered.

The perpetrator of the El Paso massacre was actually not against the Hispanic invasion. If his goal was to kill Mexicans, he was only following in the footsteps of Cortés. He is a modern-day adherent and participant in the Desmadre the Spanish initiated 500 years earlier. The mass shootings, along with the ICE raids, are a perfect continuation of the historical Hispanic invasion which targeted Mexicans as inferior beings and as obstacles that need to be either totally subdued or eliminated.

### **“Desmadre” as it is commonly used**

In my line of work as a university educator in Chicana/o Studies, I am frequently asked by my students to talk about the “conquest of the Aztecs.” In trying to explain the essence

of the catastrophic aftermath suffered by Indigenous people of the Americas I frequently resort to a word commonly used among Mexicans and Chicanas/os. The word is *desmadre*. This word does not neatly translate into English. If you were to look for the most literal translation of this word it would mean “dis-mother” or “de-mother” (i.e. the removal of a mother). However, to people that do not speak Spanish, this literal but inaccurate translation does nothing to illuminate the meaning frequently understood by the users of this word.

When this word is used by Mexicans/Chicanas/os and other Spanish speakers, it most often refers to a chaotic or “messed up” situation. It can be used anytime there is chaos, disarray, confusion, disorder, and even violence. For example, someone might look at a messy disorderly garage and say “es un *desmadre*” and they could use the same phrase if there is an accident on the freeway and there is heavy traffic. It is also frequently used to describe a violent situation, not just a fight, but out of control, entangled violence. In this case the same phrase could be used to describe a war-torn region.

For monolingual English speakers it might be tempting to say that the word *desmadre* merely equates “mess” as in: the garage is a mess, the freeway is a mess, or Iraq is a mess. However, the word “mess” does not capture the robust and intense meaning of this word for Mexicanos. It is a strong word that is frequently seen as distasteful and carries at least a semi-vulgar connotation. An English-speaking traffic reporter on the news might talk about “a mess on the freeway” but a Spanish-speaking newscaster would never say there is a “*desmadre*” on the freeway. It is not palatable and too obscene for formal settings like a newscast or a classroom. In fact, when I try to explain this word to English speakers, I usually refer to terms frequently used in the military that are also vulgar such as FUBAR or SNAFU. These are much closer to what *desmadre* means.

### **Two dimensions of *Desmadre***

I use the word *Desmadre* in reference to the European invasions of the Americas because it fits perfectly on at least two levels. First, the word *desmadre*, as it is commonly used, implies violence and chaos. This is precisely what Indigenous people in the Americas have been subjected to for the last five centuries. Second, taking a more literal translation of this word, through colonization our people suffered a *des-madre*, – a removal of our mothers.

### **Violence and chaos**

As was previously mentioned, the word *desmadre* in its most frequent and popular use refers to a situation that is chaotic or violent. This word captures the state in which Native

peoples found themselves in the wake of the European invasions. The original peoples living in what we now call the “Americas” suffered extreme violence at the hands of Europeans immediately after Columbus arrived in 1492. These sustained and deliberate violent attacks coupled with the decimation brought on by diseases such as smallpox caused Native societies to go into a tailspin. The magnitude of the violence perpetrated by the Europeans against the original inhabitants of the Americas is widely accepted to be one of the most intense and horrific acts of mass violence in human history. Historian David Stannard has referred to this wave of violence as an “American Holocaust.” What had mostly been orderly and understandable societies became a catastrophic desmadre. In this way, Native people experienced both of the primary connotations of the word desmadre -the onslaught of violence and the accompanying chaos from the disintegration of their societies.

### **The attack on the feminine**

In the second meaning, this word is befitting because colonization contained and relied upon a literal attack on our mothers. Rape and sexual violence, primarily aimed at women (our ancestral mothers), was a core component of colonization. Starting with Columbus, European invaders made assaults on women an integral part of their arsenal. This included, but was not limited to, rape, kidnappings, torture, and murder of women. Native peoples suffered a literal des-madre, that is, our mothers were forcibly removed from us thus further destabilizing the existing social orders. However, the lasting impacts and legacy of these attacks went substantially beyond the immediate physical aggressions on individual women. There was a new culture in place of not only assaulting women but devaluing femininity in general. In the Americas, there was generally a great emphasis on balance and reciprocity. That meant femininity and masculinity were both important in cosmological and in earthly dimensions. The Spanish Catholics broke that balance by imposing their male-centered religion and worldviews. In Europeans’ eyes, since God was male and ruled over the universe, so should men, not women, have dominion over the earth -“on Earth as it is in Heaven.” The roles played by women were subsequently seen as unimportant. Their labor and contributions were no longer valued. All things feminine, whether religious/spiritual or otherwise, would now be deemed inferior.

Another dimension of this literal “dis-mothering” is the attitudes that Europeans introduced about our mother Earth. The pillaging of the land and general disrespect for the natural world was a desmadre. An important precursor to colonization demanded that we be disconnected from the land -separated from our Pachamama. This multi-faceted

alienation resulted in an odd and estranged relationship with our mother Earth. We were working the land but had no right to the land. We were producing food but it was for the invaders' profit -not for our sustenance. We were discouraged from our ancient ways of maintaining a reciprocal relationship with mother Earth and in many instances some of us completely lost touch with those ancestral sensitivities.

### **El Desmadre is not a singular event**

One of the reasons I feel compelled to amend the existing language around the conquest and its consequences is because modern day Mexicanos and other Native peoples of the Americas often do not make an explicit connection between the desmadre in our communities today and the conquest of centuries ago. We treat these as separate and independent phenomena. In reality, we are experiencing the current version of the ongoing colonial project which started in 1492. That is, the conquest movement is not over yet. There is still an active attempt at completely subjugating Native peoples. A central tactic is to fragment the colonized -to break us apart in every way possible. When things are broken into smaller pieces, they are much easier to manipulate. Western forms of knowledge are good examples of this. Information is not disseminated and consumed in a holistic way but rather in a segmented and de-contextualized way. For example, historians do this by what they refer to as periodization, -they split history up into blocks of time. When we read the history of Mexico or the Americas, we often hear about distinct periods like pre-columbian, conquest, colonial, etc. One of the problems that can frequently arise is that in treating these as distinct periods, we may not see the fluidity and continuity throughout these periods. We often think about the violence that was unleashed in the Americas as only contained in the conquest period. This is absolutely false. Although the initial contacts between Europeans and Natives were overall horrifically violent, the violence did not stop once the Natives had been "conquered." In fact, the so-called "colonial" periods were just as violent and in many ways even more violent than the initial conquest. In "modern" times we often do not see any connection between the violence in our communities and the violence of colonization. We should treat these not as separate instances but as one fluid and continuous violent chain of events stemming from European invasions of the Americas. No word currently unifies these "periods" and makes a clear connection between the suffering in our communities and its roots in colonization. The Desmadre does not merely refer to the conquest. It is not a singular event, it is the continuous chain of attacks that Native people have endured from 1492 to the 21st century.

Once you take into consideration the long arc of the historical Desmadre, the context of the current attacks comes into clearer view. The recent upsurge of anti-Mexican and anti-Latino rhetoric and violence is just the latest embodiment of an old idea which has violently targeted all peoples with a historic ancestral presence in the Western hemisphere. As long as these people are standing on their ancestral land, their presence is an affront to colonizing efforts and any White supremacist claim of a “homeland” in the Americas. Colonization dictates that Native peoples be forcefully brought under control and constantly reminded of their subordinate role in society. The conquest is not over. The Desmadre continues and so does the resistance.

**Notes.**

1. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed February 2, 1848 officially ended the Mexican American War. As a result of the US military victory over Mexico, the US annexed approximately half of what used to be Mexico including all or part of the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. ↑

2. The word Hispanic technically only means “Spanish.” Things that pertain to Spain are “Hispanic.” When Americans use terms like “Hispanic culture” they are almost never referring to the culture of Spain and almost always referring to the cultures of Latin America -most commonly Mexico. ↑

3. While Cortes and other Spanish expeditions had arrived in and skirted the southeastern coast of what today is called “Mexico,” the march into the interior of Mexico towards Tenochtitlan (modern day Mexico City) did not start until August of 1519. ↑

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