

“Indigenous Martyrs in the Early Modern Spanish World,” paper presented for *Politics, Ethnography, and the Paradoxes of Empire*, XXXII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, USA, May 24, 2014.

Across the early modern Spanish world sacred historians described the work of evangelization as a “spiritual conquest” of native souls. They masterfully crafted an image of self-sacrificing religious men bent on suffering, hardship, and even martyrdom for the sake of an expanding global church. This vision of the militant church overseas gives the impression that only Europeans—lighter skinned men cloaked in religious habits—were the primary, if not the only, martyrs in the early missionary theatre in Spanish America. Although most martyrs were indeed Spaniards, several sacred historians believed that indigenous converts had died at the hands of their own people because of their witness to the Christian faith. These religious chroniclers hailed several Indians from Hispaniola, Peru, New Spain, and Paraguay as Catholic martyrs in the same manner as the early Christian martyrs of the first three centuries. In this paper I argue that when sacred histories from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries are surveyed across the Spanish world an alternative, and perhaps unintended, narrative to the triumphant version of the “spiritual conquest” emerges. By analyzing the ways in which indigenous peoples appear as martyrs in these texts, I question the traditional binary between European missionary and native convert.