Mesoamerican Codices

In the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015), the use of monochrome is associated with the act of writing in a series of illustrations about colors and their production. Cochineal red is clearly associated with pictorial manuscript production and the drawing of guiding lines on a rectangular strip in folio 217v (Fig. 8.1a). Black, a pigment obtained from a fruit known as nacazcolotl, is produced for writing, as exemplified by an illustration of a scribe in folio 281v, where his tools, chair, and book indicate a European activity (Fig. 8.1b). The Nahuatl text related to this image defines the black pigment as “a medium for painting, a medium for writing” (tlacuiloloni, letrachioaloni; Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, 241, Dupey García 2015, 235). The distinction between local and imported techniques and technologies is clearly stated. While black as a color has intrinsic symbolic associations in both pre-Hispanic and Indigenous colonial art, as stated in the same chapter on the Florentine Codex regarding the color tlilli (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015, 238), in the current discussion I am primarily concerned with what is clearly a lack of color: the use of black and white in an obvious and conscious opposition to a colored palette. Indeed, painting was considered writing in Mesoamerican tradition. Recent studies on the importance of colors in manuscripts and sculpture revealed that the meaning of images was closely tied to their material components (Magaloni Kerpel 2014, Dupey and Vásquez 2018). Hue, brilliance, texture, origin, production process, and provenience were all factored into the selection of a specific palette for any given occasion.

In the colonial setting, pictographic images not only had to coexist with written texts but also often played an ancillary role. The changing dynamic between these two poles (the written and the painted) is highlighted in manuscripts produced in the intellectual circles of the conventos using monochrome. In both Primeros Memoriales and

8.1. The work of Sahagún

The intellectual enterprise of Bernardino de Sahagún culminated in two major works that are commonly referred to as Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex. In this section, they are analyzed by focusing on the distribution and function of the illustrations in the manuscripts, as well as their relationship to the corresponding written text. In the process, the deliberate role played by grisaille becomes apparent.

In the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015), the use of monochrome is associated with the act of writing in a series of illustrations about colors and their production. Cochineal red is clearly associated with pictorial manuscript production and the drawing of guiding lines on a rectangular strip in folio 217v (Fig. 8.1a). Black, a pigment obtained from a fruit known as nacazcolotl, is produced for writing, as exemplified by an illustration of a scribe in folio 281v, where his tools, chair, and book indicate a European activity (Fig. 8.1b). The Nahuatl text related to this image defines the black pigment as “a medium for painting, a medium for writing” (tlacuiloloni, letrachioaloni; Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, 241, Dupey García 2015, 235). The distinction between local and imported techniques and technologies is clearly stated. While black as a color has intrinsic symbolic associations in both pre-Hispanic and Indigenous colonial art, as stated in the same chapter on the Florentine Codex regarding the color tlilli (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 11, ch. 11, Dupey García 2015, 238), in the current discussion I am primarily concerned with what is clearly a lack of color: the use of black and white in an obvious and conscious opposition to a colored palette. Indeed, painting was considered writing in Mesoamerican tradition. Recent studies on the importance of colors in manuscripts and sculpture revealed that the meaning of images was closely tied to their material components (Magaloni Kerpel 2014, Dupey and Vásquez 2018). Hue, brilliance, texture, origin, production process, and provenience were all factored into the selection of a specific palette for any given occasion.

In the colonial setting, pictographic images not only had to coexist with written texts but also often played an ancillary role. The changing dynamic between these two poles (the written and the painted) is highlighted in manuscripts produced in the intellectual circles of the conventos using monochrome. In both Primeros Memoriales and

the Florentine Codex, images played a fundamentally different role than the nearly contemporaneous manuscripts discussed in the previous chapter despite being drawn by Indigenous artists. However, like the Codices Telleriano-Remensis, Vaticanus A, Tudela, and Magliabechiano, Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex are two distinct works that are closely related to each other, as the latter made ample use of the information and images found in the former, which was produced earlier. While Primeros Memoriales was largely drafted in Tepeapulco in the modern state of Hidalgo, the Florentine Codex was essentially a product of the College of Santiago Tlatelolco, where Sahagún ended his prolific career as a teacher and a missionary. Primeros Memoriales, which is missing some sections, is about a third of the length of the Florentine Codex, which comprises three volumes of over 700 folios each. Furthermore, in Primeros Memoriales, most illustrations are found in sections dedicated to the religious aspects of Nahua culture, such as the veintena ceremonies and the array of gods; in the later Florentine Codex, sections devoted to natural philosophy are more profusely illustrated. While certain final decisions on the production of both manuscripts may only be speculated about (perhaps Sahagún realized that it was wiser not to indulge in the illustration of “idolatrous” subjects), it is worth engaging in a comparison of the strategies employed in the two works.

8.1.1. The gods and the chants

According to Sahagún himself (1950–1982, Introductory Volume, prologue to bk. 2) regarding the way that information was initially gathered, elderly people in the community of Tepeapulco discussed matters pertaining to various topics (e.g., court, warfare, politics, and religion) “in pictures.” It is possible that Sahagún was referring to pictographic documents that eventually became the sources for the selectively drafted images in Primeros Memoriales. Indigenous students and assistants eventually added Nahuatl text to the illustrations (López Austin 1974, 123, Quiñones Keber 1988, 202–203). A passage in Primeros Memoriales (paragraph 5A, ff. 261r–267v) depicts Mesoamerican and Nahua deities. Each image is accompanied by a short text in a manner that was probably similar to the way that Nahua researchers initially took notes in the field. In folio 261r (Fig. 8.2), the first god depicted is Huitzilopochtli, the patron of the Mexica. Although the text on the left refers to him, he is preceded in the illustration by Paynal, a vicar or surrogate of Huitzilopochtli who plays a major role in the festival of Panquetzaliztli dedicated by the Mexica to their tutelary god (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2, ch. 34). Paynal is holding a white and blue banner that may indeed signal this celebration, as argued for a similar depiction on page 17 of the Codex Laud (Fig. 7.21). Huitzilopochtli carries a turquoise fire serpent disguise, known as *xiuhconahualli* in Nahuatl. In the corresponding image in the Codex Laud, the New Fire is lit on a turquoise fire serpent.

I believe that Paynal was depicted as preceding Huitzilopochtli in Primeros Memoriales, a decision that was later reversed in the corresponding section of the Florentine Codex (vol. 1, bk. 1, f. 10r), because of the

Figure 8.2. Huitzilopochtli preceded by Paynal, Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Patrimonio Nacional. Madrid, Real Biblioteca, II/3280, f. 261r.
Mesoamerican Codices

intrinsic ceremonial value assigned to the enunciation of a god. Mentioning a god means summoning their presence, an act that in itself implies ceremoniality and temporality. Gods cannot be fully distinguished from the specific celebration and moment in which they appear because they do not exist as an absolute idea; rather, they are the materialization of prayers, chants, and other ceremonial acts designed to summon them according to given calendrical occurrences (such as the veintena of Panquetzaliztli).

Even if depictions of single deities are a pictographic innovation extracted and reduced from more complex pictographic scenes (Quiñones Keber 1988, Boone 2019, 99–106), they still bear unmistakable traces of the Mesoamerican tradition of image-making, which materializes divinity through the medium of pictures. The succinct text that accompanies the images enumerates the gods’ attributes, from headdresses to staffs and other paraphernalia, in a rather descriptive manner—first for Huitzilopochtli, then Paynal. The text suggests that enunciation can create an image, its likeness (or ixiptla), in a similar manner to dough, stone, wood, or pigments (Magaloni Kerpel 2014, 9–13). The redundant and pleonastic listing of the images’ features, which may or may not be visible in the illustration, recalls the comments made by one of the annotators in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Reiterating in writing what is depicted in a side picture may seem repetitive according to the proto-scientific interpretive logic applied in “research” by Sahagún’s pupils. From the viewpoint of religion and ritual, however, correct repetition is necessary for the successful completion of a ceremony. If the ceremoniality of the god’s attributes and evocation is suppressed, the listing becomes repetitive and useless. Thus, the Sahaguntine encyclopedic project clashed with the intrinsic value of pictography as an expressive religious medium.

In the later redrafting of the Florentine Codex (vol. 1, bk. 1, ff. 10r–12v), deity depictions were placed at the beginning of the first book. They were not accompanied by descriptive texts but rather were assigned the names of Roman gods and a reference to the text in which their ceremony is mentioned (Fig. 8.3). In only two instances, images of the gods were reused to illustrate the cuicame (songs) in the appendix of the second book, which was dedicated to

Figure 8.3. The gods Opuchtli, Yacatecutli, Xipe, and Nappa Tecutli. Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Ms. Med. Palat. 218, vol. 1, bk. 1, f. 12r. Courtesy of MiC. Any further reproduction is prohibited.
the ceremonies of the veintenas (Fig. 8.4). The images of deities that accompanied the chants were adjusted to make the figures’ postures more dynamic than those of their counterparts in the first book. Xipe Totec, whose chant was analyzed in Section 2.3 of this book, is engaged in chanting, as indicated by the speech volutes emerging from his mouth. In the following image, his position has flipped, and he is playing a drum and drinking. These are fitting additions to a text that purportedly reproduces a chant—a performance. Thus, we are left to wonder whether this is a depiction of a deity or a performer. This ambiguity is even more apparent given that the god, priest, or impersonator performs a ritual and sings a song that should be chanted to him rather than by him. No clue is given on where the chant and dance may be taking place, as no participant or temple is shown. Instead, the image is witness to the effect of the chanting; it comes alive thanks to the power of the accompanying song.

In Sahagún’s cuicame, both texts and images are engaged in an act of mutual interpretation. They do not explain each other but rather indicate the constitutive elements of the performance. Collectively, song, music, dance, and the image of the god are the god. While the image itself remains only an illustration, it expresses the vitality and efficacy of the ceremony that does not lie in the clear enunciation or communication of content but rather in the correct realization of a performance. While written texts
and images are forcefully separated by the colonial logic of writing, the painting of the singing Xipe Totec is a correlative of the transcribed chant, which also seems to have the power to breathe life into the image.

8.1.2. The huehuetlatolli and the book

Aside from the cuicame, there is another section in both Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex that includes the transcription of recited texts—namely, prayers and admonitions given by the rulers to their people and by parents to their children. Paragraphs 15–17 of Primeros Memoriales and Book 6 of the Florentine Codex are dedicated to the huehuetlatolli (words of the elders; Sullivan 1974). Unlike the cuicame, these texts are prosaic, although the language employed is still profusely rhetorical and metaphorical. The corresponding illustrations in both manuscripts share a lack of color and evident reliance on European models, especially engravings.

In Primeros Memoriales (paragraphs 15–17, ff. 61v–66r), uncolored images were deliberately employed to illustrate the rulers’ speeches and admonitions in a section of the manuscript on rulership. In folio 65v, the image of a lonely man illustrates “how the ruler felt compassion for the people” (Sahagún et al. 1997, 248; Fig. 8.5). The bearded

Figure 8.5. “How the ruler felt compassion for the people,” Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España. Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia, 9/5524, f. 65v.
Man sits on an icpalli, a straw seat with a high back, and rests his head on his left hand in a pensive manner. This posture is typical of an innovative type of Ecce Homo or Man of Sorrows, which developed around 1500 in northern Europe and was especially popularized through German engravings and the work of Albrecht Dürer (Fig. 8.6). In New Spain, a close geographical and chronological example can be found in the upper cloister of the Augustinian convent in Malinalco in the state of Mexico. A despondent Christ sits on the cross, awaiting crucifixion (Fig. 8.7). A nun kneels and prays in front of Jesus, indicating the devotional and meditational nature of the image.

In the Florentine Codex, Book 6 includes the speeches of leaders but begins with prayers dedicated to the ancient gods, followed by a series of expiatory texts. In the first prayers, Tezcatlipoca is introduced as “principal god” (principal dios), betraying the Christianized overtones found throughout the texts. Moreover, all the illustrations are in grisaille, which led Magaloni Kerpel (2011, 73) to suggest an explicit adherence to European book illustrations of a mostly doctrinal and liturgical nature. The question remains, however, as to why the artists decided to employ such a strategy in this particular book.

Figure 8.8 presents a double illustration. A group of kneeling men in the bottom image direct their gaze upwards. The object of their attention is seemingly a monstrous creature floating in the sky in the top vignette. In the latter, a lone man stands with his arms crossed in a sign of respect for the same being. The illustrations seemingly depict Tezcatlipoca, who appears at the beginning of Book 1 in full attire. Here, however, the god is completely transformed, and his bifurcated tongue suggests a diabolical creature. In the image, the presence of both worshipers and a priest, who is cast in an intermediary role, separates the divine from the human in a clear hierarchical arrangement. At the same time, there are no costumes or musical instruments to indicate a specific ceremony or gods; instead, the image is a diagrammatic representation of a religious power structure.

Throughout Book 6 of the Florentine Codex, images and texts make constant (albeit indirect and implicit) references to Christianity by employing an image typology that abruptly deviates from Mesoamerican types and adheres to models derived from Christian doctrinal texts. Printing presses had been active in New Spain since 1539 and were almost exclusively devoted to the production of religious texts in Indigenous languages. It is likely that Indigenous peoples participated in the production of books in their native language, not only as writers and translators but also as illustrators and typographers (Grañén Porrúa 1991, 24–25, Garone Gravier 2011, 161–163). Despite fragmentary historical information, the participation of Indigenous intellectuals seems quite reasonable given that New Spain’s doctrinal books made extensive use of their native language in bilingual texts, a feature shared by Primeros Memoriales and the Florentine Codex, and indeed an innovation of New Spain’s presses. Therefore, it is unsurprising that manuscript and book illustrations resembled each other, as they were all simultaneously produced in the same intellectual milieu of the friars’ conventual schools.
The strikingly different visual references used by Nahua artists in illustrations of the cuicame and the discourses of the elders demonstrate that there were two types of religious images at play, each with a distinct cultural ancestry and formal and iconographic features. They conveyed a different religious experience in pictures and words. It is generally assumed that huehuetlatolli was a Mesoamerican genre (León Portilla 1961). In the colonial context of book production, while the cuicame were largely left untranslated, the more prosaic discourses of the elders seem to find a counterpart in the doctrinal genre employed by the friars (Dibble 1974).

As for the illustrations, Tezcatlipoca is distorted and monstrous in Book 6 of the Florentine Codex. In Book 1, he appears with all his diagnostic attributes, along with all the other Mesoamerican gods in an arrangement akin to the Greco-Roman pantheon (Botta 2016, Olivier 2016). Perhaps a Classical topos allowed the tlacuilo a truer image of the ancient gods who were no longer worshiped (not openly, at least) when the book was compiled. However, is this depiction more reliable, or have we come to “believe” colonial images of Mesoamerican gods because they present the readable iconographic pictures that we need as scholars?
The overall structure of the Florentine Codex, which loosely follows that of Primeros Memoriales, is encyclopedic and based on medieval and universalistic conceptions of knowledge (Robertson 1959, 167–172, Palmeri Capesciotti 2001, Ríos Castañón 2014, ch. 3). As remarked by Quiñones Keber (1988, 207), the first six books of the manuscript are dedicated to ancient sacred wisdom, including chapters on gods, ceremonies, divination, and prognostication—all aspects also treated in ancient pictographic manuscripts. Books 7 to 12, by contrast, concern natural philosophy—topics and genres that have no counterpart in Indigenous manuscripts. The Mesoamerican roots of the first six books prioritized orality and performance tied to ritual events. Book 6 also belongs to this part, but incorporates Christian sermons and prayers, effectively mediating between a Mesoamerican conception of ceremonies and their depictions and Western rhetoric and images. While the texts are inspired and poetic in Book 6, Tezcatlipoca is depicted as unreachable and monstrous. Through the use of grisaille, the tacuilos commented on all that is missing when a Christian conception is applied to Mesoamerican religion: the gods are unrecognizable, distant, and silenced. Monochrome illustrations in Sahagún’s works typically accompanied very long texts that claimed to be verbatim reproductions of recited originals. The text is thus frozen and not performed. The gods have left this world, and the new religion posits a god who remains unknowable. The use of monochrome, based on engraved illustrations, communicates the idea that the Christian way of constructing doctrinal truth is incapable of conveying Mesoamerican divinity. Thus, Sahagüíntine illustrations express the impossibility of a resolution between Mesoamerican and Christian conceptions of the sacred.

8.1.3. History and its moral

Book 12 of the Florentine Codex relates the conquest of Mexico-Tenochtitlan by Cortés’ invading troops. The book is unique to the Florentine Codex and not present in Primeros Memoriales. Lockhart (1993, 1–27) argued that the narrative of the city’s siege and capitulations was likely collected at an early date in Tlatelolco, based on details of the account that specifically refer to this locality of Mexico City. It is well known that illustrations were left uncolored starting from Volume 3, Book 11, folio 178r, which is probably due to technical and logistical problems such as a lack of pigment or time to apply it before the work was shipped to Europe. However, in Book 12, the use of color is resumed in a few vignettes, thus creating a visible contrast with the rest of the images.

Folio 34r (Fig. 8.9) illustrates the rebellion of Tlatelolca warriors after the massacre perpetrated by the Spaniards in the sacred precinct during the celebrations of Toxcatl. A Nahua warrior overcomes his adversaries, who are falling in the background. His spear is horizontally positioned and straight, and the diagonal posture of his legs creates an abstract and solid composition that starkly contrasts with the dismembered bodies of the falling Spaniards. The colorful feathers on the warrior’s helm and the pink hue of his skin clearly indicate that the figures in the background are purposefully painted in grisaille. The Tlatelolca warrior is static and victorious, while the Spaniards are trampled and defeated.

The illustration neatly conforms to the genre of Book 12, which appears to be based on a long-standing European historiographic paradigm established by Greek historian Herodotus, a fact that has not been recognized before. Herodotus’ narration of the Greek war of resistance against the Achaemenid Empire combines eyewitness accounts of battles and other pivotal events of the conflict with anecdotal and ethnographic details about the jewelry, armor, and weapons of the foreign Persians (Hartog 2009). Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 12) adheres to this Classical topos by declaring in the introduction to Book 12 that he wanted to compile the history of the conquest to record Indigenous terms for weaponry and other information related to the Nahua art of war. Ludo Snijders indicated to me in a personal communication (2015) that the reference to the Persian war was indeed explicit in the image under discussion, as well as in the following images in folios 36v and 39r because the shield of the Nahua warrior sports a capital lambda (Λ) whose diagonals mimic the firm posture of the Tlatelolca warrior. The letter is equivalent to the Latin “L” and stands for “Lacedaemon,” the Greek name of the city of Sparta. It bears remembering that the Spartans were the army that led the Greek coalition in a heroic last stand at Thermopylae.

In central Mexico, history was not as favorable to the Nahua as it was to the Greeks. When the Tlatelolca rebellion finally succumbed to the Spaniards, all was lost. The use of monochrome in this context functions within a specific historiographic genre and should not be understood in relation to chants, ceremonies, and performance, as analyzed above, but rather as a parable or moral. In “pagan” times, before the advent and imposition of Christianity, the confrontation between Spaniards and Nahua would have resulted in a favorable outcome for the besieged Nahua. The painter of the images in Book 12 took the final defeat and imposition of Christianity as an incontrovertible fact and a starting point. He projected the events of the conquest to an ancient time, when the “others” (or barbarians) would have been the Spaniards. Thus, the cities around the lake in the basin of Mexico were accordingly equated to the coalition of Greek cities against the invading Persian army.

The impact of Christianity’s imposition is evident in another illustration in which color is applied as a juxtaposition to monochrome. The vignette in folio 40v (Fig. 8.10) represents in a vertical arrangement the sequence of events that followed the death of Motecuhzoma II, leader of Tenochtitlan and the Mexica, and Itzquauhtzin, ruler of Tlatelolco, when the Spaniards threw their bodies into the city canals. Eventually, Nahua priests recovered the bodies and gave them a proper burial. In the first illustration at the top, two Spaniards and the rigid but lifeless body of Itzquauhtzin are painted in full color; this contrasts with
the lower half of the image, in which the murky waters of the canal and the body of the Mexica tiltroi are depicted in gray. The use of color progressively ceases and in the second vignette the image is rendered only in black outline. This shift in the use of color is accompanied by changes in composition. While the bodies of the deceased rulers are depicted in a frontal position in the upper part of the image and the point of view is longitudinally placed in the air, Motecuhzoma’s body is disarticulated when Nahua priests transport it. The viewer finds themself on the same plane as the protagonists of the events. The lifeless movement of the Mexica ruler’s body equals that of the fallen Spanish soldiers in the previously discussed illustration on folio 34r to indicate defeat and death. It also signals the tiltroi’s transition from the status of a hero to that of a defeated human.

Magaloni Kerpel (2003a, 38–40) interpreted the two compositions as contrasting pre-Hispanic and Spanish views. First, the static and front-facing bodies of...
the deceased rulers rely on Mesoamerican canons in the representation of sacrificial victims, while the transportation of Motecuhzoma’s body is based on the Catholic theme of the burial of Christ in the following scene. I agree with the latter identification, which is amply evidenced by the many representations of the same theme in Mexican conventos (Fig. 8.11). However, I do not think that the colored and frontal depiction of the Indigenous leaders is related to the depiction of human sacrifice in the Florentine Codex or pre-Hispanic manuscripts, which usually show naked, disarticulated or dismembered, bleeding bodies (see, for example, Fig. 4.14, 6.9). Rather, I believe that both images rely on prototypes of the dead body of Christ, whose depiction underwent profound transformation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ringbom 1965, Belting 1994, Nagel 2000). Increasingly emotional and dramatic images and compositions departed from long-held canons imposed by Byzantine icons,
which were front-facing, hieratic, and flat, as seen in the famous feather mosaic that Diego Huaniztín, the governor of Mexico City, bequeathed to Pope Paul III in 1539 (Fig. 8.12). The sequence of images in the Florentine Codex presents the trajectory from iconicity to naturalism.

According to the text and images, the burial of Motecuhzoma was not conducted according to established pre-Hispanic customs. Instead, his body was covered with wood and then burnt. In the Nahuatl text, it is further stated that the body of Motecuhzoma was disrespected and humiliated in a manner reminiscent of Jesus’ suffering during the Passion. Eventually, Motecuhzoma’s body burst into flames and produced a foul odor. According to the narrative in both images and words, it would appear that the Mexica ruler lost his sacred status when his life assumed the same trajectory as that of Christ. However, Jesus died as a man, only to be resurrected as a pure spirit. By contrast, the Mexica ruler had the opposite destiny, moving from a deified presence to physical disappearance (Bröchler 2009, 63–69).

The use of monochrome enabled Indigenous artists to discuss the new status and function of the image in a colonial context in purely visual terms. The humanization of God according to Christian canons denotes a world without gods. The new god imposed by the Spaniards after barbaric campaigns of destruction that razed ancient

Figure 8.11. The burial of Christ, sixteenth century. Cloister, Convento de Santo Domingo, Tepetlaostec, state of Mexico. Photo by Javier García.

Figure 8.12. Diego Huanitzín, Mass of Saint Gregory, detail. Musée des Jacobins, Auch. Photo by Steven Zucker.
Manuscript Painting and the Conventos

8.2. The Codex Yanhuitlan

The Codex Yanhuitlan, the last manuscript considered in this book, is quite different from those addressed so far. Its contents are not religious, although there are remarkable images of Mesoamerican gods. It dates to the colonial period but was not produced in the schools of the conventos. However, as I claim in the following pages, it shows a clear relationship with and dependence on the artistic innovations of the friars’ workshops. The Codex Yanhuitlan was produced in the Mixtec town of the same name under Indigenous patronage and thus offers an opportunity to close the story of Mesoamerican pictography and religion by returning to an Indigenous point of view, albeit in an inevitably colonial context.

The manuscript hails from the Mixteca in modern Oaxaca, southern Mexico, a region known for its long pictographic tradition in pre-contact times. Possibly drafted around 1550, the manuscript directly addresses historical events and characters related to the tumultuous period following the invasion and the imposition of the colonial regime. For this reason, it has attracted the attention of scholars since the 1940s, which resulted in a progressive clearer image of its contents and the town’s history (Jiménez Moreno and Mateos Higuera 1940, Berlin 1947, Sepúlveda y Herrera 1994, Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2009, Doesburg et al. 2015). Every folio of the manuscript was cut and separated from the original quire or binding, most likely in the eighteenth century. Most of the pages are in the Biblioteca Lafragua in Puebla (hereafter referred to as “Lafragua”), while other parts are found in the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City and the Centro Cultural Santo Domingo of the Biblioteca Francisco de Burgoa (CCSD) in Oaxaca.

I specifically address the manuscript’s style and iconography, which display a unique intermingling of Mixtec, Nahua, and Western features. Grisaille is used throughout the manuscript, which represents an innovation of the Codex Yanhuitlan within the Mixtec pictographic tradition. Folio Lafragua 8v (Fig. 8.13) depicts a typical colonial scene. A large Spanish figure looms in the center and is seated on a large wooden armchair. He is engaged in a lively interaction with three visibly smaller Indigenous men while holding an oversized necklace (most likely a rosary), which extends to the other side of the page. The Indigenous figures on the Spaniard’s right stand on top of a rectangle, a place name for Yanhuitlan found throughout the manuscript. Another male figure addresses the Spaniard from the left. The lower part of the page is missing, but there is another place name on the right, which is currently unidentified. The identity of the scene’s protagonist has been a matter of disagreement among scholars. On the one hand, Jiménez Moreno and Higuera (1940, 64) considered him to be a religious figure such as a vicar or a bishop because of his long robe and large hat, whose brim is tied with a knotted rope. Jansen and Pérez Jiménez (2009, 167), on the other hand, identified him as a lay person—more specifically, Francisco de las Casas, a Spanish conquistador and the first encomendero of Yanhuitlan, who was said to have usurped the role of the friars and taught the rosary (doctrina) to Indigenous people under his encomienda (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1999, 167–168).

I believe that an illustration produced in Juan Pablos’ printing workshop in Mexico City may contribute to the discussion on the identity of this enigmatic character. The print first appeared in Pedro de Gante’s 1553 doctrina (doctrinal manual), a bilingual Nahuatl and Spanish text. On a page dedicated to the Spiritual Works of Mercy (Las obras de misericordia spirituales; Fig. 8.14), a small illustration depicts a man engaged in a lively conversation with a group of smaller people standing in front of him. The image illustrates one of the seven spiritual works of mercy—namely instructing the ignorant, which involved lay people, not friars or priests, in the care of the spiritual...

Figure 8.13. Man holding a rosary and talking to Indigenous peoples. Codex Yanhuitlan, f. 8v. Biblioteca José Maria Lafragua, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Puebla.