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Disseminating Devotion: The Image and Cult of the Black Christ in Colonial Mexico and Central America

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DISSEMINATING DEVOTION: THE IMAGE AND CULT OF THE BLACK CHRIST IN COLONIAL MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA

by

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Abstract

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Adviser: Dr. Eloise Quiñones Keber

Following the conquest of Mexico in 1521, Spanish conquerors and friars considered it their duty to bring Christianity to the New World. Even before the task of conversion began, they introduced Christian images, like the cross, to the native peoples they first encountered. Eventually, local artists began to create the sacred objects.

This study is the first in-depth, art historical inquiry into the significance of the most prominent Black Christ crucifix images and cults in various regions of Mexico and Central America from the sixteenth to early nineteenth century. It traces the origin and history of the Black Christ, often found in traditional sacred locations among Nahua, Maya, Mestizo, and African converts and in connection with legends describing associated miraculous events that made the sites pilgrimage destinations. It also examines the misunderstood materiality of the crucifixes, which in most cases began as typical European flesh-colored figures that gradually blackened from exposure and ritual activity. The darkened color came to hold a myriad of connotations, and artists created replicas, deliberately painted black, for churches from New Mexico to Panama.

This widespread process of dissemination is examined via reproduced paintings, sculptures, and prints in order to trace how the cult grew and changed in each locale, where the image of the Black Christ was constantly resignified. Some churches saw it as a sign of ancient pre-Hispanic sacrality and power, others as a connection to the famed Christ in Esquipulas, Guatemala; in other cases it mimicked the race of its African devotees. Looking at a traditional Christian image—a crucifix—through the lens of the local reveals how different communities, whether indigenous, mestizo, or African, shaped their spiritual landscape using the Black Christ as a powerful emblem of sanctity.

Esquipulas also emerges as preeminent among all the Black Christ images, cults, and locales considered, highlighting the often overlooked importance of Guatemala as a progenitor, along with Mexico and Peru, of artistic and cultural developments in Colonial Latin America.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGCA	Archivo General de Centro América
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación
CIRMA	Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica
INAH	Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

"Disseminating Devotion: The Image and Cult of the Black Christ in Colonial Mexico and Central America" unfolds from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in the geographic and cultural region of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. It thus extends roughly from north central Mexico to the Maya region of present-day Central America (see fig. 0-1).[1] From the first major Mesoamerican civilization, the Olmecs (ca. 1500-400 B.C.), to the Mexica (Aztecs) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of our era, three thousand years of history witnessed the birth, development, and fall of a series of interconnected cultures. These societies, separated by time and space, were nonetheless connected by shared cultural traits. Mesoamericans domesticated the same crops, played a ritual ball game, and developed trade and pilgrimage routes that linked disparate regions. Mesoamerican societies, built cities and created monumental architecture and art, used complex calendars, developed intricate mythologies and religions, and practiced human sacrifice, believing that their gods and goddesses were nourished by human blood as they engaged in the acts of creation, life, death, and renewal.

Pre-Columbian history was forever altered by the conquest of the country that we now call Mexico, under the leadership of Hernando Cortés, the son of a noble Spanish family, who chose to make his fortunes in the New World. After a brief tenure as magistrate on the island of Cuba, he commandeered an exploratory voyage and embarked for the mainland of Mexico in 1519. Moving inland from the Gulf Coast, in central Mexico the invaders encountered the Tlaxcalans, who were competing for resources while almost completely surrounded by the expansive and powerful tribute empire of the

Triple Alliance.[2] With their critical help and the added weakening of indigenous peoples by diseases introduced by the Spaniards, Cortés was eventually able to conquer the mighty capital of Tenochtitlan (modern Mexico City). He established a colony that would become the Viceroyalty of New Spain in 1535.[3]

The conquest of Central America, which began as early as 1524, followed. During the Colonial period modern-day Central America was divided into the Audencia of Guatemala and the Audencia of Panama. Guatemala, established in 1542, extended from Chiapas in Mexico to modern-day Costa Rica and was, aside from Guatemala proper, a poor colony that was ruled and subsidized by the powerful Viceroyalty of Mexico. The Audencia of Panama, on the other hand, was relatively well off once raw goods from Peru began to be couriered across the isthmus from the Pacific to the Caribbean. After 1579 the Caribbean post of Portobelo became an important fairground, creating a prosperous transisthmian mercantile economy. In 1739 Panama became part of the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada (modern-day Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela).[4]

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[2] The Triple Alliance was a pact established in 1428 by three city-states: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. All three were populated by Nahuatl-speaking people (Nahuas) who had emigrated from the north to the central Basin of Mexico beginning in the twelfth century. Increasingly dominated by the Mexica (Aztecs of Tenochtitlan), the Triple Alliance is sometimes referred to as the "Aztec Empire," which continued until the Spanish conquest of 1521. See Pedro Carrasco, *The Tenocha Empire of Ancient Mexico: The Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Tetzcoco, and Tlacopan* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

[3] The status of colony, or viceroyalty, lasted until independence from Spain in 1821.

[4] Stanley Heckadon-Moreno, "Spanish Rule, Independence, and the Modern Colonization Frontiers," in *Central America: A Natural and Cultural* History, ed. Anthony G. Coates (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 181-182.

Alongside their military campaign, the conquerors also enacted what has been controversially called a "spiritual conquest."[5] The Franciscans were the first missionary order to arrive in Mexico in 1523, followed by a group of twelve friars in 1524, a number symbolic of Christ's twelve apostles. They are depicted kneeling before a simple wooden cross in a mural executed by a native artist at the early Franciscan mission in Huejotzingo, Puebla (fig. 0-2). Crosses like this one were likely the first Christian symbols seen by the native population. Abstracted emblems of the new faith, they were prototypes for the more elaborate crucifixes, shown with the body of Jesus Christ, that would soon hang in churches throughout the newly conquered lands.

Soon Dominicans (1526) and Augustinians (1533) followed. These mendicant friars believed that it was their mission to convert the indigenous population, often viewing them as lost children in need of guidance. After the start of the conversion process in Mexico, Spanish missionaries also began moving into the Maya regions of Yucatan and southern Mexico and Guatemala, and other parts of Central America.

By the 1540s, most of the individual conquests in Central America were complete, and missionary efforts had begun in earnest. The Dominicans, Franciscans and Mercedarians were the most powerful orders involved in the Central American missionization process. These friars worked in the *reducciones* ("reduced" or congregated populations) and took evangelical trips into "unreduced" areas to persuade the local Indians to adopt the Christian faith.[6]

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[5] Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

[6] Richard Cooke, "The Native Peoples of Central America during Precolumbian and Colonial Times," in *Central America: A Natural and Cultural* History, ed. Anthony G. Coates (New

Missionaries performed massive burnings of local books made of bark paper or deerskin and filled with painted images and hieroglyphic texts. These sacred books, today called codices, held valuable information about native religion, ritual, and cosmology, and the friars aimed to eradicate native religions and their practices in order to replace them with the Christian faith. They saw the Americas as a New Jerusalem, full of potential for spreading the Christian faith.[7]

Throughout the colony, the conquerors also destroyed temples and replaced them with churches, such as the now famous church of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios in Cholula that sits directly atop a hill that covers a former indigenous temple (fig. 0-3). By physically placing the Christian god above native gods, the Spanish metaphorically attempted to supersede the native religion. At the same time, this placement allowed them to coopt the spiritual power of the original temple, thus retaining a sacred authenticity in the minds of native neophytes.

The violence of conquest was not new to the native populations of the Americas, who had known a long history of warfare and colonization before the arrival of Europeans. In Mesoamerica, for example, the Classic-period Maya engaged in periodic warfare, as evidenced in painted murals, sculpture, and hieroglyphic texts.[8] The Late Postclassic Mexica were migrants from the north who eventually settled on an undesirable group of islands near the Western shore of Lake Texcoco, transforming them

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Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 174; Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History*, 1520-1720 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 106-107.

[7] The New Jerusalem was viewed as an ideal community on earth, made up of souls redeemed by God.

[8] Michael D. Coe, *Royal Cities of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 27.

into a powerful imperial metropolis.[9] Although they dominated through military force, the Mexica allowed their subjects relative religious and cultural freedom. The defeated were never forced to give up their religion and language entirely. Instead, they had to agree to the terms of the new ruler, which typically were to pay tribute or be brutally attacked. This practice created an environment in which conquered communities assimilated the conqueror's gods into their own pantheon. When the Spaniards arrived, some native neophytes enthusiastically adopted the Christian faith as a way of improving their position within the Colonial hierarchy, but perhaps also because it had become usual practice to adopt the traditional gods of the conqueror alongside their own.

To catechize and indoctrinate native groups with the teachings of the Catholic Church, the friars turned to images, which became valuable tools that allowed visual communication in the face of difficult linguistic and cultural barriers. Friars brought with them images of Jesus Christ, Mary, and the saints, and soon indigenous converts began making their own local versions. Throughout the new colony, cities and towns alike came to define themselves by their local saints and their images, as they had with local pre-Hispanic gods and patrons. This *patria chica*, or local and regional culture, came to define the Colonial religious experience, and this is evident in the myriad local shines to various holy figures that dotted the Colonial landscape. Some of the images attained cult status through reports of their miraculous works; as a result, these cults and associated objects were disseminated far beyond their points of origin via painted, printed, and sculpted copies of the source image.

[9] Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe R. Solís Olguín, *Aztecs* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 11.

Subject and Rationale for This Study of the *Cristo Negro*

This study focuses on a particular category of Colonial images of the *Cristos Negros* (Black Christs) of Mexico and Central America, as well as objects and rituals, especially pilgrimages, associated with them. It does this by using the Black Christs as case studies in the development of popular art and faith throughout the Colonial period.

Most investigations of Colonial religious art in the Americas have focused on the many apparitions of the Virgin Mary rather than those of Jesus Christ, a surprising fact considering Christ's centrality to the Christian faith. In particular, images of the crucified Christ have received little attention as sacred New World art. They have not been investigated in terms of their relationship to earlier Spanish or pre-Hispanic cultures, or in terms of their distinctiveness as original images and devotions in New Spain and Central America. Nor has their place within the broader category of Colonial Latin American art been treated. Even within the larger category of miraculous crucifixes, there is a dearth of scholarship on the *Cristo Negro*, even though this image was immensely popular throughout the Colonial period and has remained so up to the present day. Rectifying this neglect is one of the primary aims of this dissertation.

Although there are numerous examples of the Black Madonna in Europe, including those of a Black Madonna and Child, the adult *Cristo Negro* is rare in Spain but quite common in its colonies.[10] As some scholars have discussed, and as I will further explore, many of the earliest examples of Black Christ images are crucifixes that were originally white but slowly darkened over the years from exposure and ritual activity.

[10] Two of the best-known Black Christs outside the Americas are the Lord of Santa María de Jesús in Cáceres, Spain, and the Lord of Quiapo, in the Philippines. These examples and others are discussed later in the Introduction.

They are unique not because they blackened, for surely this discoloration happened to cult images around the world, but because they were allowed to remain black. Whereas in many churches images would be routinely cleaned from the layers of soot from candles, oxidation of varnishes, and oil and dirt from human hands, these pieces were kept dark. As described in numerous legends associated with the Black Christs, this was often done to augment their miraculous sacrality, which was thought to have been bestowed by God.

Because of the "accidental" darkening of the sculptures, the topic of the Black Christ has apparently been largely ignored by art historians, who have viewed the blackness of the images as not essential to their meaning and thus not worthy of study. The major early examples discussed in this dissertation—the Black Christs of Chalma (1537) and Tila (circa 1590) in Mexico, and Esquipulas (1595) in Guatemala—are all images that were gradually blackened. Following the rise to prominence of these cult images, the most famous of which was the Black Christ of Esquipulas, many churches throughout Mexico and Central America began to create their own *Cristos Negros,* either by painting existing images black or by creating new black images of Christ. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, and increasingly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, blackness came to signify the image's divine strength, thus making the darkened image an emblem of local sacrality and legitimacy. Black Christ images came to be seen as distinct from and more powerful than conventional versions of a "white" Jesus.

It has also been pointed out that many of the most famous images of the Black Christ arose in heavily indigenous areas.[11] Many of the rituals and sacred associations of

[11] Geographer Mary Lee Nolan notes a "…Latin American propensity to venerate black or dark images of Christ…Nearly 10 percent of the Christ-centered shrines I have found in Latin America focus on dark images and two-thirds of these figures are found at the shrines described as traditionally Indian." Mary Lee Nolan, "The European Roots of Latin American Pilgrimage," in

pre-Hispanic cultures continued into the Colonial period in relation to Christian cult images. Legends arose linking the Christs to earlier gods, particularly "dark" or "black" gods connected with local caves. Few of these origin theories can be substantiated by period documents, but it is clear that native associations with the sacred landscape and related ritual and pilgrimage practices were grafted onto many of these Christ cults over the centuries.

In Chalma, for example, a Nahuatl-speaking group revered a crucifix that purportedly appeared in a cave in 1537. The area surrounding Chalma is rich in caves, mountains, and springs. In contrast to many of the sites where the presence of original "dark" gods are only conjectural, at Chalma Colonial-era documents identify a "dark lord of caves," Oxtoteotl, who was worshipped in a nearby cave. According to local legend and Augustinian records, a Spanish friar named Nicolás de Perea entered the cave accompanied by indigenous converts during the Feast of Pentecost in 1537. There they found an image of Christ crucified, mounted atop a broken Pre-Columbian deity idol. It soon became famous for its healing powers and was reproduced in printed books and illustrated to spread the popularity of this Nahua *Cristo* and its cult. [12]

Also associated with caves was the *Cristo Negro* of Esquipulas, which offers a fascinating example of a native Christ from the Chortí Maya region of Guatemala. A European artist in Antigua, Guatemala, named Quirio Cataño, created this *Cristo* in 1595, and it became central to a highly developed pilgrimage system that superseded one that

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Pilgrimage in Latin America, ed. N.R. Crumrine and A. Morinis (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 31-32.

[12] The term "Nahua" refers to indigenous people of Mexico who speak the Nahuatl language. The Mexica (Atzecs) are one of many Nahua groups. Miraculous images of Jesus Christ were often referred to simply as *Cristos*.

was in place even before the Spanish arrival. The site was sacred for its healing rivers and caves and known for the ancient practice of geophagy, or earth eating. The Lord of Esquipulas was and remains the most famous *Cristo Negro*, inspiring a rash of votive copies, most of which retain close affinity with the original.[13] Offshoots of the cult have been found from New Mexico to Costa Rica.[14]

Other copies became miraculous cult objects in their own right, inspiring devotion and pilgrimage beyond their immediate vicinity. Perhaps the farthest afield from the Esquipulas cult, yet one of the most famous examples, is the Black Nazarene of Portobelo, Panama. *El Nazareno* lies outside the tradition of Black Christ imagery that radiated out from Esquipulas to reach all of Mexico and much of Central America. Instead of a crucifix, *El Nazareno* is an image of Christ bearing the cross. Rather than emerging from a primarily indigenous community, the Portobelo Christ is located in the heavily African area of Panama's Caribbean coast. Here the figure's blackness came to be associated with the race of the local population, but nevertheless it can be linked to the larger category of Black Christ imagery.

Overall, these examples shed light on the process of production, replication, and reception of religious images in Colonial New Spain and Central America. This dissertation seeks to understand the origins and changing meaning of the blackness of the major Black Christ images in various locations. Incorporating Spanish devotional

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[13] These sculptural copies will heretofore be referred to as votive sculptures, since they point directly back to the famed progenitor image (in this case, Esquipulas). This differs from a devotional sculpture, which is regarded as miraculous and inspires pilgrimage.

[14] There are votive sculptures of the Christ of Esquipulas in the Chapel of the Holy Child of Atocha in Chimayó, New Mexico, and the Sanctuary of the Holy Christ of Esquipulas in Alajuelita, Costa Rica. These images allow local devotees access to the famed image in Esquipulas via these local subsidiary sculptures.

practices and indigenous and African cultural predilections, these images emerge as fascinating examples of traditional representations of Christ's Passion that were transformed into specific and local manifestations of the divine.

Beyond examining the acts of devotion pertinent to each image, this dissertation also examines the material origins of the works of art. The process of dissemination calls attention not only to the original sculpture but also the subsequent painted and printed copies that spread these Christ cults beyond their small, localized communities to the greater Colonial society at large. Through the adoption of a Black Christ, local communities could stake their claim on the sacred landscape, asserting them as powerful centers of the Christian faith.

Sites that initially attracted only local devotion became increasingly popular during the Viceregal period (1521-1821),[15] as artists came to each church to copy the miraculous Christ images in sculpture, paint, and printed form. As these cults spread beyond their immediate vicinity, they were reinterpreted and changed to cross racial and social boundaries. For example, while the Lord of Esquipulas retained its blackness in sculptural copies, the Lord of Chalma was whitened over time as creoles and *mestizos* adopted the cult for their own purposes.[16] The original crucifixes nevertheless remained tied to local geographic locations, much as Pre-Columbian gods had been associated with natural topographical features. It is also similar to the ways in which European pagans

[15] For examples of the rich variety of religious images created during this period, see Hector Rivero Borrell Miranda, *The Grandeur of Viceregal Mexico* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2002); Ilona Katzew, *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

[16] Creoles, or *criollos*, were Spaniards born in the Americas, rather than in Spain. *Mestizos* were people of mixed indigenous and Spanish descent.

before the time of Christ had worshipped in or near local rivers, caves, and mountains.[17] Each manifestation of Christ was a localized expression of the new Christian faith, its copies harkening back to an original miracle as well as to the prototype of Christ himself.

Mesoamerican Dark Gods

Mesoamerica had a long history of "dark gods" before the arrival of the Spaniards and the development of cults of the Black Christ. Nine "Lords of the Night" are depicted in the divinatory *tonalamatl* sections of pre- and post-conquest manuscripts.[18] The tonalamatl was a cyclical calendar of 260 days broken up into twenty thirteen-day periods called trecenas by the Spanish, each one presided over by different deities. Each ruler of the night sky was associated with a distinct level of the underworld. Similarly, the Maya had nine Lords of the Night, called the G series, who ran continuously through their Long Count calendar.[19]

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[17] The deliberate missionary strategy of transference of sacred meaning from pagan idols to Christian icons took place in both Europe and the Americas. In Europe this phenomenon has been relegated to a historical curiosity, while in the Americas it often holds continuing relevance for contemporary ritual practice. See John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 141.

[18] The *tonalamatl* is the divinatory almanac structured around the 260-day count of days, or *tonalpohualli*. This ritual calendar was used alongside the *xiuhpohualli*, or 365-day solar year. See Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 240; Mary Ellen Miller and Karl A. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 53.

[19] The Long Count calendar, developed most notably by the Maya, recorded time from a fixed point in the past using numerals and figural images. They commonly depicted it on stelae and other monuments to record the ascendency of a ruler and other important dynastic events. It began with the mythical creation date of August 13, 3114 B.C. On the Long Count, see Michael D. Coe, *The* Maya, 8th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 64-66.

These dark gods were often depicted with dark skin, dark facial markings or dark accouterments. The rain god Tlaloc, for example, was often painted in indigenous books with a black mask over his eyes, signifying the night sky. Tlazolteotl, an earth goddess associated with midwives, childbirth, and purification, was often depicted with a black band around her mouth, indicating her ingestion of sin. These gods, as well as the Night Lords, are typically Mesoamerican in their plethora of names, associations, and guises. [20]

Aside from these Lords of the Night, Tezcatlipoca, the omnipotent god of rulers, diviners, and warriors, is a principal deity in the Nahua pantheon. Like most gods, Tezcatlipoca was imbued with many traits; he was god of the night sky, sorcery, rulership, and obsidian. There are numerous distinct names for him in book six of the Florentine Codex, dedicated to rhetoric and moral philosophy.[21] His animal counterpart is the jaguar, a nocturnal power animal also associated with the Night Lord, Tepeyollotl, "heart of the mountain." This manifestation thus links Tezcatlipoca with the Night Lords.[22]

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[20] The nine Aztec Lords of the Night were Xiuhtecuhtli, Mictlantecuhtli, Tecpatl, Piltzintecuhtli, Centeotl, Chalchiuhtlicue, Tlazolteotl, Tepeyollotl, and Tlaloc. The Maya Lords of the Night are not all known by name, but are commonly classified as the "G series." Miller and Taube, 53.

[21] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and the School of American Research, 1950-1982). Sahagún's work, properly entitled *General History of the Things of New Spain* in English, is an encyclopedic study of the people of Central Mexico. Sahagún was a Franciscan missionary who arrived in Mexico shortly after the conquest and began conducting ethnographic research into the local cultures with the help of his indigenous students. He believed that understanding indigenous gods and customs fascilitated the eradication of native practices and the successful conversion of Indians to Christianity. Although disdainful of many indigenous practices, Sahagún came to admire many qualities of Mexica culture that he recorded in great detail in his *General History*. Today it remains one of the most important documents for the study of the Mexica.

[22] For more on Tezcatlipoca see Guilhem Olivier, *Mockeries and Metamorphoses of an Aztec God: Tezcatlipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror,"* trans. Michel Besson (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2008).

Tezcatlipoca at times appears as the black god of the north and as patron of the day *acatl* in the ritual calendar. The god's accouterments included a back ornament consisting of a round plate of black obsidian polished like a mirror.[23] The Codex Borgia,[24] a pre-conquest native painted book, also shows the god with another smoking obsidian mirror in place of one foot, referencing his mythic battles with the Earth Monster (fig. 0-4). Obsidian, a black volcanic rock, was associated with the earth, and the polished black obsidian mirror was used for necromancy and sorcery throughout Mesoamerica. Through its reflection, his "smoking mirror" symbolized Tezcatlipoca's ability to see all that took place in the world.

In one of his many guises, Tezcatlipoca was also known as Oxtoteotl, the dark lord of caves. Caves held a special place in Mesoamerican mythology. It was said in one origin myth that mankind emerged from Chicomoztoc, a primordial mountain perforated by seven caves. Caves held vaginal associations as indentations into the earth and as the conduits of human life.[25] In some accounts, most famously the post-conquest *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, out of the seven caves at Chicomoztoc emerged a different ethnic group—the Xochimilca, Tlahuica, Acolhua, Tlaxcalan, Tepaneca, Chalca, and Mexica

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[23] Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 99.

[24] The provenance of the Codex Borgia is still debated, and it may have either Nahua (possibly from Cholula) or Mixtec origins. Its chronology is also unclear, with scholars debating whether it was written before or very shortly after the conquest, though most would say pre-conquest. It is an excellent example of the type of manuscript created by indigenous people before contact with Europeans, exhibiting a purely indigenous pictorial style. Eduard Seler, ed., *Códice Borgia* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963); see also Gisele Díaz, Alan Rogers, and Bruce E. Byland, *The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993).

[25] Allan R. Sandstrom, "The Cave-Pyramid Complex among the Contemporary Nahua of Northern Veracruz," in *In the Maw of the Earth Monster: Mesoamerican Ritual Cave Use*, ed. James E. Brady and Keith M. Prufer (Austin: University of Texas Press), 45.

(fig. 0-5).[26] These caves captivated the Nahua imagination, and in the mid-fifteenth century the Mexica ruler Motecuhzoma I sent a group of wise men to find it in order to learn more about their ancestors.[27] This journey can be thought of as a pilgrimage, a sojourn to a place with spiritual significance—in this case, an opening in the earth and a portal to the place of creation. As places of emergence, caves were also treated with some ambivalence, as they were considered portals to the underworld. They were places of fertility, but also conduits to the dark and pernicious world of the dead.

The Maya also had myths of travel to or from caves, particularly *Tulan Zuyua*, or the place of seven caves, where the Quiché Maya journeyed to receive their gods.[28] More than dark portals to the underworld, caves were viewed as powerfully charged ritual spaces.[29] The Maya used caves to mark the life cycles of creation, reproduction, and death, and they gathered there to make appeals for health and prosperity and to codify the social status of individuals and communities.[30] In short, caves were dark, powerfully charged, ritual spaces, and the gods dedicated to them were deities of the underworld, associated with darkness and typically painted as such. Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica,

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[26] Dana Leibsohn, *The Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca: Recollecting Identity in a Nahua Manuscript* (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1993), 180.

[27] Miller and Taube, 60.

[28] Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 152.

[29] Cave worship, in fact, extends back to Olmec times, when caves were represented as the mouths of fanged power animals, usually a jaguar, seen at the sites of La Venta and Izapa. Stanislav Chládek, *Exploring Maya Ritual Caves: Dark Secrets from the Maya Underworld* (Washington, D.C.: Altamira Press, 2011), 21.

[30] Keith Malcolm Prufer and James Edward Brady, *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 11.

then, had many prototypes of dark gods, most commonly associated with the night sky or earthly caves.

When the Spanish arrived, they brought with them an entirely new belief system, but nevertheless both indigenes and Spaniards drew parallels between the native and Catholic religious practices. The sixteenth-century conquerors were both horrified and intrigued by Mesoamerican religion. They felt that human sacrifice and cannibalism were works of the devil, but they also viewed practices that strangely mirrored their own as signs of indigenous potential to be converted. For example, the friars noted the native practice of rituals similar to baptism and penance, the use of incense, and legends of a primordial flood as analogous to their own rituals and Biblical history. Some even noted the linguistic similarity between the Mexica word for god, *teo*, and the Spanish word for god, *dios*.[31]

Black Christs and Black Madonnas in Europe and the Americas

"Cum ex apostolatus officio," a 1558 bull issued by Pope Paul IV, encouraged evangelizers to promote such fortuitous connections: "The days which the Indians, according to their ancient rites, dedicate to the sun and to their idols should be replaced with feasts in honor of the true sun, Jesus Christ, his most holy Mother, and the saints whose feast days the Church celebrates."[32] One might think that the friars would adamantly deny such "pagan" associations when attempting to eradicate native beliefs, but in fact they used them as a means of bringing indigenous neophytes into the church.

[31] Miller and Taube, 26.

[32] Cited in Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 174.

The evangelizers brought with them a complex visual vocabulary that they sought to replicate on American shores by training indigenous, creole, and mestizo artists alike to re-create images of Jesus, the Virgin, and saints. Some of these objects attained cult status through their miraculous works. The most famous of these is Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe, whose journey began in Extremadura, Spain, as a black virgin carved from a dark wood. In both Spain and New Spain she was represented as the apocalyptic woman standing on the moon, clothed in the sun and stars. In New Spain, according to legend, she appeared to the Indian Juan Diego on Tepeyac, the hill that had been a pre-Hispanic site for the worship of the Aztec goddess Tonanzin. She began as an Indian Virgin and later became a symbol of criollo pride in order to assert the prominence of New Spain as a New Jerusalem.[33] The Virgin of Guadalupe is not quite a black Virgin but closer to a *morena* (brown) one, which related her skin color to the darker complexion of the Indian and mestizos of the New World, and perhaps went back to her provenance as a dark Virgin in Extremadura.

Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba's *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe* recounts the ways in which popular Catholicism, Amerindian traditions, and African *orisha* worship have been blended together in the Americas to create numerous permutations of Black Madonna imagery.[34] The author argues that Black Madonna imagery derives from Mother Earth images, citing the example of one in Russia who is

[33] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" *Art Journal* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 39-47.

[34] Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 8.

fertile and black, with her skin referencing the rich and moist earth.[35] She also makes a link as far back as the Egyptian goddess Isis, who is black and nurses her son Horus, and suggests a resemblance to the Christian iconography of Virgin and Child, where Mary nurses the infant Jesus. She calls this "dark feminine" imagery found in Africa, the Americas, and Europe an example of "parallel developments in distant locations," and identifies the images as symbols of the hybridization and transformation occurring during the process of conversion to Christianity.[36]

I propose that such parallel developments can be seen in a plethora of black *santos* in the Americas. One of the most popular saints in the Americas was San Benito, a freed African slave from Sicily. Somewhat less prominent was St. Iphigenia, an Ethiopian woman converted by the apostle and evangelist St. Matthew. These saints were relatively obscure in Europe but gained a much larger cult in the Americas, particularly in communities of African descendants. In New Spain these saints were prominent cult figures within Afro-Mexican confraternities during the Colonial period.[37] Two of the *Cristos Negros* to be explored in this dissertation were particularly venerated in areas with a black population: the *Cristo* of Otatitlán in Veracruz, Mexico, and *El Nazareno* in Portobelo, Panama. It may be that in these regions with a sizable African population, *santos* with black pigmentation became popular partly because they bore a resemblance to their devotees.

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[35] Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 9.

[36] Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 9.

[37] Nicole von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

The Lord of Otatitlán in Mexico is associated with both indigenous and African groups, but the Black Nazarene of Portobelo in Panama seems to have been most strongly associated with the local black majority population. This latter example is also one of the most modern cults discussed in the dissertation. Although the sculpture was created in the later seventeenth century, not until the early nineteenth century did it gain widespread following as a black (African) image associated with the trials and tribulations of the local population under the yoke of slavery.

In contrast, in places with largely indigenous populations, the *Cristo Negro* served a different purpose. His color was interpreted as a prestigious sign of ancient and sacred power, whether through a connection to the dark gods of the Mesoamerican pantheon, the sacrality of local (dark) caves of emergence, or simply the accumulation of years of ritual activity.

There are hundreds of shrines to the Black Christ throughout Mexico and Central America, although Black Madonnas far outnumber Black Christs in Europe. It is difficult to determine exactly why this reversal took place. Art historian Jeanette Favrot Peterson argues that it is due to Pre-Columbian associations between blackness and masculinity,[38] while, as noted, Oleszkiewicz-Peralba associates blackness with pagan Earth-mother worship in Europe. These analyses, however, are focused on essentializing blackness as something innate in the images. The reality is, however, that most of the Black Christs were originally white and slowly blackened. A 2001 conservator's report determined that the black color of the Virgin of Montserrat in Spain, commonly called "La Moreneta" (the little dark one), developed due to prolonged exposure to candle smoke and/or the

[38] Peterson, 65.

oxidation of varnish on the surface of the sculpture. A series of x-rays exposed the figure's original white color and revealed that the image had been repainted dark brown over the centuries, most recently in the eighteenth century.[39]

On both sides of the Atlantic, then, devotional images were deliberately painted brown or black either to preserve their status as black devotional images or in imitation of another more famous (black) *santo*. Whether slowly darkened and allowed to remain black (e.g., Esquipulas, Chalma, Tila) or deliberately painted black (e.g., Otatitlán, El Petén, *Señor del Veneno*), by the seventeenth century and increasingly in the eighteenth century, the American Black Christ became a popular marker of sacrality, much like Black Madonna imagery in the Old World.

But the Black Christ was not invented in the Americas. There are a few examples of Black Christ figures in Europe that were present long before the colonization of the New World. In fact, since ancient times Europeans had created statues from black marble, such as busts of Roman emperors. Artists used a number of methods to create dark sculptures, including charcoal, graphite, chalk, minerals, and hardwoods. In some instances patinas darkened the works, especially those made of bronze or copper.[40]

Ethnogeographer William V. Davidson claims that political and religious leaders who came from Europe to Latin America were well acquainted with the Black Christ of the Old World: "It is well known that certain effigies of Black Christs from Europe were copied and transferred directly to Central America. From the region of Barcelona, to

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[39] Ismabard Wilkinson, "Montserrat Virgin was White Originally," *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2001, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/spain/1316133/Montserrat-Black-Virgin-was-white-originally.html (accessed January 12, 2013).

[40] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro América, 2012), 36.

mention one case, there are examples of a Black Madonna of Montserrat with the Christ Child (in many sites of Central America, among others Tegucigalpa and León) and of the Lord of Salomé (in the cathedral of Comayagua)."[41] But the examples on which he focuses are Black Virgins, not Christs, or a Black Virgin and Child such as the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, Poland, which includes a black infant Christ, and the Black Madonna of Les Saintes-Maries-de-la Mer, France (a singular sculpture of a blackened Madonna). He claims that these Black Virgins may have also been models for the Black Christs of the Americas. But the blackness of these Virgins was, as with many of the Black Christs, the result of years of exposure and ritual activity.

Many of the oldest and most popular pilgrimage Virgins in Spain, France, Italy, and Germany are Black Madonnas, but in Europe their blackness was not essential to their meaning until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[42] Interestingly, pilgrimages and cults of relics and miraculous images that had been popular in the Middle Ages were revived as part of the Counter-Reformation beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. Along with the organization of rituals and processions, Catholic reformers aimed to promote and preserve image veneration in the face of attacks by Protestants.[43] While the critical focus on miraculous images did not originate with the Reformation, it further popularized them in opposition to iconoclasm. In the course of this cultural struggle the Black Madonnas of Europe came to be seen as an ancient embodiment of Early Christian and medieval traditions. Beginning in the Counter-Reformation period, some local

[41] Davidson, 36.

[42] Scheer, 1438.

[43] Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700: A Reassessment of the Counter Reformation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 57.

churches purposefully began to paint their Virgins black in order to capitalize on the ancient prestige of such images.

The oldest Black Christ in Europe is a statue known as the *Volto Santo di Lucca*, found in the Cathedral of San Martino in Lucca.[44] Davidson cites a medieval legend that claims Nicodemus, who lived at the time of Christ, made an image of him in a dark cedar wood, which arrived in Lucca in 742. Scientific analysis has discovered that the original sculpture was picked apart bit by bit by pilgrims who wanted to obtain a relic of the miraculous image. According to radiocarbon dating, the current image dates from 1060-1070, the period when the cathedral housing it was reconstructed. [45] Davidson points out that in the 245 pages of the publication on the Lucca Christ the word *nero* (black in Italian) is never once mentioned.[46] Although the figure is black in color, its blackness was not particularly salient in terms of its spiritual force.

In western Spain there are several Black Christs. In Cáceres, Extremadura, there exists a confraternity called the *Hermandad del Cristo Negro*, based in the Cathedral of Santa María. This cathedral's life-sized Black Christ was made in the fourteenth century (fig. 0-6). Davidson also lists Black Christs in Villamiel, Plasencia, Trujillo, and Mérida, all in Spain.[47] The Cathedral of Barcelona houses the *Santo Cristo de Lepanto*, another life-sized, polychromed wooden crucifix. According to legend, a local artist made the

[44] Davidson, 40.

[45] Davidson, 40.

[46] Davidson, 40.

[47] Davidson, 41.

sculpture to commemorate the miraculous apparition and intercession of a crucifix during the Battle of Lepanto in 1571.[48]

Davidson argues that the Battle of Lepanto, which took place in northern Greece was one of Europe's most important battles as it marked a showdown between the "Holy League" (Spain, Venice, and the Papal States), commanded by John of Austria, half-brother of Philip II, and the Ottoman Empire. The victory by the Holy League prevented the Ottomans from extending further into the Mediterranean and was celebrated as a victory for Christendom over Islam. Despite the fact that there are numerous painted scenes of the famous battle, none contains an image of a Black Christ. Another story states that the local admiral's bowsprit—the pole that extends from the front of a vessel—was an image of a Black Christ.[49]

This is not the only legend that connects Philip II to the Black Christ. At Otatitlán, local legend states that the ruler commissioned three Black Christ images in 1595.[50] They were shipped out of the port in Santander via an English fleet and arrived in Veracruz in April of 1596. The legend asserts that one of the images was taken to Chalma, another to Esquipulas, and the third to Otatitlán. This legend is most certainly false, as we know that the Christ in Esquipulas was made on American soil, and that the Lord of Chalma dates from 1539, and was likely originally made from *pasta de caña*, an indigenous technique

[48] Davidson, 43.

[49] Davidson, 43.

[50] José Martínez Mata, *El Santuario de Otatitlán: Historia y oraciones* (Otatitlán, Veracruz, 2008).

indicating American provenance.[51] The direct connection with Philip II was likely used in Otatitlán as a way of legitimizing its *Cristo* amid more famous Black Christ cults.

But the connection to Philip II is intriguing, as he was notoriously devout and concerned with the fate of the Catholic Church in both Spain and the Americas. In 1575 he ordered a questionnaire of local religion in Spain, and beginning in 1579 he ordered the *relaciones geográficas* to survey the people, lands, and missionary practices of his American colonies.[52] Nevertheless, there is no period documentation linking Philip II to Black Christ imagery, and in fact, all of the earliest examples were originally white. It is possible that the monarch's deep religiosity was remembered as a source of the religious fervor of the early colonization and missionization of the region. Perhaps even the legends surrounding the *Santo Cristo de Lepanto* and its connections to Philip II's reign made their way to the Americas via the conquistadors. But such direct connections cannot be substantiated, and only serve as, at most, a broad contextual framework for understanding the larger trajectory of devotional imagery in the Americas.

Previous Literature and Methodologies for Christ Images and the Black Christ

In one of the earliest surveys of Viceregal art, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America*, art historian Pál Kelemen devotes a chapter to "Christ in the New World." He compares European and Latin American images of Christ, concluding that through

[51] Pasta de caña is a sculptural technology invented in Mexico. It derived from indigenous (Purépecha) artistic practice, and in the Colonial period involved the creation of processional sculptures from corn pith. This technique will be further discussed in chapter two, "Christ of Chalma: Dark Lord of Caves at an Augustinian Mission in Mexico."

[52] See William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Barbara Mundy, *The Mapping of New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Maps of the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

changes in iconography, ritual, and philosophy, local and Spanish artists created an "Indianized Christ."[53] Many of his observations on hybridity are insightful, but are marred by his prejudice against "Indian idols." Nevertheless, Keleman's work is important as one of the first to recognize Viceregal art as worthy of study and for introducing new topics that have stimulated more detailed studies of these overlooked works of art.

More recently, Kelly Donahue-Wallace's section on "Christological Imagery" in *Art and Architecture in Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821* examines the methodological progress of scholarship on images of Christ.[54] Donahue-Wallace, an art historian, argues that in the New World crucifixes may have been particularly popular among indigenous people because they evoked memories of indigenous blood sacrifice. For Mexican-born Spaniards (criollos or creoles) they also conjured the intense realism of polychromed statuary that had been popular since medieval times in Spain.[55] Her observations are useful for their acknowledgment of the cultural circumstances that affected the development and reception of these Colonial Christ cults. This dissertation takes a similar cultural stance but looks more closely at individual examples, narrowing the focus to the *Cristo Negro*.

Art historian Xavier Moyssén Echeverria's *México: angustia de sus Cristos* is the only survey of Mexican polychromed statues of Christ.[56] It catalogues these images in

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[53]Pál Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 58.

[54] Kelly Donahue-Wallace, *Art and Architecture in Viceregal Latin America, 1521-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 148-151.

[55] Donahue-Wallace, 150.

[56] Xavier Moyssén Echeverría, *México: Angustia de sus Cristos* (Mexico City: INAH, 1967).

different cities and towns throughout Mexico from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Although he lists the major examples, Moyssén provides only cursory information about each image and its related miracles. He fails to discuss copies of statues in paintings or prints, an aspect that is integral to my study of the development and dissemination of Christ cults in New Spain.

Most recently historian of religions Jennifer Scheper Hughes published her dissertation as a book entitled *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present*.[57] A work in the tradition of religious studies, it chronicles devotion to the *Cristo Aparecido* of Totolapan, Mexico from its sixteenth-century inception to the present. The chapters are divided into discrete encounters between the image and its devotees, offering new reflections and adding nuance to the issue of a syncretic, indigenous Christianity, including comparative mention of the Lord of Chalma. Its contribution to the topic of this dissertation lies in its methodology, as the author deals in depth with the contested issue of syncretism, the melding of different cultures and cosmologies.

Hughes states that scholars have long sought to make correlations between the Pre-Columbian and Christian faiths by drawing direct parallels between, for example, the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the *ixiptla* (deity impersonator) in Aztec ritual. She rejects the notion that the "spiritual conquest" engendered either a melding or a clashing of the two religious systems. Instead, she insists:

> In the Christian conversion of Mexico it was not, in the final analysis, the case that the old symbolic apparatus found new application and expression in the novel Christian order. Rather,

[57] Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

> it was the underlying sentiment that lingered and endured; and the more ordinary and modest, but also more deeply rooted, everyday sensibilities and practices that most framed interpretive engagement with Christian material religion. Simply put, the religious *feelings* that drummed beneath the prior institutional, symbolic, iconographic, and ritual religions are what sought (and ultimately found) continuity, purchase, and home within Christianity.[58]

Choosing only the most convincing parallels between native and Christian thought, Hughes uses affect theory, or "religious feeling," to link the native and Christian religions. Her approach is useful in avoiding the temptation to draw direct causal parallels between native and Christian religion and instead to approach syncretism as a nuanced and delicate phenomenon, one that may have occurred subconsciously and subliminally.

Anthropologist John M. Watanabe's similarly nuanced approach to syncretism is also a useful model. In "From Saints to Shibboleths: Image, Structure, and Identity," he examines the church at Santiago Chimaltenango, a Maya town in western Guatemala.[59] He argues that instead of viewing Maya syncretism as "a seamless fusion of native and Christian elements," the process should be seen as a community effort that was strategically planned to place Christianity and Maya religion into a new Colonial framework.[60]

Watanabe compares Castilian saint devotions to those of the Maya, arguing that Maya saints, though named after Castilian saints, take on distinctly Mayan temperaments. As he explains in his introduction: "At the center of every Maya town in the highlands of

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[58] Hughes, 70-71.

[59] John M. Watanabe, "From Saints to Shibboleths: Image, Structure and Identity in Maya Religious Syncretism," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (February 1990): 131-50.

[60] Watanabe, 131.

southern Mexico and Guatemala stands the Catholic church, often referred to as the house of the saints' images that dwell inside. For the Maya, these saints have long served as local guardians of crops, health, and community well-being, whose benevolence hinges on proper homage from town residents."[61] He insists that this process was not simply fortuitous, but a meaningful and conscious effort on the part of Maya community members, calling syncretism a "dialectical process."[62] This process is of utmost importance in my study as it confers agency on both cultural groups and suggests that Colonial Christianity is neither native nor European, but is a third signifier.

Art historian Cecilia Klein's "The Aztec Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca and Its Implications for Christ Crucified" takes the more direct route that Hughes avoids in revealing syncretic tendencies in Colonial works of art.[63] Klein compares the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca with Jesus Christ, particularly through the lens of gender. She examines descriptions of the Aztec deity that describe him as a perfect specimen, assigning him androgynous qualities of beauty, youthfulness, and perfection. Klein argues that converts in the Colonial period drew connections between their god and Jesus Christ and thus ascribed feminized characteristics to the Christian god. She uses José de Ibarra's statue painting of the Christ of Ixmiquilpan, painted in 1731 (see fig. 2-11), as the prime example of what she calls a Colonial-era androgynous and feminized Christ.

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[61] Watanabe, 131.

[62] Watanabe, 132.

[63] Cecilia Klein, "The Aztec Sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca and Its Implications for Christ Crucified," in *Power, Gender, and Ritual in Europe and the Americas: Essays in Memory of Richard C. Trexler*, ed. Peter Arnade and Michael Rocke (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 273-298.

Klein's article raises many questions. How would a creole artist painting some two hundred years after the conquest understand the Aztec conception of an androgynous Christ, if there even had been such a concept? In fact, Klein points out that Europe had a long-standing tradition of a feminized Christ dating back to early Christian times.[64] The problem with Klein's analysis is that she does not historicize an androgynous Christ in New Spain, cite any reference to or descriptions of one, or provide a context for a continuous cult of this type. To associate Ibarra's Christ of Ixmiquilpan with a feminized Tezcatlipoca is a large leap back. This dissertation attempts to provide a historicized explication of these Christ images, suggesting that, at a certain point, Pre-Columbian and Hispanic viewpoints become intertwined as a new Colonial signifier. By focusing on specific case studies rather than on an iconic New Spanish Christ, my study avoids generalizations like those that weaken Klein's essay.

A more useful model for this study is a recent doctoral dissertation by Maya Stanfield-Mazzi entitled "The Replication of Ritual in the Colonial Andes: Images of the Virgin of Pomata and Christ of the Earthquakes."[65] Stanfield-Mazzi, an art historian, uses ethnographic methods by looking at current devotional practices and then extrapolating or "upstreaming" to similar actions that come from a Colonial (and at times Pre-Columbian) history.[66] My dissertation will look at current practice as well as the social context of each *Cristo* in order to create a "biography" of each miraculous crucifix.

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[64] Klein, 277.

[65] Maya Stanfield-Mazzi, "The Replication of Ritual in the Colonial Andes: Images of the Virgin of Pomata and Christ of the Earthquakes" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2006).

[66] Upstreaming is commonly used in art history, anthropology and archaeology as means of understanding people of the past via their descendants in the present. This method allows scholars

Stanfield-Mazzi's ethnographic approach derives from the lineage of David Freedburg, particularly his seminal *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*.[67] Freedburg's work was groundbreaking for its new approach to creating a biography of a religious image, as he studied localized interaction with a particular cult image and then drew "universal" conclusions about an innate human response to the aesthetic arrangement of an image. Stanfield-Mazzi wisely eschews Freedburg's universal conclusions, but she uses his methods well. She employs an ethnographic approach to images and equally considers both so-called "high" and "low" art. These contributions drawn from Freedburg's work also form a part of this study, which takes ethnographic information from the present and carefully reconstructs the past. This type of upstreaming is not used speculatively, however, but only when such actions and choices can be corroborated via historical documents, whether written or artistic.

Instead of investigating black crucifixion images in order to come to a single "truth" about each one's history and context of creation, my study proposes to create a broader framework for them. Art historian Norman Bryson argues against a single social context for art-historical interpretation, advocating instead for "framing," a more flexible lens of investigation focused on process and storytelling. [68] The concept of framing

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to plot cultural patterns over time. William N. Fenton, an anthropologist of the Iroquois people of New York, first used the term. See William N. Fenton, *Iroquois Journey: An Anthropologist Remembers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

[67] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[68] Norman Bryson, "Art in Context," in *Studies in Historical Change*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 18-42.

certainly elucidates the subjects of the present study, as the documentation uncovered and utilized—contemporaneous prayer books, written accounts, miracles, rituals, and legal histories—constantly modify and change the life of the object.

My work also borrows from semiotics, the study of the ways in which meanings are constructed and perceived. One of the major figures of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, argued that the signifier (the word or emblem) has no direct relationship to the signified (the understood concept).[69] While the *Cristo* of Esquipulas appears entirely European, its "feeling" is indigenous, thereby creating a separation between the signifier (crucifix) and the signified (Christ cult).

Questions regarding the creation of meaning are also useful when one considers the reproduction of these miraculous crucifixes. Printed versions of the crucifixes of Chalma and Esquipulas circulated in books, advertising the popularity of the original crucifix and pointing toward its original prototype. The same could be said of painted versions. The issues of replication and signification are muddled, however, in three-dimensional sculpted copies. The crucifix at Esquipulas was copied numerous times, creating a question as to whether they maintain the authenticity of the original, and if so, in what way.

Until recently, the only published book dealing directly with the theme of the Black Christ was a small narrative travel guide, *Los Cristos Negros: El Señor del Veneno*, written in 1985 by an amateur Mexican American historian, Francisco Javier Reynoso.[70] The book narrates his "discovery" of the Lord of Venom in Mexico City's Metropolitan

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[69] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1998).

[70] Francisco Reynoso, *Los Cristos Negros: El Señor del Veneno* (Mexico City: n.p., 1985).

Cathedral and his subsequent journeys to find out more about the *Cristo Negro* in Mexico and abroad. Although not a scholarly resource, this book provides a good introduction and survey on the topic, as it lists all the most famous examples of Black Christ devotion in the Americas.

The first major survey of Black Christ images and cults was ethnogeographer William V. Davidson's *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua*.[71] The book is thorough, including possibly all the examples of Black Christ images worldwide. His very broad sweep includes images in Central America that are direct copies of the Esquipulas image as well as the more famous pilgrimage Christs explored in my study. Davidson primarily examines secondary images in Honduras and Nicaragua, whereas this dissertation focuses on Esquipulas itself as well as the miraculous *Cristos Negros* in Mexico and Panama. His study is more concerned with breadth than with depth and makes only passing mention of these *Cristos*, an aspect to which I give greater attention in this study.

Most Christological images remained regional in their popularity, and many that reached prominence did not do so until the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Historian William Taylor estimates that 156 shrines to Christ developed in the Colonial period, and of those only about twelve maintained widespread popularity.[72] Among these are the

[71] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro America, 2012).

[72] William B. Taylor, "Two Shrines of the Cristo Renovado: Religion and Peasant Politics in Late Colonial Mexico," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 2.

Lord of Chalma and the Lord of Esquipulas (both *Cristos Negros*) as well as the Lord of Santa Teresa, Ixmiquilpan, and the stone cross of Querétaro.[73]

There have also been numerous dissertations and theses covering the individual case studies in "Disseminating Devotion." Most useful for Esquipulas is L. Jean Palmer's "Esquipulas, Guatemala: The Historical Cultural Geography of a Central American Religious Pilgrimage Center." Palmer's geographic study focuses on the ritual of pilgrimage and its relationship with the sacred indigenous landscape in and around Esquipulas.[74]

Not directly covering the issue of blackness, but nevertheless useful for understanding the dissemination of the Chalma cult is Natalia Ferriero Reyes Retana's "Entre la retina y el mundo: Simulción y trampantojo en un verdadero retrato de milagrosa imagen del Santo Cristo de Chalma," which focuses not on the Chalma *Cristo* itself, but on its numerous painted and printed copies.[75] The author, an art historian, argues that the copies were often just as important as the original because they served to

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[73] The Lord of Santa Teresa will be further discussed in chapter four. It was made of corn paste in 1545 and was originally in the town of Ixmiquilpan in the modern state of Hidalgo. After a series of miracles the crucifix was moved to the Carmelite monastery in Mexico City, where it remains to this day. See Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, "Christ of Ixmiquilpan," in *The Arts in Latin America: 1492-1820*, ed. Joseph J. Rishel and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 382. The Stone Cross of Querétaro is today housed in the Temple of Santa Cruz in Querétaro. According to legend, it marks the place where a battle took place between the Otomí and the Chichimeca in 1531. The story states that a large cross appeared in the sky along with an image of the Apostle Santiago, causing the Chichimecas to surrender. A cross was erected on the spot, and it became a miraculous and popular pilgrimage destination. It is perhaps the only such Christological example that is not a polychromed sculpture of Christ. See Juan Ricardo Jiménez Gómez, *Creencias y prácticas religiosas en Querétaro, siglos XVI-XIX* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2004), 35.

[74] L. Jean Palmer, "Esquipulas, Guatemala: The Historical Cultural Geography of a Central American Religious Pilgrimage Center" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1982).

[75] Natalia Ferreiro Reyes Retana, "Entre la retina y el mundo: Simulación y trampantojo en un verdadero retrato de milagrosa imagen del santo Cristo de Chalma" (PhD diss., UNAM, 2011).

spread the cult beyond Chalma and at times became devotional images in and of themselves.

A third dissertation that has proven useful is Arminda Cristobal Caraval's "Ni yendo a danzar a Chalma: Análisis cualitativo del uso y significado que se le da a la danza prehispánica en Chalma desde la significación de quien la realiza," which studies the ritual of dance at Chalma from the Colonial period to the present.[76] This anthropological study sheds light on the ritual interactions that developed around the *Cristo* and the indigenous associations that became an important part of the Chalma cult.

Throughout the Colonial period, friars and historians mention the Lord of Chalma alongside the Virgin of Guadalupe. An eighteenth-century letter from an Augustinian friar at Chalma to the Viceroy petitioned for a prohibition on the sale of pulque in the village.[77] He claimed that alcohol threatened the sanctity of the shrine and pointed out that there was just such a prohibition at Tepeyac, the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The two shrines were in competition, and despite the popularity of the Virgin in the Colonial period her overwhelming preeminence was not firmly cemented until the twentieth century.[78] This letter is just one example of hundreds of Colonial-era primary sources that illuminate the social history of these miraculous crucifixes. In addition to unpublished documents, each site often has an official history, written during the Colonial period and outlining the foundation and development of the cult.

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[76] Arminda Cristobal Caraval, "Ni yendo a danzar a Chalma: Análisis cualitativo del uso y significado que se le da a la danza prehispánica en Chalma desde la significación de quien la realiza" (PhD diss., UNAM, 2006).

[77] Joseph Simon, "Letter to Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli concerning the Sanctuary of the Lord of Chalma," Clero Regular y Secular (1796), vol. 185, exp. 6, fs. 228-9, AGN, Mexico City.

[78] Taylor, 3.

Overall, then, this dissertation does not rely on a single methodological approach but considers Colonial crucifixes and their cults to be dynamic cultural entities that call for a more complex analysis of their social contexts from their discovery to the present.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter one, "Making God Visible: The Development of Christ Imagery in New Spain," examines the slippage-- that is, the points of intersection and disjunction-- between the holy prototype (in this case, Jesus Christ), miraculous devotional imagery (the famed *Cristos Negros*), and votive images (copies that point back to the miraculous cult image). It questions how people on both sides of the Atlantic interacted with religious imagery and differentiated between the adoration of Christ himself and devotion to his image, though which he performed miracles. The chapter introduces the reader to various sculptural forms of Christ imagery from the simplest wooden crosses to life-sized polychrome statuary. With this contextual framework it becomes clear that the Black Christ was a unique permutation of Christ imagery, altering the traditional representation yet maintaining a visceral connection to the subject and iconography of the flesh and blood struggles of Jesus Christ's Passion in Christian art.

Chapter two, "Christ of Chalma: Dark Lord of Caves at an Augustinian Mission in Mexico," begins with a history of the arrival of Augustinian friars in the region of Chalma in the present-day location of the State of Mexico. As a site with extraordinary physical features (a deep canyon, mountains, rivers, and caves), Chalma became an important pilgrimage site for Nahua speakers long before the Spanish arrival. The chapter introduces the origin of the miraculous crucifix of the Black Christ of Chalma, the

vagaries of its coloration over time, as well as the growth of Chalma legends in association with a pre-Hispanic deity idol and its emergence from a local (dark) cave.

Chapter three, "Black Skin, White Clay: A Crucifix and Its Cult in Esquipulas, Guatemala," probes the development of two parallel origin myths for the most famous *Cristo Negro*, the legend of its origin in a local cave despite knowledge of its European creator, and its layering with Maya cosmology and ritual, particularly the ingesting of kaolin, a clay substance with medicinal properties found in and around Esquipulas. It details the dissemination of the image throughout Guatemala and beyond. The conspicuous blackness of the Lord of Esquipulas became not only a marker of its sacrality but the catapult for its fame from New Mexico to Costa Rica, to become the most popular Christ cult in the Americas.

Chapter four, "The Other *Cristos Negros*: Regional Connections and Diversions," draws together an inventory of the most important *Cristos Negros* that became local extensions of the original pilgrimage sites. While these crucifixes and their cults were not as popular or widespread as those at Chalma and Esquipulas, the images were deliberately painted black, inspired by the prestige and popularity of the famed *Cristo* in Esquipulas. They highlight the substitution of these copies in lieu of making an arduous pilgrimage to Esquipulas in distant Guatemala. Devotees could have their own local Black Christ images and devotions, and benefit from becoming a geographic and ritual link in expanding pilgrimage routes throughout Mexico and Central America.
The chapter also questions the meaning of blackness in each location.

Chapter five, "Black *Santos,* Panama's Black Nazarene, and African Devotees," considers the racial implications of Black Christ imagery. Amid the numerous examples

of Black saint imagery, *El Nazareno* of Portobelo in Panama is the only Black Christ widely popular among African descendants in the Americas. It is a distinctive image of Christ bearing the cross rather than a crucifixion, and was associated with the African community in Portobelo and the larger country of Panama as a symbol of its struggles and triumphs.

The concluding chapter compares the American Black Christ to its European precedents to highlight its distinctive features; situates the study within the context of art history; synthesizes and compares findings concerning the blackness of the images and the development of pilgrimage; and summarizes the contributions of the dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE

MAKING GOD VISIBLE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRIST IMAGERY IN NEW SPAIN

Devotional Images: Idol or Visual Tool?

Devotional images have proven problematic throughout the history of Christian visual arts. David Freedberg describes the difficulties for historians of Christian devotional objects: "In one place the statue is venerated for its own sake, for its substantive qualities; elsewhere it is the saint who is venerated by way of its icon."[79] Although the official church doctrine on images, codified during the Council of Trent (1545–1563), claimed that images were meant as reminders of the person represented and aids for prayer, there were many instances in which the object became a reincarnation of the holy person, something beyond mere representation.[80]

Europeans had long wrestled with the question: Was the object revered for its sacred essence, or was it a tool used to commemorate the sacred person? Freedberg observes:

> Between the second and fourth century arguments about the status of images became a central element of the pagan response to Christianity. From the defenders of traditional Roman religion to the New Platonists, from the exponents of theurgy to the practitioners of syncretism, all insisted on the role of images in enabling men and women to perceive and grasp the divine. In doing so they attributed to images just those qualities most vigorously denied by the Christians, endowing them with powers which, if believed to be real, would have

[79] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

[80] John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 39.

> undermined the very basis of the burgeoning faith.[81]

This undermining of which Freedberg speaks can be traced back to the medieval debate over iconoclasm, which centered on the appropriate use of icons and the relationship between religious personages and their image. The controversy, which reached its height in the eighth and ninth centuries during schisms between the Eastern and Western branches of the church, involved great anxiety about veneration and whether the viewer worshiped the image rather than the holy person represented.[82] This fear came directly from the second commandment in the book of Exodus:

> Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them: I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.[83]

The iconoclasts believed that producing religious images constituted direct defiance of this commandment and that images limited humanity's understanding of God, thereby insulting him. John of Damascus, on the other hand, insisted that images were integral to learning the faith, pointing out that God the Father was made visible in the form of Jesus Christ and that Christ insisted on displaying his physical, visible self when he invited

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[81] Freedberg, 87.

[82] Byzantine emperor Leo III issued a proclamation banning icons in 730 A.D., leading to a hundred years of waves of iconoclasm (the deliberate destruction of religious images). In 843 Pope Gregory III condemned the iconoclasts, asserting that images should be used to educate the illiterate. Gordon M. Patterson, *The Essentials of Medieval History: 500 to 1450 AD, the Middle Ages* (Piscataway, NJ: Research & Education Association, 1990), 14.

[83] Exodus 20: 4-5.

Thomas to touch his wounds.[84] Ultimately the iconophiles won, with images being upheld as devotional aids and tools for teaching the illiterate masses, rather than eliminated as false idols. Images of Jesus Christ were seen as reminders of him, much as the bread and wine of the Eucharist were visible signs of his real presence.

Yet these debates raged on. The next major period of dissent against devotional images occurred during the Protestant Reformation.[85] Although Martin Luther denounced icons, he did not set about to destroy them as had the iconoclasts of prior centuries. Other more radical sects, like the Calvinists, advocated for the complete eradication of religious imagery, believing that images were a distraction from the word of God, delivered in the Bible, which Protestants wanted to see translated into the local dialect for all to read.

John Calvin rejected all images, but other Protestant groups allowed them in certain tightly controlled circumstances. One major change was the rejection of the dead body of Christ on the cross. Protestants preferred to represent the empty cross, a reminder of Christ's Resurrection rather than of his earthly suffering.

In response the Catholic Church convened in Trent (1545-63) to counter Protestant attacks and establish a number of Church teachings. These would have a tremendous impact on the arts of both Europe and the Americas beginning in the mid-

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[84] John of Damascus was an eighth century Syrian monk, considered one of the doctors of the Catholic Church. He was an iconophile (defender of religious imagery) and insisted that he did not worship the matter of the icon, but the maker of all matter. James Clifton, *The Body of Christ in the Art of European and New Spain, 1150-1800* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), 12.

[85] The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 when Martin Luther published his ninety-five theses, which were complaints against the Catholic Church. Luther and John Calvin are the two great leaders of this schism in Western Christianity, which criticized the sale of indulgences as well as many other doctrines of the Catholic Church. See Hans Q. Hillerbrand, *The Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

sixteenth century. The Council of Trent's twenty-fifth session, which met in 1563, decreed that:

> the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honour and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped; or that anything is to be asked of them; or, that trust is to be reposed in images, as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honour which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent; in such wise that by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ; and we venerate the saints, whose similitude they bear: as, by the decrees of Councils, and especially of the second Synod of Nicaea, has been defined against the opponents of images. And the bishops shall carefully teach this, that, by means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in (the habit of) remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety. But if any one shall teach, or entertain sentiments, contrary to these decrees; let him be anathema.[86]

With this decree the Catholic Church reasserted the power of images, with the caveat that they be used for didactic purposes and not as idols. The council clearly stated that images reference their prototypes and serve as reminders of the holy figures—the objects were not to be worshipped on their own accord.

Such debates about the meaning and purpose of religious images are essential for understanding Spanish New World *Cristos*. Scholar of religion Jaime Lara describes claims that the distinction between idolatry and veneration of images was clear to

[86] J. Waterworth, ed., "The Council of Trent, the Twenty-Fifth Session," http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct25.html (accessed December 12, 2012).

European churchmen, but not so distinct to the native population. Indigenes observed Spaniards treating Christian icons in much the same way as they interacted with their own sacred images.[87]

At times Christian religious imagery carried the taint of pagan religions and their devotions to local gods associated with natural features such as forests, rivers, and springs. These devotions to natural features and their associated cult objects continued in the Christian period. In the Americas, the same pattern played out. Before the arrival of Cortés, indigenous people worshipped local gods who were often tied to the natural landscape; with the arrival of the Spanish and the subsequent "spiritual conquest" many of these features and associations remained.

Too often Colonial exchanges are described as the all-knowing, pious European clergyman instructing the idolatrous native neophyte. However, the statements of the Council of Trent demonstrate that Europeans themselves were unclear about the true meaning and correct use of images, as Freedberg points out. Throughout the history of Christianity, objects have supposedly worked miracles and behaved strangely like idols. A seventh-century hagiographic text written by Byzantine monk and author John Moschos, entitled *Spiritual Meadow*, records the miraculous nature of sacred images:

> In our times a pious woman of the region of Apamea dug a well. She spent a great deal of money and went down to a great depth, but did not strike water. So she was despondent on account both of her toil and expenditure. One day she sees a man [in a vision] who says to her: "Send for the likeness of the monk Theodosios of Skopelos, and, thanks to him, God will grant you water." Straightaway, the woman sent two men to fetch the saint's image, and she lowered it into the well. And immediately water came out so that half the hole was filled.[88]

[87] Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 4.

This association between an image and its miraculous, magical qualities comes from pre-Christian societies and, literally, is in direct opposition to the Second Commandment. Yet Moschos praises this woman as "pious" without questioning her superstition. It is just this culture of image worship that is evident in a slippage of devotional practice in the New World as well as in the Old World. Even after the decrees of the Council of Trent condemning the worship of images, distinctions were often not made in the minds of devotees, particularly in the case of miraculous objects.

This ambiguity about the true nature of images, even following the decrees of Trent against idolatry, filtered into the New World. Objects there quickly took on lives of their own, promoted by the local inhabitants. Because of the vast diversity of the New World, including New Spain and Central America, the geographical focus of this dissertation, there emerged a plethora of localized devotional practices. Each town's unique *santo* was an emblem of the *patria chica*, a localized development arising from a distinct and ancient geographic and cultural milieu.

The Form and Function of Religious Art in Pre-Conquest Mesoamerica

Much of the cosmology and art of Mesoamerican people centered on themes of conflict, sacrifice, and man's reciprocal obligation to the gods. The cycles of life, death and rebirth were constant themes in Pre-Columbian art and architecture. City planning was designed as a ritual theatre, laid out for participation in and viewing of ritual and

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[88] As quoted in Robert G. Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker, *The Sacred Image East and West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 8.

sacrifice.[89] Whether a painted mural within a temple or a monumental stone sculpture, Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican art explored mankind's place within a carefully ordered cosmos controlled by the gods.

The earliest advanced civilizations emerged in Mesoamerica in what is called the Pre-Classic period, beginning in the second millennium B.C. The Olmecs, often called the Mesoamerican "mother culture," lived on the Gulf Coast of Mexico where they created large, open-air ceremonial complexes.[90] These sacred spaces featured pyramid temples and ceremonial plazas with centrally placed altars. Such building patterns, along with the ritual ball game, would become standard features of Mesoamerican societies in the centuries that followed.

The Maya emerged in the late Pre-Classic period (ca. 400 B.C.-A.D. 250) in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and parts of Honduras and El Salvador, reaching their apex in the Classic period (ca. A.D. 250-900) alongside the Teotihuacanos of Central Mexico and the Zapotecs of Oaxaca. These civilizations created cities centered on open-air ceremonial centers ruled by leaders who held political and spiritual power. The Maya are especially known for their monumental architecture and highly advanced sculptures, murals, and ceramics.[91] The Maya also developed the most advanced written language in

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[89] Esther Pasztory, *Pre-Columbian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

[90] The Olmecs have long been called the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica. This belief has been contested, with some scholars conceiving of them as a "sister" culture, evolving alongside others. Archaeologist Michael D. Coe asserts the mother culture model in Michael D. Coe, *The Maya,* 8th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011). Archaeologists Joyce Marcus and Kenneth V. Flannery, however, insist that the Olmecs were one among many advanced civilizations in the Pre-Classic in Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Formative Mexican Chiefdoms and the Myth of the 'Mother Culture,' " *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 19, no. 1 (2000): 1-37.

[91] Maya sculpture features low-relief carving, while full sculpture in the round is rare. Stelae, low-relief compositions on slabs of stone, are some of the most iconic Maya objects, usually

the Americas, with the use of glyphs incorporating both phonetic and symbolic elements. Their written records in stone and on ceramics provide scholars with rich histories on Maya dynasties, religion, deities, rituals, and cosmology. Their art related to the power of the ruler as a man-god, with an obsessive recording of the ruler's place within the cosmos and in time.[92]

The civilizations that Europeans encountered in Mesoamerica belonged to what historians label the Postclassic era,[93] a period after the fall of the great Classic-period cities. The Spanish explorers most famously conquered the Mexica, popularly known as the Aztecs, who began to consolidate their power in the Basin of Mexico in the late fourteenth century.[94] The Mexica excelled in sculpture, particularly sculpture in the round. They sculpted impressive and often terrifying images of the gods as reflections of their militaristic culture.[95] They also enacted their gods as *ixiptla*, human impersonators of gods, who dressed and lived as a god for a period of time leading up to their ritual sacrifice. As art historian George Kubler explains: "The god's presence appeared as an impersonator clad in godly attributes, who, during the festivals of the god, mingled with

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elaborately incised with images of the ruler, richly dressed and bedecked with powerful symbolism. See Michael D. Coe, *The Maya.*

[92] Michael D. Coe, *Royal Cities of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 27.

[93] The Toltecs were the great early Postclassic civilization in Central Mexico, ruling until the mid twelfth century.

[94] The Basin of Mexico, sometimes incorrectly called the Valley of Mexico, is a highland plateau in central Mexico. It was the home of the Mexica capital city of Tenochtitlan, as well as the cities of Texcoco and Tlacopan. These three city-states made up the Aztec Triple Alliance, founded in 1428. See Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe R. Solís Olguín, *Aztecs* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 17.

[95] Henri Stierlin, "The Art of Mesoamerica," in *Ritual Arts of the New World: Pre-Columbian America*, ed. John O'Toole, Fatma Turkkan-Wille, and Anna Albano (Geneva: Musé Barbier-Muller, 2000), 154.

the people, a living and moving cult image, of which the stone replicas were immobile representations, kept like capital reserves in the vault-like temple chambers."[96] These temple chambers were located in the sacred precinct in the center of the city, where life revolved around the delicate balance of pleasing the gods in order to allow the continuation of humanity.

The Translation of "Lord" Imagery: Tezcatlipoca's Embodiment of Male Spiritual Power Pre- and Post-Conquest

Human Sacrifice and Male Spiritual Power

Despite their efforts to eradicate native cultural practices, some European missionaries learned native languages and compiled extensive encyclopedias of religion, language, and history based on now lost pre-conquest materials and interviews with conquest survivors.[97] These remain some of our most valuable primary sources to this day.[98] Thanks to such surviving documents, we know that for the Mexica time was regulated by a dual calendar into a series of rituals, in which blood offerings played a part. It was considered noble for a person to give his or her life to the gods, as doing so

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[96] George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Maya, and Andean Peoples* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 104.

[97] The Franciscans and Dominicans were especially known for studying indigenous religion and cosmology, which they felt could help them to successfully convert Indians to the Christian faith.

[98] The most outstanding single works were compiled by friars Diego Durán and Bernardino de Sahagún. See Fray Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*, trans. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971; Fray Diego Durán, *History of the Indies of New Spain*, ed. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994); Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 12 vols., ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and the School of American Research, 1950-1982).

ensured the continuity of life.[99] The most common form of human sacrifice happened atop the great pyramids. As illustrated in the Codex Magliabechiano, captives were sliced in the chest and their hearts extracted and raised to the sun (fig. 1-1).[100] The lifeless body was then rolled down the stepped pyramid, and its head placed on a skull rack to remind viewers of the sacrifice. Bodies were often eaten, since the act of ingesting *tonalli* was considered vital for the continuation of the cycle of life.[101] In this way, death begat life.

It seems that indigenous people understood the ritualized act of ingesting Christ's sacrificial flesh during the Eucharist as similar to their tradition of sacrifice and pageantry that was practiced before the arrival of the Spanish. Fray Diego Durán describes some of these perceived symbolic continuities in his *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*. Durán narrates his conversation with an elderly Nahua woman who had been a priestess in pre-Hispanic times. She informed him that Christian holy days were nothing new, since sacred days and events had all been celebrated in Mexico long before the conquest. Enraged, the friar responded: "Evil old woman … the devil has plotted and has

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[99] Human sacrifice was believed to be necessary for maintaining cosmic and earthly harmony. It was human duty to acknowledge the gods who made life possible; sacrifice thus was an act of retribution. See Davíd Carrasco, *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

[100] Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Codex Maliabechiano and the Lost Prototype of the Magliabechiano Group* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 141.

[101] Scholars differ on the precise meaning of *tonalli*, which derives from the word *tona*, "to make heat or sun." Historian Alfredo López Austin defines it as an animistic force that allowed the continuity of the universe. This force was located in the human head. Alfredo López Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, translated by Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 205. Davíd Carrasco defines *tonalli* as a sacred energy that nourished the gods and kept the sun on its celestial path. In order for the cosmos to continue, sacrifice of *tonalli* was needed. For this reason the Mexica practiced sacrifice and bloodletting. Davíd Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 60. See also Alessandro Russo, "Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformation in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Feather Art, *Res* 42 (Autumn 2002): 230.

sown tares with wheat so that you will never learn the truth!"[102] In his book he goes on to explain with great anxiety the connections made by both Spaniards and Indians between pre-conquest ritual and Christian practice. For example, Durán compares the feast of Corpus Christi, which celebrates the body of Jesus Christ in the eucharist, with the ceremony of Toxcatl dedicated to the god Tezcatlipoca, during which sacrificial flesh was eaten.

Toxcatl and Corpus Christi

Tezcatlipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror," was one of the principal deities in the Mexica pantheon. Like most gods, he was imbued with numerous traits; he was god of the night sky, sorcery, rulership, and obsidian. His feast, called Toxcatl, took place in the fifth *veintena* period of the ritual calendar and was one of the most ostentatious and imposing of Mexica rituals.[103] Durán describes it as a "festival [of] merrymaking, dance, farces, and representations [that] can be compared to those of Corpus Christi. Cursed be the Evil Adversary who planned it thus and brought this water to the mill so that his wheel would keep turning! And his mill grinds out the ceremonies, rites, and hellish sacrifices we have described."[104] These "hellish sacrifices" involved an *ixiptla* (impersonator) who lived as the god for an entire year. On the day of Toxcatl, the

[102] Durán, 20.

[103] This solar ritual calendar, the *xiuhpohualli*, was made up of eighteen periods of twenty days each (*veintenas*) and an extra five days at the end of the year, for a total of 365 days. This differs from the divinatory calendar, or *tonalamatl* discussed in the Introduction, which was broken up into thirteen twenty-day periods (*trecenas*) for a total of 260 days. Randall C. Jiménez and Richard B. Graeber, *Aztec Calendar Handbook* (Santa Clara, CA: Historical Science Publishing, 2001), 26.

[104] Durán, 426.

impersonator was sacrificed while wearing Tezcatlipoca's ritual garb. Dancing and feasting ensued.[105]

Durán's *Book of the Gods* illustrates Tezcatlipoca holding his obsidian "smoking mirror," displayed within a feathery frame (fig. 1-2).[106] The numerous drawings in his manuscript were likely created by indigenous artists and differ dramatically from other indigenous depictions of the god. In the preconquest Codex Borgia, for example, Tezcatlipoca is depicted with the smoking obsidian mirror in place of his foot to reference his battles with the Earth Monster (see fig. 0-4).[107] The Codex Borgia is an excellent example of a native-style manuscript created by indigenous people before contact with Europeans. It derives from the Mixteca-Puebla cultural milieu, not the Mexica (Aztec).[108] The Codex Borgia, however, and other similar manuscripts in the so-called Borgia Group, are the only surviving pre-contact manuscripts in the region to the east of the Basin of Mexico and are likely similar to manuscripts produced by the Mexica that did not survive the conquest.

There is a major transformation between the two manuscripts as to how Tezcatlipoca is portrayed. Instead of being laden with glyphic symbols and metaphorical

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[105] Durán, 428-429.
[106] Durán, 330.

[107] Eduard Seler, ed., *Códice Borgia* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963); Gisele Díaz, Alan Rogers and Bruce E. Byland, *The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993).

[108] The term Mixteca-Puebla was coined by anthropologist George C. Vaillant to describe what he saw as cultural similarities between the areas of Puebla and Oaxaca (the Mixteca) in the Early Postclassic period. See H. B. Nicholson and Eloise Quiñones Keber, eds. *Mixteca-Puebla: Discoveries and Research in Mesoamerican Art and Archaeology* (Culver City, CA: Labyrinthos, 1994).

accouterments, Durán's Tezcatlipoca is painted in a European-inspired naturalism.[109] The "smoking mirror" held in the figure's left hand in fact bears a striking resemblance to a Christian "sunburst" monstrance, even including a small cruciform shape in its center. It takes no stretch of the imagination to imagine a native artist conflating these two types of ritual objects. Perhaps this similarity signifies the continuities being drawn between a native and a Christian ritual: Toxcatl and the processions of Corpus Christi.

European Precedents: Christ Images and Cults

The earliest Christians in the Roman Empire practiced their new religion secretively, and their symbolism was disguised in iconography that resembled that of ancient gods and goddesses. Christ was frequently depicted as the Good Shepherd rather than shown on the cross, which would have made him immediately identifiable. Not until after Christianity was legalized under Constantine in 313 did the cross become a prominent public symbol of the Christian faith. While the cross had been used in this way shortly after the death of Jesus Christ, albeit secretly, only in the middle of the sixth century did crucifixes—crosses with the dead body of Christ—begin to be used.[110] One of the earliest known crucifixes is found in the sanctuary of Castel Belici, in the mountain town of Marianopolis e Villabella in central Sicily. In the tenth century this local crucifix became an object of popular devotion and may have been the earliest one to inspire

[109] Interestingly, Durán's caption also points out that the god Tezcatlipoca is painted black in this rendering. Durán, 330. The connection between blackness and male spiritual power will be further discussed in chapter two as it relates to the Black Christ.
[110] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro America, 2012), 38.

pilgrimages.[111] In Cologne, Germany, the cathedral housed the Gero Cross from approximately 970, and claims that this is the earliest extant life-sized crucifix.[112]

In Spain the image of the cross played a prominent symbolic role during the reconquest of the peninsula from Moorish (Muslim) settlements.[113] In late medieval theology the cross was a sign of great power, believed to have the ability to turn back the devil and all enemies of Christendom—especially the Turks and Moors. The insignia of the cross was carried in the battle of Navas de Tolosa in 1212, when the army under the leadership of King Alfonso VIII of Castile defeated the Moorish army and regained a large portion of Southern Spain. It was also raised on the heights of the Alhambra in 1492 when Spain finally conquered Granada, the last Moorish stronghold on the Iberian Peninsula.[114]

Beginning in 1575 King Philip II of Spain sent a questionnaire to the towns and villages of New Castile regarding the population, religion, and culture of his subjects. Based on the results of the survey, it seems that two forms of the Catholic faith were practiced in Spain at the time. One was the universal practice based on the Roman calendar, sacraments, and liturgy, but many areas also had a local faith based on particular sacred places, images, and relics, as well as locally chosen patron saints,

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[111] Davidson, 38.

[112] The Gero cross is named after Archbishop Gero of Cologne, who commissioned it in 965 A.D. Soren Kaspersen and Erik Thuno, *Decorating the Lord's Table: On the Dynamics Between Image and Altar in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9.

[113] The Spanish reconquest was a period of almost 800 years ending in 1492, during which Spain's Christian kingdoms sought to conquer Moorish strongholds in the Iberian peninsula and restore the Christian faith. See Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

[114] Davidson, 41.

idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from the settlement's own sacred history.[115]

This survey came in the midst of the Catholic Counter-Reformation as the Spanish church, the most orthodox in Europe, sought to define itself as the defender of Christendom in the face of Protestant attacks. Spanish reformers regarded local religion as ignorant, pagan, and superstitious, and although local beliefs continued throughout the Counter-Reformation, Spanish religious leaders sought to subordinate them to the universal Roman Catholic faith.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries iconic devotion to Christ experienced its greatest growth. Of the 314 towns surveyed in King Phillip II's questionnaire, only three images of Christ were accorded special veneration. Two hundred years later images of Christ (almost all of them crucifixions or images of the Passion) represented one-third of popular devotion.[116] The most popular use of crucifix imagery in Spain took place during the drama of Holy Week, when confraternities would process through the streets with polychromed statues telling the story of Christ's Passion.

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[115] William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 2.

[116] Christian, 183. The increase was inspired by the Counter-Reformation growth of the cult of Jesus Christ whereby the Church urged people to empathize with the human suffering of Christ. For this study the statistic is particularly fascinating, because it shows us that devotion to images of Christ was popular in the Americas long before it was popular in Spain. According to anthropologist Miles Richardson: "…Christ-centered shrines are more numerous in Latin America than in Europe. This frequency stems form the initial zeal, inspired by the Tridentine reforms…to construct a purer Christianity in the New World than in the Old, one more focused on devotion to Christ." Miles Richardson, *Being-in-Christ and Putting Death in its Place: An Anthropologist's Account of Christian Performance in Spanish America and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003). The most famous miraculous images of Christ, such at the *Cristos* of Chalma and Esquipulas highlighted in this study, were all prominent Christological devotional images shortly after the conquest, beginning in the mid- to late sixteenth century.

Increasingly in the sixteenth century, devotional objects, relics, images of the Passion brotherhoods, and processional crosses began to be credited with working miracles.[117] In addition to being carried during Holy Week, they came to be venerated in shrines, with pilgrims bringing alms and votive offerings to their respective churches.[118] Beginning in the early seventeenth century, the image of Christ of the Nazarene (Christ bearing the cross), made in about 1590 in the city of Jaén, Spain, was said to work miracles. This Christ soon became patron of the city and was used in processions petitioning for rain and against plague. By 1703 there were written testimonies of his miracles, and this fervent devotion to images of Christ continued to develop throughout Spain.[119]

Often new shrines emerged when the image was said to work miracles; at other times the image's miraculous properties indicated the sacred nature of a site. Much as images had interacted with humans in medieval monasteries—proving their miraculous power by weeping, sweating, or bleeding—these seventeenth-century crucifixes showed their potency before they began working miracles for the benefit of people. The earliest reported example in Spain was the crucifix owned by the brotherhood in Igualada in

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[117] Miracles in the Catholic faith are events that defy the laws of nature and involve direct works of God or intercessions by specific saints. Such intercessions could be enacted via communion with a holy image. Sixteenth-century Carmelite friar St. John of the Cross wrote: "God does not work miracles and grant favors by means of some statues in order that these statues may be held in higher esteem than others, but that through his wonderful works he may awaken the dormant devotion and affection of the faithful." Quoted in Joan Carroll Cruz, *Miraculous Images of Our Lord: Famous Catholic Statues, Portraits, and Crucifixes* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1995), ix.

[118] Christian, 195.

[119] Christian, 194.

Barcelona, said to begin bleeding during Holy Week processions in 1590.[120]

These dramatic events marked the new interaction between people and their images, objects that were seen as sentient and alive. Similar to the thetre of passion plays, polychromed sculpture carried in procession were made to mimic the phsycial reality of the Biblical figures. As William A. Christian describes: "The people dressed and whipped themselves and wept so they looked like the images; and the images sweated and bled and wept as if they were real people."[121] In this way onlookers could participate in the Passion and the images carried were activated to express human struggles.

Out of this sense of divine participation emerged the idea that onlookers became closer to the divine resting places of the saints and holy personages. Each church and brotherhood had its own holy image, marking a location as sacred. Increasingly, during the great building campaigns of the seventeenth century it was believed that this sacred power could be harnessed and placed within chapels, churches, cathedrals, and monasteries.[122]

The First New World Crosses

The Spanish conquerors entered the New World with images of the cross both as simple upright wooden crosses and as emblems on banners. Because there was limited space on transatlantic voyages, the first friars arrived with only the simplest of religious objects and quickly went about constructing more. The simple wooden crosses

[120] Christian, 196.

[121] Christian, 198.

[122] Christian, 199.

transported on the Spanish ships and erected in each newly conquered *pueblo* were used as markers of Spanish domination and the victory of their Christian god.

A mural at the Augustinian mission of San Nicolás in Actopan, Hidalgo, Mexico, shows a group of friars entering a harbor by ship (fig. 1-3). The vessel is outfitted with a wooden cross, which serves as the flagpole for a banner of the cross that is shown swaying in the wind. God the Father and the dove as Holy Spirit are shown slinging allegorical arrows of divine inspiration toward the monks, who are wading through the water to the shore. On land they drop to their knees before Christ, who is shown crucified on a palm tree, his blood flowing into a font. The trifecta of Christological images (wooden cross, banner with a cross, and crucified Christ) signifies the arrival of the Christian faith. The palm tree-turned-cross also serves as a preview of the development of Christological imagery in the New World, all of which began with the simplest of wooden crosses.

During the military conquest, even before the arrival of the mendicants, Cortés ordered the Indians to construct a cross and erect it in a prominent place, demanding that it be treated with the utmost care and respect.[123] Cortés held a mass and instructed the indigenous leaders on proper comportment by having them observe his men bowing to kiss the cross. He left the cross with instructions to "keep the place well cleaned and swept and decked with branches, and to worship it if they wanted to enjoy good health and harvests."[124] These simple wooden crosses marked the landscape as conquered, but

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[123] Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

[124] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. John M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books), 135.

the local people had differing reactions to this new imagery. In Tlaxcala, for example, theTlaxcalans decided to ally with the Spanish and fight under the leadership of the cross in order to defeat their Mexica enemies.[125] In contrast, during the Yucatan insurrection of 1546–1547, hostile Maya rose up against the Spanish, at times crucifying the conquerors and destroying all emblems of the Christian god, especially the cross.[126]

These simple wooden crosses eventually punctuated the early Colonial landscape and served as emblems of Indian villages. A mural at the Jesuit mission in Tepotzotlán in Central Mexico shows an idealized landscape with a large, centrally placed cross (fig. 1-4). Throughout the Spanish Americas, crosses were placed on altar bases that the Christian Nahuas called a *momoxtli*, which translates as "an altar on which they erect a cross."[127] At Tepotzotlán it towers above the rest of the landscape, serving as a landmark for the *pueblo*. Lara compares the shape of the *momoxtli* to a Mesoamerican stepped pyramid, which represented the sacred mountain atop which temples dedicated to the most powerful gods were placed. By mimicking the form of these ancient structures and replacing the temple with a cross, the Spaniards provided for a symbolic transference of sacred meaning from the pre-Hispanic past to the Christianized present.

Such transference of meaning can be seen as well in early seventeenth-century Testerian manuscripts, which combined Mesoamerican "rebus writing" with what Samuel

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[125] Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1547*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 19.

[126] This was a nativist movement and an attempt to remove all Spanish presence, including people, animals, plants, art and architecture. See Zachary Wingerd, "Symbol of Conquest, Alliance, and Hegemony: The Image of the Cross in Colonial Mexico" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Arlington, 2008), 27.

[127] *Momoxtli* originally meant platform, stage or altar for human sacrifice. Lara, 171.

Edgerton describes as a "quaint Westernized folk art style."[128] The Egerton Codex of 1614 shows the Lord's Prayer in Testerian hieroglyphics (fig. 1-5). Similar to pre-Hispanic painted books, the manuscript employs pictographic as well as phonetic glyphs. Above each picture the Dominican author, Fray Locas, translated the message into Latinized Nahuatl. Lara points out the small platform atop which a cross rests next to the glyph representing the phrase "give us this day our daily bread."[129] Beside the friar passing out the circular host is a series of small stepped pyramids topped by crosses. The priest offers the host to native converts, holding what appears to be a simplified monstrance in his hand, the "daily bread" codified as an offering of the Eucharistic wafer. Behind him, the altar as pyramid displays a Christian cross. It comes as no surprise that this type of imagery would represent the Holy Sacrament in the most basic of Christian prayers, the Lord's Prayer.

These first New World crosses, simple, wooden structures placed atop a stepped "pyramid" were some of the first Christian images that indigenous people encountered. They remained in small villages for years after being first erected and became prominent town symbols.[130]

Atrial Crosses in the Missions of New Spain

Following the simple wooden crosses, the first ones manufactured on Mexican soil were the so-called atrial crosses, monumental stone crosses placed on platforms in

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[128] Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 29.

[129] Lara, 171.

[130] Wingerd, 36.

the center of the large outdoor *atrio* (atrium) of countless provincial and urban missions. *Atrios*, used for religious instruction, processions, and festivities, are said to have appealed to native participants who were accustomed to outdoor worship.[131] During the early years of missionization, most worship took place outdoors in the atrium or within an outdoor Indian chapel. As a sixteenth-century Augustinian described:

> The Christian doctrine is always taught in the courtyard of the church, because it should be made accessible for all, and it is good to have it in a public place. It is divided at the corners by *posas*, in one place for men, and another for women, one for the old Indians, who are taught as needed. It used to be two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon and now it seems that two hours is enough in the morning. And with this care all are carefully taught the doctrine, which they are examined on rigorously … on Sundays and feast days all of the people meet in the courtyard of the church. where there are trees.[132]

Indigenous artists created atrial crosses following iconographic programs introduced by European friars. Instead of a typical crucifix with a body on a cross, these crosses usually included high-relief images of the instruments of the Passion (Arma Christi): the crown of thorns, stakes, column, cock, ladder, and chalice, as seen in the example at the Villa de Guadalupe (fig. 1-6). In addition to this typical Passion imagery, many of the New Spanish atrial crosses include Eucharistic imagery, namely the chalice and host. These carved instruments of the Passion have been compared to indigenous

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[131] Russo, 245.

[132] "La doctrina cristiana se enseña siempre en los patios de la iglesia; porque como ha de ser tan general para todos, es bien que el lugar sea público. Allí se dividen por los ángulos (las posas?), a una parte los varones, y a otra las hembras, y unos indios viejos, que les enseñan según la necesidad. Solía ser dos horas por la mañana, y dos a la tarde; ya parece, que bastan las dos horas por la mañana. Y con este cuidado salen todos muy enseñados en la doctrina, en la cual los examinan rigurosamente … los domingos y fiestas de guarda se junta todo el pueblo en los patios de la iglesia, donde hay árboles." Juan de Grijalva, *Crónica de la Orden de N.P.S. Agustín en las provincias de la Nueva España: En cuatro edades desde el año de 1533 hasta el de 1592* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Porrúa, 1924), 226-28; my translation.

glyphs.[133] These served the didactic purpose of visually narrating the story of Christ's sacrifice and connected it to Christian practice. Native converts could read them much in the way that the pictographic writing of preconquest manuscripts was read.

Beyond the European imagery of the Arma Christi, native artists also introduced indigenous figuration, such as the central Mexican symbol for blood, seen gushing from the stylized stigmata of the same cross. The host, resting atop a chalice, is prominently placed at the base of the cross. Directly above this grouping is a stake, the implement used to nail Christ to the cross. Out of it runs another typically native-stylized representation of human blood. Its location suggests that the blood runs from the symbolic wound and into the Eucharistic chalice, creating a literal interpretation of transubstantiation that would be easily understandable to native neophytes.[134] Instead of the body of Christ, his face is shown in the center of the cross as a symbolic reference to the image on Veronica's veil, an apparition of Christ as opposed to his physical body. Friars were careful not to present the actual body of Christ on the cross for fear that neophytes would draw direct connections to Pre-Columbian sacrifice. There were, of course, more typical crucifixes inside churches, but during the early years of missionization indigenous people rarely entered inside. Those images were kept carefully guarded in the church and most likely were brought outside only during Holy Week for specific and pointed instruction. Instead the atrial cross was used for catechization.

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[133] Bailey, 223.

[134] Art historian Samuel Edgerton draws a similar conclusion from a stone cross in the mission church of San Salvador in Malinalco, Mexico. This cross depicts blood running from a flower into a chalice, though it does not incorporate the blood glyph as at the Villa de Guadalupe. Edgerton, 71.

Samuel Edgerton and Jaime Lara cite the Nahua cross or "World Tree" as evidence of continuities between Christian and Pre-Columbian traditions.[135] In Mesoamerican cosmology the World Tree, nourished by blood sacrifice, serves as a conduit between the heavens and the earth and is the place from which the human race emerged (fig. 1-7). The World Tree is depicted in numerous indigenous manuscripts in a cruciform shape, a visual similarity that friars viewed as a prefiguration of Christ's cross. On the mission cross at Acolman the two are visually merged, as the cross's arms are engraved with vegetal forms (fig. 1-8). By allowing references to it on this Christian symbol, friars were able to "evoke in Indian eyes reassuring resemblances to pre-conquest concepts of their own."[136] At the bottom of the Acolman cross the skull of Golgotha (where Christ was crucified) is depicted. Further connections can be drawn between Golgotha and the *quaxicalli* "skull place," connecting it to the Nahua skull rack that displayed skulls of sacrificial victims near ancient pyramids as a reminder of sacrifice.[137]

Following this type of interpretation, the issue of native agency arises. Art historian Gauvin Alexander Bailey offers a different interpretation of the atrial cross imagery. The head of Christ, which appears at the center of the cross's arms, is commonly believed to be the apparition of Christ's face on Veronica's veil, rather than Jesus' actual face. While Edgerton reasons that this representation was due to native interest in hieroglyphic interpretations of Passion imagery, Bailey argues that it was used

[135] Lara, 151; Edgerton, 67.

[136] Edgerton, 71.

[137] Lara, 172.

as a means of indicating the presence of Christ *within* the cross, rather than hanging from it.[138] This distinction is important, since if one accepts Edgerton's postulation, agency is placed in the hands of the native artist rather than the Spanish friar. The assumption would be that the artist, already converted to Christianity, has transposed these images into something more easily grasped by those who were in the process of conversion. Bailey, however, argues that the friars themselves chose to symbolically place Christ within the cross in order to avoid connections to preconquest human sacrifice. Bailey agrees that the cross was conceived of as a Christian World Tree, but sees this morphology as something perpetuated by Christian friars in order to prevent reversion to more pernicious native traditions. In contrast, Edgerton emphasizes the native hand and mind in this process by treating the cross as an emblem that called forth uniquely native interpretations of Christian iconography.

Homi Bhabha explains this process in the introduction to *The Location of Culture*:

> In-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society. It is in the emergence of interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.[139]

The Mexican mission was just this sort of "in-between" space, one in which native and Spanish identities were negotiated.

When we interpret Colonial Latin American art, it is often impossible to speak in absolutes. There is little documentation on this period, and Spaniards largely wrote what

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[138] Bailey, 87.

[139] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

favored their own perspective. For example, Fray Diego Valadés, who was a *mestizo* and Franciscan, wrote the *Rhetorica Christiana* to facilitate the missionary work of priests by helping them to understand native life in sixteenth-century Mexico.[140] In it he records the conversion of natives from "savages" to Christians, as well as Chichimec traditions and their barbarity. One of his famous prints records a native sacrificial ceremony (fig. 1-9). Not only does the author render indigenes as wild and naked savages, but places them in a European-inspired triumphal arch setting. He lauds neophytes for their attempts at conversion and derides them for holding on to remnants of native "evils."

A post-Colonial approach is quite popular in the Colonial field as it allows for an examination of the way in which both groups played an active role in defining Colonial society. By destabilizing the binaries, Bhabha insists that the first (colonizer) is not necessarily dominant over the second (colonized). Granted, there is an internal power struggle in which, generally, the colonizer exerts power over the colonized. But even the colonized have agency in the situation, as when indigenous artists infused their own symbols and cosmology into Christian objects. Even when objects were not made by indigenes, or were not visibly hybrid, they were resignified and came infused with indigenous concepts of the sacred.[141] Hybridity is not just a catchall phrase from 1980s multiculturalism; rather, it emerged from a situation of fractured identities as something new and different from its individual contributors.

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[140] Diego Valadés, *Rhetorica Christiana* (Perusia: Pietro Giacomo Petrucci, 1579).

[141] This process of resignification will be further discussed in relation to Black Christ imagery in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. The concept of "invisible" hybridity is discussed in Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 5-35.

The Passion imagery used on the "hybrid" atrial crosses derives from European prints such as Israhel Van Meckenem's *The Mass of Saint Gregory* (fig. 1-10). According to the legend, the eighth century Pope Gregory the Great, while performing the mass in Rome, was confronted by an apparition on the altar of the Savior flanked by instruments of his Passion. His miraculous vision was used as proof of the real presence of Christ in the host by its transubstantiation during the Eucharist. At the church of Santa Croce en Gerusalem, a Carthusian church in Rome, the friars promoted the *imago pietatis* (Christ as Man of Sorrows) as the true image of Christ (fig. 1-11), which is also physically recorded in Gregory's miraculous vision at the altar.[142] By the late Middle Ages the Mass of Saint Gregory had become a popular iconographic scheme, with the image of Christ always bearing a resemblance to the Italo-Byzantine icon in Rome. The most popular version was van Meckenem's, which made its way across the Atlantic and was reused at the Franciscan school of San José de los Naturales in Mexico as early as 1539.[143]

The Miraculous Mass of Saint Gregory featherwork picture was commissioned for the pope by the Nahua nobleman Diego Huanitzin as proof of the Indian's ability to see Christian truth during the period of evangelization (fig. 1-12). It was an appropriate subject because the medieval pope "saw" the truth of transubstantiation and advocated for the importance of visually experiencing divine truth.[144] This work thus probes the issue of

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[142] Carlo Bertelli, "The Image of Pity in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme," *in Essays Presented to Rudolf Wittkower on His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Douglas Fraser, Howard Hibbard, and Milton J. Lewine (London: Phaidon Press, 1967), 52.

[143] Donna Pierce, Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, and Clara Bargellini, *Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2004), 96.

[144] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St. Gregory in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theology in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 211.

the didactic quality of art, as well as the act of seeing and believing. Its conception is pertinent to the indigenous population in the wake of the conquest of the Americas and the beginning of the Counter-Reformation on both sides of the Atlantic.

This miracle was used to strengthen belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Traditional European versions of the Mass show the implements of the Passion appearing on a triptych panel behind the figure of Christ. These images are recognizable symbols in the European print, but they serve quite a different purpose when transposed onto an atrial cross. Rather than appearing on a defined surface, the Passion instruments on atrial crosses hover in the background, isolated from each other. Instead of suggesting miraculous visions, they are imposed upon the cross, which can be "read." Edgerton explains this quite well: "Perhaps a useful analogy is to think of [the Passion images] as performing like icons on a modern computer screen; when the eye 'clicks' on any one, a window opens in the imagination, revealing a specific moment in the narrative. The programmer may arrange the icons in any order, moving them around in different sequences, or even 'retouching' them individually according to his/her own cultural or ideological predispositions."[145] The arrangement of these icons serves a dual purpose: they are both didactic and aligned with native visuality.

Such an analysis of these Arma Christi icons comes out of semiotics, the study of the ways in which meanings are constructed and perceived. One of the major figures of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, argued that the signifier (the word or emblem) had no

[145] Samuel Y. Edgerton, "Christian Cross as Indigenous 'World Tree' in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," in *Exploring New World Imagery*, ed. Donna Pierce (Denver: Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art, 2002), 24.

direct relationship to the signified (the understood concept).[146] Only through convention is the icon's meaning created. Only through the mode of performance can the signifier function, as its meaning is not fixed but created through actual use. The theory of semiotics comes from modern linguistic discourse, in which language is defined by difference, without positive or absolute terms.

Following this logic, Edgerton insists that the Passion icons were not randomly placed on the cross, but "were positioned in deliberate relation to one another for particular narrative coherence—in terms not so much of orthodox Christian interpretation as of native artists' own cultural perceptions of the Passion story."[147] On all three of the crosses that Edgerton uses as illustrations, the sacramental chalice, the cup in which liturgical wine is transubstantiated into the blood of Christ, is carved prominently on the front below the arm's crossing. As noted, the Nahuas practiced sacrifice and bloodletting because of their belief that the universe ran on a sacred energy called *tonalli*,[148] which nourished the gods and kept the sun on its celestial path.[149] In order for the cosmos to continue, sacrifice of *tonalli* was needed. For this reason, Nahuas practiced sacrifice and bloodletting. On the cross at the mission of Malinalco, the concept is expressed by a centrally placed flower that drips blood into the chalice at the base of the cross (fig. 1-13).

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[146] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1998).

[147] Edgerton, "Christian Cross," 23.

[148] See note 82.

[149] Alessandra Russo, "Plumes of Sacrifice: Transformations in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Feather Art," *Res* 42 (Autumn 2002): 230.

One might assume that friars would have taken issue with such direct references to preconquest blood sacrifice on atrial crosses. Instead, Edgerton argues that the friars viewed it as a "charming and innocently impromptu signifier for Jesus' sacred heart from which his blood flowed into the Eucharistic chalice."[150] Friars would have been aware of the native associations between flowers and the human heart and would have encouraged them as a means of cultural translation. But to a Nahua convert, the association would have had deeper spiritual connotations. Edgerton argues further that a Nahua Indian would recognize the sprouting form in the center of the Christian cross as a seed nourished by blood pouring from the flower's "heart," thus connecting it to the indigenous view of human sacrifice. In this way the iconography would signify two very different things for both groups. Friars would have been aware of the heart/flower metaphor, and would have interpreted it as an association between Jesus' heart and the wine of the Eucharist. Indigenous viewers, however, would have read this iconography as the World Tree, the center of their cosmological universe.

Following the pragmatic American logician C. S. Peirce's contributions to linguistics and semiotics, there is a triadic relationship in the performance of a given sign.[151] In the case of atrial cross iconography, the icon is the actual "glyph" of a Passion instrument. The index, which shows traces of the object, is Van Meckenem's *Mass of Saint Gregory* print from which an indigenous artist lifted the image. And the symbol, which holds no direct relationship to the image, activates indigenous associations with the host and human sacrifice.

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[150] Edgerton, "Christian Cross," 30.

[151] C. S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce,* ed. Justus Bulcher (Mineola, NY: Cover Publications, 2012).

Considering these associations, one might assume that Nahua Christianity must have been a bastardized or inauthentic form of Catholicism. But Bhabha's view of hybridity calls on "linguistic multivocality" in order to restructure Colonial discourse.[152] In other words, once converted, Nahua Christianity is just as Catholic as Spanish Christianity even if the indigenous neophytes have retained some of their previous religion's meanings and interpretations. No belief system is fixed, and hybridity is inherent regardless of the cultural components of which it is made.

In the atrial crosses we see indigenous artisans creating Christian symbols under the guidance of Spanish friars. Together they created a form that references both Pre-Columbian and Christian notions of creation and sacrifice. Surely the friars' goal was to foster an understanding of Christian symbols with the underlying aim of eradicating Mexica beliefs and replacing them with the new faith. It is hard to imagine, however, that in this early Colonial exchange native beliefs were not retained in some way. Certainly Durán's exchange with the noblewoman evidences the continuity of preconquest beliefs. It was, however, perhaps not an either-or issue of native or Christian belief, but a situation in which the two found ways to coexist in the minds of indigenous neophytes.

Polychrome Crucifixes

Beginning in the Middle Ages in Europe, sculptors increasingly worked in wood rather than in marble and bronze used in the Classical periods of Greece and Rome. With the rebirth of life-sized statuary in fifteenth century Florence, artists in Italy abandoned wood, preferring to work in bronze and marble in emulation of the ancients. There are, of course, numerous exceptions, including most famously Donatello's wooden *Mary*

[152] Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994),148.

Magdalene, a uniquely expressive piece that deviated entirely from the Classical aims of the Florentine Renaissance (fig. 1-14). Instead of the naturalistic, Classicized marble sculpture that proliferated during the Renaissance, Donatello's Mary Magdalene is stylized. Magdalene's hair is shown as a cloak and her face is haggard, an image of the penitent saint later in life during her thirty years in the desert, dedicated to repenting for her sins. Both the realism of the sculpture and its material are unique in the context of the Italian Renaissance.

In Northern Europe, where wooden statuary continued to be produced, artists would sculpt figures from wood that they then painted, or polychromed, to give them lifelike verisimilitude. Northern artists brought the practice to Spain, where it became standard for devotional imagery. By the seventeenth century artists in Spain developed highly naturalistic polychrome sculpture that was intended to inspire piety and devotion in the viewer. Artists began augmenting the carved and painted human figure with wigs, glass eyes, and painted blood and tears. The most famous example of this highly developed tradition is the *Christ of Clemency*, created as a personal devotional image for an elite patron by Juan Martínez Montañés, who was popularly known during his lifetime as the *dios de madera*, "god of wood" (fig. 1-15). Commissioned in 1603, the work was carved by Montañés, but painted by Spanish painter Francisco Pacheco. [153]

The painted technique used is known as *encarnación*, literally "to make flesh," which involved painting the wood with layers of oil paint and varnishes in order to create highly naturalistic flesh tones. Montañés' polychromist also included blood that drips from the stigmata and from Christ's forehead, punctured by the crown of thorns.

[153] Xavier Bray et al. *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture: 1600-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 156.

This emphasis on Christ's physical suffering as expressed in the tortured body became increasingly popular following the Council of Trent, which called for images to evoke pity and contemplation in the viewer. Polychrome wooden statuary was used to inspire Christian devotion in churches, monasteries, and convents, or on city streets when carried in procession. In Spain, the patronage of processional sculpture reached its apex in sixteenth-century Seville. Confraternities there developed a uniquely Spanish sculptural type: the highly veristic lightweight processional sculpture.[154] Lay confraternity members commissioned these distinct sculptures at a time when elites or the church commissioned most art works.

Processional sculptures are fascinating objects that exist in the multimedia context of religious processions, particularly during the Holy Week leading up to Easter. These figures were typically clothed with textiles made especially for them, and their realism was heightened by the addition of glass eyes, tears, and even wigs of human hair. They were created on a human scale and could be viewed from all angles so as to make the Passion story most lifelike and believable. As these images processed through the streets, they were accompanied by music, incense, and pageantry. These elaborate processions began in Spain during the Middle Ages but reached their apex around the late sixteenth century and continue there to this day. This tradition was carried to the New World, where processional sculpture was also used to inspire the new society.

Friars in New Spain used polychrome sculpture, religious pageantry (i.e., theatre and processions), and the establishment of confraternities in order to overcome language barriers. Sculptures were particularly important objects used in the conversion process.

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[154] Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1998.

Whether imposed by European friars or selected by townspeople, these sculptures became dynamic popular objects. Indigenous people displayed their devotion by showering them with offerings and by commissioning or creating their own versions, known as *santocalli*.[155]

While sculptures were the primary focus of native veneration, paintings were used as additional didactic tools. In fact, one of the major differences between sixteenth century arts in Spain and New Spain is the preponderance of didactic painting, particularly in the form of murals, in the colonies. In her study of Holy Week in Mexico, Webster focuses not on sculptures but on mural paintings of processions housed in the church of the sixteenth-century monastery of San Miguel in Huejotzingo, near Puebla (fig. 1-16). The murals have been dated to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, which would make them the earliest depictions of Holy Week in the Hispanic world.[156] Interestingly, Goya painted the first such images in Spain—in the early *nineteenth* century. This makes the New World a catalyst for a new subgenre. Webster suggests that the impetus for these works was not only to glorify the role of the sponsoring confraternities, but also to instruct Indian observers who were unfamiliar with the processions and their meanings.

The most detailed portion of the murals features a procession of figures wearing black and white hoods. These figures are confraternity members, presumably native Christians from the community of Huejotzingo, who were performing penitential rites in

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[155] Susan Verdi Webster, "Art, Ritual, and Confraternities in Sixteenth-Century New Spain: Penitential Imagery at the Monastery of San Miguel, Huejotzingo," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 70 (1997): 7.

[156] Webster, "Art, Ritual, and Confraternities," 21.

commemoration of Christ's Passion. A group of them carries platforms mounted with sculptures representing the Virgin, St. John, Mary Magdalene, and a dead Christ. Webster traces these images back to the Confraternity of Vera Cruz, dedicated to the "true cross," the actual wooden cross of the historic Christ's crucifixion.[157]

Directly below the penitential mural in Huejotzingo is a sculpture of Christ housed in a glass tomb. Webster points out that the work has been repainted numerous times, which makes assessing its provenance difficult. Although in Seville Webster was able to meticulously reconstruct the history of the most important Holy Week confraternities, such efforts were more difficult in Mexico due to the lack of documentation and continuity of practice. In general, there are fewer extant documents and contracts for works in the Colonial Americas, making research more difficult.

Nevertheless, we have fascinating records of the continuity and transformation of processional sculpture in the Americas via the objects themselves, if not through vast historical documentation. Early in the Colonial period some of the most famous examples were imported from Spain, but very rapidly native artists began making their own versions, most famously in a new form known as *pasta de caña*, adapted from pre-Hispanic technology wherein sculptures were produced from paper, corn pith, and orchid glue, much like the technique of papier-mâché (fig. 1-17). [158]

Pasta de caña was lightweight, making it easily adaptable as processional sculpture, a development that has been credited to the bishop of Michoacán, Don Vasco de Quiroga. Known as a protector of Indians, Quiroga advocated against enslavement,

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[157] Webster, "Art, Ritual, and Confraternities," 10.

[158] Sofía Irene Velarde Cruz, *Imaginería michoacana en caña de maíz* (Michoacán, Mexico: Centro de Documentación e Investigación de las Artes, 2009), 19.

insisting that natives should instead be organized into administrative congregations where they would be hispanized and Christianized.[159] He was inspired by Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, which imagined a utopian land where people worked communally and were governed by order and discipline.[160] Quiroga urged the organization of basic social units following More's example. As bishop, he named the city of Pazcuaro capital of the diocese. There he founded the Seminary of San Nicolás, where Purépecha Indians from the area would be taught Christian religion, government, and craftsmanship.

Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta's *Historia Ecclesiástica Indiana* mentions the use of pasta de caña: "They also carry crucifixes made from reeds that are the size of a large man but weigh as little as a child."[161] Many of the famous *Cristos de caña* were exported and are found today all over Mexico as well as on the Canary Islands and in Spain. A number of these *Cristos* have entered museum collections, where x-rays have been done to ascertain the materials used.[162] Not only do they include corn pith, but a number of them include pre-Hispanic sacred painted books as filler in their interior. Scholars have speculated on the symbolic meaning embedded within, as corn was a sacred substance and the ancient books were reminders of the pre-Hispanic past.

Maize (corn) factors prominently in Mesoamerican mythohistory. The Mexica believed that the first humans, named Oxomoco and Cipactonal, played an important role

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[159] Velarde Cruz, 12.

[160] Bailey, 213.

[161] Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia ecclesiástica indiana,* ed. Joaquín García Icazbalceta (Whitefish, MO: Kessinger Publishing, 1870).

[162] Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, *El Cristo de Mexicaltzingo: Técnica de las esculturas en caña* (Mexico City: Dirección de Monumentos Coloniales, 1949).

in the discovery and spread of the plant. Their myth states that ants had hidden the corn deep inside of a mountain and that the god Quetzalcoatl knew that there was something of great value within. He transformed himself into an ant in order to investigate. Within the mountain he found the maize, which he carried back to the other gods. They ground it into a meal and placed it in the mouths of human babies, who thrived on the food.[163]

The Popol Vuh, the Quiché Maya creation story, tells of four gods of the celestial and terrestrial realms who tried three times, unsuccessfully, to make man. In these first three attempts they used animal body parts, then mud, then wood—but each lacked a soul. On the fourth attempt, the gods used corn to construct man: "The making, the modeling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food alone for the human legs and arms…."[164] "Real" humans were thus made of corn, as opposed to the failed proto-humans made from other substances. Clearly the Quiché thought of corn as a sacred substance, one infused with a life force and was important enough to be the very thing from which man was created.[165]

Translated into the Christian context, then, it is quite interesting to think of corn as the very substance used to create the man-God, Christ. Perhaps in the eyes of the Purepécha some of the sacred character of corn was infused into the *Cristo*. The very essence of the material was sacred, so appropriately reused in a Christian context. This is

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[163] Alfredo López Austin, *The Rabbit on the Face of the Moon: Mythology in the Mesoamerican Tradition*, trans. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano and Thelma Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), 104.

[164] Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 164.

[165] The *Popol Vuh* also describes the resurrection of Hun Hunahpu, father of the Hero Twins, who rose from the dead to become the Maize God. This story of rebirth can be linked to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

not to say that this signification would have been immediately visible to converts once it was exported and spread beyond Michoacán. Given their understanding of corn, it is tempting to conclude that the first Indians who saw and experienced these *Cristos* would have drawn pre-Hispanic connections. Once the works traveled beyond their place of production, these intricacies may have been unknown. Certainly the manuscripts were hidden, but even the corn substance, once polychromed, was also hidden within.

Today it is quite difficult to discern the difference between a wooden *Cristo* and one made from *pasta de caña*, as both types were polychromed using the *encarnación* technique. Polychromed wood sculpture was commonly carved from cedar, a large tree whose wood is relatively easy to carve, as it is not porous, lacks hard knots, does not splinter, is termite resistant, and was abundant in forests throughout Mexico and Central America.[166] Before carving, the wood would be dried in order to prevent cracks and warpage. The figure would then be sketched directly onto the wood following studies drawn on paper in order to work out the proportions and general features of the figure.[167] Wooden statuary is a subtractive technique as opposed to the additive process of *pasta de* caña. The only way to tell the difference between a wood sculpture and one made of corn pith is to lift each one, an opportunity that is rare. After the creation of the figure, whether from wood or corn pith, the figure would be first painted white and then polychromed with layers of paint and finally varnishes to create the lifelike appearance of both flesh and cloth.

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[166] J. Haroldo Rodas, *Pintura y Escultura Hispánica en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1992), 68.

[167] Rodas, 69.

Silver Crucifixes

Along with devotional imagery in the form of polychromed statuary, silver crosses became standard religious paraphernalia. Silverwork was a hallmark of Colonial life, as it was a luxury commodity provided by abundant mines throughout the Spanish Americas, two of the most famous of which were located in Zacatecas, Mexico, and Potosí, Bolivia. Hispanic American silver objects were produced as a response to the strong and early demand for luxury objects. They were used in both sacred and secular contexts, but the most impressive silver objects were used for ecclesiastic purposes.

Silver was used to proclaim the majesty and grandeur of religious buildings and of the mass itself.[168] These impressive objects, intended to inspire the religious sentiments of the faithful, were produced in metalwork shops throughout the Viceroyalties. Although at first the crown forbade indigenous people from doing metalwork, that ban was soon lifted and native craftsmen were able to resume their craft, now working for a Spanish clientele. Some worked under Spanish masters, but there were also independent native workshops.

In central Mexico, Nahua artists had made elaborate metalwork since before the conquest. When these artists then made Christian objects, their pre-Hispanic cosmology was evident. An altar cross from Mexico City, dated 1560 and now housed at the Museo de la Catedral in Palencia, Spain, for example, is a stunning demonstration of the ways in which native artists retained pre-Hispanic forms in a new, Christian context (fig. 1-18). The body of the cross is made from rock crystal, while its base and extremities as well as

[168] Cristina Esteras Martín, "Silver and Silverwork: Wealth and Art in Viceregal America," in *The Arts in Latin America: 1492-1820*, ed. Joseph J. Rishel and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 197.

Christ's body are in stunningly naturalistic gilded silver.

The cross's altar takes the form of the hill of Golgotha, rendered in precise and naturalistic detail. It gives the illusion of a mountainous and craggy landscape that includes all type of flora and fauna. According to New Spanish silverwork specialist Cristina Esteras Martin, an indigenous artist who was familiar with native iconography made the altar cross. She points out that the "landscape" created on the cross's base showcases the artist's knowledge of autochthonous plants and animals, including Mexico's national symbol, the nopal cactus. Martin compares the altar cross's cascade of insects with the skirts of the water goddess Chalchiutlicue.[169] These carefully observed natural elements as well as references to pre-Hispanic stylized designs indicate that an indigenous artist made this work. Although it is a thoroughly orthodox (Catholic) object, these inclusions are a fascinating example of the stamping of an indigenous worldview on a Christian work of art.

The two most important forms of Christ-related imagery seen outside the walls of a church were monstrances, used to hold the Eucharistic wafer, and processional crosses. These objects were most impressively displayed during the elaborate processions of Corpus Christi, the feast day that celebrates the body of Christ and the sacrament of the Eucharist.[170]

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[169] Esteras Martin, 197.

[170] The feast of Corpus Christi, Latin for "body of Christ," was codified in 1264 by Pope Urban IV. It celebrates the host (the Eucharistic wafer) as a physical manifestation of the body and blood of Christ. The feast involved procession through the streets with the host, planted in a gilded monstrance. During the Counter-Reformation (1545-1648), Corpus Christi became central in the Catholic Church's opposition to spreading Protestantism. It was particularly promoted in the Americas, site of the "New Jerusalem," where it was thought Christianity could thrive in an unblemished land. Corpus Christi became a tool in the religious conversion of native people, and subsequently was a central part of religious pageantry in both Mexico and Peru. See

An elaborate festival in the Iberian world, Corpus Christi was a prime showcase for religious art in the form of processional sculpture—carriages carrying images of patron saints, plus devotees walking with elaborate metalwork in the form of crosses, lanterns, and incense burners.[171] On Sunday during mass, the priest would walk with these objects from the sacristy to the altar. In the elaborate outdoor festivals such as Corpus Christi, the processional cross was carried in front, typically mounted on a long staff so that it might be seen (fig. 1-19).

Throughout the Iberian world people would flock to their streets and balconies to witness strikingly realistic, polychromed statues that enabled Christ, the Virgin, and saints to come alive before their eyes. Each confraternity carried its patron saint on a litter, and it was common for devotees to carry smaller crosses or crucifixes in their hands. Along with music, incense, and elaborate costuming, Corpus Christi was second only to Holy Week in its pageantry. The grand finale was the arrival of the host, the transubstantiated bread, planted in a gilded monstrance. This hierarchy of objects can be seen in an eighteenth century painted ex-voto[172] from the village of San Juan Nepomuceno, in Puebla (fig. 1-20). At the front of the procession are four individuals wearing ecclesiastic garb. One in the center carries a gilded cross and is flanked by candle bearers. The elaborate metalwork is clear despite the painting's stylization. Following them are a series of litters carrying elaborate polychromed statuary, images of

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Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Linda Curcio-Nagy, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

[171] Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 7.

[172] Ex-votos are small paintings, usually comissioned to commemorate a miracle.

archangels carried on the shoulders of Colonial citizens of all stripes. The ex-voto illustrates the stunning diversity of Colonial life. One of the confraternity members is clearly shown as an Indian walking alongside a Spanish brother. In the audience, Africans peek out at the event from shadowy corners, clearly on the fringes. Two nuns genuflect in the doorway.

Through such painted images we can get a glimpse of how these objects were incorporated into Colonial life, and in many ways this usage has remained unchanged in ceremonies up to the modern day.

Filipino Ivories

The crucifixion of Christ was, of course, one of the most popular subjects of Viceregal sculpture. It presented the artist with the challenge of rendering a semi-nude body. Following strict rules of propriety, the nude or semi-nude form was very rare in the Colonial world. The image of Christ on the cross, however, was the one iconographic schema wherein the nude subject was appropriate and, in fact, necessary.

Beginning in 1565, Asian goods were imported to Mexico via the Manila Galleon, convoys of Spanish ships that sailed between Manila in the Spanish East Indies (the present-day Philippines) and the Mexican port city of Acapulco. These ships carried a myriad of Asian goods, both manufactured and raw, into the Spanish New World. Asian influence on Christological imagery engendered a new category of *Cristos*—the Filipino ivory. Ivory came to be seen as an appropriate material for Christ because of its almost skin-like texture when carved.[173]

[173] Stratton-Pruitt et al., 269.

Chinese artists in Manila began producing ivory crucifixes that were shipped to the New World to fill wealthy homes and churches. Many of these artists learned about Christian iconography via prints.[174] Interestingly, a number of the Hispano-Filipino ivories show Jesus Christ emerging triumphantly from the cross, his back arched forwards, and with little sense of his suffering (fig. 1-21). These Asian images of Christ are stylized and idealized in a distinctly Eastern manner.

Soon artists on American soil began creating their own versions from ivory shipped in raw form. Some Asian artists even settled in Spanish colonies and continued to produce these crucifixes there. These artists, who came to be known as *sangleyes*, created some of the most elite forms of Viceregal Christ imagery, carved from the tusks of Asian elephants.[175] Most of these ivory *Cristos* were used in *capillas privadas* (private chapels) and homes, or in private display in larger churches. They were expensive items owned only by the upper classes of Colonial society.[176] Their elite status distinguishes them from the other Christ images that were meant to appeal to and be used by the masses.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a context for understanding the range of sculptural forms of Christological imagery produced in New Spain, as a prelude to examining one type, the Black Christ. The sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries were tumultuous periods for

[174] Museum label for Ivories, Museo Soumaya, Mexico City, 5 January 2012.

[175] Museum label for Ivories, Museo Soumaya, Mexico City, 5 January 2012.

[176] Museum label for Ivories, Museo Soumaya, Mexico City, 5 January 2012.

defining the purpose of religious art in the Americas as well as Europe. Sculpture was particularly questioned as it had potential to become a false idol due to its mimicry of the three-dimensional form of flesh-and-blood saints and biblical figures. After discussing the issue of slippage between idolatry and the use of devotional imagery, the chapter explores how art was used for religious purposes, particularly in devotion to Jesus Christ.

Idolatry troubled European sensibilities because of the ban on graven images contained in the Second Commandment. During the conquest and conversion process in the New World, missionaries and secular priests[177] were continually preoccupied with emphasizing the difference between an idol that was worshipped and a devotional image that recalled its prototype but was not divine in its own right. This distinction became particularly problematic in the Americas, where Pre-Columbian religions did not hold taboos against idolatry, a concern in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Mexica god Tezcatlipoca offers a case study for the translation of male spiritual power from pre- to post-conquest. Native artists and European friars worked together to both record Mexica culture and to translate the Christian faith for the conversion of the indigenous population, a phenomenon that is well illustrated in Durán's connection between the Pre-Columbian Tezcatlipoca's feast (Toxcatl) and the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi.

An enumeration of the many three-dimensional forms of Christ imagery in New Spain, from simple wooden crosses to complex crucifixes brought to life with clothing, wigs, and polychrome lifelike painting, showed the plurality of religious sculpture in the Colonial period. This overview provides the foundation for an understanding of how Black Christ imagery fit into the larger context of Christological sculpture in New Spain.

[177] Secular clergy are priests unafilliated with a religious order.

It was this type of sculpture alone, polychromed and lifelike, that would inspire intense devotion and pilgrimage, while the others were merely symbols of Christ used for votive purposes. The wooden crosses, atrial crosses, and silver and ivory crucifixes did not come to embody Christ's divine presence, as did some examples of life-size, polychromed sculpture. As the following chapters will demonstrate, within the larger category of polychromed sculpture, the darkened "Black" Christs held a special place.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRIST OF CHALMA: DARK LORD OF CAVES AT AN AUGUSTINIAN MISSION

Augustinians in Spain and New Spain

The Augustinian order was established in 1244 as a mendicant ("begging") order, inspired by St. Augustine's renouncement of worldly pursuits in order to live in closer communion with God.[178] From their inception, Augustinian friars served the religious needs of the masses though teaching, catechizing, and spreading the word of god, but did not serve as local parish priests. Augustinians answered directly to Papal authority, thereby bypassing their local bishop and the crown.[179] The Augustinians were especially strong in Spain, and large numbers of mendicants were dispatched to the New World,[180] where they began the process of conversion and catechization.[181]

While Catholic Europe was neatly divided into compact (and manageable) bishoprics and archbishoprics, the Archdiocese of Mexico, founded in 1530, eventually

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[178] The Augustinians were the last of the five "great" mendicant orders to be founded, following the Franciscans (1209), Carmelites (1214), Dominicans (1216), and Servites (1223). All five were formally recognized during the fourteenth ecumenical council of the Catholic Church in 1272. "Mendicant Friars," *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10183c.htm (accessed December 10, 2013).

[179] Matthew D. O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749–1857* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 27.

[180] The earliest mendicants to arrive in the New World were the Franciscans, followed quickly by the Dominicans and Augustinians, then by the Mercedarians, and in the 1560s the Society of Jesus, a new order of priests and lay brothers. Together they developed a utopian mission, one that they compared to the work of Christ's apostles in the Roman world. Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art of Colonial Latin America* (New York and London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 47.

[181] Mendicants viewed the indigenous peoples of the vast New World as lost innocents in need of spiritual sustenance. Bailey, 48.

spanned more than 400 miles from end to end.[182] A growing competition between the secular church served by parish priests and the mendicant orders reached a head in the early years, even though in 1522 Pope Adrian VI had issued the bull *Exponi nobis Fecite*, known popularly as the *Omnimoda*, which laid out the division of labor in the New World.[183] The bull gave the mendicant friars autonomy within the Spanish Americas, allowing them to work outside the control of the crown and the local bishop, although they were limited to serving Indian parishes known as the *doctrinas de indios*.[184]

Ten Augustinians set out from Toledo on March 3, 1533, stopping in the Canary Islands and at Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola, then disembarking in Veracruz before trekking inland to Mexico City.[185] By then Mexico City, built over the former Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan and now Viceregal capital of New Spain, was already being served by Franciscans and Dominicans. Initially the crown forbade the newly arrived Augustinians from establishing a mission, or *convento* there, arguing that the Indians who provided alms for the mendicants would be overburdened with the arrival of a third order.[186]

The New Spanish Augustinians were at a disadvantage, since they did not have esteemed and popular priests like the Dominican Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and the

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[182] O'Hara, 28.

[183] O'Hara, 28.

[184] O'Hara, 29.

[185] Alipio Ruiz Zavala, *Historia de la provincia Agustiniana del Santísimo Nombre de Jesús de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1984), vol. 1, 2.

[186] Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

Franciscan Motolinía. Instead they braved the backwaters of the Viceroyalty and set out into the hinterlands, away from its Spanish capital. They penetrated the missionary frontier populated by the northern Chichimecas, Indians who had avoided or resisted entering the Spanish forced settlements called *reducciones*.[187] As the Augustinians settled in the Viceroyalty, the order continued to augment its numbers.

In spring 1539 four ships left Seville, one of them carrying Fray Nicolás de Perea and Fray Sebastián de Tolentino, who would become major players in the story of the *Cristo Negro* of Chalma. These early nomadic missionaries traversed the rugged terrain on foot, usually working alone or in pairs. Perea and Tolentino were sent to the municipality of Ocuilan, located in the valley of Malinalco to the southwest of the Basin of Mexico.

History of the Chalma Region

The valley of Malinalco, today in the state of Mexico, is home to the towns of Ocuilan, Malinalco, and Chalma. The landscape in the region is an impressive valley riddled with caves and rivers. The mountain setting with such natural features as caves, rivers, and a steep valley set the region apart as a fertile and sacred natural setting, an important element for the creation of both non-Christian and Christian sacred spaces.

The original settlers in the Malinalco valley area surrounding Chalma were the Otomí, one of the earliest complex Mesoamerican cultures and the original inhabitants of the central Mexican highlands as well.[188] Archeological investigations date the Otomí

[187] Hughes, 27.

[188] Yolanda Lastra de Suárez, *Los otomíes: Su lengua y su historia* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2006), 36.

presence in the valley to around A.D. 500 to 750. There they established the town of Ocuilan, which was eventually overrun in 1476 by the powerful Aztec Triple Alliance under the leadership of the Mexica ruler Axayacatl, who designated his two sons as governors of the region surrounding Ocuilan, Malinalco, and Chalma. [189]

The valley of Malinalco was an area that was long associated with magic and sorcery due to the legend that it was home to the goddess Malinalxochil. The name comes from the Nahuatl words *malinalli*, a type of grass; *xochitl,* flower; and *co*, place, translating to "where they worship Malinalxochitl, the malinalli flower." Under Aztec rule, Malinalco also housed the sanctuary built into the bedrock and dedicated to their military elite, the eagle and jaguar warriors. The Codex Mendoza, a mid sixteenth-century painted manuscript, details the tribute levied on the inhabitants of Ocuilan by the Triple Alliance.[190] The vanquished Ocuilanos were forced to provide the usual tribute items of clothing, warrior costumes, and food.[191]

Early seventeenth-century Augustinian chronicler Juan de Grijalva wrote that Ocuilan was one of the most difficult regions to missionize because of the number and difficulty of the local languages. He claimed that thirteen languages were spoken in

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[189] Eufracio García López, *Ocuilan: Monografia municipal* (Toluca, Mexico: Asociación Mexiquense de Cronistas Municipales, 1998), 91.

[190] The Codex Mendoza was commissioned by Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain for Charles I, king of Spain. It includes a history of Mexica rulership, a tribute record, and scenes of everyday life. It is illustrated in Aztec pictorial style and accompanied by Spanish written glosses and commentary.

[191] Scant records survive of the specific tributes paid to the Spaniards, but the nearby towns of Tonatiuhco and Tenantzinco gave their Spanish overlords maize in the mid-sixteenth century. The typical staples of the Mesoamerican diet were grown in the region: maize, beans, chile, and amaranth, plus the less common and highly desirable staple of salt. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), vol. 2, 70; García López, 91.

nearby Malinalco and that the region was diverse and heavily populated.[192] A multiethnic population made a single ethnic identification for the region impossible. The inhabitants of Ocuilan are often referred to as Ocuiltecans or Ocuilanos, but the immediate surrounding region (including Chalma and Malinalco) also contained Otomi, Nahuas, Chichimecas, and Huastecs.[193] As these cultures were in close contact for thousands of years, they developed overlapping cosmologies.[194]

The *convento* at Ocuilan, founded in 1537 by friars Juan de San Román and Diego de Alvarado, [195] was strategically established in proximity to the famous caves of what became known as Chalma and close to the important political and mythic pre-Hispanic center of Malinalco.[196] Ocuilan's *convento* survived until August 1711, when it was destroyed by an earthquake, never to be rebuilt.[197] By that time, the fame of Chalma's *Cristo* had far overshadowed Ocuilan, leaving it a peripheral backwater.

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[192] Juan de Grijalva, *Crónica de la orden de N.P.S. Agustín en las provincias de la Nueva España. En cuatro edades desde el año de 1533 hasta el de 1592* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Porrúa, 1924), 24.

[193] Huaxteca (also Huasteca) inhabited the area along the Gulf Coast of Mexico in the modern-day states of Hidalgo, Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, and Tamaulipas. They came under the rule of the Triple Alliance in 1450 and eventually under Spanish rule around the mid 1520s. George Kubler, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America: The Mexican, Maya, and Andean Peoples* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 149.

[194] Peterson deals with the region similarly, arguing for a pan-Mesoamerican approach to the ritual and worldview of the native population surrounding what became known as Chalma. Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," in *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World,* ed. Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette Favrot Peterson (Burlington and Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

[195] Ramiro Alfonso Gómez Arzapalo Dorantes, *Imágenes de santos en los pueblos de la región de Chalma* (Mexico City: Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007), 61.

[196] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 54.

[197] García López, 96.

Chalma and the Appearance of the *Cristo Negro*, Sacred and Material Origins

Chalma's local topography included a deep canyon, a river with numerous tributaries (including one springing from an ancient tree), and—most importantly—caves, making Chalma a unique and desirable location that was sacred both pre- and post-conquest. The *convento* in Chalma was officially founded by Fray Diego Velázquez de la Cadena, who built the first Augustinian cells in 1681. In Joaquín Sardo's official history of Chalma, written in the early nineteenth century, he compares the Augustinians' work in the multiethnic region of Chalma to that of the prophet Zechariah, who wrote, "We are here to erase from the earth the name and memory of the idols." He likened their proselytizing in the Malinalco Valley to St. Patrick's mission in Ireland and that of St. Severin in Germany.[198]

According to local legend, in 1537 baptized indigenous guides offered to bring the friars to the local sacred cave, where they witnessed the rites dedicated to the dark lord of caves, Oxtoteotl.[199] The friars continued their evangelizing efforts there, urging the native population to destroy the image. According to Fray Joaquín Sardo's account, written in 1810, "The Augustinians continued urging, promising heaven, threatening them with hell. Those [Indians] who had remained in the cave called a timeout to decide

[198] Joaquín Sardo, *Relacion historica y moral de la portentosa imagen de N. Sr. Jesucristo crucificado aparecida en una de las cuevas de S. Miguel de Chalma, hoy real convento y santuario de este nombre* (Mexico City: Impresa en Casa de Arizpe, 1810), 57.

[199] Guillermo Andrade Marín, *Chalma: Un santuartio tradicional* (Mexico City: Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1970), 55.

and they agreed that they would respond later."[200] After three days of consideration, the guides brought the monks back to the caves to destroy the idol.

Joaquín Sardo concedes two possible origin stories for the appearance of an allegedly miraculous crucifix at the site. The first directly involves the Augustinians, who he describes deliberately carrying the "blessed image" of the *Cristo Negro* into the cave so as to "remove the superstitious cult to the idol."[201] The second origin story describes the image as having been placed in the cave by angels. Sardo suggests that Perea carried a simple wooden cross to replace the idol, but when they reached the cave the *Cristo* was already miraculously in place.[202]

Sardo's copper-engraved plate frontispiece illustrates the drama of the Augustinian friars and indigenous neophytes encountering the miraculous replacement of the image of the native god Oxtoteotl with that of the crucified Christ (fig. 2-1). The Pre-Columbian deity statue is shown shattered on the ground, styled as a classical Greek or Roman sculpture, an Early Modern connection between New World "pagan" religions and the Western classical past. A devil and a serpent are depicted fleeing from the scene, signifying the triumph of Christianity over pagan idolatry. The astonished onlookers in the foreground are indigenous peoples of the region who would soon be converted thanks in part to the miracle that they witnessed in the cave at Chalma.

Another powerful image of the apparition was painted by Domingo Ortiz in 1809 on mural panels in the sacristy of Chalma's sanctuary, and is remarkably similar to

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[200] Sardo, 30.

[201] Sardo, 32.

[202] Sardo, 37.

Sardo's frontispiece, published just a year later. Three canvases depict *The Gentiles*, an image of the dark indigenous god Oxtoteotl (fig. 2-2); *The Portent*, an image of the apparition surrounded by astonished Augustinians and native neophytes (fig. 2-3); and *The Translation*, illustrating the transference of the image to the newly constructed church in 1683 (fig. 2-4).[203]

The first canvas, *The Gentiles* (i.e., pagans), depicts indigenes worshipping a bloody pre-Hispanic deity idol, indicating that human sacrifice had taken place (see fig. 2-2). In the foreground friars Tolentino and Perea are praying for the conversion of the inhabitants of Chalma who worshiped what is described as an "abominable idol" in the cartouche below.[204]

The second canvas, *The Portent*, represents the Chalma cave bathed in light with the *Cristo* taking the space that had been occupied by the idol, now broken at its feet (see fig. 2-3). According to Sardo, Perea, accompanied by Tolentino and the Indian neophytes, found the cave whitewashed and decorated with "exquisite flowers." As he explained, the sight of the "exquisite flowers," the whitewashed cave, and the miraculous

[203] Natalia Ferreiro Reyes Retana, "Entre la retina y el mundo: Simulación y trampantojo en un verdadero retrato de milagrosa imagen del santo Cristo de Chalma" (PhD diss., UNAM, 2011), 20.

[204] The entire cartouche reads: "In the year of our Lord 1539 and Easter Day of the Holy Spirit Friars Nicolás de Perea and Sebastian de Tolentino, apostolic preachers from the order of Augustinians intended to plant the faith of the Redeemer Jesus Christ in the province of Ocuilan and Malinalco. In the largest cave of this canyon of Chalma they found the idol of abomination, to whom the Gentiles blindly offered inhuman and cruel sacrifices, worshipping him (according to the most plausible reports) with the name of Ostoc-Theotl or God of the Caves;" my translation. "En el año del Señor de 1539 y día de la Pascua del Espíritu Santo los V.V. P.P. Fr. Nicolás de Perea y Sebastián de Tolentino, Predicadores apostólicos del Orden de N.P.S. Agustín, y destinados para plantar la fe de Jesucristo nuestro Redentor en las Provincias de Ocuilán y Malinalco; hallaron en la cueva mayor e esta barranca de Chalma el ídolo de abominación, a quien los ciegos gentiles ofrecían sacrificios inhumanos y crueles, venerándolo (según las más probables noticias) con el nombre de Ostoc-Theotl o Dios de las Cuevas."

substitution of the crucifix for the tumbled idol caused the Indians to fall to their knees in amazement. Inhabitants of the region were drawn to the cave to visit the *Cristo*, which remained there for some 143 years.

Flowers in Mesoamerican tradition symbolized many things, from beauty and creation to death and destruction.[205] The Aztecs used flowers metaphorically in the "Flowery Wars," staged battles with enemy combatants to train warriors and obtain sacrificial victims. In this practice flowers represented death and were decidedly male in their association. In contrast, the "Flower World" was a spirit land where the dead were received among bountiful flowers, birds, butterflies, and rainbows. According to these interpretations, flowers were metaphors for the soul and the spiritual essence of a person or a ritual object could be evoked through association with flowers.[206] As flowers were powerfully charged objects for this culture, their reported presence within the cave comes as no surprise.

Eventually the *Cristo* was moved out of the cave and into the church built on the canyon floor below, as illustrated in the third panel, *The Translation* (see fig. 2-4). Once in the church, devotees would leave flowers to adorn the altar, a tradition seen in Colonial painted and printed copies of the Lord of Chalma and still practiced today. Pilgrims came to Chalma to worship first in the cave and then in the church once the Lord of Chalma (fig. 2-5) was moved to the Augustinian church built specifically for its worship in the canyon below.

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[205] Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Jane J. Hill, "The Flower World in Material Culture: An Iconographic Complex in the Southwest and Mesoamerica," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 55 (Spring 1999): 2.

[206] Hays-Gilpin and Hill, 2.

When Jesuit historian Francisco de Florencia wrote the earliest chronicle on the Lord of Chalma in 1683, he described the image as lightweight.[207] The second historian, Sardo, made similar comments, calling the original *Cristo* "tan ligera y tan débil" (very light and very fragile).[208] This may indicate that the original crucifix was made out of pasta de caña, the indigenous sculptural technique discussed in chapter one.[209]

Although the records are unclear, at some point in the eighteenth century the altar of the church at Chalma was consumed by a fire that apparently destroyed most of the famous *Cristo*. Sardo mentions both the original *Cristo* and an "identical copy" made of wood that supposedly incorporated ashes from the original in order to transfer the sacred power from the original to the copy (see fig. 2-5).[210] Although the original *Cristo* had been lost, the replacement retained the original's layers of myth and sacrality, including an association with darkness derived from being housed in a cave.

Pilgrimage and the Sacred Landscape

The word *altepetl*, which signifies "place;" comes from the Nahuatl words "*atl*" (water) and "*tepetl*" (mountain), two of the most esteemed landscape features. In Central Mexican and Mixtec manuscripts, a community name often consisted of variations of the

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[207] Francisco de Florencia, *Descripción histórica y moral del yermo de San Miguel, de las cuevas en el reyno de la Nueva España, y invención de la imagen de Christo crucificado, que se verena en ellas* (Cádiz, Spain: Imprenta de la Compañia de Jesus, 1689), 16. Cited in Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 55.

[208] Sardo, 48.

[209] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 55.

[210] Sardo, xix.

words for mountains and rivers.[212] The word *altepetl* was translated into Spanish as "*pueblo*," meaning "people," thus maintaining the link between a local ethnic group and its geographic location.[213] This strong connection between people and landscape had sacred significance. If a locale did not possess a sacred natural element, the landscape was often manipulated by its inhabitants so as to mimic the appearance of sacred natural features. The classic Mesoamerican stepped pyramid, for example, represents a mountain and its interior sacred precinct embodies a cave.

Both natural and built environments could become pilgrimage sites, places to which people traveled to experience the divine. The most popular pilgrimage site in Postclassic Mesoamerica was the Classic-period city of Teotihuacan's great pyramids. By the time that the Mexica established themselves in the Basin of Mexico, the civilization of Teotihuacan had long disappeared, but its temple mountains remained and the site was seen as a place of origin for the gods, which is signified by the very name Teotihuacan. There the so-called Temple of the Sun was built atop a naturally occurring cave, thus fusing the natural and built environments.[214]

The Spanish regarded Mesoamerican religion, and such expressions as pilgrimages to deity shrines, as diabolical and made every attempt to eradicate them, using evangelization as a moral justification for the violence and turmoil of the conquest.

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[212] Judith Francis Zeitlin, "Contesting the Sacred Landscape in Colonial Mesoamerica," Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (2008), http://www.famsi.org/reports/07085/07085Zeitlin01.pdf (accessed November 20, 2012).

[213] James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 15.

[214] Doris Heyden, "An Interpretation of the Cave Underneath the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 40, no. 2 (April 1975): 131-47.

Throughout Mesoamerica, the Spanish missionaries destroyed pagan idols, as Augustinians had at the cave of Oxtoteotl. Some communities hid their images of Pre-Columbian deities beneath church altars, but they were eventually discovered and destroyed. The landscape shrines had a better chance at surviving because they could not be destroyed. Instead, they were altered. Apparitions of the Virgin Mary or miraculous crucifixes found in and around natural features (caves, rivers, or mountains) became widely reported, often accompanied by narratives claiming the triumph of Christianity over the native religion, such as at Chalma.[215]

The sacred cave became the most potent natural element at Chalma as the location where the miraculous *Cristo* purportedly appeared in 1537. The image remained in the cave for 146 years until 1683, when the Augustinian brothers Bartolomé de Jesús María and Juan de San José founded the new church in the valley below, located alongside the crystalline waters of the River Chalma.[216] Even then the cave retained its sacred importance. The Cedula Real from 1781 mentions Augustinian monks caring for an image, apparently a replica, in the cave, which by this point had been renamed the Caves of San Miguel. The author indicates that images of the Virgin of the Conception and the Virgin of Guadalupe were also venerated nearby the cave.[217] This is the same cave where

[215] This also occurred most famously with the Virgin of Guadalupe, who according to legend, appeared to an Indian named Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac.

[216] María J. Rodríguez-Shadow and Robert D. Shadow, *El pueblo del Señor: Las fiestas y peregrinaciones de Chalma* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2002), 35.

[217] "Description of Chalma," Cedula Real, Originales (1781), vol. 111, exp. 196, fs. 421, AGN, Mexico City.

the "Indians adored their idols and made sacrifices to the devil."[218] In Chalma the indigenous religion was thus metaphorically replaced by the Christian faith through a co-opting of the sacred cave.

Yet, rather than completely erasing the prior veneration and its idol, the friars clearly attempted to co-opt Oxtoteotl's prestige by replacing it. The choice of a male image (Christ rather than the Virgin Mary) was appropriate in this location, as opposed to Tepeyac, for example, where a female goddess had been venerated and the replacement devotion that arose there was to the female Virgin of Guadalupe. These choices were made deliberately, perhaps following what art historian Samuel Edgerton calls the "theory of expedient selection," a process carried out by missionary friars whose "proselytizing strategy emphasiz[ed] just those Christian doctrines and rituals that bore the closest similarity to preconquest native traditions."[219] The choice of a miraculous image of Christ, the location within the cave, and the use of flowers in the legend, all exemplify Edgerton's hypothesis. Yet Edgerton's assertions give all the agency to European friars, without taking into account that the indigenous peoples chose to continue the pilgrimages, with their offerings, dances, and ritual baths in the River Chalma that had been performed long before the appearance of the miraculous *Cristo*. The river is used today as it has been for hundreds of years, as a sacred place where pilgrims wash themselves before entering the sacred sanctuary.

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[218] "Description of Chalma," Cedula Real, Originales (1781), vol. 111, exp. 196, fs. 442, AGN, Mexico City.

[219] Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 33.

Another key part of Chalma's sacred landscape is the *ahuehuete*, which translates to "old man of the water," an ancient cypress tree located two miles from the sanctuary. Out of its roots springs a tributary that feeds the River Chalma (fig. 2-6). Trees were often regarded in Mesoamerica as cosmic centers or *axes mundi*, portals into the upper and lower worlds. They were frequently, like Christian crosses, personified and linked to notions of life, death, and rebirth. The *ahuehuete* was considered a particularly sacred tree because of its impressive size and age.[220] To this day pilgrims at Chalma gather at the sacred tree to bathe themselves and their children before donning floral crowns and taking the path to the sanctuary.[221] They also leave their infants' umbilical cords on the branches of the tree to give thanks for a successful birth.

The landscape surrounding Chalma was seen as spiritually charged and protective of the sacred objects housed within the church. In 1781 a thief reportedly attempted to steal the famed *Cristo*, but he was only able to abscond with a silver candlestick from the altar as he fled to the surrounding highlands. His body was later found eaten entirely by wolves, except for the bones of his hand still holding the stolen candlestick.[222] A miracle was proclaimed and, although there is no record of it, the candlestick was likely returned to the altar with great jubilation. The mountainous landscape and predatory animals were

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[220] At the mission complex of San Francisco in Mexico City the Christianized Nahuas erected a 200-foot-high cross made out of a cypress, *ahuehuetl*. The huge cross was described by Cervantes de Salazar as "reach[ing] the heavens."Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 153.

[221] Cris Costanze Martens Espinosa, "Yendo a bailar a Chalma: Ruta de peregination y propuesta de albergue" (MA thesis, UNAM, 2004), 82.

[222] "Description of Chalma," Cedula Real, Originales (1781), volume 111, exp. 196, fs. 457, AGN, Mexico City.

seen as divine protection for the *Cristo* and its devotees, as well as sources of retribution for those who dared to violate the sanctity of its sacred spaces. Ironically, in his chronicle Florencia claims that the *Cristo* banished all predatory animals from the region.[223]

Ritual at Chalma: The Dance

A popular idiom in Mexico to this day is the saying, "Ni yendo a bailar a Chalma," or "without going to dance in Chalma." The phrase refers to the dances that were performed on what is now called the "Hill of the Three Crosses," one of many large cliffs that loom over the town and the church below. The implication is that of a difficult and arduous task that cannot be undertaken without making the long trek to Chalma to dance in honor of the *Cristo*.

Mexican anthropologist Arminda Cristobal Caraval claims that Chalma is the southern center of the cosmology of sacred dance in the region, while the shrine of Guadalupe is the northern center; the church in Amecameca (also home to a Black Christ, discussed in chapter four) is the western center, and the Church of Los Remedios in Cholula is the eastern one.[224] She adds that these four important sacred centers serve as stages for a number of dances including the *conchero*, *chichimeca*, and *azteca*.

Music, dance, and performance were important aspects of indigenous ritual and cosmology. According to historian of religions Jaime Lara, "The precontact Nahuas staged elaborate theatrical productions with costumes, scenery and makeup. Theatre, for

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[223] Florencia, 247.

[224] Arminda Cristobal Caraval, "Ni yendo a danzar a Chalma: Análisis cualitativo del uso y significado que se le da a la danza prehispánica en Chalma desde la significación de quien la realiza" (PhD diss., UNAM, 2006), xi.

them, was sacred speech … and it included dance, music, mime, puppetry, and song—all for the purposes of moral instruction and the actualization of the myths."[225] Music, dance, and theatrics, as Lara indicates, were used to enact the complex cosmology and mythology of indigenous people. Dances were linked to agricultural and ritual cycles and dedicated to specific deities.[226] Statuettes in clay and jade from as early as 1500 B.C. show that dance, probably related to the invocation of rain, was already well established.[227] By the early sixteenth century dance, particularly in the capital of Tenochtitlan, had developed into highly elaborate choreographed mass spectacles, often performed in concentric circles.[228]

Ritualized theatre and dance had been performed in Europe as well since the Middle Ages, particularly in mystery plays, as a means of communicating biblical stories to the masses. The Spanish missionaries thus utilized native dance and theatre in similar ways, seeing the potential for indigenous people to use their bodies as expressive tools to communicate their new faith. Some of the famous early mission dances involved circumambulating the *convento* atrium, with neophytes pausing within the *posas*, small chapels set up at the four corners of the atrium.[229] This movement replicated the movement of the cosmos, the passage of time and cycles of celestial change. Similarly,

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[225] Lara, 177.

[226] Paul A. Scolieri, *Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 62.

[227] Mexicolore, "Did Pre-Columbian Dances Survive the Conquest?" http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/spanish-conquest/did-pre-columbian-dances-survive-the-conquest, accessed February 13, 2014.

[228] Scolieri, 50.

[229] Bailey, 221.

the dances at Chalma tended to take on a circumambulatory pattern around the atrium directly outside of the church.

Documents from the Colonial period confirm Chalma's long history of ritual dance. For example, the 1781 Cedula Real notes that "Indians with music and dances in their own style are attributed to the holy image."[230] These dances may have originally been performed in the cave in honor of Oxtoteotl as part of sacrificial rites.[231] Today the dances occur year round, but the most important ones derived from pre-Hispanic roots occur only once per year, when thousands of dancers descend on Chalma during the Feast of Pentecost. The dances begin on the Hill of the Three Crosses. Dancers remove the simple wooden crosses that dot the landscape and march in procession with them down to the church, in a reenactment of the transfer of the *Cristo* from the cave to the church in the valley below. The dances recreate the mythology surrounding the Christ of Chalma. The dancers dress up as a captain, a Malinche, sergeants, horsemen, and serpents. The sergeants are seen as dominating the serpent, reenacting the drama of conquest and conversion within the context of the miraculous Christ of Chalma.

Replication of the Image of the Lord of Chalma and the Spread of Its Cult

José de Olivares's *Oración panegirica* was a sermon dedicated to the transfer of the Chalma crucifix to the new church, which occurred at the same time as the dedication of the new *capilla* of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In it the friar pronounces that "The water

[230] "Description of Chalma," Cedula Real, Originales (1781), volume 111, exp. 196, fs. 409, AGN, Mexico City.

[231] Caraval, 29.

must run for echos to resonate."[232] The echos to which he refers are the pilgrims, alms, and miracles attributed to the power of the image. Throughout the Viceregal period the number of Chalma devotees steadily increased, particularly following the construction of the church in 1683. The creation of secondary images, particularly prints, helped to spread the cult that pilgrims would carry back with them to their homes.[233] The prints always pointed back to the original prototype and its miraculous appearance in the cave in Chalma.

The most widespread of those prints was created by an artist known only as Zapata at the end of the sixteenth or beginning of the seventeenth century (fig. 2-7).[234] At the top center of the print, the Lord of Chalma is suspended above a bishop's hat with tassels that encircle a flaming hat, symbolic of the Augustinian order. Below, a text narrates the history of the apparition, indicating that a full published history on the miraculous *Cristo* was soon to be published (presumably the Florencia text, published in 1638). The wish expressed within the text is that the "Lord of Chalma should be blessed in the sanctuary, in homes, and on all journeys."[235] This early image of the Lord of Chalma clearly was intended to promote the dissemination of its cult beyond the immediate region.

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[232] "Hacer correr el agua, que resuenen los ecos." José de Olivares, *Oración panegyrica qua a la festiva solemnidad de la nueva capilla que se consagró a N. Señora de Guadalupe, y translación de la peregrina, y milagros aefigie a Cristo crucificado, que por tiempo inmemorial se adora y venera en la cuebas y santuario de S. Miguel de Chalma, del orden de N. P. San Augustín* (Mexico City: Bernardo Calderón, 1683).

[233] Ferriero Reyes Retana, 50.

[234] Ferriero Reyes Retana, 52.

[235] "Sea bendito en el santuario, en las casas y por todos los caminos." Page signed by Zapata, *Alabado que cantan los pueblos al Señor de Chalma.* Colección del INAH. Quoted in Ferriero Reyes Retana, 53.

These reproduced printed or painted images were found in both private and public spaces to promote a direct relationship between the devotee and the original image. One such private image is a small altarpiece now in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 2-8). Museum employee Patricia Wooley traveled to Mexico in 1945 to obtain art works for the museum's Mexican painting collection. In her correspondence with the museum she mentioned the need to "guarantee the authenticity of the material."[236] The question of authenticity is a typical preoccupation of art historians, but one that does not apply in the case of a replicated devotional image. The issue is not whether the image is original or authentic, for it is used as a votive tool referring to the *Cristo* at Chalma and his miraculous powers, but it in no way replaces him.

The Brooklyn Museum's altarpiece is a type that would have been used at home or in a small side chapel and is an excellent example of a genre sometimes referred to in Spanish as a *trampantojo* (traps the eye) for its ability to trick the eye into thinking that one is looking at a sculpture rather than a painting.[237] That is, the painting replicates in three-dimensions the appearance of not only the crucifix, but also the altar and niche within which it was placed. Interestingly, the painting is actually halfway between a *trampantojo* replicated the church's niche and an imagined image of the *Cristo*, because it includes the figures of the Virgin Mary and St. John on either side of Christ, figures that were not actually placed in the niche but were imagined there by the artist. Wax drippings on the back of the painting, and in smaller amounts on the front remain from offertory candles, indicating the devotional nature of the altarpiece. Although it has been

[236] Patricia Wooley, letter to Mrs. Roberts, October 11, 1945. Courtesy of Emily Sessions, Curatorial Assistant in the Arts of America and Europe, Brooklyn Museum, November 11, 2011.

[237] This is better known in English as a trompe l'oeil painting.

decontextualized (removed from its original physical setting) the painting appears to contain layers of soot from years of use in a prayer setting. It is an excellent example of popular art, the simple, folk-style image that devotees would have had in their homes or placed in small chapels dedicated to the Lord of Chalma.

Once the Chalma *Cristo* gained fame and attracted pilgrims, artists and others began making secondary statues, paintings, and prints that reproduced its appearance. Some devotees would bring crucifixion images with them to the sanctuary to be blessed in the presence of the Lord of Chalma, thus transferring its miraculous properties. In the 1781 Cedula Real, the reporter describes the great number of Indian devotees who came from throughout the kingdom, bringing with them engravings and small statues to be blessed as relics.[238] These images were commonly known as *santocalli*, a hybrid word that combines the Spanish word *santo* (saint) and the Nahuatl word *calli* (house), thus literally meaning "saint's house."[239] These were small structures at the entrance to some indigenous *pueblos* where local people would house small sacred images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the saints.[240] It soon became used as a general word for images such as the ones brought by native pilgrims to the church at Chalma.

These secondary images were sometimes produced elsewhere and brought to Chalma for benediction, or they could be produced in Chalma and carried home by

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[238] "Description of Chalma," Cedula Real, Originales (1781), volume 111, exp. 196, fs. 421, AGN, Mexico City.

[239] Susan Verdi Webster, "Art, Ritual, and Confraternities in Sixteenth-Century New Spain: Penitential Imagery at the Monastery of San Miguel, Huejotzingo," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 70 (1997): 7.

[240] Frederick Starr, *An Indian Mexico: A Narrative of Travel and Labor* (Chicago: Forbes and Company, 1908), 27.

pilgrims. In both scenarios they served to both spread the cult beyond the town of Chalma and draw more devotees to visit the miraculous image during pilgrimages and festivals. An example of these types of images is a small nineteenth-century crucifix sculpted in simplified folk style that is housed in the Brooklyn Museum but was collected in the region of Chalma (fig. 2-9).

Some of the most famous copies of the Lord of Chalma were in the form of the so-called *verdaderos retratos* ("true portraits"), highly naturalistic, three-dimensional renderings of the crucifix, niche, vases, flowers, and other offerings left for the Lord of Chalma, all of which referred back to the original crucifix and rituals that took place in Chalma. The most famous of the statue paintings of the Chalma crucifix were made by José de Mora, who seems to have been the official painter for the Augustinians in Chalma. He painted at least five extant versions of the Lord of Chalma. Four can be found in the churches of La Conchita in Coyoacán, La Profesa in Mexico City, San Cristobal Ecatepec, and the convent of Nuestra Señora del Carmen in Tenancingo.[241]

All five paintings feature an almost life-sized image of the *Cristo* displaying an emaciated and bloodied body with marks of the stigmata and the lance that pierced his side, as indicated in Florencia's chronicle. Also characteristic of Mora's paintings and of many later images of the *Cristo* in painted, sculpted, or printed form, is the large and prominent knot on his sendal, the garment that clothed the *Cristo* in the church. It was particularly common in the eighteenth century for these silk fabrics to be quite large and decorative.[242] Although this large style was popular in general, apparently the large

[241] Ferriero Reyes Retana, 55.

[242] Ferriero Reyes Retana, 55.

sendal with a prominent, sweeping side knot became a distinctive characteristic of the Lord of Chalma and its copies.

The most famous of Mora's images of the Lord of Chalma was painted in 1719 and is today housed in the Museo Nacional del Arte in Mexico City (fig. 2-10). It is not only an image of the *Cristo*, but specifically a "true portrait of the miraculous image of the holy Christ of Chalma," as indicated in the cartouche.[243] The official "true portrait" was seen as a definitive copy of the original and thereby accorded a certain level of prestige over other copies. This designation was very popular in New Spain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as it functioned as a sort of seal attesting to the accurate rendering of the *santo*; moreover, it acted as a conduit transfering sacred properties from the shrine to the true portrait.

Specific painters specialized in creating the *verdaderos retratos* (true portraits), as Mora may have done at Chalma. Although there is no documentary evidence of this fact, the sheer number of painted copies by his hand indicate that he must have held a certain prestige in this arena. The exact relationship between the painter and the Augustinians is unclear, but perhaps he was specifically entrusted to paint the images destined for other major churches.

Another famous Colonial painter who created an image of the *Cristo* is José de Ibarra (fig. 2-11). The back of the canvas holds an inscription proclaiming that the painting was "touched by the original on the 15th of July, 1738."[244] This indicates that not only was the painting a lifelike and powerful image of the *Cristo*, but it was painted

[243] "Verdadero retrato de la milagrosa ymagen del santo Cristo de Chalma" as quoted in Ferriero Reyes Retana, 57.

[244] "Tocado a la original en 15 de Julio 1738" as quoted in Ferriero Reyes Retana, 57.

directly from the crucifix itself, and not from painted or printed copies. This fact imbued it with the power of the miraculous Christ. Similar to Mora's printed copies, Ibarra's includes the large sendal with a flowing side knot made of fabric featuring the monogram of Jesus and Mary and the flanking porcelain vases.

The most notable difference between the artists' renderings is that Ibarra's *Cristo* is shown with his eyes slightly open, a characteristic not seen in the original *Cristo* or in any of its copies. Perhaps Ibarra made this adjustment to further activate and authenticate the image in the mind of the viewer, making Christ more palpable and lifelike. Because he was not as established as Mora in making copies of the Lord of Chalma on site, he was perhaps granted some artistic license and used the open eyes to create a more powerful image. Ibarra was a much more famous painter overall, and his prominence may account for the fact that he was selected over Mora to produce the painting for the most famous church in New Spain, the Basilica of Guadalupe.

Both images, signed by the artists, were clearly made by human hands. Their designation as "true portraits" indicated that they were powerful but by no means replaced the original. Instead, they always referred back to the church in Chalma. They were tools of propaganda that helped to spread the cult beyond its local confines. Bestowed with power only as derived from the original crucifix in Chalma, they represented authorized copies rather than mere replicas.[245]

[245] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 440.

The Lord of Chalma and the Virgin of Guadalupe, *Santos Hermanos*

Since its origination the Lord of Chalma has been connected to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Legend states that, because she appeared ten years earlier than the *Cristo*, she is his mother.[246] Both the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Lord of Chalma were miracles of substitution, whereby a sacred space dedicated to an indigenous deity was transformed into a Christian church with a new, miraculous image.

At Tepayac, home of Guadalupe, the indigenous inhabitants originally worshipped an earth goddess named Tonanzin, whose shrine was found atop the hill. The legend states that an Indian named Juan Diego received several visions of the Virgin Mary there, and on her final appearance she asked him to pick roses, which he placed in his mantle and delivered to the local priest to convince him of the truth of his visitation by the Virgin. When the roses were removed, an image of Guadalupe was emblazoned on the cloth.[247] This miracle sparked the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who became known as a Virgin in native style. She was noted for her dark hair and *mestizo* coloring that separated her from typically fair-skinned European Virgins (fig. 2-12).

Guadalupe's European prototype is found in Extremadura, Spain. The church housing the statue of The Virgin of Guadalupe was the most important Marian shrine in Extremadura beginning in the Middle Ages, and it is one of several so-called Black

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[246] Linda Kay Davidson and David Martin Gilitz, *Pilgrimage: From Ganges to Graceland* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 93.

[247] For more on Guadalupe see Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1995); D.A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

Virgins in Spain.[248] Similar to many miraculous apparitions, including Guadalupe in Mexico, she first appeared to a member of the proletariat. The legend states that a shepherd received a vision and instructed local priests to dig for the hidden statue, which was excavated and housed in a shrine that eventually became an important monastery in the early fourteenth century.[249] Since many of the early conquerors, including Cortés, came from the region of Extremadura, it is natural that Guadalupe was imported to New Spain.

The phenomenon of the Black Madonna has been extensively studied and is a popular designation for Medieval Marian statues that have darkened over the ages to the point of developing a rich, black patina (see Introduction).[250] Literary scholar and linguist Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba argues that the Black Madonna represents a universal "dark feminine," an association between the dark and fertile earth and the feminine qualities of fertility and nurturing as embodied in the Virgin Mary.[251] It seems, however, that this association of darkness with femininity was not as exclusive in the Americas. Judging by the sheer number of miraculous Christ images in New Spain relative to Spain, and by Christ's frequent association with caves, rivers, and mountains such as at Chalma,

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[248] Davidson, 36.

[249] Brading, 77.

[250] See for example Ean Begg, *Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Deep Books, 2007); Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 161; Monique Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (December 2002): 1412-1440.

[251] Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, 161.

it appears that in Mesoamerican thought male gods were also associated with the rich and fertile earth.

Guadalupe and the Chalma *Cristo* were both early Viceregal devotional images located close to the capital of Mexico City. Also, both were dark *santos*, an important marker of their sacred prestige that is discussed below. Considering these similarities, it is not surprising that the two became closely associated. In fact, until Mexico gained its independence and the Virgin of Guadalupe was subsequently installed as patroness of the Americas, her popularity was not so dominant;[252] rather, she was one of a number of Virgins worshipped in the Viceroyalty. Furthermore, miraculous images of Christ actually outnumbered Virgin devotional sites during much of the Colonial period.

In popular Catholic belief, both God the Father and Jesus Christ were feared. The Virgin Mary, however, was viewed as a benevolent mother who interceded on behalf of humanity. As discussed in chapter one, miraculous Marian images far outnumbered Christological shrines in Spain throughout the medieval period, perhaps due to Mary's role as intercessor. Starting in the seventeenth century, according to William A. Christian, Spanish confraternities began using passion imagery during Holy Week, largely in response to the post-Tridentine exhortation for people to form a direct and intimate connection with biblical stories and particularly with the Passion of Christ.[253] These popular images came to be objects of devotion not only during the outdoor processions,

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[252] William B. Taylor, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion," *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (February 1987): 10.

[253] William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 195.

but also within churches. Not until the eighteenth century did shrines devoted to Christ represent as much as one-third of popular Spanish devotional sites.[254]

In contrast, in Mexico Christ shrines have always been popular. According to historian William B. Taylor:

> Of about 480 Mexican shrines to miraculous images that have attracted followers from beyond their immediate vicinity since the sixteenth century, 219 are dedicated to images of the Virgin Mary and 261 to images of Christ. True, the Christs are more likely than the Marys to have become famous during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but at least 156 of the shrines to images of Christ developed in the Colonial period. Most of them were confined to district-wide or regional followings, but the Lord of Chalma, the Cristo Renovado de Santa Teresa, the Stone Cross of Querétaro, Guatemala's Lord of Esquipulas, and a dozen others were more widely venerated.[255]

Based on Christian and Taylor's studies of popular religion in Spain and New Spain respectively, it becomes clear that Christological devotion was more popular overall in the colony than in the Old World.[256]

This may come as a surprise considering what Taylor calls the "Wal-Mart style history" of the Virgin of Guadalupe (i.e., its broad mass marketing), but not until the mid-nineteenth century did the Virgin of Guadalupe became famous beyond her immediate vicinity. Prior to this she competed for popularity with eight or nine other pilgrimage

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[254] Christian, 183.

[255] William B. Taylor, "Two Shrines." 946.

[256] William A. Christian claims that in 1580 of the 314 towns surveyed by King Philip II, only three images of Christ were accorded special veneration. Although not comprehensive, this figure still reveals the relative dearth of devotional Christ imagery in sixteenth century Spain. Christian's figure of 219 in New Spain is clearly much larger. Taylor, "Two Shrines," 946; Christian, 183.

shrines as well as other, less famous local shrines.[257] The Lord of Chalma was one of the principal competitors, as the two shrines are only about forty miles apart and both commemorated early Colonial miraculous apparitions (Guadalupe in 1531 and the Lord of Chalma just six years later in 1537).

The connection between the two cults is most expressly stated in a popular sermon, *Oración panegyrica* (briefly considered earlier in this chapter), by Joseph de Olivares, seventeenth-century professor of theology at the Royal University in Mexico City. The sermon, written in 1683, was dedicated to the transfer of the *Cristo* from the cave to the newly built Chalma sanctuary and published expressly to promote the Chalma devotional cult.[258] It was preached on the day of the dedication of the new temple of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was said to be a patroness of the Christ of Chalma.

In 1778 an Augustinian named Joseph Simon wrote a letter to the Viceroy, Antonio Maria de Bucareli, requesting the prohibition of the sale of pulque in Chalma. [259] He expressed his concern about the drunk and lascivious nature of townspeople, including gambling events with an image of the Lord of Chalma offered as the prize. He argued that such prohibitions were instituted at the sanctuary of the Lady of Guadalupe, and that the same steps should therefore be taken in Chalma. Such comparison between the two shrines is common in the archival documents and points to the prominence of these dark *santos* in the Viceregal period.

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[257] Taylor, "Two Shrines," 947.

[258] Olivares, *Oración panegyrica*.

[259] Joseph Simon, "Letter to Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli concerning the Sanctuary of the Lord of Chalma," Clero Regular y Secular (1796), vol. 185, exp. 6, fs. 220-64, AGN, Mexico City.

Sardo offers another example of such parallels between the two sites. In insisting that the *Santo Cristo* was made by miraculous means, he points out that while some devotional images, like the Virgin of Remedios (Remedies), were made by human hands, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Lord of Chalma were made by the hand of God.[260]

The Dark Lord of Caves: The Changing Color of the Lord of Chalma

Most important for the purposes of this dissertation is the color, or perception of color, in these painted, printed, and sculpted copies of the Chalma *Cristo*. It seems that throughout the Lord of Chalma's life the image has vacillated between being a *Cristo negro* and a typical "white" crucifix. Its blackness is noted in texts from multiple periods, such as Florencia's "*denegrido*" description,[261] corroborated by Sardo's discussion of the original Christ,[262] and the Guadalupan sermon of Joseph de Olivares who claimed that the Christ began to *ennegrarse* or become blackened during its time in the cave.[263]

For over a century the Chalma *Cristo* was confined to the cave, where it slowly darkened from the effects of oxidation, humidity, and soot from votive candles. It was moved to the present sanctuary in 1638; then, at some point in the early eighteenth century, a fire engulfed the main altar, destroying all or most of the original Black Christ. Shortly after the fire it was reconstructed out of wood, allegedly incorporating ashes from

[260] Sardo, 39.

[261] Francisco de Florencia, *Descripción histórica y* moral, 16. As mentioned in Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 55.

[262] Sardo, 48.

[263] Olivares, *Oración panegyrica*.

the original crucifix into the replica, and in this way transferring its sacred potency.[264] The replacement crucifix was no longer black like the original, however. In fact, from the eighteenth century onward it seems that descriptions and reproductions of the *Cristo* have varied in their coloration, sometimes being described as black and at other times as a typical white crucifix. Art historian Jeanette Favrot Peterson argues that "Blackness … inheres in this sacred image regardless of the actual skin tonality; it has become a 'symbol-vehicle,' a signifier that has taken on a 'life of its own' quite apart from its original signified."[265] The Chalma crucifix, though popularly referred to as a *Cristo Negro*, remains far from black in its current appearance; it is perhaps better described as tan or swarthy. The Augustinian order at the sanctuary has never formally granted it the title of a "Black Christ," but the designation has remained despite changes in its appearance and official views on the subject.

How then, did the Chalma *Cristo* retain its "blackness," at least in popular perception, when it physically became whitened? It seems that the Augustinians made efforts to whiten the image, perhaps for racial reasons, as whiteness was equated with Europeans and thus with Colonial power. Peterson points out that in Tila, Chiapas, which will be discussed further in chapter four, bishop Francisco Núñez de la Vega destroyed a number of "sooty" idols in the region, that is, images of "black" gods that had been worshipped there long before the arrival of the Spaniards and Christianity. Seven years later, in 1694, the bishop described the miraculous renovation of the Tila *Cristo* from dark to light, its "smoky and blackened body suddenly becoming white, as it is seen

[264] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 55.

[265] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 53.

today."[266] Yet the Tila *Cristo* was in fact allowed to darken since today it appears black once again. Although records do not survive at Chalma, it seems that a similar cycle of darkening and renovation or lightening of the image must have transpired there, whether through the actual recreation of the crucifix after the fire or via the cleaning of the soot from its surface.

This process of the accumulation of dark patina begs the question of exactly why the layers of grime were allowed to remain on the image in the first place, as well as why, though eventually cleaned and "renovated," the image retained its blackness in popular consciousness. Many of the written descriptions of the original *Cristo* describe him as black, as evidenced in the Florencia, Sardo, and Olivares texts mentioned above. Yet all the eighteenth-century paintings of the *Cristo* show him as white, including one of the earliest *verdaderos retratos*, painted in the first half of the eighteenth century by an artist named Pedro Calderón (fig. 2-13). The painting follows the conventions set out by Mora, depicting a luminescently white image of the Chalma crucifix, placed in the typical niche and surrounded by floral and votive candle offerings. Yet, the *Cristo* continued to be described as black, its color attributed to candle smoke by the chronicler Rivera Cambas in 1883.[267] Not until the twentieth century, in fact, was the Lord of Chalma routinely illustrated as black following popular written descriptions.

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[266] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 56: "Su cuerpo ahumado y denegrido improvisadamente se manifestó y halló blanco como al presente se ve," as quoted from Francisco Núnez de la Vega, *Las Constituciones Diocesanas del obispado de Chiapa*, ed. María del Carmen León Cázares and Mario Humberto Ruiz (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Centro de Estudias Mayas, 1988), 65.

[267] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 56.

The best known black example of the Lord of Chalma is the encaustic mural painted in 1922 by the muralist Fernando Leal, entitled *Dancers at Chalma* (fig. 2-14). Leal, part of the first generation of Mexican muralists, was commissioned by Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos to paint the public spaces of the National Preparatory School (San Idelfonso) in Mexico City.[268] These murals celebrated Vasconcelos's philosophy of *indigenismo*, which emphasized the social and political contributions of the indigenous population of Mexico to the country's history. In the mural Leal depicts the *Cristo* as coal-black, and being carried through the streets during one of the annual festivities in Chalma. Pilgrims dance wildly alongside it in celebration. Leal celebrates the Lord of Chalma as a symbol of indigenous pride, its black color strongly differentiating him from typical Spanish crucifixes. Today *santocalli*, the small sculpted reproductions bought by pilgrims are routinely painted a dark ebony, though a range of colors (from white to tan to black) is often available, showing the varying interpretations of the color of the Lord of Chalma (fig. 2-15).

Yet such dramatically dark interpretations were not the norm at Chalma in the Colonial period, even though numerous writers described the *Cristo* as dark or blackened. The question then remains: how did the Lord of Chalma retain his blackness when both the physical crucifix (which was apparently cleaned or whitened at certain points) and its painted, printed, and sculpted copies were routinely shown as white?

For this answer we must turn back to the sacred landscape and the persistent memories of dark gods that must have retained resonance at Chalma. Caves, as discussed in the "Pilgrimage and Sacred Landscape" section of this chapter, were important ritual

[268] Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 151.

spaces in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Cave entrances were liminal portals in which a person could pass from the light-filled surface of the earth into the dark underworld.[269] In Mesoamerican cosmology caves were associated with the reciprocal relationship between life and death. Though human sacrifice life was allowed to continue, and caves represented this crucial relationship. They held vaginal associations, seen as wombs and places of emergence, but they could also be viewed as places of death and subsequent rebirth. Caves helped to mark these boundaries between light and dark, life and death, and often images of the World Tree and crosses were placed within them to mark these important transformations.[270]

The Chalma crucifix emerged in a cave; therefore, once it began turning black, this was seen as a natural process that associated the figure with the dark cave interior, the place of both death and the emergence of life. Its darkness thus became seen as integral to its sacred essence, allowing the figure to retain its physical blackness, at least until the next fire that destroyed the original and its subsequent reconstruction and whitening. Even through the process of whitening, however, the figure maintained its *metaphysical* blackness, as evidenced by the continuation of written descriptions throughout the Colonial period and the reemergence of physical copies in dramatically dark colors in the independence period.

Beyond the cave context, blackness had long been associated with male strength in Mesoamerica. Obsidian, jet, soot, rubber, and bitumen are all dark and sacred materials

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[269] Timothy Pugh, "Caves and Artificial Caves in Late Postclassic Maya Ceremonial Groups," in *Stone Houses and Earth Lords: Maya Religion in the Cave Context*, ed. Keith M. Prufer and James E. Brady (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005), 47.

[270] Pugh, 50.

often associated with male deities.[271] The local cave god at Chalma, Oxtoteotl, is believed to be a specific local example of Tezcatlipoca, "The Lord of the Smoking Mirror." His black volcanic "mirror" symbolized his ability to see all that took place in the world through its reflection. Although dark, obsidian was also luminous because, when polished, the volcanic stone reflects light, indicating its divine powers. Images of Tezcatlipoca included wooden sculptures smeared with black bitumen, known as the "tar of the gods." This feature mimicked his most important effigy, carved in polished obsidian as described by the chronicler Diego Durán.[272]

Unlike the Western association of darkness with evil and light with good, the Mesoamerican worldview did not have a strict dichotomy. Alfredo López Austin claims that there was a clear relationship between darkness and holiness and that the Nahuatl word *teotl*, which translates as god or sacred essence, also refers in some cases to blackness.[273] Aztec priests often painted themselves black to honor male deities and to embody the sacred prestige associated with blackness. They used paint derived from poisonous or hallucinogenic plants and animals, which served as bodily protection during potentially harmful activities such as entering caves. These same salves were at times applied to deity icons as means of activation. At times of turmoil or change, they were placed on the Aztec ruler himself. This allowed passage through liminal zones during sacred ceremonial occasions.[274]

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[271] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 61.

[272] Fray Diego Durán, "The History of the Indies of New Spain," *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 222.

[273] López Austin, 145.

[274] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 61.

Peterson further observes, "Well into the Colonial period, a blackened body declaimed the ability of the highest members of the ruling class to channel the supernatural, within an ethos in which sacred and civil realms were inextricably meshed."[275] The elite figures painted in the sixteenth-century central Mexican *Tira de Tepechpan* are shown with their faces, hands, and sometimes their feet painted black (fig. 2-16).[276] Even powerful Spaniards are shown with this ebony coloring. Hernándo Cortés is shown as a typical European—sitting in a European armchair and holding a lance—yet he is painted dark black. The most powerful figures, whether natives or Spaniards were routinely depicted as black in New Spain, as a sign of their prestige and leadership.

Blackness in Mesoamerican cosmology was far from ominous and pernicious, as it was for Western Europeans. In fact, it symbolized sacrality, transformation, and male power. Once the Lord of Chalma began the process of darkening, this blackened color was thence believed to add to its sacred prestige, at least in the minds of native devotees. His connection with the dark Virgin of Guadalupe further enhanced his association with blackened skin. Despite the Augustinians' best efforts to whiten the *Cristo* both physically and metaphorically, it was still able to retain its association with blackness.

Conclusion

Chalma is an excellent entry point for this larger study of the Black Christ because it possesses many of the features that are found in the other prominent examples. The site itself is located in an impressive natural landscape that held sacred associations

[275] Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness," 63.

[276] Lori Boornazian Diel, *The Tira de Tepechpan: Negotiating Place under Aztec and Spanish Rule* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 38.

to the multi-ethnic indigenous population before the arrival of Spanish friars and the Christian faith. This hybridity is further asserted via the legends of Chalma's "Dark Lord of Caves," Oxtoteotl, who was symbolically replaced by the Christ of Chalma. Finally, at different points in the *Cristo*'s history it was described and depicted as black or blackened. At times the local Augustinians deliberately cleaned (miraculously "renovated") the image, and at other points it was allowed to naturally darken. Clearly the blackness of the Lord of Chalma became a part of popular lore, and its dark color came to be associated with other "dark" *santos*, particularly the famed Virgin of Guadalupe. These associations (blackness, sacred landscape, and hybridity) became prominent tropes with their own local permutations in other Black Christ images that became pilgrimage shrines from Mexico to Panama.

Unlike these other examples, however, the Chalma cult was spread and aggrandized primarily via reproductive statue paintings, particularly in the form of the famous *verdadero retratos* (true portraits). These images depicted the *Cristo* as "white," following the church-led whitening campaigns of the eigteenth century. These copies come out of the larger tradition of New Spanish painting whose locus was in the capital of Mexico City, not surprising considering its proximity to Chalma. The other Black Christ examples were further afield, and at Esquipulas we will see that reproductive votive sculpture, rather than painting, was the prime vehicle for dissemination of the cult.

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK SKIN, WHITE CLAY: A CRUCIFIX AND ITS CULT IN ESQUIPULAS, GUATEMALA

The Pre-Hispanic Region of Esquipulas

The eastern corner of modern-day Guatemala houses the most important sacred pilgrimage center in Central America, the Basilica of Esquipulas, home to the famed *Cristo Negro* (fig. 3-1). Esquipulas is located in the Olapa High Valley, a fertile region with numerous river tributaries that likely served as trade and pilgrimage arteries both pre- and post-conquest.

This region was part of the Chortí Maya lordship commonly referred to as the Payaquí, with its capital in the city of Copán, located in modern-day Honduras.[277] The indigenous peoples of this region, the Chortí of the modern-day Guatemalan department of Chiquimula, derive from large immigrations from Mexico to Guatemala beginning around 100 B.C. These groups established themselves on the Pacific coast and in the Petén, which is now the northernmost department of Guatemala. From there they spread out to the southeast and within a few generations toward Lake Izabal and the regions of Zacapa and Chiquimula, eventually founding the city of Copán.[278]

Although Esquipulas is not a prominent archaeological site, the village of Quetzaltepeque, just a few kilometers from the town, was an important ceremonial center in pre-Hispanic times. Quetzaltepeque did not display the typical features of

[277] Copán was a major Classic-period Maya city in what is now western Honduras. It is the ancestral homeland of the Chortí Maya people.

[278] Rosa Flores, *Chiquimula en la historia* (Chiquimula, Guatemala: Imprenta la Cultura, 1952), 3. I am indebted to Flores for her history of the Chortí of Chiquimula.

Mesoamerican sacred centers such as pyramids and a ball court; instead, its sacred prestige was derived from four large ceiba trees.[279] In Maya mythology the ceiba is called *Yaaxché*, or World Tree, and its large trunk was believed to connect the underworld, earth, and heavens.[280] Rites dedicated to the solstices and equinoxes were performed beneath Quetzaltepeque's ceiba trees. Pilgrimages also took place from Quetzaltepeque to Copán (regarded as the birthplace of the sun) and to Mitlan (ending point of the sun's daily journey).[281]

Copán was a Chortí Maya center, and the Chortí words Es-kip-ur-ha translate as "raised head stream."[282] The name of Esquipulas preserves the heritage of its original Chortí inhabitants, perhaps a version of a chief's name, but also possibly the indigenous name of its famous Isquitschochitl (ceiba) tree.[283]

Contact, Conquest, and Establishment of the Cult in Esquipulas

As early as 1523, two years after the conquest of Mexico, conquistadors dissatisfied with their portion of the spoils or eager for more adventure set out from

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[279] Vitalino Fernández Marroquín, *Apuntes históricos de Esquipulas* (Esquipulas, Guatemala: Imprenta Maya, 1971), 30.

[280] Ralph Loveland Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Alexandria: Library of Alexandria, 1934), 64.

[281] Fernández Marroquín, 30.

[282] Both Chortí Mayan and Pipil cultures knew Esquipulas, and the name likely has significance in each language. In the Pipil language, which is similar to Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs), the original name was likely Ixquitxochitl, "a flower found in abundance." L. Jean Palmer, "Esquipulas, Guatemala: The Historical Cultural Geography of a Central American Religious Pilgrimage Center" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1982), 60.

[283] Carl Kendall, "Filiation and Brotherhood: Compadrazgo in Esquipulas, Guatemala" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1974), 33.

Mexico City seeking new exploits. Before they even reached Guatemala the diseases they had brought with them had begun to spread, and as early as 1523 approximately one-third of the Indian population of Guatemala was killed by a pandemic.[284]

The first Spanish soldier to reach Guatemala was Pedro de Alvarado, one of the conquistadors of Mexico, who entered Guatemala in 1524, finding the Indian community already in crisis and conquering it. There were, however, numerous uprisings, including one in the vicinity of Esquipulas. In February 1530 Hernando de Chávez and Pedro Amalín suppressed a local uprising, and in April Esquipulas was taken without bloodshed. As part of the spoils of war, the valley of Esquipulas was given as an *encomienda* to Hernando de Chávez.[285] During the Colonial era—for nearly three centuries, from 1548 to 1838—Guatemala was the seat of the Audencia of Guatemala, also referred to as the General Captaincy of the United Provinces of Central America.[286]

The area around Esquipulas was already an established settlement before the arrival of the Spanish, who founded a stable *encomienda* system. In contrast, in other areas nomadic Indians had to be corralled by force and contained by a sedentary lifestyle, causing conflict in the Colonial system. At Esquipulas the lands were fertile and provided enough food for both native and Spanish inhabitants. The nearby river systems offered easy transportation that may have helped Esquipulas develop earlier as a trade artery and pilgrimage site located near the sacred ceiba trees in Quetzaltepeque. The burning of copal, cave worship, and the practice of geophagy (earth eating) also indicate that

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[284] Palmer, 64.

[285] Palmer, 64.

[286] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro América, 2012), 2.

Esquipulas must have had some sort of pre-Hispanic importance, and the pilgrimage practices that developed there probably reflect this.

The closest church in these early years was in the town of Chiquimula. It is possible that the parochial church priests there may have noticed indigenous pilgrims traveling to Esquipulas and decided to translate this pagan tradition into Christian ritual, as was customary in both the New and Old Worlds. The physical location near two river systems and in between Mayan and Pipil groups, combined with the local practice of pilgrimage, made the region of Esquipulas an attractive center for the development of a Christian pilgrimage site. Resident priests likely noted the times when Indian travelers arrived in the valley, adding this period to the church calendar.

Around the early 1580s a parish church was built in the nearby hamlet of Quetzaltepeque. Esquipulas chronicler José Luis García Aceituno asserts that the Christ cult was founded in March of 1595 by a Geronimite friar named Fray Gómez Fernández de Córdova who worked in Guatemala and was later a bishop of Nicaragua.[287] Eventually the local cult flourished sufficiently so that by August 29, 1596, the inhabitants of Esquipulas commissioned a life-sized wooden statue of Christ to be carved by a sculptor named Quirio Cataño who lived in the Guatemalan capital of Antigua (fig. 3-2).[288] It was delivered the following year and housed in a small chapel, drawing immediate attention. In a region bereft of Christian images it became a prestigious object, crafted by a European artist in the modern style.

The Black Christ of Esquipulas is a striking image of Christ hanging on an ornate

[287] José Luis García Aceituno, *Esquipulas* (Guatemala City: n.p., 1954), 20.

[288] García Aceituno, 33.

silver cross embelished with grapevines that reference the Eucharist.[289] The figure's head rests on its chest with closed eyes, indicating that the sculpture depicts the dead human Christ. The figure's body displays an idealized athleticism and weightlessness that is typical of sixteenth century crucifixes.[290] Each muscle and tendon is carefully articulated and the positioning of the body is symmetrical. The *Cristo*'s loincloth is gathered in convincing folds, displaying the artist's ability to render both flesh and cloth from wood. The static and stoic body is shown with its head bowed with a solemn and serene expression. This is not a bloody and violent painful reminder of bodily torture. Instead the image draws the viewer into a meditative and abstracted commune with Christ's Passion. This lifelike image of Christ drew attention early on, attracting pilgrims and devotees to the small temporary chapel.

Within eight years of the image's arrival in Esquipulas, a Mexican pilgrim reportedly experienced a miraculous cure at the shrine.[291] The site slowly began attracting more pilgrims, and the popularity of the *Cristo* likely grew when Esquipulas became a way station for the indigo trade.[292] After the founding of Santo Tomás as a port on the Caribbean coast in 1609, indigo traffic from El Salvador shifted and Esquipulas became a

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[289] Concepción García Sáiz, "Cristo de Esquipulas," in *El País del quetzal: Guatemala maya e hispana*, ed. Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior (Madrid: SEACEX, 2002), 411.

[290] García Sáiz points out this tendency towards idealization in sixteenth century crucifixes. García Sáiz, 411. Such representations of Christ are not concerned with bodily torture and are more closely aligned with Italian Renaissance interest in the beauty of the heroic male nude form. This contrasts with the more dramatic, contorted and tortured bodies seen in later seventeenth and eighteenth century Passion images that can be described as Baroque for their focus on realism and the physical suffering of Christ.

[291] Robert N. Thomas, Oscar H. Horst, and John M. Hunter, "Pilgrim Networks of the Holy Shrine of Esquipulas, Guatemala," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 20, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2002), 27.

[292] Palmer, 67.

stopover on the way to the Rio Dulce basin, resulting in the spread of the fame of the Black Christ throughout Guatemala.[293]

Unlike Chalma, Esquipulas was not a mendicant mission. Rather, it was a small village served by secular priests. As the number of devotees and pilgrims increased, the small chapel became inadequate, and in 1673 the inhabitants of Esquipulas petitioned the Real Audencia of the Kingdom of Guatemala to exempt them from tributary tax so that they could use the money to construct a suitable church for their famed statue. In response to this request, one-quarter of the taxes were remitted by the royal provision of King Carlos II and María of Spain, the queen mother. Construction began shortly thereafter and was completed in 1700. The church, now a Basilica,[294] is the largest in Central America and features an impressive four bell towers.

Throughout the seventeenth century pilgrims continued to visit Esquipulas from Central America and southern Mexico to benefit from the reported curative powers of its *Cristo*. By the eighteenth century Esquipulas had become a major center for devotion in Guatemala.[295] Its prominence was significantly augmented in 1737 when the archbishop of Guatemala, Fray Pedro de Figueroa y Victoria, was cured of a contagious disease following his visit to the famed *Cristo*. With the resulting official recognition of the site's miraculous powers by the Catholic Church, the *Cristo*'s fame exploded in popularity, overshadowing other regional cults and drawing devotees from Mexico and other regions

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[14] Palmer, 67.

[294] A basilica is a church that has been visited by the Pope. The church in Esquipulas gained this designation in 1956 with the visit of Pope Pius XII.

[295] Adriaan van Oss, *Catholic Colonialism: A Parish History of Guatemala* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 104.

of Central America.[296]

In gratitude Figueroa y Victoria ordered the construction of the basilica to replace the earlier church (see fig. 3-1). Desiring political independence from the capital, Antigua, he wished to move the administrative center of the Church to the new religious center of the realm, Esquipulas. Construction of the basilica began in 1751, the year in which the bishop suddenly died. Alms were gathered to finance the construction of the new church, and the archbishop was buried in the adjacent cemetery.[297] The building was dedicated on January 5, 1759, and two days later the image was moved with great celebration from the smaller church to the new basilica via the newly constructed Calle Real. The guest list at this ceremony showcases the early spread of the cult, with the bishops of Chiapas and Honduras in attendance.[298]

The Legend and Growth of the Cult of the Lord of Esquipulas

Unlike many of the cases of miraculous images from both the Old and New Worlds, the original contract for the creation of the Lord of Esquipulas is extant, providing information about how local townspeople were involved in commissioning the work. The contract, dated August 29, 1594, was forged between a representative of the Indians of Esquipulas and the artist. It reads in English: "Christoval de Morales, Vicar

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[296] Carlos Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas: Origen y difusión de un Cristo Negro en Mesoamerica," http://www.hcentroamerica.fcs.ucr.ac.cr/Contenidos/hca/cong/mesas/x_congreso/cultura/esquipulas-religion.pdf (accessed December 20, 2013), 4.

[297] Fray Pedro Pardo de Figueroa, "Order of Archbishop Fray Pedro Pardo de Figueroa naming Captain José Delgado de Nájera custodian of alms destined for the work on the temple of Esquipulas in the year 1751," A1.10.3, exp. 350, leg. 4049, AGCA, Guatemala City.

[298] Palmer, 69.

General of this Bishopric, agreed with Quirio Cataño, an Officer Sculptor, to have him make for the town of Esquipulas a crucifix measuring one-and-a-half varas, very well finished and perfected that must be complete for the coming feast of St Francis, and will receive for his work one hundred *tostones*."[299] After the image was completed and grew in popularity, the details of the contract quickly faded in popular memory and the document was not rediscovered until 1685.[300] It was in this year that the bishop Andrés de las Navas discovered the original contract and ordered it to be transcribed, thus preserving the image's history. Art historian Heinrich Berlin points out that the bishop did not attempt to erase the object's human provenance in order to fabricate a supernatural origin, but instead saw the value in preserving Cataño's contribution.[301] During the nearly one hundred years between the creation of the image and the bishop's "rediscovery" of the contract numerous legends developed as the fame of the crucifix spread out from Esquipulas.

One popular legend states that an image of the crucified Christ appeared to a catechized Indian, catalyzing the spread of the cult via a small, temporary image. According to this legend, the townspeople then raised funds for a more "official" image to be carved by Cataño.[302] Other popular myths claim no direct connection to Cataño and instead assert that the crucifix miraculously appeared in a local cave, aiding in the spread

[299] Stephan F. de Borghegyi, *The Miraculous Shrines of Our Lord of Esquipulas in Guatemala and Chimayo, New Mexico* (Santa Fe, NM: Spanish Colonial Arts Society, 1956).

[300] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 1.

[301] Heinrich Berlin, *Historia de la imaginería colonial en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1952), 103.

[302] Gabriel A. Castañeda, *Esquipulas: Descripción geográfica, histórica, legendaria y etimológica del municipio de la villa de Esquipulas* (Guatemala City: Biblioteca Guatemalteca de Cultura Popular, 1955), 68.

of Christianity in the region. This connection between miraculous crucifixes and caves was common throughout Mesoamerica (as seen at Chalma) and will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter, "The Sacred Landscape."

As the *Cristo*'s fame spread, so too did the legends and rituals surrounding him. During the early period of the cult, up until the earthquake of 1765, the Lord of Esquipulas was likely the center of a Lourdes-type devotion centered on faith healing and miraculous cures, much like the Christ of Chalma.[303] It seems, however, that the sentiment shifted following the earthquake that severely destroyed the surrounding region, including the village and cathedral in nearby Chiquimula. The nearly completed basilica at Esquipulas was spared—a miracle attributed to the Christ and considered a special favor from God.

As the cult became more popular, devotees, instead of asking for miracles, came to Esquipulas to give thanks for favors and miracles already bestowed. Popular lore states that, after a favor is bestowed, the recipient owes the bestowing saint the responsibility of giving thanks and visiting his or her shrine. This type of devotion was described in the 1830s by the American diplomat John Lloyd Stephens: "Every year, on the fifteenth of January, pilgrims visit it [the great church of pilgrimage], even from Peru and Mexico; the latter being a journey not exceeded in hardship by the pilgrimage to Mecca … and when there are no wars to make the roads unsafe, eight thousand people have assembled

[303] Our Lady of Lourdes is a Marian apparition that took place in France in the mid nineteenth century. Along with Fátima in Portugal, it is one of the most frequented Marian shrines and is well known for its curative properties. Although it originated much later than the Esquipulas *Cristo*, it serves as a comparative example of popular devotional practices. Esquipulas was at first also a healing shrine, but it soon became a place to offer gratitude rather than to ask for divine favor.

among the mountains to barter and pay homage to 'our lord of Esquipulas.' "[304] In 1769 Father Cortés y Larraz, a local priest, reported that 20,000 pilgrims from Mexico, Central America, and Peru visited the shrine. According to his reports, these pilgrims were made up primarily of Indian women.[305]

The cult spread most rapidly from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth century. Following the consecration of the basilica, in Chiapas, the southernmost region of Mexico, there was an explosion of confraternities dedicated to the Lord of Esquipulas. In Comitán a local resident named Manuel de Villatoro established a confraternity in 1768. In Tecpatán another confraternity was active by 1800, founded by Vicente Samora and his wife Estefana Ponce.[306] In San Marcos Tuxtla (today the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez) a book entitled *Community of the Miraculous Image of Esquipulas* was compiled in 1795, written by congregants at the local church and dedicated to the famed *Cristo*. Near the end of the eighteenth century in Villa Flores, Dominican friars who had established sugar cane plantations manned by African slaves began a local cult to the Lord of Esquipulas. And on the coast of Oaxaca, in the tiny village of Zanatepec, a confraternity dedicated to the "*Cristo moreno de Esquipulas"* was established in 1796, sending pilgrims on yearly voyages to the sanctuary each January 15.[307] Numerous reports during the nineteenth century emphasized mid January as the most popular time for pilgrims to visit Esquipulas, which coincides with the "fetching of winter," a Maya ceremony to be

[304] As cited in Palmer, 70.

[305] Thomas, Horst, and Hunter, 28.

[306] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

[307] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

discussed further in "The Sacred Landscape."

The cult reached Central Mexico as early as the late seventeenth century; by the early nineteenth century it had also extended to northern Mexico, where Juan and Dolores Torres in Durango established a brotherhood. They funded the construction of an image of the Lord of Esquipulas to celebrate the festival of January 15,[308] and they dedicated a book entitled *The First Book of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Crucified Lord of Esquipulas, Established in the Church of Calvary in the City of Durango on January Second, 1802.*[309]

By the early nineteenth century the cult had stretched to cover all of Mexico. By the mid nineteenth century at least twenty pueblos bore the name of Esquipulas: nine in Chiapas, two in Tabasco, one in Veracruz, five in Oaxaca, one in Tlaxcala, one in Durango and one in Chihuahua.[310] By 1829 the local fair in Esquipulas was thriving, and the introduction of tobacco to this sacred center caused controversy. Tradesmen from neighboring Honduras were entering Esquipulas with the crop and not paying proper alms to the church or taxes to the Audencia. The booming fair indicated the centrality of Esquipulas as a trade hub that drew people to the shrine for both sacred and secular purposes.[311]

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[308] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

[309] Primer Libro de la Cofradía del Santísimo Señor Crucificado de Esquipulas, establecida en la Iglesia del Calvario en la ciudad de Durango el 2 día de Enero de 1802. Cited in Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

[310] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

[311] "Reports from the political chief of Chiquimula during the fair of Esquipulas," (1835) B119.2, exp. 56514, leg. 2512, AGCA, Guatemala City.

Today there are about four hundred images of Black Christs throughout Mexico and Central America.[312] Most of these are small church shrines with votive images that directly reference the famed crucifix in Esquipulas. In Nicaragua and Honduras alone there are nearly two hundred.[313] The centrality of Guatemala as a political anchor in the region (as both Audencia and Captain Generalcy) may further explain the popular spread of the cult. This chapter focuses on only the most prominent offshoots of the original cult, the miraculous crucifixes that dot the landscape of Central America.

The Sacred Landscape

Esquipulas is located on a plateau or high valley called the Olapa (fig. 3-3), which shares its name with the Olapa River, a major tributary of the Lempa River. The Lempa and the Motagua River flow through the region and eventually empty into both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.[314] Its natural features, particularly local caves, rivers, and medicinal earth, are important elements that defined Esquipulas as what Brady and Veni call a "pre-Hispanic pilgrimage complex before the introduction of the cult of the Black Christ."[315]

Caves

Today, the caves at Esquipulas are visited by pilgrims who pay respect by leaving

[312] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centroamérica, 2012), 7.

[313] Davidson, 7.

[314] Davidson, 10.

[315] Brady and Veni, 160.

offerings of flowers, candles, and other types of ritual objects.[316] The "caves" in Esquipulas are actually somewhat of a misnomer; as they are entirely manmade, and should more accurately be termed tunnels (fig. 3-4). According to Brady and Veni, who have studied manmade caves in highland Guatemala, one of the caves at Esquipulas is cruciform in shape and has rocks piled within to create a stone altar for offerings.[317] "It is widely recognized," Brady and Veni observe, "among those studying primitive religion that the location for a settlement is often selected because the spot has a strongly charged supernatural meaning in the group's ideology. … Caves were regularly incorporated into sites … as a means of validating their claim to sacred status."[318] These so-called caves were in fact mines hacked out of basalt by Spaniards seeking precious metals.[319] Although they were manmade after the creation of the image, the pre-Hispanic association of caves as sacred places of emergence was combined with the miraculous *Cristo*, further authenticating the sacred prestige of Esquipulas.

Because of the lack of primary source material, scholars studying Esquipulas rely heavily on "upstreaming," that is, they use the Maya culture of today as a means of understanding the cultures of the past. Maya scholar Raphael Girard discusses this technique in *People of the Chan*, a book on the Chortí Maya published in 1964.[320] Girard

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[316] Palmer, 59.

[317] James E. Brady and George Veni, "Man-Made and Pseudo-Karst Caves: The Implications of Subsurface Features within Maya Centers," *Geoarchaeology: An International Journal* 7, no. 2 (1992): 155.

[318] Brady and Veni, 163.

[319] Miles Richardson and William Davidson, "Earth as the Lord's Bread: The Cultural World of Geophagy in Esquipulas, Guatemala," unpublished paper on site at CIRMA, Antigua, Guatemala, n.d.

[320] Raphael Girard, *People of the Chan* (Chino Valley, AZ: Continuum Foundation, 1995).

asserts that because of the lack of Western-style historical "directives," modern archaeology is often the only type of "evidence" that scholars can rely on.[321]

As a way around that roadblock, Girard proposes the study of the modern Maya, arguing that they live in continuity with the Maya of the past and have remained much the same over the centuries.[322] In this way he conceives of ethnography and ethnology as the "cornerstone" of Maya history. Although no group in fact remains unchanged, it nonetheless proves fruitful to look at the significance of caves from modern times and back to pre-Hispanic ones in order to study the Chortí sacred landscape and to further delve into the significance of the *Cristo Negro* as part of that sacred landscape.

Caves held a special place in Mesoamerican mythology; as breaks in the earth, they were universally seen as portals into the underworld. Many groups believed that they emerged from caves, making these features the center or *axis mundi* of Mesoamerican cosmology. Caves were important ceremonial complexes throughout Mesoamerica. The Pyramid of the Sun, for example, at the Classic center of Teotihuacan was built directly atop a naturally occurring cave.[323].

Caves were associated with black, a color in Mayan cosmology that was linked to dark things that were difficult to perceive and discern. Overall, black was seen as a color

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[321] This is called the "direct historical approach" or "upstreaming."

[322] Girard, 2.

[323] For more on Teotihuacan see Linda Manzanilla and Carlos Serrano Sánchez, *Prácticas funerarias en la ciudad de los dioses: Los enterramientos humanos de la antigua Teotihuacan* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1999); Doris Heyden, "An Interpretation of the Cave Underneath the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, Mexico," *American Antiquity* 40, no. 2 (April 1975): 131-47.

for supernaturals and of dark and foreboding locations with limited access to humans. [324] The linkage between the color black, supernaturals, and dark caves leads to an understanding of the Lord of Esquipulas in indigenous thought. Although not originally black, the *Cristo* became associated with the local cave and therefore with blackness and the supernatural.

Water

The town's water sources are also an important part of the Chortí sacred landscape, and water is further associated with blackness and the west.[325]The local water rite known as the "fetching of winter," is a ceremonial east-west procession performed on the Maya calendar's New Year's Day. The procession is divided into two stages. The eastern lap goes from Esquipulas to Quetzaltepeque, and the western lap goes from Quetzaltepeque to San Jacinto. The march, which imitates the course of the sun, includes the retrieval of water as one of the "magic elements" guaranteeing a good rainy season.[326] The water is drawn from what Girard describes as a "pool" nearby the Catholic church of Esquipulas, which houses the famous *Cristo Negro*.

According to Girard's ethnography, before drawing water from the sacred spring (today called the "Miracle River"), native devotees visit the church to request permission

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[324] Stephen Houston, Claudia Brittenham, Cassandra Mesick, Alexandre Tokovinine, and Christina Warinner, *Veiled Brightness: A History of Ancient Maya Color* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 34-36.

[325] Archaeologist Timothy Pugh's study of the Postclassic Itza Maya in the Petén region of Guatemala determined that the color black was associated with the west, sunset, darkness, and death which is the opposite of red, the east, sunrise and life. "From western death came eastern life—hence, it is fertile." Timothy W. Pugh and Leslie G. Cecil, "The contact period of central Petén, Guatemala in color," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61/62 (Spring/Autumn 2012): 326.

[326] Girard, 36.

and pay tribute to the acting priest (fig. 3-5). They fill their gourds with sacred water, which is carried by servants back to the temple of Quetzaltepeque. In this manner they "fetch the winter" from Esquipulas, the eastern end of the cosmic universe, the place of origin of the gods, and the "reservoir of the clouds."

The rites that Girard describes are performed by indigenous people who reside in the small highland towns called *aldeas* (villages), because Esquipulas itself is a mainly *ladino* town.[327] The religious life of the Indians centers on the ceremonial houses and sacred spots in the *aldeas* as well as on the Catholic churches in the larger pueblos of Esquipulas and Quetzaltepeque. Men called *padrinos*, the religious leaders given "permission" by the Christian and native gods to conduct these rainmaking rites, lead these devotions. Though Catholic priests perform as gatekeepers of the waters near the church, they are said not to have permission to conduct the rainmaking rites and must concern themselves only with church matters.

Interpreting these rites, we see that the natives believe in a source of sacred Mayan water that is associated with yet separate from the Christian church at Esquipulas. In addition, both indigenous and natives and the more Hispanicized *ladinos* practice earth eating as part of the pilgrimage process. We are thus left with many questions. How exactly did the connection between sacred earth, sacred water, and the *Cristo Negro* develop? What did it mean in the Colonial period to be a pilgrim in Esquipulas, and what can we deduce about the creation of the sculpture in this hybrid Colonial context?

According to Palmer, local legend states that pilgrims (presumably both in Colonial times and today) intend to appease both the old and new gods through their devotion to the *Cristo Negro*. It is a specific type of Chortí syncretism in which

[327] *Ladino* is a term used to described Hispanized mestizos in Guatemala.

traditional gods are respected as controlling the natural elements while Christ is revered as protector of the home, family, and health.[328] If we accept that pre-contact Esquipulas was a sacred religious healing center, then the adoption of a Christ figure was a natural process that took place upon contact and conversion, particularly considering the modern "found cross" myth that claimed that the image miraculously appeared in the cave.

Copán was historically the cultural center of the Chortí Maya, who spread their influence into eastern Guatemala and El Salvador. Since the conquest the larger nearby towns have been taken over by *ladinos* and the Chortí speakers are found mainly in the highlands. Esquipulas is a sort of transition point between the highlands and the lowlands, where the two groups meet to worship the Black Christ.

Much of what we know about the contemporary Chortí comes from Charles Wisdom's ethnographic studies, conducted in the 1930s. According to Wisdom, a specific Chortí syncretism survived into modern times, wherein the Christian god acts as chief of all the lesser (indigenous) deities.[329] The Christian god is attended by Chicchan (the working man), ah katiyon (the wind gods), the gods of rain, the spirits of natural phenomena, and the moon deity that protects pregnant women.[330]

Stone

Another important aspect of the sacred landscape around Esquipulas is the so-called *Piedra de los Compadres* (The Stone of the Godparents), located on an old

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[328] Palmer, 48.

[329] Charles Wisdom, *The Chortí Indians of Guatemala* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 391.

[330] Rubén E. Reina, "Eastern Guatemalan Highlands: The Pkomames and Chortí," In *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Wauchope, Ethnology, vol. 7, part 1, ed. Evon Z. Vogt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 101.

pilgrimage road from Quetzaltepeque, about two kilometers north of Esquipulas (fig. 3-6).[331] Along the side of the road are two boulders, one on top of the other. Where the two meet, a depression has been scooped out, and offerings of fire and corn are frequently placed there. Local legend states that years ago, a man and woman on their way back from Esquipulas, where the man had become godfather to the woman's child, were overcome with passion for each other and engaged in incest.[332] As punishment, God turned them into stone as a lesson to all those who might be similarly tempted. Interestingly, there is also a Stone of the Godparents on the route to Chalma, home to the other famous *Cristo Negro* of Mesoamerica.

Stone plays a central sacred and utilitarian function in Maya ritual and worldview. At the center of every traditional dwelling is the household hearth, made up of three stones. The Earth, dwelling place of humanity, is said to be centered on a cosmic hearth out of which the cosmic World Tree arose. The *Popol Vuh*, the traditional Mayan creation story, speaks of the reordering of the world after a large deluge that involved the resettling of hearthstones.[333] Stones therefore had deep cosmic and mythic symbolic significance. In the case of the Stones of the Godparents the Maya significance of stone was grafted onto a Christian morality tale.[334]

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[331] Richardson and Davidson, 26.

[332] Mundo Chapin, "La Leyenda de la Piedra de los Compadres," http://mundochapin.com/2011/12/la-piedra-de-los-compadres/2773/ (accessed October 12, 2012).

[333] Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 72.

[334] Richardson and Davidson, 25.

According to anthropologist Carl Kendall, the Lord of Esquipulas is "intimately associated with household shrines and ritual geography."[335] Surrounding mountains, caves, and rivers inspired a local pre-Hispanic pilgrimage practice, one that was continued and added upon with the establishment of the Esquipulas Christ cult.

The Practice of Earth Eating

The caves and nearby mountains of Esquipulas, which produced kaolin (a soft white clay), are believed to have been sacred centers before the arrival of the Spanish. Because of the town's orientation on an east-west volcanic axis, plate tectonics produce heavy deposits of white kaolin.[336] Today (and presumably during the Colonial period as well), tablets of the white substance called *benditos* (blessings) were embossed with images of *El Señor* and sold at and around the basilica (fig. 3-7). Pilgrims ingested these small tablets of "sacred earth" as part of devotion to the Black Christ, as they were believed to bestow health, particularly on pregnant women. Their form and color may additionally reference the eucharistic Host and the body of Christ as bread.[337]

Hunter and Kleine discuss the spread of geophagy from Esquipulas to outlying regions.[338] Their study focuses on the practice of earth eating, aiming to ascertain its health benefits and the reasons why the practice spread all the way into Garifuna (Black

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[335] Kendall, "Esquipulas," 17.

[336] Palmer, 58.

[337] Miles Richardson, *Being-in-Christ and Putting Death in its Place: An Anthropologist's Account of Christian Performance in Spanish America and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 228-229.

[338] John M. Hunter and Renate de Kleine, "Geophagy in Central America," *Geographical Review* 24 (April 1984): 157-69.

Carib) communities in Belize. They present scientific evidence suggesting medicinal benefits of kaolin, which when ingested by pregnant women, is comparable to modern-day prenatal vitamins in their effect. The *benditos* are said to have curative powers, as do the waters from the nearby *Rio Milagro* (Miracle River), particularly the water collected from directly in front of the cruciform "cave." [339]

The proximity of Esquipulas to Copán, the great Classic-period Mayan ceremonial center, and the sacred associations with medicinal earth and ritual bathing, suggest that the cult was established here to capitalize on the ancient sacred importance of the area. Anthropological and geographical literature since the 1930s claim that geophagy was practiced in Esquipulas by its Maya inhabitants before the Spanish arrival. Unfortunately, there are apparently no primary sources that substantiate these claims. These assertions are instead based on observing Esquipulas's geographical orientation as well as on upstreaming from present-day religious practices, which are neither purely Maya nor purely Christian.

It is possible that the Pre-Columbian Maya used the area around Esquipulas both to collect kaolin and as a lookout point down into the valley. Mayan religious beliefs consider caves and rivers to be sacred places, the homes of the old gods. As Palmer states, "Going down from the areas of kaolin deposit into the valley near the town, there are caves and streams that could have been utilized in addition to the local clay."[340]

Palmer approached Esquipulas from a geographical perspective, aiming to untangle the phenomena of pilgrimage and the way in which the site was constructed as a

[340] Palmer, 61.
[340] Palmer, 61.

sacred space from pre-conquest times to the modern era. She addresses the roadblock created by the lack of primary sources:

> Did the pilgrimage to Esquipulas begin because the place was sacred or because something sacred happened there? Perhaps the pilgrimage had some sociopolitical motives. Whatever the case might have been, today these and other alternative "genesis" theories are founded on intuitive rather than concrete grounds.[341]

Due to the lack of primary source documents, Palmer uses the geographic location of Esquipulas to understand the practice of geophagy and subsequent devotion to the *Cristo Negro*. Since the town sits halfway between the precontact centers of Copán and Mitlan, she hypothesizes that Esquipulas may have been the hub of a trade and communication network that connected the two. Palmer argues that the natural aspects of the site—caves, springs, and kaolin deposits—create a natural explanation for the sacredness of the site.

The earliest known written reference to geophagy in Esquipulas does not appear until the late nineteenth century, in the 1886 work of Swiss linguist and ethnographer Otto Stoll. The practice of eating kaolin is actually rather widespread, and in some cases it occurs without any connection to the Black Christ, such as among the Garifuna. Nevertheless, as Stoll wrote, "Those people who made the famous pilgrimage to Esquipulas are accustomed to bring back from there sacred, holy figures, whose production from a pulverized, earthy substance is an industry of the clerics of Esquipulas. These figures (*benditos*) are eaten by the faithful, or presented to friends and relatives in the belief their consumption cures existing illnesses and prevents threatening ones."[342]

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[341] Palmer, 61.

[342] Otto Stoll, "Guatemala, Reisen und Schilderungen aud den Jahren, 1878-1883" (Leipzig: FA Brockhaus, 1886), 133, as quoted in Richardson and Davidson, 47.

The curing powers of the *Cristo* are thus fused with the local landscape via the medicinal use of kaolin.

A *Cristo Negro*: Black Skin and the Lord of Esquipulas

Blackness is the most often discussed and prominent physical feature of the Lord of Esquipulas and the reason for the shrine's inclusion in this study. Unlike the Lord of Chalma, which varied in color from its original physical appearance to reproductions in prints and paintings, the Lord of Esquipulas remained consistent in rendering, almost always in the form of sculpted copies that were deliberately painted black.

Yet the Lord of Esquipulas was not black from inception. In fact, Cataño painted it white, in accordance with typical protocol. The 1594 contract written by Cristoval de Morales, bishop of the diocese, says nothing of the color of the statue, but only lays out guidelines for payment and demands a crucifix that would be "well done and perfected."[343] Clearly, if it had been intended to be dark, that specification would have been noted in the contract. Today we know that the Lord of Esquipulas is black because of the passage of time.

A restoration project on the *Cristo*, carried out in 1998 under the jurisdiction of the Guatemalan Institute of Anthropology and History, studied the creation, conservation, preparation, painting, and damage of the object over its 400-year history.[344] The authors observe, "The tone of the *encarnación* is dark brown, almost black because of years of

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[343] "El escultor de la imagen del Señor de Esquipulas," http://www.Cristodeesquipulas.com/quirio_catano.htm (accessed December 2, 2008).

[344] Aura Rosa González de Flores and Jorge Alberto Carias, *Restauracíon en Esquipulas* (Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, 1998).

worship."[345] They explain that the figure displays a "rather pronounced darkening" due to the accumulation of impurities over the centuries that merged with the original color.[346] They add that these "impurities" were augmented by the ritual practice of pilgrims touching the statue, resulting in transfer of wax from candles and grease from hands, soot, hair, lint, and dust. The restorers determined that the original color was of a much lighter tone, which was exposed only in a small patch at the back of the right thigh. They discovered that the surface has been tampered with and repainted in certain areas to darken the image, particularly on the arms (fig. 3-8).[347] This was done in order to preserve and perhaps exaggerate the image's blackness, which had become an important part of its allure and spiritual potency.

Today the *Cristo* is behind glass, making it impossible for devotees to physically touch the sculpture.[348] We can presume that through the years of oxidation, accumulation, and exposure the darkening occurred, and it was then augmented by subsequent painting. It is unclear when exactly during the previous restorations the figure was "tampered with" through the touching up of spots in the outer layer with the dark paint. This suggests, though, that the status of this figure as a Black Christ lent distinct meaning and prestige to the object. Its patina was therefore preserved in contrast to the Chalma *Cristo*.

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[345] "La tonalidad del encarnado es cafe oscuro, casi negro logrado debido a los años de veneración." González de Flores and Carias, 10; my translation.

[346] "Presenta un oscurecimiento bastante pronunciado." González de Flores and Carias, 12; my translation.

[347] González de Flores and Carias, 14.

[348] Anthropologist Miles Richardson points out that the image's placement behind glass is part of the church hierarchy's quest to control access to the icon by organizing the masses and maintaining order. Miles Richardson, "Clarifying the Dark in Black Christs: The Play of Icon, Narrative and Experience in the Construction of Presence," *Yearbook: Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers*, vol. 21 (1995), 116.

Many of the myths that surround the *Cristo* nevertheless draw on the question of its blackness. In 1723 the chronicler Nicolás de Paz described the crucifix as blackened and attributed this feature to the appearance of blood and decay of Christ's body:

> The body could stay clear and clean as before the Passion. It is not. Since the color of the Holy Christ of Esquipulas is black and represents a dead body covered in dark purple blood. Dead blood. This claim is true and the image can be examined up close, noting that the *encarnatión* is not quite even, nor smooth, nor thin, but somewhat rough and stained and splattered with clotted blood all over the body, with clear spaces interspersed and tears in the skin to make evident the pitiful state that the body was in.[349]

Paz's chronicle is the earliest major source on the *Cristo* after the original contract. A church document from 1794 recording the worship practices of the Lord of Esquipulas describes the *Cristo* as "very black and obscured."[350] These descriptions indicate that by the early eighteenth century the image was significantly blackened, though not in the smooth and uniform way that it is seen today.

The cult in Esquipulas slowly grew over time, and its blackness was not the prime source of its popularity; rather, the sacred prestige of the area's landscape and the early miracles attributed to the *Cristo* helped to build the cult. It is important to remember the relative dearth of life-sized devotional images in the early years, particularly in the outposts of New Spain. As time passed and the figure darkened, its blackness became

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[349] "Podría aquel cuerpo quedar claro y limpio como antes de la Pasión. No es, pues, negro el color del Santo Cristo de Esquipulas, sino la representación de un cuerpo muerto, cubierto de sangre morada oscura. Sangre muerta. Lo que afirmo es cierto y puede examinarse de cerca la imagen, notándose que la encarnación no es completamente igual, ni tersa, ni fina, lisa, sino algo áspera y como manchada y salpicada de sangre coagulada en todo el cuerpo, con espacios claros intercalados y rasgaduras en la piel para hacer patente el estado lastimoso como quedó su cuerpo." Nicolás de Paz, *Novena a Cristo Crucificado* (Esquipulas: Asociación Benedictina de Esquipulas, 1723); my translation.

[350] "Novena for the Holy Christ of Esquipulas," Inquisición (1794), vol. 1116, exp. 10, fs. 364, AGN, Mexico City.

part of its prestige and myth.

Navarette Cáceres points out that the first author to claim in 1924 that the *Cristo*'s blackness was directly connected to pre-Hispanic belief was Samuel Lothrop, who linked the devotion at Esquipulas to Ek-chuah, the Mayan god of merchants.[351] He proposed this attribution because Esquipulas was an artery for trade, linking different cultural centers. In 1959 Borghegyi also postulated that a black pre-Hispanic deity must have been worshipped nearby in Copán, yet there is no concrete evidence of this direct connection.[352] We tend to think of syncretism as occurring at the initial contact between traditions, as an indigenous deity was absorbed into or associated with a Christian devotional image. Yet in the case of Esquipulas, some factors suggest that the syncretism may have progressed gradually.

The cult of the *Cristo* became popular in the seventeenth century not because of any association with a dark pre-Hispanic god (the image, remember, was originally white); rather, the popularity stemmed from the fame of its healing (both Spanish and native), which was associated with the practice of geophagy. Later the "caves" were added to the legend, associating the *Cristo* with the ancient Mesoamerican belief in caves as sacred and charged dark points of emergence. The syncretism occurring around the image was slow, as was the darkening of the Lord of Esquipulas.

Chronicler Fernández Marroquín claims that the crucifix was purposefully commissioned as *moreno* (brown) because the locals did not trust a god that was the same

[351] Navarette Cáceres, "Esquipulas," 6.

[352] Borghegyi, 12.

color as the Spaniards.[353] This facet of the mythology was elaborated by Borghegyi, one of the most famous scholars on the topic: "It is recorded that the Indians had seen enough of the cruelty of the white man to be suspicious of a white Christ and so a famed woodcarver named Quirio Cataño was commissioned to carve a Christ. … The Indians accepted this Christ eagerly because the natural color of the wood resembled their own brown complexions."[354] Yet we now know from modern conservators' reports that the blackness of the *Cristo* comes not from its original painting, but from the layers of oxidation, candle smoke, and salves that were applied to the crucifix.[355]

Previous scholars have claimed that the figure was carved from dark orange wood. In fact, wooden sculpture was never left in its natural state as it could easily decompose. The painted *encarnación* on the surface not only to gave the figure a lifelike appearance, but sealed the natural grain of the wood through the application of paint and varnish, helping to preserve it.

Paz Solorzano, the priest and chaplain at Esquipulas in the early decades of the twentieth century, became exasperated by what he called a "crass error" and declared, writing in all capitals, that "The image is not black." [356] The reasons given for its blackness, both physically and symbolically, have been numerous, including the claim that the orange wood allowed Indians with darker skin to identify with the suffering Christ or that the Lord of Esquipulas was linked to veneration of the Mayan gods, either

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[353] Fernández Marroquín, 19.

[354] Borghegyi, 3.

[355] González de Flores and Carias, 17.

[356] "La imagen no es de color negro," in Juan Paz Solórzano, *Historia del Santo Cristo de Esquipulas* (Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: n.p., 1949*),* 17.

Ek Ahau, the Black Lord who controlled death and violence, or Ek Chu Ah, the tall, black one who protected travellers. .

Thanks to the work of the restorers, we now know that the *Cristo* of Esquipulas was not originally black, but gradually darkened over time. We must therefore look for a different interpretation. We must think of its blackness as not essentially and directly tied to Mayan gods but as a distinctive symbol, a signifier of change and transformation from the ordinary to the extraordinary through the act of pilgrimage and devotion. In this ritualized and localized sense the *Cristo* was transformed from a conventional European white Christ into a Black Christ more suited to the indigenous people's devotional orientations. The Christ's blackness may thus refer to conceptions of the sacred and features of the landscape (caves, mountains, earth), while whiteness may be associated with the light color of kaolin clay that is ingested and attributed to the *Cristo*. Today, *ladino* pilgrims coming to Esquipulas outnumber members of indigenous groups, and the Chortí Maya tend to refer to him not as a *Cristo Negro* but as "a god whose name is Milagroso,"[357] that is, miraculous.

Amid all the speculation about the true meaning and origin of the blackness of the Lord of Esquipulas, there is a solid fact. The *Cristo* was *not* originally black, but slowly blackened over time due to exposure and ritual. And yet his blackness became an integral part of its identity, a source of distinction that set the crucifix apart from typical Spanish models. This blackness became a signifier, one that identified the figure as spiritually charged, a local manifestation of the sacred.

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[357] John G. Fought, Isidiro González, and Jay Kislak, *Chorti (Mayan) Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 452.

Quirio Cataño and the Antigua School of Sculptors

Guatemalan Colonial sculpture began to flourish in the mid sixteenth century.[358] Although a few painted and sculpted images had been imported from Spain, most of the artistic knowledge of European styles came via imported engravings, either in loose prints or in books.[359] The initial stages of European sculpture in the Kingdom of Guatemala saw a flourishing of Renaissance and Mannerist styles.[360] Soon after, Indian artists began creating copies of the small images that were distributed by missionaries who expected them to be copied as faithfully as possible. Artists arriving from Europe in this early formative artistic period created a dichotomy between the orthodox Spanish sculpture of the urban centers and the popular sculpture of rural areas.[361]

The 1555 Mexican Provisional Council, which overlooked the Audencia of Guatemala, ordered that

> no Spaniard, nor Indian may paint images, nor altarpieces in any church of our bishopric and province, nor sell images, without first being examined to ensure that the said painter can paint … and our inspectors will ensure that in the churches and holy places they visit, they see and examine the stories and images that have been painted thus far, and those found to be apocryphal or poorly or indecently painted, shall be removed from such places and substituted by others suitable for the devotion of the faithful; and in the same manner they shall ensure that the images they find which are not honestly or decently dressed, especially on the altar, or others carried in processions, be made decent.[362]

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[358] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 63.

[359] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 63.

[360] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 35.

[361] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 35.

[362] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 36.

This quest for orthodoxy was typical throughout the Spanish New World and reflects the anxiety of the "spiritual conquest" and catechization of Indians. Religious images played a key role in the conversion process, and the council felt that by regulating them they could control the way in which the Catholic faith was introduced and received by native converts. Clearly, even with such provisions in place, sacred objects were interpreted and reinterpreted by local communities, often fused with indigenous cosmology and ritual and not necessarily in opposition to the new Christian faith.

By the late sixteenth century, with the first stage of the conquest complete, *mestizos* slowly began making religious painting and sculpture. By the start of the seventeenth century creoles, Indians, Africans, and *mestizos* created their own works and workshops specializing in religious images.[363] These artists, regardless of their ethnicity, were called *imagineros* (image makers). The artworks that they created were used to inspire religious fervor, meditation, and prayer.

Quirio Cataño, a European sculptor and painter living in Antigua, Guatemala, carved the *Cristo Negro* of Esquipulas in 1594.[364] Cataño was born in the Old World, but arrived in Guatemala as a young man, marrying in 1580.[365] Art historian Heinrich Berlin concludes, based on numerous records including his marriage records and contracts, that

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[363] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 6.

[364] There are no records of Cataño's birth in Guatemala, leading scholars to conclude that he was born in Europe. His country of origin is unclear, but based on his name (Quirio is an Italian first name and Cataño is Portuguese), numerous scholars have concluded that he was from one or the other country. See Heinrich Berlin, *Historia de la imaginería colonial en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1952), 104; J. Haroldo Rodas, *Pintura y Escultura Hispánica en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1992), 26-27; Concepción García Sáiz, "La Escultura en Guatemala," in *El País del quetzal: Guatemala maya e hispana*, ed. Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior (Madrid: SEACEX, 2002), 148.

[365] Rodas, 27.

Cataño must have been trained in Europe (either Italy of Portugal) before his arrival in Guatemala, where he became the most celebrated artist in Colonial Guatemala.[366]

The school of Guatemalan sculpture to which Cataño belonged flourished at least from 1568 onwards, and in these early years the creators of religious images were primarily Spanish in origin.[367] These artists associated with and were commissioned to work by government officials, bishops, superiors in the religious orders, and other such influential elites. Through such associations they were able to establish themselves and their descendants in the upper echelons of colonial society.[368]

The Lord of Esquipulas was not, however, intended from its inception to be an "Indian" Christ, as Borghegyi surmises that its creator, Cataño, was a European who had trained in a workshop under the tutelage of peninsular teachers.[369] This school was located in the capital of Guatemala, today called Antigua, on a street called *La Calle del Viacrusis*, where prominent Spanish families resided.[370]

Because of the popularity of the Lord of Esquipulas and the subsequent prestige of Quirio Cataño, other images, particularly crucifixes, have been attributed to him, none with documentary evidence. The most famous misattribution is the Lord of Juayúa in El Salvador, also a *Cristo Negro* (fig. 3-9). Modern sources claim that Cataño created the crucifix, and such claims likely arose in the Colonial period. Far from Cataño's

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[366] Heinrich Berlin, *Historia de la imaginería colonial en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1952), 106.

[367] Luis Luján Muñoz and Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, *Imágenes de Oro* (Guatemala City: Corporación G&T, 1993), 1.

[368] Rodas, 22.

[369] Borghegyi, 33.

[370] García Aceituno, 30.

expressive style, with its carefully articulated and naturalistic musculature, the crucifix in Juayúa is stylized with angular and elongated anatomy, displaying a folk style not uncommon in peripheral churches throughout Mesoamerica. Although there is no extant contract and little available information about its provenance, it appears to have been made locally, and it was likely deliberately painted black in imitation of its illustrious Esquipulas neighbor. This imitation suggests that the *Cristo* in Juayúa was created in connection with the spread of the Esquipulas cult, perhaps in the second half of the eighteenth century, following the healing miracle of the bishop in Esquipulas.

As Juayúa is located just 85 miles from Esquipulas, it is little wonder that this attribution to Cataño was made and perpetuated, but a thorough inspection of the images reveals that the same hand could not have created both statues. Rather, Cataño's name was used to lend credence to the claim of another nearby miraculous (and black) crucifix, and to bolster the prestige of the image and thus the church and town of Juayúa.

The only other known commission awarded to Cataño was documented in a signed contract dated 1582 for an altarpiece in Sonsonate, El Salvador.[371] He was also hired in 1606 and 1608 to create the altarpiece for a church in Santo Domingo, the Dominican convent in Antigua Guatemala. In 1615 Cataño signed a contract for the altarpiece for the chapel of Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the local church for Spaniards in Antigua, although he later decided not to complete the project. He also finished the famous main altarpiece by Pedro de Brizuela for the Cathedral in Antigua, now destroyed. Cataño died in 1622.[372]

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[371] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 40.

[372] Detailed information about Cataño is drawn from Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 40-42.

Cataño was part of the first generation of what became known as the Antigua school, a stylistic classification for determining works of art that were created in the early Guatemalan capital during the Colonial period. The visual arts flourished in the city, sustained by the need for churches, altarpieces, sculpture, and paintings designed to sustain and increase religious devotion and to enable communication between the clergy and citizens of the city.

The sculptors of the Antigua school were able to achieve a sense of great pain and expression as well as a certain softness and sweetness of emotion. Dr. Martín Guillén describes Guatemalan sculpture, particularly the typical appearance of local crucifixes:

> A common characteristic of all semi-nude male figures is their globular and flaccid lower abdomen that does not go with the rest of the athletic and well-proportioned body of some of the images. I cannot say if this is a characteristic of the style from that period, but it is true that it represents a loss of anatomical proportion. … The observation of Guatemalan Colonial sculpture makes it possible to assert that the figures were athletic, very well proportioned, and usually had a slight constant deformation of the lower abdomen which is a characteristic of this style in male human proportions.[373]

The Esquipulas crucifix exhibits just this "deformity" of which Guillén speaks, positioning it stylistically within the Antigua school. It is undoubtedly the most famous image to come out of this tradition, one that achieved cult status during the Colonial period and remains a popular devotional object to this day.

Conclusion

The centrality of Esquipulas as a sacred shrine in Central America cannot be ignored. Since the early twentieth century many geographic and historical analyses have

[373] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 116-18.

been conducted in order to understand how from such a seemingly peripheral location such sacred prominence could arise, most famously in the case of the *Cristo Negro* of Esquipulas. Despite its distance, far removed from the Guatemalan capital, it seems its location was a fertile highland plateau that had likely been a sacred and trade center before the arrival of the Spanish.

The fame of this *Cristo*, then, comes not only from countless attributed cures but also from its black color, a distinguishing characteristic that has been replicated innumerable times in copies throughout Mexico and Central America. At times this has occurred in direct relation to Esquipulas, but at other times as a result of distinct local cults. Judging by the sheer number of sculpted copies of the crucifix, there is no denying that the Lord of Esquipulas is the most famous Black Christ of New Spain.

Although not originally black, the figure's blackness was preserved and even augmented, and it came to signify a profound connection between the local people and their sacred *Cristo*. The legends of the *Cristo* soon began to incorporate associations with local (man-made) caves, the practice of geophagy, and complex Mayan ritual that developed around the shrine. The Lord of Esquipulas thus became an "Indian" Christ, intertwined with earlier Mayan rituals surviving from the pre-Hispanic period.

Despite various popular legends, the true historical origin of knowledge that the crucifix was man-made was known and officially recognized in the Colonial period. In fact, the artistic prestige of European sculptor Quirio Cataño added to the fame of the crucifix at a time when there was still a dearth of Christian sacred imagery in the Audiencia of Guatemala. The meaning of the Esquipulas *Cristo* was constantly resignified through ritual and myth. The lasting significance and popularity of the

crucifix derives in large part from its two parallel associations: its simultaneous “Indian” and European character, and the sacred manifestation of the combinations of Old World and New World devotion in Guatemala and beyond.

CHAPTER FOUR

OTHER MIRACULOUS *CRISTOS NEGROS* IN MEXICO AND GUATEMALA

The *Cristos Hermanos* and Other Pilgrimage Black Christs

As Esquipulas became an increasingly popular pilgrimage destination in the early seventeenth century, the cult of the Black Christ began to spread, resulting in the creation of copies of the miraculous crucifix all over Mexico and Central America. Many of these so-called *Cristos hermanos* (brother Christs) were deliberately painted black to mimic the prestige of their progenitor. As most of them were referred to as lord of Esquipulas, they served as symbols harking back to the "true" image in Esquipulas. By the mid-nineteenth century references increased to the inclusion of shrines on maps. The shrines in this period tended to be located in chapels maintained by private individuals or within secondary churches in suburbs of larger cities.[374] Dozens of *haciendas*, *aldeas*, and *municipios* bearing the name Esquipulas also indicate further expansion of devotion to the Black Christ of Esquipulas.

The term *Cristo Negro* was first used in the eighteenth century, but it did not enter common usage in written records until the twentieth century, nor was much scholarly attention was given to the dissemination of the cult until then. In his 1949 *Historia del Santo Cristo de Esquipulas* Father Juan Paz Solórzano mapped the spread of the cult to fourteen communities in Guatemala, eight in Honduras, eleven in El Salvador, five in Nicaragua, one in Costa Rica, and five in Mexico, totaling forty-four churches with altars

[374] Oscar Horst, "The Diffusion of the Guatemalan Black Christ of Esquipulas," paper delivered at the meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Toronto, Canada, n.d.; manuscript on site at CIRMA, Antigua, Guatemala, 10.

dedicated to the Lord of Esquipulas.[375] More recently, Davidson has asserted that there are over two hundred shrines to the Lord of Esquipulas throughout Central America, Mexico, and even the United States.[376] Unfortunately, the origins of all the secondary votive shrines are largely unknown.

At some point in each chapel or church's history, someone commissioned an image of the famed *Cristo* and locals became members of the cult. The image referred directly to the original in Esquipulas, allowing, in effect, remote access to the original. These local members might then perhaps embark on pilgrimages to the primary shrine in Esquipulas, Guatemala, as gestures of gratitude for divine favor. Some of these devotional sculptures that originally referred to Esquipulas also came to develop their own hagiography. Perhaps the image appeared miraculously, was left in the care of a person and the original owner never returned, made itself too heavy to be carried further, journeyed to its intended location, or was foiled by natural calamities. On rare occasions the image was recorded as a gift from a patron. In more recent times it is acknowledged that an image was bought in Esquipulas and transported to its new home.[377]

A subsidiary shrine was not formally recorded until as late as the 1720s, when an

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[375] Juan Paz Solórzano, *Historia del Santo Cristo de Esquipulas* (Guatemala de la Asuncíon: Arzobispo de Guatemala, 1949), 17.

[376] The Esquipulas shrines in the United States are in the following locations: Chapel of Santo Niño de Atocha in Chimayó, NM; St. Patrick's Church in Baltimore, MD; Church of St. Rose of Lima in Bay Saint Louis, MS; Church of Our Lady of Lourdes and San Alfonso in Chicago, IL; Church of St. Cecilia in Los Angeles, CA; Church of St. Theresa of Avila in New Orleans, LA; Church of the Presentation of the Virgin Mary in Jamaica, NY; Church of St. Isabel in Oakland, CA; Cathedral of San Fernando in San Antonio, TX.; and the Mission of San Francis of Assisi in San Francisco, CA. William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro América, 2012), 235-38.

[377] Horst, 3.

image carried as part of a larger ritual procession was "stranded" in the village of El Sauce in northwestern Nicaragua.[378] By the mid-eighteenth century, Franciscan priests likely became instrumental in spreading the cult as they returned to Mexico from assignments in Guatemala.[379] The cult's popularity grew most rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century, while the basilica was being constructed in Esquipulas.

By the nineteenth century the cult spread further south in Central America. In 1804 an image of the Lord of Esquipulas was reported as having appeared in Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Following that, Franciscans established devotion to the image in Alajuelita, outside of San José.[380] Another image made in Antigua, Guatemala, was destined for Guanajuato, Mexico in 1804 when it was reportedly abandoned in Moroleón, Mexico and enshrined in the church there.[381] Most of these examples remained strongly associated with the Lord of Esquipulas. Even if they began as copies of the more famed *Cristo* in Guatemala, a few branched off and developed their own separate devotions.

While all of these copies maintained largely regional followings (as opposed to the widespread attraction of the original Lord of Esquipulas), some of them attained the status of cult objects in their own right, bestowing miracles on their devotees and acquiring an identity apart from that of their predecessor. The examples discussed in this chapter are the most famous Black Christ images aside from Chalma, Esquipulas, and Portobelo, Panama (to be discussed in chapter five). Some claim a direct link to

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[378] Horst, 4.

[379] Horst, 4.

[380] Horst, 5.

[381] Horst, 6.

Esquipulas while others do not. They all, however, attracted devotees from beyond their immediate vicinity.

Esquipulas is the unquestionable center of Black Christ devotion, and it appears that the vast majority of offshoots refer directly back to it, as is the case with the examples in southern Mexico, all of Guatemala, and much of Honduras and Nicaragua. It appears, however, that the farther one travels away from the sacred Guatemalan center, the more likely the image was to become a miraculous pilgrimage destination in its own right. The image's blackness became a marker of its sacrality and power alongside or in place of the Esquipulas crucifix. Therefore, most of the Black Christ images in nearby Guatemala and the neighboring countries of El Salvador and Honduras are direct copies of the Esquipulas image, whereas in Chalma (covered in chapter two), Chiapas (Mexico), farther afield in Guatemala (El Petén), and in Panama (chapter five), separate Black Christ cults emerged.

The Lord of Tila, Chiapas, Mexico

Location and Pre-Hispanic Origins

Tila is a Chol Maya town in the highlands of northern Chiapas, located near the border of Tabasco in southeast Mexico. Tila can be traced back to the pre-Hispanic period, not only because it was founded and recorded by Spanish conquistadors, but also because of archaeological evidence dating back to the late Classic period (ninth century).[382] The main archeological finds in and around Tila are in the form of three

[382] Fabiola Patricia Monroy y Valverde, *Tila, santuario de un Cristo Negro en Chiapas* (Mexico City: UNAM, Centro de Estudios Mayas, 2004), 14.

stelae,[383] which were discovered by German archaeologist Hermann Beyer in the 1920s.[384]

The first, Stela A, was found underneath the church patio at the highest altitude in the town. The stela's glyphs indicate that it was dedicated on March 15, 830 to celebrate the beginning of a new Baktun.[385] Stela B dates to April 24, 692, and Stela C dates to March 692.[386] Curiously, aside from the stelae there have not been any other major archaeological finds, such as remains of buildings or temples, at the site of Tila. The town is, however, located in a region rich with archaeological finds, indicating that it was a small principality amidst much larger ones such as Palenque and Toniná.

Although the language and culture of Tila are part of the Chol Maya cultural group, the name of the town derives from the Nahuatl language of Central Mexico. Mesoamerican linguist Marcos E. Becerra connects the name with the Nahuatl words *tliltik* (black) and *atl* (water).[387] When Fray Domingo de Ara recorded the Tezeltal language in the mid sixteenth century, he wrote Tila as Tzija, claiming that the Spanish name was Tila but that in the native language it was Tzisa. Becerra claims that *Sisac* was an alternative name for Tila, deriving from *sibac*, which means color (tinta), and *sak*,

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[383] Stelae are a form of Maya monumental construction. They are tall shafts of stone, usually sculpted in low relief. They were erected to celebrate the accomplishments of the local king, glorifying him as a divine and powerful ruler. Their texts contain some of our main sources for Maya history.

[384] Monroy y Valverde, 14.

[385] A Baktun is a measurement of time in the Maya long count calendar corresponding to 144,000 days.

[386] Monroy y Valverde, 16.

[387] Marcos E. Becerra, *Nombres geográficos indígenas del estado de Chiapas* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1985), 312.

which means white, literally translating as white that blackens itself.[388] In both the Nahuatl and Maya names, therefore, there is a reference to blackness, which Becerra relates to the black tints used for painting glyphs.

This association with blackness has also been extended to deity worship in Tila. The early eighteenth-century bishop of Chiapas, Fray Francisco Núñez de la Vega, described a "fiercely black figure" in the region that Monroy y Valverde links to the black god *Ik'alajaw*.[389] Núñez de la Vega further described local images in the region as "sooty idols," which he went about destroying in order to erase the native religion.[390] Following Núñez de la Vega's descriptions, Monroy y Valverde concludes that a sacred importance was conferred upon blackness at Tila during the pre-Hispanic period.

Tila under Spanish Domination

The earliest records of Tila list it as the *encomienda* of Julián Pardo, resident of the town of Coatzacoalcos, a port city in the state of Veracruz some 250 miles away.[391] The region was given to Pardo in 1528 by Captain Luis Martín, a vice commander under Cortés who sought to populate the highlands by bringing the native people into the *encomienda* system. The region had been heavily populated, but many of the inhabitants had been killed or enslaved under Martín.[392]

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[388] "Blanco que se ennegrece," Becerra, 281.

[389] Monroy y Valverde, 22.

[390] Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Perceiving Blackness, Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," in *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World,* ed. Dana Leibsohn and Jeanette Favrot Peterson (Burlington and Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 56.

[391] Marta Ilia Nájera Coronado, *La formación de la oligarquía criolla en Ciudad Real de Chiapa* (Mexico: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas-Centro de Estudios Mayas, 1993), 20.

[392] Monroy y Valverde, 28.

In 1532 the limits of New Spain and the Captain Generalcy of Guatemala were established and Tila was placed under the jurisdiction of Pedro de Alvarado, one of Cortés's henchmen.[393] Under his leadership, Spanish authorities exacted great cruelty on the indigenous people of the region, using tactics like burning and mutilating natives' bodies in order to inspire terror and ensure submission to the new overlords.[394]

In 1536 the north of Chiapas witnessed a series of rebellions. Tila and the nearby towns of Petalcingo and Ocosingo were involved in the rebellion, which was squelched later that year under the leadership of Alvarado. Again in 1539 the local indigenous people rebelled, but by 1542 the area was subdued and the *encomienda* system established.[395]

Evangelization efforts began in the region via the *encomienda* system, with each *encomendero* responsible for converting and catechizing the Indians under his watch. There was, however, very little formal education in the seventeen years between the establishment of the *encomiendas* (1528) and the arrival of the first friars in 1545.

The Dominicans were the second major mendicant order to arrive in New Spain, coming in 1526, and were thus forced to journey away from earlier Franciscan strongholds in central Mexico and venture into the Audencia of Guatemala, of which the province of Chiapas was then a part. They reached Chiapas in 1545 with the famous

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[393] Monroy y Valverde, 28.

[394] Monroy y Valverde, 28.

[395] J. Kathryn Josserand and Nicholas A. Hopkins, "Tila y su Cristo Negro: Historia, peregrinación y devoción en Chiapas, Mexico," *Mesoamerica* (2007): 92.

Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, the first bishop of Chiapas. [396] Las Casas initiated a change in tactics away from military intimidation toward peaceful resettlement and conversion of the native population. The Chol were sent mainly to the towns of Palenque, Tumbalá, and Tila, all of which became important Colonial towns in the region. Of this network, Tila became the religious center of the region.

The construction of the Temple of San Mateo in Tila began in the mid sixteenth century when the town was still in Dominican hands (fig. 4-1). The Dominicans are not known for their strong architectural legacy, but many architectural projects were initiated in Chiapas under the Dominican leadership of Luis de León, Pedro de la Cruz, and Pedro Lorenzo de la Nanda.[397]

Nanda arrived in Chiapas in 1560 and studied the local languages with the help of indigenous informants in the schools in Ciudad Real (today San Cristóbal de las Casas). He traveled throughout the region, living with and proselytizing the indigenous people

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[396] Bartolomé de las Casas was born in Seville and emigrated to Hispaniola in 1502, where he became a slave owner. He was ordained in 1510 and, in 1513, participated in the conquest of Cuba. Las Casas was awarded an *encomienda* and worked there as a parish priest. During his time in Cuba, after witnessing great cruelty toward the indigenous people, he decided to renounce his *encomienda* and preach against the unjust treatment of the natives. Las Casas argued that enslaving the natives was cruel and illegal, and he waged his fight on both sides of the Atlantic, most famously during his debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in Valladolid, Spain. Originally he argued that Africans should be enslaved instead, a stance that he retracted later in life. In 1545 Las Casas was appointed Bishop of Chiapas, where he had frequent conflicts with local *encomenderos*. In 1545 he famously refused absolution to all *encomenderos* unless their slaves were set free and property returned to them. He threatened anyone who abused natives with excommunication. Las Casas was instrumental in advocating for the abolition of the *encomienda* system, and he met with much resistance from Spanish settlers for his policies favoring the fair treatment of natives. His influence was so strong in the region that not until after he returned to Spain in 1550 did military intrusions commence, with Spanish soldiers penetrating the jungle to the east in order to subjugate the Lancandon Maya, cousins of the Chol. During his work in Chiapas, Las Casas was widely known as the "Defender of the Indians." See Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolomé de las Casas: A Biography* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[397] Monroy y Valverde, 34.

and urging them to live in the new Colonial settlements. Nanda was in constant conflict with church bureaucrats, and it was said that he preferred the company of indigenous people to that of the Spaniards.[398] Under the watch of Las Casas, Nanda dedicated himself to the evangelization of the Chol Indians of the region, working in Ciudad Real, Ocosingo, Bachajón, Chilón, Yajalón, and Tila.[399] Nanda registered the first baptized citizens of Tila in 1563, and in that same year he baptized the hermitage of Tila.[400]

The first Indian brotherhood (confraternity) was founded in Tila in 1580.[401] Unrest in Tila began around the same time. In 1584, following much unrest in the region, the bishop of Chiapas, Fray Pedro de Deria, asked the local mendicants to cede their missions to the secular clergy. By 1591 Tila was in the hands of the seculars.[402]

Origins of the Miraculous Christ of Tila

A popular legend at Tila tells the story of a man dressed in white visiting the foundation of the town's first church. [403] He informed the workers that they were constructing the church in a poor location and that the earth beneath it was not suitable. Later they began constructing a new church and the man appeared again, stating that there were too many ants in the area and they should try yet another site. Finally they chose a third location, where the church is today situated. The story spread that the man

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[398] Josserand and Hopkins, 93. I am indebted to Josserand and Hopkins for their information on Nanda.

[399] Monroy y Valverde, 36.

[400] Monroy y Valverde, 44.

[401] Monroy y Valverde, 38.

[402] Monroy y Valverde, 40.

[403] Josserand and Hopkins, 86.

who appeared was Christ himself, instructing them to build the church at the highest peak of the city; subsequently it prompted the adoption of Jesus as the town's patron and led to the creation of the cult of the Lord of Tila.

Legend states that the crucifix appeared at some point between 1589 and 1598 in a cave in front of Tila's hill of San Antonio, where the indigenous people of the area began to leave offerings (fig. 4-2).[404] The Lord of Tila exhibits a similar definition of musculature as the Esquipulas *Cristo,* but lacks the precision of anatomically correct scale seen in Cataño's work. The figure's arms, for example, appear oddly large in comparison to the torso. The Tila *Cristo* is clearly depicted before the moment of death, the figure's mouth open as if moaning in pain, contrasting with the serene downcast face of the Esquipulas crucifix.

Construction of the church was completed in the early seventeenth century, but criminals from Ciudad Real arrived to loot it. According to the legend, the *Cristo* fled and hid in a cave in the mountain opposite the church, where he remained for a number of years until, with the help of devotees from Tabasco, he was able to return to the church in Tila with some of the lost goods.[405]

Other local legends claim that Quirio Cataño, the famed artist of the Esquipulas image, made the Tila crucifix in Guatemala.[406] Monroy y Valverde posits that Antonio de Rodas, a Guatemalan sculptor, painter, and silversmith who along with Cataño was one of the most famous sculptors of the region, more probably made the Tila *Cristo*.

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[404] Monroy y Valverde, 47.

[405] Monroy y Valverde, 28.

[406] Luis Luján Muñoz and Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, *Imágenes de oro* (Guatemala City: Corporación G&T, 1993), 42.

Rodas was, like Cataño, an Iberian sculptor working in Guatemala. He was first mentioned there in 1581 as godfather to Cataño's firstborn son.

Rodas travelled to Chiapas in October of 1598 to make a retablo, and it is likely that during this trip he was commissioned to create the Tila *Cristo*.[407] That same year he renewed his apprenticeship contract and was commissioned to make a silver sculpture of Saint John the Baptist for the church of Santo Domingo in Antigua. Rodas was also listed as one of the sculptors subject to the *alcabala* (sales tax) from 1604 to 1608.[408] Because of the lack of early records, the patron of the Tila *Cristo* is unknown.[409] However, the image's connection to the Lord of Esquipulas, its more famous progenitor in Guatemala, is clear.

Development of the Cult

The cult of the Black Christ likely disseminated from Esquipulas to Tila via the missionary Antonio Margil, who was born in Valencia in 1657 and arrived in Mexico in 1683, subsequently working in both Mexico and Central America.[410] Margil worked closely with the Chol Maya and introduced the cult of the Lord of Esquipulas there as well as in Querétaro, Mexico, where he worked as vicar beginning in 1701. His epitaph read, "Missionary, prefect and guardian of the schools for the propagation of the faith of

[407] Monroy y Valverde, 46.

[408] Luján Muñoz and Alvarez Arévalo, 42.

[409] Monroy y Valverde, 46.

[410] Josserand and Hopkins, 94.

the Holy Cross in Querétaro, the crucified Christ in Guatemala and Saint Mary of Guadalupe here in New Spain."[411]

In 1695 Margil was part of an expedition to convert and pacify the Chol people of Chiapas, an area that had gained a heightened importance by the late seventeenth century as the Spanish crown began creating overland routes, including a passageway between Mérida in the Yucatán and Guatemala.[412] There Margil learned the Chol language and worked on translating the Bible.[413] Although there is no direct documentation of Margil in Tila, his presence in the region and the epitaph identifying him as a propagator of the Lord of Esquipulas makes his contribution probable.[414] In some locales the cult remained dedicated to the Lord of Esquipulas, and there are countless examples of this as well throughout Central America and Mexico. But in others, like Tila, the cult took on its own name and identity specific to the local culture.

By the mid seventeenth century the Chol people of Tila began to form confraternities dedicated to their *Cristo.* Santísimo Sacramento (1655), Santa Lucía (1677), and San Nicolás (1677) were the strongest of these local confraternities.[415] These were the first organizations that allowed native people to congregate away from the

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[411] "Misionero, prefecto y guardián de los colegios para la propagación de la fe de Santa Cruz en Querétaro, Cristo Crucificado en Guatemala y Santa María de Guadalupe, aquí en Nueva España." Alfred M. Tozzer, *A Spanish Manuscript Letter on the Lancandones, Archives of the Indies at Seville* (Culver City, Calif.: Labyrinthos, 1984), 1, as quoted in Josserand and Hopkins, 95.

[412] British pirates had wrought havoc on Spanish maritime commerce, so the Spanish crown sought to create overland trade routes, including a passageway between Mérida and Guatemala.

[413] Josserand and Hopkins, 95.

[414] Josserand and Hopkins, 96.

[415] Monroy y Valverde, 59.

suspicious eyes of Spanish officials.[416] The confraternities had a great degree of autonomy because of the extremely small presence of Spaniards in the town of Tila.

Not long after the founding of these confraternities a miracle occurred in Tila that would catapult the *Cristo* to fame throughout the region. It took place in 1693 during a period of unrest regarding the indigenous practices of idolatry uncovered by Spaniards in the region. The campaigns to root out these practices had begun ten years earlier, in 1683, with the appointment of Francisco Núñez de la Vega as bishop of Chiapas. Núñez was preoccupied with exorcising "the devil" from the minds of his Indian subjects. In the town of Oxchuc (Chiapas) he wrote of encountering representations of pagan cults that he identified as *Poxlom* and *Hicalahau*. He described one of the images as "…a fierce black figure, a graven image or sooty package with the features of a man."[417] Upon discovering the idols Núñez de la Vega performed an *auto de fe*, publicly destroying them.[418]

According to legend, while the *Cristo* hid in the cave it became a *Cristo Negro* alongside another stalagmite blackened idol.[419] This part of the story relates to the Mesoamerican view of caves as sacred dark places of emergence. The Christ of Tila, like the other *Cristos Negros*, was actually darkened over time from exposure and ritual activity. Nevertheless, the local caves are still an important part of devotion to the *Cristo*,

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[416] Monroy y Valverde, 59.

[417] "…figura de feroz negro, como una imagen de escultura o bulto tiznado, con los miembros de hombre…." Fray Francisco Núñez de la Vega, *Constituciones diocesanas del Obispado de Chiapa*, ed. María del Carmen León Cázares and Mario Humberto Ruiz (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Centro de Estudias Mayas, 1988), 256, as quoted in Monroy y Valverde, 65.

[418] *Autos de fe* were rituals of public penance performed against heretics following the Spanish Inquisition's practices.

[419] José L. Pérez Chacón, *Los Choles de Tila y su mundo* (Chiapas, Mexico: Secretaría de Desarrollo Rural, 1988), 309.

and during the annual festival to the Christ of Tila in June processions bring a small image of Christ from the capilla of the church to the cave. This arduous trek is part of the rites to ask for favor from the *Cristo*. Dominican friars noted that the pacified Indians adored this Christ and gradually moved away from their idolatrous adoration of a black god named *Tlin-lan*.[420]

Seven years after the destruction of the "sooty idols" Núñez de la Vega described the Christ of Tila as renovating itself, transforming itself from dark to light:

> In fact, a very old image of Our Lord and Savior on the cross in a certain village called "Tila" by the indigenous people that long looked stained and surrounded by an almost secular blackness. This blackness was deposited there by divine will and it changed to an absolutely heavenly whiteness completely foreign to the human art of painting—just like the halo that illuminates the bruises and flesh wounds through the intercession of angels. And, as the fame of such a great miracle keeps growing, the very hateful idol worshippers will fail, holding their detestable metamorphosis in higher regard than this one, the very true and very divine.[421]

The bishop went on to describe the crucifix itself as black, or blackened (from candle smoke) and spoke of it as surrounded by blackness, a pernicious and evil color in Western thought.

Whereas in Western thought blackness was seen as a sign of evil, blackness had an entirely different association in Mesoamerican cosmology. As Monroy y Valverde states: "We must remember that there existed a Prehispanic cult involving the offer of

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[420] Abel Abundio Estrada Trujillo, *15 de enero* (Tila, Mexico: Church of San Mateo, 1993), 2.

[421] "En efecto, aunque una imagen muy antigua de Nuestro Señor Salvador en la cruz, que había en cierto poblado llamado 'Tila' en la expresión de los indígenas y que se veía teñida y rodeada desde hacía muchísimo por una negrura casi secular, había depuesto por voluntad divina esta negrura y había mudado a una blancura absolutamente celeste y del todo ajena al humano arte de la pintura—a semejanza del que albea entre cardenales y heridas de la carne por obra de los ángeles—, o faltarán, con todo, detestabilísimos adoradores de ídolos que, al crecer la fama de tan gran milagro, tenían en mucho más estima a sus huerísimas metamorfosis, que a aquella, la más veraz y divina." Núñez de la Vega, 255, as quoted in Monroy y Valverde, 65.

smoke as food for the gods. The excess use of it causes a blackening of everything around him, causing great horror to those who witnessed the marks left by the Maya rites."[422] She uses the example of the Dominican chronicler Ximénez, who wrote about another Maya town called Cajabón, describing an encounter with a "black and dirty" image to which Indians offered sacrifices.[423] The "dirt" on such an idol marked it as transformed via ritual and added to the history and thus the spiritual potency of the object. Dirtiness, however, in Western thought, describes grime where it should not be, necessitating cleaning.

Such intentional sootiness was perhaps related to the ancient Maya use of the color black, whereby resinous trees were ritually burned and created the black pigment that was applied to the walls of tombs and painted ceramics.[424] Copal was the most important tree resin, one that is aromatic and continues to be used as incense in Mesoamerica. According to anthropologist Timothy Pugh, in the Petén region of Guatemala: "The Maya burned resin from the copal tree in [the] vessels, likely as offerings to the represented deity, though the burning of incense also helped to frame the ritual event."[425] Contemporary Lacandón Maya from the region of Chiapas, for example,

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[422] "Se debe recordar que existían culto prehispánicos que involucraban el ofrecimiento del humo como alimento para los dioses. El exceso del uso de éste provoca un enegrecimiento de todo aquello que le rodea, causando gran horror a aquellos que alcanzaron a ser testigos de la huella dejada por los ritos mayas." Monroy y Valverde, 22.

[423] Fray Francisco Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala de la Orden de Predicadores*, ed. Antonio Villacorta (Guatemala City: Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, 1929), vol. 2, 23. Cited in Monroy y Valverde, 67.

[424] Stephen Houston, Claudia Brittenham, Cassandra Mesick, Alexandre Tokovinine, and Christina Warinner, *Veiled Brightness: A History of Ancient Maya Color* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 63.

[425] Timothy W. Pugh and Leslie G. Cecil, "The contact period of central Petén, Guatemala in color," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61/62 (Spring/Autumn 2012): 322.

collect the *sabac* (black soot from copal smoke) for use in rain rituals and as black paint.[426]

The Lacandón rain deity Menzabak, known as Chaac in the Yucatán, was said to live in a cave nearby Lake Menzabak and dispensed this black powder for use in the creation of rain.[427] These powders were used to coat sacred objects and came to connote their ritual history and sacred potency, not unlike the accumulation of blackness on the surfaces of the Black Christs in Esquipulas and Tila. This color was thus seen as an essential part of the sacred power of the *Cristo*, but the Western binary and preoccupation with black as a pernicious color led European churchmen on campaigns to whiten such images.

The famous crucifix of Santa Teresa Ixmiquilpan (now in the state of Hidalgo) is an example of a crucifix that reportedly renovated itself (fig. 4-3). According to chronicler Alonso Alberto de Velasco, the crucifix "was from top to bottom very black and completely disfigured, to the point where it lost all of its original form and the torso looked very darkly burnt like a *negro* from Guinea."[428] In this case, the blackness of the image was seen as surely a negative feature. By comparing the image to an African, Velasco expressed the popular bias against blacks in Colonial Mexico, since as slaves

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[426] Karl Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan, Issue 32* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992), 84.

[427] John E. Staller and Brian Stross, *Lightning in the Andes and Mesoamerica:Pre-Columbian, Colonial , and Contemporary Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 126.

[428] "Estaba de arriba a bajo muy negra y desfigurada del todo, de calidad que tenía perdida toda su primera forma, y parecía un trozo quemado muy prieto como negro de Guinea." Alonso Alberto de Velasco, *Exaltación de la Divina Misericordia en la milagrosa renovación de la soberana imagen de Christo Señor N. crucificado que se venera en la iglesia del convento de san Ioseph de Carmelitas descalzas se esta Ciudad México que consagra a la Madre de Misericordia María Santísima de los Dolores, México* (Mexico City: Doña María de Benavides, 1699), 44.

Africans occupied the lowest rung of Colonial society. They were seen as heathens incapable of truly becoming Christians, although Las Casas argued that the Indians, on the other hand, were noble savages capable of true conversion. Velasco's comparison of the *Cristo* to a *negro* from Guinea was a method of emphasizing its degradation before its miraculous renovation to a "celestial whiteness."

The exact date of the renovation is unclear, but local records indicate that in 1693 bishop Núñez de la Vega hired an artist to execute a restoration of the sculpture.[429] Monroy y Valverde argues that Núñez de la Vega was inspired by his time in Chiquinquirá, Nueva Granada (modern-day Colombia), where a canvas with an image of the Virgin of the Rosary that was in poor condition miraculously renovated itself in 1586, sparking the establishment of her cult.[430]

The miracle of *renovación*, which was seen as restoring these images to their original beauty, is further evidence of the reality of their original (white) *encarnación*, which slowly blackened. The "miracle" was most likely a thorough cleaning, possibly in addition to a new layer of paint on the figure's surface. In both Chalma and Esquipulas the images' indigenous devotees saw the layers of grime as sacred and essential to the image's blackness. The subsequent whitening campaigns in Chalma were part of the Spanish preoccupation with whiteness. Yet although today the Lord of Chalma is white (albeit presumably slowly darkening yet again), it is still known and revered as a *Cristo Negro*.

[429] Monroy y Valverde, 67.

[430] Monroy y Valverde, 69.

Similarly at Tila, despite the miraculous renovation, the figure darkened once again, perhaps explaining the very visible patina to this day whereby from a distance the figure appears black but when one is up close the white *encarnación* beneath is visible.

Similarities Between Tila and Esquipulas

The rituals performed by the Chol in Tila and the Chortí in Esquipulas bear marked similarity. In Tila, as in Esquipulas, the *Cristo* rests high above the altar on the main platform of the church; a series of stairs allows the pilgrim to circumnavigate the altar in order to gain close access to the sculpture. This model originated in medieval Europe, such as at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a medieval pilgrimage church in Spain where an image of Santiago is placed above the altar that pilgrims and others can access by a series of ramps behind the image. This model was used in Esquipulas, as well as in Chalma and Otatitlán and permits devotees to stroke, kiss, and otherwise handle the sculpture and its vestments.

In more recent times most of these images have been placed behind glass as a means of protecting them. In 2007 the Tila *Cristo* was exposed, allowing pilgrims to continue to touch the sculpture. In 2012, however, when the author visited Tila, it was behind glass, much like the Lord of Esquipulas.[431] With the sculptures thus protected, the ritual of touching and rubbing the *Cristo* was replaced by rubbing of the glass. It is likely that this very act of rubbing contributed to the blackening of the images. The conservators' report at Esquipulas mentions human hair and oils as two of the substances

[431] Josserand and Hopkins mention that the Tila *Cristo* was exposed while the Esquipulas *Cristo* was behind glass as of 2007, the year of publication of their article. Josserand and Hopkins, 90. As of 2012, however, the Tila *Cristo* was behind glass.

found on the accumulated surface of the *Cristo*.[432] This act of touching was done in the process of prayer, with the intent of bringing the devotee even closer to the miraculous image.

Josserand and Hopkins conjecture that the Tila *Cristo* was made of a dark wood to explain its status as a *Cristo Negro*.[433] This explanation, however, does not seem plausible. Throughout the Spanish world at this time devotional images like this one were painted using the *encarnación* technique, whereby layers of flesh-colored paint were applied to the wooden surface, bringing the image to life by making it appear like human flesh. These layers of paint and varnish also served to protect and preserve the image, as without them the wood would have been susceptible to rot. Upon close observation, moreover, it is clear that the Tila *Cristo* was originally painted with a typical European flesh-tone *encarnación*. From afar it appears to be a deep shade of brown, but up close one can see the uneven layers of grime that rest atop an otherwise white figure. This is remarkably clear in Tila, whereas in Esquipulas the original (white) color is imperceptible. Finally, not only did the figure darken over time from the elements, burning of candles, and the constant exposure to human hands, but also it was at times deliberately painted black to maintain its identity as a Black Christ.[434]

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[432] Aura Rosa González de Flores and Jorge Alberto Carias, *Restauración en Esquipulas* (Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, 1998), 14.

[433] "La madera oscura con que se había tallado al Cristo, llegó a conocerse como Cristo Negro." Josserand and Hopkins, 112.

[434] González de Flores and Carias, 14.

In both Tila and Esquipulas the indigenous pilgrims leave offerings to both the *Cristo* in the church and the lord of the earth in nearby natural features.[435] This practice indicates that there is thus a synthesis between the local Christ devotion and the image with the lord of the earth, a tradition coming from cave worship in the Pre-Columbian period. This dual devotion does not pose any qualms in the faithful about contradiction; in fact, it is viewed and accepted as completely Christian in the eyes of both pilgrims and clergy.

Like the Esquipulas *Cristo*, the Lord of Tila was revered as a source of health and fertility. During the Lord of Tila's festival each June, thousands of people converge on the town and the holy image is carried through the streets, decorated with flowers and balloons. Local elders who adorn themselves with precious quetzal and macaw feathers lead the procession. These adornments are further linked with an indigenous deity who controls rain, wind, and wild animals.[436]

History and Myth at Tila

Citizens of Tila were involved in the Zendal rebellion in 1712, a six-month-long uprising against church leaders who demanded excessive labor and taxes from the indigenous population for the construction of religious buildings. The rebellion began in Ciudad Real (today San Cristobal de Las Casas) in the state of Chiapas with indigenous resistance against Spanish control, which included the sending of troops from Guatemala

[435] Josserand and Hopkins, 91.

[436] Smithsonian National Museum of National History, "Mexican Cycles," http://www.mnh.si.edu/exhibits/cycles/choles.html (accessed December 2, 2013).

and Tabasco to squelch skirmishes during the construction of the Temple of Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Ciudad Real.[437]

Leading up to the rebellion, there was a series of miraculous apparitions of the Virgin throughout highland Chiapas. Maya leaders enlisted the Virgin in support of their cause, claiming that she had spoken to and helped them in the struggle against their Spanish overlords. Some leaders claimed to be wizards able to contain the advances of Spanish troops and compared their power to that of Jesus Christ. Rebels similarly used the image of Christ as a symbol of protection against the Spanish troops.[438]

Clearly, although these indigenous people were rebelling against the Colonial system, their fury did not extend to the images and beliefs introduced by the Spanish as part of the conversion process. By this time the Tila *Cristo* was seen not as a symbol of Spanish domination, but as a local manifestation of the divine. The Catholic faith did not replace the indigenous one; instead each locale gradually developed its own relationship with the new Catholic images and cults. At Tila this meant that the local blackened Christ was esteemed as a powerful local symbol, and not a universal image of the crucifixion introduced by Spanish friars.

The Lord of Otatitlán, Veracruz, Mexico

Background and Relationship to Esquipulas

Another pilgrimage image of the Black Christ in Mexico that claims links to Esquipulas is the Lord of Otatitlán (fig. 4-4). The crucifix there displays a stylization of

[437] Hector Pérez Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 49.

[438] Monroy y Valverde, 89.

the human form, head, and hair, belying the artist's lack of training in the European tradition. The *Cristo*'s musculature takes on a stylized geometric patterning that is faintly carved in relief on the surface of the body. The proportions lack consistency, with the shoulders far too wide for the waist. Nevertheless, the figure's imposing size and powerful downward gaze create an impressive and captivating image that is housed in the largest sanctuary in the region.

The town of Otatitlán is located along the Papaloapan River, which like Esquipulas was the hub of a Pre-Columbian trade route.[439] Located in the modern state of Veracruz, Otatitlán is near the border of Oaxaca where the Gulf Coast and central highlands of Mexico meet. Otatitlán was an important trade center in both the pre-Hispanic and Colonial periods. The Papaloapan and San Juan Rivers carried goods via canoe, and a busy trade route traveled by mule connected the rivers with inland centers of production.[440] The Papaloapan River basin's population forms an ethnic mosaic, with the sanctuary at Otatitlán at its center. The three linguistic traditions in the area are Mixtec, Chinantec, and Mazatec. It is also a place of interaction between mestizos and various ethnic groups: Jarochos, Chinantecs, Mazatecs, Zapotecs, Nahuas, and Mixtecs.[441] When the Spaniards arrived in the Papaloapan Basin, the area was already under the imperial control of the Triple Alliance of central Mexico. The absentee overlords made it relatively easy for the Spaniards to conquer the area, and the invaders quickly controlled the population.

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[439] Davidson, 219.

[440] José Velasco Toro, *De la historia al mito: Mentalidad y culto en el santuario de Otatitlán* (Veracruz, Mexico: Instituto Veracruzano de Cultura, 2000), 58.

[441] Velasco Toro, 27.

There are numerous origin stories for the Black Christ of Otatitlán, all of which date their origin sometime between 1543 and 1611.[442] Construction of the sanctuary began in 1597 and was completed in 1606 (fig. 4-5).[443] Local documents claim that the figure was shipped along with the *Cristos* of Esquipulas and Chalma from Spain to Mexico.[444] This provenance is certainly a fabrication, as we know that Quirio Cataño made the Lord of Esquipulas on American soil, and furthermore the folk stylization of the Otatitlán *Cristo* shows none of the refined naturalism of the crucifixes in Chalma and Esquipulas. The torso is thin and elongated with angular ribs protruding from beneath, and the face and facial hair are geometric and stylized, indicating that they were perhaps carved by a local artist far from urban artistic centers in Mexico, Guatemala, or Spain (see fig. 4-4).

The prayer book for the Lord of Esquipulas states: "The sick from all over Chiapas and the Isthmus of Veracruz come walking to be in front of your cross."[445] Otatitlán's association with Esquipulas was likely not forged until the eighteenth century, which corresponds to its first mention as a *Cristo Negro.* The earliest local documents do not refer to the crucifix as a Black Christ, but the first mention of its blackness is in the

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[442] Davidson, 219.

[443] Fernando Winfield, "La cofradía del Cristo Negro," *La Palabra y el Hombre* 89 (January-March 1994): 44-45.

[444] This is also claimed in the cartouche within the church mural (fig. 4-6) as well as in the local history*:* José Martínez Mata, *El Señor de Otatitlán: Historia y oraciones* (Otatitlán, Veracruz, 2008).

[445] "Enfermos de todo Chiapas, del Istmo de Veracruz todos van en el camino para estar frente de su cruz," quoted in Carlos Navarrete Cáceres, *Oraciones a la cruz y al diablo: oraciones populares de la depresión central de Chiapas* (Mexico City: Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1968), 48.

registry of a new confraternity founded in 1779 and dedicated to a *Cristo Negro*.[446] In the late eighteenth century the number of confraternities in the region grew exponentially throughout the towns of Veracruz and northern Oaxaca, encompassing a plethora of cultural and language groups. It appears that the church used these confraternities to integrate the vast ethnic diversity in the area into a single faith-based polity.[447]

Mythic Origins

There are two principal origin tales for the Lord of Otatitlán, written by Joseph de Villaseñor y Sánchez in 1746, the earliest recorded at the sanctuary.[448] According to this story, the *Cristo* appeared via the sculptural work of angels sent by God, as documented by testimonials described in the archives of the local confraternity.[449] It tells of two men of "gallant bearing" who stopped at the home of an Indian who possessed a cedar tree trunk that he planned to have sculpted into an image of the Virgin Mary. The following day, when they returned to pay the sculptor, the cedar log had converted into a large image of Christ crucified. The angels then disappeared, leaving money and gifts. This origin story is carefully illustrated in a panel painted in the mid-twentieth century, highlighting the *Cristo*'s connections with Chalma and Esquipulas and illustrating its journey down the Papaloapan River (fig. 4-6).

Another more modern legend recorded in the local municipal archives of Otatitlán claims that the Lord of Otatitlán was commissioned by King Phillip II to be executed by

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[446] Davidson, 219.

[447] Winfield, 43.

[448] Martínez Mata, 8.

[449] Martínez Mata, 8.

an English sculptor in 1595 along with two other sculptures of the crucified Christ.[450] On January 19, 1596, it arrived in the city of Santander aboard an English ship and from there departed for Veracruz, arriving on April 20, 1596. The three images made their way to Otatitlán, Chalma, and Esquipulas. When the image for Otatitlán finally arrived via the Papaloapan River, the Spaniards who were delivering it left the *Cristo* tied to a xúchil tree. The next morning an indigenous wedding party was visited by two apparitions of Christ and came across the crucifix in a nearby grass hut. These two miraculous events sparked the rapid rise of a local Christ cult. The crucifix remained in the small hut until 1597, when survivors of a series of local epidemics and floods shipped the *Cristo* downriver. However, it was stopped by a whirlwind that threw the image onto the shore at the foot of a tamarind tree, a prodigious sign that the *Cristo* had found its resting place in Otatitlán.

Ethnic Origins

As with much of the scholarship on the Black Christ, writers have attempted to directly link the Lord of Otatitlán to a pre-Hispanic dark god. According to Otatitlán historian Jose Velasco Toro, the pre-Hispanic deity Yacatecuhtli (Nahua god of commerce and travelers) was reinterpreted as a representation of the crucified Christ by connecting this native dark god with the blackness of the crucifix.[451] No Colonial-era documents exist to substantiate such claims. Because the association with blackness was not forged until the eighteenth century, the more logical conclusion is that the image's

[450] Martínez Mata, 9.

[451] Velasco Toro, 66.

blackness was a result of gradual darkening and a later as yet unknown development leading to its association with the Black Christ of Esquipulas.

Otatitlán's location in Veracruz may also explain some of the importance of the black *santo* at Otatitlán, commonly called simply *Santuario* today. Veracruz is the state in Mexico with the highest proportion of people of African descent who arrived as slaves beginning in the early sixteenth century and increasingly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[452] Most Afro-Mexicans have intermarried over the centuries with both Spaniards and indigenes. Many of them maintain today a strong devotion to Black *santos*, including San Benito (fig. 4-7). A curious image of a Black Virgin also appears to be quite modern (fig. 4-8). The modern chronicler of the church describes the original head of the *Cristo* as "Africanoid," but says that one with "Latin" features replaced it.[453] Today the *Cristo* wears indigenous textiles at his waist and its origin tales are related to indigenes rather than to the African population, reflecting the widespread preference throughout Mexico for native cultural contributions.

The Black Christ of El Petén, Flores, Guatemala

Another important Black Christ was reportedly destined for Mérida (Yucatan) in 1831 when it was abandoned in Flores, a city on an island in Lake Petén Itza; it remains an important shrine image there to this day (fig. 4-9).[454] Flores is located near the last Maya stronghold in Guatemala, the city of Tayasal, which was not successfully

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[452] Sagrario Cruz-Carretero et al., *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yango to the Present* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 2006), 16.

[453] Martínez Mata, 13.

[454] Horst, 5.

conquered by the Spanish until 1697.[455] The sanctuary housing the Black Christ of the Petén, called Nuestra Señora de los Remedios del Itzá, is located on the most elevated portion of the island.

It is unclear when this *Cristo* was made and installed, with some authors giving a date in the late nineteenth century whereas others place it much earlier.[456] It is safe, however, to conclude that this *Cristo* must have been created after the 1737 healing miracle of the archbishop of Guatemala, Fray Pedro de Figueroa y Victoria, which caused an explosion of the cult in Guatemala and the surrounding region. The majority of Black Christ images, whether miraculous pilgrimage images in their own right or simple copies of the Esquipulas *Cristo*, were not created until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were undoubtedly painted black deliberately to mimic the appearance and prestige of the crucifix in Esquipulas.

Davidson's ethnography, collected in 1994, includes a number of origin myths for the Black Christ of el Petén.[457] The most popular one includes a reference to the Esquipulas *Cristo.* It tells of a woman from Mérida in the Yucatan region of Mexico who was ill and heard of the great miracles of the crucifix in Esquipulas, so she set out on a journey to visit the shrine. As she passed through Flores on her way to Esquipulas and approached the town, her health improved. Even before she even arrived in Esquipulas she was cured, but decided to continue on the journey in order to show her respect to the

[455] Davidson, 190.

[456] Davidson, 191.

[457] Davidson, 191.

power of the *Cristo*.[458] In Esquipulas the woman was so enamored with the *Cristo* that she purchased a replica to bring home. Stopping in Flores on the way back to stay with relatives before continuing the journey, the woman left the *Cristo* in the church in Flores, where upon local townspeople began assembling to pray before it. When the woman returned to retrieve the crucifix she found it too heavy to move. After many attempts to take the figure with her, she left for home empty handed. And the city of Flores finally had its own Black Christ.

According to one of Davidson's informants, the weight of the crucifix indicated that "our Christ is blacker than the one in Esquipulas."[459] Fascinatingly, the strength of the *Cristo*, its determination to remain in Flores, and its miraculous power are directly tied to its blackness, a marker of the image's omnipotence. While this sentiment is not so directly established in the early Colonial period, incidental blackening of the crucifix led to strong associations between blackness and sacred power. This need for local sacralization was not simply manifested in the Colonial period, but stretches to the modern day, as each church stakes a claim at a distinctive sacrality. The Black Christ plays an important and defining role in marking the environs as sacred, often in direct competition with the original Black Christ in Esquipulas.

[458] This miracle story is particularly interesting considering the shifts that occurred in devotion to the Lord of Esquipulas in the eighteenth century, wherein people no longer came to ask for favors but to give thanks for favors bestowed.

[459] "Fíjese que nuestro Cristo es más negro que el de Esquipulas." Davidson, 191.

The Lord of Poison, Mexico City

One of the best-known Black Christs is the Lord of Poison (*Señor de Veneno*), an almost life-sized crucifix now housed in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City. The crucifix was originally white and was likely made of *pasta de caña* (corn paste) in the early seventeenth century for the small Dominican church of Porta Coeli, located a few blocks from the Zócalo in the heart of Mexico City. The Dominicans bought the land in 1603 and founded a school there called the *Colegio de Porta-Coeli*. They later added a chapel in 1711.[460] At some later point the miracle of the Lord of Poison took place, perhaps as late as the early nineteenth century, making this one of the latest examples of the establishment of a Black Christ cult.

The legend of the Lord of Poison states that a devout believer came to pray daily before the crucifix, kneeling before it and kissing its feet. An enemy of the man plotted to exact revenge on him by applying poison to the feet of the *Cristo*, thereby killing him.[461] According to the story, the miraculous Christ retracted his legs and absorbed the poison into its skin, warning the man and saving his life. The blackness of the *Cristo* was thus a potent signal of Jesus Christ's divine strength and sacrifice on behalf of mankind.

As the *Señor de Veneno* gained prominence, devotees began flocking to the small church, leaving offerings to the miraculous crucifix. One of the candles left by a devotee was likely the culprit that set the *Cristo* on fire, and it was completely lost. At some time during the period of the mid-nineteenth-century Reform Laws the church was turned into

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[460] Antonio Mouhanna, *La Iglesia de Porta-Coeli, cuna y santuario del Señor del Veneno* (Mexico City: Venustiano Carranza, 2005), 4-5.

[461] Xavier Moyssén Echeverría, *México: Angustia de sus Cristos* (Mexico City: INAH, 1967), xxxiv.

a government archive.[462] During this time a copy of the *Cristo* was moved from Porto Coeli to the Metropolitan Cathedral, where it remains to this day (fig. 4-10). It appears to have been created by a poorly trained artist in *pasta de caña* since the surface of the image is imperfect and lumpy, belying its materials. The legs also have an awkward bend to them, indicating an artist not formally trained in Western naturalism.

More recently other tales have emerged to link the image to African guilds by claiming that it was destined for veneration by slaves of African origin.[463] No primary source supports this account, however. Although during the colonial period there was a large population of Africans in Mexico City, these stories seem to be modern attempts to account for the blackness of the crucifix. As with many of these *Cristos*, *Negros* no conservation has been performed, so we have no scientific data, but it is more likely that the image was deliberately painted black in imitation of the other more famous Black Christs. The blackness of the figure nevertheless drew interest and the legend catapulted the Christ to great fame.

The Accidental Black Christ: The *Santo Entierro del Sacromonte*, Amecameca, Mexico

Like the Black Nazarene of Portobelo, Panama, to be discussed in chapter five, the *Cristo* of Sacromonte lies outside of typical Black Christ imagery because it is not a crucifix. The *Santo Entierro*, or Holy Burial, as it is known, is an image of Christ in

[462] Mouhanna, 7. The Reform Laws of the mid-nineteenth century saw the closing of many churches throughout Mexico. Their impact on the Black Christ will be further discussed in the concluding chapter.

[463] Moyssén Echeverría, xxxiv.

deathly repose, buried in the tomb (fig. 4-11). The image is interred in a natural cave atop a hill in Amecameca, a town east of Mexico City near the Popocatépetl volcano.

A Chichimec group called the Totolimpanecas arrived in the area of Amecameca in the late thirteenth century, settling there after a period of nomadism.[464] There were subsequent waves of immigration to the area, and collectively the local people became known as Amaquemecas. In 1465 they were conquered by the Mexica, who ruled via a tribute empire. When the Mexica conquered a region, they never (like Western conquerors) attempted to eliminate the local religion and language; instead they allowed locals to retain their culture and religion, demanding only that they add Aztec numens to their pantheon and pay tribute to the Triple Alliance.

Cortés arrived in Amecameca in 1519 on his way from the Gulf Coast to Tenochtitlan and soon after the conquest installed two indigenous rulers, Tlaxcalans who had aided Spanish soldiers in their subjugation of the Aztec capital. Franciscans, as the first friars to arrive in New Spain, controlled the spiritual landscape in and around Mexico City, and in 1527 they began constructing their mission in Amecameca. The earliest Colonial record of the town is in the form of a map produced in 1599 by the congregations of thirteen indigenous towns in the area.[465] Native artists represented the local mountain, Chalchiuhmomoztli, using the pre-Hispanic pictographic convention of the *tepetl*—a symbol depicting a mountain with cave beneath it to represent the town. For

[464] Chichimeca was the name that the Nahua people of central Mexico gave to a wide range of semi-nomadic people from northern Mexico.

[465] Rigel García Pérez, "De la cueva al Sacromonte: Cuerpo y territorios. El Santo Entierro del Amequeme" (MA thesis, UNAM, 2008), 9.

this reason, following native tradition, the place of the Lord of Sacromonte is represented as a mountain.

Although these associations clearly persisted into the Colonial period, the *Santo Entierro*, while located in a cave, did not emerge from either indigenous earth lord or cave worship. Rather, it arose from local Franciscan and later Dominican friars' deliberate attempts to create a pure Christian cult, untainted by any associations with indigenous beliefs.

While the Franciscans were initially instrumental in promoting the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, by the second half of the sixteenth century they began to oppose it because indigenous pilgrims were still associating the Virgin with the ancient goddess Tonantzin. The famous Franciscan friar Sahagún denounced the worship of Guadalupe, insisting that it was a continuation of pagan practices.[466] Franciscan friar Pedro de Bustamante insisted that "nothing was better calculated to keep the Indians from becoming good Christians than the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Ever since their conversion they have been told that they should not believe in their idols, but only in God and Our Lady.…To tell them now that an image painted by an Indian would work miracles will utterly confuse them and tear up the vine that has been planted."[467] The cult nevertheless continued to be promoted by the secular clergy despite its obvious syncretic associations. The Franciscans, however, opposed it for both spiritual and political reasons, as they were desperate to continue to control the *iglesia indiana* (Indian

[466] Brian C. Wilson, "What Does Jerusalem Have To Do with Amecameca? A Case Study of Colonial Mexican Sacred Space," in *Religion as Human Capacity: A Festschrift in Honour of E. Thomas Lauson*, ed. Ernest Thomas Lauson, Timothy Light, and Brian Courtney Wilson (Boston and Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 208.

[467] Wilson, 208.

church).[468] Instead of pilgrimage to Guadalupe, the Franciscans in Amecameca under the leadership of Fray Martín de Valencia began to promote the "purer" cult of the *Santo Entierro* in the town located where they believed there were no prior indigenous sacred associations.

Valencia frequented the small cave on the outskirts of Amecameca as a hermitage, a place of prayer and contemplation, during the last years of his life (fig. 4-12). After he died in 1534 the local Franciscans began to develop accounts of the wonders of the friar's life, aiming to promote pilgrimage to the cave.[469] The hagiography that they developed for Valencia purposefully paralleled the life of their patron, St. Francis. The Franciscan friar known as Motolinía, one of the first twelve friars to arrive in New Spain, wrote about Valencia's time in Amecameca, comparing the village with La Verna, the mountainous Italian retreat of St. Francis.[470]

Much as Francis was celebrated as a lover of the animals and nature, Motolinía celebrated Valencia as a hermit who communed with nature and tended and spoke with the birds. Motolinía even claimed that Valencia had been visited by St. Francis himself, as well as by St. Anthony of Padua, another of the great hermit saints, also known as a lover of animals. Wilson explains: "Just as St. Francis had been assured of his salvation through his experience with the seraphic Christ at La Verna, so too was Fray Martín assured of his salvation by his vision of the stigmatized St. Francis at Amecameca."[471]

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[468] Wilson, 209.

[469] Wilson, 209.

[470] Wilson, 210. See Toribio de Benevente (Motolinía), *History of the Indians of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Francis Borgia Steck (Berkeley: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1951).

[471] Wilson, 210.

Gradually Amecameca became a popular pilgrimage destination for both Nahuas and Spaniards, though it would never reach the prominence of Guadalupe's Tepeyac. The hilltop cave was a source of Franciscan pride because of its origins as a hermitage for one of their own. At some point in the mid-sixteenth century, however, the Franciscans lost control of Amecameca and it was ceded to their rivals, the Dominicans,[472] under whose leadership the *Santo Entierro del Sacromonte* was born, likely in the 1570s.

It was originally a crucifix image installed in the mountain cave and was later changed into a Holy Burial image in 1583 by the new Dominican vicar, Juan Páez, who placed Valencia's relics at the feet of the Christ.[473] Páez founded an indigenous confraternity called the *Cofradía del Descendimiento y Sepulchro de Cristo Nuestro Señor* (Confraternity of the Descent from the Cross and the Sepulcher of our Lord Christ), dedicated to the burial of Christ, a popular Dominican devotion.[474]

The friars installed an altar in the cave and initiated the practice of Friday mass dedicated to Christ's Passion. On Easter Sunday the image was taken from the cave and carried through the streets to the Dominican church in town.[475] In 1584 it was reported that Valencia's relics—a robe, socks, and a hair shirt—had been discovered, and they too were installed in the cave shrine, thus metaphorically uniting the two orders.[476] Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta narrated these events in his *Historia eclesiástica indiana*:

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[472] Wilson, 210.

[473] García Pérez, 31.

[474] Wilson, 211.

[475] Fortino Hipólito Vera, *Santuario del Sacromonte: O lo que se escrito sobre él desde el siglo XVI hasta el presente* (Amecameca, Mexico: Colegio Católico, 1880).

[476] Wilson, 211.

...And after the Indians had been converted and indoctrinated, the Dominican fathers founded a monastery in Amecameca. …And thus this place is the particular recreation of the spiritual servant of God, Martín de Valencia, and he frequented the place as much as he could…and very often he would come there, as much to visit and indoctrinate the Indians of that town which was in his charge, as to recollect himself and give all his attention to God in that cave, without the noise of people and without the interruptions of business. There he spent his days of rigorous fasts and days of Lent; there he spent days and nights in continuous prayer and meditation on the crucified Christ, mortifying his body with diverse means of affliction and punishment. There it is told that he used to go out in the morning to a forest and pray under a great tree that was there, and upon sitting there the tree will swell with birds which would sing him lovely sounds, such that it appeared that they came there to help him praise God….The Indians, who knew well what the holy man was doing there, admired his austerity, and they were greatly edified, and were confirmed in their hearts the opinion of his sanctity that they had conceived because of the other virtues that they knew he possessed and the doctrine which he had taught them.…And they have been so perseverant in this devotion that they kept those relics hidden for a space of some fifty years, passing them from hand to hand during those great plagues that have occurred in New Spain….There was at that time acting as vicar of the monastery in Amecameca a venerable old father who had been the Provincial Vicar of the Order of Preachers of New Spain, Fr. Juan Páez by name, very devoted to Fr. Martín de Valencia, due to the fame of his sanctity which had flown through those regions always amongst the religious of all orders, and the seculars, Spanish as well as Indians.… And in the said year of '84, finding himself in the presence of some Indians who worked in the monastery speaking with fervor and zeal of the things of that man of God, Fr. Martín, and showing himself desirous of finding out about his corpse and his relics, one of the Indians who was present told him in secret afterwards that the town had for many years kept some relics of the saint, and he told him how and where he might see them. He made an inquiry after them, and following clues, came to find a hair shirt of horsehair and a very rough tunic … and two poor cassocks of local linen, in which he used to say mass. … On one side of the cave was put an altar on which to say mass, and on the other side a great deep box which was closed and served as a tomb for a very devoutly made statue of Christ, which was laid in it, and at the foot of the Christ statue was kept a small box covered with an iron grill in which was kept the tunic and the hair shirt, in such a way that they could be seen but not removed. … At any time Indians are frequently gathered, especially during the day, and no less those

> neighboring Spaniards and those passing through, because it is on the royal road and much frequented by those who travel from Mexico City to Puebla, and from Puebla back to Mexico City.[477]

Although Mendieta was a Franciscan, he acknowledged and even celebrated the contributions of the Dominicans and their establishment of the *Santo Entierro*, while also lauding the life and legacy of his fellow Franciscan, Fray Martín de Valencia. Wilson postulates that perhaps his equanimity was due to a new spirit of reconciliation between the mendicant orders, which banded together beginning in the late sixteenth century against attacks by the secular clergy.[478]

Or perhaps Mendieta's motivation was to "Franciscanize" the shrine, drawing parallels between Amecameca and La Verna and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The Franciscans commonly made parallels between the life of Christ and that of St. Francis, and here Mendieta takes the comparison a step further to include Valencia. Amecameca thus became a surrogate pilgrimage location for both La Verna and Jerusalem.

Despite the Franciscan efforts to choose a location free of pagan associations, the mountain cave was in fact an important preconquest landmark, as "local pre-conquest legend linked the peak at Amecameca with Chalchiuhmomoztli, the sacred mountain on which the Amecameca territorial polity (*altepetl*) had been formally established centuries before."[479] The early acts of veneration that Mendieta describes, including the secreting away of Valencia's relics, could be read as indications that the Indians who revered him

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[477] Fray Geronimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, ed. Joaquín García Icalzbalceta (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 1870), 602-5, as quoted in and translated by Wilson, 211-14.

[478] Wilson, 215.

[479] Wilson, 216.

had fully converted to Christianity. Wilson, however, postulates differently, asserting that Valencia had little direct interaction with indigenous people during his time in the cave hermitage. It is unlikely that they viewed him not as a saint but rather as a hermit, separate from the intensely group-focused spirituality of their native culture.[480]

In indigenous cosmology the sacred community (*altepetl*) was made up of individuals who recognized as their shared possession the sacred bundle, *tlaquimilolli*, made up of relics and/or belongings of a god or mythic founder. As Wilson explains, the physical remains of the man-god "functioned as a channel through which flowed the sacred forces that empowered, protected, legitimated, and gave a common identity to the village or town."[481] The *tlaquimilolli* was kept in the temple, which represented the people's spiritual center. Many of these sacred bundles were destroyed or hidden after the Spanish missionaries began destroying native temples.[482]

Because the Franciscans burned the local temple in Amecameca, the local sacred bundle of their divine founder was lost with it. Perhaps the indigenes of Amecameca were searching for a new divine founder, and Valencia played that role. They likely hid his relics not for their Christian potency, but for their status as *tlaquimilolli* (sacred bundles).[483] The location on the sacred mountain of Chalchiuhmomoztli made perfect sense as a new center for local sacrality.

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[480] Wilson, 216.

[481] Wilson, 216.

[482] Wilson, 217.

[483] Wilson, 218.

This fascinating story at Amecameca indicates an alternative to the typical syncretism narrative. This is not, as Samuel Edgerton describes, an example of the friar's ingenious use of "expedient selection," the process by which friars adapted native beliefs to achieve Christian conversion. In fact, the friars were attempting to *avoid* any sort of syncretic connections. Instead, this is an instance of the agency and ingenuity of native peoples in fitting Christian symbolism into their worldview. Over the centuries numerous legends developed surrounding the *Santo Entierro*, including his status as a Black Christ and the discovery of the figure in 1533 by a Franciscan friar outside a cave where the Nahua rain god Tlaloc was worshipped.[484]

According to this popular legend, the friars and some native neophytes carried the *Cristo* into the cave and placed it in the position previously occupied by Tlaloc. Some weeks later a number of Indians penetrated into the interior in order to remove the figure of Christ and replace it with that of their own god, but by then the image had grown too heavy to move. The *Santo Entierro* remained in the cave and granted permission for people to move it only once a year, at Lent, when it is carried down to the parish church in Amacameca and then to the top of a nearby hill, where it is placed on a cross before its return to the cave tomb.[485]

The *Santo Entierro* was at some point altered to create a jointed figure, enabling its manipulation into different positions during rituals in remembrance of the Passion. The current polychrome is also a later addition.[486] Because a full restoration report has

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[484] Moyssén Echeverría, 81.

[485]Moyssén Echeverría, 82.

[486] García Pérez, 12.

not been conducted, it is impossible to determine the precise materials and dates for the series of renovations it has undergone. It does, however, appear to be a lightweight figure, executed in either pasta de caña or a lightweight wood.[487] The *Santo Entierro* is clearly from the sixteenth century and possesses the serene, closed eyes and delicate features also found on other period *Cristos* such as the Lord of Esquipulas. This differs greatly from the pained expression and pathos of a later Baroque figure like the Black Nazarene of Portobelo, to be discussed in chapter five.

The *Santo Entierro* also lacks the tears and blood that characterize later *Cristos*. In fact, the layers of *encarnación* have clearly not been updated in quite some time, as there is a thick black layer on top of him, causing the figure to be considered a *Cristo Negro* in both popular lore and modern secondary sources.[488] When the figure was examined in 2008, however, it was found that the blackness of the figure was only on his exposed parts; the entire bottom portion of the body was of typical European *encarnación*. Only the *Cristo*'s visible face and hands were blackened from years of exposure.[489]

The blackness of some figures seems inconsequential to their development in the Colonial period, unlike that of the Lord of Esquipulas, for example, whose blackness was essentialized and became an important source of sacrality and signification for the local indigenous population. The blackness of the Christ at Amecameca is not mentioned in any period sources, and it does not appear to have blackened until the nineteenth century. It therefore gained its status as a Black Christ in modern times, and that significance was

[487] García Pérez, 22.

[488] Francisco Javier Reynoso, *Los Cristos Negros: El Señor del Veneno* (Mexico Ciiy: n.p., 1985).

[489] Personal communication with restorer Pablo Amador Marrero, UNAM, July 2012.

grafted onto the figure in much the same way as native significance was grafted onto an image intended to be purely European in spirituality. Thus the figure was continually resignified, a quality that makes it an important aspect of this study despite its presence outside the typical categorization of a *Cristo Negro*.

Conclusion

Although most of the important secondary *Cristo Negro* shrines had direct or indirect ties to Esquipulas, they became miraculous pilgrimage images and sites in their own right. Some towns with their own miraculous Black Christs even deliberately competed with Esquipulas and aimed to establish their location as distinct and powerful sacred centers. Not discussed in this study because of space limitations are the hundreds of direct copies of the Lord of Esquipulas, named as such and referring directly back to the famed *Cristo* in Guatemala. These images dot the landscape from New Mexico to Panama, and are heavily concentrated in Chiapas in Mexico and, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, almost all Maya areas in the pre-Hispanic period and still today.

Clearly the Black Christ is an ambiguous category, one that brings with it numerous associations. It is equally clear that the category most often entails a strong and unmistakable connection to the sacred indigenous landscape, including caves and rivers. Although the blackness of the figure of the earliest Black Christs (Esquipulas, Chalma, Tila) was the result of gradual darkening from exposure and ritual activity, most of the secondary examples (El Petén, Otatitlán, Lord of Poison) were deliberately painted black. Overall, blackness became a marker of local spiritual prestige.

Connections with native cosmology and ritual became fused with the image of the Black Christ, except in Amecameca in Mexico. The case of the *Santo Entierro del Sacromonte* in Amecameca is an isolated one because the image's blackness never became essential to its meaning or potency. This may be due to the Franciscan (and later Dominican) insistence on creating a "pure" cult uncontaminated by indigenous features, a goal which they ultimately did not achieve.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLACK *SANTOS,* PANAMA'S BLACK NAZARENE*,* AND AFRICAN DEVOTEES

Africans in Spain and New Spain

Spain's proximity to the continent of Africa—the two are just eight miles at the Strait of Gibraltar—resulted in people of the Iberian Peninsula having close contact with Africans since at least Roman times. When Moors from North Africa occupied Spain under the Umayyad dynasty of the Middle East beginning in the eighth century, Catholic Spaniards launched the *reconquista* (reconquest) from the unconquered northwestern part of the peninsula. According to legend, St. James appeared miraculously on a white horse during what was probably the fictional battle of Clavijo in 844, aiding in the defeat of the Moors as part of the Spanish reconquest of the peninsula and becoming known as Saint Iago, or Santiago Matamoros, the Moor slayer (fig. 5-1).[490] The gradual reconquest of the peninsula was completed in 1492 with the fall of the last holdout of Granada by forces under the command of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the so-called "Catholic Kings." While at last eliminating Moorish domination from the peninsula, they unknowingly began the process that would lead to the displacement of still other Africans to the Spanish New World.

Because of Spain's proximity to the African continent and its longstanding contact with African people, as well as the centuries-long legacies of both Muslims and Jews (who eventually were either expelled or forced to convert after the reconquest), many Spaniards already had "mixed" blood when they began arriving in the Americas. In the New World Spanish rulers developed a precarious and ambivalent racial hierarchy

[490] Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 194-95.

that clung to the notion of *limpieza de sangre* (cleanliness of blood) as a marker of prestige. It had not been unusual for Spaniards to intermarry with both Africans and indigenous people, a phenomenon that did not happen in Protestant North American colonies that held strong taboos against such intermarriage. At the same time, Spanish settlers developed a complex and racist *sistema de castas*, a hierarchical order that categorized people based on racial mixture in the world's first truly global society of Colonial Latin America.

Although the African diaspora in the Americas is commonly believed to have begun with the importation of captured Africans via the Middle Passage beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, the story is far more complex.[491] In fact, Africans accompanied Spaniards as both slaves and freemen during the initial conquests of the New World, and Africans touched American shores as early as 1493, when they accompanied Columbus on his second transatlantic voyage. [492] These Africans had earlier been captured by Portuguese slave traders in West and Central Africa and brought to Europe, where they lived in large numbers in such places as Seville and the Canary Islands. Once brought to the New World, they were referred to as *ladinos*, who had learned Western European ways on the Iberian Peninsula. This distinguished them from *bozales*, who were newly captured and not yet Hispanicized or Christianized.[493]

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[491] The Middle Passage refers to the portion of the transatlantic slave trade that carried captured African men and women to the Americas to be sold as slaves.

[492] Peter Gerhard, "A Black Conquistador in Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (August 1978): 451.

[493] Sagrario Cruz-Carretero et al., *The African Presence in Mexico: From Yango to the Present* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 2006), 64.

Fray Diego Durán's *History of the Indies of New Spain*, written in 1581, is one of the earliest examples of American ethnography.[494] As a Dominican missionary, Durán travelled throughout the Basin of Mexico and beyond, at the same time collecting accounts of the conquest and native life and history from Indian informants in order to document the culture of indigenous people so that he and other missionaries could more successfully evangelize them. Durán became fascinated by native culture and meticulously recorded beliefs and customs, making his manuscript one of the most useful sources for Mesoamerican scholarship to this day. The images contained in his book, which number over one hundred, were most likely painted by an acculturated native artist, or artists, who worked alongside the friar. In the text he alludes to his use of interviews and collecting of pictorial manuscripts.[495] None of the original pre-conquest manuscripts from which Durán obtained information survive, but his methods suggest that his account is quite accurate.

A painting in Durán's History depicts the meeting of Cortés and Motecuhzoma II, accompanied by their retainers, on the outskirts of Tenochtitlan (fig. 5-2). Chapter eighty-four "…treats of how Hernan Cortés, the Marqués, was welcomed in Mexico-Tenochtitlan by Motecuhzoma and his dignitaries with much solemnity and rejoicing. With a description of how he was lodged in a palace in the city and was well served there. And how King Motecuhzoma was taken prisoner."[496] In the text Durán recounts how Motechuzoma left the city carried on a litter to meet Cortés, pointing out the

[494] Fray Diego Durán, *History of the Indies of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Doris Heyden (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

[495] Durán, 10.

[496] Durán, 528.

indigenous leader's grandeur and power. Similarly, he narrates, Cortés arrived on horseback, the equivalent European symbol of power. On seeing Cortés the Aztec emperor descended, and Cortes did the same in return. Here we see the two meeting face to face as Motechuzoma offers gifts of finery to the Spanish leader, who was believed to be the reincarnation of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl.[497]

Most pertinent to the present study, however, is the inclusion of an African man dressed in European clothing, prominently placed in the center of the illustration. Although Durán makes no mention of the Africans who accompanied Cortés, this dark-skinned man's centrality in the composition evidences the novel appearance of "otherness" as recorded by the native artist. Although the account and accompanying drawings were compiled several decades after the conquest, the information was garnered from first-hand testimony. We can only imagine that the appearance of an African within the company of Spaniards would have made a distinct impression on the minds of the elders who informed Durán. Historian Herman Bennett suggests that the Nahuatl-speaking emissaries sent by Motecuhzoma to gather intelligence about these new arrivals must have noticed the varying phenotypes of the men. Perhaps based on their military strength (but also perhaps a post-conquest revision), the armored conquistadors were classified as gods, while the Africans were singled out as "soiled gods."[498]

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[497] Diego Durán, *History of the Indies of New Spain*, 7, note 4 by Doris Heyden.

[498] Herman L. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 213.

This figure, one of the earliest depictions of Africans in the Americas, may in fact be a representation of Juan Cortés, Hernando Cortés's slave.[499] Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán estimates that as many as six blacks took part in the conquest of Mexico.[500] Although we cannot be sure of this figure's exact identity, we can conclude that he traveled with the conquistadors. He may have been born in Spain, and he most likely spent time in Cuba with the rest of the Spanish conquerors before embarking for Mexico.

The African member of the conquistador's retinue holds Cortés's horse's reins in one hand and a spear in another. He is not clad in armor like the other Spaniards but wears regular clothing, differentiating him from his compatriots. He is clearly a servant holding symbols of his leader's power. His position directly between the Spanish and the Aztecs is a reminder of the liminal position that blacks occupied in the context of the encounter. He is neither conqueror nor conquered, neither Spanish nor Aztec, yet he is present, observed, and recorded.

Once the conquest of Mexico was completed in 1521, the Spanish proceeded to set up a new Colonial system. As the native population increasingly died from warfare, disease, and harsh treatment, the Spaniards began importing captured West and Central Africans as slaves. By the mid-sixteenth century Africans and their descendants

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[499] Bobby Vaughn, "Race and Nation: A Study of Blackness in Mexico" (PhD Diss., Stanford University, 2001), 11. Vaughn is a cultural anthropologist focusing on the Afro-Mexican experience.

[500] Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de México: Estudio etnohistórico* (Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 200.

outnumbered Spaniards in New Spain.[501] They worked in the city as servants, and later in the growing *encomienda* system in the countryside.

As the African population in New Spain swelled, a great fear of slave uprisings arose. This concern is recorded in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, painted in the mid sixteenth century as a collaboration between Dominican missionaries and native scribes and artists.[502] The first two sections are calendrical. The third is an illustrated Aztec history with several parts: a migration account from their origins in the twelfth century from the mythical homeland of Aztlan to the Basin of Mexico, where they founded the city of Tenochtitlan; their dynastic history; and events of the early Colonial period. Within its Colonial section is a depiction of an African, again dressed in European clothing, hanged for insurrection (fig. 5-3), with a date of 1536 for this event. It indicates the very early development of a slave system in Mexico. Eloise Quiñones Keber, who published the Codex Telleriano-Remensis as a facsimile with commentary, points out that this may be a record of a 1537 slave revolt that involved a conspiracy to kill all Spaniards and install an African king. The prominent inclusion of a cross in the figure's hand speaks to the pious nature of African slaves in the early Colonial system. Even when a rebel was hanged for insurrection, the Christian god was invoked.

Although there is little surviving evidence of slave revolts in Mexico, the fear of rebellion was rampant in the Colonial period. Thomas Gage, an English Dominican missionary, spent time in the Americas in the early seventeenth century. He is best known for his travelogue, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World*, written in 1648 during a

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[501] Bennett, 17.

[502] Eloise Quiñones Keber, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis: Ritual, Divination, and History in a Pictorial Aztec Manuscript* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 95.

trip that took him from Mexico through Central America to the Isthmus of Panama. The narrative offers vivid firsthand accounts of Viceregal life, including *criollo* fears of insurrection by freed blacks:

> Most of these are or have been slaves, though love have set them loose, at liberty to enslave souls to sin and Satan. And there are so many of this kind, both men and women, grown to a height of pride and vanity, that many times the Spaniards have feared they would rise up and mutiny against them. The looseness of their lives and public scandals committed by them and the better sort of the Spaniards were such that I have heard those who have professed more religion and fear of God say often they verily thought God would destroy that city, and give up the country into the power of some other nation.[503]

Clearly, throughout the Colonial period many Spaniards feared that insurrections could disrupt the prevailing arrangement of power and status, which had Spaniards from Spain (*peninsulares*) at the top, followed by Spaniards born in the New World (*criollos*) who were increasingly agitating for greater political prestige. This insecurity was common throughout American slave societies, but it has a particular salience in New Spain, which had high manumission rates. Once no longer enslaved, blacks had much more social mobility. Freedom could be obtained by purchasing it or by procreating with a "free womb," usually that of a native woman, because in New Spain a child was free if born to a free mother.[504]

Such racial mixing is best recorded in casta paintings, which have been a primary focus of discussions on race in Viceregal visual culture. These paintings, made beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, were usually produced in sets of sixteen, each one

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[503] Thomas Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 70.

[504] María Elena Martínez, "The Black Blood of New Spain: *Limpieza de Sangre*, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 61, no. 3 (July 2004): 496-97.

showing couples with different ethnic backgrounds and their resulting mixed-race offspring. They were largely intended for export to Spain, where they were curiosities because of their illustration of New World miscegenation. As art historian Magali Carrera points out, the process of racial mixing as illustrated in many casta sets privileges the offspring of Spanish-native relations over those that include an African-descended partner.[505] Casta sets often showed mixed descendants of natives as able to achieve the coveted status of "Spaniard." If natives continued to have children with Spaniards, they would eventually be considered Spaniards, as illustrated in a casta pair by José de Páez from 1770 (fig. 5-4). The painting depicts a family in a well appointed domestic interior, connoting their prosperous position. Although the mother has indigenous blood, she is depicted as a Spanish woman tending to her children while their father reclines on a couch in his fashionable frock.

Africans, on the other hand could never "become Spaniards." Even after many generations of producing children with Spaniards, a *tourna atrás* (return backwards) could unexpectedly occur, bringing with it negative consequences within the casta system. Once African ancestry was revealed, a family's status could decline, as seen in Páez's *From Spaniard and Albino, Return Backward* (fig. 5-5). This painting shows two parents who appear to be white and their much darker skinned children. They are shown in an outdoor setting and the children have no shoes, connoting their lower status as compared to the "Spanish" family in figure 5-4.

Despite these strong prejudices against Africans, some darker-skinned people

[505] Magali Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 50.

could successfully negotiate the *sistema de castas* by using their piety and connection to the Catholic faith. According to historian Herman Bennett, "Even as civic law sanctioned the master's domination over chattel, canon law upheld a slave's personhood."[506] Africans and their descendants could marry legally within the church and could secure a degree of legitimacy through the character of their religious and familial lives.

Technically, under civic law Africans and their descendants were considered members of the *república de españoles* (Spanish republic) rather than the *república de indios* (Indian republic); there was no *república de africanos* (African republic).[507] Though this classification may appear to have suggested a higher status for Africans, in fact it offered them few advantages. Because they could never reach the prerequisites for *calidad y limpieza de sangre* (quality and cleanliness of blood), they could never hold public or religious office. But, as members of the Spanish republic, they were not afforded any of the legal protections granted to Indians within the *república de indios*.[508] Similarly, clerics argued that indigenous people did not understand Christian doctrine well enough to be subject to the Inquisition, whereas Africans, even the un-Hispanicized *bozales* arriving straight from the continent, were responsible for understanding Christian doctrine.

Despite their status as members of the Spanish republic, Africans were nevertheless the most subjugated group on the American continent, living in the shackles

[506] Bennett, 1.

[507] Bennett, 4.

[508] Bennett, 4.

of slavery for three hundred years.[509] While the subjugation of Indians was at times frowned upon, Africans were imported to fill the deficit of labor in the growing colonies. Most famously, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, a conquistador turned Dominican priest, was given the title "defender of the Indians" after perceiving the horrors of the conquest and advocating on behalf of the natives to King Charles I of Spain,[510] but, in order to protect the Indians from the excessive labor imposed on them within the e*ncomienda* system, Las Casas proposed importing more Africans. "As the labor of one Negro was more valuable than that of four Indians, every effort should be made to bring to Hispaniola many Negroes from Guinea," Las Casas stated.[511] Not until the very end of his life did Las Casas acknowledge the outrages of the African slave trade, at which point he admitted that it and the *encomienda* system were equally horrid. Nonetheless, Las Casas's earlier sentiments were indicative of the changing tide in the New World as Africans were brought to the colony in increasing numbers.

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[509] Slavery was formally abolished by Spanish decree in Spain and its colonies (except Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Santo Domingo) in 1811.

[510] Las Casas renounced his *encomienda* and poured out his frustration in his *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, written in 1552 and dedicated to Prince Philip II. The narrative chronicled the violence and horrors of the conquest, and it demanded better treatment of the natives, who Las Casas felt were capable of becoming true Christians.

[511] Las Casas, as quoted in Eric C. Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492-1969* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 37.

Black Confraternities and Their *Santos*

The study of African diaspora religion in the Americas has largely focused on Cuba and Brazil, where Santería[512] and Candomblé[513] developed, both syncretic practices that fused Christian saints with African deities. These religions were not a part of the Afro-Mexican or Central American experience. Nevertheless, Africans in these regions did develop their own confraternities and looked to black saints and blackened images (such as the Black Christ) as figures to inspire devotion and familiarity. In this way, people of African descent resignified the Black Christ from an indigenous image, linked to the Pre-Columbian sacred landscape, into an African Christ whose blackness represented racial affinity.

Nicole von Germeten's *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* is the first comprehensive study of African Christian community formation in New Spain.[514] The study focuses on the social role that confraternities played in the lives of Africans and their descendants in New Spain, particularly the ways in which these brotherhoods helped their members to improve their status within the Colonial system. The confraternities were dedicated to popular devotions like the Virgin of Guadalupe but also to other specifically African saints, such

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[512] Santería combines West African religion and Roman Catholicism. It originated in Cuba. See David H. Brown, *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[513] Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion that combines traditional religions from West Africa with Roman Catholicism. See J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[514] Nicole von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

as St. Iphigenia (fig. 5-6), an Ethiopian converted by St. Matthew, and St. Benedict of Sicily (fig. 5-7), an African Franciscan friar in Sicily.

St. Benedict (San Benito)[515] was an especially popular devotion, with the largest confraternity based in a Franciscan convent in San Miguel el Grande (now San Miguel Allende) in the state of Guanajuato. The founders were described as *morenos* (brown), and the record book there displays a large drawing of St. Benedict, inscribed with a message stating that he was the patron of pregnant women. It is impossible to ascertain exactly why the given confraternity or local cult chose this particular saint as its patron. We can only surmise that his African pedigree, ties to the Franciscan order, and associations with female fertility would have made him attractive to this Black confraternity that included both male and female members and an overarching symbolic connection to motherhood.[516]

The head mother of the same confraternity was also named the *madre mayor de Santa Ifigenia,* indicating that she cared for and perhaps carried the image of St. Iphigenia in outdoor processions. Iphigenia was also a popular saint in Guatemala. A large sculpture of the Ethiopian saint was carved for an altarpiece dedicated to her in the Mercedarian church in Guatemala City at some point during the latter half of the

[515] St. Benedict was born in 1526 to an African couple enslaved in Sicily. His hagiography states that Benedict was freed as a young child although the rest of his family remained enslaved. Benedict became a hermit and later a member of the Franciscan order known for numerous miracles. He was not beatified until 1743, but the cult of San Benito was popular in the Spanish colonies of Peru, Mexico and Brazil among people of African descent beginning in the seventeenth century. Giovanna Fiume, "Saint Benedict the Moor: From Sicily to the New World," in Margaret Jean Cormack, *Saints and Their Cults in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 16-17.

[516] Von Germeten, 55.

eighteenth century.[517] The altarpiece contains sculpture and paintings of scenes from Iphigenia's life, telling the story of this Ethiopian princess who was converted by St. Matthew and spent her life evangelizing her native country until she was martyred for her faith. As was typical of eighteenth-century Guatemalan sculpture, the figure is painted using *estofado*, the elaborate painting of a sculpture to emulate the appearance of valuable textiles. In this technique gold leaf was layered over a painted base and then scratched off to reveal the paint below. The *estofado* in the St. Iphigenia sculpture at the church of La Merced shows typical floral details and was possibly executed by a Spanish artist working in Guatemala.[518]

Although St. Iphigenia was an African shown with dark skin, her features are European. Similarly, St. Rose of Lima, the first American saint and a *mestiza*, was always depicted as purely European. Saint Iphigenia looks just like a Spanish saint, except that her skin is blackened.

The Black Nazarene of Portobelo, Panama

The inhabitants of Portobelo on the Caribbean coast of Panama adopted Black Christ images for their own purposes, and these images display blackened skin and European features just as seen in the sculpture of Iphigenia. They nevertheless came to symbolize racial affinity and devotion within this community of African descendants.

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[517] J. Horaldo Rodas, "Saint Iphigenia," in *The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820*, ed. Joseph J. Rishel and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 276.

[518] Rodas, 276.

Setting: Panama's Caribbean Coast

Although today it is considered part of Central America, Panama during the Colonial period was part of the Audencia de Nueva Granada, established in 1717 with its capital in Bogotá, Colombia. Most of the rest of Central America, including all of the regions heretofore discussed, remained part of New Spain with its capital in Mexico City. This administrative distinction, along with the geographic and cultural features that set it apart, perhaps explains why the famed Black Christ of Portobelo bears little resemblance to the other more famous Central American *Cristo Negro*—namely, the Lord of Esquipulas. Furthermore, the Black Christ of Portobelo is distinct in its derivation from African rather than indigenous peoples.

Panama was referred to as Tierra Firme ("dry land") by the conquistadors who explored its Caribbean coast beginning in 1502. Legend states that Christopher Columbus himself first reached Portobelo, naming it Porto Bello, or "beautiful port," on his fourth and final voyage across the Atlantic in 1505.[519] Panama became particularly important to Spain after Vasco de Balboa crossed the isthmus and recognized the advantage of the narrow land passageway between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.[520] The isthmus was quickly exploited as a link between the Atlantic and the Pacific, with Panama City serving as the principal Pacific port. During the sixteenth century, Nombre de Dios was the principal Caribbean port, playing host to annual fairs in which merchants would buy

[519] Kirkpatrick Sale, *Christopher Columbus and the Conquest of Paradise* (New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2006), 195.

[520] Patricia Lund Drolet, "The Congo Ritual of Northeastern Panama: An Afro-American Expressive Structure of Cultural Adaptation" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1980), 33.

and trade goods from throughout the Spanish empire. These fairs were the annual location of the so-called *carrera de las Indias*, a series of shipping fleets transporting goods throughout the vast empire. Because of its strategic location, manufactured goods from Europe as well as raw goods from South America were brought to Nombre de Dios and exchanged there.

Because of its vast stores of both raw and manufactured goods and lack of adequate defense, Nombre de Dios soon became a prime target for privateer attacks. In 1571 the first of a long series of pirate attacks, led by the infamous Francis Drake, hit Panama's Caribbean coast. Nombre de Dios was quickly attacked, captured, and pillaged. It became increasingly clear to the Spanish crown that defense strategies would have to be adopted in order to protect the city's vast stores of wealth. Around 1580 the Spanish sent Juan Bautista Antonelli to survey the city and assess what should be done.

Antonelli, a native of Rome, was the most famous military engineer of the age.[521] Upon his arrival in the isthmus he quickly surmised that Nombre de Dios was not fit to be a seaport. The harbor was shallow, making it difficult for ships laden with goods to anchor nearby. The land was also rather flat, with no heights from which to spot oncoming enemies. Antonelli proposed moving the Caribbean seaport to Portobelo, a town with a deep natural harbor that could accommodate many more ships.[522] Portobelo had the added advantage of the Río Chagres, which provided fresh water and a means of transport at least halfway across the isthmus. Furthermore, steeply rising cliffs

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[521] Christopher Ward, *Imperial Panama: Commerce and Conflict in Isthmian America, 1550-1800* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 162.

[522] Diego Angulo Iñiguez, *Bautista Antonelli, Las fortificaciones americanas del siglo XVI* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1942), 142-48.

surrounded Portobelo on one side, providing convenient lookout points. On the other side of the harbor were flat lands that provided ample space for plantations and cattle ranches.[523] Antonelli surmised that if he could fortify the mouth of the harbor and the center of the town itself, the new Caribbean port would be safe from attack.

The city of Portobelo was founded in 1597 by Francisco Velarde y Mercado and quickly became Spain's main Caribbean port for the transportation of Peruvian silver. It hosted the famed *Ferias de Portobelo*, which were grander than the earlier ones at Nombre de Dios. At Portobelo goods from South America, Asia, and Europe were exchanged and shipped to Europe or carried across the isthmus to the Pacific Ocean, bound for Peru or the Philippines. Although little studied, Portobelo was a vital component of the Spanish imperial program, as an important location where the crown's booty was accumulated and dispersed. Antonelli's initial defenses were not enough to deter fortune-seeking pirates, and Portobelo was plundered innumerable times from the late sixteenth century until well into the 1800s. [524]

Portobelo was never heavily populated. At its height it had no more than a handful of stone buildings and a few dozen *vecinos*, or permanent Spanish settlers. Its importance relied entirely on the annual fair, during which time Portobelo's population swelled to more than 10,000 people and the streets were lined with the empire's wealth. When the fair was over, it reverted to a sleepy provincial town, made up primarily of

[523] Ward, 23.

[524] Portobelo remained an important center of Spanish trade in the Americas in the seventeenth century, and its warehouses contained the goods of many wealthy merchants. By this time the town was protected by three large Spanish forts, but these fortifications were not enough to protect the town from numerous successful pirate attacks.

black slaves who carried goods across the Isthmus or labored on the fortifications. In 1606 there were 50 *vecinos*, 65 free blacks, and 316 black slaves.[525] By 1617, another source claimed that there were only a dozen *vecinos.*[526] By 1789 the population reached 1,736 people, made up of 142 whites, 1,411 free blacks, 45 Indians, and 165 slaves.[527] The numbers of Spaniards in Portobelo was always low, and the town clearly had a majority black population throughout the Colonial period. Significantly, at least by 1789, the population was dominated by free blacks who would likely have had a strong tie to their local Black Christ.

The African Population of Portobelo

Reports of Balboa's voyage across the isthmus contain the first mention of an African in the region; records indicate that he travelled with a slave named Olano.[528] As in New Spain, these first Africans traveled with the *conquistadors*, taking part in the conquest, plunder and settlement of the new colony. Soon Africans were brought to Portobelo as slaves to work as couriers, builders of the fortifications, and domestic servants.[529] By 1607 there were 3,696 African slaves in Portobelo, creating what is believed to be a black majority in the relatively small town.[530]

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[525] "Descripción de la ciudad de San Felipe de Puertobelo, sacada de relaciones de los años 1606-1607," in Alfredo Castillero Calvo, *Los Negros y Mulatos libres en la historia social panameña* (Panama City: Impresora Panama, 1969), 11. A more recent source claims that there were over 3,000 slaves in Portobelo by the early seventeenth century. See Ward, 31.

[526] "Expediente con súplicas y peticiones del cabildo de Portobelo al Rey," Madrid-Portobelo, junio 1617–mayo 1619, AGI ,Panama, 32, in Castillero Calvo, 11.

[527] Castillero Calvo, 11.

[528] Drolet, 33.

[529] There are, in fact, two groups of "Negros" in Panama. The Congos belong to the Afro-Colonial group, as they were brought to the isthmus from Central and West Africa as slaves. The second group, the Afro-Antilleans, came to Panama in the early twentieth century as migrant

Because many of the African slaves worked as couriers, this allowed ample opportunity for escape. They frequently fled their Spanish masters and established fortified settlements called *palenques* in the dense tropical forest of the region. These escaped slaves became known as *cimarrones* or "maroons" in the English-speaking Caribbean. Descriptions of the material culture of these early *palenques* indicate that trade and contact with outside groups were essential for maintaining their independence from Spanish rule. Contemporary ethnographies record that Blacks in the region have long shared similarities in fishing, hunting, and woodworking with local indigenous groups such as the Cuna and Chocó, which indicates that these people were contact during the Colonial period.[531]

From their *palenques*, former slaves attacked invading pirates, Spanish settlers, and passing gold trains from the coast. Bayano was the most famous *cimarron* leader, known for leading numerous attacks against Spanish settlers between approximately 1552 and 1582.[532] It is believed that his band of *cimarrones* was stationed on the San Blas Islands, an archipelago off the Caribbean coast of mainland Panama. From there the group attacked mule trains laden with goods from the Andes being brought to Portobelo. After this series of raids, the Colonial center in Madrid issued a pardon for many

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laborers from the West Indies. They worked on building the Panama Canal and in foreign-owned banana plantations. See John M. Lipski, "The Negros Congos of Panama: Afro-Hispanic Creole Language and Culture," *Journal of Black Studies* 16, no. 4 (June 1986): 409-28.

[530] Ward, 31.

[531] Drolet, 41.

[532] Luis A. Diez Castillo, *Los cimarrones y la esclavitud en Panamá* (Panama City: Editorial Litográfica, 1968), 27.

Panamanian *cimarrones*, who were thus able to move out of the *palenques* and establish their own free towns. Beginning in 1549 the Governor of Panama, Alvaro de Sosa, began issuing letters of collective manumission. In 1575, by order of the crown, *cimarrones* were declared free. The *cimarrones* in the region of Portobelo came mainly from the *palenque* of Santiago Príncipe and received their collective manumission in 1579 as a means of pacifying them and moving them into the city from the surrounding hinterlands.[533] Beginning in the late sixteenth century the Spanish agreed to sign peace treaties with the militant *cimarrones*. These former slaves then dispersed to become founders of smaller settlements on the remote Caribbean coast.

By the time slavery was effectively abolished in Panama 1852, most of the *cimarron* groups lived on this coast, which they dubbed "Costa Arriba" to signify its remote location. The *cimarrones* were able to retain elements of African culture because they were isolated from mainstream Panama for centuries. Descendants of the *cimarrones* became known as "Congos," not to be confused with the Kongo people of Central and West Africa. Although some Africans in Panama were from the Congo, many more were from Guinea and Angola. Black Atlantic art historian Robert Farris Thompson states that "Congo" became a ubiquitous name for slaves brought from Central Africa to the Americas.[534]

The three main *palenques*, Bayano, Palenque, and Santiago Principe, were all inhabited by former slaves who had been forced to speak Spanish and baptized as

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[533] Alfredo Castillero Calvo, *La sociedad panameña: Historia de su formación e integración* (Panama City: Comisión de Estudios Interdisciplinatios para el Desarrollo de la Nacionalidad, 1970), 21.

[534] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 103.

Catholics. It appears that even with their independence they continued to practice some form of Catholicism, baptizing their children as Christians.[535] As part of their indoctrination while enslaved, they had been taught that the devil took slaves to hell for poor conduct, disobedience, and rebellion, whereas a guardian angel protected humble and servile slaves from the devil.[536] After escaping, the *cimarrones* changed these beliefs to fit their new status as freemen, and conflated Spaniards with the devil. Their inversion of these tropes is illustrated in a Congo song often performed as part of the modern-day Carnival season's *congadas*, or ritual dances: "The whites won't go to heaven for one reason, they like to eat sweet bread without sowing cane."[537] These lyrics show that the ancestors of the Congos took the cruelty of slavery and adopted it into a new Christian worldview. They used the Christian belief that the righteous go to heaven as a spiritual tool against their exploiters. Similarly, the devil came to represent the slave master and angels represented the spirits of the *cimarron* ancestors.

Legends of Portobelo's Black Nazarene

Unlike most of the Black Christs in Central America, the one in Portobelo is not a crucified figure but instead a Nazarene, a depiction of Christ dragging the cross on which he would be crucified (fig. 5-8). This distinction is significant. Known as *El Nazareno*, the figure displays a dramatic and pained expression, emphasizing the burden of the cross. The *encarnación* today is a deep brown with copious amounts of blood depicted on the face and hands, though it is unclear if these were original or more modern additions.

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[535] Drolet, 41.

[536] Victor M. Franceschi, "Los negros congos en Panamá," *Loteria* 51 (1960): 100.

[537] "*Los blancos no irán al cielo/por una solita maña/les gusta comer panela/sin haber sembrado caña*," Franceschi, 100.

El Nazareno is always clothed with ornate purple velvet and lace garb and wears a silver crown atop his luxurious wig.[538] Its fanciful clothing and pained facial expression create an evocative image that is imitated by pilgrims to this day; many arrive wearing purple, crawling on their knees in supplication to pay devotion to their *Cristo* and to be cleansed of their sins (fig. 5-9).

After the *Cristos Negros* in Esquipulas and Chalma, the Black Nazarene of Portobelo ranks as the most famous such site in Mexico or Central America, its origins dating from the second half of the seventeenth century. It appears that the Black Nazarene bears little relation to the famous Black Christ of Esquipulas. Perhaps because of Panama's geographic distinction as the isthmus of the Americas and not a member of the Audencia of New Spain, and because of the heavily African population, the Black Christ tradition in that location morphed and developed its own distinctive local form.

Numerous legends surround the origin of *El Nazareno*; all of them place the events in the mid seventeenth century and involve its arrival from Spain, its refusal to leave Portobelo, and subsequent miracles and veneration. According to the most popular version, in 1663 the *Cristo* was passing through Portobelo en route to Peru.[539] Strong winds continually blew the vessel back to shore. In order to lessen the ship's weight the captain decided to throw some containers overboard. An African named Quinquinbandú saw what was happening and alerted the authorities who brought the cargo to shore.

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[538] It is also common in Seville, Spain for Nazarene figures to wear purple.

[539] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro America, 2012), 205.

Within one of the boxes was the Nazarene. Once exhumed, it was placed in the Church of San Felipe, where it miraculously cured the region of contagious diseases.[540]

Another legend has an uncertain date, though it is believed to have arisen around the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century.[541] A merchant ship carrying two Black Christs from Spain was en route to Cartagena, the most important Spanish Caribbean port of the time. A storm made navigation impossible, leading the captain to seek refuge in Portobelo. A sailor suggested that they leave one of the *Cristos* on shore to see if its potency would mitigate the storm. The Nazarene was left in Portobelo for its residents and immediately stopped the storm.[542]

Yet another popular tale states that on October 21, 1658, the Nazarene miraculously arrived in Portobelo. It was spotted in a floating bundle by local fishermen, who brought it to the city and opened it. They asked for salvation from the local epidemic, and the image worked its magic. According to some accounts, the plague avoided Portobelo even as it devastated the surrounding region.[543]

A less popular version of events also exists. It claims that the local parishioners sent a request to Spain for an image of Santo Domingo for their altar.[544] Coincidentally, a congregation on Tobaga (an island off the Pacific coast of Panama) asked for a statue of

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[540] Davidson, 205.

[541] Davidson, 206.

[542] Davidson, 206.

[543] Arturo Lindsay, "The Role of Art in the Veneration of the Black Christ *Santos* in the Americas (1999), http://www.arturolindsay.com/BlackChrist.htm (accessed September 16, 2013). Lindsay, a Panamanian artist and scholar, has conducted extensive ethnographic research in Portobelo.

[544] McGehee, 220.

Jesus at the same time. The supplier in Spain incorrectly labeled the boxes and the church in Portobelo received the Christ intended for Tobaga. The island parishioners wished to exchange their image for the correct statue, but each time they attempted to move the *Nazarene* from Portobelo the attempt was foiled.[545]

Stories about *El Nazareno* must be taken on faith or interpreted as myth because, unlike many of the other *Cristos* heretofore discussed, this one has no surviving documents from the Colonial period. Much of the history of the early churches in Panama has been lost due to the humid conditions and the fires that destroyed Panama City during Pirate Henry Morgan's raids in the 1660s and 1670s. Despite the dearth of documentation, the numerous stories of the *Cristo*'s arrival in Portobelo point to a real event that has led to much conjecture. As Portobelo chronicler Patricia McGehee asserts: "These stories are more than entertaining; they reveal truths about people who must come to terms with events they do not understand or who must deal with the harsh realities of living."[546]

These variants circulated among the local population, particularly among free and enslaved blacks, and devotees began arriving from surrounding villages and eventually from Panama City and beyond to venerate the great Nazarene. These origin stories follow typical hagiographic models that had been present in Europe since the Middle Ages. The most famous *Cristo* in Spain, the Christ of Burgos, for example, has a similar story. One of the stops on the road to Santiago de Compostela, Burgos became famous in the fourteenth century for its lifelike crucifix that was reputed to have been fashioned from

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[545] McGehee, 220.

[546] Patricia A. McGehee, *Portobelo Chronicles* (Panama City: Republic of Panama, 1994), 219.

human skin.[547] The Burgos story states that the *Cristo* was originally discovered by a merchant from Flanders in a crate adrift in the ocean and was subsequently brought to shore, where it was entrusted to the Augustinian order and enshrined in its monastery in Burgos. The shrine began to draw pilgrims en route to Compostela and survived a fire in the nineteenth century. Similar hagiographic details pepper the legends of the Black Christs of the Americas. The Chalma crucifix also miraculously survived a fire, and the Nazarene of Portobelo was also found adrift in the ocean and hauled to shore.

At Portobelo, it is significant that an African supposedly discovered the *Cristo*. This aspect of the story parallels the legend of Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe, according to which the Virgin Mary appeared to an Indian named Juan Diego, leaving her image on his mantle. She became known as an Indian Virgin, and eventually the patroness of the Americas. Although the Black Nazarene is not nearly as famous, it follows the same model of appearing not to an elite Spaniard, but to a member of the underclass—in this case an African rather than an Indian. These legends developed as a way for local populations to assert themselves as worthy of divine visitation and therefore as true Christians. Such an assertion could enhance their status within the Colonial system, which conferred great significance on such demonstrations of faith and divine approval.

Growth of *El Nazareno*'s Cult

Although the Nazarene "arrived" in Portobelo in the mid-seventeenth century, not until the early nineteenth century did the cult began to flourish far beyond the Caribbean coast of Panama. In 1814, amid a period of great turmoil in Panama, a new church of San Felipe was built to house the Nazarene. A fire destroyed the only remaining hospital on

[547] Rafael Yzquierdo Perrín, *Burgos: El Cristo, El Castillo, y El Cid* (Bilbao, Spain: Ediciones Beta III Milenio, 2007).

the isthmus and the Merced convent in Panama City was abandoned. A treaty abolishing slavery was passed in 1821, the same year as Panama gained its independence from Spain. Spanish troops who had been stationed in Portobelo for 235 years departed, many of them never making it back to Spain after succumbing to cholera. The town had become known as "Puerto Malo" for the waves of afflictions that had passed through its population.[548] Shortly after the departure of Spanish soldiers in 1821 and Panama's incorporation into the newly formed nation of Colombia in the same year, another epidemic swept the isthmus. In Portobelo and the surrounding Costa Arriba, people petitioned the Nazarene for protection. It was said that the population of Portobelo was spared while the rest of Panama suffered greatly. As a result, devotion to the holy figure took on new proportions. As a gesture of gratitude and reverence, a festival was dedicated on October 21, also beginning in 1821.[549]

Both before and after the events of 1821, the Nazarene served a primarily black population; only in recent times has its devotional appeal spread to the diverse population of Panama. Although its origins are murky and shrouded in myth, it seems that the Black Nazarene's blackness came to identify it directly with the African population. Perhaps the Nazarene's struggle to bear the weight of the cross resonated with the experience of former slaves who had labored under the oppression of their masters.

The Nazarene's Material Origins and "Blackness"

The Black Christ of Portobelo is markedly different from the other *Cristos Negros* in Mexico and Central America. Portobelo's Nazarene was created later than most of the

[548] McGehee, 221.

[549] McGehee, 221.

previously mentioned *Cristos*, and it displays features more characteristic of Baroque sculpture, such as the dramatic and pained expression, painted blood, and elaborate costuming. Rather than a static crucifixion of Christ's body hanging lifeless from the cross, the Nazarene is a dynamic subject, showing the physical trial of the Passion and Jesus' burden of bearing the cross.

This pose is echoed by pilgrims who make the arduous trek to the church crawling on their knees, thus mimicking the trials of Christ. The figure is further activated during Holy Week processions when the *Cristo* is taken out of the church and paraded through the streets, its movement on the elevated litter mimicking the labored movements of the tortured historic Christ burdened by the cross. The figure today wears elaborate purple robes lined with fanciful lace and a long wig that sways with the movement of the sculpture in processions. These details serve to activate the sculpture, creating a heightened illusion of reality. Looking at the Nazarene's bloody and stooped body and expression of pathos served draws viewers into communion with Christ, as if they themselves were experiencing his worldly physical suffering.

Further differentiating the Black Nazarene from the other major Black Christs in Central America is that its "blackness" has been racially rather than symbolically interpreted.[550] Black Christ historian Stephan de Borghegyi claimed that the blackness of the Lord of Esquipulas and his imitators was intended to link him to the darker-skinned natives of Guatemala. But this sort of direct racial connection, not substantiated by any period document or surviving folklore, seems unlikely since we now know that the Lord of Esquipulas was originally "white" and slowly blackened over time. In the case of *El*

[550] Stephan F. de Borghegyi, *The Miraculous Shrines of Our Lord of Esquipulas in Guatemala and Chimayo, New Mexico* (Santa Fe, NM: Spanish Colonial Arts Society, 1956), 17.

Nazareno, all the legends link the sculpture to Spain, a detail that makes sense considering the many ships that traveled from Spain via Cuba into Portobelo's harbor. As already noted, unlike the provenance stories of the *Cristos* of Chalma and Esquipulas, which were made (or miraculously appeared) on American soil, all the legends of *El Nazareno* involve its arrival from Spain. Further, the Portobelo *Cristo* is composed of a rare Italian or Spanish wood, indicating a likely provenance in Europe.

Because no extant contract or records on the origin of the Nazarene precede stories of its Spanish provenance, it is difficult to surmise when the *Cristo* became black. Perhaps, coming at a later point in the popular dissemination of Black Christ devotions, it was deliberately commissioned as such. But based on the tales that the figure was bound for South America, where Black Christ devotions were not popular, that speculation seems unlikely. It appears, then, that the Nazarene was painted black deliberately, perhaps by African Christians at some point after its arrival on Tierra Firme.

Devotional sculptures were continually being repainted, dressed in different clothing, and altered either for the sake of conservation or simply to comply with changes in style and outside influences. It is not unthinkable that a local artist may have applied a new layer of darker *encarnación* at some point. Portobelo's Nazarene does not have the patina of more obviously darkened *Cristos* like the Lord of Tila, nor does it have a historical record of darkening like the Lords of Chalma and Esquipulas. So we can only postulate about the origins of its blackness. Certainly by the seventeenth century the Black Christ phenomenon had become widespread from Mexico to Central America, and Portobelo's Christ is perhaps another offshoot of that popular tradition.

The Nazarene has typical dramatic Baroque flourishes, including painted dripping blood, glass tears, a wig of long hair, and a pained expression on his face. These features are similar to Baroque sculpture in Spain as well as in Latin America. Art historian Susan Verdi Webster has described Holy Week processions in seventeenth-century Seville and the dramatic flourish of polychromed statuary in that city, much of which resembles the heightened dramatic realism of Portobelo's Nazarene.[551] The City of Los Realejos in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of northwest Africa, also has its own Nazarene, carved in 1637 by Martín de Andujar Cantos (fig. 5-10). The Spanish Baroque sculptor and architect was trained by famed Sevillian sculptor Juan Martínez Montañés, who worked in Spain, the Canary Islands, and later in Guatemala.[552] The pained expression, large eyes, dripping blood, and stylized facial hair on the Nazarene of Realejos's face resembles that of the Nazarene in Portobelo.

We may never know exactly where the Black Christ of Portobelo was carved, but folklore points to its European derivation. This hypothesis is further bolstered by the absence of artist guilds near the sleepy Caribbean port. The *Cristos* in both Chalma and Esquipulas were located within a reasonable distance from Mexico City and Antigua, Guatemala, respectively, making it likely that they were constructed in local artist guilds that were influenced by the more advanced art styles of the capitals of Mexico and Guatemala. The Nazarene in Portobelo, in contrast, is more likely to have been imported, because Portobelo was a small, rustic town that was populated mostly by Black domestics and cargo couriers, with no artist guilds whatsoever. Yet shipments were arriving from

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[551] Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[552] Margarita Rodríguez González, "El escultor Martín de Andújar en Gran Canaria," *Anuario de estudios Atlánticos* 30 (1985): 557.

Europe frequently, so it is reasonable to presume that the Nazarene would have come from abroad.

If the Nazarene did in fact come from Spain, it is unlikely to have been commissioned specifically for Portobelo, whose local population was made up primarily of poor Blacks, both enslaved and free. It was therefore most likely painted white, consistent with European convention. Following this logic, the Portobelo Nazarene was at some point blackened, whether slowly over the passage of time (as at Chalma, Esquipulas, and Tila) or in one fell swoop with the deliberate application of brown paint, apparently to serve as a saint for African devotions and Holy Week services.

Because of the lack of records, it is also not certain how the tradition of a Black Christ traveled to Portobelo. Although the region had a Black Christ tradition radiating out of the spiritual center in Esquipulas in Guatemala, this tradition was of black (or blackened) crucifix images; moreover, not until the nineteenth century did the popularity of the Black Christ in Esquipulas reach the southern regions of Central America, which would include Panama.[553] In addition, except for small populations of African-descended peoples living in Caribbean Guatemala and Belize or the Coclé region on the Pacific rim of Panama, there is a general disassociation of people of African heritage from the cult of the Black Christ.[554] These small pockets may include some devotees of the Lord of Esquipulas, but, generally speaking, most of the Black Christ cults heretofore mentioned are indigenous and *mestizo* devotional sites. The major exception, of course, is the Black

[553] Oscar Horst, "The Diffusion of the Guatemalan Black Christ of Esquipulas," paper delivered at a meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Toronto, Canada, n.d., on site at CIRMA, Antigua, Guatemala.

[554] Horst, 5.

Nazarene of Portobelo. So, while the blackness of the Portobelo Nazarene is not unique, it did come to carry a different signification from the other Black Christs in mainly indigenous areas.

Although its origins are murky, the Black Nazarene's blackness came to be associated directly with the dark skin of the local African population. Whether this was intended at its onset is difficult to assess, and no conservator has prepared a report on the Portobelo *Cristo* like the one conducted on his more illustrious counterpart, the Lord of Esquipulas. It appears that the *encarnación* currently visible was painted relatively recently, as evidenced by its shiny and smooth surface appearance. In contrast, it is quite obvious from examining the Lord of Tila that the *Cristo* was white underneath and that its blackness is due to layers of grime from ritual activity over the centuries. There has been no effort at Tila to repaint the *Cristo*, whereas clearly the blackness at Portobelo has been carefully maintained, whether original or not.

Interestingly, the current devotees of the Black Nazarene in Portobelo do not emphasize his blackness as essential to its meaning. It is simply accepted that the Christ is black. However, it is primarily in the black regions of Panama that the Black Christ is worshipped, namely in Portobelo and on the nearby island of Isla Grande (fig. 5-11). The Black Christ in Isla Grande is placed in the shallow bay, serving as a visual reminder of Christ's presence. But this modern image is not a direct reference back to the nearby Black Nazarene in Portobelo, for it is a crucifix rather than an image of Christ bearing the cross. The image is a reminder, then, of the larger spread of Black Christ imagery in the region.

El Nazareno and Ritual Theatrics in Portobelo

Rituals performed for *El Nazareno* in Portobelo closely resembled (and continue to resemble) religious festivals in early modern Spain, particularly during Holy Week, with the procession of holy figures on litters accompanied by music and devotees burning candles and incense. In Portobelo, the figure is carried by a large group of men who move in a quick rhythm to the music, taking three steps forward and two steps back to move the image forward through the streets. In Portobelo, as in much of Latin America, the music is livelier than in Europe and the bearers walk with a more up-tempo rhythm.[555]

Today the Nazarene is widely worshipped throughout Panama, and although he is never referred to there as a Cristo Negro but simply as *El Nazareno*, his devotees still tend to be Black. He has also gained a popular following among the larger underclass as a symbol of the counterculture, a Christ for repentant criminals and the disempowered. In Panama, where the white population still controls politics and economic wealth, the Black Nazarene is revered as a symbol of the downtrodden. People crawl on their knees from the town of Sabanitas to visit the Christ in Portobelo, many of them repentant criminals.[556]

It is also interesting to note that devotion to the Black Nazarene evolved alongside the carnival tradition. Carnival originated in medieval Europe as the last chance for carnal pleasures before the start of the pious Lenten season, but once transported to

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[555] McGehee, 222.

[556] Eric Jackson, "Festival of the Black Christ," http://www.thepanamanews.com/pn/v_09/issue_19/travel_01.html (accessed November 30, 2013). Eric Jackson is a Panamanian lawyer and journalist who reports on popular culture in Panama in the English language newspaper "The Panama News." Sabanitas is about 20 miles from Portobelo and today is the closest point of access to the road to Portobelo off of the Transisthmian highway.

the Americas, people of African descent radically changed the event to center on a mythic battle between good and evil.[557] In Portobelo the Congo people embody the righteous while the *diablos* are metaphors for slave owners. During carnival season, a ritual dance called the *congada* is the focal point of a tradition that celebrates an epic battle between the Congos (allied with their ancestors) against the Spanish slave masters. The *congada* is danced with a cross-legged shuffle, an aspect of African diasporic dance that experts Arturo Lindsay and Robert Farris Thompson identify as a Kongo cultural retention.[558]

As part of these rituals, the participants elect a *Rey Congo*, or Congo king, who is crowned. Although the *congadas* are secular dances, their themes emerge from a Christian worldview, and there is a parallel between the *Rey Congo* and the local Black Christ. Following the region's independence from Spain, McGehee points out, "Despite losing support of the monarch, they had another 'king'–*El Cristo Negro*."[559]

African Cultural and Material Retentions

Because of the deplorable conditions of the transatlantic slave trade that ripped people from their homes and subjugated them as human chattel, it was difficult for peoples of African descent in the Americas to retain their cultural heritage. This was particularly true in terms of material culture, as Africans in the Americas usually did not

[557] Patricia Tamara Alleyne-Dettmers, "Black Kings: Aesthetic Representation in Carnival in Trinidad and London," *Black Music Research* Journal, no. 2 (Autumn 2000): 247.

[558] Arturo Lindsay, personal communication, New York, 26 April 2007. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango: The Art History of Love* (New York: Random House, 2010).

[559] McGehee, 222.

have the objects, time, or resources to create visual arts. There are, however, a number of examples of African material retentions in the Americas, in such forms as bottle trees in the American South and the creation of drums and stringed instruments throughout the Americas.[560]

Portobelo also has some examples of African material culture retention, most notably the use and decoration of walking sticks, or *bastones*, that (according to local oral histories) the *cimarrones* used for hiking the steep mountains and defending themselves from Spaniards and wild animals.[561] Walking sticks have been a component of black cultures throughout the diaspora. African-American art historian Sharon Patton states, "The tradition of using elaborately carved staffs as insignia among men, or in dance, is a feature of African-American culture."[562] In Portobelo today local artists belonging to a collective called the Taller Portobelo create *bastones* that are colorfully painted and decorated with found objects such as broken mirrors and beads.

This predilection for embellishment with shiny and iridescent materials is discussed in Thompson's Black Atlantic study, *Flash of the Spirit*. Kongo minkisi,[563] sacred figures believed to embody "an inner spark of divinity or soul," are used in the

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[560] Bottle trees, common in the southeastern United States, are created by hanging glass bottles from tree limbs. The practice is believed to derive from the kingdom of Kongo on the West African coast, where clay vessels were used, and was continued in the Americas using whatever materials were available to enslaved Africans. They have been interpreted as protective objects designed to lure and capture evil spirits, preventing them from entering the home. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 143-7.

[561] "Taller de arte Portobelo," http://www.tallerportobelonorte.com/TallerPortobelo/ Artists.html (accessed December 11, 2013).

[562] Sharon Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 63.

[563] Minkisi are sculptures used in the Kongo Basin of Central Africa that are said to house spiritual force. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 117.

Kongo regions of Africa to enact change in the spirit and natural worlds. They are usually anthropomorphic statues with attached objects such as broken mirrors, nails, glass, and shells. Thompson says that this use of shiny decorative objects was transferred to the Southern American states and parts of the Caribbean in the form of bottle trees and grave decorations. He describes their purpose as the "flash and arrest of the spirit," their ability to attract and contain supernatural forces.[564]

Ethnomusicologist Ronald R. Smith has done extensive cultural studies on the Kongos and has found similarities in shape and craftsmanship between their drums and others found in regions of West and Central Africa.[565] Lindsay has also written about African retentions in Congo culture and the art of the Taller Portobelo. He points out that the feathered hat worn by carnival kings is similar in shape to one worn by Kongo men in Africa.[566] It is a conical-shaped hat made from calabash and decorated with layers of mirrors, beads, and feathers.

These Portobelo aesthetics could be African retentions within Congo culture, but this cannot be proven with certainty. Often, in this line of study, scholars strain to link cultural elements in the Americas to specific African cultures as proof of retentions, but sometimes such links are difficult to verify. Africans came from different parts of the continent to the New World, and often the remaining retentions are an amalgamation of different African cultures mixed with New World experiences. Therefore, the Congo

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[564] Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 120.

[565] Ronald R. Smith, "Society of *Los Congos* of Panama: An Ethnomusicological Study of the Music and Dance Theatre of an Afro-Panamanian Group" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1976), 112.

[566] Arturo Lindsay, "Understanding Congo Aesthetics and Iconography." http://www.arturolindsay.com/Taller/tallerflash.htm (accessed April 27, 2007).

predilection for iridescent and reflective materials *could* be a Kongo retention, but there is no way to be entirely sure.

The place where African culture was most able to survive and thrive was nevertheless through song, ritual, and dance, since these were not material objects that could be strictly controlled. When slave masters took away drums, African slaves used their bodies and voices to create music, such as in the African-American ring shout.[567] Because much of Portobelo's Black population was free during the Colonial period (living in *palenques* separated from the Spanish Colonial system), the people could retain many aspects of their African heritage, most significantly in the form of their *congada* dances. It seems likely that African-derived ritual, musical, and dancing traditions found their way into Black Christ rituals, with the same rhythms being used in their processions through the streets with the famed *Nazareno*.

Conclusion

Chapter five explores the question of a racial identity for the Black Christ. It focuses on the Black Christ, or *El Nazareno* of Portobelo, which was created in an African community in Panama and came to develop racial (African) associations for both locals and pilgrims. Although the Nazarene image was originally made as a typical European Christ with white physiognomy, the residents of Portobelo transformed it into a *Cristo Negro*, identifying the figure of Christ with not only their pigmentation but also their struggles under the burdens of slavery in the lowest rungs of Spanish Colonial society. Interestingly, the

[567] For more on the ring shout see Art Rosenbaum, *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

Black Christ in Portobelo is locally called *El Nazareno* and rarely if ever referred to as a *Cristo Negro*.

Although not directly linked to the larger diffusion of the images and cult of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, the existence of a Black Christ had perhaps become normative due to its widespread popularity throughout Mexico and Central America. Like the other famous *Cristos Negros* of Chalma and Esquipulas, the Black Nazarene of Portobelo is part of a larger American tradition, but it is also specific to its locale and culture, the *patria chica* of a small Caribbean seaport on the Isthmus of Panama.

CONCLUSION

The Latin American Black Christ and Spanish Models

To draw conclusions about the role and meaning of the Latin American Black Christ, it is valuable to consider its prominent images and cults in the larger context of European Catholicism. Spain in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries was the most orthodox Catholic country in Europe. Upon Europe's "discovery" of the Americas, the Spanish crown, clergy, conquistadors, and settlers were determined to evangelize and convert indigenous people to the faith.

The missionaries borrowed from Spanish Medieval religious precedents which had longstanding pilgrimage practices. Most famous was the one culminating at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, which legend says was built on the site where St. James the apostle was supposedly buried. The pilgrimage to the shrine of Santiago began in about the ninth century and became a popular alternative to pilgrimages to the Holy Land, which was then under Muslim control.

Another famous pilgrimage destination in Spain was to the shrine of the Virgin of Montserrat in Catalonia. A statue of the Virgin and Child, it is often referred to in Catalan as *La Moreneta*, or "the little dark-skinned one." Legends of *La Moreneta* claim that she was carved in Jerusalem in early Christian times and later transferred to Spain.[568] Montserrat's mountain was apparently important in pre-Christian times as a Roman temple dedicated to the goddess Venus. One legend tells that the local Benedictine monks

[568] Michael P. Duricy, "Black Madonnas: Our Lady of Montserrat," http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/meditations/olmont.html (accessed December 12, 2013).

could not move the image to erect their sanctuary and were forced to build around it.[569] This pretext was reused countless times in the New World. Recall that in Flores, Guatemala, the Lord of El Petén also grew too heavy for the owner to move it. An image's refusal to move was a popular trope, used on both sides of the Atlantic to highlight the divine favor of a given town or site.

New World friars and priests early set about to convert large swaths of the indigenous population and aimed to do so quickly. Without the Medieval cults of relics and devotional images that inspired pilgrimages in Europe, popular religious art in the form of polychromed statuary became a prime didactic tool for the task in the Americas. Although both tools existed in both the Old World and the New (recall Valencia's relics in Amecameca and the miraculous *Christ of Clemency* in Seville), the sheer number of new devotional images in the Colonial New World attests to their function as a primary means of inspiring devotion and pilgrimage.

The beginning of the conversion process of the Americas actually predates the intense religious fervor of the Counter-Reformation in Europe. The Lord of Chalma (1539), for example, was established before the reforms of the Church were enacted after the Council of Trent. Its cult, as well as that of other early Black Christs (Esquipulas and Tila) are prime examples of the early evangelical fervor that swept New Spain and Central America in the sixteenth century.

Although there were many Medieval Black Virgins and a few Black Christs in Europe before the encounter of the Americas, the blackness of these images was not an essential component of their importance until the late seventeenth and the eighteenth

[569] Ean Begg, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* (London: Deep Books, 2007).

centuries, when votive copies began to be made.[570] Historian Monique Scheer argues that although most of these images were created in the Medieval period, they were not widely perceived as black until the Counter-Reformation led to a rise in devotion to miraculous Marian images. She goes on to say that during this period black copies of the Virgin were made and placed in votive shrines, as their blackness became associated with age and prestige:

> Many legends emphasize the age of the image. This can probably be seen as the background of the most frequent motif: *inventio*, the miraculous finding of the image, sometimes after it had been lost or hidden away from infidels for centuries. Antiquity as an attribute of prestige not only follows the aristocratic model of heritage, whose value increases the farther back in time the family line can be traced, but also the notion that the older an image of Mary is, the greater the proximity to the time in which she lived and indeed to her.…The color could serve as a visual metaphor for authenticity."[571]

In Europe, then, such archaic dating attempted to attribute an enhanced sacrality to Medieval Marian and Christological images. In Latin America, however, they often displayed later European Baroque typologies, such as more active physical and facial expression.[572] Because images were blackened over time, blackness in the New World as in the Old was seen as a marker of age and thus prestige.

In Latin America blackness also appears to have been invested with indigenous undertones, as many of the rituals and associations became linked to indigenous beliefs in the sacred landscape, which could not be erased by the new Christian faith. The Black

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[570] Monique Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (December 2002): 1437.

[571] Scheer, 1430.

[572] Luisa Elena Alcalá, "The Image and Its Maker: The Problem of Authorship in Relation to Miraculous Images in Spanish America," in *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Spanish World*, ed. Ronda Kasl (Indianapolis: Indiana Museum of Art, 2009), 58.

Christ became a marker of an ancient, charged, and powerful sacrality that eased the transition into an imposed new spiritual order in the post-conquest era.

Synthesizing and Comparing the Images and Cults of the Black Christ

"Disseminating Devotion" has looked at the Latin American Black Christ as both object and symbol, while framing the cults as important tools for making visible the ineffable Christian divine. Although the original image and cult disseminated, that is spread out, from its most famous examples via prints and reproductive votive sculptures, in each locale the Black Christ took on its own particular meaning and set of associations.

Color

The dissertation has explored the different sources and meanings attributed to the blackness of these devotional images. The earliest examples (Chalma, Tila and Esquipulas) were all originally "white" crucifixes that blackened over time, a phenomenon that caused blackness to be associated with age and thus with prestige. Alongside age, the history of the object was encoded in its blackness as it reflected the physical darkening of the image via interactions with both local people and pilgrims. Yet in each of these examples, the blackness of the figure held slightly different significance, depending on its location. The Lord of Chalma, although it went through a series of whitening campaigns, was throughout its history intimately connected with the Pre-Columbian "Dark Lord of Caves," Oxtoteotl, and the dark cave from which both the deity idol and sculpted *Cristo* emerged.

Similar to Chalma, the Lord of Tila gradually blackened over time and then achieved a miraculous renovation back to whiteness. It appears that the *Cristo* there was

seen as part of a larger tradition of blackened or, as Nanda described them, "sooty" indigenous idols in the region.[573] Local priests attempted to stomp out any such associations by miraculously "renovating" the image. In this way, the deliberate whitening of an image came to signify the church's co-option of the devotion away from the local (indigenous) people back towards the orthodox Christian (and Spanish) faith.

The Esquipulas *Cristo* was also originally "white" and created by a European artist, a fact that was at times obfuscated in popular consciousness. Legends developed of the *Cristo*'s emergence from a cave that was in reality a man-made tunnel, and indigenous rituals similar to ones performed before the conquest came to incorporate the miraculous Christ. In this instance, then, syncretism occurred in reverse. Often European friars would purposefully replace a local deity shrine with a Christian one, thereby attempting to create a seamless transference sacred power.[574] Instead, at Esquipulas, these indigenous associations were projected onto the *Cristo* after the fact. The importance of the sacred landscape and the pan-Mesoamerican fascination with caves were grafted onto the Christ, much as the layers of soot from candles were layered onto the sculpture over time. The blackness of the Esquipulas *Cristo* became a distinct marker of sacrality that captivated devotees and differentiated it from other typical "white" crucifixes. Blackness became intimately intertwined with hybridity and the majority of Black Christ cults following the example of Esquipulas were in areas with heavily indigenous

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[573] Fray Francisco Núñez de la Vega, *Constituciones diocesanas del Obispado de Chiapa*, ed. María del Carmen León Cázares and Mario Humberto Ruiz (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Centro de Estudias Mayas, 1988), 256.

[574] This of course occurred at Chalma and at the Basilica of Guadalupe in Tepeyac, among countless other early Colonial shrines.

populations.[575] In fact, by the early nineteenth century the cleric Miguel Muñoz bemoaned the waning tradition of shrine pilgrimage, which had greatly declined among the local white population and remained popular only with Indians.[576]

Once Esquipulas became a popular pilgrimage destination, Black Christ images began to be produced for churches throughout Mexico and Central America. These *Cristos* were deliberately painted black, often in connection to or in competition with the famed image in Esquipulas. Such examples include the Black Christs of Petén, Otatitlán, and Juayúa, which became miraculous devotional images. Others remained votive images that allowed people to worship the Lord of Esquipulas *in absentia*.

One devotional *Cristo* that was deliberately painted black was The Lord of Poison in Mexico City that, according to legend, suddenly blackened as a sign of miraculous intervention in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, when Black Christ imagery would have been very popular and not as novel as earlier in the Colonial period. During the author's visit to Chalma, a man peddling religious wares stated that he sold both black and white *Cristos* because the black ones were images of the Lord of Poison while the white ones were the local Lord of Chalma. In Central Mexico today, the Chalma *Cristo* is no longer black in color while the Lord of Poison is very dark. The latter therefore stands out as an authentic Black Christ despite its later dating. The Lord of Poison cult, however, is much more recent and only gained popularity because of its displacement to

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[575] Geographer Mary Lee Nolan estimates that approximately two-thirds of Black Christ shrines are found in locations with a predominantly indigenous population. Mary Lee Nolan, "The European Roots of Latin American Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage in Latin America*, ed. N.R. Crumrine and A. Morinis (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 31-32.

[576] Miguel Muñoz, *Doctrina cristiana sobre el culto de las imágenes, y noticia verdadera de la imágen milagrosa que se venera en el santuario del pueblo de Esquipulas con una novena al fin dedicada al dulcísimo nombre de Jesús, año de 1830* (Guatemala: 1889), 23.

the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City during the anti-clerical Cristeros rebellions of the early twentieth century.[577] And yet Mexican muralist Fernando Leal chose the Lord of Chalma, which he painted nearly black, as a theme to express Mexican indigeneity on the walls of the Colegio de San Idelfonso in Mexico City, right around the corner from the cathedral. Considering these two very different interpretations of the Chalma *Cristo* it becomes apparent that these cults have no fixed meaning; rather, they have been constantly resignified through the ages to fit into larger categories of national and local identity.

Finally, the process of dissemination of Black Christ imagery and subsequent resignification of the meaning of blackness is seen farthest afield in Portobelo, Panama. Consistent with eighteenth-century preoccupations with racial classification and in the same vein as the development and popularity of casta (caste) painting, the Black Christ took on racialized associations in places with African ancestry. There the cult developed alongside Congo cultural retentions and served as an image for the (largely black) underclass of Panama into the independence period and beyond.

Certainly the meaning of the blackness of these images has evolved, much as the appearance of the objects has changed over time. Whether associated with dark caves, black gods, or African ancestry, the Black Christ was an alluring and prestigious marker of sacrality that tied a traditional Christian image to the *patria chica*, the local culture and people. These Black Christs then gained devotees outside of their immediate areas to become eventual magnets for pilgrimage.

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[577] José Martínez Mata, *El Señor de Otatitlán: Historia y oraciones* (Otatitlán Veracruz, 2008), 14. For more on the Cristeros war see Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between Church and State 1926-1929* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Pilgrimage

The examples highlighted in this study are all pilgrimage images that drew devotees from beyond their immediate vicinity. This is in contrast to the hundreds of other Black Christs that were merely local images, mostly votive in nature and pointing directly back to the more famous Christ of Esquipulas. The question thus remains: why did some *Cristos* become pilgrimage images while others remained regional devotional shines or isolated votive images? The answer to that, I believe, lies in their geography.

The Lord of Esquipulas was by far the most famous Black Christ and the one that triggered the largest number of copies. It was tied to the local landscape features that included a "Miracle River" and "caves" that were actually man-made tunnels. Following the 1759 construction of the basilica, the cult exploded and shrines to the Lord of Esquipulas cropped up throughout the region. Some of these images lost their direct ties to Esquipulas, becoming miraculous cult figures in their own right. It appears that the farther one travels from Esquipulas, the larger number of pilgrimage Christs one encounters. That is, these images served to replace the need for an arduous trek to Eastern Guatemala. The examples close by in Guatemala and in the neighboring countries of El Salvador and Honduras are by and large still referred to as images of the Lord of Esquipulas and are therefore votive images that allow remote access to the Esquipulas *Cristo* but are not miraculous devotional images in their own right.

Of the category of devotional images that are distinct from Esquipulas, it appears that those that were located in impressive natural surroundings were also more likely to become pilgrimage sites. Those in larger cities like the Lord of Poison in Mexico City or

the Black Christ of Encino[578] in Aguascalientes maintained mainly regional followings, attracting devotees mainly because they were located in urban environments. It was thus those that were further afield and in impressive natural surroundings that became pilgrimage images. This was certainly the case in Chalma, which was an important sacred center in the pre-conquest period, located near the hilltop temple of Malinalco and surrounded by natural features such as a large canyon, numerous rivers, caves and large cypress trees. The region of Chalma was situated amid an important sacred landscape and likely a pilgrimage location before the arrival of the Augustinian order and the miraculous local crucifix, an aspect that cemented its status as a prestigious cult and its destination as a pilgrimage site.

Similar phenomena occurred at Otatitlán, which was an important trade center and therefore conducive to pilgrimage. In Amecameca the *Santo Entierro del Sacromonte*, became tied to the local cave and impressive volcanoes in the region. Finally, *El Nazareno* in Portobelo is strategically located in a town that was an important center of mercantile activity, receiving shipments from Europe and South America throughout the Colonial period and attracting outsiders. Each pilgrimage Black Christ, therefore, was located near an impressive natural or commercial feature that would have drawn people before the arrival of the Spanish, whether for its sacred resonances or trade activity.

[578] The Lord of Encino is a minor Black Christ in the city of Aguascalientes in Mexico. According to legend, the image miraculously appeared sometime in the mid eighteenth century within the trunk of an oak tree. Located in the capital city, it was a popular devotional image for inhabitants of the state of Aguascalientes. See José Humberto Chávez Aranda, *Del mito al rito de El Señor del Encino* (Aguascalientes: Instituto Cultural de Aguascalientes, 2010).

The Black Christ and Art History

The Lacuna of the Black Christ in Art History

Images of the Black Christ have not received much attention in the field of art history because of the dominant view that the blackness was accidental and incidental and thus unworthy of investigation. This attitude was first voiced with regard to Black Virgin images in 1878 by Parisian architect and religious archaeologist Charles Rohault de Fleury, who asserted that silver plating on French Madonna images had blackened with age. This observation was subsequently misunderstood by copyists as intentional, prompting the deliberate painting of black images.[579] In the same vein, German art historian Stephan Beissel wrote in 1909: "Many types of paint, especially the vermilion and red leaf used to make skin tones as well as the silver used here and there as the base, turn black with age. … Other images of this kind stood for decades, even centuries, in the midst of innumerable candles, whose smoke blackened them."[580] Fleury's and Beissel's determinations that the blackening was accidental have held through time, and art historians have similarly assumed that the blackness was not intended and therefore un-noteworthy.

Instead, anthropologists, historians, and geographers in Mexico and Central America have conducted most of the scholarship related to the Black Christ. Among them, ethnogeographer William V. Davidson's research provides the most thorough study of the images and cults to date, since his work focuses on the encyclopedic cataloging of

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[579] Scheer, 1417.

[580] Stephen Beissel, *Geschichte der Verehrung Marias in Deutchland wahrend des Mittelaters: Ein Beitrag zur Religionswissenschaft und Kunstgeschichte* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1909), 345, as quoted and translated in Scheer, 1418.

every example in Central America and its relation both to Esquipulas and its own local sacred landscape.[581] Geographer L. Jean Palmer's study similarly focuses on the geographic importance of Esquipulas as a ritual and pilgrimage center from the Pre-Columbian to the Colonial period and into the modern era.[582] Historian Francisco Reynoso deals with the legends and general history of the most prominent Black Christ images, particularly those of the Lord of Venom in Mexico City.[583] Anthropologist Patricia Lund Drolet directs her attention to the rituals of the Congo culture in Portobelo, Panama, in which she includes the Black Christ.[584] Although these types of studies are useful for contextualizing Black Christ cults, none of them provides an art historical focus on the miraculous sculptures in themselves and with their associated cults. Neither the painted, printed, and sculpted copies that aided in their spread, nor the reception and development of the cults within their historical and social contexts of the conquest and colonization of the Americas have drawn their concern.

The current study fills this gap in the scholarship on the Black Christ by looking at both its images and cults. By reinforcing the central role of Esquipulas, as a dynamic pilgrimage site whose image inspired new Black Christ images throughout Mesoamerica and beyond, it further reveals that Guatemala was an important player in both art and culture in the Viceroyalty of New Spain.

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[581] William V. Davidson, *Los Cristos Negros de Centroamérica: El Señor de Esquipulas y otros, con énfasis en Honduras y Nicaragua* (Managua: Colección de Centro America, 2012).

[582] L. Jean Palmer, "Esquipulas, Guatemala: The Historical Cultural Geography of a Central American Religious Pilgrimage Center" (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1982).

[583] Francisco Javier Reynoso, *Los Cristos Negros: El Señor del Veneno* (Mexico City: n.p., 1985).

[584] Patricia Lund Drolet, "The Congo Ritual of Northeastern Panama: An Afro-American Expressive Structure of Cultural Adaptation" (PhD diss., University of Illinois-Urbana, 1980), 33.

The Black Christ and Guatemalan Art History

The Lord of Esquipulas, although the most famous Guatemalan art work in the Colonial period as well as today, has received little attention in the field of Guatemalan art history. The work that has been done has focused on the determining its provenance and process of darkening,[585] as well as on fitting the image into the Antigua School of sculpture.[586]

Instead of investigating this prominent cult image and its artistic and cultural imact in the region, art historians working on Colonial Guatemala have largely concerned themselves with identifying European artistic influences, distinct artistic styles, and the development of workshops.[587] Beginning in the mid twentieth century, Heinrich Berlin was the first scholar to seriously study Colonial Guatemalan art. In the introduction to his *Historia de la Imaginería Colonial en Guatemala* he slyly comments on the virtuosity of Guatemalan sculpture: "When the docent of a museum in Mexico wants to impress upon the visitor the value of a sculptural work, he lowers his voice and whispers as if a big secret: it's from Guatemala."[588] The implication, of course, is that some stunningly

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[585] Aura Rosa González de Flores and Jorge Alberto Carias, *Restauración en Esquipulas* (Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, 1998).

[586] Luis Luján Muñoz and Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, *Imágenes de Oro* (Guatemala City: Corporación G&T, 1993), 40-42.

[587] See, for example, Heinrich Berlin, *Historia de la imaginería colonial en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1952); Ernesto Chinchilla Aguilar, *Historia del Arte en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín, 2002); Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, *Iconografia Aplicada a la Escultura Colonial de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Fondo Editorial La Luz, 1990); Luis Luján Muñoz and Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, *Imágenes de Oro* (Guatemala City: Corporación G&T, 1993).

[588] "Cuando el cicerone de un museo en México desea impresionat al visitante acerca del valor de una obra escultórica, baja la voz y murmura como si fuera un gran secreto: <<Es de

beautiful and technically refined objects in Mexican museums are actually from its overlooked Southern neighbor.

It should also be noted that Berlin was trained as an archaeologist and spent most of his career excavating and publishing on the Mixtec and Maya.[589]Although beginning his career as a Pre-Columbianist, his Colonial research in the mid-twentieth century makes little mention of the continuity of Maya ritual and cosmology. On the other hand, he helped lay the groundwork for Guatemalan Colonial art by constructing biographies of artists, explaining workshop practices, and defining the stylistic, iconographic and cultural links between Guatemala and Spain.

A 1997 collaboration between the Franz Mayer Museum in Mexico City and the Guatemalan embassy in Mexico produced an exhibition entitled "Teoxché: Madera de Dios, imaginería colonial guatemalteca," dedicated to religious sculpture in Colonial Guatemala. The catalog focuses on workshop practices, iconography, and the affinity between the arts and culture of Mexico and Guatemala, describing them as brother nations.[590] The exhibition highlights the fact that Guatemalan sculpture made in *estofado* for export throughout New Spain, was particularly popular in Mexico (see fig. 5-60).[591]

Guatemala>>." Berlin, *Historia de la imaginería colonial en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1952), 9.

[589] See for example Heinrich Berlin and Jorge Luján Muñoz, *Los túmulos funerarios en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1983); Heinrich Berlin, *Las antiguas creencias en San Miguel Sola, Oaxaca, México* (Hamburg: Museums für Völkerkunde und Vorgeschichte, 1957).

[590] Juan José Serra Castillo, "Presentacion," *Teoxché: Madera de Dios, Imaginería colonial guatemalteca* (Mexico City: Museo Franz Mayer, 1997), 11.

[591] Francisco Vidargas and Miguel Alvarez Arévalo, "Introducción," *Teoxché: Madera de Dios, imaginería colonial guatemalteca* (Mexico City: Museo Franz Mayer, 1997), 15.

The technically refined and deeply expressive works in the Franz Mayer exibition brilliantly showcase the virtuosity of Guatemalan sculptors and the appeal of their work beyond Guatemala. This emphasis on the impact of Guatemalan sculpture in Mexico shows close affinity to the contribution of this dissertation, which insists on the Black Christ of Esquipulas as the most influential Black Christ, thus disrupting the narrative of Mexico as the sole progenitor of cultural and artistic innovation in the Viceroyalty. Despite its importance, recent studies of Colonial Guatemalan art have largely overlooked the Esquipulas image.

One of the more recent champions of Guatemalan art history, J. Haroldo Rodas, for example, has published a number of monographs on specific churches and their sacred imagery, but his oeuvre curiously lacks attention on the Black Christ in Esquipulas.[592] Similarly, the most comprehensive art historical publication on Gutemalan art, the 2002 catalog for an exhibition at the Centro Cultural de la Villa de Madrid, entitled *El país del Quetzal: Guatemala maya e hispana*, also lacks mention of the Esquipulas image. It is divided into two parts, a "Maya Section" and an "Hispanic Section."[593] Both clearly illustrate the belief that Maya contributions to Guatemalan history were isolated in the Pre-Columbian past, and that the conquest of the Americas created a new "Hispanic" culture. Art historian Luisa Elena Alcalá even mistakenly points out in her entry on "Art and Identity in Colonial Guatemala" that the Audencia of

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[592] J. Haroldo Rodas, *Arte e historia del templo y convento de San Francisco de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Dirección General de Antropología e Historia, 1981); *Encuentro y reencuentro con el Nazareno del Calavario* (Guatemala City: Unidad de Investigaciones de Arte Guatemalteco, 2000); *Jesús de las Tres Potencias: Arte, historia y tradición* (Guatemala City: Universidad de San Carlos, 1996).

[593] Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior, *El país del quetzal: Guatemala maya e hispana* (Madrid: SEACEX, 2002).

Guatemala lacks the visibly indigenous contributions seen in Mexico such as featherwork, casta painting, and Indian iconography. She points instead to Guatemalan textiles and a few remaining examples of "popular art" as examples of the indigenous contribution that survived the Colonial period.[594]

"Disseminating Devotion" is the first study to consider the material, stylistic, and ritual aspects of the Esquipulas *Cristo*, insisting that its material blackness is essential to its art historical and cultural meaning. In Esquipulas indigenous rituals incorporating the miraculous *Cristo* continued to be performed. The image thus bears traces of what Dean and Leibsohn call "invisible hybridity," in that it appears ostensibly European but is hybrid because of its *association* with indigenous practices.[595] Only its dark color marks the *Cristo* as visibly different from typical European crucifixes. And yet we have seen that there are a few European Black Christs and a plethora of Black Virgins pointing to a possible European provenance for the phenomenon of the Black Christ. In contrast, the Latin American Black Christ gained recognizable associations with its own local people despite not appearing markedly hybrid in the same way as an atrial cross or a Colonial featherwork.

Although many of the *Cristos* discussed in this dissertation can be fit into broader stylistic trends (*El Nazareno* in Portobelo, for example, is distinctly Baroque in its pained and dramatic expression), assigning stylistic categories has not been prime concern for

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[594] Luisa Elena Alcalá, "Arte e identidad en Guatemala colonial," in *El País del quetzal: Guatemala maya e hispana*, ed. Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior (Madrid: SEACEX, 2002), 105.

[595] Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 5-35.

understanding these images and their cults. The rituals and associations that were built up around each individual local image have provided far more for our understanding of the cult and its place within New World Christian imagery.

Original Contributions of the Dissertation

"Disseminating Devotion: The Image and Cult of the Black Christ in Colonial Mexico and Central America" is the first in-depth art historical inquiry into the imagery of and devotion to the Black Christ in the Colonial art of Mexico and Central America. Anthropologists and geographers have examined the cult and its environs, and art historians have given attention to individual examples of Black Christ imagery, but this is the first study to examine the sculptural image and the cult within broader historical, geographic, social, and cultural contexts. Additionally, it is my contention that the physical materials of the image, including the painted, sculpted, and printed copies as well as devotional practices and other ritual activities, are integral for understanding the spread and development of the Black Christ cult.

As Black Christ imagery and its cult spread, a process of resignification ensued, whereby local people participated in making meaning from the blackness of the cult figure. These interpretations have not existed in the ivory tower of scholarship; they were the legends told by priests, painted in church murals, sung in hymns, and disseminated via leaflets and popular church histories from the Colonial period to the present day. Rather than assuming a singular meaning for the image's blackness, then, the dissertation examined the resignification process whereby both involved lay people and religious authorities played an integral part in shaping their spiritual landscape. Instead of thinking

of art and ritual as a static entities with fixed histories and meanings, this study insists that the dynamic lives of art objects were constantly given new meaning, whether in oral, ritual, or written form.

Finally, my study also places Central America in the forefront of artistic, cultural, and religious developments in Colonial Latin America. It extends the better recognized contributions of Mexico and Peru, the two most popular centers for art historical inquiry in Latin America, adding to them, in particular, Guatemala's importance as the epicenter of the Black Christ phenomenon because of its preeminent Black Christ of Esquipulas. The Lord of Poison in Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral, well known only because of its location, is actually a modern example of the much older category of Black Christ imagery first popularized in Esquipulas. "Disseminating Devotion" thus broadens the perception in Colonial Latin American art history that Mexico and Peru were the only artistic and cultural progenitors of the most important artistic trends in the Viceregal period. Instead, it positions Guatemala (and thus Central America) as an important player in the story of the religious art and cultural history of the Americas.

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