



Fig. 1. The Eremitic Life Mural at Actopan

## Image/Texts in Sixteenth-Century Mexican Murals (A Devil in the Details)

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### A beginning: reflections on a mural at Actopan

A MONUMENTAL wall painting of the “Eremitic Life” fills the lunette-shaped north wall of the *sala de profundis* in the Augustinian monastery of Actopan in Hidalgo, Mexico (Fig. 1). Unfurled from the top of the barrel-vaulted ceiling down to the edge of the wainscoting is a craggy landscape some 20’ high by 18’ wide. Executed in the black and white palette characteristic of most sixteenth-century mendicant murals, the monochromatic tonality is enlivened by splashes of aquamarine and crimson on secondary details. Leafy trees, churches, and a variety of diminutive animals, such as rabbits, birds, snakes, and felines, alleviate the inhospitable rocky environment. Singly or in pockets, human figures are dispersed over the landscape, devoutly praying, meditating, or simply traversing the mountainous terrain, their silhouettes often framed by grottoes. Most are black-robed and tonsured Augustinians, but scattered among them are the desert penitents and solitary hermits that provided St. Augustine himself with inspiration for his earliest monastic experiment at Thagaste. Although not founded until the thirteenth century, the Augustinian order was based on St. Augustine’s rules.

This linked history is represented in the mural. Augustine’s conversion is shown on the left above his portrayal as bishop of Hippo, baptizing a group of “pagan” individuals. More centrally located in the mural, St. Augustine as spiritual founder of the order and church father is again singled out teaching a clutch of friars, a book in his lap, his crimson cape and miter reiterating the red-robed God the Father overhead (Fig. 2). The eremitic theme of this scene is spelled out in the Latin inscription below, which says, “Hermits – Cenobites – Anchorites – St. Augustine radiates glory upon St. Anthony.” Conflating legend with lived history, Augustinians, like other monastic orders in the New World, claimed a goal of reconstituting the ardor and purity of original Christian monasticism. According to the colonial chronicler Matías de Escobar in his *Americana Thebaida*, the order was “conceived in the mountains of Egypt, born in those of Tagaste, developed in Burgos [Spain],” and finally disseminated in the Americas (Escobar 1970, p.15). To make explicit this transposition to the Mezquital plain of New Spain, two rocky outcroppings on the upper left of the mural’s landscape localize the topography in Actopan’s nearby twin peaks, today dubbed “Los frailes.” Like their Desert Father predecessors, the mendicants in Mexico shared a calling that required an isolated lifestyle within non-Christian, sometimes hostile populations.

What claimed my attention more than twenty years ago when I first saw the “Eremitic Life” mural is a startling detail in the center and at eye level in the composition. Climbing a steeply inclined path on two clawed feet is a devil-porter, bearing a load using an indigenous tumpline (Fig. 3). This European-style

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Fig. 2. The Eremitic Life Mural, Detail: St. Augustine Teaching.





Fig. 3. Detail of the Eremitic Life mural: the Devil-Porter

bestial demon, with forked tongue and horns, provokes many questions of authorship, intent, and function. It seemed likely that no European artist would include the tumpline, but if native, why this demonized form of self-representation? How do we explain the curious paraphernalia he carries, his meaning as “fly” in the otherwise idyllic ointment, and most importantly, his bicultural role both at Actopan and within the larger monastic program?

An unsettling observation almost always begins my research projects, a visual detail that generates further questions, invariably leading in many interdisciplinary directions and into the general cultural fabric. The Actopan demon and the devilish queries he raises provide an entering point. A little later in this article I use him to illustrate general observations about the ever-growing corpus of mendicant murals as image/texts that are eminently valuable in reconstructing not only their artistic and intellectual contexts but also their sociopolitical role in the early colonial period.<sup>1</sup> Large-scale murals are a rich mine of information that illumines the mendicant enterprise and the negotiated identities of European and native constituencies in the contested interchange of New Spain.

### **Advantages of murals as sources**

Murals that originally covered much of a monastery’s stuccoed walls remain visible today, if at times in a fragmentary state, in at least a third of the more than 300 monasteries or friaries (*conventos*) erected by the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians before 1600 in Mexico. This impressive corpus of artworks provides fertile ground for investigating their wide-ranging subjects, scenes based on allegorical themes, biblical and church history, and local historical events. They have an inherent beauty in settings of dramatic majesty and incomparable serenity that has consistently nourished my scholarly interest. Thus a discussion of methodology begins with the admission that the pursuit of sixteenth-century mural painting is for me a constant interplay between visceral pleasure and intellectual inquiry.

To state the obvious, these primary sources are archived on walls and require in situ inspection. In spite of the destructive passage of time and human neglect, they have been preserved by the late sixteenth-century campaign to whitewash and obliterate them. For example, at Actopan, from six to fourteen coats of paint protected the murals until a program of conservation, begun in the 1930s (Enciso 1935) and reinitiated in the 1980s, carefully peeled away the superimposed layers of whitewashing to reveal the hidden underpaintings. Even more ironically, the most deleterious impact on the murals has been the gross interventions of the inept and overzealous “restorer.”

In contrast to more ephemeral and portable source materials, the monumentality, relative permanence, and bonding of mendicant murals to sturdy, stone construction are distinct advantages. Anchored to an architectural complex, the murals’ painted messages are place-specific, unequivocally fixed to a given mendicant order, a local history, both archaeological and colonial, and a community that is often even today alive with vestiges of ancestral traditions. These

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<sup>1</sup>My use of image/texts expands the word “text” beyond alphabetic writing to include visual images. On this see Cummins 1998, pp. 452–53.



Fig. 4. The Open Chapel of Actopan

contextual spaces, both natural and built, are vital in elucidating the meaning of mural themes and their role in colonial Mexico. The murals' immutability also facilitates tracing their links to other murals in a given monastery; internal correspondences must be heeded to understand how a specific mural operates within a larger programmatic design. Themes selected for public spaces, those painted in the more accessible areas, such as the open chapels (Fig. 4), church walls, and open portals (*porterías*) as well as administrative rooms of the cloister are largely sermonic or pedagogical in subject. Aimed primarily at the native neophyte, murals with unimpeded access include historical narratives that commemorate the relevant religious order, popular devotional images, such as representations of the Virgin, or themes of an eschatological nature. By contrast, on the second story of cloisters in the more private residential quarters for the friars, the subjects of wall paintings are consistently inspirational or theologically esoteric, more relevant to the meditative practices and educational backgrounds of the mendicant community (Peterson 1993, pp. 158–64, 169, 187).

### Limitations of Sources

Aside from the occasional frustration of the absent custodian and his keys, access to monasteries in Mexico is generally excellent. There are, however, limiting factors to the architectural fixity of murals for study purposes. Art historians require double exposure to visual sources: the direct experience of the original work of art as well as photographic documentation that is crucial before a study can even begin. Murals can challenge even the most determined efforts to record them when they are found in impossibly dark or elevated spots. I have more than once blessed my telephoto lens and digital camera, which have immensely improved the ability to shoot in low-light conditions. At the Augustinian monastery of Malinalco, for example, a telephoto lens permitted my close scrutiny of the painted cloister vaults some 20' high to discover the presence of highly abstract signs within the floral patterns. These glyph-like symbols, including flanged song scrolls and the *ilhuitl*, meaning "sun's orb" or "ceremonial day," are in style and iconography characteristic of pre-Hispanic pictographic writing. They are the unmistakable marks of not only an indigenous hand, but one familiar with the preconquest esoteric vocabulary of the *tlacuilo*, painter and scribe (Peterson 1993, p. 136). It was this discovery that helped to corroborate my conclusion that most, if not all, murals were the creative outcome of a collaboration between native artisans, some of whom were heirs to the *tlacuilo* tradition, with their friar-supervisors. Photography at Actopan also benefited from modern technology. The Eremitic Life mural is located in the *sala de profundis*, a multipurpose chapter room that has only a modicum of light filtering through one doorway at the far end of the room. The mural's lack of illumination and scale require the use of digital photography. Computer-enhanced images, which can be manipulated for brightness and clarity, have significantly aided in the conversion of mediocre or underexposed photographs into readable documents.

Early colonial mural painting is a stunning medium that took advantage of pre-Hispanic precedents, using native labor already familiar with a variety of tempera and fresco techniques, such as those employed at Actopan (Enciso 1935).



To fulfill their ambitious program of erecting and decorating hundreds of monasteries, the friars relied on talented indigenous masons and painters who worked in teams ranked according to skill, under master craftsmen, in a manner reflecting both preconquest and European collective groups or guilds. Each of the regular orders ran arts and crafts schools at selected monasteries. It is telling that Actopan, in addition to Yuririapúndaro and Tiripitio, were the three centers of training artisans for the Augustinians, explaining in part the high quality of Actopan's murals.<sup>2</sup> In addition to using students trained elsewhere, the friars brought master artisans from the capital to their provincial houses, or alternatively, sent more promising indigenous students to Mexico City to be trained under craft masters (*maestros*). The more highly trained muralists traveled from monastery to monastery, where local native artists served as assistants. The colonial mural program was a relatively expeditious, cheap, and rapid method of covering the plenitude of newly available wall space.

As a byproduct of their participation, indigenous painters interjected their own structural concepts, traditional world views, and on occasion specific iconographic motifs, in order to reformulate Christian values and narratives to fit older, more familiar patterns. Murals thus betray the same sense of proprietorship that converted the very building of the monastery in each major community or altepetl into "a symbol of the altepetl's sovereignty and identity," in Lockhart's words (Lockhart 1992, p. 206). Adjacent to the Actopan stairwell, a mural depicts fray Martín de Acevedo, the prior who completed the monastery's decorative program after fray Andrés de Mata's death in 1574 (MacGregor 1982, pp. 43–45); fray Martín is kneeling in prayer before a crucifix with two "caciques," described in Nahuatl as "don Juan, who is here in Atocpan, and don Pedro in Itzcuincuitlapilco."<sup>3</sup> Equal in size and piety, the indigenous leaders are proudly claiming the fruits of their joint enterprise.

The importance of this art form in the early colonial enterprise cannot be overestimated. Writ large, these mostly public monuments continued a bicultural tradition of disseminating official religious and state ideologies in bold and comprehensible pictorial statements. Their ubiquity on both exterior and interior monastic walls endorses the crucial mnemonic role of all images, including murals, painted cloths (*lienzos*) and graphic images, in the task of inculcating proper Christian values, as outlined by the Franciscan fray Diego de Valadés in his treatise (Palomera 1962, I: 66–67, 137–38). Valadés and others recognized the need to replace the indigenous "hieroglyphs" with powerful images of their own in the effort to convert indigenous souls, minds, and bodies into loyal and productive Hispanic citizens. Just as painted screenfolds were accessory to the pre-Hispanic oral tradition, so in the mendicant context friars used an audiovisual approach, with images, theater, and song, to accompany and punctuate their spoken doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup>Rubial García (1989, p. 138), according to the chapter meeting of 1575.

<sup>3</sup>The original wording (retranscribed here in standard orthography) is "don Juan in nican Atocpan don Pedro Itzcuincuitlapilco."



### The collaborative process

Any analysis of sixteenth-century wall paintings must consider the medieval and Renaissance literary, theological, and artistic models on which they were primarily based. Murals relied on an eclectic repertory of early-modern-style traits and Christian symbolic vocabulary. Ultimately, the meaning of mendicant wall paintings can be deduced only when situated within this complex matrix of sources. Thus murals display an intertextuality dependent on varied media, including tapestry, easel painting, illustrated books, and single-sheet prints from Flanders, Italy, France, and Spain. And since the producers of murals were by and large indigenous artists, some of whom retained traditional skills, these sources may have included the screenfolds and *lienzos* that were still in circulation at the time the majority of the murals were painted.

Native craftsmen were lauded for their mimetic skills; in all the arts they were considered remarkable copyists, scrupulously reproducing the models set before them. Their expertise is confirmed by their control over mural images when they were required to magnify their visual sources, often small black and white prints, into oversized wall images without losing the proportions or the cohesive design of the finished product. Although the native hand cannot always be detected through stylistic means or overt symbolic insertions, the very act of selecting and transcribing images is transformative. Partnering with the mendicant friars, indigenous painters brought not only their technical skills to the mural projects but cosmological and religious beliefs that restructured Christian narratives and created a new visual language. William Hanks' work on Yucatec Maya colonial texts attests to the difficulty of locating an "authentic native perspective in a fundamentally equivocal context," yet he also cautions against positing a pure native voice that is absent—as it effectively "silences the native components that are in the language" (Hanks 2000, pp. 104, 127). In hybrid colonial texts, as in images, it is impossible to disentangle clearly two systems of representation since they are at the same time distinguishable and inextricably fused.

Since early colonial mural images operated as a primary system of communication, much as did preconquest wall painting, they can be studied as evidentiary documentation. Full understanding of an art work's meaning and function, of course, requires that all available written material, both Spanish and indigenous-language texts, be brought to bear on the interpretive process. Art historians, however, give primacy to visual representations, mining them as image/texts rather than as secondary illustrations that simply describe an alphabetic text. And indeed, in preconquest practice a visual artifact often served as a framework and guide for a longer oral presentation. The ability of images to tell a more inclusive or alternative story gives them great potential for understanding subtexts that are often unarticulated in official documents; they can also reveal the discrepancy between ideological positions and social realities. Multivalent images are susceptible to varied and contradictory interpretations by the producers and receivers alike, as we will see in the multiple renderings of devils in Actopan and related Augustinian monasteries.

### The devils of Actopan and Santa María Xoxoteco

Painted devils abound at Actopan just as they haunted the friars' imagination, preoccupied with the forces of darkness that they felt eroded and contested their missionary goals. This combative vigilance is well expressed by fray Bernardino de Sahagún in his prologue to Book 3: "I know of a certainty that neither does the devil sleep nor is the reverence these natives render him forgotten" (Sahagún 1950–1982, Introduction, p. 59). Along the cloister walks of Actopan seemingly innocuous little devilish figures are shown gamboling within the ornamental friezes on the upper registers of the wainscoting (*guardapolvo*). Horned imps with tails hang and curl themselves among the oversized, interlaced vines, as omnipresent visually as they were mentally in the friars' lives.

More demonic are the figures represented on the painted walls of the cavernous barrel-vaulted *capilla abierta* erected soon after Actopan was founded in 1548 by fray Andrés de Mata (also founder of Ixmiquilpan). Typically, after an initial modest thatch building (*jacal*) was built at a mission site, an open chapel was the first permanent structure to accommodate the dense crowds of Indians who attended services (Fig. 4). Painted high on the walls of Actopan's open chapel (c. 1550), terrible scenes of the Last Judgment formed a backdrop for the friar who was positioned below them to say mass on a raised altar platform or sermonize in an elevated pulpit. While he spoke to the neophytes, the Augustinian may have pointed to the winged demons overhead, in blue, brown, and white, who were subjecting sinners to the horrific torments of being scalded, stretched over grills, flayed, dismembered, and disemboweled. With moralizing intent, these scenes vividly depict the punitive consequences of the seven deadly sins, such as apostasy and polygamy. Accordingly, didactic panels featuring proper moral behaviors, promoting marriage and eschewing idolatry, also appear on the side walls of the open chapel at both Actopan and its cognate mural cycle in the *visita* chapel of Santa María Xoxoteco, Hidalgo.

In one of these mural panels at Xoxoteco, three devils hover over a pulque-drinking scene, leaving no doubt as to the friars' intent to sermonize on the overeating and excessive drinking that constituted the sin of gluttony (Peterson 1995, fig. 5). However, the native artist's composition and "props" of the scene reformulate the transgression of drunkenness as a composite of native and Euro-Christian conventions and a more ambivalent message for the Indian viewer. In the mural, a native woman in a wrap-around skirt and *huipilli* is shown kneeling, a traditional gendered pose, drinking pulque from a dish. On the left a servant, barefoot and wearing a commoner's *tilmatli* or cape is bringing another bowl of pulque to her more Hispanized male partner, who wears Spanish shoes, shirt, and pants as well as the longer *tilmatli* of the elite. In the foreground are two important preconquest objects, a large earthen jar traditionally for pulque and a vertical drum or *huehuatl*. The drum suggests the consistent presence of music featured at indigenous rituals where pulque was served and replicates similar pulque-drinking scenes from sixteenth-century pictorial manuscripts, the codices Mendoza and Magliabecchiano, suggesting possibly that either the artists were familiar with these native-style codices or that the muralists and illustrators were one and the same, or both (Peterson 1995, p. 23).



Fig. 5. The Devil-Porter in the Eremitic Life Mural  
 Courtesy of Richard Perry 1992, p. 59.

Both Xoxoteco drinkers hold fans, and the man additionally has a smoking cane, identifying them as members of the upper class. In preconquest society it was precisely the lords, warriors, and old men and women who are supposed to have been given greater liberty to drink during festival occasions. According to preconquest norms as reported after the conquest, drinking was prohibited to some while being allowed, even in excess, to others. Although both Christian and Nahuatl cultures viewed drunkenness as disruptive and dangerous, only the Christian church censured it as a sin of the flesh leading to eternal damnation. Thus the very imagery used in the Spanish campaign against alcohol may have been viewed as the depiction of a traditional ritual drinking scene, condoning acceptable limits to imbibing rather than condemning it altogether. Two modes of pictorial expression are being purposefully manipulated here, demonstrating the artist's degree of autonomy to selectively reshape an end product that is overtly Christian but simultaneously encoded with meaningful indigenous values.

Analogous to these large-scale murals are the devil images in fray Bernardino de Sahagún's Florentine Codex that editorialize on sacrificial practices, such as the first enemy captive who was traditionally dispatched to the gods (1979, Bk. 8:



f. 34v). Similarly, in six of fray Diego Valadés's 26 images illustrating his *Retórica Cristiana* (1579), devils play a prominent role. Located on the lowest strata of the illustrations, hellish scenes of demonic torture visually occupy a subterranean realm, acting as a conceptual subtext to the evangelistic program represented above. Theatrical performance reinforced these graphic exempla. Motolinia recounts that during one fire and brimstone sermon censuring vices, a "drunkard" was dragged into a fiery hell by the "devils." He writes, "The devils and the souls of the damned cried out and shrieked, which produced a feeling of horror and fear even in those who knew that no one was really being burned" (Motolinia 1950, p. 119). Vivid reenactments of satanic punishments were important, in Valadés's view: "para que sean más cautos se les describen varios géneros de tormentos" (*Retórica* 1989, Pt. II, XIV, 285; Estrada de Gerlero 1987, p. 85).

The powerful role of the devil in inventing false gods had further implications for the moral degeneracy and weak nature of native peoples. Not only was idolatry attributed to demons as a byproduct of Satan's deception of Amerindians (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. 1: 58; Motolinia 1950, pp. 52, 74–75), but pre-Hispanic gods, not surprisingly, were conflated with the devil, as seen in depictions of temples (*teocalli*) translated as "homes of the devil," and in the imaging of individual deities such as Tlaloc or Tlazolteotl (Sahagún 1979, Bk. 6, f. 27v–28).

#### **The devil-porter in the "Eremitic Life"**

Within the ubiquitous demonology at Actopan, the devil-porter in the "Eremitic Life" occupies a unique position. Half animal, half human, this devil displays a bearded human head and torso, but also manifests horns and a tail, two of the three most common physical characteristics that marked medieval "devils" after the eleventh century, lacking only wings. The devil-porter is represented with rapacious bird feet, satyr-like goat legs, a distended tail ending in a snake's head, and distinct male genitalia; nakedness signified the wild sexual nature of his animal status (Fig. 5). The monstrous face inscribed on his abdomen and the small, somewhat indistinct faces on his hind leg joints reflected Lucifer's moral depravity (Russell 1984, pp. 210–11). Moreover, monster faces that appeared on chest and buttocks also formed part of the classical repertory characteristic of the fabulous barbaric races whose heads migrated from their necks to the grotesque faces protruding from their chests (Boone 1989, p. 77). Grotesque joint masks also conveniently facilitated the conflation of devil with indigenous deities, in colonial depictions of Huitzilopochtli and members of the earth goddess complex.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of this composite devil within the context of the Eremitic Life is not incongruous. On the contrary, not only were deserts, caverns, and mountains or rocky places home to demons (Rudwin 1970, p. 62), but the goodness and asceticism of the desert fathers represented a special challenge. The demons who attacked the reclusive hermits in their isolated and penitential retreats used many guises in order to deflect their victims from their purest intentions. The devil was highly mutable, assuming the forms of wild beasts, including lions, serpents, and

<sup>4</sup>See Cecelia Klein (2000) on the Aztec Tzitzimime and Cihuacoatl and Elizabeth Boone (1989, pp. 55–83) on Huitzilopochtli as incarnations of the devil for Europeans.



Fig. 6. Stairwell Murals of Actopan

wolves who consistently tested the commitment of these hermits to the spiritual life.

Participants in desert monasticism were perceived as “a lightning rod attracting the hostile attention of the demons away from the rest of the community” (Russell 1981, p.180). In a fashion patterned after Christ’s temptations, desert fathers such as St. Anthony were besieged with spiky tormentors, the subject of many European graphics that likely were transported to the Americas. These notions and images entered into colonial theater. During the Corpus Christi festivities in Tlaxcala of 1538, during a scene of the Temptations of Christ, Lucifer appears as a hermit, whose robe nonetheless cannot conceal his horns and long claws (Motolinia 1950, p. 118). Thus, along with his bestial composites, the ever-morphing Satan also assumed more humanoid incarnations, a more insidious manifestation of evil. In New Spain, sightings of the devil included manifestations as a friar, a mulatto, and an Indian.

Only in the broader context of the other Actopan murals is one able to identify the devil-porter’s paraphernalia: he holds writing tools, a quill holder and ink pot, and carries a large red-covered book as his cargo. These iconographic elements are clearly displayed on the extraordinary stairwell murals of Actopan. Stretching up four registers and several stories are portraits of Church fathers Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory and Jerome, and venerated Augustine saints, such as St. Nicholas of Tolentino (Fig. 6). A few are shown standing, but most are seated at desks, with ink pots and quill containers identical to the objects tangling from the devil’s arm (Fig. 7). Certain ecclesiastics are actively reading or writing large volumes, some of which are open so that the black and red texts are visible. Serge Gruzinski (1994, p. 51) comments that these dignified portrayals not only advertise the impressive genealogy of the Augustinian order, but they also display the triumph of the book and the Hispanic “culture of writing.”

#### **Alternative readings: European and indigenous**

From a friar’s perspective, one interpretation of the devil-porter may have depended on whether he is seen as a thief, removing the objects he carries, or as an arriving peddler with tempting merchandise. If stealing away, the devil-porter may have been participating in one of the fiendish plots to derail the Christianization program by absconding with the writing implements and the “Word” that lay at the foundation of the Christian faith—as represented in the monumental stairwell portraits. In an anonymous sixteenth-century Netherlandish woodcut by a contemporary of Lucas van Leyden, St. John is shown writing his Book of Revelation on Patmos (Fig. 8). On the lower left, an enraptured St. John gazes onto his distant vision of the airborne apocalyptic woman. Behind him a horned devil, with cloven feet and tail, is spiriting off the evangelist’s writing equipment, a quill container and ink pot (Fig. 9). The devil here interrupts St. John’s divinely inspired task of inscribing the visionary, thus potentially impeding the trajectory of Christian history and, with it, the establishment of the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, a related European exegesis might have emphasized the devil’s delivery of writing tools and manuscript, tempting the friars with the seduction of scholarship, a conceit that would focus entirely on the life of the





Fig. 7. Stairwell Murals, Actopan. St. Paul at his desk.





Fig. 8. Anonymous Netherlandish artist. "St. John the Evangelist on Patmos."  
Woodcut, 1522–1525. From Jacobowitz and Stepanek 1983, Plate 103.





Fig. 9. St. John and the Apocalyptic Woman, Detail of Devil

mind and neglect pastoral care. Moreover, there was skepticism about learning and books that were potentially “tools of hell” (Rudwin 1970, pp. 248–51, 260). Care had to be taken that books contained orthodox sacred scriptures as authorized by the Counter Reformation, unsullied by protestant (*luterano*) heresies. Not



only did an anxious Catholic church remain vigilant against potentially heretical writings, but native-authored texts were equally dangerous, replete with recipes for pagan worship and witchcraft. Several inquisitorial cases speak of demonized Indians, distributing “little books,” sometimes written in native languages or with seductive images (Cervantes 1994, pp. 37, 88, 91), to deflect true faith and to exert control over their victims. The Actopan devil-porter’s forked tongue may refer to his capacity for speaking falsehoods. This was a deception worthy of Satan and driven by a perverse “mimetic desire,” in which Christian practices, here the creation of divinely inspired texts, were parodied by the counter-religious practices of American Indians (Cervantes 1994, p. 29).

These European interpretations of the Actopan devil-porter would have been much more equivocal for a native audience, making the figure accessible to multiple readings. The Mesoamerican worldview did not readily embrace the Christian dichotomy of moral absolutes, but subscribed instead to a different dialectic of complementarity. As Burkhart (1989, pp. 40–41) notes, friars early on sought an appropriate Nahuatl word for *diablo* or *demonio*, a concept that was compromised by substituting *tlacatecolotl* or “human owl.” This surrogate term for a shape-changing sorcerer diluted the Christian concept of the devil. The *tlacatecolotl* became a “failed” Satan, less diabolical than the Christian embodiment of absolute evil and the implacable enemy of Christ. Cervantes (1994, pp. 46–49) has emphasized how malleable the concept of devil became in indigenous thinking, as a creature associated with darkness and disease, but also with positive shamanic attributes, at times incorporated into the indigenous pantheon of dualistic deities. The closest visual parallel for the *tlacatecolotl*, a bird-human figure represented in the Florentine Codex, demonstrates this ambivalence, for it is shown hovering over mushrooms, *nanacatl*, in order to censor their ingestion (Sahagún 1979, Bk. 11, f. 142v). Yet the potency of hallucinogenic mushrooms was revered in pre-conquest indigenous ideology, and partaking of them was highly ritualized, associated with positive, healing shamanic activities. That Motolinia (1950, p. 46) refers to mushrooms as *teonanacatl* or “flesh of the god,” quickly then adding that they were the “food of the devil,” betrays contradictory attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is unlikely that the devil-porter image would have been received by the indigenous painter and audience as an entirely reprehensible figure.

Not only is the very nature of the diabolical partially neutralized for the non-European, but his native mode of bearing his load prevents the Actopan devil-porter from being subsumed under a Christian interpretation. The tumpline was characteristic of the *tlameme* (pl. *tlamemeque*; in Spanish often *tameme*) or indigenous porter, vital to maintaining the pre-Hispanic and for many decades the postconquest economy. Both elite and common goods were carried locally and long distances by the *tamemes*, members of a quasi-hereditary profession on the lower rungs of preconquest society (Hassig 1985, pp. 28–31; 34–40). As a metaphor, “the digging stick, the tumpline” connoted punishing labor, a dreary exist-

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<sup>5</sup>Ambiguities abound here as well. *Nanacatl*, “mushroom,” is derived from *nacatl*, “flesh,” but is not necessarily identical with it, and the element *teo-*, though literally “god, divine thing,” was also used to indicate a particularly large or splendid species of animal or plant.

tence, and at times a servile state (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. 1: 69; Bk. 4: 5). Yet in keeping with the complementarity of Mesoamerican thinking, the act of carrying a load could also signify an honorary status, the “great burden” of responsibility borne in marriage or by a ruler carrying his people (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. 6: 132, 258). When the gods gathered to form the universe the act of creating the sun was symbolically referred to as the one who will carry the burden (Sahagún 1950–1982, Bk. 7: 4; Hassig 1985, p. 30). The *teomama* or “god carrier” bore a *tlaquimilolli* or sacred bundle on his back, as in the codices Boturini or Azcatitlan. In Book 8 of the Florentine Codex, “all the priests, the keepers of the gods, took the lead” (Sahagún 1979, Bk. 8: f. 34); marching ahead of the seasoned warriors, the priests are bearing rather happy devil-loads using the tumpline.

The ambiguity on many levels of both the nature and role of the Actopan devil-porter suggests a native-authored meaning that destabilizes the European concept of the devil and may also parody the authority of the Book in Christian culture and its implications of literacy and history. Power inhered in the “books” and writing systems of both cultures. *Amatl* or bark paper, the very material out of which many picture-writing surfaces were fashioned, was in itself imbued with sacrality, a magical potency that continues to the present day among some traditional Mexican cultures. Moreover, “the red and the black” was a metaphor for esoteric knowledge and ancestral wisdom, colors likewise found in the biblical texts being consulted by the ecclesiastics in the Actopan stair-well murals. Rather than assuming the cultural superiority of the Book, thereby rehearsing the arrogant claims of early colonial triumphalist assumptions of European writing, we need to give equal weight to the indigenous claims for the antiquity, authenticity, and power of their texts. A more empowering interpretation of the devil-porter’s book and writing tools is one that effectively affirms his indigenous identity, one that used and manipulated Christian concepts. The devil-porter *is* partially self-referential, but a hybrid creature that held ambivalent meanings for the native artist and viewer.

Although a holy place for hermits and saints, the landscape of the Eremitic Life duplicates those peripheral zones of disorder divorced from the stabilizing moral center so integral to Nahua cosmology. As Burkhart (1989, pp. 61–63) explains, it was a liminal space such as this, with its devious roads and precipitous cliffs, that the Nahuas associated with both physical danger and moral lapse. To European and native alike, then, the devils or their substitutes, fierce beasts called *tequani* (people eater), ensnared and devoured their prey. The wilderness of the Actopan Eremitic Life is not only an allegorical place but seems conceptually appropriate as a locale for the hybrid Christianity that emerges in the image of the devil-porter.

The construction of the devil-porter involves a double coding that enabled the tlacuilo artist of the mural to locate himself within a European vocabulary and claim Christianity as part of his own past.<sup>6</sup> Robert Young (1995, p. 5) points to language as a productive paradigm for understanding the mechanics of the

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<sup>6</sup>See Gruzinski 1993, p. 25; see also Double Mistaken Identity in Lockhart 1999.

“processes of cultural contact, fusion and disjunction.” Relying on Bakhtin’s model for hybridity in language as being “double voiced,” Young (1995, pp. 20–22) concludes that the same word can belong simultaneously to two languages and may, at the same time, display both harmonious fusion and antagonistic opposition. In a similar vein, Hanks’ concept of “intertexts” as a site of mediation between native and European may allow for a most fruitful avenue to understanding colonial production. And, I would argue, the Actopan Devil-porter offers us just such a site.

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