

4-1-2017

Review of *The Relación de Michoacán (1539–1541)*
& *the Politics of Representation in Colonial Mexico* by
Angélica Jimena Afanador-Pujol

Laura E. Matthew

Marquette University, laura.matthew@marquette.edu

The volume is a rich meal that cannot be digested in one sitting. It will be beneficial to historians and archaeologists, who work in the same region, or those interested in the broad themes. Thiaw, in his comments, offers a useful summary of each chapter but notes the absence of case studies from North, Central, or East Africa. Moreover, he draws attention to the persistent problem of disconnect between archaeology and modern-day identities and ideologies, specifically the lack of Africa-based contributors. Rowland points at a central contradiction embodied in the collection: do we seek alternative ways of seeing/knowing the world while simultaneously expecting an agency of material things that relies on dualism of subject-object? Archaeologists and anthropologists today probably desire an irreconcilable outcome: on one hand an alternative, indigenous way of being in the world and perceiving the past; on the other, participation and inclusion within a standardized academic discourse. “African” scholarship is clearly a place where stimulating and unnerving conversations are happening.

SILVIA TOMÁŠKOVÁ, *University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

The Relación de Michoacán (1539–1541) & the Politics of Representation in Colonial Mexico. Angélica Jimena Afanador-Pujol. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015, 288 pp. \$25.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-4773-0239-2.

The *Relación de Michoacán*, a 139-page illustrated compendium of P’urhépecha (Tarascan) history and culture made by a team of Indigenous scribes and painters with the Franciscan Fr. Jerónimo de Alcalá between 1539 and 1541, is to western Mexico what the *Florentine Codex* and *Primeros memoriales* are to the Nahuatl central region. Indeed, the *Relación* predates the more famous works of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún and his Tlatelolca informants by nearly twenty years. These are the Americas’ earliest ethnographies, even more valuable for their temporal proximity to first contact with Europe, Africa, and Asia. Much ink has therefore been spilled assessing the *Relación* from many different disciplinary angles. Angélica Jimena Afanador-Pujol focuses our attention on the context of the document’s production and the contradictions between its text and images, using methods from both the historian’s and the art historian’s toolbox. She emphasizes P’urhépecha politics at a particular moment in time over more general questions of European artistic influence, stylistic hybridity, pan-Mesoamerican cosmovision, or precolumbian history writ large.

Three immediate political realities shaped the *Relación*’s production according to Afanador-Pujol. First, its commissioning by Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza conditioned the narrative. Afanador-Pujol suggests that the *Relación*’s Indigenous cre-

ators were “given . . . an unprecedented opportunity” (p. 104) to influence Spanish policy toward them, and tailored their presentation to their European audience for maximum effect. She interprets the inclusion of European elements such as three-dimensionality, Christian morality, knightly pastimes presented as Mesoamerican “Chichimec” traits, or the Tree of Jesse, and the sometime absence of Mesoamerican elements such as glyphic toponyms, as strategic choices designed to make the *Relación*’s message more intelligible. Second, labor and land disputes with local Spaniards led the *Relación*’s creators to emphasize the region’s unity under a single lord as a hedge against Spanish encroachment—a stance also favored by Franciscans such as Fr. Jerónimo and the bishop Vasco de Quiroga. Afanador-Pujol’s argument here is particularly strong, analyzing the migration story of the *Relación*’s text, the selection and placement of its images, and archival documentation of these land disputes in Spanish courts all in relation to one another.

Third, and paradoxically, Afanador-Pujol detects ethnic rivalry in the contradictions between the *Relación*’s text and images. Based on an analysis of scribal hands, visible emendations to the pages, and artistic styles, she posits the existence of two separate groups of five scribes and four artists. The artists, she contends, generally favored the previously dominant but more recently arrived Uanacaze, whose leader had been executed one decade earlier by the Spanish. The scribes, on the other hand, appear to have followed the dictates of the leader of the older “Islander” population and acting indigenous governor of Michoacán, who was the *Relación*’s only named informant, Don Pedro Cuiniarangari. Again Afanador-Pujol sees strategy where other scholars have seen mistakes or mere discrepancies. She suggests that Don Pedro carefully asserted his authority while also acknowledging the Uanacaze’s power in the Lake Pátzcuaro region in the text, posing himself as an ideal intermediary between the Uanacaze, their subordinated neighbors, and the Spanish. Subsequently, the artists altered, added, or ignored the scribes’ assigned illustrations to subtly justify an eventual reassertion of Uanacaze power while maintaining the *Relación*’s overall message of unity. In our own era of graphic novels and neuroscientific studies of vision and memory, it is tempting to imagine Viceroy Mendoza and the king skipping over the scribes’ work and gleaning most of their understanding of P’urhépecha history and culture from the *Relación*’s paintings and edited captions, storybook fashion—which Afanador-Pujol implies is just what the artists hoped would happen.

This is a bold claim. I am not entirely convinced by Afanador-Pujol’s envisioning of two separate groups of artists and scribes so neatly aligned with Uanacaze and Islander points of view. Analysis of the *Relación*’s interethnic balancing act sometimes overshadows another of the book’s key points: the political positioning and influential hand of Fr. Jerónimo. Nevertheless, Afanador-Pujol provides a compelling interpretation of this important text, firmly attached to the circumstances of its making with systematic, sophisticated attention to its visual details. One closes her book with a new appreciation for the delicate negotiations, contradictory and

overlapping alliances, and cultural translations that Mesoamericans such as the P'urhépecha speakers of western Mexico managed in the earliest decades of European colonialism.

LAURA E. MATTHEW, *Marquette University*

Remote Avant-Garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation. Jennifer Loureide Biddle. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 265 pp. \$26.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-8223-6071-1.

Contemporary Aboriginal art of the Central and Western Desert of Australia has evolved as a community-based art movement, sustained by a widespread network of Aboriginal-run art centers dedicated to providing social, cultural, and economic benefits to their communities. From its beginnings in the twentieth century, the movement has continued to confound the world with its innovative forms, stunning aesthetic qualities, and unwavering cosmological complexity. The diversity and ingenuity of art practice belies misconceptions of Australian desert art as homogeneous and Aboriginal culture as conservative and trapped in the past.

Jennifer Loureide Biddle's book takes us into the relatively uncharted territory of aesthetic developments in the desert since 2007. This is a highly contextual study which emphasizes that these developments coincide with "the intervention" (re-legislated as "Stronger Futures"), a set of contentious government policies aimed at addressing alleged severe dysfunction in remote Aboriginal communities. Biddle models the intervention as a case of "humanitarian imperialism" and, in this context, labels contemporary desert art as "art under occupation." Notwithstanding this somber theme, the book unfolds as an affirmation of the resilience, dynamism, and relevance of the desert art movement and its threatened communities.

As an anthropologist who has built long-term relationships with Lajamanu Warlpiri people, Biddle is well placed to conduct an informed, culturally sensitive, and empathetic analysis of desert art in its complex social and political contexts. She is particularly critical of the intervention-inspired dismantling of the bilingual community education system. As a strategy to improve Aboriginal literacy, community schools are now required to privilege Standard Australian English at the expense of teaching in Aboriginal languages. With the literacy debate in mind, Biddle argues that Aboriginal art of the desert, rather than being a peripheral pursuit, is a unique and determinedly functional type of place-based cultural writing.

An especially valuable feature of *Remote Avant-Garde* is its intense gaze upon, and unusually detailed study of, many individual works. The art-historical chapters on collectives provide a wider perspective: a pan-regional enterprise (Tjanpi Desert