

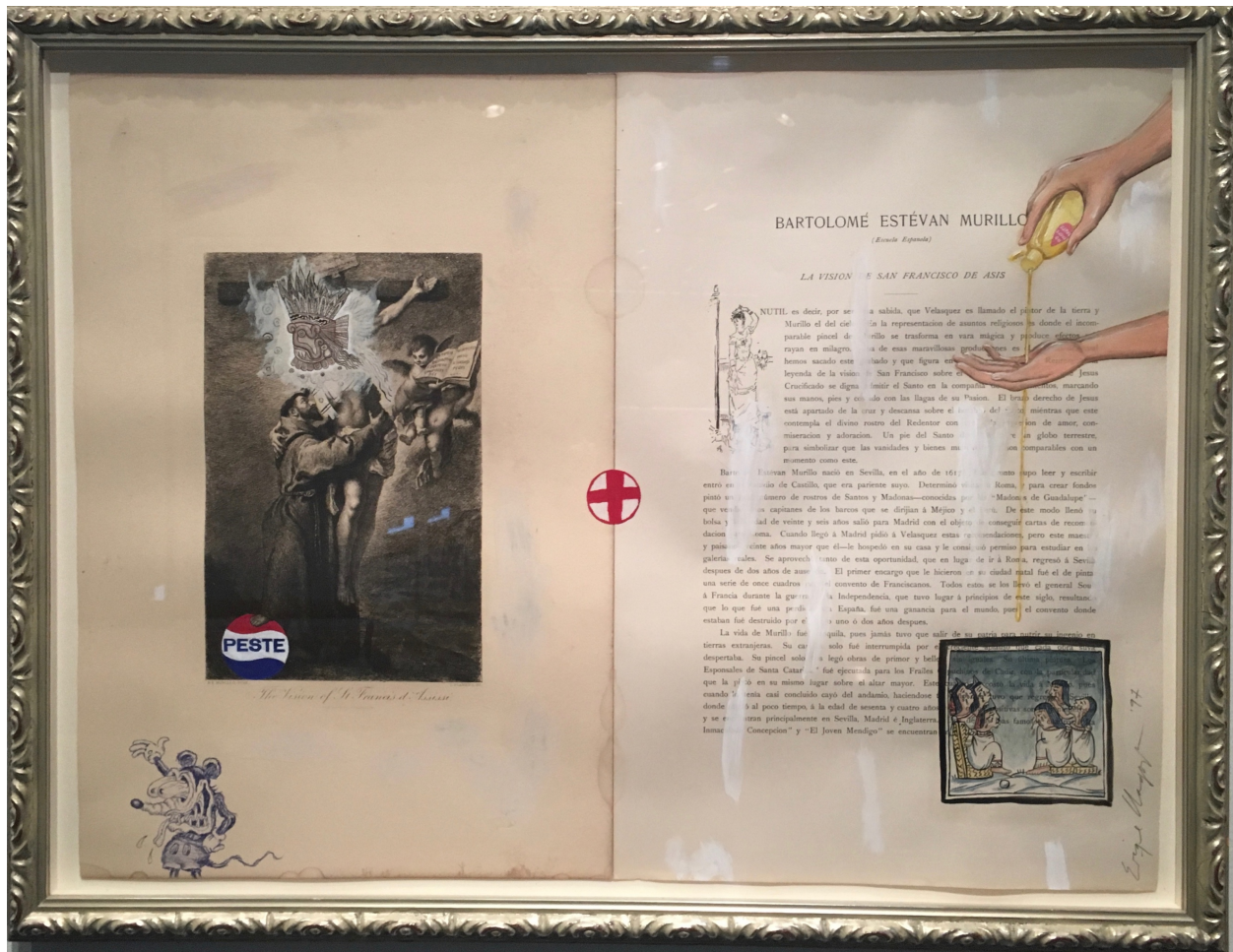
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ARTH 1400

Alexander Penn- Section 115

April 20, 2017

*The Vision of Saint Francis of Assisi: A Satire*



Enrique Chagoya

*The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi, 1997*

Mixed media: print, paint, ink

Mexican-born contemporary artist, Enrique Chagoya, is well known for collage pieces that possess a powerful political punch. His statements often draw ties between long histories of cultural inequalities<sup>1</sup> to the roots of many modern day political issues. He speaks through application of a layering technique which often incorporates Meso-American drawings, Colonial-era depictions of indigenous peoples, and contemporary animations and icons<sup>2</sup>. Chagoya adheres to his signature subject matter, message, and style in his piece, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*. Through intentional compilation of images from a Meso-American codex, symbols of popular culture, an excerpt from a Colonial-era text, and other markings, Enrique Chagoya produces a satirical narrative that draws ties between a Catholic saint, Spanish colonialism, and much of today's political turmoil regarding nationalism in the America's in his piece, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*.

An initial description of the piece at hand is necessary for our ultimate analysis and understanding of its narrative. This piece is of a collage format: An excerpt from a 19<sup>th</sup> century art or art history textbook functions as the base layer which features various illustrations added atop by Chagoya. The book pages include a side of text on the right as well as a copy of an illustration by 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish artist, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo<sup>3</sup>, on the left. The book snippet is headed, "La Vision de San Francisco de Asis", which so appropriately translates to "The Vision of Saint Francis of Assisi". Murillo's illustration is that of a religious nature depicting Jesus Christ upheld upon the cross by Saint Francis himself. Chagoya also depicted an image of the head of an Aztec god atop that of Christ's within Murillo's etching. Just below

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<sup>1</sup> Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya, and Felicia Rice, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Liudmila L. Kaganè, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, and Gosudarstvennyĭ Ėrmitazh, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo: The Spanish Master of the 17th Century* (Bournemouth; St. Petersburg: Parkstone Publishers, 1995) 7.

Murillo's illustration is Chagoya's depiction of a seemingly distressed-looking Mickey Mouse. Scanning towards the right side of the piece, a human hand pouring the contents of Johnson's 'no more tears' baby shampoo upon an image from a Meso-American, or pre-Hispanic, codex appears. Also found on the right, atop the text portion of the book page, are multiple tear-like markings of white paint (see Figure 1). Formal analysis of this piece can commence now that a general description has been established.

A brief discussion of the history behind the background text and accompanying illustration will set the stage for our ultimate understanding of Chagoya's overall message. The artist's selection of Saint Francis as the focus of both the title and subject of the base layer of this collage is highly notable. "One of the most venerated religious figures in history"<sup>4</sup>, Saint Francis was canonized by Pope Gregory IX and designated co-patron saint of Italy with Saint Catherine of Siena in 1228. Known for numerous religious visions, this Saint's most famous apparition involves his encounter with an angel that left him with wounds in his hands, feet, and side which parallel those of Christ's following his crucifixion<sup>5</sup>. This concept is known as stigmata in Roman Catholicism and is what this patron saint is most known for, as emphasized by Murillo's etching to the left of the text. As the first recorded stigmatic in Roman Catholic history, Saint Francis's lifelong missionary work indubitably played a vital role in the Christianization of the New World in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Satire regarding the Spanish conquest and its everlasting influence upon the America's is a recurring theme within a great deal Chagoya's work. His collaborative book/piece, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, will be of great use in this analysis of *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Cunningham, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

*Vision of Saint Francis Assisi* to display evidence of this notion. An entire short book's length of illustration, *Codex Espangliensis* displays overlapping images and themes found within the piece at hand. These paralleled ideas, combined with Chagoya's own explanation from this book, will allow for credible, evidence-based connections regarding meaning behind this piece, to be made.

Just as in *Codex Espangliensis*, Chagoya tells the narrative of *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi* from the right to the left side of the piece. This intentional layout honors the tradition of the Meso-American codices<sup>6</sup> that Chagoya frequently incorporates into his work. However, it will best serve the purposes of our understanding to first interpret the piece in a fashion that strays from this traditional practice. This will allow us to first establish certain themes that are necessary to later draw ties among the various images that are scattered throughout the piece. We will later return to Meso-American tradition and analyze the narrative according to the artist's original intention of interpretation.

Chagoya is known to display a great familiarity with pre-Columbian culture<sup>7</sup> in his works often through inclusion of pre-Columbian codices, as seen in *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi* as well as in *Codex Espangliensis*. We will first observe the images included by Chagoya from the Florentine codex in order to build a base layer understanding of the multi-layered message at hand. A codex is essentially a book of images that are typically historical. Chagoya emphasizes the reverence with which he regards these books by stating that “[he] is most interested in non-alphabetic writing, as is demonstrated in pre-Columbian books”<sup>8</sup> in our main piece of reference, *Codex Espangliensis*. The Florentine codex in particular is known to be one of the most

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<sup>6</sup> Gómez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Selz, Susan Landauer, and San Jose Museum of Art, *Art of Engagement: Visual Politics in California and Beyond* (San Jose, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>8</sup> Gómez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 4.

important resources for the study of ancient Meso-American history<sup>9</sup>. Even more notable is the notion that it displays “a history of the conflict, negotiation, and dialogue between two different worlds and cultures [of the Spanish and the Aztec]”<sup>10</sup>, which is a common theme within Chagoya’s work. His incorporation of this book alone is highly indicative of his intention to generate a theme of Aztec versus Spanish, and more broadly, indigenous versus colonized, in *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*.

Chagoya’s most striking application of the Florentine codex in this piece is his portrayal of the Aztec god, Huitzilopochtli. As the “patron god of the Aztecs”<sup>11</sup>, Huitzilopochtli is said to have lead the Aztecs on their pilgrimage from Aztlán to the ‘promised land’ where they founded the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325<sup>12</sup>, which later became Mexico City in the post-colonial era. It is notable that of the numerous gods worshipped by this polytheistic group, Chagoya chose Huitzilopochtli- the god of war. Even more captivating is the manner in which Huitzilopochtli is portrayed. As briefly described in the foundational explanation of this piece, Chagoya replaced the head of Jesus Christ from Murillo’s etching with that of this Aztec god (see Figure 2). Chagoya makes a striking statement here by juxtaposing Catholicism, the major religion in post-colonial, modern day Mexico City, with Aztec religion in what was previously Tenochtitlán in the 1300s<sup>13</sup>. He specifically is making a satirical reference to the way that the Spanish Christianized the Aztec during the conquest of the New World. The rather disturbing

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez, “Christian Morality Revealed in New Spain: The Inimical Nahua Woman in Book Ten of the Florentine Codex”, *Journal of Women's History* 10 (2): 9-37, (1998), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Franca Arduini and Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, *The World of the Aztecs: In the Florentine Codex*, (Florence: Mandragora, 2007), 12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>13</sup> Michael Schreffler, ““Their Cortés and Our Cortés”: Spanish Colonialism and Aztec Representation”, *The Art Bulletin* 91 (4): 407-25, (2009), 414.

decapitation of Christ that Chagoya created parallels that of Aztec religion; It too was in a way, ‘decapitated’ or destroyed by the Spanish during the colonial era.

An unusual depiction of Mickey Mouse appears just below Murillo’s rather modified depiction of Christ on the same side of the piece (see Figure 3). Similar satirical Mickey’s make appearances in both *Codex Espangliensis* and another Chagoya piece titled, *Their Freedom of Expression.... The Recovery of Their Economy* (see Figures 4 and 5). Chagoya is known to use this Disney character, being “the most prominent ambassador of American pop culture”<sup>14</sup>, to generate a satirical conversation regarding cultural imperialism<sup>15</sup>. Here, Mickey Mouse, a symbol of American cultural imperialism, as implied by Chagoya, is satirically reacting to the imperialism of today’s America’s. Chagoya is suggesting that the imperialism we see today, which takes the form of border politics, xenophobia, etc., is a direct result of the imperialism implemented centuries ago in the New World by the Spanish during the conquest. Chagoya establishes an obvious negative tone regarding this state of affairs through his rather disturbing depiction of Mickey. Through careful observation of the character’s expression, we can almost confer that the imperialism which Mickey is looking upon is so obviously a historical result of Spanish colonialism that he is both dumb-founded and distraught (see Figure 3). This of course is Chagoya communicating his own voice through this popular icon. Mickey plays the important role of relating the horrors of Spanish colonialism, as seen by Chagoya, to similar themes of nationalism that we continue to observe today.

Moving to the right side of the collage, we find a human hand pouring the contents of a bottle of Johnson’s ‘no more tears’ baby shampoo upon yet another image from the Florentine

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<sup>14</sup> Selz, Landauer, and San Jose Museum, *Art of Engagement*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Gomez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 3.

codex. The shampoo appears to run straight through the hand, as if a hole of sorts were pierced through it, and directly onto the image below. Upon close observation, a hole is in fact visible in the palm (see Figure 6). This laceration parallels that of the stigmatic saint after which this collage is named. As we learned before, an encounter with an angel left Saint Francis with wounds on his body that resembled those of Christ's after his crucifixion, including holes in his hands as if pierced by nails to be hung on a cross. Here, Chagoya is drawing ties between the notion of the cultural imperialism that was established during the conquest, and its ever-present consequences seen today, directly to Saint Francis. Knowing Saint Francis's extremely prominent role in the early Christianization of indigenous lands, it is reasonable to conclude that this image is Chagoya's way of ascribing the horrors of the conquest, and its fallout, to him. Chagoya proceeds to satirize this idea by ironically naming this collage after the patron saint's most famous 'vision'. The artist is satirizing the aftermath of Saint Francis's 'holy' vision of converting all peoples as having materialized into something wretched instead.

The baby shampoo itself is of note here as well. Chagoya is known to juxtapose images from popular culture and mass media, such as Johnson's 'no more tears' baby shampoo in this case, to negate issues like nationalism and ethnocentrism. Similar to Mickey Mouse's role in *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, this immediately distinguishable brand name is also representative of the American nationalism that exists today as a result of the colonization of the New World.

Chagoya depicts his feelings regarding the horrors of colonialism and its aftereffects as tears streaming down the text of the right-hand side of the piece. These "visual tropes"<sup>16</sup> make frequent appearances in much of Chagoya's work. In *Codex Espangliensis*, his metaphorical marking of choice is blood, generating a more violent tone to that particular message (see Figure

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<sup>16</sup> Gomez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 4.

7 and 4). However, in *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, Chagoya seeks to evoke a more emotional, empathetic response from his audience through application of tears instead. This appeal to pathos implies a metaphorical shedding of tears upon Spanish colonialism by Chagoya: The background text, images, and themes upon which these tears have been shed are allegorical of the colonization of the New World during the conquest. The prominent placement of these markings as the most foregrounded illustration of this collage is indicative that this sadness is the theme which Chagoya wished to emphasize most within his entire narrative.

Chagoya states that through his work, he seeks to “create an ideological construction of his own... [consisting of] cultural hybrids, political collisions, and universal consequences”<sup>17</sup> in his collaborative book/piece, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*. This same intention is undeniably reflected in his collage, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*. Chagoya blends a 19<sup>th</sup> text and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s 17<sup>th</sup> century etching with both modern icons of popular culture as well as images from the Florentine codex to generate a melting pot of ideas, each of which contribute to one comprehensive message. Similar to the material assembly of the piece, the artist’s message is multilayered. He builds off of the idea that Spanish colonialism, and synonymously Christianization of the New World in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is traceable to the immense impact which Saint Francis of Assisi left upon European Catholicism centuries prior. It is this Spanish colonialism and its everlasting consequences that which Chagoya speaks loudest upon. He uses identifiable symbols of American culture to represent aspects of this aftermath that are ever-prevalent today, i.e. xenophobia and imperialism. Images from the Florentine codex allow Chagoya to establish an emotional appeal to his audience by relating the horrors he sees within Spanish colonialism to the indigenous Aztec group of peoples. He completes the sentiment of his

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<sup>17</sup> Gomez-Peña, Chagoya, and Rice, *Codex Espangliensis*, 8.



message by shedding tears upon the bulk of his collage and thus, metaphorically upon Spanish colonialism. Each layer of Chagoya's message is wrapped into one collective, equally satirical title: *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*.

## Figures

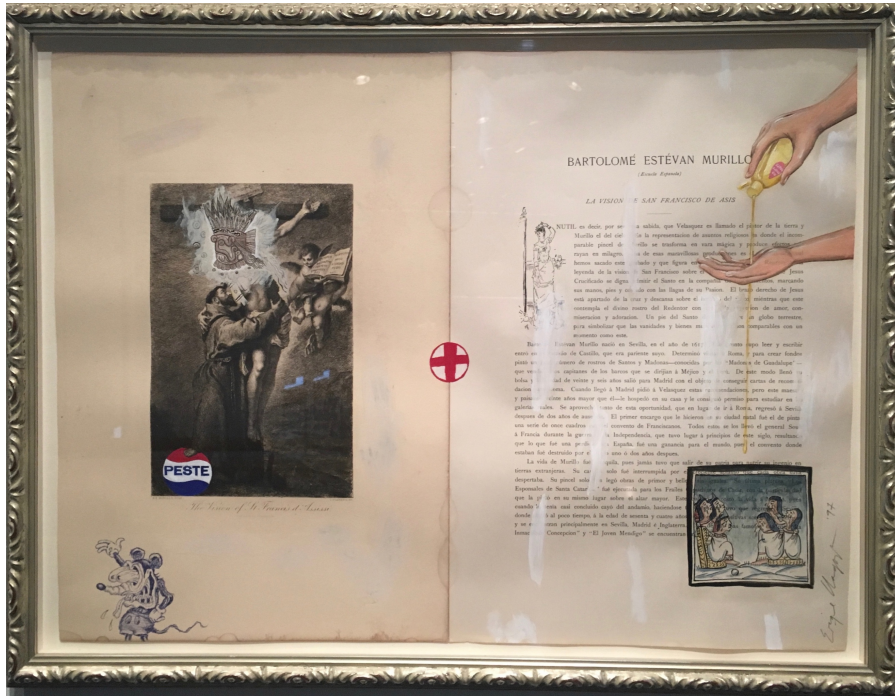


Figure 1: Enrique Chagoya, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, 1997, mixed media, CU Art Museum, Boulder.



Figure 2: Enrique Chagoya, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, 1997, mixed media, CU Art Museum, Boulder.



Figure 3: Enrique Chagoya, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, 1997, mixed media, CU Art Museum, Boulder.



Figure 4: Enrique Chagoya, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, 1998, print.



Figure 5: Enrique Chagoya, *Their Freedom of Expression.... The Recovery of Their Economy*, 1984, charcoal and pastel, San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose.

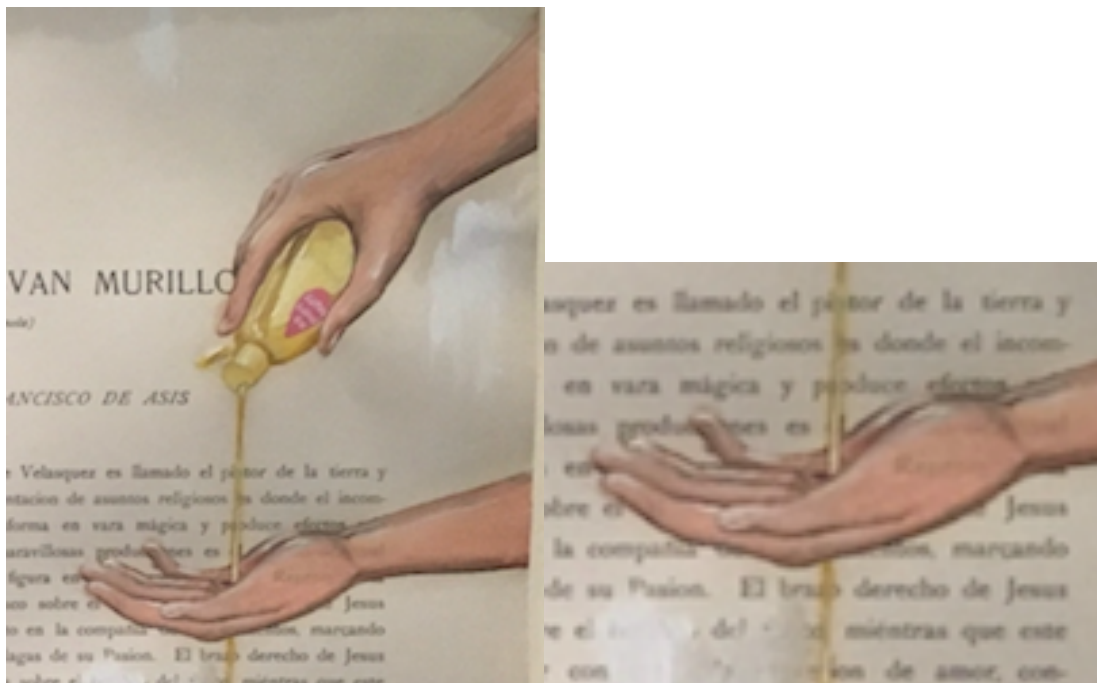


Figure 6: Enrique Chagoya, *The Vision of Saint Francis Assisi*, 1997, mixed media, CU Art Museum, Boulder.

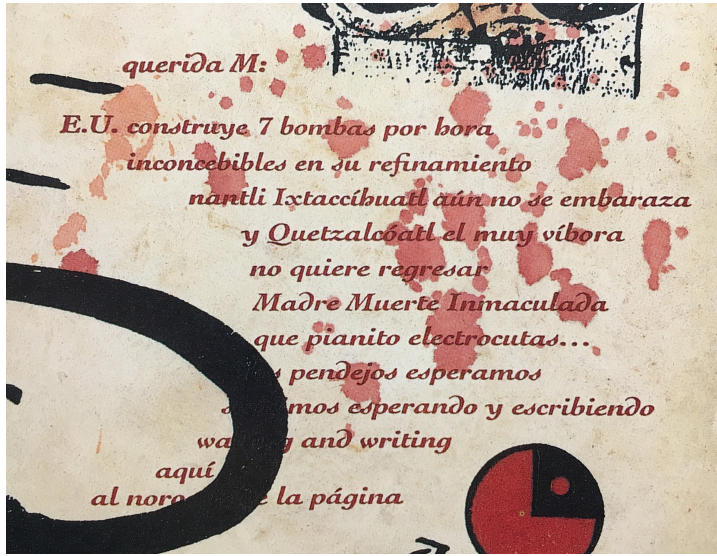


Figure 7: Enrique Chagoya, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol*, 1998, print.

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