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Material historicity: Rethinking objects through the mis/recognition of a Catholic saint

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ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research in Santa Cruz Mixtepec, Mexico, this article investigates a local debate about the identity of a historic statue of a saint. It shows that historical and object biography approaches cannot fully account for the different ways that people draw on material evidence, religious understandings, and their own perceptions of the past when engaging with such meaningful objects. To more fully account for such processes, I develop the concept of 'material historicity,' which provides a framework that connects theories of materiality and historical consciousness. This framework will allow scholars to understand how objects and their material qualities provoke and enable creative and interpretive engagements with the past, and how these engagements interact with one another in the present. The case of the Mixtepec Saint shows that in addition to these analytical possibilities, attention to material historicity can also offer a politics that challenges the authority of secular, historicist interpretations of the past by allowing multiple perspectives to be considered on equal footing.

KEYWORDS

Material culture; object biography; history; historicity; Catholicism; saints; Mexico

Locked away in the sacristy of the parish church in Santa Cruz Mixtepec, Mexico, antique carvings, crosses and paintings gather dust. One of the carvings, which dates to the late 17th or early eighteenth century, depicts a male saint enrobed in red and gold. Although this carving has evident 'attributes' – those iconographic symbols that enable believers and art historians to identify specific saints in Christian religious imagery – his identity became a matter of muted contention during my research in Santa Cruz in 2017. While many Catholic villagers identified the figure as San Jacinto (Saint Hyacinth of Poland), he was identified as San José (Saint Joseph) by the parish priest and some art historians, none of whom were from the community. At first, I did not expect this seemingly minor discrepancy to be all that significant: after all, the sculpture was no longer publicly visible in the church and it was also no longer the focus of any overt public devotional activity in the parish. However, as I will show, the disagreement over this saint's identity reveals much about how historic Catholic material culture is understood and experienced by different kinds of people in Mexico today.

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In this article, I use the local debate about the identity of the Mixtepec Saint as a device to investigate how the past is central to people's knowledge and experiences of meaningful material objects. I call this debate a 'mis/recognition,' in order to highlight that the polysemous qualities of the sculpture are not socially neutral: what is perceived as the true identification of the saint by one party constitutes his misrecognition for others; a misrecognition, it transpires, that is itself consequential and potentially dangerous for some of my research participants. My central argument is that these conflicting identifications of the Mixtepec Saint indicate the presence not only of different interpretations of its history and biography as an object, but also completely different modes of understanding and attaching meaning to the past. While these different modes of historical understanding may appear to map onto cultural differences entailed by class and ethnicity in contemporary Oaxaca, I will show that such an interpretation risks missing the nuances of the diversity of ways that people can understand the past and its relationship with the present. Instead, I argue that the different identifications of the Mixtepec Saint are more usefully understood as manifestations of different 'material historicities,' which enable people to perceive the past through its material evidence in very different ways.

In developing the concept of 'material historicities' as a framework that can be used to ethnographically capture the ways that different people relate to the pasts and presents of objects, I offer a new approach to analysing the work of historical objects in contemporary social life. The broader anthropological value of this framework lies in the fact that it bridges discussions about materiality and agency with anthropological perspectives on different formations and modes of historical consciousness (Brightman 1990; Fazioli 2017; Henig 2017; Hodges 2019; Stewart 2016). In exploring the case of the Mixtepec Saint, I also show that different material historicities can engage with one another in the present in ways that are influenced by larger social and cultural features, such as relations of authority or religious perspectives. In Santa Cruz, the most palpable of these influences is the immanence of saints: the belief that they actually are present and fully embodied in their images and representations (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, 85–87). As such, the material historicity framework can also allow a rethinking of the role that visual practices play in religious experience, underscoring the need to critically examine whether, when and how biographical, visual, or canonical histories of objects and images are relevant to those 'on the ground' (cf. Colwell 2022). I begin in the next section by setting out the concept of 'material historicity' as I develop it here.

Material historicity

In recent decades, anthropologists inspired by phenomenological philosophy developed a series of now familiar concepts like 'materiality' and 'sociality,' which enabled them to challenge the apparently objective separation of objects, society, and environment from people's social experiences of them (Miller 2005; Stewart 2016, 81). More recently, 'historicity' has been added to this toolkit into order to distinguish the emergent nature of people's knowledge and experiences of the past from historicist accounts of 'history,' which are seemingly closed off and unaffected by the present (Hodges 2019, 291–293; Stewart 2016, 80–81). The historicity concept is particularly useful for anthropologists working with historic objects like the Mixtepec Saint, because rather than analysing different interpretations of historical 'facts', it focuses our attention onto how *all* knowledge of the past is influenced by the ways that people experience and utilize it. It

allows us to take into account different cultural models of what the past is in relationship to people's present circumstances and also their ideas about the future, both of which inevitably affect whether and how the past is meaningful and relevant to their lives today (Hirsch 2007, 159; cf. Fazioli 2017, 11–18; Hirsch and Stewart 2006).

Historicity can also be used to understand those forms of historical consciousness that do not depend on practices or discourses of 'memory': rather than the recollection and recovery of things that have already been known, historicity emphasizes creative and emergent acts of discovery, inference, and ongoing social experience that work to describe and explain the past (Irvine 2018; Rozental 2016; Sansi 2005; Stewart 2016, 89). Interpretation and inference are essential for people who engage with objects or images whose histories are not easily known, especially where those objects are culturally, intellectually, or spiritually salient in the present (Harries 2017). As I have explored elsewhere, inference – those patterns of thought described by Gell and others as 'abduction' – is essential for individuals to interpret meaningful material and aesthetic forms, especially within changing social and cultural contexts (Cant 2019a, 35–40; Gell 1998, 12–24). Importantly for the discussion here, inference is also how people 'read clues' from material evidence to interpret backwards to identify the causes, provenances, and identities of things (Ginzburg 1980; Sanchez 2024; cf. Keane 2003). But such readings always takes place within larger contexts of disciplinary, cultural, or social regimes of knowledge, which influence not only the interpretation of evidence, but also what kinds of evidence are selected or discounted in the first place (Cant 2019a, 39–49; Engelke 2008; Gell 1998, 12–24; Ginzburg 1980; Scheper Hughes 2012).[1]

In framing my approach as *material* historicity, I emphasize the ways that objects and their aesthetic and material qualities provoke and enable such multiple, creative and interpretive engagements with the past. Like other scholars working in the vein of material culture, and especially material religion, this framework focuses analytic attention onto the registers of emotion, sensation, perception, and value that are generated as people encounter and engage with objects in ways that precede and exceed verbal communication about symbols and overt meanings (Carroll 2018; Hutchings and McKenzie 2016, 5; Ingold 2000, 153–171; Keane 2003; Morgan 2016, 14–15; Myers 2005). At the same time, the concept of material historicity challenges the idea that attention to an object's biography – its seemingly identifiable 'career' or its path of circulation – necessarily captures its most important temporal qualities. Over the past 35 years, documenting an object's trajectory through space and time has been one of the fundamental methods through which anthropologists, archaeologists, and others have sought to understand material objects and their entanglements with people's social lives (Appadurai 1986; Bauer 2019; Kopytoff 1986; Morgan 2016). While this approach, of course, has offered wonderful insights into what happens as objects traverse different regimes of value, ideology, ontology, et cetera, it also risks obscuring that the aesthetic, temporal, affective, and ontological conditions of some objects, in some contexts, cannot be glimpsed through an exclusively biographical lens (Cant 2019a, 34–35; Domínguez Rubio 2016; see Bauer 2019 for a comprehensive overview and reappraisal of *The Social Life of Things*). Indeed, Arjun Appadurai himself pointed to the unstable and unruly nature of material objects and their social lives, emphasising that objecthood itself is a state that must be continuously buttressed through time: even permanency is a kind of historical change (2006; cf. Domínguez Rubio 2016; Hammant Forthcoming).

Chip Colwell (2022) takes up this point in his recent exploration of how some objects may be metaphorical (and sometimes literal) palimpsests. He examines how objects can accrue aspects of symbolism, materiality, and inter-indexicality with other objects, people and cultural forms, as they move through time and space, resulting in objects that 'simultaneously contain multiple meanings – by turns added and erased, hidden and conspicuous – as each new meaning is inscribed on and made in reference to past ones' (2022, 130). The palimpsest approach is informative here, as it challenges the idea that objects always entail meanings that can be clearly assigned to the discrete places, times, and contexts through which objects move, and it also attends to questions of scale and erasure of meaning through time (Colwell 2022, 135). Indeed, the Mixtepec Saint can certainly be understood as a palimpsest, both metaphorically and literally. Yet, what is still missing is a recognition of the temporal qualities of objects beyond those of trajectory/biography. Biography typically assumes a chronological unfolding of linear process, characterized through the metaphor of forward movement in time (Mímisson 2012, 456).[2] While the palimpsest approach provides a welcome rebalancing of the chronological relationships between context, meaning and object, it still relies on the sequential temporality of object biography, even if the object itself does not present its meanings and representations to us in linear form (Colwell 2022, 133–135; cf. Lucas 2022, 149).[3]

Other temporal qualities of objects beyond that of biography can and do exist, and I suggest that they become particularly evident when different understandings of the past (that is, historicities) are at odds with one another, as with the case of the Mixtepec Saint. Rebecca Bryant (2014), for example, describes two important non-biographical temporal qualities of objects that she observed during her research on the aftermath of the war in Cyprus.[4] The first, 'temporal alterity' describes the way that the lifespans of intimate belongings are often mismatched to human lifespans, in that they have social lives before their owners and they also usually far outlive them. Bryant argues that this 'outliving' causes a temporal dissonance between a person and their intimate belongings, in the sense that these objects have the capacity to bring other futures into being, beyond those that their owners can imagine or predict themselves. This second quality she describes as 'temporal dynamism,' or an object's capacity to dramatically change the relationship of the past and present to the future. Bryant argues that it is this temporal dynamism, underpinned by the particular material forms and aesthetic characteristics of Cypriots' intimate belongings, that enables such objects to do particular kinds of historical work, and helps people living in the aftermath of the war to reconcile themselves with a history and a future that feel entirely outside of their control. In Bryant's analysis, these capacities are associated with objects' *endurance* in time, space, and condition, rather than forward movement and change into an unwritten future.

The material historicity framework I propose here likewise enables us to view other temporal capacities of objects, and to consider the historical work that they may do in the present and in times other than the present. It prompts us to ask not just what objects have meant and have done at different points through time and space, but also how different people reckon an object's past, what that past means to them and others, and – crucially – how issues like power and authority may influence these experiences (cf. Ramsey 2024). As Sandra Rozental has suggested in her analyses of the heritagisation of cultural objects, a focus on historicity makes a political as well as an analytical

point: it resists the secular and often nationalistic framing of objects as discrete and inert 'artefacts' from the past, a perspective that denies communities' and individuals' active and autonomous engagement with such objects for the ongoing reproduction of their social, cultural and spiritual lives (2016, 185–186, 211–212; cf. Colwell 2022, 144). In the sections that follow, I explore some of the material historicities entailed by the Mixtepec Saint by considering how its different viewers engage its material and aesthetic features. I also show how these different historicities impinge upon one another in the present in ways that are powerful, meaningful and potentially dangerous (for some viewers at least) by the possibility of saintly immanence.

The saint in Mixtepec

Santa Cruz Mixtepec is nestled in the foothills of the Southern Sierra Madre mountains in central Oaxaca, about 55 kilometres south of the state capital.[5] It is a relatively small village of about 1,200 people that serves as the administrative centre (*cabecera municipal*) of the larger municipality of about 3,700 people living in small hamlets, including a settlement at the ruins of El Trapiche, an eighteenth century hacienda (INEGI 2020). It is the centre of the Roman Catholic parish, also called Santa Cruz Mixtepec, which has a number of chapels and churches maintained by municipal church committees and served by the single parish priest, Padre Luis.[6] [7] The vast majority of Cruzeños (people from Santa Cruz) identify as Roman Catholics, although two small evangelical Protestant churches are also active there. In the nearby market town of Zimatlán de Alvarez there are also Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, and Baptist churches, however this Christian diversity is relatively new, and even the non-Catholic residents of Santa Cruz view its deep Catholic history as a fundamental part of the community's identity.

Mixtepec was one of the first sites of Christian evangelization in this part of Mexico. By 1557, just thirty five years after Europeans first arrived in the region, it had been incorporated into the Diocese of Antequera and the Dominican Order had established a convent there, eventually naming it *La Santa Cruz* (The Holy Cross) (Mullen 1975, 234–237; Pérez et al. 1991, 83–84).[8] The Dominicans initially had exclusive permission to evangelize the Zapotec peoples, granted in 1536 by the infamous conquistador Hernán Cortés, who was by then the Marques of Oaxaca (Martínez Sola 1998). However, by the seventeenth century, the Dominicans were losing influence, especially in rural hinterlands like Santa Cruz Mixtepec. The Indigenous population had been decimated by epidemics of European diseases: one estimate suggests that 1.35 million people died in Oaxaca alone between 1520 and 1630, which led to wholesale social and economic upheaval, and undermined the political and extractive power of traditional Indigenous elites and the Dominican friars in their rural convents (Romero Frizzi 2000, 310–312). Further, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Spanish Crown sought to curtail the power of the papacy in New Spain by placing the mendicant orders under greater authority of the bishops, thus provoking what would have felt like rapid shifts in ecclesiastic authority and religious practice in rural Oaxaca (Norget 2008, 145). In the nineteenth century, the Reform Laws of the newly independent Mexican nation finally eroded what was left of the Order's power; the last Dominican friars left Oaxaca in 1859 after the male Catholic orders were suppressed and expelled from their convents throughout the country (Morales 1998; Torres Torres 1997, 338).

This deep history of Dominican presence in Santa Cruz is palpable in the community even today through the celebration of feast days that are particularly important to the Order, such as those of Our Lady of the Rosary and St Catherine of Siena, in addition to the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which occasions a large fiesta on the 14th of September each year for the village's holy patron and namesake. Saint Hyacinth (San Jacinto, one of the Mixtepec Saint's possible identities) is also a significant figure in Dominican history as he became one of Saint Dominic's first followers after meeting him in Rome in 1220 (Proctor 1901, 229–232). But the Dominican past is most strongly evident in the physical ruins of the convent that are attached to the parish church. These ruins have been the focus of a heritage conservation and restoration project, and they were what drew me to Santa Cruz Mixtepec in the first place for my research on the intersections of the aesthetics and practices of seemingly secular heritage professionals and religious Roman Catholics within Mexican heritage regimes (Cant 2019b).

The restoration of the convent was undertaken through a collaboration of the municipal authority of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, the Mexican Federal Government, via the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), and the Alfredo Harp Helú Foundation of Oaxaca (FAHHO), a private cultural and public health organization that is bankrolled by one of the wealthiest families in Mexico (FAHHO 2022).[9] The FAHHO has a dedicated restoration workshop that employs researchers, architects and engineers who work on approximately twenty projects per year (FAHHO 2019). By law INAH regulates and oversees all such projects in the country, because all religious buildings built before 1992 are federally owned and designated as national patrimony (General Law of National Assets 2004; see Cant 2018a for a discussion of other implications of this law). INAH's local office supplies professional art conservationists and art historians who frequently work with the FAHHO. Many of these heritage professionals are knowledgeable about, and very sympathetic to, so-called popular religious practices as they take place in rural Mexico: after all, they are most often the ones who negotiate with individuals, churches, and communities about specific heritage interventions. Over the last decade, discussions about professional ethics in the Mexican heritage sector have also encouraged community engagement and pluralism in their treatment of objects and spaces – especially where these are central to local identities and spiritual practices. However, their primary professional and legal responsibilities remain firmly rooted in secular heritage, conservation, and art historical values (INAH 2016).

My first encounter with the Mixtepec Saint was with these heritage professionals in the initial stages of my research. I was touring the site with the FAHHO architect in charge of the Mixtepec project, as well as two art historians from INAH, one of which was working onsite to stabilize some fresco fragments on the convent walls. The visiting art historian was keen to see the objects stored in the sacristy, so they asked Juan, the church's sacristan, to show them to us. As their attention roamed around the small space, the art historians interrogated Juan on everything he knew about the religious objects. They admired a large, black crucifix that one of the art historians identified as being made from *pasta de caña de maíz* (corn stalk paste), a sculptural material characteristic of the early colonial period, and unique to New Spain. They were also intrigued by carvings of three Dominican monks with identical faces, which the other art historian said represented the Holy Trinity. She spent quite some time considering their physical deterioration, as they had suffered from an insect infestation at some point in the past. But

she only briefly acknowledged the carving of the saint with which we are concerned here, noting that it was a lovely carving of San José, and pointing out some large, vertical fissures that had opened up in the figure's back.

The figure of the Mixtepec Saint is carved entirely from a single piece of hardwood, most likely alder or cedar, and its robes are decorated with yellow and red pigments, overlain with patterning in gold leaf to indicate fabrics rich with embroidery and embellishment [Figure 1]. The saint's right hand is raised in blessing, and he holds a child in the crook of his left arm. The child, whose form more resembles a miniature adult than an infant, opens his arms to embrace the viewer, even as he turns to look into the face of the saint who cradles him. The saint's features are decidedly European: fair skin, angular cheekbones and a tapering nose; his flowing black hair, moustache and double-pointed beard are formed of sculpted curls and waves. Unlike some other sculptures of the period, his eyes are not made of glass, but are carved from the wood itself.

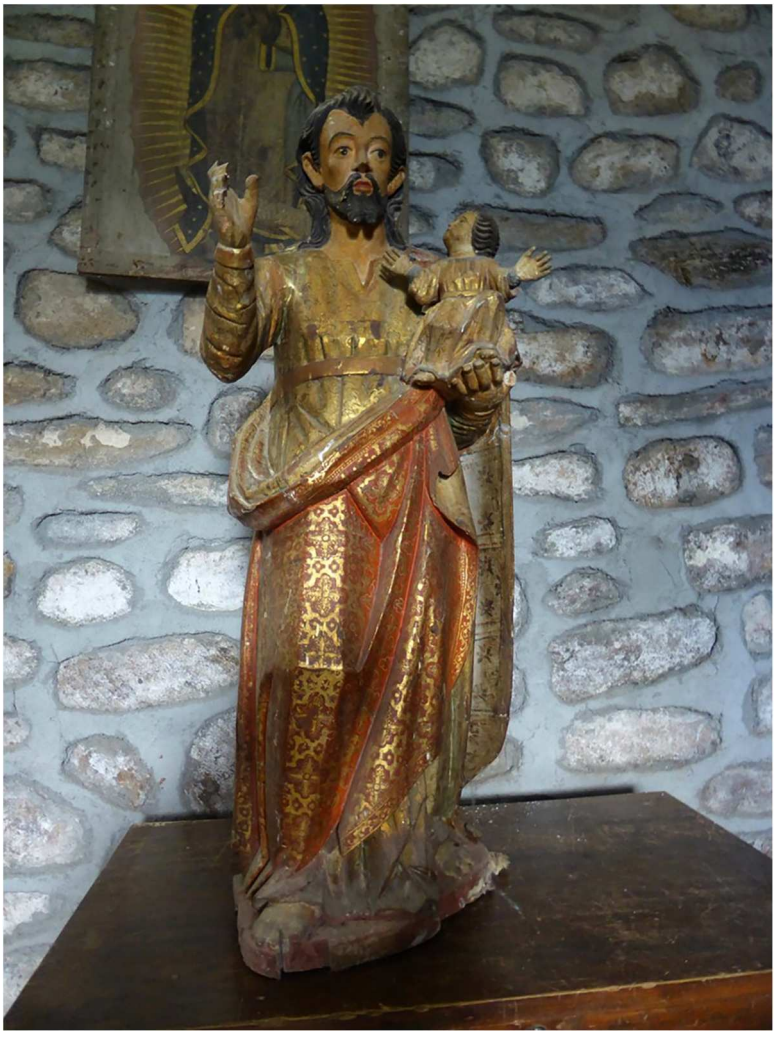

Figure 1. The 'Mixtepec Saint.' Photo by Author.

Their painted pupils are large and black, without irises, and their lids are lined by a heavy black contour. They look directly outwards, toward the viewer, and the eyebrows are slightly raised. This combines with the neutral expression of the mouth to give the saint the appearance of stern contemplation. The damage that the art historian observed on the statue is evidence of its age and past use as an active devotional object: almost all of the fingertips have been broken off, and the paint on its back is riddled with large areas of flaking and wear, most likely caused by exposure to the elements and the dry Oaxacan air over time. As with all rural churches in Oaxaca, Santa Cruz's church has no climate control and the sculpture was often brought outdoors for processions and other devotional activities in the past. The saint's back is also covered with splashes of light blue latex house paint that was used to repaint the church's reredos altarpiece (*retablo*) in the early 2000s. The large cracks that the art historian noted were caused by an iron ring that had been fitted into the saint's shoulder blades most likely in the early twentieth century, which had been used to secure the figure into the highest niche above the altar in the parish church, where it was ensconced until quite recently.

Perhaps ironically, it was the local Catholic community's ongoing veneration of this statue and its location in pride of place over the altar that ultimately caused it to be removed to storage in the sacristy. When Padre Luis took up his post in Santa Cruz Mixtepec, one of the first tasks he undertook was to reorganize – and in some cases completely redecorate – the churches and chapels in the parish. During his seminary training in Mexico City he studied Christian art history extensively, a topic he now teaches to trainee priests in the seminary in Oaxaca, in addition to his parish duties. Padre Luis puts great stock in the spiritual and didactic importance of the official liturgical aesthetics of the Church, as set by Roman (that is, Vatican-led) tradition and regulation. Although he was content to retain many of the other antique statues and crosses in the main chapel where they could be accessed by parishioners at any time, as soon as he arrived in Santa Cruz, he insisted that the Mixtepec Saint be removed from above the altar and replaced with the Holy Cross, the village's namesake and patron. Many people in the community were not pleased with this change, and they were concerned that San Jacinto was being neglected: as I have explored elsewhere, when Catholic Cruzeños are forcibly kept from caring for their own images of saints, they worry that the social bonds they have cultivated with them can become eroded (Cant 2018a; cf. Graziano 2016 on personhood of Mexican saints).

The movement of the statue into storage was just one of many 'improvements' Padre Luis had instituted during his time in Santa Cruz. Unlike his predecessor, he insisted that all young people who wished to undergo the sacrament of confirmation must complete at least one year of preparation classes beforehand, to the chagrin of many mothers in the community who embarked on a fervent text-message campaign to track down a priest from Oaxaca City who supposedly would perform the sacraments 'no questions asked.' Many of Padre Luis' interventions were intended to 'correct' errors relating to the treatment of saints: he tried to insist that only flowers in the appropriate liturgical colours for the season could be used in the church, regardless of what was available in the weekly market.[10] He also prevented Cruzeños from celebrating Our Lady of the Rosary on the first Sunday in October as they had traditionally done, because her feast is officially October 7th, and he memorably banned bull riding from the churchyard during fiestas, a move that was grumbled about frequently by the church committee

and other municipal authorities.[11] Padre Luis' rather doctrinaire position needs to be understood within the larger context of the Church's anxieties about the perceived distance between 'popular' and 'official' Catholicism in Latin America and elsewhere globally. Since the Second Ecumenical Council (Vatican II) in the 1960s, more conservative currents in the Church have promoted a catechismal programme they call 'the New Evangelization,' which aims to promote a more unified Catholic community by bringing popular practices closer to official norms and by encouraging deeper knowledge and accurate understanding of the Catholic faith (Peterson and Vasquez 1998). This programme has had significant traction in the Archdiocese of Oaxaca since the 1990s (Norget 1997, 74–79).[12] Padre Luis often discussed its importance with me, especially in reference to the increasing threat he saw from Protestant churches in the region.

Villagers' perspectives on the changes brought in by Padre Luis were, of course, variable. For example, a retired teacher who was a catechist, very active in regional Church networks, and went twice weekly to pray the Rosary in Zimatlán, was generally supportive of the changes. A middle-aged man who had recently returned from living in the United States for over twenty years likewise saw value in the community 'coming into line with proper Church practices,' although he qualified this by saying it should not be 'to the detriment of village culture.' Almost all Cruzeño Catholics, however – even Juan the sacristan and those who stood as lectors and ushers during the weekly Mass – thought that Padre Luis was meddling in things that were not properly his to decide, things that should rightfully be left to Cruzeños on the church and fiesta committees. Although it may seem odd that faithful Catholics would readily question their priest's authority and leadership within his own church, this actually reflects a more general state of affairs across rural Oaxaca. The roots of such circumstances can be traced to the dramatic changes in the relationship between the Church, state and society from at least the nineteenth century through to the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth (Meyer 2006; Wright-Rios 2009). More recently, since 1995 Indigenous communities' political and civil autonomy from the state and other external parties has been constitutionally guaranteed in Oaxaca through the recognition of traditional collective governance systems ('*usos y costumbres*'), which typically function through the voluntary labour of married men, and sometimes married women, in various civil committees and leadership positions. In some communities like Santa Cruz, these include the church committee, which is responsible for the physical maintenance and accessibility of the church and its grounds, coordinating meetings for catechism, family outreach, and youth groups, as well as overseeing the various fiesta committees that are convened throughout the year.[13]

This official political autonomy also translates into de facto social autonomy in these communities. Paired with significant economic and political support from the Oaxacan government for cultural development and tourism programmes, this has led in recent years to the strengthening of the already potent community-based identities in central Oaxaca, premised on values of localism and the renewal of tangible and intangible cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions (Cant 2019a, 111–128; Cohen 2001). This often positions community leaders as the guardians of culture and tradition vis-à-vis outside influences, sometimes including the Catholic Church itself (cf. Chávez Castillo 2000; Gross 2003; Norget 2007). Even the convent conservation project was a collaboration between the municipal authority, INAH and the FAHHO, and did not formally include any representation for the Church (FAHHO 2022, 44). Padre Luis was often excluded

from their discussions and decision-making on the ground: after all, it is the federal government and not the diocese that legally owns the church and the ruins, and as a branch of the autonomous municipal authority, it is the church committee that actually holds its keys.

This does not mean that clergy are always in conflict with community leaders in Oaxaca, of course (see Norget 1997), and there are very good reasons that the municipal authorities and Catholic Cruzeños want to keep Padre Luis fairly happy. They need him for the celebration of the Eucharist, confession, and the sacraments, and there is a long-term shortage of Catholic priests in Mexico, perhaps exacerbated by rising rates of violence against them by drug cartels and other criminal groups (Hodge 2022; Zorzi and Prieto 2023). The Catholic community in Santa Cruz is concerned that if Padre Luis requests to leave his post due to disagreements, they could be left with no parish priest at all. This worry is not unreasonable, as the parish already had their previous priest removed due to local dissatisfaction, and the Church Committee was worried about having a reputation as a difficult parish. Nevertheless, this complex balance of social, political and historical circumstances encourages Catholic Cruzeños to view the formalized rituals of Mass and the sacraments as the purview of Padre Luis, and all their other activities as properly matters for the local community. As I discuss in the sections that follow, the Mixtepec Saint lends itself particularly well to such consistent, local, and collective perspectives, precisely because its identity as San Jacinto is grounded in histories and traditions that only work at the scale of Santa Cruz Mixtepec itself.

The material historicities of the Mixtepec Saint

A few weeks after my first encounter with the Mixtepec Saint, I was once again in the sacristy with Juan, but this time without the heritage professionals. He had wanted to show me the vestiges of a doorway from the now missing second storey of the cloister, which could be seen only from the inside. While we were there, I asked to look again at the antique sculptures. Juan pulled each of them out of a low glass-doored case and placed them on the table in the sunlight that was slanting into the dusty room from the narrow window set high above us in the exterior stone wall. After some time looking at the Holy Trinity series, Juan and I turned to the Mixtepec Saint. We looked at the damage to the wood and the crackling paint, and Juan explained that some people in the parish were trying to fundraise from wealthier relatives living in the United States to have the sculpture restored by a private art conservator. This restoration was perhaps even more important than the work on the convent, he explained, because this saint was the original patron saint of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, the one that the friars brought with them when they founded the church – the one that came before the Holy Cross. Then, he continued, 'This is one of our oldest sculptures, but I'm not sure why [the art historian] said that he is San José; he is San Jacinto. But I am also not sure why he is carrying a child. Perhaps the *padre* knows.'

After carefully returning the statues to their dusty case, Juan and I left the sacristy through the ruined cloister, and we found Padre Luis outside. He was just finishing with the queue of parishioners that always appeared during his office hours, when arrangements for baptisms, blessings and confessions are made. Juan explained to the priest that we had been looking at the old carving of San Jacinto, and that we were

curious about why he was holding a child. 'Because he's not San Jacinto,' Padre Luis stated, bluntly. 'Come with me.' The priest led us into his office in the small modern outbuilding that served as the parish rectory. He indicated for us to wait in the two chairs facing his desk while he went to look for something in the adjoining bedroom. When he returned, he was carrying a large picture book of Italian Renaissance religious paintings as well as a handful of printed prayer cards. Adopting a pedagogical tone, Padre Luis began to explain to us that every saint can be clearly identified by a number of specific characteristics – their 'attributes' – and that the sculpture that the villagers called San Jacinto was very clearly San José. Flipping through the book, he found a number of images of Saint Joseph, and pointed out that in many of them, he was enrobed in green and gold, and that he often carried the Christ Child and a lily, which relates to the apocryphal story of how Joseph became betrothed to Mary. Then, sifting through his prayer cards, he pulled out two images of saints who wore the simple black and white habit of the Dominicans. 'This is what San Jacinto should look like, since he was one of the original followers of St Dominic. He would not be dressed in gold, and he would not carry a child. Actually, this is what makes our imagery in the Church so useful for catechism: everyone is easy to recognize.' Forty minutes later, after many more examples of how holy images can be identified by their adornments and associated symbols, Juan and I shuffled out of the priest's office.

When we were out of earshot, I said that Padre Luis' explanation seemed very thorough. Juan glanced over his shoulder and then muttered, 'but *our* San Jacinto doesn't have a lily and he is not dressed in green.' Juan explained that he knew that the sculpture was San Jacinto because before Padre Luis arrived in Santa Cruz and rearranged all of the images in the church, the sculpture had always been in the privileged place above the crucifix and altar where a patron saint should be stationed. He reminded me of the iron ring in the statue's back, and promised that he would take me to the top of the reredos on the wall behind altar to show me the rope that it had been tied to.[14] The niche was now occupied, on Padre Luis' insistence, by the antique silver-plated Holy Cross for which the village now takes its name. Juan then told me the story of how the Holy Cross came to be the village's patron:

> 'When the Spanish arrived, they built this church here in the hills, so they could begin their work bringing the faith to our Zapotec ancestors (*antepasados*) here in Mixtepec. They dedicated it to San Jacinto who is a very important saint for the Dominicans. However, people began to fall very ill: first the small children grew sick and died; then the old people. Everyone was very scared. It was around this time that the Holy Cross miraculously appeared in the cave of La Nerela. [The cross] was naturally formed from the roots of a tree that grew down through the limestone, so we knew that God himself had sent it to us. Once the Holy Cross came to Mixtepec, people stopped getting sick, and so we changed our *patron* [to it].'[15]

This was a tale I was to hear repeated many times by different people throughout my fieldwork. When I asked people to tell me about the history of Santa Cruz, more often than not they began with the story of San Jacinto and the discovery of the Holy Cross. Unlike the hazy conjectures that some enjoyed making about what life *might have* been like for the pre-Hispanic Zapotecs in the palaces on the nearby hilltops (see Winter 1978), the story of San Jacinto was concrete and had a clear narrative grounded in the physical place of the ruined convent, the landscape of the parish, and in the statue itself. For example, when I asked Cruzeños why they thought San Jacinto had

sent illness to the village, some said it was punishment for their earlier sins, before they became Catholics. However, many others explained that it was not really intentional but rather that Santa Cruz had suffered from evil eye (*mal ojo*) caused by the Mixtepec Saint's stare [Figure 1]. One man explained that it was not the archetypal San Jacinto 'as a holy person' (*como una persona santa*) who suffered from evil eye, but the statue itself: 'look at how he stares. When he was up above the altar, he was always watching, always watching *us*! But the Holy Cross came to protect us, and it always protects us now.'

The association of the image of San Jacinto with negative experiences of evil eye and illness was not blamed on the saint per se, but on this particular iteration of his image, and its connection to the place of Mixtepec. I was frequently told that Mixtepec was a negative place – a place where 'good intentions do not have good outcomes.' Evidence for this included the fact that although the site of Santa Cruz was the 'original' community when the Zapotecs descended from their mountaintop settlements, the town had now lost most of its land to neighbouring villages, most of which did not even exist when Santa Cruz and the convent were founded. They had even lost the cave from where the Holy Cross had emerged to San Miguel Mixtepec, a neighbouring municipality in the same parish, with which Santa Cruz has an ongoing and sometimes violent land dispute. Since 2010, Cruzeños have been banned from the cave, preventing them from conducting their annual pilgrimage during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross: this was offered to me as prime evidence of how the conflictual nature of Cruzeños directly obstructs their own interests and correct devotional practices and also, therefore, villagers' relationships with the saints and their patron.[16]

Most incriminating, however, was the fact that people believed that Santa Cruz had *never* become a place of good Catholics. I was frequently told how some of the Dominican friars, after many years of trying to evangelize the Mixtepec area, decided to give up. They sought permission from the bishop to establish a new parish further down the valley at what is now the much larger town of Zimatlán de Alvarez, taking all of the 'true' Christians with them. As one elderly woman told me, in Santa Cruz they left only 'the most stubborn, superstitious and witchcrafty people (*brujeriegos*), whose descendants are all still like this.' It came as quite a surprise when I discovered this tale confirmed by the Dominican historian Fr Francisco Burgoa in his 1674 historical and ethnographic description of Oaxaca, in which he describes Cruzeños as 'superstitious spell-makers, sorcerers, witches and idolaters' (Burgoa 1934 [1674], 27), seemingly anticipating my interlocutor's words by 343 years.[17] It was because of this particular character of Cruzeños, the woman explained, that the statue of San Jacinto remains important in Santa Cruz today: although he is no longer the patron of the village, the figure itself has something in common with the people there. He was, as she said, very difficult, and 'of our kind.' I should note here, however, that this seemingly negative evaluation of Santa Cruz was also viewed by many Cruzeños with some mischievous pride. It showed a streak of anti-authoritarianism and autonomy that they thought positively distinguished themselves from neighbouring towns down in the valley, and, as I have explored elsewhere, practices of witchcraft are also not generally viewed as particularly socially or religiously harmful in Santa Cruz (Cant 2018b). The material historicity through which Catholic Cruzeños identify the Mixtepec Saint as San Jacinto is therefore grounded in the local relationships between past evangelization and conversion by Dominicans and experiences that Cruzeños have had in their own lifetimes. This relationship creates a particular expression of localized temporal

continuity[18] that could not exist if the statue were really San José, as it is the relationship between San Jacinto, the Holy Cross and Cruzeños inside the parish of Mixtepec that both explains, and is explained by, the ways that people have experienced the immanence, personality, and sometimes dangerous spiritual agency of San Jacinto through *this particular statue*'s material and aesthetic characteristics (cf. Graziano 2016; Lamrani 2018; Hodges 2019, 399–400 on the role of locality in popular historicities).

Yet, it is this same material form that leads Padre Luis and the art historians to conclude that he is San José. Both identify the Mixtepec Saint by drawing on Catholic iconographic tradition – they point to the fact that he holds a child as an indicator of his personal relationship with Jesus, and also that he is dressed in sumptuous robes befitting a member of the Holy Family [compare Figures 1 and 2]. As Padre Luis pointed out, as a member of a mendicant order images of San Jacinto would not be so richly decorated

Figure 2. Unknown Artist. San José, n.d. [colonial period]. Sculpture, wood with polychrome. Museo de las Culturas de Oaxaca, Exconvento de Santo Domingo de Guzmán, INAH, Mexico.

in gold leaf, and he would always be dressed in a simple habit [see Figure 3]. Saint Hyacinth of Poland was indeed a Dominican friar. The nobly born Hyacinth (Jacek) Odrowąż became one of the first followers of St Dominic in 1220, eventually becoming known as the Apostle of the North. In fact, not only would Saint Hyacinth have worn the plain black and white Dominican habit in life, but this clothing is doubly iconic of him from the perspective of art history. In addition to his miracles, 'the clothing of Saint Hyacinth by Saint Dominic' is a key moment in his hagiography that is frequently represented in religious artworks (Walzcak 2018).[19] The Mixtepec Saint also lacks the more standard 'attributes' of Saint Hyacinth: a ciborium or monstrance in his right hand and a statue of the Virgin Mary in his left (although these are not always present, as Figure 3 shows). From a purely art historical perspective, one could simply conclude that the priest and the art historians are correct: that the statue is Saint Joseph, and the villagers

Figure 3. Unknown Artist. San Jacinto de Polonia, seventeenth century. Sculpture, white cedar with polychrome. Museo Nacional del Virreinato, INAH, Mexico.

are mistaken. But I would argue that we can only rest easily with this conclusion if we already accept that Western/Christian art history is the only way to know this object at this point in time, and that as a historical object its meaning is unaffected by the present. Indeed, a further comparison of the views of the priest and the art historians challenge this perspective. Although they agree on who the saint is, their reasons and motivations for doing so are not the same.

The art historians and conservationists who consider the Mixtepec Saint purely an example of colonial *Novohispano* art, experience the statue only as material evidence of the artistic, religious and social context in which it was originally created. In the seventeenth century, there was vigorous demand for religious statuary in New Spain, as highly elaborate physical representations of the divine became central to Baroque Catholic sensibilities and practices; they were also essential for evangelization and catechism in regions with low literacy (Larkin 2010, 28–50; Norget 2008; Pierce, Gomar, and Bargellini 2004). Images of Saint Joseph were especially common, since he was designated the patron saint of New Spain in 1555 (Chorpenning 1992; Pierce, Gomar, and Bargellini 2004, 180, 264). One of the art historians explained to me that his diverse representations are also particularly important within *Novohispano* art history: images of 'San José de la Luz', for example, were censored by the Mexican Inquisition because they represented Joseph within the cosmological iconography that should be reserved for Mary. So, variations in his depictions are useful for charting the politics of religious imagery through colonial time and space [Figure 4]. Although such diversity in the past is taken into account in this art historical perspective, divergent interpretations or uses of images in times later than the colonial period are entirely discounted. Further, since the Mixtepec Saint depicts Joseph in a very standard way, it has never entered into the art historical record as an individual piece, and so it remains for them just one example of a broader and very common category of religious objects in Mexico today.

Of the three, this kind of historicity corresponds most closely with the hegemonic historicism that has characterized Western academic and secular-public notions of the past since at least the nineteenth century. Such perspectives are grounded in 'common sense' ontological assumptions about the linear and sequential relationship between past, present and future: the past is perceived as entirely finished, temporally and even spatially distinct from the present (see Hodges 2019, 391–393).[20] However, from an anthropological perspective, it is analytically and politically productive to take such positions as just one possibility among many. In viewing their identification of the statue as the expression of a particular material historicity – which is itself the product of social, historical, political and disciplinary processes – I can take all my research participants' perspectives on equal footing and analyse the cultural formations and relations of power and authority that exist around and between them (cf. Ramsey 2024. Rozental 2016). To be fair to the art historians and conservationists who work long, hard hours restoring buildings and objects in rural villages, they generally do their best to handle religious imagery in ways that are considered locally appropriate. For example, one male conservationist I interviewed had previously worked on a statue of a female saint who was dressed in cloth robes and was the focus of significant devotional activity in her community. The robes had to be removed for the work to be done, so it was agreed that the conservationist would be accompanied at all times by a female member of the confraternity, so that the saint would not be embarrassed by her nudity. But where conservation comes into conflict

Figure 4. Andrés Lopez. San José, eighteenth century. Painting, oil on metal plate. Museo Nacional del Virreinato, INAH, Mexico

with local practices, the legal definition of such objects as patrimony of the Mexican nation takes priority, and these experts do not generally consider locals' views on the artworks in their churches as reliable sources of information about the objects themselves. They view villagers only as potential custodians or at times, potential threats, to such 'heritagised' objects (cf. Rozental 2016).

Padre Luís also did not place much value on the villagers' knowledge about the history and meaning of the objects in their church. However, although he agreed with the art historians that the statue was clearly San José, his understanding and experience of it was quite distinct from theirs. When we discussed privately the identity of the Mixtepec Saint, Padre Luis said that it was:

> very important, *very* essential to recognize Mary and Joseph when you encounter their images. This is not just because they are holy saints, but because they are members of the

> Holy Family, and as such, the child in Joseph's arms is Christ himself. By calling this statue Saint Hyacinth, the villagers not only fail to recognise Joseph, but even worse, they fail to recognize Jesus as God.

By connecting the identification of the saint with the identification of the infant Jesus, Padre Luis draws on the salvation history of Christ's life in order to make a historical, theological, and even moral claim for the statue's identity. For him, it is not just factually incorrect to identify this statute as San Jacinto, as it is for the art historians, but it is more deeply wrong. It is an act that fails to recognize the likeness and even presence of Jesus Christ, who should be the essential figure of Catholic devotion. Although Padre Luis agreed with the art historians' interpretations of the image's history: that it was made by a mestizo or European artist working in the colonial Church's artistic guilds, this was simply not important to him. When viewing the Mixtepec Saint, Padre Luis was not taken to an artist's workshop or a rural Dominican convent in sixteenth century Mexico, but instead to the first century lives of Joseph and Jesus as told in the New Testament, and to the atemporal liturgical authority of the Roman Catholic Church itself.

Padre Luis' own, perhaps softer, belief in the immanence of saints in their images was also linked through their material forms to the image of the Catholic Church resplendent and successful. For him, the continuing existence of the seventeenth century Mixtepec Saint into the twenty-first century speaks to the Roman Catholic Church's enduring righteousness and authority over the land and through time. As discussed above, Padre Luis in different ways has attempted to bring his parishioners' religious practices into line with the Church's official liturgical aesthetics and calendar. This, he insisted was not just a matter of taste or tradition, but was crucial for coordinating the 'right kind of worship' that best enabled Catholics together to glorify God and to resist the incursions of other religions in Mexico today. Padre Luis felt it was absolutely necessary to remove the Mixtepec Saint from the niche high above the main altar, because from his point of view it was dangerously occupying a space higher than the crucifix: 'how can we have another image placed above Jesus on the Cross, if it is not the holy patron?' he asked rhetorically. While the material historicity through which Catholic Cruzeños identify the Mixtepec Saint as San Jacinto emphasizes individual and collective experiences through time in the place of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, the material historicity drawn upon by Padre Luis is rooted in the global history and temporality of ritual, tradition and salvation, as promoted by the Church in Mexico today. Finally, for the art historians, the statue exists within the national, political and secular temporality of heritage and colonial art history.

The different explanations of the Mixtepec Saint's identity that have been explored here depend on its interlocutors' diverse understandings of material evidence and historical perception, which I have argued can be conceptualized and compared using the concept of 'material historicity'. However, the implications of this diversity are not the same for everyone concerned. For the art historians, it is inconsequential that the villagers in Santa Cruz Mixtepec do not agree that the statue is San José, nor are they particularly interested in the fact that Padre Luis does agree with them. For them, the Mixtepec Saint is an artefact from a time in the past that is fully closed off from the present, so his identity is an intellectual question whose answer does not particularly affect life today, or even how they treat it as an object (apart from, hypothetically, whether or not they might

recommend it for conservation). However, for Padre Luis and most Cruzeños, the possibility that the Mixtepec Saint may be misidentified by a fellow Catholic is disturbing and potentially risky. In the hope of making this point as explicit as possible, I have called this situation a 'mis/recognition' to emphasize how, from each party's perspective, the other's misidentification of the saint has the potential to undermine good relationships with sacred persons, potentially incurring consequences now or in the immediate or eschatological future (see Irvine 2018 on the productive value of dissonance within saintly histories and landscapes).

The correct identification of saints is in fact a repeating trope in Catholic histories and devotional narratives. It can be seen, for example, in one of the most important foundation narratives of New Spain: the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the Indigenous peasant Juan Diego on the outskirts of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán in 1531. The story contains a feature typical of Marian apparitions worldwide: Guadalupe provided Juan Diego with a miraculous image of *her own physical likeness* to prove to the bishop that she was genuinely the mother of God, thus establishing her public devotion and hastening the conversion of Indigenous Americans to Christianity (Gruzinski 1995; Wolf 1958). Anxieties about saints' authenticity and their correct identification were also central to the emerging sensibilities of the broader Catholic Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Tutino 2021; Winston 2002), foreshadowing current practices in which the recognition of a saint's likeness is associated with the beginning or renewal of devotional engagement (Lamrani 2018, 51–71; 116-146; Mayblin 2014, S273; Norget 2008; Scheper Hughes 2010).[21]

Such concerns about identification make perfect sense when considered in light of saintly immanence, as engagement with a saint is not a matter of *belief*, but rather of *knowing someone*: the saint actually *is* present as a person, one who knows and experiences their human interlocutors within contemporary historical time (Cannell 1995, 379–380; Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, 85–87).[22] It is noteworthy here that in Santa Cruz, people never call the images of saints 'carvings,' 'statues,' or 'figures' unless they are speaking about specific features of the material objects – and usually in response to questions by conservation experts or anthropologists. Instead, they address them by gendered pronouns (he/she) or, often, a diminutive of their name (*la virgencita, Judasito*, etc.). After the initial discussion between Juan, myself and Padre Luis about the Mixtepec Saint, Juan always called him 'the antique little saint with the child' (*el antiguo santito con el niño*) when speaking in front of the priest, to avoid irritating him and to avoid calling the saint by what he considered the incorrect name. When Padre Luis was not around, Juan continued to call him San Jacinto.

Documenting the conflicting historicities of the Mixtepec Saint therefore provides a window onto Catholic understandings of immanence and the troubles that may arise when an immanent saint cannot be readily identified by his interlocutors. David Morgan has suggested that individual practices of devotional identification can be understood by considering how they are rooted in cultural and institutional traditions of visual knowledge, which he analyses via the metaphor of 'the archive': those entwined histories of images, cultural forms, and visual formulae that allow viewers to connect a particular image to a saint's hagiography, history of representation and larger fields of symbolism, enabling the viewed image to embody the saint in her entirety and thus achieve personhood (2012, 58–60; cf. Meyer 2015; Orsi 2010). However, it seems to me that the archive

approach only helps us to understand situations in which people *successfully* identify the holy images that they view. Indeed, for theologically essential figures like Jesus, the immediate recognition of his likeness is a necessary component of many types of Christian practice – as Padre Luis himself argued.[23]

For the multitudes of lesser-known Catholic saints, recognition by believers is not necessarily automatic nor even always possible, however. As my ethnography shows, the clues that are offered by material forms, aesthetics, symbols and 'attributes' – and even historical 'facts' and hagiography – will not necessarily lead all viewers to the same conclusions about an image's identity. As there is no such thing as a 'neutral' or 'ideal' viewer, whose interpretation of such clues will be objective, so to speak, the archive approach needs to be augmented by taking relevant historicities (material and otherwise) into account.[24] In giving attention to the different ways that people use inference and experience to identify sacred persons, we can better place such practices within broader religious, ideological and political contexts, and take our research participants' own ideas about the nature of place, time and personhood into account. Such an approach helps to explain why Catholic saints seem to have a type of personhood that is never fully settled, despite their immanence. Because historicities are contingent and inseparable from the contexts in which they emerge, saints cohere into permanently manifold identities and meanings: what Aviad Kleinberg evocatively calls a 'saintly syrup' of identity that shifts between contexts and through time (2008, 27; cf. Graziano 2016; Lamrani 2018; Scheper Hughes 2012; Turner and Turner 1978, 143–144; Orsi 2010).

Conclusion: mis/recognition and material historicity

The possibility that saints may not be recognizable in their statues and paintings can make immanence a problem for Roman Catholics in Mexico and elsewhere today, especially where competing religious and non-religious views come into contact or even conflict with one another. If a saint is immanent but her physical form can be misidentified, then her interlocutors may worry that they will address her by the wrong name, celebrate her on the wrong day, or petition her incorrectly for support. This could have serious consequences for them: saints may become angry, or the authority and durability of the Catholic Church may be undermined. As such, we can see why some of my research participants wanted certainty about the Mixtepec Saint's identity. However, as anthropologists, we do not need such certainty, and the friction between different religious, ideological and historical perspectives is itself ethnographically informative. Certainly, we should strive to take all such different perspectives 'seriously,' so to speak, in our analyses. In Santa Cruz, I found that people who held different points of view about the identity of the antique Mixtepec Saint based their arguments on the same types of evidence: the material and aesthetic features of the statue and their perceptions of the meaningful past. How such evidence is used is essential for understanding the work that historic material culture does in the present. I suggest that the mis/recognition of the Mixtepec Saint shows that we require a more robust analytical framework that can allow us to take diverse perspectives on the past into account, and to do so on equal footing with one another. The historicity concept enables us to do this, as it provides the opportunity for comparison and to explore how different perceptions of, and engagements with, the past interact with one another within their larger social and cultural contexts.

In extending this concept towards *material* historicity, I am able to chart how different people in Santa Cruz Mixtepec utilize material evidence and explanations of the past to ground their perspectives and practices in ways that are meaningful to them. Catholic Cruzeños, Padre Luis and the heritage professionals engage different material historicities in their identifications of the Mixtepec Saint, not because they disagree about the sculpture's provenance, biography, or authenticity, or even the veracity of each other's histories. Instead, they disagree about what kind of past matters, which, in turn, depends on what kind of object they perceive the statue to be (cf. Carroll 2018). Catholic Cruzeños identify the Mixtepec Saint as San Jacinto by drawing on the unfinished past of local Catholic experience in Santa Cruz. Padre Luis grounds his identification of the Mixtepec Saint as San José in the salvation history of Christ's life, and the official liturgical aesthetics and symbolism of the Catholic Church, as it is supposed to be practiced today. Finally, the art historians view the statue as an historical artefact or simple work of art that can only be correctly identified by reference to the political history of the Church in Mexico and its established iconography, but without incorporating its devotional, liturgical or other religious implications.

By considering the ways in which material forms and their aesthetic qualities provoke creative and interpretive engagements with the past, we not only can explain how people use the past in the present, but we can also analyse how different perspectives on materiality and temporality relate to and impact one another. Paying attention to material historicity will enable researchers to recognize and analyse such competing views simultaneously, taking into account questions of identity, power, authority and relationships between evidence and experience. Ultimately, what the concept of material historicity leads me to see is that, in twenty-first century Santa Cruz at least, the Mixtepec Saint might be *both* San Jacinto and San José.

Notes

1. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for teasing out this connection and recommending Ginzburg to me.
2. Tellingly, Mímisson (2012) argues that biography's narrative linearity can be unpicked precisely through attention to the temporality and relationality of material objects.
3. I suspect the fact that Colwell is writing about objects that have made significant journeys through diverse cultural and institutional spaces, while I am writing about an object that has not moved beyond the borders of a small community also underpins this difference in approach.
4. My thanks to Editor David Henig for drawing my attention to Bryant's piece.
5. Not to be confused with the Mixtepec district of the Mixteca in NW Oaxaca. Santa Cruz Mixtepec is in the Zimatlán district of the Central Valleys region.
6. The parish comprises the municipalities of Santa Cruz Mixtepec, San Miguel Mixtepec, San Bernardo Mixtepec, and Magdalena Mixtepec, including the small hamlets and settlements within these.
7. Names of all living persons are pseudonyms, with the exception of Alfredo Harp Helú, a well-known public figure.
8. The Dominicans are a mendicant and not a monastic order, so they technically establish convents or friaries, not monasteries. Such buildings are known as 'ex-convents' (*exconventos*) in Mexico today, so I have retained that usage here.
9. The project was delivered in three stages from 2015-2018. The total financial investment was 1,000,000 MXN by the FAHHO (approx. £39,000); 800,000 MXN (approx. £31,000) by the federal Secretariat for Culture (Secretaría de Cultura); and 410,000 MXN (approx. £16,000)

by the Municipality of Santa Cruz Mixtepec (FAHHO 2022, 44). No financial contributions from the Archdiocese of Oaxaca were permitted.

10. See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2022) for an explanation of the seasonal liturgical colours and calendar.
11. The churchyard does not contain graves; the municipal cemetery has been used since at least the early 20th century.
12. Many Latin American Catholic regional authorities took up the New Evangelization programme in the 1990s response to the expansion of Evangelical Protestantism and also in reaction to emerging progressive movements within the Church such as Liberation Theology and laity-led Catholic activism and leadership (Peterson and Vasquez 1998).
13. For detailed analyses of *usos y costumbres* and the aftereffects of the constitutional changes, see Anaya Muñoz (2005) and Hernández Díaz (2007).
14. Which he did, to my dismay, as I am quite afraid of heights.
15. There are other miracles locally associated with this 'natural' Holy Cross, including its resistance to burning by a friar who had thought it was the work of the Devil, and various stories of healing.
16. As I was considered to be an ally of Santa Cruz, I was also denied access to the cave by the authorities in San Miguel Mixtepec, after many weeks of formal requests.
17. ' … *unos indios cerriles y montaraces, supersticiosos, sortílegos, hechiceros, brujos y* [sic] *idólatras* … '
18. Note the shift in pronouns from 'they' to 'we' in Juan's telling of the story of the Holy Cross as the village becomes Catholic and incorporated around San Jacinto.
19. As seen in the fresco by Zuccari at Santa Sabina, the mother church of the Dominicans in Rome (Walzcak 2018). Another charming attribute of Saint Hyacinth is that he is today associated with pierogi dumplings in his native Poland.
20. Hodges (2019) offers a full discussion of the cultural development of this historicism, including the roles of social anthropology within it.
21. Such practices were theologically rooted in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (1485) (Winston 2002, 277–281).
22. This seems to me to be distinct from Pentecostal perspectives on the immanence of God's grace or the Holy Spirit, which has been described as an 'en-Spirited naturalism,' but which nevertheless must be actively cultivated through commitment and action (Reinhardt 2015, 411–413).
23. Of course many Protestant Christians view images and the material world more broadly as persistent obstacles to their spiritual relationship with God (Engelke 2005).
24. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

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