The Many Faces of Mary:
A Study of the Enduring Relevance of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s Symbolism

I. Introduction/Literature Review

Visual images often become powerful beyond the imagination of those present during their origination. Many times they are essential in helping to bridge the gap between two opposing parties, especially during critical periods of chaos and dissension. In such situations, these images become icons that are used to unite groups in conflict promoting the formation of a collected national identity. These icons become signs that have the ability to stand independently from the images they were derived from. As these icons become more prevalent in use, the concepts associated with them can begin to escape the cultural and social boundaries that were present with their original context of creation and ultimately become symbols.1 Unfortunately, “there are no inherent qualities in…symbols that prevent them from being accepted, and likewise, no particular design and details will in and of themselves guarantee their success.”2 Therefore, a delicate formula comes into play where those in power must understand how to go about advancing the significant use of these symbolic images. However, there are times when symbols continually being redefined, accepted or rejected, ultimately stand on their own. Such is the case with the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Nearly 500 years ago when the Spanish were colonizing the Aztec, bringing with them Catholicism to convert the indigenous populations, there was a reported apparition of the Virgin Mary to the Native convert Juan Diego in 1531.3 While the colonizers initially rejected Juan Diego’s claims, they eventually saw the potential advantages in accepting his story. What was interesting about this reported vision was the actual appearance of this radically different

depiction of Mary. This was a figure that not only held onto the essential traits of any Mother of God from the Judeo-Christian and European traditions, such as the dress, veil, positioning in the image and so forth, but also incorporated a darker complexion similar to that of the indigenous individual. Moreover, she integrated many elements reminiscent of Aztec spirituality as well.\(^4\) Thus, the indigenous population came to adopt a juxtaposition of their beliefs melded with the colonizers beliefs, providing the colonizers themselves with an instrument that would facilitate their work.

Now, while this was important for New Spain at the time, what is especially interesting is the role the Virgin of Guadalupe has taken in the years since the reported apparition. Initially, what could have been viewed as a symbol encouraged by the oppressors has instead been embraced by the Mexican population, coming to represent not only a highly respected religious figure, but the Mexican mestizo as well, corresponding to what Homi Bhabha identifies as forms of resistance.\(^5\) Through this symbol, one can look at how the very hybridization of the two cultures worked while also understanding the various power struggles that have occurred as a result. Over time, the symbol has been used initially as a mother-figure linked to the Indians’ past, subsequently as a model for how women should behave, and even as an emblem of war beginning with Miguel Hidalgo and the Mexican War of Independence in 1810.\(^6\) Two centuries later, her popularity has grown to the point where the late Pope John Paul II declared her to be the Patroness of the Americas in 1999, holding much significance not only for those in Mexico, but also for other nations.\(^7\)

Through migration, the symbol has spread north to the United States with the Latino community. For these people, she begins to take on an additional meaning of home and protection, especially for those entering the country illegally. However, it must be noted that as much as she is a beacon for individuals in the United States to protect their identity, there are others - especially in the Chicana feminist and gay-rights movements - that have reacted against her, assigning her the role of oppressor rather than protectress. This can be seen in a variety of ways. What remains undeniable, though is the fact that whether she is being embraced or altered, the Virgin of Guadalupe is an important figure not only in the history of Mexico, but now in the culture of the United States and elsewhere. Edward Said has often looked at the complexity of how a colonized individual interprets identity away from home stating that “identity – who we are, where we come from, what we are – is difficult to maintain in exile”.  

So, looking at the migrant and Chicana populations and how they have responded to the icon while being in an exile of sorts will illustrate the influence it retains in contemporary society, and future trends.

II. Central Question/Hypothesis

As we consider the ways in which the Virgin of Guadalupe’s symbolism has been preserved or changed over the last 500 years in Mexico, what has been carried over into the Hispanic culture in the United States and how has it evolved in the new space? Based on current trends, what are the directions the use of the symbol may take in the future to come?

III. Methodology

This thesis will be developed primarily on research conducted from preexisting textual and visual resources up to the present, from Mexican and US sources. These come in the form of books, scholarly journal articles, essays, cinema, works of art including a variety of mediums

---

such as paintings and crafts by authors and artists with differing backgrounds, and an array of commercial products. I will be looking at a wide range of material and will try wherever possible to cross-reference any claims made that are not concrete fact. Especially when concerning the roots of the symbol and its location within Mexican history, I will be looking at how both colonial and post-colonial social and cultural realities have shaped how the symbol is viewed.

Drawing upon the cultural theories advanced by Said and Bhabha, I will also focus on how certain cultural practices, such as the creation of a national icon, relate to power. In this situation, the apparition and advancement of the Virgin of Guadalupe was quite beneficial for the Spanish as they attempted to hone their power over the indigenous population in the 16th Century. However, as an ironic result, the icon came to represent the nation as a whole. As Mexicans migrated to the United States, bringing along with them the Virgin, she became part of a minority subculture, rather than the majority. In this scenario, the cultural practices in conjunction with the symbol are taking place under very different power struggles, within and without Mexican migrants. For example, I will examine how the Chicana lesbian population uses the symbol in framing their responses to their status as minorities in the United States, but also within their own subculture. Then, based on current trends, the study will propose potential uses and/or directions in which interest groups related to the Virgin may reinvent her, infusing new life and meaning to one of the world’s most recognizable figures.

IV: Expected Results/Conclusions

The United States are at the brink of many changes brought about by demographic realities. Within the last few years, Latinos have overcome the African-American population by becoming the largest minority group in the United States at numbers of 44.3 million individuals.9

Mexicans and Mexican-Americans overwhelmingly form the largest subcategory, accounting for 64% of Hispanics. In addition, as a result of many different circumstances, immigration is a major issue being considered during this election year. With these two elements in mind, it is no longer possible for American society to deny the influence that this group of individuals brings into the United States’ cultural mélangé. Moreover, Catholicism is the single largest Christian denomination in the United States. Of these, it is estimated that approximately one-third of all Catholics are of Hispanic origin, with the percentage expected to rise in coming years. Therefore, their beliefs and cultural practices will most likely have some influence on the Church just as it will have on society as a whole.

Through the development of my thesis, I expect to illustrate how the visual image of the Virgin of Guadalupe has evolved to acquire iconic qualities and eventually symbolic values in many points throughout history. I will especially focus on the migrant and Chicana communities’ experiences and show how their responses to the Virgin of Guadalupe not only have changed how she is defined but also have spread her popularity resulting in her endurance and continued relevance. As a result of this spread into the United States, I will show how the use of the Virgin has begun to acquire a separate, unique representation in this nation. Not without her share of controversy, the Virgin of Guadalupe has managed to survive changing governments and centuries, and looks to be able to survive crossing cultures becoming a symbol of even wider and increased value.

Annotated Bibliography


This book contains a selection of essays written by a variety of Latin American women covering topics dealing with religion experienced as a Latina in the United States. The editors of the reader are professors at differing universities; Harvard, Texas Christian School and Seattle University, respectively. While the book as a whole offers a variety of perspectives on the way religion is viewed, both positively and negatively, by Latin American women, two selections in particular address the Virgin of Guadalupe. One selection, written by Nora O. Lozano-Díaz, approaches the idea of the Virgin of Guadalupe from a non-Catholic perspective. A second selection, written by Nancy Pineda-Madrid, compares the Virgin of Guadalupe with Malinche, another very popular image in the Chicana culture. She explores the ways in which the Virgin of Guadalupe is both embraced and rejected by the Chicana movement. Due to the fact that the book is not solely focused on the Virgin of Guadalupe, one is able to see how the she fits on a larger scale of religiosity in the Latina community.


D. A. Brading is a professor at the University of Cambridge, focusing on Mexican History. This book takes a look solely at the Virgin of Guadalupe and how she has survived for hundreds of years. In particular, the book provides detailed accounts of the history surrounding the reported apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Brading takes an intellectual, academic standpoint on delving into the reasons why she has endured over many centuries. Moreover, he attempts to unravel the zealous, popular following of the Virgin and how as a result, she has been
influential in many different arenas. Finally, he looks at how academic research into the apparition both does and does not impact the devotion to the Virgin. As a result, Brading’s analysis of the Virgin of Guadalupe allows for an added depth of research to the project as a whole, for he concerns himself mainly with history and not the sociological impact of the symbol on others.


David Huddart is currently a professor teaching English Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In this book, Huddart looks at the various theories and concepts created by Bhabha discussing various issues in a post-colonial discourse. While Huddart explains Bhabha’s theories by breaking them up into various topics, he also looks at how they apply to different fields of thought including both cultural theory and literary studies. Moreover, Huddart also takes into account how different individual have responded to Bhabha’s claims, enabling the theories to expand to different periods and issues. This text is especially important when studying the development of the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe because much of it focuses on the formation of national identity in a colonial and post-colonial setting. Additionally, Bhabha is one of the essential voices in cultural studies and post-colonial discourse. To understand the current theories, one must have a firm grasp on where and why they began, especially focusing on Bhabha.


Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella, SVD are both Professors of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and the Catholic Theological Union, respectively. Together, they are the editors of a collection of essays that looks at the various ways religious traditions brought
from Mexico have influenced the way Catholicism is practiced in the United States. While one piece in particular, written by Matovina, focuses specifically on the practices celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe in San Antonio, Texas, much of the book in fact addresses the Virgin of Guadalupe in one way or another, showing the immense popularity of the symbol in the United States, already. Finally, the book also explores how in many places in the United States devotions to the Virgin of Guadalupe have become almost or as popular as non-Mexican devotions, and attempts to explain what that may mean for the future of Catholicism in the United States.


Coming from a different perspective, John F. Moffitt is a Professor of Art History as New Mexico State University. Moffitt attempts to take an objective view of the myth surrounding the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe. To do so, he brings forth many historical articles that are often used in support of the Virgin and explores the origins of the documents. Moreover, he tries to unravel not only the myth, but also the reasons behind its perpetuation. Drawing from his knowledge of art, Moffitt also analyzes the revered image of the Virgin in much detail in an effort to explain how it was produced to begin with. This is an important resource due to its objectivity and exploration of why she is still so popular. The book offers a firm foundation to begin looking at the cultural influences surrounding the status of the icon.


This book, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis looks at a specific period in Mexican history when much was occurring as a nation and how different voices and
movements were experienced as a result. Vaughan and Lewis are both Professors of History with Vaughan teaching at University of Maryland, College Park and Lewis at California State University, Chico. While the book does not necessarily focus on the Virgin of Guadalupe, it does touch upon the presence of the icon, but moreover, captures the status of the nation of the time. Through a collection of essays, especially “Saints, Sinners, and State Formation: Local Religion and Cultural Revolution in Mexico” written by Adrian A. Bantjes and “An Idea of Mexico: Catholics in the Revolution” written by Jean Meyer, one is able to see how what was occurring in the country affected society, and more importantly what role Catholicism and religion in general played during the time period. With a firm understanding of religion during this time period comes the additional understanding of how the Virgin of Guadalupe was also embraced or altered.