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Art and La Virgin de Guadalupe: Towards Social Transformation

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Abstract

This work provides an ethnographic and analytical study of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the ways in which she has been represented both historically and through contemporary art and American street art. This work seeks to provide a thorough understanding of the origins of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* so that one can employ with the image in order to confront and resist oppression and cultural violence while critically engaging politics of identity, race, gender, and sexuality. Because the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is so widely recognized and honored throughout Latina/o and Chicana/o communities she serves as a valuable vehicle for communicating messages of hope, resistance, and critique of the established order to numerous people. The thesis directs most of its focus to the ways in which artists have progressively reinvented *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to speak to specific needs and concerns of not only Mexican and Chicana/o communities but to all of those who exist within neocolonial social structures. The goal of this work is to provide the reader with a thorough background of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* so that one can ultimately engage with reinventions of the image in order to embrace and embark upon a journey of decolonization.

Chapter One

Identity, Experience, and Identifying Oppression

As a multi-racial, multicultural, woman of Mexican descent born into America I have experienced an insuppressible feeling of un-belonging within my own society, culture and country. All of those born within the non-dominant race, culture, gender, sexuality etc. in America have experienced the sting of alienation and the violence of marginalization that shapes and deforms experiences and realities. Existing beyond the boundaries of conventionality and privilege in America I find that there are few spheres of society in which women, especially women of color, are valued, honored, listened to, or even acknowledged as contributing members of society. I live in a world where women of color face having their skin lightened to be on the cover of a magazine-- or where a woman who speaks her educated mind is not valued but deemed as a threat to male superiority. Women scholars, leaders, entertainers, athletes-- women of all walks of life-- experience the constant pressure to legitimize themselves, their work, and their experiences in comparison to men. Women of color and women of other marginalized communities experience these forms of oppression on multiple levels, never able to escape the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

As I seek to recognize and eradicate the ways in which patriarchy and racism inform my own life I find myself looking for examples, images, and

figures that represent progressive forms of empowered womanhood. Although empowering examples of women exist throughout society the dominant culture does not often reflect, value, or recognize the contributions of these women. Prominent and mainstream images of women, and women figures most readily available in American culture, demonstrate both blatant and subtle manifestations of patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism. Popular culture and media play immense roles in shaping and defining conceptions of women's appearance, sexuality, and capability. Women in the media, especially women of color, singers, actresses, models, etc. represent stereotypical and unrealistic standards of beauty often predicated by hypersexualization and colonization of the female body heavily dependent on men's approval and pleasure. The opposite to the hypersexual images of women in mainstream media is the cultural value and expectation of women to be docile, domestic, and pure, which is also based upon meeting and supporting the needs of men. Whether it be due to men controlling and projecting these images and identities, or women who have internalized concepts surrounding patriarchy, these socially constructed ideas surrounding who women are entirely dehumanizing. I witness these forms of oppression not only due to my observations of the world and media that surrounds me, but due to the personal pressures I encounter daily as a multi-racial woman.

Living face to face with the oppressive forces of neocolonialism in a white-supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexist society makes the need to endure-- and the desire to impact change ever more important. The patriarchal structure of society has violently deformed women's relationship to not only society but to themselves. I constantly struggle to educate myself and inform others of the violence and the prevalence of sexism that continues to colonize women and push them into the margins. Many people I encounter wish to turn a blind eye to sexism or conclude that we live in a post-sexist society, or even post-racist society. This is utterly untrue. Until women and the dominant society undergo a process of decolonization that radically and revolutionarily changes the mentalities surrounding women, patriarchy will continue to deform my relationship to society, men, and myself. The idea of a post-sexist, or post-racist society, projects a dangerous myth that encourages people not to critically deal with the issues at hand.

As a student on the University of Colorado at Boulder campus evidence of the fact that revolutionary social change is necessary can be found everywhere. Between classes, diversity trainings, and social settings faces of not only ignorance, but hate, are ever present. As I strive to use my college experience as a means to advance my understanding of issues surrounding colonial, and neo-colonial forms of oppression, so many others fail to see the need. What bothers me about the students at CU, and throughout the general

population, is not so much the fact that many have been conditioned by society and education to not take part in these important conversations, but that they demonstrate a complete unwillingness to learn. What I see on a daily basis on campus, is students who blatantly defend their patriarchal, white, and class privilege, rather than listening to and learning from the lived-experiences of their peers who have actually felt the pain of discrimination and oppression. In realizing the willful ignorance, hate, and denial of privilege that is all around me, I have become inspired to try and reach those who perpetuate cycles of oppression-- whether this perpetuation it is done knowingly or not, it needs to be addressed. As I strive to dedicate various aspects of my life to impacting cultural and social change, I find myself returning to the idea of art as a way to deconstruct and combat forms of racial, patriarchal, heterosexist, gender, class, and religious oppression within a neo-colonial context.

Between the patriarchal, white supremacist, heterosexist American society and the *machismo* mentalities of Mexican and Chicano culture, women and those who seek to put an end to the cycles of injustice and sexism must create their own role models, their own protectors of culture, their own spiritual leaders to help them combat these forms of oppression. Both art as a creative sphere for decolonialism and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a revered cultural figure can serve to illuminate real and alternative role models and

realities for both men and women across borders of race, sexuality, gender, and class. As a female figure *La Virgen of Guadalupe* has gained honor and respect among Mexicans and Chicana/os due to her ties to *Mesoamerican* culture and her presence as a conveyor of Indigenous culture, a representative of the oppressed, and a mother to the *mestizo* race.¹ Since her inception in 1531, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been evolved to fit the revolutionary needs of her people. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* holds an important place in my daily life. Growing up in a Mexican American household the image *La Virgen de Guadalupe* was always near-- whether it be the image of her painted on the wooden door of my house to protect our home, or the prayer candle adorned with her image lighting our kitchen window. In my own apartment I have a poster of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on my wall and often wear a small pendant of her as a necklace. These images serve as a constant reminders in my own life to value and respect my own culture and roots. The influence and power that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* holds within Mexican and Chicana/o communities allows her to be reinvented and revolutionized in order to speak to specific struggles. For myself, she serves as a symbol of women's empowerment, a protector of Indigenous culture, and a spiritual leader who possesses the power to serve as vital tool, valuable in the process of de-colonization for both men and women.

Mexican and Chicana/o artists have reinvented *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to meet the needs of their people by communicating important messages that challenge and deconstruct the established order, and demand social change. This exemplifies the potentiality that a single image can hold. So much of our daily lives and realities are informed by the written word and verbal rhetoric, and history and religion are often recorded and communicated through words. I am interested in the ways in which visual rhetoric and iconic images can shape reality and guide daily lives. Laura Perez speaks to the importance of using art as a place to express and communicate notions of identity, culture and spirituality for Chicanas. Perez explores art as an avenue for personal, spiritual, and social transformation in her book *Chicana Art*. In her book she writes, “in their own irreducible way, the various arts are a form of highly developed thought, each through the language of its own medium. At its best, art is nothing less than philosophy and cultural theory” (10). Perez’s engagement with art as a vital place for expressing and communicating cultural theory and philosophical thought urges us to look to the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a valuable subject matter that can channel some of these notions to a wide array of observers. Artists engage with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* not only because they have unique and special relationships to her story and her image, but also because she has the ability to impact the masses. I see the purpose of revolutionary reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as

engaging with the forward movement of social, cultural, and political liberation and transformation. Lara Medina illuminates the purpose and possibilities of putting into motion progressive Chicana spirituality that draws resourcefully from an Indigenous past. Medina writes:

Transformation requires humans to critique unhealthy relationships and systems of oppression, reconstruct new ones and critique them again. This never-ending process will offer liberation, or the inherent right and ability to shape one's life and environment based on justice and solidarity. Liberation does not mean an irresponsible autonomy that allows one to do what is most advantageous for personal gain. Rather, liberation offers the freedom to create conditions that provide all persons with equal respect and opportunity." (264)

Medina's theoretical insight concerning Chicana spirituality and liberation and transformation can be eloquently applied to Chicana visual art. As stated by Laura Pérez, "Chicana work inscribing culturally different and politically challenging views of art and spirituality points beyond Euro-dominated languages and worldviews to the necessity of a more complex hermeneutics, one that is cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and beyond sexist and heterosexist myopias" (272). Here Pérez shines light upon the intersecting forces and political conditions that are held within Chicana art. Pérez informs

my understanding of Chicana art as a space for decolonization and reclaiming identities that contribute to social, political, cultural, and personal transformation. The freedom in expressing oneself or communicating an idea or an ideology through art allows the artist to transcend borders, limitations and forms of oppression that dictate and determine reality within a neocolonial society, due to this freedom art serves as a space for escaping social constructs and provides a place from which artists can communicate their own stories, experiences, and identities. Art as a realm of culture, holds an openness to the future and a space for being and thinking that cannot be grasped by the ever-reaching hands of colonization. Also, art as space for human expression, transcends social barriers and gives artists their opportunity to use their art as a tool for critiquing the established order and contributing to a future of decolonialism.

La Virgen de Guadalupe has been used both historically and contemporarily to communicate messages aimed at activated and mobilizing the human mind. Artists, who speak from the margins and represent *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in progressive and meaningful ways, contribute to a visual discourse of liberation and revolution that is aimed at encouraging its audience to challenge their constructed realities. Although art historians often study art from the perspective of what social factors influenced the artists and their artwork I would like to on the ways in which artists have the ability to

influence their social conditions. Interpretations and reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* provides a powerful example of the way in which artists can engage with a popular image in order to profoundly influence concepts and realities of thinking, living, and being in the world.

The image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a cultural phenomenon appearing in museums and on the streets throughout Mexico, Latin America, the United States. Through the proliferation of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* I feel as if some of her original ties to *Mesoamerican* culture and spirituality have been lost, forgotten, or perhaps never learned. This hinders the true potential of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to serve a revolutionary purpose. Through this study I hope to use visual representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, both traditional and contemporary, to promote *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a symbol of political, cultural and women's empowerment, the valuing of Indigenous culture and spirituality, and also to educate myself and others, as to the power that visual art has in shaping communities and ideologies. By bringing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* into the space of art attention can be brought to the critical social, cultural, and political issues faced by people of Mexican descent throughout both Mexico and America; and can also be extended to encompass the cultural, social, and political struggles of many different peoples, countries, and continents.

This exploration of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* begins with the birth and iconography of the original image and how and why it has evolved from being solely a religious icon to being an important cultural and political symbol. Secondly, it engages and analyzes artists who have evolved, reinvented, and revolutionized the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to speak to the experiences and needs of Mexican and Chicana/o peoples; focusing on issues of Indigenous culture, identity, race, sexuality, gender, and technology. Further, I investigate the ways in which *La Virgen de Guadalupe* exists within popular street cultures, through examining and problematizing the relationships men hold with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* through tattoos. All chapters in this study aim at demonstrating the ways in which art can serve as a tool of empowerment, resistance, decolonization, and cultural and social transformation; with the main focus being on engaging with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to provide progressive representations of women figures as real, multidimensional, and empowered beings, leaders, and role models.

Chapter Two

Herstoria and Iconography

Chapter Two focuses on the origins of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and explains how *La Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as a visual and ideological embodiment of *mestizo* culture and people. Further, this chapter emphasizes the influence and presence of Mesoamerican deities and feminine energies within *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. This is accomplished through looking into the historical and cultural significance of female deities such as *Tonantzin* and *Coatlicue*, and how they have been integrated into the Judeo-Christian image of the Virgin Mary. Finally, this chapter provides historical context for the ways in which *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has historically become associated with social rights, revolution, and decolonization.

The Deities of Mesoamerica

Although the traditional image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* was not born until 1531 after the European Catholic conquest of the Americas, the presence and worship of female deities was central to the spiritual practices of Mesoamerican peoples¹. The complex and multidimensional religious beliefs and practices of the Mesoamericans were closely connected to the energy of the earth, cosmos, animals, elements, and human life. Many Mesoamerican

deities channeled different energies of the universe and of humanity that served as a way to enter into a greater understanding and connection with life and death. *Ometéotl* is a Mesoamerican god of duality that channeled energies from both male and female realms of life, identity, and existence. “*Ometéotl* is neither male nor female but as the source, is both male and female” (Forbes 54, Rodriguez). The embodiment of both male and female energies was viewed as valuable to the Mesoamericans because it connected and completed the creative forces of the male-female dynamic. Before the introduction of the Christian Madonna figure by Europeans, the Mesoamericans honored and worshiped, female mother deities known as *Tonantzin*, or *Teteo Inan*, which translates to, “Our Mother” (Forbes). The *Tonantzin* worshiped by the Mesoamericans often symbolized and embodied the forces of life and death, fertility, motherhood, childbirth, creation, war, earthly elements, and the cosmos (Franco). *Coatlicue*, whose name translates from *Nahuatl* to “skirt of snakes”, was the female deity of the sun, moon and stars, as well as, motherhood, childbirth and rebirth. She is often associated through both her name and visual representations with snakes, which represent “poison and remedy, death and renewal” (Franco 209). *Coatlicue’s* connections to the cosmos made her a very powerful force that guided and sustained all life. She is also known to be the deity of life, death, and rebirth, and was devoutly honored as both a creator and destroyer of life. As Gloria

Anzaldúa describes, “*Coatlicue*, or ‘Serpent Skirt’...had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was mother of the celestial deities, and of *Huitzilopochtli* and his sister, *Coyolxauhqui*” (*Anzaldúa* 49)². The image that *Anzaldúa* describes is influenced by the Mesoamerican stone carving of *Coatlicue* that gives us not only a commanding visual image of the deity but also demonstrates the importance of creating visual images as a means of connecting the divine to the human.



2.1. *Coatlicue* Stone, 15th Century.

Anzaldúa engages with the image of *Coatlicue*, remarking, “*Coatlicue* depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated....she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (Anzaldúa 69). This embodiment of duality, that was a distinctive feature of Mesoamerican religious thought and would later serve as a powerful tool for dissecting the conflicting forces that shape *mestizo* identity. Therefore *Coatlicue* becomes an important image and energy for engaging with the multidimensionality of Mexican womanhood.

Coatlicue Becomes Guadalupe

The place of worship for the *Tonantzin*, and deities such as *Coatlicue*, was on the hill of *Tepeyac* in *Tenochtitlan* (Mexico City) (Anzaldúa 50-51, Brading, Granziera). The place of worship for *Tonantzin* at *Tepeyac* was destroyed by Spanish conquistadors, as they attempted to enforce Christianity and obliterate what they viewed as the pagan practices of the Mesoamericans (Brading). Although the many of the original places of worship were destroyed and Christianity was violently imposed throughout what is now Mexico and the rest of the Americas, the hill of *Tepeyac* became a place of rebirth and is honored today as the place where the legend of *La*

Virgen de Guadalupe begins. Although *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has come to be recognized as a figure of Mexican Catholicism, the legend of her apparition to Juan Diego at *Tepeyac* reveals in-severable ties to the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples and their ancient religion and philosophy (Brading, Castillo, Lara,). The story of Juan Diego and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been historically documented in texts such as *Imagen de la Virgen Maria, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe* (1648), and the *Nican Mopohua* (1649) (Brading). These texts tell the account of the first appearance of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that explains the origins of the iconic image and the legend of her apparition to Juan Diego.

The image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* we so widely recognize and embrace today is tied to an important story that sheds light upon *La Virgen de Guadalupe's* connections to the Mesoamerican peoples, the poor, and the oppressed (Brading). The legend recounts *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as first appearing to Nahuatl peasant *Cuauhtlatohtzin*, known by his Christian name Juan Diego, on December 9th 1531 (Brading). Juan Diego was said to be worshiping the goddess of *Tonantzin*, or *Coatlicue* at the hill of *Tepeyac* when an apparition of a young *morena* (dark skinned) woman who spoke in Nahuatl and gave him *Tecuauhtlacuepeuh* as her name, (which translates as "She who comes flying from the Region of Light like an Eagle of Fire") appeared to him and asked him to build a temple to worship her at *Tepeyac* hill (Brading). Juan Diego went to the Bishop Zumárraga and asked for the temple to be built.

The bishop told Juan Diego to ask the woman for a sign (Brading). The woman reappeared to Juan Diego, who pleaded with her to choose someone more worthy than he, due to the fact that he was a poor Aztec who held no place of authority in the church or community. Mexican American writer Gustavo Arellano assures, "she could have revealed herself before a Spanish priest or soldier but instead she chose Juan Diego. Juan Diego was an Indian, the lowest of the low in the Americas. By doing this she announced to the new world that salvation comes not through identifying with conquest but by comforting the oppressed." This comment reminds us of the powerful connections that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has always had to colonized peoples. The apparition reaffirmed that she had chosen Juan Diego as her son, and encouraged him to trust her as his mother and therefore became a mother for all poor and subjugated *indios, mestizos*, and therefore Mexicans.

La Virgen de Guadalupe advised Juan Diego to go to the top of *Tepeyac* hill and gather roses, which Juan Diego found to be in full bloom in the middle of the winter (Brading). Juan Diego gathered the roses and rolled them in his *tilma* (cloak) and returned to the bishop (Brading). Juan Diego released the roses from his *tilma* and the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* miraculously appeared on the cloth (Brading). The bishop, having received the sign, ordered that a church dedicated to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* be built at

Tepeyac (Brading). The image on Juan Diego's *tilma* remains in the *Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* in Mexico City (Brading).



2.2. *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 1531.

The legend of Juan Diego reveals the transition from the Mesoamerican *Tonantzin* deities, and in particular *Coatlicue*, to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Although Juan Diego was paying homage to the *Tonantzin* he was also a member of the Catholic community and thus the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that was given to Juan Diego embodied aspects from both of these

distinct worlds. Because Catholicism was becoming the dominant religion of the land and the Mesoamerican religious practices of indigenous peoples were not permitted perhaps *La Virgen de Guadalupe* was created by *mestizo* peoples out of a desire to maintain their indigenous beliefs within the accepted Catholicism. Therefore *La Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as a guised Mesoamerican deity whom European Catholics accept as a representation of The Virgin Mary and whom *mestizos*, and *indios* of Mexico interpreted to be eternally linked to their mother deities. In "Aztecas del Norte" Jack D. Forbes explains the ways in which indigenous peoples of Mexico resisted Catholic colonization and domination through incorporating their own Mesoamerican beliefs and symbols into the widespread practice of Christianity. Forbes writes, "the local gods could be made into 'saints'" (51). This insight allows us to see the ways in which Indigenous peoples, despite the violent conquering of the culture and religion, were able to use Christianity as a tool for resistance rather than oppression. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* provides an eloquent example of this religious transition and resistance. The indigenous peoples of Mexico and the *mestizos* created out of colonialism took advantage of the female energy of the Virgin Mary and used her image in order to channel their own female deity *Coatlicue*. In her writings "From Coatlicue to Guadalupe" Patrizia Granziera describes, "Mary became the most important sacred female available for indigenous adaptation. Coming from a tradition

in which female divinities were significant players and the sacred was conceived in terms of deified forms of the cosmic human, Nahuas [Mesoamericans] were predisposed to grant importance to the only major female figure presented to them by Christianity" (269). Through these words it becomes clear that Mesoamerican peoples and *mestizos* resisted the loss of their beliefs by maintaining it through and within Christianity. And because of the heavy emphasis on the honoring and worship of female energies and deities within the Mesoamerican religions, the fusion of *Coatlicue* with the Virgin Mary allowed for Mexicans from all backgrounds to worship the female face of God (or the gods) in who is now widely known as *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.

La Virgen de Guadalupe holds a powerful place in not only the hearts and minds of *mestizo* and *indio* peoples, but is always widely accepted and honored among Catholic Mexicans. The sacred painting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is honored daily and pilgrimages are made every year around December 12th to see and honor the original image and celebrate *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on her feast day.³ The story, image, and legacy of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* ignited a powerful cultural phenomenon that reaches people throughout Mexico, the Americas and beyond. *Guadalupanos* embrace and honor *La Virgen de Guadalupe* through various forms of prayer, pop-culture, media, art, music, dance, ceremony, celebration, protest, and household and

personal adornment.⁴ *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a prolific cultural, spiritual, religious, political, and pop-culture figure demonstrates the multiculturalism and malleability of sacred and popular images. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* represents archetypal dynamism due to the ways in which she has been emphatically embraced to speak the messages and voices of people from all walks of life.

Within the Image

While *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is clearly reminiscent of the European Virgin Madonna figure, upon closer analysis the image holds several symbols and references to the deities of the ancient *Mesoamericans* (Granziera). *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a reinvention of the Virgin Mary that through its connection to the Mesoamerican people has escaped the patriarchy of Christianity to become a goddess of the Mexican people. As Gloria Anzaldúa confirms *La Virgen de Guadalupe* “mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-Mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess” (Anzaldúa 52). Through Anzaldúa’s ethnographic and spiritual understanding of *La Virgen de*

Guadalupe notions of *mestizo* identity and *Mesoamerican* spirituality become the driving force behind interpreting the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.

The iconography of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* reveals several references to *Mesoamerican* culture and spirituality embedded in the superficially Catholic image. The traditional image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on Juan Diego's *tilma* depicts the young woman in a dress covered in flowers. She wears a maternity band tied at her waist, she is surrounded by rays of the sun, and bears a turquoise mantle covered in stars. At her feet is a winged angel and a crescent moon. Her downward gaze and hands in prayer suggest both divinity and humility. Although European Christianity and *Mesoamerican* religious beliefs stand with grave differences, many of the symbols found within the image overlap and produce similar interpretations (Brading). The dress and the maternity band can be connected to the clothing of both the Christian Mother Mary and the clothing worn by pregnant *Nahuas* women (Brading). While the Virgin Mary is often depicted in a blue cloak, which to the Western world commonly represents eternity or immortality, the turquoise color of *La Virgen de Guadalupe's* cloak reflects the *Mesoamerican* association with turquoise as a sacred color of deities, royalty, and divine nature. The stars on the cloak not only denote her relation to divinity and cosmos but also have been interpreted to depict the constellations of the winter solstice, which occurred on December 12th 1531 on the Old Spanish

calendar (Sunegenis 3). Additionally, the three stars near her foot denote the Aztec year *Acatl*, equivalent to the Western calendar year 1531 (Lesur). The stars also form the Southern constellations, (with east as the top, customary to the *Nahuatl* coordinates) that were visible in the sky from *Tepeyec* hill in the winter of the year 1531, when and where the apparition appeared to Juan Diego (Lesur). Additionally, as the head of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* represents the *Nahuatl* East being at the top of the coordinate it has been proven that on the day of December 12th 1531 that the moon would have been in a crescent form open concavely to the east (Sunegis 4). The sun rays and the moon can be interpreted as both a biblical reference to the “woman of the Apocalypse” who is described in the Bible as, “the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet” (Rev 12:1); and as a reference to *Coatlicue*, the Mesoamerican goddess of the cosmos (Sunegis 5). The angel beneath *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been interpreted as both reaffirming her divinity and the carrying in of a new era that arrives with the mergence of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (Brading).

The flowers on her dress and the roses often depicted with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* are not only associated with the roses that Juan Diego picked and brought to the bishop in his *tilma*, but also hold significant meaning within Mesoamerican culture.⁵ There is a cross-like flower with four petals, known to the *Nahuas* as the *quincunx*, the flower of the sun and a symbol of the center of

the universe (Brading). It is said that if one positions the single *quincunx* flower as *Tepeyac* hill the nine other flowers on her mantle reflect the geography of the surrounding mountains (Brading). Her dress also depicts cross-shaped flowers that in *Nahuatl* were called *mamalhuaztli*, and symbolized new life for the Mesoamericans (Brading). She also has nine larger flowers throughout her dress that are Mexican magnolia flowers, which for the *Nahuas* symbolized the beating heart of human sacrifice (Brading). The number of these Mexican magnolia flowers are said to be representative of the nine levels of the *Nahuatl* underworld (Brading). Because the nine flowers represent the nine beating hearts of human sacrifice the nine levels of the underworld have been met and her child can be born because no more human sacrifice is required (Brading). Identifying these hidden or symbolic meanings with the image hint towards the ability of images to speak something creator about the culture that created them.

Throughout the history and spirituality of both Mesoamericans and Europeans, art has played a central role in not only providing visual representations of the deities, but also in educating about and honoring these deities through ceremony. Art serves as a means of connecting humanity to divinity and it provides a space that can transcend the material world to reach that which lies beyond. Although visual representations was, and remains a point of contention when it comes to translating the divine into a

visual materiality – because the divine inherently defies earthly representation-- images have held an important place in educating the illiterate about the stories and figures of a specific religious of spirituality. These images have the power to educate and unify masses across linguistic barriers. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as a quintessential example of the way in which a single image can serve as a unifying force.

La Virgen de Guadalupe and her apparition to Juan Diego eternally ties her to the poor, oppressed, and Indigenous people of Mexico and reaffirms her presence as their mother and protector (Castillo, Brading). The fact *La Virgen de Guadalupe* provides her people with an image of herself to honor, can be interpreted as a gesture of self-representation and women's agency. The original image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on Juan Diego's *tilma* is embedded with symbols and references to *Mesoamerican* culture and beliefs and has served as a symbol of hope and spiritual nourishment for Mexican peoples born out of colonialism. The image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has unified people of Mexican descent across borders and languages under one mother that has been an essential part of forming a national and cultural identity that reflects the *mestizo* culture of Mexico.

Mother of *Los Mestizos*

Despite the fact that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a patron saint within the Catholic faith, the influences of the Mesoamerican deity *Coatlicue* and the empowerment of the Mesoamerican people through her legend and image are undeniable. The ties to the mother goddess of *Coatlicue* through both location, language, and appearance have been integrated into the traditional image of the European mother Mary. Although the historicity of the legend of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and Juan Diego has been harshly criticized and the original image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on Juan Diego's *tilma* greatly scrutinized, the story of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* remains a formative force in the creation of image that is connected to and honored by both Catholics and the Indigenous people of Mexico (Brading). The factuality of the story is not of importance, because even as a legend the story of Juan Diego and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* communicates greater truths about *mestizo* culture and has significantly tied *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to the oppressed Indigenous peoples of Mexico. The legend has also importantly provided us with an image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that clearly depicts the mergence of European and Mesoamerican culture. Art historians who have studied the original painting on Juan Diego's *tilma* remain bewildered by the mystery behind the creation of the image (Brading). Although it remains controversial as to whether or not the painting is truly a divine miracle, it has been concluded that the painting was constructed using a unique combination of

both European and Mesoamerican techniques (Brading). Therefore the very materiality of the image represents the fusion of the colonized and the colonizer, which critically reflects the *mestizo* people of Mexico.

The Catholic imposition by the conquistadors onto the Indigenous peoples of the Americas has both maimed and shaped the culture and spirituality of contemporary Mexican peoples. In her article “Nepantla Spirituality” Lara Medina takes a critical look at the ways in which Mesoamerican peoples have endured Catholic colonization. She dissects the spiritual relationship that Mesoamericans have to Catholicism, stating, “not being willing to give up their ancestral deities and being forced to accept a new way left many Indigenous people in between worlds, discerning how best to survive” (Medina 251). Due to the widespread enforcement of Christianity throughout Mexico, and the systematic destruction of Indigenous beliefs and culture, it is impossible to ever completely eradicate the scars inflicted by the colonizer upon the colonized. Yet, *mestizo* people have found practical, creative, and insinuating ways of enduring and maintaining their Mesoamerican spirituality within Catholicism. Medina explains, “Indigenous people did not merely resist the imposition of Christianity but they responded to the foreign tradition by crafting their religiosity, developing unsanctioned traditions, reinforcing their community networks, and ultimately asserting their religious autonomy” (251). *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is

a perfect example of what Medina is referring to. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is an example of this endurance and resistance to Catholic colonization because she embodies the ways in which Mesoamericans have upheld their spirituality through this colonization. Medina speaks to the idea of 'idols behind alters' that refers to the ways in which *mestizo* people have always had connections to their Indigenous spirituality despite the enforcement of Catholicism by always seeing and honoring their Mesoamerican deities through Christian religious figures (Medina 251). Although the *Mesoamerican* religion was nearly destroyed by the European colonizers and violently replaced with Catholicism, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as a figure of redemption that allows people of Mexican descent to speak through Catholicism.

As a symbol of the European world and the *Mesoamerican* world coming together, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* both literally and symbolically embodies the *mestizo* culture of Mexico. And while Mexicans and Chicanos must acknowledge and embrace themselves as the result of the mergence of two distinct cultures, the violence of racial colonialism through which the *mestizo* people of Mexico were created must never be undermined or forgotten. The systematic physical, cultural, psychological, and spiritual violence experienced by the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, not only brutally damaged and destroyed numerous peoples and their cultures, but also continues to shape the realities and experiences of generations born out

of this violence. Therefore *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, as the mother of her people and a figure of spiritual authority and cultural preservation for peoples of Mexican descent, must serve to protect and heal her children. It becomes necessary for peoples of Mexican descent, especially those who acknowledge, value, and represent connections to their Indigenous pre-colonial roots, to find ways to revolutionize the Catholic tradition to fit their cultural, social, and political needs. And it is also imperative to forge new paths for peoples of Mexican descent that can serve as decolonial guidance in a world perpetually shaped by neocolonial social structures. One way this is possible is through contemporary art, in which artists continue to endure the loss of their Indigenous religion, and endeavor to reclaim their Indigenous spirituality through self-expression and self-definition (Ehrenberg, Medina 251).

***La Virgen de Guadalupe* and Revolution**

Generations after the Mesoamericans were colonized by European conquerors Mexicans are still facing the oppressive forces of neo-colonialism. As neocolonial subjects in both American and Mexican society, people of Mexican descent still look to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a symbol of unity, hope, and cultural perseverance. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a central figure in the art of many Mexican and Chicana/o artists who seek to reinvent

and re-envision the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to represent the needs and identities of contemporary Mexican and Chicano peoples. Through art Mexicans and Chicana/os have been able to expose truths and provide alternative realities that aid in deconstructing neocolonial systems of oppression and demand the social, cultural, and political change necessary for decolonization. Artists of color exist in the margins beyond the traditional history and canon of art. Art coming from these margins has the ability to speak the struggles of the oppressed and disenfranchised in a language that transcends the infiltration of colonialism within language and other forms of communication. Since the inception of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* artists have been fascinated by her image, her story, and what she symbolizes. The story of Juan Diego and the gift of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is depicted in this print by Jose Guadalupe Posada.



2.3. Jose Guadalupe Posada, *Etching Of St. Juan Diego*

Posada became one of the first artists to begin depicting *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and her story in a way that truly honored and emphasized her connections to Mexican Indians (“His Art and Times”). His artwork became associated with revolutionary Mexico at the turn of the 19th century and focused on communicating important social and political messages through traditional images such as *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Day of the Dead* images (“His Art and Times”). Posada provides us with an example as to how *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a figure who is revolutionized through art in

order to address social needs; which for Posada included poverty and oppression of *indio*-Mexicans, political and class corruption, and the violence of Mexican independence (“His Art and Times”).

Continuing to associate the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe with liberation and revolution was Father Hidalgo. In 1810 Miguel Hidalgo, a Mexican priest, associated the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with Mexican revolution and independence by carrying flags with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe into battle with a chant of “Viva Guadalupe” (Alvarez-Cuauhtemoc).



2.4. Father Hidalgo's 'Viva Guadalupe' Flag

Additionally the first president of the newly established Mexican republic, Felix Fernandez, changed his name to Guadalupe Victoria (Victory of Guadalupe) in order to honor the achievements of the unifying power of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in the development of Mexico (Alvarez-Cuauhtemoc). Therefore, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become inextricable from the patriotic and national identity of Mexico and Mexican people as they are born out of conquest and revolution. Stemming from this politicization of the image, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* became a symbol for Mexican liberation and revolution across the border in the United States (Alvarez-Cuauhtemoc). As reaffirmed by Costillo, "To Mexicans on both sides of the border, Guadalupe is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middle class; against their subjugation of the poor and the *indio*" (Costillo 52) In the 1960s, in California, the National Farm Workers Association, lead by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, brought the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to the center of their movement, eventually incorporating the image to represent the United Farm Workers of America.



2.5. NFWA *Virgin of Guadalupe* Flag, 1960s.

Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers of America commented on the adoption of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a campaign symbol, stating, "she is a symbol of faith, hope and leadership" ("The March from Delano to Sacramento"). Images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* can be found throughout the protest and visual rhetoric of the UFWA, further connecting *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to the liberation of Mexican people, now moving across the border in to the United States.

Through these examples we see the way in which artistic representations of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* have served as a means of unifying and mobilizing the masses. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been used as a symbol of revolution throughout Mexico and the United States and therefore has become an important symbol for communicating social, cultural, and political issues. Chicano artist, author, and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña affirms, “They [Chicana/o/s] have expropriated it [the image of the Virgin], activated it, recontextualized it, and turned it into a symbol of resistance” (Costillo 180). Through progressive, decolonial, reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Mexican and Chicana/o artists have the ability to inform social change by asking questions and creating critical thought surrounding pertinent issues faced by their people through a medium that allows for mass interpretation and influence.

Chapter Three

Reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in Contemporary Art

In this chapter I look to the work of several artists in order to understand the significance and legacy of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. I seek to provide interpretative analyses of the artworks that illuminate the social, political, and cultural issues that the artists have identified and represent in their works. Although countless artists have chosen *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a central figure in their artwork, I focus on artists that have reinvented *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to: address and combat oppression and discrimination, to restore and honor the destroyed Indigenous culture and spirituality of the *Mesoamerican* people, to provide figures of female empowerment, and finally to transform thought and impact social change. In framing and interpreting these artworks I do not wish to speak for the artists or to authoritatively impose meanings onto their pieces. Rather, I endeavor to provide a space in which the artworks can speak for themselves. At the same time, I hope to use my own identity and experience as a valuable tool for illuminating the artist's messages.

Chapter Three analyses these artworks from my own subjective point of view, while still drawing from relevant historical and contemporary facts

and ideas surrounding the struggles and joys of *mestizo* culture and identity, with attention to politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class across borders. Each artwork will be interpreted hermeneutically as to let the artworks speak for themselves without imposing or prescribing meaning that cannot be supported by the aesthetic content.¹ Whenever possible I incorporate comments or thoughts by the artists themselves in regard to their artworks as a means for better understanding the intentions behind their work. While the main emphasis is on honoring and interpreting the messages and meaning behind the artworks as each artist communicates them, my interpretations are subjective to my own imagination and perspective. Meeting each painting with my own sense of self and personal identity enables me to develop my own meaning of each artwork and contribute my own interpretations to the evolving discourse surrounding revolutionary representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.

I have divided the chapter thematically to include four sections entitled: *Indigenous Identity, Rights and Empowerment, Sexuality, and Technology and Rebirth*. I have chosen artworks that I believe speak to the ideas encompassed by each category. This organization is not meant to compartmentalize the artists and their works, but is rather meant to give direction to my own interpretations. Despite the fact that I have chosen to organize the artworks by category I acknowledge the intersectionality of

these pieces and therefore do not wish to use the mentioned categories to limit or flatten the multidimensionality of each artwork. The common thread that connects all of these artworks is that each one provides a unique depictions and/or reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. The chapter features representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* by artists: Yolanda Lopez, Colette Crutcher, Nephtalí de León, Ester Hernández, Alfred J. Quiroz, Alma Lopez, Margarita 'Mita' Cuarón, and Marion C. Martinez. I have chosen these artists based on my attraction to the particular artworks that they have produced and their commitment to addressing pertinent social and cultural issues that I find relevant to combating oppression through transforming thoughts and ideologies. Beyond the artworks featured in this chapter several of these artists, namely Yolanda Lopez, Alma Lopez, and Ester Hernandez have a legacy of socially impactful art and have engaged with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on several different accounts, across many contexts.

Therefore this chapter provides a place where well renowned artists, (who have been linked by their artistic legacy to reinventing *La Virgen de Guadalupe*) along with lesser-known artists, who have also importantly engaged with the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, come together to contribute to a visual discourse that exemplifies the profound impact artists have had on revolutionizing *La Virgen de Guadalupe's* image. I chose to begin this chapter with Yolanda Lopez based on the fact that in many ways she

paved the way for other artists in creating revolutionary reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and therefore serves as an important foundation for understanding the ways in which artists have evoked images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to communicate their messages to the masses.

Indigenous Identity

In the 1970-80s Yolanda M. Lopez became one of the first Chicana artists to revolutionarily engage with the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, leading the way for several artists to come.² Lopez's work has been widely published and exhibited igniting discourse concerning what many have considered to be Lopez's dishonoring of a sacred religious icon. Despite the controversy surrounding the images, Lopez has received an outpouring of respect and admiration for her work from across many communities (Davalos). Many Chicanas view her images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as empowering to women and telling of the struggles faced by Chicana women in their contemporary situations. Lopez imaginatively connected the everyday Chicana woman, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and workers to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* serves as a vehicle for Lopez to communicate messages that allowed women to see themselves in the *La Virgen's* image. Lopez offers us reinventions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that speak to the challenges and beauty of Chicana identity and the importance of

honoring the culture and spirituality of Indigenous peoples. Lopez importantly emphasizes the Indigenous roots that are so central *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and her legacy. This can be seen clearly in Lopez's painting *Nuestra Madre*.



3.1. Yolanda M. Lopez, *Nuestra Madre*, 1981-88.

In her own words Lopez explains her motivations behind *Nuestra Madre*, stating:

It took me an entire year in 1978 to look and think about the whole range of meanings in the Guadalupe, trying very hard to contextualize it with what I knew about our history and our spirit. I came to realize that the Guadalupe represents what is sacred about and, as importantly, I concluded that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is an ancient Goddess coated with a thin veneer of Christianity. It is my way of connecting our past with our present. It is also an offering to Chicanas and Chicanos to rethink our roles as men and women, and the values we have created for ourselves. And as an artist, I ask you to examine how those values are expressed in the images we make (Nepantla Aesthetics).

Here it becomes clear that Lopez views *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as *Tonantzin*, or *Coatlicue*, mother of the gods, and engages with this image in order to transform social thought concerning history and identity. Although the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has always subtly articulated its connection to *Coatlicue* and the female deities of the Mesoamericans, Lopez takes us one step further to truly return *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to her Indigenous origins. Lopez removes the Judeo-Christian Mother Mary imagery all together, and

replaces it with an image of *Coatlicue* that is based upon the 15th century stone carving of *Coatlicue*.

The *Nuestra Madre* image maintains the golden sunrays, the star covered mantle, and the crescent moon traditional to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, yet they come into new meaning as images connected to the celestial forces of the *Coatlicue* deity. The docile and passive image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is replaced with the commanding and powerful image of the *Coatlicue* stone sculpture. Lopez's radical removal of the Judeo-Christian imagery, emphasizes *Coatlicue* within *La Virgen of Guadalupe* and in doing so educates its viewers about Mexican peoples Indigenous history and heritage. Mexicans and Chicana/os alike tend to see *La Virgen de Guadalupe* only as she relates to Catholicism. This painting challenges these notions by truly decolonizing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* image and embracing the strength of *Coatlicue* as a new cultural icon.

Looking to another artwork inspired by the *Coatlicue* deity is Colette Crutcher's *Tonantzin Renace (Tonantzin Is Reborn)*. The multi-media mural located in San Francisco, California seeks to educate about the mother deities *Tonantzin* and *Coatlicue* and makes vibrantly visible the Indigenous heritage of people of Mexican descent.



3.2. Colette Crutcher, *Tonantzin Renace/Tonantzin Reborn*, 1998.

(Photograph by Emily Hoyer, 2006.)



3.3. Colette Crutcher, *Tonantzin Renace Detail*, 1998.

The mural is constructed from various materials including paint,

wood, and mosaic tiles made from recycled materials (Artwork Made by Hand). The image is an imaginative representation of *Mesoamerican* deity *Tonantzin*, and represents a mother goddess that also embodies elements of both *Coatlicue* and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Although the deity featured in the mural is not a direct reference to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* the mural is still punctuated with reminders of *La Virgen* that help to direct the message of the artwork. The mural features not only a small image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on the forehead of the *Tonantzin* deity but also incorporates the recognizable sunrays from the traditional image. Through connecting *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to the *Mesoamerican* deities Crutcher emphasizes the interconnectedness of the two figures.

Although European-American artist Crutcher is not of Mexican descent she has spoken of her conception to *Tonantzin* as a powerful representation of womanhood, as a connecting force that unites humans to the earth, and as simply a visually inspiring deity (Latorre 223). Crutcher uses the mural to educate about Mesoamerican culture and deities by bringing her interpretation of *Tonantzin* to the people of California in a public sphere. The mural contains numerous references to Mesoamerican culture and spirituality, especially that associated with *Tonantzin* or *Coatlicue*, such as the serpents, jade, celestial bodies, and earthly elements. Also connecting the mural to *Mesoamerican* spirituality is the dedication posted next to the mural

that is written in both *Nahuatl* and English, and reads:

Our Mother, Mother of the Gods, Heart of the Earth, Earth
 Monster, Petticoat of Serpents, Goddess of Nourishment,
 Mother Warrior, Fire Goddess, Obsidian Butterfly, She Who
 Makes Green Things Grow, Mother of the Inferno, Flower
 Plume, Thirteen Eagle, Skirt of Jade, Goddess of the Eagles,
 Goddess of the Filth and Cleansing

This dedication communicates the multidimensionality of not only the deity but of all women. The fact that *Coatlicue* is both a mother and a warrior, a creator and a cleanser, a goddess and a monster, destroys one dimensional conceptions and representations of women. By emphasizing the multidimensionality of the female *Mesoamerican* deities Crutcher aims to free all women from confines that drive them into conflicting categories that deny their ability to occupy multiple spaces within culture, society, and spirituality.

This mural is not only an influential image in regards to conceptions of women's identity and empowerment but also serves as a symbol of resistance for all peoples. As spoken by Guisela Latorre in her book *Walls of Empowerment*, "in this mural, Tonantzin becomes a general allegory of

cultural survival in the face of adversity. Since she is reincarnated and takes new form in *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, she is also an allegory of overlapping and fluid identities and thereby appeals to communities other than that of women of color” (Latorre 224-225). Not only due to the centralization of *Mesoamerican* imagery within the work of a European-American artist, but also due to the mural’s public presence, the image is able to speak to broad and diverse communities. Through this mural the presence and energy of the Indigenous *Tonantzin* and *Coatlicue* exceeds that of the Catholic Virgin Mary restoring *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to her true origins and potentiality for serving as a tool for social resistance and empowerment across many oppressed groups.

Rights and Empowerment

As previously demonstrated in this study, the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has long been associated with Mexican and Chicana/o empowerment, the protection of human rights, and a commitment to progressive social change. The following artists provide influential examples of the way in which *La Virgen de Guadalupe* can be reinvented in order to provide an empowering role model for people of Mexican descent. Ester Hernández and Nephtalí de León have created empowering images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that truly mobilize *La Virgen de Guadalupe* endowing her with the power to protect her children.

Artist Ester Hernández has dedicated her artistic work to the cultural and political empowerment of Chicana/o communities. Dolores Huerta attests to the power of Hernández's art commenting:

Once seeing her work, the memory of it will remain with you forever. Ester is a master of communication through art and cuts to the quick, to the soul, to the Corazon, to the passion that touches us and helps us to understand the experiences of others -making them our own" (esterhernandez).

Huerta illuminates Hernández's art as a powerful tool for communicating political and cultural messages. Experiencing Hernández's art expands political and cultural understandings of Chicana/o people with the intent of initiating social transformation. In her piece *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derecho de los Xicanos (La Virgen de Guadalupe Defending the Rights of Chicanos)* Hernández represents *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in a karate pose wearing a karate uniform breaking out of her traditional pose in order to rise to the defense of her people.



3.4. Ester Hernández, *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo Los Derechos de los Xicanos*, 1975.

The image mobilizes and empowers Chicana women, and goes beyond the traditional protective image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to explore a space in which women are encouraged to take a stance against oppression in order to protect and defend the rights of their people. The passive position and downward gaze of the original *Virgen de Guadalupe* is replaced with an image of strength and directness. Even the angel motif is animated and appears prepared for action. Hernández shows us *La Virgen de Guadalupe* both literally and figuratively breaking out of her traditional pose. In doing so, Hernández transforms *La Virgen de Guadalupe* into an image of women's and Chicana

empowerment that provides a role model for those seeking to resist oppression and defend their human rights.

The ability of artists to create empowering role models for people of Mexican descent is evident in the work of Nephtalí de León. In his painting *Virgen de Guadaliberty* he depicts a fusion of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with the classic American icon of the *Statue of Liberty*.



3.5. Nephtalí de León, *La Virgen de Guadaliberty*, 1999.

In fusing these two images León creates a vision of American liberty that welcomes and acknowledges the presence of Mexican and Chicana/o

people. The painting calls into question the universality and neutrality of American liberty and identity. Who has access liberty in America? And who does American identity include, or rather exclude? Mexicans living in the United States have been denied rights and liberties due to their Mexican or Chicana/o identity. Through this painting León allows people of Mexican descent to reclaim America. This painting allows people of Mexican descent to be visible in the history and identity of their own country.

Further, León's reinvention of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* implants in *La Virgen* a sense of strength and conviction. Her traditionally docile and passive pose is now replaced with the strength and affirmation of the *Statue of Liberty*. She is a protector of the liberties of her people in a country that has long denied their freedom and humanity. The *Statue of Liberty* is also a symbol that welcomed European immigrants to America, promising freedom and success. León's painting points to the irony of Eurocentric conceptions of American history and identity in which people of Mexican descent have always been treated as foreigners within their own land. Therefore the painting demands that one rethink the history and the identity of America and commands that in order for liberty to truly reign, the history, culture, and identity of Mexico and its people must be embraced and made visible.

Sexuality and Gender

La Virgen de Guadalupe as woman leader and icon has provided a valuable arena for artists to explore issues of gender and sexuality. In this section I first look to the work of Alma Lopez to understand and demonstrate the ways in which *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has been creatively reinvented to speak to the pertinent issues surrounding women of color, particularly lesbian women of color. Alma Lopez has used her reinterpretations and re-contextualizations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in order to explore, critique, and re-envision concepts of sexuality and gender. Her interpretations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* have stirred up controversy and been rejected by those who see her as threatening the purity and sacredness of the *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (Peréz). She has been accused, by mainly conservative Catholic communities, of desecrating the sacred image by infusing it with nudity, lesbianism, and sexuality (Peréz). In regards to Lopez's work and other Chicana representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, Laura Peréz writes:

Eroticized images that are dehumanizing and violent to women are not only openly tolerated they are ubiquitous visual reminders of what some men have done, and others will continue to do, to hold power over women. The historical and present-day hyper-visibility of images of women impositions of male power, sexual desire, and violence, cyclically reinforce,

and are reinforced by, the use of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a model of abnegation and passivity with respect to patriarchy. Thus, Chicana feminist artists struggle over the representation of the everyday negatively racialized female body through her. (Pérez 266)

The ownership and embrace of the Indigenous female body that Pérez points to as the motivation and message behind several Chicana representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* truly speaks to the intent of Lopez's work.

One of Lopez's most notable pieces that has caused controversy by speaking to these raw issues of sex, race, and gender is *Our Lady*.



3.6. Alma Lopez, *Our Lady*, 1999.

This piece of digital artwork creatively embodies the strength and importance of women's agency. In this piece Lopez demonstrates self-representation of the female body that does not stigmatize female nudity or sexuality. In *Our Lady* Lopez challenges that patriarchal conceptions of womanhood and women's sexuality that have violently oppressed and dehumanized women, and have denied them the right to self-representation. Gloria Anzaldúa speaks about the oppressive nature of the Catholic tradition when it comes to violently severing our spiritual selves from our bodies. Anzaldúa writes, "The Catholic and Protestant religions encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves." (59). I believe this separation and killing off of the self to be especially pertinent to women. In order to reclaim sexual agency and the right to exist in one's body Lopez explodes the confines of the *virgin-whore complex*.³ Western and Catholic definitions of female sexuality and identity have enforced virginity as the defining quality of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, predicating that her respectability is a result of her virginal status. Irene Lara expresses in the concluding words of her article, "Goddess of the Americas: Beyond the Virtuous Virgin/Pagan *Putá* Dichotomy," "ultimately, decolonizing Tonantzin-Guadalupe does not necessarily mean rejecting Guadalupe as a colonial sign of the virtuous *virgen* in favor of Tonantzin and associated

goddesses as signs of the colonized pagan *puta* [whore]. Instead, through Tonantzin-Guadalupe, they [Chicanas] engage her in order to sanctify the complexity and dynamism of their spiritual and sexual subjectives" (123). These words speak loudly to the motives and accomplishments of Alma Lopez's *Our Lady*. In the painting Lopez allows *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and her sexual being to occupy the same woman. Through this painting Lopez provides a role model for women who is not ashamed of her body or sexuality and in merging this image of a confident, natural, and real image of a women of color with *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, she breaks down the patriarchal barriers that seek to control and suppress women's sexuality.

In response to the backlash, hate, and controversy Lopez received when this painting was exhibited in Santa Fe, New Mexico Alma Lopez released a letter of defense. Her words are worth quoting at length:

Even if I look really hard at my work and the works of many Chicanas artists, I don't see what is so offensive. I see beautiful bodies that are gifts from our creator. I see nurturing breasts. I see the strong nurturing mothers of all of us. I am forced to wonder how men like Mr. Villegas and the Archbishop are looking at my work that they feel it is "blasphemy" and "the devil." I wonder how they see bodies of women. I wonder why they think that our bodies are so ugly and perverted that they

cannot be seen in an art piece in a museum?

For me, this experience at times has been confusing and upsetting, primarily because Mr. Villegas self-righteously believes that he has the authority to dictate how a particular image should be interpreted. He believes he can tell me how to think. I am a woman who has grown up with the Virgen. Who is this man to tell me what to think and relate to her?

Through Lopez's firm and passionate words we see her commitment to women's empowerment and the decolonization of their sexuality and bodies. The original intent of the artwork sought to liberate women from the violence and oppression of patriarchy in which the female body is objectified and commodified and through which women's agency and ownership concerning their own bodies and sexuality is violently seized and used as a weapon of control and domination.

In her letter Lopez also calls into question the idea of spiritual authority. She questions who has the right to dictate and determine other's relationships to spirituality, or even religious images. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* being a cultural symbol belongs to each and every individual and can be reinvented to speak the needs and visions of that person. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has many faces that are given to her by the imagination and

progressive thoughts of Mexican and Chicana artists and no one is to dictate the way in which one relates to a shared cultural symbol. Claiming ownership of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* contradicts everything that *La Virgen* has represented to Mexican and Chicana/o peoples throughout history. Through *Our Lady* Lopez is not claiming ownership or authority over the image but is rather freeing the image from oppressive sexist confines in order to speak her own voice and represent her own identity.

Further engaging with the work of Alma Lopez I look to her two artworks *Encuentro* and *Lupe & Sirena in Love*.



3.7. Alma Lopez, *Lupe & Sirena in Love*, 1999.



3.8. Alma Lopez, *Encuentro (Meeting)*, 1999.

Similarly to *Our Lady* these two pieces explore notions of women's sexuality, gender, empowerment, and equality. These paintings merge the recognizable images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the *Sirena*, depicting a loving relationship that brings visibility to lesbians and aesthetically fights against gender oppression, hetero-normatively, and homophobia. Regarding Lopez's work Pérez writes, "*Lupe & Sirena in Love* raises further questions about how we inhabit the space we dwell in, including our bodies, in gendered and sexualized ways" (Pérez 176)

In her own words Alma Lopez elaborates on the meaning behind these two paintings stating, "The image of two recognizable cultural female figures appeared to me: the Sirena/Mermaid from the popular *loteria* bingo game

and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the post-conquest Mother of Jesus. I am re-imagining these cultural icons from my own worldview as a Chicana Lesbian.” Through these words and through close interpretation of the paintings it becomes clear that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has the power to transform cultural identity and create space and representation for those in the margins. Through merging those in the margins with an iconic and respected figure, the voices from the margins are brought to the center to be heard, appreciated, and incorporated into a cultural and national identity.

Chicana artists have allowed *La Virgen* to be sexual and to exist in their bodies in a way that does not threaten their respectability or virtue. The degraded sexuality of *La Malinche* (Randall, Del Castillo) and her connection to the creation of *mestizo* people allows us to turn our back on her as our mother and turn toward the pure and virginal *Guadalupe*.⁴In many regards *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become as respectable mother figure due to her virginal purity and lack of sexuality. Chicana artists such as Alma Lopez and Yolanda Lopez reinvent *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in a way that does not sever her from her body and her sexuality. Her virtue is no longer predicated on her male-defined existence as a virgin. Virginité, conceptually gives power to the man, to take and objectify women and render them dirty, un-virtuous, or even traitors.

In her artwork *Love Goddess* Yolanda Lopez creates an image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* merged with sexuality in a way that is beautiful and empowering and frees her from patriarchal definitions of female sexuality.



3.9. Yolanda M. Lopez, *Love Goddess*, 1978.

The painting overlays an image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with Sandro Botticelli's popular depiction of the Greek goddess Aphrodite entitled *The Birth of Venus*. In Greek mythology sexuality of all forms was not suppressed or stigmatized like it has been in the Christian tradition, but rather, was expressed openly and valued as a habitual, natural, powerful, creative, and

necessary part of everyday life and love.

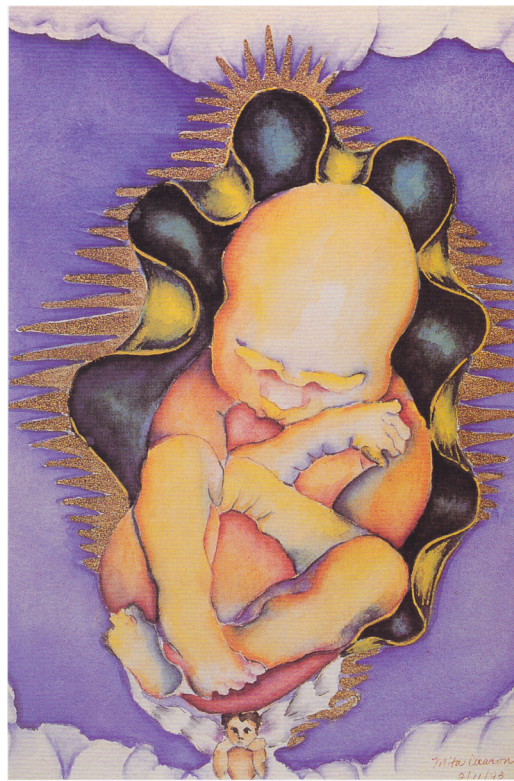
In Greek mythology the goddess Aphrodite is celebrated and not degraded nor devalued by her sexual openness and connection to her body. Botticelli's painting is a representation of Aphrodite's birth as a grown woman, confident and assured in her sexual being and female body. Through engaging Botticelli's and bringing it into visual dialogue with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Lopez strips away the layers of stigma and sin that Christian traditions have imposed on female sexuality. By superimposing an image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* onto the figure of Botticelli's Aphrodite, Lopez is creating an image of female sexuality and nakedness that challenges *Guadalupe's* virginal image. Lopez infuses *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with sexuality that de-centers the emphasis on her conventionality and virginity. This allows *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to exist within realms of real womanhood and within the artwork *Love Goddess* returns notions of sexuality to the spheres of love and nature.

Rebirth and Technology

All of the artists featured in this chapter attest to the malleability of the image of *La Virgen of Guadalupe* and have proven that as a popular cultural icon she possesses the power to communicate important messages to the masses. In concluding this chapter I think it is important to look to artists who

have demonstrated a critical understanding of *La Virgen of Guadalupe* as an image of transformation that meets the ever-changing needs of her people. The artwork of Margarita, 'Mita' Cuarón and Marion C. Martinez embodies the transformative power of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as an image that is destined to reflect the evolving voices of Mexicans and Chicana/os.

On a less political level as some of the previous artists, Cuarón provides us with an image of *La Virgen of Guadalupe* that represents growth and rebirth.



3.10. Margarita 'Mita' Cuarón, *Virgen de Guadalupe Baby*, 1992.

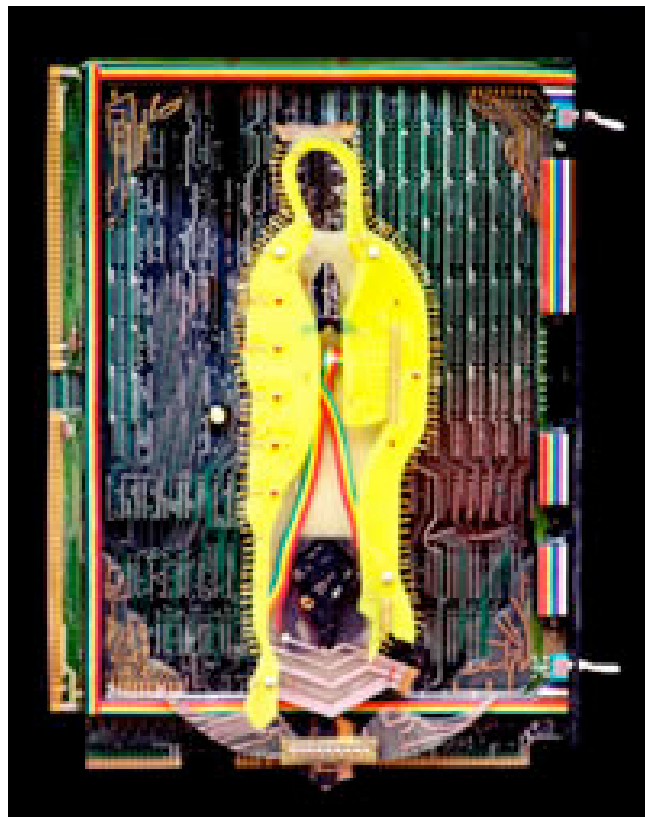
In the painting *Virgen de Guadalupe Baby* Cuarón depicts *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a sleeping embryonic baby with the surrounding womb as the

blue mantle and golden sunrays of the traditional *Virgen de Guadalupe* image. The child appears to be in a blue sky with white clouds and is supported by the recognizable winged angel usually seen at the feet of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. The traditional mantle becomes a womb that shelters and protects the child. The artist is clearly representing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a symbol of life and rebirth. Through this painting Cuarón opens the traditional symbol to new possibilities and formations. In this painting *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the mother but rather the child.

This representation delves into the cyclical nature of both life and symbols, suggesting that they should never remain static but should continue to nurture and evolve new thoughts, ideologies, and praxes. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as an infant, and not a mother, shows that we do not only rely on her for protection as a stable mother figure, but that she is also a figure who we create and nurture for ourselves. As Miguel Leon-Portilla illustrates “the earth, created by *Ometéotl*, is not static, it is ever moving” (Portilla 45). Therefore the inversion of mother to child becomes significant in terms of Mesoamerican spirituality in which the universe, the earth, and humankind are in a constant state of rebirth and movement.

Using these ideas of rebirth and movement as a platform for *La Virgen of Guadalupe* Marion C. Martinez has radically ushered *La Virgen of Guadalupe*

into the 21st century. New Mexican artist Martinez has become known for her construction pieces made from recycled computer hardware and other electronic materials. The medium of her artwork infuses her images of *La Virgen of Guadalupe* with new and radical relations to the world of technology and progress.



3.11. Marion C. Martinez, *Guadalupe 3-D*, 1998.



3.12. Marion C. Martinez, *Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2003.

Through these two pieces we see that Martinez's unique merging of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* with electronic materials creates a revolutionary conception of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a modern woman, not confined to the past, but moving rapidly into the future. In her own words Martinez expresses, "my artwork represents the coming together of the dichotomy of my life experiences." Through this statement Martinez boldly addresses the conflicting forces surrounding *mestizo* culture, especially within a modern context. It is common to speak of Indigenous peoples, traditions, and thought as bound to the past and irrelevant to the present and future.

This oppressive form of nostalgia usually enacted by Western culture renders the energy and tradition of Indigenous thought as lifeless and extraneous. Martinez's work makes a bold statement that ensures that traditional cultural images are relevant, valuable, and alive within the present and can be evolved to reflect the contemporary culture.

In her article, "Tradition, Technology and the Chicanafuturist art of Marion C. Martinez" Catherine S. Rameriez writes, "just as saints, according to Catholic doctrine, mediate between heaven and earth, Martinez's work links science and spirituality, which have long been regarded and positioned as separate and mutually exclusive" (72). Further Ramierez affirms, "Martinez's work reconciles putative opposites. It recognizes that the sacred and divine may be found in the everyday, material world, even in objects dismissed as trash, and blurs the line between science and spirituality" (Ramirez 72). Here we see that the message and impact of Martinez's work is clear. Martinez's work innovatively intertwines tradition with technology, asserting that a relationship between traditional thought and culture and technological innovation and modernity must not be viewed as anomalous or impossible.

Chapter Four

La Virgen de la Calle

Although *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has long had a significant place in the realms of sacred religious imagery and has been and continues to be a central subject in modern art, *La Virgen* also holds a special place within the everyday lives of Mexican and Chicano/o people. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a prolific symbol within pop-culture, street art, tattoos, jewelry and clothing. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a symbol that adorns nearly every street, restaurant, shop, household and body throughout Mexico and Mexican-America communities. In this final chapter I hope to both analyze and problematize today's fascination with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* through looking at the relationships held by men with *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, especially those from low-rider or *cholo* cultures.¹ I focus primarily on the tattoos of Los Angeles tattoo artist Mark Machado, better known as Mr. Cartoon and the work of Chicana artist Delilah Montoya in order to address not only the popularity of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, but also to complicate the status she holds in relation to men. Mr. Cartoon provides an example of the ways in which men view *La Virgen de Guadalupe* through a patriarchal lens that allows her to be used in order to reinforce their masculinity and control women's sexuality. Delilah Montoya uses her artwork to highlight *Virgen de Guadalupe* tattoos as a means of communicating a greater message about the ways in

which both men and women of Mexican descent have been oppressed and have engaged with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in a manner that is redemptive and liberating for the self and soul. Through engaging with Mr. Cartoon and Delilah Montoya I endeavor to further explore the personal meanings people find within *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, but also to restore meaning and to educate others about the true significance and power of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as both a historical and contemporary figure. I feel this is necessary because, perhaps inevitably, when an image becomes so prominently used its true meaning is sometimes lost or overlooked.

While I have endeavored to portray progressive and *womanist* representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* by male artists such as Nephtalí de León the relationship between *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and Mexican and Chicano men remains complicated and problematic in terms of reinforcing patriarchy and a failure to move beyond the compartmentalizing dichotomy of a *virgin-whore complex*. Men such as President Hidalgo and César Chávez have entered *La Virgen de Guadalupe* into a visual rhetoric of revolution and liberation, yet many men fail to recognize the true agency and female energy of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. In many ways men have recolonized the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in terms of male superiority and control of women's bodies and sexualities. There is also an interesting irony in place between men who honor and defend *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as their mother and

protector of their culture yet in their daily lives continue to perpetuate cycles of patriarchal violence against women.

In order to investigate the relationship between men and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* the world of tattoos becomes a valuable place for examining contemporary images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Mr. Cartoon is a renowned Los Angeles tattoo artist who is famous for both his tattoos of “sexy women” and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Mr. Cartoon’s body of work and his perspective towards the women he portrays in his tattoos can be said to be a complete reinforcement of the ideologies that fuels the *virgin-whore complex*. Even if it is done unknowingly Mr. Cartoon’s representations of women and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* deny women rights to self-definition and self-determination in regards to their bodies, sexuality and moral virtue. Here is an example of one of Mr. Cartoon’s tattoos on a male client that illuminates his problematic representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in contrast to his depictions of other women.



4.1. Mr. Cartoon, *Untitled*. Date unknown.

This image shows two images of women; one is a passive *La Virgen de Guadalupe* figure, and the other is a hyper-sexualized and animated angel. These two images on the arm of one man show the disconnect between representing real women, and representing women through the lens of a *virgin-whore complex*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*'s honor and virtue should not be determined or predicated by male defined categories of virginity and purity that originated in order to reinforce and justify systems of male domination and female subordination. Mr. Cartoon says in an interview with National Public Radio, "I specialize in doing sexy women tattoos, and for her [*La Virgen de Guadalupe*] I have to pull

more towards the mother side" (Day to Day). This shows the way in which Mr. Cartoon perpetuates patriarchal conceptions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. He does not engage with *La Virgen* on a multidimensional level, but rather, pushes her further into the strict confines of the *virgin-whore* dichotomy. Ultimately the tattoos of Mr. Cartoon are blatant reinforcements of a dichotomy between respectable mother figures void of sexuality and female agency, and the opposite, women highly objectified and hyper-sexualized according to misogynistic male standards.

Further complicating the male relationship to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* Mr. Cartoon describes the decision to get a *Virgen de Guadalupe* tattoo as, "an accomplishment in life" further stating, "you become a man to get that tattoo" (Day to Day). Here we see conceptions and projections of masculinity and manhood tied to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Mr. Cartoon elaborates on why men value *Virgin of Guadalupe* tattoos saying "we (Chicano men) are raised to be macho...and not to let anyone treat you second class, so along with that attitude comes a lot of street fighting...it's funny how the hardest gangsters have that (La Virgen) on them" (Day to Day). Here, Mr. Cartoon reveals the way in which *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has become a reassurance of male masculinity. The docile, passive, and virginal image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in juxtaposition to the brutality and *machista* street culture of some *Cholo* or Chicano men reinforces male dominance and masculinity. In many ways the

tattoo is used to reinforce patriarchy by suggesting that only a man who is secure in his masculinity and street credibility has the power and conviction to associate his body and identity with a feminine, female symbol.

Mr. Cartoon also comments on the power of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as an image of redemption and as a forgiving mother among Chicano gang cultures. He describes the way *La Virgen* as a passive and compassionate mother forgives her children for their sins. He says tattoos of the *La Virgen* are redemptive because it allows men to carry with them an image of a forgiving mother that he explains in saying, "the reason that the homies get that (*Virgen de Guadalupe* tattoo) is kind of a protector, its like forgive me for what I'm about to do" (Day to Day). This conception of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the reason behind numerous tattoos of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a token of forgiveness for violent behavior enables men to utilize *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a symbol that justifies cycles of violence and oppression, that are ultimately destructive to Chicana/o communities.

While Mr. Cartoon expresses his own respect for *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a mother and protector through his art form, his work enters him into a dialogue contingent upon the need to progress past patriarchal conceptions and images of women, their bodies, and their sexuality. Moving forward from Mr. Cartoon's tattoos of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* I think it is important to emphasize that tattoos of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* should be

enacted as a means to further reinventing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in a progressive way that encompasses all that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* offers and represents for people of Mexican descent. The personal relationship between *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the body should be an informed decision that seeks to understand and display *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, not only as virginal mother figure that binds women to the polarizing *virgin-whore complex*, but as all the diverse and multi-dimensional women that she encompasses.

All this is not to say that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* does not hold a progressive place in the minds of Mexican and Chicano men. In fact *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has historically and contemporarily significantly garnered honor and respect as a female leader, provider, and protector within the misogynistic and *machista* culture produced by Mexican colonialism. In a world in which the dominant and most numerous leaders and spiritual figures are male, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has maintained her power and presence as a leading spiritual and cultural icon, through a following of both men and women alike. Yet, as we deconstruct what *La Virgen de Guadalupe* means across lines of gender it is imperative that men take it upon themselves to begin the process of decolonization and deconstructing and reconstructing their overall conceptualizations of women. I believe that the male embracing of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* proves to be problematic if it does not seek to critically go beyond systems of structural and personal patriarchy and

misogyny to arrive at a thorough understanding of womanhood. This must be achieved through listening to and educating oneself through the voices of progressive women and challenging oneself to see the world through the eyes of women as equal members of society. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter women artists are providing us with progressive images of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that seek to educate and liberate definitions of self-determined woman-hood, sexuality, and identity; and they need to be listened to.

In his ethnographic study of Latino prison tattoos, titled, “Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious” Ben Olguín illuminates the historical origins and political significance of full-back Guadalupe tattoos. He explains, “Christian iconography, especially the symbol of *La Virgen* was placed on the backs of prisoners ostensibly to protect them from beatings. The belief was that no Catholic guard would strike the back of an inmate with his whip if he had *La Virgen* etched into it, for fear of being eternally damned for the sacrilegious act” (Olguín 210). Here we see the way in which simply the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a symbol of both figurative and literal protection against violent oppression. Through looking at the tattoos of incarcerated Latino men Olguín investigates the ways in which cultural tattoos serve as a form of political and cultural resistance. Olguín argues, “these socially symbolic markings facilitate a universal moral – and always

political – claims against human degradation (Olguín 164). Through these words it becomes clear that cultural tattoos, including tattoos of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* can symbolize the reclaiming of identity. The respect for *La Virgen de Guadalupe* across political, religious, and cultural barriers allows her to transcend personal and institutional power structures. Thus, enabling her to not only exist within and between dichotomies but as a figure of mediation and therefore protection. Offering further analytical insight into the cultural, social, and political functions of *Virgen de Guadalupe* tattoos, Marian and art scholar, Judith Dupré states, “once tattooed, the gangster is both sinner and saint, holding in visual tension the spectrum of human behaviors and hopes” (Dupré). This tension of dichotomy present in the street culture tattooing of the sacred religious and cultural icon is part of what fundamentally drives the power of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Since her origins, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, followed by her reinventions in art, has been a connecting force between opposing and binary spheres of thought and being. Dupré intelligibly contributes to this train of thought, stating:

Although *La Virgen's* ubiquitous presence defies simple explanation, her ability to mediate contradictions – whether religious, political, ethnic, or economic – is undeniable. The proof is everywhere around us. That *Guadalupe's* image is found on bottle caps as well as in basilicas is evidence of the

wide faith in her perennial power to build bridges between people with different values (Dupré).

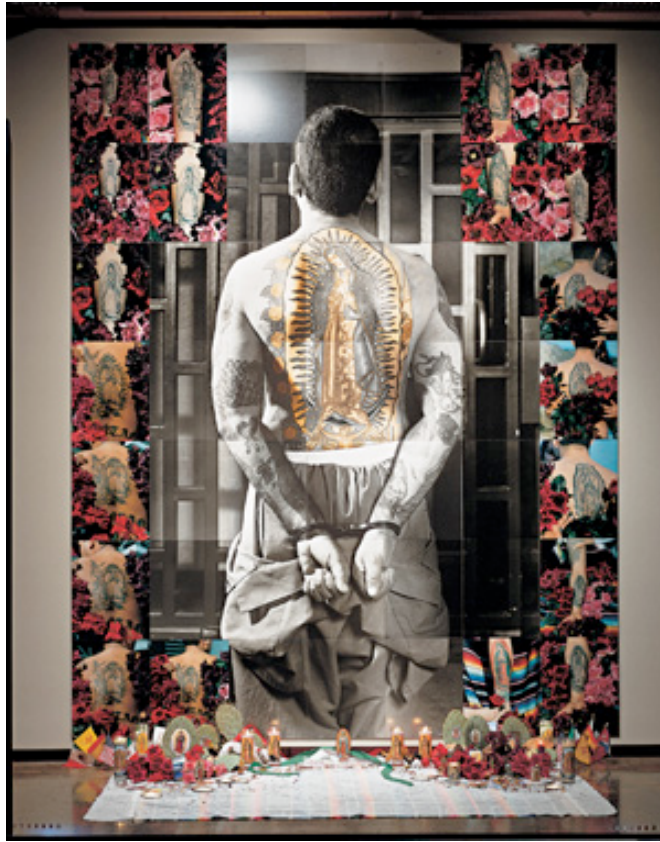
Through these words Dupré addresses the cultural significance and ubiquity of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as telling of her connective ability to bring together communities and opposing viewpoints and to mediate between dichotomous spheres of thought and being. This ties in fluidly with Lara Medina's exploration of *nepantla* spirituality.² Medina speaks about the power of *nepantla*, as the existence between two worlds that allows one to embrace the "duality or complementary opposites [that] exist in all things, *nepantla* itself is comprised of the shadow side or the bewildering state of uncertainty and the transparent side or the state of clarity and meaning making" (254). Medina's words give us insight into the clarity and meaning that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* can create for Mexican people by existing in this space. In examining the omnipresence of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* across peoples, politics, and art forms it becomes clear that she does not only represent the *mestizo* connection of the European and the Mesoamerican, the colonizer and the colonized, but she also bridges the gaps between male and female, sexuality and gender, self and body.

Continuing the visual discourse of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in tattoos is Chicana artist Delilah Montoya. Montoya engages digital art-forms and photography in order to produce powerful aesthetics embedded with social,

cultural, and political messages that allow her viewers to see the world through Chicana eyes. Montoya has created several pieces that confront and address *Virgen de Guadalupe* tattoos. Montoya gives us her perspective on La Virgen and tattoos in saying:

The contemporary tattooing of the Guadalupe onto the backs of Cholos is not an odd coincidence, that is, if one trusts the collective consciousness. This act in many ways is a ritual practice that is meant to provide protection against harm and also empowers the Cholo during conflicts. It is the protective symbol for the pugnacious person. In tattooing Guadalupe's images onto their backs, the ritualistic wearing of "Our Lady" is referenced. In following the myth, the tattooed Cholo can be thought of as the Xipe Totec who is the male aspect of Tonantzin. This act binds together both the male and female energies of "Our Lady". (Montoya)

Montoya's clear and critical understanding of the male relationship to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is powerfully depicted not only in these words but also in her piece *La Guadalupana*.



4.2. Delilah Montoya, *La Guadalupana*, 1998.



4.3. Delilah Montoya, *La Guadalupana*, 1998. Detail.

In *La Guadalupana* Montoya's work speaks loudly to the relationship between men and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Laura Pérez suggests that in this artwork "the prisoner has become a living alter [*una altera*] (136). The body as an alter has significant meaning as Mexicans and Chicana/os engage with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a guiding figure in their lives. The immense collage depicts a Chicano prisoner, with his back to the camera in order to expose his hands that are bound in handcuffs. His position also allows us to see the large image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* that he has tattooed across his back. The photograph itself is a powerful image that addresses the reality of issues such Chicano male incarceration and criminality that has stemmed from and reflects colonial violence. Symbolically the photograph represents the immobility of Chicana/os in America. The official grasp of the handcuffs becomes a metaphor for the violent and systematic oppression, dehumanization, and immobilization of Chicana/o's in America and the arrest of Chicana/o agency.

While the photograph of the prisoner remains a central and guiding image to the artwork, the fact that the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the only part of the photograph that is in color draws our attention to the importance of this image. Accompanying this piece in an exhibit entitled *Guadalupe en Piel (Guadalupe in the Skin)*, were several other *Virgen de*

Guadalupe tattoo artworks. The following untitled piece features a poem that reads:

Corazon Colonizado
Como Rosa Blooms
Guadalupe Tonantzin
En La Tilma de Nuestra
Xicana Piel

Translated:

Colonized Heart
Like a Rose Blooms
Guadalupe Tonantzin
In the *tilma* of our
Chicana Skin



4.4 Delilah Montoya, *Untitled from Guadalupe en Piel (Guadalupe in Skin)* Series, 1998.

This artwork and the poem work together within the same mission of *La Guadalupana* piece to recognize the presence of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* within our selves. As people of Mexican descent we carry *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and everything that she stands for in our skin and on our souls. The words of the poem point to this embodying of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in metaphorically connecting Juan Diego's *tilma* with Chicana skin. Therefore, in the eyes of Montoya, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is born and carried within the skin of Chicana/o people. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* informs our daily thoughts and actions, encouraging us to stand on the side of the oppressed and not the oppressors. This connection between *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the self is symbolically represented through the act of tattooing *La Virgen de Guadalupe* onto one's body. Thus making *La Virgen de Guadalupe* inseparable from who we are.

Expanding the discourse and ethnographic study of culturally significant tattoos, and bringing together ideas presented in this chapter, scholar Xuan Santos gives us a view into the relationship that Chicana women have to tattoos. Santos argues that tattoos among Chicanas have served as a powerful force of self-identification and as a tool for communicating and embracing struggles of sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism and other forms of social, spiritual and cultural oppression. Tattoos, especially among groups of colonized people, have the potential to become

images and tools for resistance. Santos writes, “Chicanas, like other colonized groups, constantly struggle with agents of social control who seek to have power over their bodies” (Santos 93). Through this statement the power of tattoos for Chicanas becomes evident. Through tattoos Chicana women are given the opportunity and power to self-identify and establish autonomy over their own bodies. While Santos does not involve direct reference to *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in his discussion on Chicana tattoos, he critically engages the notion of the “Chicana canvas” as a space in which women have the agency to define themselves. In the case of tattoos, the body becomes a canvas, and a space for creative interpretation of messages and images, as well as a space for the reinvention of self and societal norms. Much like the canvases of traditional Chicana artists, the “Chicana canvas” becomes a symbolic place of decolonization that allows for oppressed peoples to re-determine and re-conceptualize their realities and identities.

Conclusion: Thinking, Living, and Being through *La Virgen de Guadalupe*

From a personal standpoint this investigation into *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and the important place she holds as an artist's subject has truly evolved my understanding of my own identity and culture. The artists, and all of the other voices featured in this study have provided me with a new lens through which to view not only *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a cultural icon, but *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a tool for combating oppression and discrimination. Although there are countless artists among Mexican and Chicana/o communities that speak to issues of neo-colonial oppression and subjectivity, I see artistic representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as holding a unique and powerful place that critically connects people across borders and dichotomies. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as an iconic and revered symbol, recognizable throughout the Americas, makes *La Virgen de Guadalupe* a powerful vehicle for communicating messages to numerous peoples, across various backgrounds. The true power of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* lies in the fact that she is a figure of and connected to the people. *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, as a religious and cultural icon, is accessible and relatable and therefore reflects a valuable connection between cultures and visual symbols.

Engaging with the power of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a reinventable cultural image has demonstrated that revolutionary reconceptions of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* have the ability to impact change and transform thought.

Artists have engaged with *La Virgen de Guadalupe* to; educate about Indigenous spirituality and culture, to activate a political voice, to create agency for women in regards to their right to self-definition concerning their sexuality and their bodies, and finally to evolve to meet the contemporary needs and conditions of all oppressed peoples. Yet moving forward from these artists and the value of their work it is imperative to acknowledge the struggles of the artists themselves. In addition to some of the artists in this study, artists who seek to challenge systems of oppression often meet harsh colonial standards that deem their artwork to be not only unimportant, but is also not considered art, or “high” art. The struggles that these artists meet not only aesthetically and ideologically, in the ways in which their art is systematically pushed out of legitimate spheres of culture and politics; but also financially. These artists serve as examples that those who challenge and oppose, rather than support or perpetuate cycles of colonial and capitalistic oppression find that success is limited within the system. This is reflective of the issues inherent within a neo-colonial society. The system rewards those who abide by it and seeks to suppress and destroy those who pose a threat. Therefore, in considering these artists and their voices as powerful tools for social change we must also take it upon ourselves to harshly criticize the social spheres in which this art is not valued. In order to make social change and social justice something real and tangible it is important that we do not

simply recolonize these artists and their thoughts by exploiting what they have to offer.

We must engage with these artists as forms of cultural expression and critical education that encourage us to challenge the social structures around us. A crucial component of what I learned through this study is that as observers of this artwork we must be an active audience. Remaining passive will not help these artists in their fight to achieve social transformation. As active participants in this relationship between art and the community and art and education there needs to be an emphasis on engaging with artwork in a way that it has the ability to have practical impacts. While artists from the margins provide us with these invaluable artworks, the artists themselves find themselves in a constant struggle against the eurocentrism of the art world and the sacrifice of financial security that comes in refusing to abide by commercial demands that would further cycles of economic and neo-colonial oppression. Ultimately, the material struggles that these artists face are a result of the overall values and mentalities of society. Therefore as consumers, educators, and community members we must be aware of the choices we make and the ways in which these choices directly or indirectly contribute to a system of neo-colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. Through making informed and educated decisions that seek to end cycles of violence and injustice and by progressively impacting those around us we may be able

to move forward in creating more and more spaces where decolonization is able to not only thrive, but be rewarded.

Ultimately *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a popular image merged with the artists voices that come from the margins has showed me that representations of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* can help create visibility for people who's voices are not heard within the dominant culture of even their own racial group. Reflecting on the prominence of *La Virgen de Guadalupe's* image in my own life I realized that I did not truly understand or appreciate the value of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on a spiritual level but merely accepted her as a cultural icon. In critically exploring the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and examining the ways in which she has been consciously and progressively evolved and reinvented through modern art I ignited the image with new meaning for myself that has the potential to play an important role in helping me educate others about the issues that are faced daily by oppressed peoples. And although millions, of people value, honor, and respect *La Virgen de Guadalupe* in their daily lives, how many of these people have critically considered the true significance of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a purveyor of Mesoamerican culture and a revolutionary model for shaping a decolonial future? Therefore, I don not simply walk away from this study, but carry it with me, as a part of myself. I will use what I have learned here in order to inform my thoughts and actions and contribute to my determination to

combat oppression and gain the support of others in my fight. Influenced by the artists I have engaged with in this work, I have learned that it is necessary to be resourceful and creative, and make use of the opportunities and the avenues available to express my voice and my messages with the hopes of educating others and impacting society.

Endnotes

Chapter One

¹ *Mestizo* definition: Peoples descendent from both European and Indian blood as the result of the European conquest of the Americas. As stated by Gloria Anzaldúa , “en 1521 nació una nuava raza, el mestizo, el mexicano (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before” (Anzaldúa 27).

Chapter Two

¹ For further reading see: Jack D. Forbes, *Aztecas del Norte: The Chicanos of Aztlán*, 1973.

² *Huitzilopochtli* was the Nahuatl God of the Gun, and *Coyolxauhqui* was the Aztec Goddess of the Moon (Portilla 52, 161), (Anzaldúa 49).

³ *The Basilica de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe* is one of the most visited sites in the world. Every December 12th millions of people from all over Mexico and the world travel to Mexico City to Worship *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (Wolf).

⁴ *Guadalupanas*: Term used to describe followers or worshipers of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (Dunnington, Mann).

⁵ For more on the ethno-botany of Mesoamerican Peoples see: Graziera, Patrizia, *From Coatlicue to Guadalupe*, 2004.

Chapter Three

¹ Hermeneutics definition: The term *hermeneutics* covers both the first order art and the second order theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions. As a theory of interpretation, the hermeneutic tradition stretches all the way back to ancient Greek philosophy. Hermeneutics is not only about symbolic communication. Its area is even more fundamental: that of human life and existence as such. It is in this form, as an interrogation into the deepest conditions for symbolic interaction and culture in general, that hermeneutics has provided the critical horizon for many of the most intriguing discussions of contemporary philosophy (Ramberg, Gjesdal).

² For additional artworks by Yolanda Lopez, including her *Guadalupe Series* see: Davalos, Karen Mary. *Yolanda Lopez*, 2008.

³ A “virgin-whore complex” also known as a “Madonna-whore complex” is a Western psychological condition that manifests itself in men in a patriarchal society due to the suppression of a sexual desire for the mother. Due to a desire to see the mother, and even one’s wife, as pure and virginal, sexuality is projected onto the “whore”. This shows the way in which Western taboos concerning sex, particularly female sexuality, have confined women’s sexuality into a strict binary. The “virgin-whore complex” determines that virtuous women are good and pure due to being virginal or void of sexuality and that women who engage in sexuality are demeaningly seen as “whores”. For further reading concerning explanations of the *virgin-whore complex* see Estela Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore*, 1992., Sigmund Freud, "Contributions to the Psychology of Love." *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 1963.,

Chapter Four

¹ For further reading on La Malinche see: Adelaide Del Castillo, *Malintain Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective*, 1999.

² *Cholo* definition: a slag term for identifying Chicano youth involved in low-rider culture, gang and street cultures, and Mexican American hip-hop culture.

³ Endnote *Nepantla* translate from *Nahuatl* as “middle” and in terms of identity and spirituality represents *mestizaje* and existing in the borderlands. As Medina describes, *nepantla* is a multifaceted psychic and spiritual space composed of complimentary opposites; obscurity and clarity” (Medina 251, 254)

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