

Socorro Castaneda-Liles, "Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation," in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, ed. Gaston Espinosa and Mario T. Garcia

## 6

## Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Politics of Cultural Interpretation

During the Mexican Revolution in 1810, her image on a banner became Mexico's symbol of liberation as Father Miguel Hidalgo carried her into the battlefield. A century later, on the northern side of the U.S.-Mexico border in the Southwest, César Chávez did the same. He organized thousands of *campesinos* into what became a successful strike against grape growers who exploited their workers.<sup>1</sup> Her image knows no borders. She crosses *la frontera* undocumented every day as immigrants swim across the treacherous Rio Grande or walk through the scorching desert carrying her image on a chain around their necks, on an *estampita* in their wallets, or in their prayers.<sup>2</sup>

For centuries people of Mexican descent—regardless of class, gender, or sexual orientation—continue to see Our Lady of Guadalupe as the most influential Catholic symbol of Mexico. On her feast day in 2005, the *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* of Mexico City, where the original image is housed, received approximately 8 million visitors.<sup>3</sup>

With such a disparate following, it might be expected that there are many interpretations and ways of experiencing Our Lady of Guadalupe. Indeed, when I searched for material on Our Lady of Guadalupe, I found at least 1,300 works. Yet, for the more traditional Guadalupanos such a multitude of readings is difficult to accept.<sup>4</sup> A Catholic religious sister whom I told of my research on Our Lady of Guadalupe responded, "What do you mean: different interpretations?" Her shocked response is not unique; instead it reflects what most believers in Our Lady of Guadalupe think. It also reveals the need, particularly today, for different voices to share their interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



2-10-81  
111  
CR  
SECOND

...ary approaches  
... Catholic apparitionist, (2) historical, (3) Chicana femi-  
... Chicana feminist art. Historical and theological  
... the study of Our Lady of Guadalupe

CR  
L  
sto  
flue

Synthesis of the *Nican mopohua* — “Here is told”

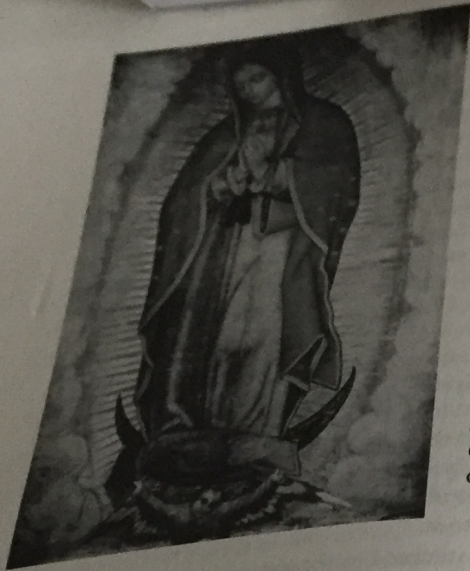
In 1521, Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City, fell to Hernán Cortés after Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec ruler, surrendered. Spanish soldiers and a few missionaries used religion to justify the physical, emotional, and spiritual enslavement of the indigenous people. Women were raped. Thousands of men, women, and children were brutally killed and their sociopolitical and religious ways of knowing were shattered. The vanquished had lost all hope and desire to live, for the conquerors had stripped them

of all dignity and self-worth, calling the indigenous people's very humanity into question. However, according to Catholic Mexican popular tradition, in the midst of this devastation, a great miracle took place—a miracle that was to return the people's dignity and restore their desire to live. As the Guadalupano poets recount, at early dawn on Saturday 9 December 1531 (a decade after the fall of Tenochtitlán), a Nahua Indian and recent convert to Christianity named Juan Diego was on his way to attend catechism classes. As he walked across the hill of Tepeyac (a sacred ancient worship site to the Aztec goddess Tonantzin), he heard birds singing at the hilltop. He then heard the sweet voice of a woman calling his name. He was astonished at what he saw at the top of the hill: A woman covered with a mantle as blue as the sky, golden sunrays gently branching out behind her (see figure 1). Her skin was cinnamon brown like his, her hands were together in the indigenous way of offering, “indicating that something is to come from her,” and she spoke the Nahuatl language.<sup>6</sup> She identified herself as Mary, mother of God. She asked Juan Diego to go to the bishop of “New Spain” (Mexico), Juan Zumárraga, and tell him that she desired that a hermitage be built in her name on the hill of Tepeyac.<sup>7</sup> Juan Diego went to the bishop and delivered the heavenly Lady's message. In disbelief, the bishop responded that Juan Diego needed to come back a second time and tell about his vision again when he would be able to carefully listen to it.

Saddened, Juan Diego returned to the site where he had seen the apparition of the beautiful Lady and, finding her there once again, told her that the bishop did not believe him, since he was only a poor Indian. Juan Diego suggested that she consider sending another person, such as a respected noble, so that her message might be heard. With great compassion, the Lady told Juan Diego that she could have chosen anybody else but that she wanted him to deliver her message to the bishop. She told him to return to the bishop and tell him that the Ever-Virgin Mary, the Mother of God wanted a hermitage to be built on the hill of Tepeyac. On the next Sunday, he did as she directed. Upon questioning Juan Diego at length, the bishop told him that he remained unconvinced, and hence could not fulfill the wishes of the heavenly Lady. Juan Diego should go to the Lady and ask for a sign.

That day, Juan Diego found his uncle, Juan Bernardino, ill with smallpox. Juan Bernardino felt that his time had come, and he asked Juan Diego to fetch a priest from Tlatelolco to hear his confession. Going in search of the priest on the next day (Tuesday), Juan Diego decided to





1. Virgen de Guadalupe, Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in Mexico City. Courtesy: Socorro Castañeda-Liles.

avoid seeing the Lady by taking the route to Tepeyac that went around the hill. To his surprise the heavenly Lady appeared to him nonetheless and asked him what his hurry was. Mournful, Juan Diego told the Lady about his dying uncle. With great love she told Juan Diego not to worry, for his uncle was in good health. Juan Diego should go to the top of the hill where he first saw her and pick some roses and bring them before her. Her request confused Juan Diego, since this occurred in December, in the dead of winter. He knew that no flowers would be growing at the top of that hill.

Yet to his surprise when he went to the hill, he found beautiful and fragrant Castilian flowers. Cutting them and placing them in his *tilma*, he brought them before the Lady.<sup>8</sup> The heavenly Lady took the flowers, but then placed them back in Juan Diego's *tilma*. She told him to return to the bishop and show him the sign for which he had asked. At the Episcopal Palace, Juan Diego asked to see the bishop. When the doorkeepers,

friars, and servants noticed Juan Diego's ebullience, they demanded to see what he was hiding in his *tilma*. Fearing their disapproval, he nonetheless showed them a couple of flowers. To everyone's surprise, when the friars and the others tried to grab the flowers they disappeared into thin air. When he was finally brought before the bishop, Juan Diego unfolded his *tilma*. As the roses fell, the image of the heavenly Lady became imprinted on his cloak. Meanwhile, the Lady visited Juan Bernardino, and identified herself as the Ever-Virgin Holy Mary of Guadalupe. She told him that he, too, was to go to the bishop and tell him about his healing and all that he had seen. The bishop was finally convinced, and not long after La Virgen's apparition a hermitage was built in her honor.

This account is the most well known, and the one generally accepted by those who are familiar with Our Lady of Guadalupe. Its interpretation, however, is another matter, for ways of understanding the meaning of the *Nican mopohua's* message (the *Nican mopohua* is the popular version of the Guadalupe account) vary anywhere between strictly indigenous to Catholic-centric indigenous readings of the text.



According to Jeannette Rodriguez's *Our Lady of Guadalupe; Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*, she is a presence that exists for those who believe...a model of cultural strength that appears in both the secular and religious worlds. One woman called her "everything we as a people should strive to be: strong yet humble, warm and compassionate, yet courageous enough to stand up for what we believe in."

Some missionaries were concerned by the growing indigenous devotion to the Virgin. Catholic missionaries called her a "satanic" invention with strong ties to Aztec goddesses. Anti-apparitionist scholars say Juan Diego is not a historical person, as his remains have never been found. The story has no historical foundation. Our Lady represents the faith of a people in an image that was painted by an indigenous artist possibly named Marcos.

Recent invocations of the Virgin of Guadalupe:

Ester Hernández, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (2010)





Yolanda López, *Guadalupe: Victoria F. Franco* [her grandmother] (1978)





Yolanda López, *Margaret F. Stewart [her mother]: Our Lady of Guadalupe* (1978)





Yolanda López, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978)





67 Ester Hernandez, *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos / The Virgin of Guadalupe Defending the Rights of the Xicanos*, 1975. Etching, 9 × 12 in. Collection of the artist.



MAY 2010

STATE OF ARIZONA  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

# WANTED

## TERRORIST

# LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE

ALIAS: Guadalupe, Reina de las Americas, Virgencita, Nuestra Madre, Tonantzin, Lupe, Lupita



**DESCRIPTION:**

Date of Birth: 12/12/1531  
Place of Birth: Tepic, Tlaxcala/Mexico  
Height: 5'  
Weight: 100 lbs.

Build: Medium  
Hair: Black  
Eyes: Dark Brown  
Complexion: Dark Brown

Scars and Marks: Unknown  
Languages: Nahuatl, Zapotec, Yaqui, Purépecha, Maya and Spanish  
Race: Amer-Indian  
Nationality: American

### SHOULD BE CONSIDERED POWERFUL AND DANGEROUS

**OCCUPATION:** Cult Leader, Human Trafficking, Terrorist

**REMARKS:** La Virgen de Guadalupe always covers her head with a star patterned shawl and wears long rose patterned dresses. She is accompanied by a young child (possibly drugged) who wears wings and pretends he is flying.

**CRIMINAL RECORD:** For over 160 years, La Virgen de Guadalupe has accompanied countless men, women and children illegally into the USA. She has given little aid and comfort to unidentified suspects at the time of their death, especially in the desert areas near the U.S./Mexico border.

**CAUTION:** She has an unexplainable, possibly dangerous light emanating from her body which could contain explosive material. She is known to have a large loyal fanatical cult following.

**REWARD:** The State of Arizona is offering of up to \$500,000 for any information leading directly to the apprehension and conviction of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE CONTACT THE ARIZONA STATE RANGERS OR YOUR LOCAL IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT (ICE) OFFICE.



© 2010 Ester Hernandez

*Janet Killebrew*  
Janet Killebrew, President of Arizona



