

The Virgin of Guadalupe: Linking the past and present by exploring the role of religion in the cultural heritage of Mexican Consciousness

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When academic experts get together to discuss important issues, in our case immigration, often times the statement “we are preaching to the choir” is uttered several times due to the frustration felt in regard to defining problems, understanding cultural history and identifying its social influence, researching public policy and legal restrictions, understanding economic influence and then influencing the implementation of sound policies and the local, state and federal level. For immigration, globally and specifically in the United States, this can seem to be a daunting task. However, if the presenters at our conference are representative of the capabilities of our nation (and I believe they are!) the congregation of the United States should be prepared for new doctrine: that of racial acceptance, the power of immigrant economics, understanding the religious affect within the context of immigration, and a critical analysis of insufficient political and legal initiatives hopefully culminating in a re-drafting of political and economic policies in the United States. Our group represented a willingness that individuals have to understand the heart of the issues that we care for deeply, but also the willingness to return to our perspective home bases and begin more discussions there; a willingness to branch out, armed with new information to send a message that more work and time is necessary to promote cultural acceptance which seems to be at the heart of attempting any legislation regarding immigration that is not based in racial prejudices and fear; fear *of the other* and fear of sharing the economic possibilities and responsibilities that come with being a citizen of any nation.

The topics presented at the this conference included varied perspectives on the topic of migration and immigration and covered social, economic, political and religious constructs with a focus on the current issues in the United States regarding immigration of undocumented Mexicans, although not wholly limited to this example. Other issues included emigration and citizenship in the Republic of Congo, Africa, the effects of state and federal legislation on immigration in the United States, the role of religion and the immigrant, social and psychological effects of short-sighted legislative policies regarding immigration, the role of teaching tolerance in American educational institutions, immigrants serving in the U.S. Armed Forces and the consequences of fencing and border control issues with the intent to curb immigration into the United States. Within the context of the research were the underlying issues of race and ethnicity, history, the effect of current political trends and the media’s effect on the social perceptions of immigrants. My research, with this context, serves to provide historical context regarding the powerful roles religious cultural heritage plays in Mexican communities related to a cultural image that has successfully migrated to the United States: the Virgin of Guadalupe. She has become a cultural anchor for Mexicans living on both sides of the Rio Grande. She is a symbol of acceptance, strength, and unity; ideas that all Mexicans, (regardless of political status), support and furthermore she may be symbolic of what a “successful” immigration policy can hope to achieve. Let the work begin!

Thesis and Introduction:

I ended my research with a question I will propose at the beginning of this essay: Does the Virgin of Guadalupe serve as a symbolic representative of a successful immigrant

experience? And while this research traces the history of this religious migration, it does within the important context that the idea of immigrant has always been in the forefront of history, and specifically that of the Western Hemisphere, a geographical wonder in the history of mankind. This paper will examine an important aspect of migration and immigration: the adaptation and use of religion as a means of solidifying power structures by the colonizer and the role religious beliefs can play in creating assimilation between two cultures. The second intention of this paper is to provide historical perspective of religion within the Mexican National Consciousness. The Americas were created as a result of migration—the opening of a New World to a European civilization entrenched in hierarchical church-state governments. The Church in New Spain developed an analogous system whose initial power rested on conversion to secure the safety and success of the Spanish migrant. Key to this conversion process was the apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1531, who became the Virgin of Guadalupe, mother of New Spain, mother to a new civilization. Even after almost three hundred years of colonization, and the political turmoil of nationhood, the Virgin of Guadalupe continued to be the Queen of the Mexican people, as she would later be declared in 1895 by Pope Leo XII. By the 20th century the Virgin of Guadalupe had become the mother of the Mexican migrant. She is an affirmation of cultural identification for many Mexicans living in the United States. And in 1999 when Pope John Paul II proclaimed her a patron saint of the Americas, it solidified her position amongst other Catholic Saints. More recently in the Catholic Cathedrals of major metropolitan cities of the United States, the Virgin of Guadalupe can be seen seated to the right of Jesus Christ, the highest honor given to a religious immigrant to the United States.

I grew up with the Virgin of Guadalupe in the background of my life. She is the soul of the Mexican nation. A symbol in the home of my Mexican family members and now my American family, and fellow children of Mexican immigrants. For a while, when I was younger, I thought that the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin Mary were two different women in religious history, then later I just thought that the Mexican community wanted a dark Virgin. This was the late seventies and eighties and every race and ethnicity was “darkening” their religious figures, more for political and social reasons than religious. Nor did I understand then that the Virgin of Guadalupe was always dark-skinned, in Spain and in Mexico. Before I became a history teacher, I knew the Virgin of Guadalupe as a moral teacher, a symbol of beauty and pureness. I still see this. Believe this. But historical research has allowed me to understand her social, political and messianic power. She has led conquerors across oceans and mountains. She brought ancient religions to their end (only to be integrated back again). She brought her miracles in the Nahuatl language. She has protected revolutionary priests and Mexican citizens to fight, and fight again for political autonomy and equality throughout centuries. She has brought Mexicans safely to all parts of the globe, but in particular the United States. She is Mother to a Nation that rose from conquest and, now in the 21st century, she is mother of North America, Herself an immigrant of her native country.

The idea to write about the permeation the Virgin of Guadalupe came to me ironically from a home visit by the cable guy. He had come to the house to bring my computer and TV into the 21st century, and I noticed that sewn into his uniform, just above his heart, was a patch of the Virgin of Guadalupe, protecting this man wherever he went. Just a regular guy displaying perhaps the most significant symbol of conquest, revolution, independence and immigration, going about his job, innocent to my long-standing questioning to this important symbol. Here She was in the 21st century, a symbol of unification, protection, in a home in a suburb of

Chicago, seen in the form of a press-on patch on a uniform shirt, wearing the same expression She had when She first arrived in 1531 on Tepeyac Hill to save a people.

On its surface the Virgin of Guadalupe is beset in a practical notion: Belief. However, like many religious traditions it is difficult to put them under historical and investigative scrutiny. Moreover, can a unifying religion, whether forced or accepted by a conquered society create equilibrium in the chaos of social structures created by said conquest? And within this context, what role does the Virgin of Guadalupe play in creating stability within the chaos of conquest, war and immigration? The answer lies in the method of integration of the Christian religion and its historical and current influence. When the Virgin Mary appears in 1531 she makes herself known in the most important region of indigenous Mexico for all colonial Spanish and Mexican societies to be witness to; a place known as D.F, or internationally known as Mexico City. This city represents, in the case of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a central staging for colonial and religious history. From this central location, She emigrates throughout Mexico during the Colonial and Independence periods. Her immigration into the United States is as old as immigrants themselves, but over the last two decades, The Virgin of Guadalupe has become a part of the mainstream Catholic faith in the United States. The end of this essay focuses on the Virgin of Guadalupe in New York City, which represents not only the pulse of the United States, but is significant due to the significant increase of Mexican immigrants in the late 20th century and early part of the 21st century.

An important note, this paper does not contain an analytical debate of the religious history of colonial or post-colonial Mexico as a whole, nor is its purpose to question the religious miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Indeed even if it did then I would be hard pressed to then explain Her incredible influence over millions of Mexicans. Instead, this essay seeks to reinforce and perhaps re-introduce the role of social and religious beliefs and their influence on political events of Mexico. And specifically seeks to trace the powerful role of the Virgin of Guadalupe as being an intrinsic force of the Mexican consciousness.

The Conquest

The conquest of the Americas occurred during the height of Spanish power in Europe. Spain itself was created out of the conquest of the Spanish Muslims and Jewish communities and the expansion of the Christian Castilian Kingdom. The conquest of the Spanish Muslims meant land, and the conquest or forced conversion of the Spanish Jews meant full financial control of the peninsula. Adding to this political and territorial consolidation was the navigational and commercial revolutions of the 15th and 16th Centuries. The “new lands” discovered by Europeans in search of “spices” would forever be changed. Historian Gomara ranked the discovery of the Indies as only second to the creation of the world itself. And Spain treated their newly found land as the “promised land”; laying claim to every pebble and organism in the name of God.

This paper will not re-examine the history of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico; those events are well documented and are not the focus of this analysis. Rather, I will begin with a conquest of a different sort, that of the soul. The souls of the indigenous peoples of Pre-Colonial Mexico were forever changed by the conquest of Christianity. The religious, social and political interplay of the Mesoamerican civilization was similar to that of Spain. Specifically, religion

was used to explain the order of the cosmos for both societies.¹ Once the Spanish arrived, ancient religious beliefs were initially used to “explain” the existence of the Spanish, only to then be abolished so that the Spanish could explain the existence of their newly conquered souls within the context of Christian doctrine. This idea truly highlights the notion that the conquest was between two intrinsically religious nations. Indeed the missionaries from Spain promoted many explanations as to how there could even *be* a civilization *to conquer*. Sixteenth Century Spain was a Christian political entity. Their own political experience in Europe could not be properly explained without an understanding of the religious component of the *Reconquista* and the imbedded mode of operating under the orders of a Christian God. The Spanish Muslim and Jewish communities, however, gradually became aware of the political and economic consequence of such intense religious evangelization. The nation of Spain was created out of this evangelization and this point must be recognized to understand the political roles the Christian missionaries were allowed in developing Colonial Mexico. In point, Christianization was part of the Spanish definition of success in all political endeavors. Furthermore, the members of the religious classes in both pre-Colonial Mesoamerica and Spain held political and economic sway in their respective societies. The Spanish realize this similarity early in the conquest and use this knowledge to parley religious evangelization and conversion into political and economic control similar to the power structures the church held in Spain. This idea is more clearly understood through the initiation that the Franciscan religious order of Spain took to become the most important religious group that instigated the governing of the population of the Valley of Mexico during the early part of colonization.² Their use of conversion, indoctrination, and religious teaching were a blueprint for social and political control in the New World.

The concept of evangelization in New Spain is fairly underscored in Lafaye’s book *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*. Historian Jacques Lafaye highlights this idea by reminding us that Christoforo (The Christ-bearer) Columbus and Hernán Cortés (the new Moses) regarded religious conversion as THE necessary prerequisite to complete conquest.³ The Europeans brought with them many powerful catalysts for change in the New World, and the Christians Missionaries were then, and now in hindsight, truly saturating. The coming of Christianity changed customs, questioned ideas and undermined the existence of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Their soul was the ultimate prize for the Roman Catholic Church which was on a political and religious decline in Europe. Indeed, the indigenous people had to be given spiritual worth before political subjugation or economic exploitation could occur. This idea is established early in the Conquest when Spanish men would have the indigenous women that were given to them by local kings of Aztec territory baptized so that their sexual relations would not be tinged with religious sin. The first Spanish missionaries, the Franciscans, who began arriving in Veracruz as early as 1523, culminated their second wave of priests with the group known as the “12 Apostles,” who were known to have walked barefoot on the 200 mile trek from Veracruz to

¹ Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, "Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, ed. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

² David J. Robinson, ed., *Migration in Colonial Spanish America*, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 182.

³ Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*, trans. Benjamin Keen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 31-37.

Mexico City,⁴ presumably to generate a pious mood from the moment of their arrival. Curiously, many of the Franciscans who arrived during this early period were from the regions of Extremadura and Andalucia, Spain. One of these orders, in San Gabriel Spain, was founded by Father Juan de Guadalupe in 1496.⁵ There was already a cult following of the Virgin of Guadalupe (same name) in Spain by the end of the 14th century. In fact, her image and legend as the “dark Lady of Las Villuercas” can be traced back to the time of Saint Luke.⁶ Moreover this Virgin’s special place in Spanish culture, referred to as *Guadalupe*, developed, beginning in 1340, because of the religious protection She gave Christians of Southern Spain in their effort to rid the peninsula of the Islamic Moors.⁷ Since then, the town of Guadalupe, Spain and the monastery there, founded by King Alfonso XI has become the principle sanctuary of Spanish Catholicism as well as a National monument. And as it relates to the migration of the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe, it is important to note that two key participants of the Conquest are also from the same region of southern Spain; Hernán Cortés of Medellin and Francisco Pizarro of Trujillo. Furthermore, the first Bishop of Mexico was a Franciscan priest, Juan de Zumárraga (1528), who was the Bishop of Mexico City during the Apparitions of the Virgin Mary which took place three years after his Bishopric began.

As the indigenous people lived within the duality of the Spanish and Native worlds, essentially performing the same social and economic tasks (rooted in agriculture and tribute),⁸ there was a turn in 1531; a turn towards the Christian Church in the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe—through *Her* a real social, religious and political conversion would occur. Perhaps the Franciscan friars believed that the Christianization process was progressing effectively after the first decade of Conquest. Certainly the process of baptism, instruction and attendance at Mass (particularly in Mexico City), gave the impression of outward success. But those procedures did not necessarily reach the soul, the true being of the individual—the place where unsubstantiated faith is created. The reality was that true Christianization of Indigenous Mexico would be slow and complex and perhaps the somewhat parallel existence of these two religious societies would always struggle on how to integrate, but the apparition and worship of the Virgin Mary would change the pace and direction of religious integration and thus the socialization and politicalization of indigenous Mexico. Indeed it is fair to say both the Natives and the Spaniards needed *Her* arrival. Once settlement turned into colonialism, Spanish Colonial Law would be fused with religious ideas of morality and justice, like most Christian (sometimes secular) governments in Western Europe. Colonial law would be based on the general idea that the Indian should know that God meant for them to be now governed by Christians; the Spaniards as the new Chosen People.⁹

The Apparitions

The coincidence that the Virgin Mary should appear in the same city that Hernán Cortés conquered for Spain is a wonderful historical convenience. This event underscores the fact that

⁴ Curcio-Nagy, "Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico," 152.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 222.

⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁸ Curcio-Nagy, "Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico," 156.

⁹ Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 50.

the political center of Mexico would be in the Valley of Mexico. Perhaps the explanation lies, in part, in the fact that her image was a part of the military emblem used by the Spaniards that accompanied Cortés.¹⁰ He is known to have venerated the Virgin of Guadalupe and visited her shrine in Spain before leaving to sail to the Indies.¹¹ Another important aspect of the explanation is the religious veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe by the Franciscan religious orders in Spain. As the earliest religious representatives of Spain to travel to Valley of Mexico, they were responsible for the conversions that took place in the immediate decades after the Conquest. Furthermore, another important piece of the explanation lies in the story of Juan Diego himself, who on the day of the first vision was on his way to attend the Saturday Mass that was solely dedicated to the Virgin Mary, a Franciscan practice from the time of St. Francis.¹² Indeed by 1531, when the apparitions occur, Her image and religious importance in the New World was over a decade old.

The apparitions of Mexico City follow the same miracle pattern that they did in Spain in the 14th century: “At the time when King Alfonso reigned over Spain, our Lady, the Holy Virgin Mary appeared to a shepherd in the mountains of Guadalupe...She said to this shepherd: ‘Have no fear, for I am the Mother of God, through whom mankind will be redeemed..’ The shepherd came home, found his wife in tears, and said to her: ‘Why do you weep?’ She replied, ‘Your son is dead,’ and he said: ‘Have no care for I dedicate him to Holy Mary of Guadalupe, that she may bring him back to life and health.’ Immediately the young man rose up sound and well; he said to his father: ‘Father, hasten; let us go to Holy Mary of Guadalupe,’ at which all who were present marveled. This shepherd went to find the priests and told them...that the miracles to be worked by the Virgin would cause many pilgrims from many regions to come to her sanctuary, and that a large village would arise in that great mountain. As soon as the priests and other people heard that, they set to work.”¹³ Religious manuscripts describing this event in Spain were published during the 16th century, from Codices dating as early as 1440.¹⁴ The classic work, written by Father Germañ n Rubio, titled *Historia de Nra. Sra. de Guadalupe* is the one used to identify the Virgin as the “dark lady of Villuercas”.¹⁵

The apparitions that occur the following century in New Spain maintain a similar pattern and content. According to the Roman Catholic Church (Mexico and Rome) and several books written about the Apparitions in Mexico, the Virgin Mary appeared to the indigenous Juan Diego (already baptized) to ask that a church be built in the place where She stood and in this place She will attend to the needs of her people. “Mary most holy spoke thus to him: Know, my dearest son, that I am the ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God, who is the author of life, Who is the creator of all things and Lord of heaven and earth, and Who is present in all places. It is my wish that a church be built for me in this place.”¹⁶ In Mexico City there are five Apparitions in all; four to Juan Diego and the last one to his uncle and father figure Juan Bernardino and Juan, but

¹⁰ Francis Borgia Steck, *Our Lady of Guadalupe* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1936), 3.

¹¹ Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 217.

¹² Steck, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 12. See also Steck's notes to translation, number 4.

¹³ Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 219.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. Lafaye also refers to manuscripts at the sanctuary of Estremadura pre-dating 16th century publications, but are not accessible to researchers.

¹⁶ Steck, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 14.

she appears to them separately. The first three Apparitions have the same pattern in which a request to ask the Bishop to build a Church is made by the Virgin Mary to Juan Diego but the requests are denied and the visions doubted. The fourth Apparition is different. Juan Diego asks Mary for “proof” of her appearances and her proof comes in two forms; the saving of his Uncle and the creation of her image on Juan’s mantle (*La manta, tilma*), fashioned from Castilian roses, growing during the winter,¹⁷ on the Hill of Tepeyac. The result of the request is fulfilled. A small church was built in 1533 on the spot the apparitions took place, and another modest structure in 1555. Between 1556- 1709 the Basilica of Guadalupe was constructed and remodeled. The Old Basilica was used until the mid 1970s when the new Basilica was built (finished in 1976), due to the slow sinking of the old structure. The New Basilica is where the original image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is displayed today.

But why did the indigenous peoples of Mexico City so readily accept this mother figure from these European conquerors? Historian Lafaye points to the idea that the Aztecs, who identified with the goddess *Tonan* (meaning our mother) and referred to as *Tonantzin*,¹⁸ already had a predisposition to believing in a strong individual female mother figure. Lafaye emphasizes this point by relating several accounts by early historians of the Conquest who all mention that *Tonantzin* was a revered goddess to whom the greatest devotion was given.¹⁹ Soon after the apparitions there was a replacement for this religious energy from one figure to another. Historian and priest Torquemada dates this transition as early as the Council of Lima (these laws also applied to Mexico as well) in 1552.²⁰ This fact also lends itself to again question the use of the word *Guadalupe* by the indigenous population in 1531. The identification with the religious miracle of the Virgin Mary by the indigenous population would have led to an initial adaptation of the term *Tonan*; indeed historians of the sixteenth century point to the term *Dios-nantzin* and the term *Tonantzin* as being used during the early religious transition.²¹ There was no religious leap of faith from polytheistic earthly identification to holy virginal monotheistic Christian identification, but rather a transfer of the whole identification itself. The worship of the Aztec religion was forbidden by the Catholic Church—but identification with the religious female constructs of fertility, faith, miracles, protection, and unification were not forbidden but necessary to facilitate religious conversion. There was a simultaneous borrowing of language and religious custom that found sanctuary in the conversion of *Tonantzin* to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

As a result of the apparitions the Catholic Church was readily able to establish churches throughout New Spain; these buildings would be the physical structures to conduct religious conversion and assist colonization. Historically, churches were the first structures built by Europeans during the colonization process of North and South America. Specifically, the Iberian practice of building Christian sanctuaries on the rubble of pagan temples or other holy sites, dates from the beginning of the Reconquista.²² The building of the first Catholic Cathedral with stones from the Aztec Templo Mayor immediately after the Conquest led by Cortés was the

¹⁷ *Documentario Guadalupano*, 1a ed., Monumenta Historica Guadalupanensia; No. 3 (Mexico: Centro de Estudios Guadalupanos, 1980), 72.

¹⁸ Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 211.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 211-17. Here Lafaye cites historians Torquemada, Sahagun and Clavijero.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

²² *Ibid.*, 214-15.

beginning of this practice in New Spain. The first Church built for the Virgin of Guadalupe began in 1532, approximately 2-3 weeks after the apparitions and was finished by the following May and was already considered a grand attraction for indigenous and Spanish devotees alike.²³ The practice of building churches gave walls and a roof to the Conquest and the Virgin of Guadalupe was the mortar holding it all together.

By 1556 the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe had a sincere and devout, cult like following. From a religious standpoint she became the reason to make Sunday a pious occasion. Her miraculous reputation and the Indian character of her image (although her physical and visual appearance is not “Indian,” she does appear without baby Jesus),²⁴ made her a new religious, social concept particular to New Spain, whose native population no longer needed Spanish Christian missionaries to facilitate conversion. Instead the role of the priests would be organizing and controlling this new Mexican Christianity that was based in the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe de Tepeyac.

It is not an understatement to write that the Virgin Mary offered hope and religious salvation and more importantly social salvation in the first century after the Conquest. The themes of bilingualism and Christian conquest exists in the name *Guadalupe* itself. It is true that the social and economic status of the groups living in Colonial Mexico, often referred to as *Las Castas* were governed by racial identifications and their place in society also determined their educational and economic opportunities, but religiously they were all Christians and daughters and sons of Guadalupe. By the end of the first century of colonization, Mexico experienced an eroding of its Mesoamerican religious system for two main reasons, one the century of religious integration and two the significant loss of population from 25,000,000 to 1,075,000 by 1599 in the Valley of Mexico alone.²⁵ This population loss couple with the religious syncretism allowed the eroding of native culture practices that were slowly replaced with Christian European cultural practices that by 1810 made Mexican Christianity unique from other Spanish colonies and Spain itself. But the apparitions did something further, as Francisco de la Maza has stated: “*Esta tradición sencilla, ingenua y hermosa única en el mundo en su acto final, produjo y produce un intenso y apasionado culto en el pueblo mexicano, de tal manera que la imagen llegó a ser, en un momento dado, la sen□al de la patria*”.²⁶

Immigration

Today images of the Virgin of Guadalupe may be seen more in everyday life than in churches throughout the United States. She is on the back of jackets, the front of sweatshirts or tattooed to the bodies of Mexicans, immigrant, or not, throughout urban and rural areas. She is in backyards or front steps of immigrant homes (and their family members of several generations as well). Her image is front and center in homemade altars dedicated to her and prayed to daily in homes throughout North America. In the United States, the Virgin of Guadalupe has become a religious icon distributed with capitalist zeal and given the appropriate title “Guadalupemania.” Immigrants, who can no longer risk returning to Mexico for religious pilgrimages to Mexico

²³ *Documentario Guadalupano*, 268.

²⁴ ———, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe*, 240.

²⁵ Curcio-Nagy, "Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico," 161.

²⁶ Francisco de la Maza, *El Guadalupanismo Mexicano*, 1a ed. (Mexico City: Secretaria de Educacion Publica, 1984), 9.

City, where devotees can finish the final walk from *la calle Reforma a Calzada de Guadalupe* to the Basilica of Guadalupe on their knees, may settle for the iconic display for her image in their homes and across their body, the very body that risked life crossing the border.

What purpose can understanding a particular cultures' religious history and more specifically the Virgin of Guadalupe and her influence within the Mexican community? I argue that understanding cultural and social history of any group promotes social tolerance, which along with fair laws and time allows for social acceptance and integration in a manner that can stand the test of equality. Overall, the United States Congress has been unable to initiate any consensus regarding the status of undocumented Mexicans currently living and working in the United States. Yet demographic trends of the past twenty years regarding Latinos conclude that this community has immigrated to and migrated across the United States faster than any other race or ethnicity in the history of the United States.²⁷ And in the midst of this congressional inactivity, Mexican immigration is on the rise, particularly in New York City, which has long been considered as a marker for the trend of the nation itself. Latinos, and specifically Mexicans, live under a duly precarious situation of being the fastest growing immigrant with the least political security regarding their legal status while living in the United States.

Recently New York City estimated that there are approximately 200,000 Mexicans (with some believing the number is higher) now living in New York City.²⁸ According to the United States Census of 2000 there were 186,872 Mexicans living in New York City; a Hispanic population that barely existed there 20 years prior.²⁹ The *New York Times* has written about the Mexican population tripling during the 1990's.³⁰ The United States Census Bureau reported in 2006 that there were 3,139,590 Latinos living in New York City, by the following year the *New York Times* reported that Mexicans consisted of 500,000 of the total Latino population.³¹ And there does not appear to be a slowing down of this trend.

What are the Mexicans doing here? Where are the Mexicans working? The Asociación Tepeyac of New York City estimates that 70% of the restaurant and Deli workers in New York are Mexican immigrants ([www. Tepeyac.org](http://www.Tepeyac.org)). The Mexican immigrants are also nannies, day laborers, construction workers, janitors, as well as urban professionals. They are becoming just as much a part of New York City as the Irish Catholics from a previous century.

But perhaps equally significant, the Virgin of Guadalupe has been given equal status on church alters throughout the United States, not only in Mexican communities. Recently on a trip to New York City during the Easter holiday I attended services at the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Manhattan. To the right of the main alter was another large alter to the Virgin of Guadalupe. For me a second generation Mexican this seems unusual, for even though I have been a witness to the cultural integration of Mexican and American traditions, lately there seems to be an increase in immigrants wanting to maintain their "Mexicaness" and replace American traditions

²⁷ Audrey Singer and Roberto Suro, "Latino Growth in Metropolitan America: Changing Patterns, New Locations" in *The Brookings Institution, Survey Series, Census 2000* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, Pew Hispanic Center 2002), 2.

²⁸ Jim Dwyer, "A Day in May to Celebrate, for Mexicans and the City," *The New York Times*, 05/03/08 2008.

²⁹ Julie Salamon, "Celebrating Mexican Life in New York," *The New York Times*, 12/08/04 2004.

³⁰ Mireya Navarro, "In Many Churches, Icons Compete for Space; Multiple Shrines to Patron Saints Testify to a Rivalry of the Devout," *The New York Times*, 05/29/02 2002.

³¹ David Gonzalez, "Raising Young Voices for Illegal Mexican Immigrants," *New York Times*, 07/16/07 2007.

instead of integrating them. And conversely, there has been an adaptation by Americans to Mexican traditions that go well beyond piñatas at birthday parties and late-night taco joints. Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe is primary to this new cultural trend. Examining symbols of the Virgin of Guadalupe in New York City I discovered a developing religious tie between New York City and Mexico City. One example was the relay torch from the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York in 2002 sponsored by the Tepeyac Association, which is an immigration rights association working with the Archdiocese of New York.

Along with the increase in Mexican immigration has come the manifestation of their religious beliefs into the mainstream society of New York City, and the United States as a whole. The increase in Mexican immigrants has even led to the replacement of La Virgen de la Providencia (traditionally revered by the Puerto Rican community) in some churches with the Virgin of Guadalupe to serve the new Hispanic immigrants.³² Internal emigration of Mexicans living in New York City has created religious competition over the Virgin Mary. Or consider the words of Sister Celia Ramirez, a Mexican nun who works at St. Cecilia's in New York City: "Really, it's only one Virgin, under different names," then she points out that it is the feast of Guadalupe that draws the largest turnout among all the celebrations at the church.³³

What purpose does the Virgin of Guadalupe serve to Mexicans living in American urban centers and outlying rural areas? What she has always given to her devotees: protection. But in every day life in the United States protection for Mexicans, immigrant or not, is needed to assuage the daily bombardment of social and economic prejudice that all Mexicans living in the United States deal with, even the most educationally and financially secure Mexicans are faced with the social realities of being a minority in the United States.

For the sake of brevity, but without an intention to make the situations of Mexican immigrants generic, the story goes like this: When immigrants are interviewed in their homes about recent arrests or raids for deportation, they speak to the press from the comfort of their homemade shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. During these interviews, the one speaking for the family is often a child or teenage son or daughter who speaks about these raids, arrests, sometimes warrant-less invasions of their home under a dual protection of their American born citizenship and the Virgin's protection for those who now need to feel and who pray for her special protection. Yet, when the younger interviewees talk about what happened to their mother, father, uncle, cousin; how their life, job, access to their savings account and identifications and paperwork were taken away from just one arrest, they often just shrug and simply say: "I don't understand why this happened?" They are reacting from a politically challenged position of living legally in a country where their family members do not. It is a complex legal reality that even some of the most qualified attorneys cannot comprehend due to the case-by-case nature of immigration law. They are also reacting from a position of trauma, for now the severe reality of reduced economic and emotional support as a result of an immigration raid is upon them.³⁴ I cannot help but wonder, how is the Virgin of Guadalupe going to protect these individuals? Or as one Mexican New Yorker, Maria I. Sanchez states to

³² Dwyer, "A Day in May to Celebrate, for Mexicans and the City."

³³ Navarro, "In Many Churches, Icons Compete for Space; Multiple Shrines to Patron Saints Testify to a Rivalry of the Devout."

³⁴ Julia Preston, "Raids Traumatized Children, Report Says," *New York Times*, 11/01/07 2007.

The Times about the role the Virgin of Guadalupe plays in the urban consciousness of a Mexican who appeals to the Virgin “in cases of grave illness or when I want a good job and to be treated well”.³⁵ In truth, Ms. Sanchez sums up the situation for so many immigrants, no matter their ethnic or racial background, they just want a job and to be treated well.

Conclusion

History can only exist when people choose to write about it; when people and events are named and explained and given context to a larger idea. Context exists when connections in time and place are interwoven into events themselves; results given in outcomes which are deemed successful or unsuccessful. The Present is only used to relate the Past and foretell the Future. Most of the time the Historian is Presently speaking or writing about the Past. Soon after I decided that I would be pursuing History as a career I realized I would be able to spend little time focused on present-day people, places and outcomes, but always secure in the comfort that with each passing minute these events would be the past and I could comprehend them unmeasured and protracted, equal to all events of the Past. But interwoven into my study has always been this idea that what *has happened* in the Past and what is *believed to have happened* is the delicate balance where all truth lies. And coupled with this idea is the Present. The definitive example of this concept is religious history. The Virgin of Guadalupe serves as a historical link in Mexican history because she is always present, as a religious icon connecting the entire history of Mexico, beginning with her assistance in turning Aztec blood into communion wine. Simultaneously she represents New Spain, Revolutionary Mexico and the Republic of Mexico and the Immigrant Mexican, without ever being a historical person directly involved or present in the action. She exists within the social fabric woven like any other strong and durable Mexican blanket that is passed from generation to generation.

I suppose it is fair to say that all types of history are fraught with severe problems of authentication, but thankfully scientific testing has increased the certification of *what happened in the Past*. But religion is a set of beliefs that do not require standard forms of proof, and therefore the time when people, places and God (in the form of a monotheistic religion) come together *is* sometimes what drives the history forward; not with what can be proved but what is believed by those who are writing about the events. In this particular case all the participants of Mexican history believed (even by the act of rejecting her) in the apparitions of the Virgin Mary of 1531, accepted her role as Mother of Mexico, were confident in her protection during important and dangerous political events and felt assured her golden glow would embrace a people across any physical or intellectual border. She is History not because of any scientific or even rational proof, but rather because her existence has permeated into the souls of a nation that no living historical figure has ever done.

Today citizens of the United States are confronted with a similar struggle that occurred between Spain and Indigenous Mexico: How to integrate two societies who “on paper” stem from a parallel historical past of European Colonialism, yet view each other as being so vastly different due in part to racial prejudice. Undocumented Mexicans, Documented Mexicans and Mexicans that are U.S. citizens share a history that includes migration, conquest, colonization

³⁵ Navarro, "In Many Churches, Icons Compete for Space; Multiple Shrines to Patron Saints Testify to a Rivalry of the Devout."

and independence, just like citizens of the United States. Mexican citizens live in country created out of European immigration, global trade based in part, on slavery, and political independence using the enlightened template of the *Republic*, just like the citizens of the United States. Mexican citizens historically have fought for social equality, democracy, religious freedom, and economic stability, just like the citizens of the United States. Yet the pervasive social prejudice about Mexican immigrants living and working in the United States stems from the erroneous idea of “how different they are”.

Facing up to the truth that our failure to create legitimate immigration policies due to racial prejudice that rears its ugly face in form of *secure borders and job protection* prevents the United States from moving forward with good law. This “Big Idea”³⁶ about national security is sold daily to the American public without any true consideration to the powerful role that all undocumented immigrants play in the economic development of the nation. We allow them to pay taxes and social security but never receive the social benefits from those payments that American *citizens* do. When will the United States create immigration law for Mexican immigrants, which is based in part, on the use of historical and cultural knowledge to assist in further promoting the American ideology of fairness and equality for all? The time is now.

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³⁶ Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *The Silence of the Rational Center* (New York: Basic Books, Perseus Books Group, 2007). In this book Halper and Clarke discuss how “Big Ideas” regarding public policy and foreign policy in the United States are condensed into the thirty second sound bites and distributed by the Media but there is insufficient debate and investigation regarding these issues.

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