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DISSIDENCES

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Healing an Open Wound: Tepeyaquism as Transnational Political and Cultural Activism

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Will the predatory Statue of Liberty devour the contemplative Virgin of Guadalupe or are they
merely going to dance a sweaty quebradita?

—Guillermo Gómez-Peña

In the little town of Santa Ana de Guadalupe, Jalisco, the street vendors sell a pocket-size
Migrants Prayer Book which opens with a *bon voyage* message from the local bishop and
includes prayers for migrants to recite on their journey to the United States. Among them is the
prayer for Crossing Without Documents. “I feel I am a citizen of the world,” it says, “and of a
church without borders.”

—New York Times, August 14, 2002.

As Guillermo Gómez Peña points out in typical tongue in cheek fashion in the epigraph above, the Virgin of Guadalupe's increasing centrality in the US is fast presenting a heretofore unimaginable challenge to the role of the Statue of Liberty in the American imaginary. While for some the question of whether these two national icons, the mother of exiles and the mother of migrants, will dance a sweaty quebradita or whether the predatory Statue of Liberty will ultimately triumph is still open to debate, for others such as anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, Guadalupe already has become the "major focus of pilgrimage devotion, and the dominant symbol of corporate identity, not only for all Mexico but for the entire Western Hemisphere" [1]. Indeed, the vertiginous rise in her importance across the Americas is an unprecedented phenomenon effected by bodies, beliefs, and objects mis- and dis-placed and set in motion across borders and cultures.

Following the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula effected under her banner, she crossed the Atlantic in 1492—along with what would become one of the world's first mass migrations—to lead the Spanish conquest of the Americas [2]. During the colonial period, the Virgin of Guadalupe emerged out of the ruins after centuries long profound processes of religious syncretism. Telling of her capacity to embrace opposites and to reconcile differences, during Mexico's war for independence she was transformed into the defender of *both* creoles and natives, thus ironically helping these two strategically allied groups now fight off the very conquerors she had once represented and whose "blood" underlay their own identities (although in different degrees) thanks to a violent history of "mestizaje." Her triumphal march across the hemisphere was marked when she was successively crowned Queen of the Americas in 1895, canonized in 1946 as Patroness of the Americas, and in 1999 Pope John Paul II declared December 12th "her" day. From her conquest of Mexico and what is today the US Southwest

(where numerous sites in the landscape bear her name), she is now once again crossing borders, only this time into the US—a country whose WASP imaginary she is fast contesting. And this time too, she is not crossing this new border alone but along with many migrants who are also bringing their languages, their customs, their foods, and even their miracles.

Miracles often occur during moments of great social and political upheaval as a means of forcing either the transculturation of two different cultural systems or as the blending of two religious icons and systems of beliefs [3]. The Virgin of Guadalupe famously appeared to recently evangelized Indian Juan Diego on the outskirts of the conquered Aztec city of Tenochtitlan ten years after the conquest in Tepeyac—significantly the very site where an important cult and pilgrimage to an indigenous deity had stood. Since the miraculous apparition, Tepeyac became Mexico's mecca where large numbers of pilgrims from the provinces converge annually (in buses, on bicycles, and walking) wearing white and carrying flags and banners of the virgin. Throughout the whole year, and particularly on December 11th and 12th for "her" day, individual villages and towns—in an Olympiad of sorts—send representatives. Over and beyond the religious fervor that it is a sign of, this national tradition of pilgrimage to Guadalupe's shrine creates an interconnecting web whereby even the most remote (and often administratively "forgotten") places feel, establish, and reinforce their connection to a narrative of the national that is founded on the space of the Distrito Federal itself. If the centralization of Mexico in one city, and the collapse of the identity of that city with the idea of the nation creates for many Mexicans tension around questions of nationality and representation (legal and otherwise), the pilgrimage tradition helps to mitigate what could be seen as a centrifugal careening off the map. It would not be altogether hyperbolic, then, to go as far as to affirm that Mexico—despite its post-Cristero deep anticlericalism and radical separation of Church and State—exists as a nation

only through Guadalupe. This is so even though the cult is often opposed—often quite vociferously—by deeply skeptic Catholic anti-Guadalupans who critique the Guadalupan's for what they see as the church's abuse of Mexico's poor and indigenous peoples. As one prominent Mexican intellectual (who shall remain unnamed) once told me, "When the poor give alms in the basilica at Tepeyac, the alms do not go into discrete collection boxes. Rather, they fall into rooms where the priests dance amid the mountains of money like Uncle Scrooge."

In similar fashion, the spread of her cult into the US was first marked with her miraculous apparition in the migrant-dominated community of Watsonville, California. "Seemingly branded by divine hand into the bark of a tall maple in the hollow," she appeared in the mid-1980s at the height of a months' long strike of the predominantly female labor force at the Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Company. The women went on to win the eighteen-month strike aided by the renewed impetus they gained from the apparition of the virgin, only to lose their jobs a few years later when the company was forced to close. Watsonville however, remains at the center of migrant worker's political activism and is now the scene of the United Farm Workers' fight over worker's rights in the strawberry fields [4] and the maple tree with the virgin draws hundreds of pilgrims annually and has had to be protected by a fence (<http://pintolakeshrine.org/>). Indeed, in the wake of the bracero program, the banner of Guadalupe had already been adopted in the 1960s by the United Farm Workers in their efforts to organize migrant labor. As if only to mark this collusion between migration and political activism, December 18th (a week after Guadalupe's feast day), is celebrated as International Day of the Migrant.

It is no accident, then, that today Guadalupe is being transformed yet again into the virgin of undocumented workers by New York City-based Guadalupan Asociación Tepeyac [5].

Founded in 1997 by Jesuit priest Joel Magallan (for an interview see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpB0i9QZIsE>). Asociación Tepeyac is as a grass roots organization established to help recent Mexican immigrants in New York City find housing, work, get an education, learn English, fight off predatory landlords and solve legal problems, among other things. Despite its initial focus on the Mexican immigrant community, it is fast becoming an organization fighting in favor of all immigrant Latino's rights in the city. It is doing so by means of an annual, highly publicized relay race that starts in November in the Basilica of the Virgin in Tepeyac/La Villa in Mexico City. Runners carrying the Guadalupan torch run north, cross the border (that open wound in Anzaldua's famous formulation), and continue up the eastern seabord and connecting Tepeyac to New York City across time and space. After the month long relay, runners arrive in St. Patrick's cathedral in New York City on December 12th, "her" day. The cathedral fills with people, many of them wearing the blue and white guadalupan colors, and waving the Mexican flag while mass is delivered in the archbishop's Spanish. After mass runners fan out to the five boroughs where more celebrations take place.

With the theme "Messengers for the Dignity of a People Divided by a Border," the Tepeyac organization has strategically created and given this transnational event great visibility in the interests of pan-Latino unity across borders, seeking amnesty as well as better living conditions and wages for undocumented immigrants in the US and calling attention to the increasing violence on the border. Paralleling the annual national pilgrimages across Mexico to Tepeyac/La Villa, the Carrera Guadalupana connects people across the US Mexico border healing an open wound. The trajectory of the runners is posted on the world wide web, allowing people everywhere to follow the progress of the torch on its way north. Symbolically trying to unite a people divided by a border and seeking post-national forms of reconciliation, the torch is

typically lit at the Virgin's sanctuary in Tepeyac by both clergy from Mexico City and New York City with the border crossing is a highly publicized event. Besides carrying the torch to make the plight of immigrants visible across both nations, the relay runners act as ambassadors, often stopping in Washington D.C. with messages to the US government from the Mexican Congress. Having won a court order, which banned the thousands of runners in NYC the torch now reaches St. Patrick's amid cheers "Viva Mexico!" and "Viva Guadalupe!"

This most recent mobilization of the Virgin depends on mirroring a long pilgrimage tradition (only this time via the Internet) and understanding that all the radical shifts in the Virgin's significance—indeed, their very possibility—depend on the mobility of the image itself, that is, the circulation and displacement of the image itself. Transferred from Spain to the New World, her shrine in La Villa (Mexico City/Tepeyac) where the famous painting and the tilma hangs (the miraculous cloak Indian Juan Diego wore at the time of her apparitions and where the image was inscribed), is the radiating center from which all the Guadalupes of the Americas derive their religious power. Thus, parishioners hoping to establish new shrines in her honor travel to Tepeyac sometimes from the farthest confines of the hemisphere with newly-made icons of Guadalupe to be either blessed, or simply, to be imbued with religious significance by contagion with the sacred. Having been placed in the presence of "the" Guadalupe, all these replicas (or third degree signs) [6] accrue immense status as religious symbols. In what constitutes a multi-layered process, the icon comes "alive" through this initial "contagion" and the rites, stories of miracles, pilgrimages, and other religious festivities and commercial ventures, which soon envelop it, serve as the performative space through which believers establish direct communication with the divine. Miracles are central to this process in that they allow for the transformation of the religious icon from its initial status as passive, universal, and merely

representational “to an active, particular, mediating presence” (Kay F. Turner, 341). In what becomes an impossible search for an origin soon shrouded in the deepest of mysteries, believers commune directly with the icon having had proof of its ability to perform miraculous cures.

Like sculptures and images that are created and that gain their power from circulation, there is also an accompanying corpus of tales and myths of miracles and origin stories woven around religious sites and images that thereby have a ripple effect establishing important links “between the sacred center and its population” (Morinis and Crumrine, 5). Stories of miracles, apparitions, and accidental findings of miraculous cult objects all underpin and anchor people’s devotion to a particular place and religious image and alter and altar space. As Latinos become the largest minority majority, and as Spanish will soon become the second language of the US, the rapid creation of shrines in Guadalupe’s honor is also accompanied by increasing reports of miraculous sightings of the Virgin. Reports like these occur on an almost daily basis and they are occurring ever more to the north of Mexico. To mention but a few largely publicized miraculous apparitions: In June 27th, 2003, even my local newspaper in rural New England reported an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the windows of a non-descript medical building in Milton, Mass. In the two weeks since the apparition, more than 40,000 people had traveled there sometimes hundreds of miles in a spontaneous Lourdes-style pilgrimage. When I mention this miracle in my classes students from Massachusetts report having heard of it and even in some cases seen it. Further south, in Florida, another Virgin appeared a number of years ago on a tall glass building and overnight became a shrine attracting thousands. One of the pilgrims sent me a photograph he had taken of the site (Figure 1). In Las Vegas local dailies reported the apparition of a miraculous weeping virgin and even in Chicago, a Virgin appeared in a freeway underpass (Figure 2). In Mexico City another very famous apparition composed of water seeping into the

underground is—not coincidentally—that of the Virgin at Metro Hidalgo which became an instant shrine and was hailed as a major apparition (Figure 3) [7]. And mirroring these apparitions, the discovery of a mural of a surfer Virgin in a beach community in southern California has made a big splash in the media in recent days.

Reminding us that long before we became obsessed with the term “globalization” the Catholic Church functioned both as a globalized religion and a transnational corporation, the migration of Guadalupe as a religious and cultural symbol ironically shadows many of the same trajectories and ease with which globalization’s time-space compression allows capital to cross borders. The vertiginous speed of her procession north—paradoxically facilitated by globalization—presents grassroots organizers with an efficient model for creating communities across borders that could stem the current trends of globalized capital. Indeed, while migrants cross the border into the US carrying stamps, flags, T-shirts, magnets, sculptures of the Virgin, the Virgin of Guadalupe herself is touring the globe on the world wide web where there are seemingly infinite sites in her name: a cyber stamp promising good fortune to whoever forwards it is in perpetual circulation, and a cyber basilica has been set up on the internet. Virgin of Guadalupe Cyber-Chapel Guadalupe.com was established May 28, 1996 “the first chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe ever built on the web.”

The feast to Guadalupe on December 12th as organized by the Asociación Tepeyac entails simultaneously several events: television programming and political cross-border mobilizing, as well as the “Carrera Guadalupana,” community candle-light vigils, the singing of “Las Mañanitas” on the morning of her day, the establishment of food stands, flower stands, and the general sense of community in festivity. Therefore, while individual parishes all across the Americas are lighting candles, singing and celebrating Guadalupe, they are being connected in

space by the runners carrying the torch north from Tepeyac and they are also being simultaneously connected via the Internet, where individual terminals are interconnected by high-speed conduits that parallel the Guadalupe simultaneous celebration-in-place and movement-through-space. New Mexican Marion C. Martínez virgin installations made out of recycled computer parts illustrate the dynamics of im/mobility I have been alluding to above clearly. (Figure 4).

Ironically, then, while globalization promotes the easy circulation of money across borders all the while militarizing the US-Mexico border in order to stop what historically was the easy circulation of people across it, Guadalupe marches back and forth with renewed vigor. However, while in Mexico the Virgin of Guadalupe functions as the national symbol in the US her border-crossing capacity and Latino community-building effect in the US makes her cult potentially transgressive of the nation-state. As anthropologists have pointed out, when religious shrines are identified with the nation-state "they can play an important role as national symbols, linking the celestial and terrestrial power sources." Conversely, as in the case of border-crossing Guadalupe "When pilgrimage shrines are identified against the social order, gatherings and ritual practices can be subversive to state and power structures" (Morinis and Crumrine, 17). The quick spread of her cult across the US is therefore serving as an important model for the effective mobilization of workers and the building of what the Turners call "communitas" across the Americas despite the militarization of the borders (Victor and Edith Turner, 39).

Alongside the highly publicized transborder relay, the Asociación Tepeyac used to also stage an annual Viacrucis representing the twelve stages of Christ's journey to the cross. Starting in front of the INS building in Manhattan (now Homeland Security), the procession would ironically end in front of the National Museum of the American Indian. As Ruiz-Navarro, an ethnographer who studied this religious performance observes, in this New York Mexican

staging of the Viacrucis the long-suffering Jesus was collapsed with the lonely, abused, illegal wetback crucified on his way north by his undocumented status. Individual parishioners dressed themselves as Border Patrol guards who flagellated him along the way, all the while yelling “Levántate ilegal!” “Trabaja indocumentado!” [8]. Leaflets calling for amnesty along with religious messages were handed out while members of the Asociación called out “What do we want?” inciting the crowd to respond, “Amnesty for all immigrants now!” The Viacrucis staging conjoined the affirmation of Mexican’s deep religiosity with the vindication of undocumented worker’s rights and the creation of a Latino identity in migration [9]. The organizers’ strategy, over and beyond their celebration of the virgin and their fight for undocumented workers’ rights, is the affirmation of Latino presence in the US and the creation of Latino cultural celebrations—modeled on those of St. Patrick’s and Columbus’ Day Parades which have given Irish and Italian immigrants to the US a sense of belonging and identity. Thus, today, there is a Cinco de Mayo celebration that takes place in Flushing Meadow Corona Park that gathers 800,000 people and is quickly rivaling these other groups’ celebrations in New York City.

Little did Emma Lazarus (ironically a Jewish immigrant to the US) imagine what a sweaty quebradita the Statue of Liberty would currently dance when she asked, in her poem “The New Colossus” (1883) for the world to give her their “tired”, their “poor”, their “huddled masses”, and the “wretched” of their “teeming” shores [10]. Indeed, nowhere is the Virgin of Guadalupe’s arrival in the US better marked than in the way she currently transcends religion having become a fashion symbol and seemingly omnipresent marker of Latinidad. She has become such a powerful symbol that we could even view her as an “umbrella symbol” that shelters the expansive archives and repertoires of being American today. As such, she is “the” privileged symbol of pan Latino unity irrespective of religious affiliation. She effects the

reconciliation of potentially divisive regional rivalries, cultural and racial hierarchies, and differences. And she is also stands for and has largely contributed to the Mexicanization of the Hispanization of the US. (Her reach can even be seen when even non-Latinos now possess Virgins of Guadalupe as fashion accoutrements). I call these phenomena tepeyaquism. Tepeyaquism marks the fact that we in the Americas have developed a special relationship to images thanks to the transculturation of indigenous traditions that held images to be powerful and even to embody spirit (as in the Aztec nahual) [11] and the colonial Church's post reformation emphasis on the power and proliferation of images as conduits to the divine. Since the conquest, then, tepeyaquism has marked the powerful mobilization of religious icons and imagery in the interests of national and in this case, transborder, reconciliation.

Notes

[1] Victor and Edith Turner, Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1978) 57.

[2] For a discussion of the agency of images see W.J.T.Mitchell What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004).

[3] Cf. Silvia Spitta Between Two Waters: Narratives of Transculturation in Latin America (Houston: Rice UP, 1995, Texas A&M 2006) and for a more extensive discussion of the Virgin of Guadalupe's "wheels" see Spitta, Misplaced Objects: Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas (Houston: University of Texas Press, 2009).

[4] Rubén Martínez, Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail (New York: Henry Holt, 2001) 302.

[5] The Asociación Tepeyac's mission statement on the web reads: "The Tepeyac Association is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 network of 40 community based organizations, whose mission is twofold: to promote the social welfare and human rights of Latino immigrants, specifically the undocumented in New York City. The Association Tepeyac is also dedicated to inform processes

to develop leaders, organizations, and communities, to build a greater Mexican community, integrated to all races and cultures in New York”

(http://www.hispanicfederation.org/index.php?option=com_contact&view=contact&id=143:asociaciontepeyacdenewyork&catid=59:ournetworkcontacts).

[6] Third order signs are signs that are a replica of the “truly significant Icon found in the Church” that are themselves a sign of the divine. See Kay F. Turner, “The Cultural Semiotics of Religious Icons: La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos,” *Semiotica* 47-1/4 (1983): 317-361, 348.

[7] This is of course not coincidental since Father Hidalgo started the process of Mexican independence from Spain in the early 19th century by fighting under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

[8] Patricia Ruiz-Navarro, “Religious Political Movements of Mexicans Across the Mexico-US Border. Being *guadalupano*” p. 3. Article posted on the web.

[9] Brian Caulfield, “Show of Faith” <http://cny.org/archive/ft/ft121699.htm>.

[10] <http://www.endex.com/gf/buildings/liberty/liberty.html>.

[11] Cf. Lois Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye* (Chicago: Chicago UP 2006).



Figure 1. Clearwater apparition. Courtesy of a devotee.



Figure 2 Chicago Underpass Virgin Apparition.
Photo Spitta



Figure 3 Virgin Apparition in Metro Hidalgo. Mexico City.

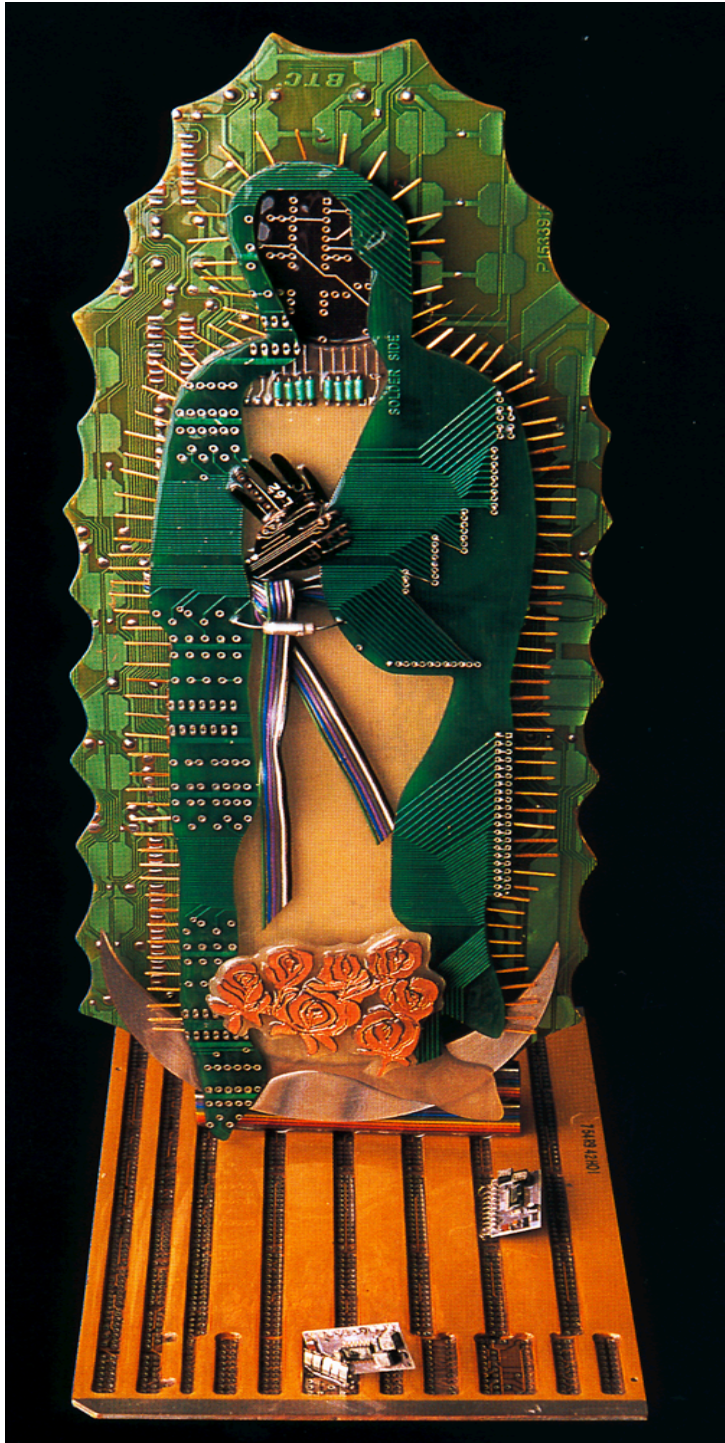


Figure 4 Blessings for the Little Flower.
Marion C. Martinez