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# Visual Witness: A Critical Rereading of Graciela Iturbide's Photography

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## Abstract

This article underlines the importance of Latin American photography at a time when the visual turn of Hispanism is increasingly evident. At the time of writing, Graciela Iturbide is one of the foremost living photographers in Latin America. This article reengages with Iturbide's work using notions of photography as witness and drawing on photography scholar Ariella Azoulay's structure of the civil contract of photography—in addition to concepts from other visual experts—to identify and underline the several fundamental elements to which Iturbide's photography testifies. To achieve this result, this article studies her first solo visual narrative, *Los que viven en la arena*.

Graciela Iturbide is one of the most outstanding photographers, not only of Latin America but also of our times. She is the gifted student of Mexican photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who has been called the patriarch of Latin American photography. A winner of the highest awards and fellowships the field of photography offers—such as the W. Eugene Smith, the Hasselblad, and a Guggenheim Fellowship—the value of Iturbide's photographic style and vision has been clearly recognized. However, to date, there has been relatively little scholarly work on her photography.<sup>1</sup> This article addresses Iturbide's artistic efforts to create new witnesses of Latin America. Indeed, her photographic vision offers new ways of seeing Mexico and the other events and locations she captures.

In part, this critical rereading stems from a comment Iturbide made when I first met her. During that encounter, the photographer provided me with a key to understanding her work: “Yo no quise [utilizar un autor famoso y conocido para prologar uno de sus libros], porque esa persona está dentro de ese cliché que es el realismo mágico. Yo no creo en el realismo mágico. Es algo que hizo Francia para ensalzar a los escritores” (Iturbide, pers. comm.). In this, Iturbide, whose images have most often been described as magic realist, was negating that her images were magic realist at all. Indeed, she was denying that magic realism existed at all. Hence, if Graciela Iturbide suggests that we need to look at her photographs using a gaze that is not magic realist, then how can understanding the themes to which these photographs bear witness help us to develop other approaches to understanding her photographic work (and by extension, that of other Latin American photographers)? If the critic forgoes considering her work from that vantage point, what might be some of the keys to understanding her work and, indeed, other visual narratives produced in Latin America?

The notion that magic realism is too frequently employed to describe Latin America is not new. Edward Said poses cautionary critiques of magic realism in *Culture and Imperialism* (374). Yet, perhaps because of the ease with which magic realism is associated or used to explain the Other, the

critical body outside of Latin America that uses magic realism to describe Latin America continues to grow. This usage of magic realism often views Latin America in a framework of folklore and exoticism, omitting other valid representations and discussion of the region (Parkinson Zamora and Faris). Indeed, Iturbide was not the only one to caution against using magic realism to interpret her work. In her article on the history of Latin American photography and its key creators, Amanda Hopkinson employs a curious anecdote by Gabriel García Márquez to underline the term's overuse in regard to Latin America: "If I watch a parakeet fly up out of a mango tree in my garden I'm witnessing a daily reality. Publish it in English and I'm doing magic realism" (524). After sharing this example of the overapplication of this term regarding literature, Hopkinson warns against also applying it to photography (524). Nonetheless, the trend has continued, with perhaps the most salient example being this description of Iturbide's work by a European critic: "Visual poetry and magic run through all her works, providing a powerful bridge between the subjects which interest her and the reality she observes" (Friis, Hasselblad 12). This description is found in the book that accompanied Iturbide's 2008 winning of the Hasselblad Award, often called the Nobel prize of photography.

A consideration of the themes and subjects to which Iturbide's photography bears witness is valuable for achieving a more nuanced understanding of her work. The visual theorist Ariella Azoulay has argued that one way to engage with photography is to understand it as a civil contract in which those who participate in the act of photography engage in what she calls the "citenry of photography" (Azoulay, *Civil Contract* 117): "Anyone who stands in any relation whatsoever to photography has membership in the citenry of photography—by virtue of the fact that she is a photographer; that she views photographs; comments on or interprets them; displays them to others or is herself photographed" (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 69). In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay writes about how photography possesses the singular ability to offer a type of visual citizenship to all, which is not presided over by a sovereign but rather by everyone who engages in the event of photography: as a producer, subject, spectator, or otherwise. With this way of understanding the viewer's relationship to photography, it is possible to consider the interpretations of her first book, *Los que viven en la arena*, which creates awareness of the Seri Indians of Sonora Mexico via the formation of a visual narrative and archive of this community, as a way of mapping the subjects of Iturbide's work. Azoulay speaks about how spectators approach a photographic image, employing the term gaze to conceive of how different viewers will approach a photograph differently (Azoulay, *Civil Imagination* 44). Here, I offer a critical reevaluation of Iturbide's work by considering the topics her work foregrounds, using her first book as a map of her visual focus as an artist.

This proposed focus—considering photographic images as a type of testimony—draws on two other areas of contemporary photo analysis. The first is Roland Barthes's understanding of photographs to be evidences of the past. They are visual proof of what has been, or, to use Barthes's terminology, of the "this has been" (*Camera Lucida* 79). Perhaps the simplest way of understanding Iturbide's *Los que viven en la arena* is to view the artist's attempt (and that of those who are photographed) to have these evidences be considered an opportunity to contemplate essential points of focus within her greater body of visual narrative. This article also draws strongly on an acknowledgment of what the visual historian Kevin Coleman has called the power of photography to "act as a witness" (*Photographs of a Prayer* 459). In this case *Los que viven en la arena* not only witnesses the Seri community but also testifies to important evidence regarding her vision as a photographer.

Iturbide's imagery occasionally offers a nod to her teacher Manuel Álvarez Bravo, but she clearly takes her own route as it sets out to explore and discover Mexico. *Los que viven en la arena* was her

first opportunity to form an independent visual narrative in a book, and for this reason it provides evidence that the topics to which her work bears witness appear even in the earliest stages of her artistic work. This article's intent also illuminates a segment of the photographic component of the visual turn in Hispanism that Paul Julian Smith signaled in his book *Spanish Visual Culture: Cinema, Television, Internet*. The identification of these themes not only enables us to understand and appreciate her work with greater nuance but also reveals more of the ways in which we can unravel the significance and signifiers of Hispanic culture through an exploration of photography (Smith 9). Those themes of focus being exploration, symbolism, personal origin and upbringing, abstractionism, portraiture, solidarity, ritual, and mediations of the present.

## Exploration

La cámara fue un pretexto para conocer mi país.

-Iturbide, "Hay tiempo"

The theme of exploration relates to Graciela Iturbide's roots. She has described herself as a foreigner in her own country, and her photographs bear witness to the theme of exploration on countless occasions. The eldest of thirteen children born to a conservative couple living in the Mexican capital, Graciela Iturbide lived a sheltered life as a youth. At a young age she went to live at a Catholic boarding school run by nuns in San Luis Potosí. After graduating, she married at the age of nineteen and soon after had three children in rapid succession. In her mid-twenties, her studies of film-making and photography at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México woke her to variety and textures of Mexican life that she had not witnessed until then. Iturbide explains that she chose photography because it was the medium that allowed her to travel as a lone individual and document what she encountered (Iturbide, pers. comm.)—the medium allowed her to create a narrative more independent from external interference in relation to other artistic narratives of our times. One of her first explorations was of the Avándaro music festival, Mexico's answer to Woodstock. Her photos in the resulting book, *Avándaro*, explore the counterculture of Mexico in the early 1970s (Carrión and Iturbide). Later, in 1978, Iturbide and several other photographers were commissioned by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista to work alongside the writer of their choosing to document different indigenous communities in Mexico. Iturbide chose to explore and photograph the world of the Seri, the smallest and most remote of the various projects being undertaken, and recruited the anthropologist Luis Barjau to work with her. Barjau's contribution to the project is an anthropological approach that describes key details from the community's past and present, cosmivision, employment, relationships with others, and indigenous language. Iturbide's approach to the photos explores another source of insight into the Seri community that testifies to her artistic vision.

## Symbols

While explaining her work on one occasion, Graciela Iturbide emphasized the following points: "Maybe finally, photography for me is my ritual. To go out with the camera, to observe, to photograph the most mythological aspects of people, to go into the darkness, to develop, to select

the most symbolic images. . . I don't believe in anything, but I seek the rituals of religion, the heroes of religion, the gods" (Iturbide, *Eyes to Fly With* 173).

Iturbide's photography witnesses many symbolic elements. One salient symbol often repeated in Iturbide's photography is the bird. She even has a book dedicated to the subject (Iturbide, *Pájaros*). For this reason, it is natural that two of the first three photographs in *Los que viven en la arena* focus on birds and that these creatures are present throughout the entire project. In an interview, Iturbide offers clues as to what their presence might signify: "Los pájaros para mí significan la libertad, la libertad de vuelo" (Iturbide, "El baño de Frida Kahlo"). Birds and how they are represented in Iturbide's project could also suggest certain parallels to Mexican identity itself. A bird is central to Mexico's coat of arms, as are the links of that bird to the oral history of the Aztecs: an eagle, sitting upon a cactus, and eating a serpent. Iturbide's photo essay makes veiled references to this pivotal moment described in the Mexican codices by capturing many birds at rest atop the saguaros of the Sonoran Desert (fig. 1). The use of a bird to represent Mexicans or Mexican identity can also be seen as symbolizing the migratory aspect of many Mexicans (Gonzales 266).

Figure 1.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 7.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

There might be other meanings of these symbols in Iturbide's work. Iturbide's mentor, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, allowed his readings of classic literature to influence his style and the titles of many of his works (104). As part of his mentorship of Iturbide, he introduced her to many works of literature and classical music. Iturbide's work can be read as having been influenced by literature; indeed, she has mentioned herself that before becoming a photographer she aspired to be a writer. An understanding of birds and their different symbolism in literature reveals a more personal connection between the images and the photographer. For example, the symbol of the bird in literature is often metonymical. Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed that "birds are given human Christian names because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason they are so different. . . . [T]hey form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means. Consequently, everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society" (204). Hence, Iturbide's overt inclusion of birds in her photography of the Seri and elsewhere reveals her curiosity about the individuals she is photographing. In this specific case, the birds form a parallel community that coexists with the Seri in the desert sands of northern Sonora, Mexico. Representing Iturbide's desire to be free and explore her own country and indeed the world, none of the birds in *Los que viven en la arena* or other works are bound by cages, hooded, or have clipped wings—symbols of oppression or of an individual who is trapped (Ferber 27). All the avian creatures Iturbide portrays roam freely, again emphasizing the theme of exploration.

Finally, the abundance of birds in Iturbide's photographic vision might bear witness to another event in her life. While they do not form a part of the *Los que viven en la arena* collection, images often repeated in Iturbide's early work are of dead children, or angelitos, as they are sometimes called in Mexico. A common practice in early Mexican photography, angelitos acquired their name from the notion that these innocent victims of death would go directly to heaven, and from the practice of dressing the defunct child or infant as a saint or angel for burial (Heilen 166–67). As the photographer explained in an interview with Fabienne Bradu, the death of her daughter Claudia in an accident at the age of six led the photographer to become fascinated with the subject matter of angelitos in her visual work. This is a subject matter that she would consciously decide to abandon after an experience in Hidalgo, Mexico (Iturbide, *Eyes to Fly With* 128). However, the constant appearance of birds in her work lends itself to the interpretation that the birds create a link to her defunct daughter, as the rebirth of the soul is likened to that of the phoenix, and the fact that "visitations of birds were felt to be reappearances of the dead" (Ferber 26). Hence, when considering Iturbide's work and the abundance of birds as symbols, it becomes possible to link this imagery to the artist's reality and personal history, showing how new critical gazes of her work might offer renewed insights.

### Personal Origin and Upbringing

Although the themes of travel and exploration focus on the new and novel in her work, many of the symbolic elements to be found in *Los que viven en la arena* can be linked to her youth and schooling in which Christian iconography was abundant. Although Iturbide states that she does not hold religious beliefs (Iturbide, *Eyes to Fly With* 128), a close examination of her work reveals that Christian symbols continually resurface in the body of her work. For example, the pelicans caught in her first pictures of birds in *Los que viven en la arena* might be read as symbols of Christ as they are birds that, when necessary, can feed their young with their own blood by pecking at their chest (Cirlot 252).

Iturbide also foregrounds the image of the fish in *Los que viven en la arena*. Not only are they the main source of protein of the Seri; the fishing industry is also the livelihood for most of Seri and a principal source of hard currency for this community. Fish are also a symbol of Christianity, one of the salient symbols of Iturbide's photographic oeuvre. Identified as one of the first symbols of Christianity, arguably even before the sign of the cross, the fish became associated with Jesus Christ because the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour became an acrostic sign of Jesus Christ in the Greek language: ΙΧΘΥΣ, which also spells the word fish (Horsley 267). This coincidence (along with Jesus' commission in the New Testament that his followers be fishers of men) allowed early Christians to adopt the symbol of the fish as a symbol of their faith. Of the forty-one pictures in this photographic narrative, five exhibit fish directly and another two do so indirectly. The first one featured in the book exhibits a group of fish that have been taken from the sea and await consumption. That image abstracts the fish by focusing on its textures and patterns.

### Abstractionism

Iturbide's almost exclusive use of black-and-white photography testifies to her use of the abstract in presenting her visual narratives, as it impedes the viewer from equating her photography with direct

reality. It is an intentional method employed to cause her viewers to see her visual subject matter differently (Iturbide “Tate Shots”). However, Iturbide’s abstractions are not limited to issues of color. She abstracts the role of fishing as she portrays this essential element of the Seri way of life. The viewer takes the point of view of the fish: the captured image observes a fisherman from a low angle in the boat looking up through the net at the fisherman who has cast it, as if the viewer was the captured prey (fig. 2). This excellent abstraction obliges the viewer to observe the Seri from the focal point of their most common prey and staff of life, as well as doubling as an element of Christian symbolism within the narrative, demonstrating two of Iturbide’s photographic topics with the body of her work.

### Portraiture and Complicity

Portraiture is key in the work of Graciela Iturbide because she consistently breaks its traditional European conventions, forcing her viewers to consider

Figure 2.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 25.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Latin Americans with other gazes, showing a pathway for a specific Latin American portraiture, and using her unique approach to develop new and relevant insights that make the study of this particular type of photography highly relevant and important. Although John Mraz did not directly link this departure from the norms of portraiture to a rejection of European aesthetics, this photo historian was perhaps the first to point out that Iturbide’s mentor, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, captured a unique element displayed in the portrait *El señor de Papantla*. This touch of uniqueness and a break in the European tradition present in her mentor’s work is an aspect Iturbide develops even further in her own oeuvre. What makes that portrait just referred to stand apart from European gazes of Latin America is that, although at first glance the man, dressed in traditional clothing, appears to display the exoticism so often captured by the European eye, the image presents an important twist: the indigenous man refuses to look at the camera. The subject refuses to be complicit with the camera’s gaze, although, following Kevin Coleman (“Right”), he does not appear to be exercising his right not to be looked at. This portrait offers visual testimony of a type of subaltern agency that offers new life regarding how Latin American portraiture can be interpreted. Graciela Iturbide’s portraiture, especially those that concern women, also bears witness to a visible divergence from European conventions. In *Ways of Seeing*, the art critic John Berger argues that in the culture of privileged Europeans, women are primarily a sight to be seen. Part of this portrayal involves the depicted woman gazing back at a painting’s spectator, or using a mirror that allows her to look at herself as others see her (Berger, Episode 2). Berger evidences this first in European oil painting, and then offers examples of the continuance of these traditions in modern images of women, such as publicity that employs photography (Berger, Episode 4). Iturbide’s photographic portraits do not

identify with these conventions identified by Berger and offer the viewer a distinct native view of Mexico and Latin America. Taking a cue from her mentor and adding her own visual signature, the viewer can witness Iturbide's unconventional portraits.

*Los que viven en la arena* offers clear examples of this uniqueness of portraiture when shown in contrast to others. For example, in 1981 the photographer Helmut Newton published a series of photographs of four women titled *They're Coming for French Vogue*. Newton has an extensive number of nudes in the body of his work that follow the depiction of the portrayal of female nudes as described by John Berger earlier. In these now-iconic photos the viewer finds four beautiful women who are masterfully dressed as powerful fashion icons. Their poses are very dramatic: two have their hands on their hips, another folded across her torso, and yet another has her hands at her sides. All of them give the impression of movement with their feet. While none of them looks directly at the spectator, in the most iconic photographs of this particular series, the posturing of their bodies makes it widely evident that their bodies are the element on display for the spectator. In fact, the other photographs in the series intensify the impact of this one. While in the first they are clothed, in the second they hold the exact same pose but are nude. This powerful contrast between the clothed and the nude is repeated within this series and asks many questions regarding the role of posture, nudity, clothing, and beauty in modern Western society. However, Iturbide's photograph offers a different interpretation by mirroring the images in a certain way, but with very important twists that allow us to contemplate important references to the individuality of this Latin American photographer.

Portraits that capture Latin American indigenous women topless or in otherwise revealing native attire have been abundant in the past, as is evidenced in Naggar and Ritchin's *Mexico: Through Foreign Eyes* (3, 34, 54), and they are not entirely unlike the images captured by Newton in the series of images previously mentioned. Iturbide's imagery also rejects that colonialist vision of Latin America and captures the women fully dressed and in postures that are not making the display of their bodies a central feature of the image. In a key example of this portraiture we too observe a portrait of two women and a small girl. Their clothing identifies them as Seri, and they, like Newton's series referred to earlier, are also captured as if they were walking to a certain destination: one woman is out in front, and the other two females walk behind her. Even so, in this case all the women have their backs to us as they walk toward the sea. They do not face us like Newton's fashion icons do; rather, they look toward their homeland of Isla Tiburón on the horizon. The pose that Iturbide captured suggests that the object of this photograph is not an exercise of their right not to be seen, as Kevin Coleman has explored in relation to other instances of the photographic capturing of the subaltern; rather, the right to be seen differently is emphasized by the photographer. In Newton's photography we do not know who or what the women face (aside from us the spectator and the photographer) or in which direction they are traveling, but in the case of the Seri women we see that they are moving in the direction of the sea and the island in front of them: a focus not on the spectator, but on their own origin (fig. 3). The fact that they hold fish in their hands and walk in the direction of the sea and fishing boats emphasizes other elements closely linked to their culture. Hence, Iturbide's image of the Seri women departs from many of the mainstream capturing of women like the ones explored by Berger's research and depicted in Newton's work. Not only does the artist abstract the women by capturing them in black and white and not allowing us to see their face; in so doing the approach leads the viewer away from focusing on feminine beauty or exoticism. Instead, we contemplate the symbols of these women's way of life: clothing, land, livelihood, or family relationships—themes Iturbide repeatedly emphasizes throughout the entire body of her work.



Figure 3.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 45.

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### Portraiture and the Unknown or the Impossible

Further exploring the key role of portraiture in Iturbide's work, it is important to consider the works of another scholar of the visual. Latin American photographic critic Edmundo Desnoes claims that since the 1960s very little has changed in Latin American photography: "If some inhabitants of paradise appears, he/she is being photographed to show that the natives are obliging and of an innocent and exotic beauty" (311). Graciela Iturbide's portraiture reveals a trend in her work that contradicts that observation. Not only do the subjects portrayed exhibit a certain level of resistance to European portraiture conventions (Berger 46–47); Iturbide's images almost always foreground an element of the unknown—a prime example being the fact that many images do not capture the subjects' face or evidence an uncertainty regarding the direction of the subjects' gaze.

Iturbide's portraiture in *Los que viven en la arena* also shows the experimental nature of Iturbide's photography. Consider the portrait of a middle-aged Seri woman seated on a chair under a leafy tree (fig. 4). The woman is holding a photograph on her lap. It is a portrait of her much-younger self dressed in traditional Seri clothing. While in the portrait within the picture the younger version of the woman is looking away from us, the woman seated in the chair stares at us directly. If, per John Berger, the exhibition of an oil painting (and, by extension, photography) within an illustration was a way of evidencing possession of property and capitalist interest (83–87), then Iturbide's photograph does exactly the opposite of the European tradition, because it underlines one thing that the individual can never eternally possess: youth (or perhaps even more specifically, time). Iturbide employs metaphotography to emphasize the passage of time by including youth captured by another photographer while also using the subject's own image to create a powerful temporal contrast. The dissimilarity of both the "this has been" moments in one location evidences a rich meditation in the photo narrative. Where other photographers have utilized the captured image to exalt or to make exotic or suggest possession, Iturbide employs it to witness a more transcendent truth: all will age, and one of the best ways of evidencing this truth is by contrasting photographic images taken at different times.

### Solidarity and the Foregrounding of the Forgotten

Graciela Iturbide has clearly mentioned that the solidarity or complicity between her subject matter and herself is key to her photographic projects (Carreras 131). This solidarity also evidences how Iturbide's photography falls in line with the concept of photography as a cooperative social practice, as argued by Ariella Azoulay (*Civil Imagination* 11). Iturbide's direct approach is also underlined by her lack of photographic aids such as flash or hidden cameras, which means that certain elements

are the norm. For example, images are often taken outside, where the light is best. Photographs of the night or nocturnal activities are practically nonexistent in the body of her work, and those who figure in her images are complicit subjects.

Figure 4.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 55.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

The subject of solidarity between the photographer and her subjects is evidenced in the photo essay in question through the Seri face painting. The Seri have long been the subject of study by social scientists from the United States and other foreign countries. Patterns of living, language, and cultural

Figure 5.

*Autorretrato con los indios seri*, from *Eyes to Fly With*, 127.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

practices have been the main focus of these studies and one of their insights is key to helping us understand Iturbide's photography in terms of solidarity with her subject. Gwyneth Harrington Xavier, an anthropologist working with for the Indian Arts and Crafts board in the 1930s, published an article on Seri face painting. This article points to the importance of the practice and the notion of solidarity between the Seri and outsiders whose face they choose to paint: "My first visit was spent almost entirely in establishing friendly relations. There were visits between camps. They tried to teach me songs, the women amused themselves by painting my face Seri fashion, little presents were exchanged" (Harrington Xavier 18). After this description, Harrington Xavier affirmed that the Seri do not use face painting to signify clan adoption, but rather that Seri women who paint the face of a non-Seri woman do so as a demonstration of solidarity. While no pictures of the photographer form a part of *Los que viven en la arena*, in other collections Graciela Iturbide has exhibited a photo of herself from the time period of her Sonoran project not only with Seri face paint but also wearing their traditional clothing and sporting a Seri hairstyle (fig. 5). In fact, the blouse she wears is almost an identical copy of the blouse worn by a Seri woman in her portraits and her face painting strongly mirrors that of her photographic subject (26). All of this suggests that she might have even been an active part of the ritual she captured as a part of her photo narrative. This focus on women as a key element of her visual discourse is important for several reasons: the most salient of which is the foregrounding of women. Photo historian John Mraz observed in his essay "Mexican History: A Photo Essay" that "the basic elements of a photograph that can be used to develop social histories

may be defined without unnecessary complications. The first is the presence of people who are often excluded from written texts. Women and children, for example, usually buried under the proclamations of male governing bodies, are present in photographs to be rescued from history” (299). Hence, Iturbide’s repeated and constant inclusion of these women not only demonstrates her solidarity with them but also serves to weave them back into the national Mexican narrative.

## Ritual and Origin

Graciela Iturbide’s solidarity with her objects of study also brings to light two other subject matters her photography witnesses: ritual and origin. While speaking about her photography, the art critic and historian Cuauhtémoc Medina notes the importance of ritual in the photography of Graciela Iturbide and how this links back to her boarding school education: “Her camera has discreetly composed a panorama of the ways in which different peoples around the world reflect on the finite nature of their existence as revealed in their dealings with animals, objects, ritual and daily existence, and not only in philosophical terms. Her personal enquiry into the meaning of transience is also a meditation on the spirituality concealed in any form of routine or ritual” (15). In addition to the theme of ritual Medina suggests, Iturbide’s work also testifies to the subject of origin within ritual or manifested independently.

The ritual of face painting has already been mentioned; however, even more salient in *Los que viven en la arena* is the ritualistic travel of this semi-nomadic people. Some of these examples are overt. Other witnesses of this ritual are much more nuanced. Consider one prime example that also evidences solidarity. In this image, we have the picture of an old woman lying on a cement floor. She rests her head on a cloth item that is bundled up to form a pillow (fig. 6). Next to her legs one can observe a walking stick and a metal tin cup. These elements suggest a traveler who is resting from her journeys and even reference the highly venerated saint in Mexico, Santo Niño de Atocha. If these were not suggestion enough of travel, there is one more element to consider. A feature found regularly in Iturbide’s photography is an intruding element within a photograph, a reference to the nature of photography itself (that is only capable of capturing small evidence of “this has been” at a time, and that, as it selects its focus, other elements will be excluded—such as the partial element on the edge of a photographic frame). On this occasion the intruding element, like others in different series she has produced, is introduced almost as if it were an accident, an oversight, or an unwanted action. However, this image reminds the viewer that Iturbide’s additions are, in reality, consciously organized and strategically placed visual clues to be analyzed. On this occasion the intruding element is a huarache-clad foot. A perfect metonymic symbol of Mexican nomadism to complement the nomad at rest, the huarache and the foot both evidence the eternal nature of human travel by presenting footwear symbolic of Mexican peasants. The fact that it is offered to the viewer as an intruding element is a method for creating focus on it while reflecting on the visual medium itself.

Figure 6.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 22.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

### Mediations of the Present

Although Graciela Iturbide's work offers evidences of the past, in general the present is a stronger theme in her oeuvre. In *Los que viven en la arena* these references to the past tend to emphasize their nomadic tendencies and their links to Isla Tiburón. However, Iturbide also connects these focuses to the present: the Seri continue to roam, and Isla Tiburón continues to be relevant to them. The photographer's images pose questions that Barjau only touches on in his retelling of the Seri's past. Her witness of their culture counterbalances that of the anthropologist as she observes how non-Seri influences from Mexico and the United States filter into the lives of this group

Figure 7.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 60.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 8.

From *Los que viven en la arena*, 67.

Image removed due to copyright restrictions.

of Indians. As she observes them, they are portrayed at the crossroads of their own culture and that of mainstream Mexico.

Some evidences of the modern Seri at a crossroads are simply peculiar, showing Iturbide's deep interest in foregrounding the curious and bizarre as she meditates on the present. In this photo essay some of Iturbide's portrayals of men are prime examples of this. When captured at work, they wear the clothes that will enable them to perform their labors as fishermen. However, when asked to dress for a portrait, several of them wear outfits in imitation of the famous Mexican singer Rigo Tovar (fig. 7).<sup>2</sup> Their attire offers evidence of engagement with mainstream Mexican culture and a desire to assimilate into certain aspects they have found within it. It is, however, this attempt at assimilation that underlines the Seri's difference on this occasion—the improvisation of attire, the

As briefly mentioned earlier, Iturbide does not tend to give her photographs titles; nonetheless, the final photograph of the series *Los que viven en la arena* does have one: *Mujer ángel*, and is probably the best-known photo from this series. Captured near an area where the Seri had taken the photographer to show her their cave paintings, in an interview Iturbide confessed that she had forgotten she had shot this image (Ramírez). Some have described it as her best photograph. Others, such as Stanley Brandes, have labeled it “beautiful and deeply mysterious” (96). This image is the ideal conclusion to her first book project not only because of its aesthetic qualities but also because it encapsulates several of the themes of Iturbide’s particular photographic vision.

The image is of a Seri woman traveling along the edge of an elevated ridge looking out toward the horizon (fig. 8). While it is impossible to know her exact age, given her posture, her hands, and her hair, it is fair to assume that she is relatively young. She is dressed in traditional Seri clothing. The photograph is devoid of almost any modernity. There are no cars, roads, houses, planes, or anything else to denote modern civilization in the photo. It would be a timeless photo except for a single element: in the woman’s right hand she holds a boom box: avant-garde technology at the moment the photo was captured. It is an excellent example of the Seri at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. It is also a wonderful specimen of Iturbide’s repeated focus on the present, using her photographs to bear witness to the “this has been” of the Seri she encountered. The nontraditional portrait of the woman, who also has her back to us, reminds us not only of the taboo of turning your back on people in Latin America (*no dar la espalda*), but also of Iturbide’s unwillingness to conform to Western or European models of portraiture and to oblige her viewers in the West and elsewhere to consider individuals with another gaze by consistently creating other innovative portraits of her subjects, paving the way for other notions of portraiture in Latin America. While the location of the cave paintings indicates the past and ritual (as suggested by Chris Walter), the direction in which the woman is facing and advancing suggests a more direct reference to the physical location of the origin of the Seri themselves according to their tradition: Isla Tiburón. Likewise, the fact that it is a woman who is pictured also reminds us of the solidarity and complicity between the two women (photographer and subject) engaging in the civil contract of photography. While some spectators (also exercising their part of the civil contract of photography) might simply reflect on the beauty of the image or its removal from the salient traditions of mainstream Western society, a more nuanced reading suggests that this picture is probably the one that best summarizes the themes found in this photo narrative, and Iturbide’s work generally.

Iturbide’s imagery is visually captivating and merits critical discourse. However, this article has evidenced that Iturbide’s photographic oeuvre creates a specific witness, or photographic vision, of Latin America that began in her early work. It foregrounds topics that include the symbols and rituals encountered in quotidian experience in Mexico as well as Iturbide’s personal experience and exploration that, once identified, offer the viewer other avenues of understanding that can be employed to approach this artist’s work, ones that promise profound analytical renewal and commentary that relate to this key player in Latin American visual culture. The identification and discussion of those significant folds and textures in Iturbide’s photographic testimony studied here permit a broader manner of interpreting her ideas and understanding of Latin America that leads to a more profound comprehension of the visual turn we are experiencing in Hispanism.

## Notes

This article is linked to the research network “Traducción, Ideología, Cultura,” based at the Universidad de Salamanca, and forms a part of the research project “Violencia simbólica y traducción: retos en la representación de identidades fragmentadas en la sociedad global” (FFI2015-66516-P; MINECO/FEDER, UE), which operates thanks to a grant from the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad del Gobierno de España and the Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional.

1. Those pieces in print focus on Graciela Iturbide’s best-known work internationally: Juchitán de las mujeres. David William Foster published an article in Spain (*Ámbitos: Revista de estudios de ciencias sociales y humanidades*) that offers a close gendered reading of Zoraida, the protagonist of *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas*, as well as the images of Magnolia; a muxe featured in the photo essay on Juchitán, Oaxaca. This essay was later republished in English as a chapter of his book *Argentine, Mexican, and Guatemalan Photography: Feminist, Queer, and Post-Masculine Perspectives* (University of Texas Press, 2014). Two other articles that study Iturbide’s photo essay on Juchitán center on the notion of the accuracy of representation of the matriarchal society (Binford and Campbell). A final article reviews Iturbide’s work and persona from a personal perspective based on interviews and friendship (Bradú).

2. Rigoberto Tovar García (1946–2005) was a pioneer of modern Mexican music of which many Seri individuals were fond at the time of Iturbide’s photo essay. From northern Mexico as well, Tovar had a style (in terms of music and dress) that was quite unique. Although he launched and solidified his career as a musician in the United States, his music proved extremely popular in Mexico: one of his concerts in Mexico drew a greater attendance than the visit of Pope John Paul II to the same location just a few weeks earlier. Iturbide’s capture of this element shows one of the manners in which her work on the Seri underlines areas not always mentioned by social scientists in their attempts to understand the Seri at that time: the incursion of mainstream Mexico and/or foreign influences on this society in terms of art and music.

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