MESTIZAJE
(RE)MAPPING RACE, CULTURE, AND FAITH IN LATINA/O CATHOLICISM

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and that more appropriately provide alternative language for speaking of U.S. Latinas/os without using such general and all-encompassing categories.

As Lourdes Martínez-Echazabal suggests, the dictates of power differentials impede true mestizaje from occurring. As she writes, "[To advocate mestizaje] without attempting to change the systems and institutions that breed the power differential would simply help to perpetuate the utopian vision that constructs Latin America . . . as the 'continent of hope,'" always in the future, never in the present.39

To take seriously the rejection and challenges to mestizaje demands reconsidering previous assertions about people's experiences, as well as the rereading of previous interpretation of religious symbols and practices. An attempt at rereading religious symbols without resorting to the notion of mestizaje may reveal other aspects not easily detectable because they are obstructed by the optic of mestizaje. To illustrate my point, I engage the symbol of Guadalupe to explore other interpretive alternatives.

REREADING OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE: UNMASKING THE VIOLENCE OF MESTIZAJE

Sometimes interpreted as Mary, the Jewish mother of Jesus, and at other times as the concrete expression of a syncretistic amalgam of indigenous and Spanish religious elements, Our Lady of Guadalupe remains the most venerated religious symbol in the Mexican and Mexican American communities. Elizondo is correct that Our Lady of Guadalupe is a rich cultural and religious symbol.40 And I agree with Rodriguez as she shows the various degrees and ways in which Guadalupe inspires and empowers Mexican American women.41

Guadalupe is also a particularly contested religious symbol, as she has always been at the forefront of people's movements, even on opposing sides. She was in the vanguard of Mexico's indigenous people's political uprisings during colonial times.42 And she was the force that inspired the Mexican struggle for independence and later the banner for the Mexican revolution.
She became prominent among Mexican Americans during the United Farm Workers' strikes and other efforts for social justice by these communities. Nowadays, dominant interpretive frames are being challenged because of their potential ideological exclusionary power. Orlando Espín, for example, tells us that reflections about Guadalupe necessitate raising questions of power asymmetry and enculturation of women promoting their submission to men. Carla Trujillo also reinterprets Guadalupe as raising important issues concerning lesbian erotic power and desire. Ross Gandy unmasks some of the ways in which official Catholicism has manipulated and whitened the symbols of Guadalupe and Juan Diego, actions which have detrimental effects for women in Mexico (and elsewhere). Guadalupe's status as mother of the Mexican and Mexican American peoples is also being challenged. In negative ways Octavio Paz had already affirmed Malinalli Tenepal's (La Malinche) right to motherhood. On various fronts women are discovering La Malinche as an example of women's disruptive power against dominant patriarchal cultures. All of this is to say that, in the context of this book, this cannot be an exhaustive study on Guadalupe, and the promises, challenges, and recent reinterpretations associated with her.

In this section I take Virgilio Elizondo's and Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizola* interpretations of the central symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe to illustrate some of the issues at play in the adoption of *mestizaje* as a central category. A *mestizola* reading of Guadalupe disallows the presence of indigenous religious elements; it coopts and subsumes them under the idea of a *mestizo* Christianity, thereby neutralizing them of their disruptive power.

**OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE: THE MESTIZO SYMBOL OF THE MEXICAN AMERICANS/CHICANOS/AS**

No process of intermixture and its articulation is without its own history of violence, conflict, and power struggles. Rafael Pérez-Torrez argues that, more often than not, "the combination of races, ethnicities, and cultures results from an incessant and ruthless history of dispossession [and dislocation]." Similarly,
the category of *mestizaje* does not point to de-historicized biological and cultural intermixtures, but refers to racialized historical social forces that conspire together in the creation of the so-called *mestizola* societies. More specifically, the category also points to sociopolitical subjects whose interests are expressed in the way *mestizaje* is deployed and made concrete.

This is no less applicable when dealing with important religious symbols such as Our Lady of Guadalupe. Like any other religious symbol, Guadalupe is subject to various interpretations. In the case of Mexican American and Chicano/a scholars, their interpretations are multiple. Elizondo's and Anzaldúa's are two examples that illustrate the multivalence of such an important symbol. For them, Guadalupe is certainly the most central symbol of the *mestizola* people (Mexican Americans and Chicanos/as). And they pour much of their creativity into discussing the significance of Guadalupe. Each of these authors engages Guadalupe in creative ways, but they differ greatly in their conclusions, particularly when it comes to discussing *mestizaje*.

**Virgilio Elizondo**

Elizondo's interpretation of the original *mestizaje* that took place between the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples speaks of the creation of a new race, the *mestizola* population, who represent the reconciliation of these disparate peoples. It is the principle of "providential reconciliation" that permeates all of Elizondo's work and is also clearly revealed in his reading of Guadalupe.

Motolinia reported that about nine million conversions of indigenous people took place after the apparition of Guadalupe.\(^{50}\) In light of the massive conversion of the indigenous peoples, Elizondo names Guadalupe the "evangelizer of the Americas."\(^{51}\) According to him, the bitter memory of the conquest made it impossible for the people to convert to Catholic Christianity, so the apparition of Guadalupe served as the catalyst for the conversion of the conquered Mexican people. For him, this was a decisive event, as Guadalupe represented the divine alternative to the European-Spanish evangelization.\(^{52}\) As he claims, one
would fail to understand the true significance of Guadalupe if she were interpreted through the categories of Western-European Mariology. Guadalupe is something new and different!

But what is the essence of such newness in Elizondo’s interpretation of Guadalupe? For him, Guadalupe was the result of the initial mestizaje (mixture) between the indigenous peoples of the land and the Spanish people. This mestizaje, he comments, involves biological and cultural aspects as well as religious ones. The biological mixture resulted in a mestizalo progeny, and since these mestizalo children are neither Spanish nor indigenous, they are something new, a “new creation.” It follows that since Guadalupe is the religious-cultural result of this first biological mestizaje (mixture), a spiritual mestizaje, she is therefore the “Mother of the New Creation.” Guadalupe is not just the adaptation of the veneration of Mary using indigenous religious symbols. Instead, she is a mestizalo expression of Christianity. She epitomizes the irruption of these new mestizalo people. Through her, “the conquered reclaim the legitimacy, veracity, beauty, and sacredness of the values and traditions of their people.”

As to the mestizalo character of Guadalupe, this is expressed in the story narrating her apparition to Juan Diego, which weaves together Nahuatl and Spanish concepts of God. As Teresa Chávez Sauceda puts it, Guadalupe “puts the Nahuatl language for God on the same plane as that of the Spanish missionaries.” Guadalupe, affirms Elizondo, is the irruption of the mestizos/as because she appeared to a mestizo member of the vanquished communities: Juan Diego. At the same time, she appeared in dark (morena) complexion, which demonstrates the divine siding for the poor and oppressed mestizalo-moreno (mixed) peoples. In the end, in Elizondo’s mestizaje scheme the significance of Guadalupe corresponds to the first biological-cultural mestizaje that took place and the spiritual mestizaje that followed expressed concretely in the devotion to Guadalupe.

This is consistent with Elizondo’s reading of mestizaje claiming the divine endorsement of the Mexican American mestizalo (mixed) communities in the form of the mestizalo divine symbols of Guadalupe, and the mestizo historical Jesus. But the mestizalo reclaiming of the indigenous elements occurs only as part
of the Mexican American ancient ancestral heritage. He leaves unaddressed how the indigenous religious symbols embedded in the image of Guadalupe have been coopted by the mestizada version of the Christian gospel. Indigenous elements have been absorbed by this version of Christianity and stripped of their potentially disruptive (pagan) nature. Elizondo’s mestiza interpretation of Guadalupe amounts to affirming the dual cultural-spiritual ancestry of mestizos/as but says nothing of the conditions of oppression of and struggles of resistance by indigenous people at the time of the apparition or in the present.

Moreover, Elizondo’s mestiza scheme is too neat. He emphasizes the mestizo identity of Juan Diego without acknowledging his original indigenous name, Quauhtlatoatzin (he who speaks with the snakes), which was changed only after his baptism by a Franciscan priest in order to fit in his appropriation of the apparition of Guadalupe for the mestiza (mixed) Mexican American communities. In my view, Juan Diego is made a mestizo by removing his indigenous background at the time of the encounter, and by some is made to represent the culturally mestiza population. The implication is that Guadalupe does not mean only liberation and the irruption of a “new” people. For some indigenous peoples, Guadalupe has also functioned as a symbol imposed upon their communities in order to have them abandon their ancient religious symbols and practices. Their religious traditions have been replaced with mestiza Christianity, and Guadalupe is the perennial reminder of the conquest and eradication of the indigenous religious traditions.

Gloria Anzaldúa

Anzaldúa does not view mestizaje as a trump card by which everything is made right by mixing. She claims that mestizaje is a way of life, a conceptual orientation for interpreting life and constructing identities. In her view, the inconsistencies and tensions in identity building are engaged head on without pretending to ameliorate them or overcoming them by mixture, as if this neutralizes or cures racism. Mestiza consciousness is the recognition that Chicanas’ racialization is a construction of “otherness,” not identical with who they really are. As Yamada writes:
“over my mask/is your mask of me.” Anzaldúa appropriates difference and the fluidity of identities as the alternative to the dominant discourse of homogeneous, hermetically sealed identities. Her proposal unsettles, disturbs, breaks from contemporary dominant frames for interpreting reality, cultures, and describing identity, resisting airtight definitions, categories, and iron-cast frames.

Like Elizondo, Anzaldúa’s cultural theoretical work tells us that Guadalupe is the “most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/a and Mexicano.” In agreement with Elizondo she conceives Guadalupe as a mestiza symbol: “She like my race is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered.” There is an interrelation between the indigenous peoples and the mestizos/as in Anzaldúa. She claims that to embrace Guadalupe is to (re)claim her indigenous ancestry. “Guadalupe is the symbol of the mestizo true to his or her Indian values.” In other words, mestizaje is the medium through which the authentic indigenous roots are reclaimed. For the people on both sides of the border, Guadalupe is also the symbol of rebellion against the rich and middle class, and against the “subjugation of the poor and the indio.” Under her favor different races, religions, and languages come together. Thus, Guadalupe is a powerful religious and cultural symbol for Mexicans and Chicanos/as alike.

Unlike Elizondo, Anzaldúa engages Guadalupe and critiques the present state of her portrayal. To her, the present patriarchal version of Guadalupe is the result of the displacement of women from the religious traditions of the people, dating as far back as the great Aztec-Méxica Empire. As she explores the early premilitaristic Aztec-Méxica civilization, she finds that the latter drove earlier indigenous female deities underground and substituted male deities for them. To her, the Aztecs-Méxica became a militaristic state where male predatory “warfare and conquest were based on patrilineal nobility,” which established the principle of “opposition between the sexes.” The split continued after the conquest, as the Spaniards divided Coatlaxopeuh, the serpent Meso-American fertility earth goddess, from Guadalupe, the holy mother. For Anzaldúa, both are characteristics of
the same ancient Nahua deity that kept both the female and male in fine tension. The Spaniards preserved only the side of “Holy Virgin Mother,” thus desexualizing Guadalupe. This dichotomy is expressed more emphatically in the juxtaposition of the three mothers of Mexico: “Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has abandoned us, La Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and La Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two.”

In Anzaldua’s view, the bifurcation of Guadalupe and Coatlaxopeuh is to blame for dichotomizing women as either saints or whores, which is at the root of all violence against women. This is manifest in the way the legendary image of Malinche (Malinali Tenepal) is communicated. The idea that La Malinche betrayed the Mexican people permeates Mexican cultural ethos and understanding of women. This emerges rather crudely in the work of Paz. Anzaldua rejects this dichotomy between Guadalupe, the saint and fighter for the people, and La Malinche, the traitor. This dichotomy must be unlearned and people must see Coatlaxopeuh-Coatlicue in the Mother, Guadalupe. Anzaldua contradicts traditional views that juxtapose the positive role of Guadalupe with La Malinche as “Guadalupe’s monstrous double.” She states that the Aztec nation fell not because La Malinche (La Chingada) “interpreted for and slept with Cortés,” but because the ruling “elite had subverted the solidarity between men and women.” La Malinche did not sell her people; they sold her.

What is at stake here is the unmasking of the male-centered patriarchal scheme that caused a rift between the sexes, argues Anzaldua. They reject the binaries women/men, saint/whore, spirit/body. As Aldama writes, Anzaldua “(re)centers and unshames desire for sexual and cultural decolonization.” She grounds her claims on women’s bodies traumatized by poverty and colonial, racial, sexual violence, “to articulate the psychic processes of recovery and decolonization.” In other words, elite males have coopted Guadalupe and turned her into a mechanism of oppression for women: the indigenous, the mestiza, the Chicana. Just as Espín points out that Guadalupe can be used at once for the oppression or the liberation of women, Anzaldua insists that Chicana women must be suspicious of the
male-centered patriarchal elements inherent in traditional articulations of Guadalupe.74

Toward an Alternative Interpretation of Guadalupe

Echoing some of the more radical strands of the Mexican revolution75 in her emphasis on mestizaje, Anzaldúa asserts that in Guadalupe the “Indian, despite extreme despair, suffering and near genocide, has survived.”76 This has great implications for interpreting the cultural, political, and religious significance of Guadalupe. It is clear that for Anzaldúa the indigenous have survived in the mestizos/as. Still, she makes the point of siding with the indigenous stating that la cultura chicana identified with the indigenous mother rather than with the Spanish father. Thus, for her, Chicana faith is “rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth.”77 Chicano/as maintain a deeper connection with the indigenous peoples and their religious symbols. Although Anzaldúa says nothing of the surviving indigenous peoples of today, she leaves the door open for taking the indigenous religious elements in Guadalupe much more seriously than previous interpretations of mestizaje have.

I propose that Guadalupe cannot be dealt with appropriately by emphasizing only the evangelization of the indigenous peoples and the choseness of the mestizos/as (Elizondo); nor does she represent only the survival of indigenous religious elements (Anzaldúa). Guadalupe can and must also be interpreted as the concrete symbol of the obstinate resistance and struggle of the indigenous peoples to survive, to the extent of transforming key Christian symbols by bringing them close to their own ancestral religious traditions and practices.

This is something with which Spanish Catholic Christianity in Latin America has been dealing since the encounter and subsequent “evangelization” of the indigenous peoples. From the beginning the Spanish priests perceived the conversion of the indigenous masses to Spanish/European versions of Christianity as suspicious. It was common to find places where people went to church and participated in the Christian mass, but then went to their homes and continued with their religious indigenous
practices, symbols, and rites, something still happening today in the indigenous populated areas of Latin America.\textsuperscript{78} The practice of mixing indigenous and Spanish religious elements took place over centuries and was aided by the work of the Spanish missionaries. For example, symbols such as the eagle and the cactus were slowly changed from having indigenous religious significance into \textit{mestizo/a} symbols of national identity. This took place as the priests in Mexico wanted to make the gospel more attractive to the indigenous masses. Solange Alberro tells us that as the Jesuit priests allowed the people to sing songs in their own language using those symbols, they became aware of the incorporation of rites and activities that were part of their indigenous religions.\textsuperscript{79} Later, in the efforts to eradicate indigenous “pagan” worship, and in the complex process of identity construction and differentiation of the Spaniards and the indigenous, the growing \textit{mestizo/a} population affirmed these symbols, now with Christian content, as symbols of their \textit{mestizo/a} identity.\textsuperscript{80} This unmasks ways in which the dominant \textit{mestizo/a} culture attempted the slow displacement and replacement of indigenous elements in local cultures and later silenced the living indigenous communities through a national agenda of \textit{mestiza­tion}. But it also points to a dynamic process of continuing resistance by the indigenous peoples and preservation of their traditions and symbols, even by subverting the Christian ones.

The paranoia over the so-called pagan character of the indigenous religious practices has much to do with the Spanish (mis)construction of the indigenous other. In her discussion of Elizondo’s vision of the \textit{mestiza} Guadalupe, Chávez Saucedo tells us that the “good news” of the Guadalupe event was the affirmation of the dignity and legitimacy of the peoples whom the Spanish considered “inferior, superstitious and diabolical.” She writes that the Nican Mopogua, the narrative of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, displays a “creative syncretism that lifts up and synthesizes what is good in two seemingly irreconcilable religious views, and avoiding what is false in both.” While Chávez Saucedo readily tells us that the narrative “breaks through the patriarchal, militaristic, judgmental god of the Spaniards,” and it also avoids the “blood-thirsty Nahuatl gods who demanded
sacrifice,” she does not tell us much about how the “sacrificial”
death of Jesus might have been perceived by the indigenous
peoples. In a civilization driven by sacrifice and shedding of
blood, it is conceivable that what happened was not only the
evangelization of the indigenous peoples, but the indigenization
of Christianity with sacrificial motifs and all, as Rafael Montano
Rodríguez suggests.

Reading Guadalupe as *mestiza* impedes seeing her as an in-
digenous subversive symbol. Recovering the central role of Juan
Diego as an indigenous and *not* a *mestizo* is most important
here. It was his eyewitness account that Don Antonio Valeriano
recorded in the *Huei tlamatiauolotlca* (Nican Mopogua), so his
interpretation of Guadalupe is at the heart of this debate. The
image of Guadalupe not only contains indigenous elements, but
she is depicted as indigenous herself, aspects that function in the
most subversive manner in relation to the Spanish-European
versions of Mary and understanding of the divine. For this reason I
agree with Jeanette Rodriguez’s assertion that popular religios-
ity can be interpreted as a form of resistance.

It is more plausible that Guadalupe’s words were interpreted
by Juan Diego and those who looked like him as the divine vin-
dication and protection of the indigenous peoples. The narrative’s
affirmation that she is the mother “of all those who love me, of
those who cry to me, of those who search for me, of those who
have confidence in me,” and that at Tepeyac she “will listen to
their cry, to their sadness, so as to curb all their different pains,
their miseries and sorrow, to remedy and alleviate their suffer-
ings,” applies more appropriately to the indigenous peoples and
their struggles against oppression. I propose that the indigenous
elements one finds in Guadalupe are not merely expressions of
the evangelization of the indigenous, by which the divine “re-
conciled” the Spanish and the indigenous, but rather are concrete
expressions of the indigenous peoples’ resilience and resistance
to being erased from history.

Stated differently, Juan Diego brings the truth to Bishop
Zumárraga; he evangelizes the bishop by bringing a new revela-
tion that stands the Eurocentric version of Christianity on its
head by insisting that the divine is revealed in the religious prac-
tices, traditions, and symbols of the indigenous peoples.
adopt Diego Irarrázaval’s notion of syncretism in interpreting Guadalupe and his insistence that the phenomenon of syncretism “constitute[s] a language of the power of the poor [indigenous], of the protagonist role of women, and of an ethics and spirituality that liberate from the roots.” He later adds that it “is possible to define syncretism as a conjugation of distinct and uneven socioreligious dynamics, in which subordinate sectors generate symbolic universes.” So, while for Irarrázaval it is conceivable that the indigenous peoples were evangelized to a lesser or greater degree, it also remains true that “the Virgin of the Conquest was transformed” into an autochthonous symbol that represents the vanquished indigenous peoples. Along with the other Patronas (female patron saints) of Latin America, Irarrázaval makes the connection between Guadalupe and the suffering people, who are the ones who “exalt these icons, that now represent a social project in which all human beings—especially the downtrodden—be appreciated.” Contrary to the insistence on mestizaje as a fusion of cultures that runs dangerously close to promoting homogeneous expressions of Christianity, popular syncretic religions demand that we look in positive terms—and in their own rights—at the cultural and religious plurality of Latin America.

This is the difference between the Virgin of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is the affirmation that Juan Diego was indigenous, and so is Guadalupe. It is to say that regarding Guadalupe as the result of mestizaje prevents us from seeing in her the concrete expression of the resistance and survival of the culture and religion of the indigenous peoples. To read Guadalupe through mestiza/o eyes alone conceals the systematic mestiza/o cooptation that results in the whitening of the indigenous religious elements in her. Guadalupe carries the indigenous collective memory of despoliation and the struggle for survival. In preserving their religious elements, Guadalupe reiterates the indigenous peoples’ refusal to be erased from history and the divine siding with those most vulnerable and most affected by the conquest: the indigenous peoples. It is only by historicizing and relativizing our understanding of mestizaje that devotion to Guadalupe can also be interpreted as an act of solidarity on the part of the indigenous peoples of today, who continue to be
persecuted, discriminated against, and oppressed. A more complete reading of Guadalupe will have to take seriously the dynamics of social and religious power within which Guadalupe emerged and became such a central symbol for (mestizo/as) Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Chicanos/as.

THE DIVERSE ETHNOCULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES OF THE LATINA/O PEOPLE: 
MESTIZAJE AND INTRA-LATINA/O INTERRELIGIOUS INTERCULTURALISM

In this critical study on mestizaje I have emphasized the larger ethnic and cultural diversity of the U.S. Latina/o population. I have argued that discussions of mestizaje that fail to retrieve the living indigenous and African presences run the danger of turning mestizaje into a weapon of the empire by reproducing the silences of these peoples. For this reason I insist that U.S. Latina/o theologians need to enter into conversation with groups and cultural traditions that have, for the most part, been absent from their debates on mestizaje. This means that future U.S. Latina/o theological debates will have to be characterized by interreligious and intercultural conversations.

So I draw attention to the importance of interrogating the exclusively Christian imaginary of the U.S. Latina/o versions of mestizaje. In this I revert to the initial impetus of mestizaje when it was originally articulated by U.S. Latina/o theologians. The adoption of mestizaje launched U.S. Latina/o scholars into a revision of the historical records in order to reclaim and reinterpret their history and their identity as people. But their history and their identity have never been exclusively Christian. In affirming their history and their identity, U.S. Latina/o theologians must also engage the different non-Christian religious traditions from which they have come. As Gonzalez sees it, "Latina/o theology will have to delve more deeply into its own non-Christian roots, how they have shaped Latino Christianity, and what they may have to contribute to theology as a whole." It is not enough to recognize Candomble, Santeria, or Vudú as some of the religious practices of the people without also engaging them in depth