La Virgen de la Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona: Technologies of Meaning and Appropriation

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ABSTRACT

In Mexico, as in the United States, gender categories are based on the feminine/masculine dichotomy, generally assigned to a specific sex. This either/or dichotomy is also present in how dominant meanings about femininity/womanhood are constructed within the Mexican, Chicano, and many Latin American cultures. The images and stories of their most popular female icons, La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe, are present in folk tales, music, poetry, movies, and literature. Through them, womanhood is represented through opposites: the virgin-whore, pure-sensual, honorable-immoral woman.

Male dominated institutions, such as the (Mexican) Catholic Church, have built a solid foundation for the strictly defined and assigned categories of gender that limit women's options for freedom, autonomy, and mobility. Mexican, Chicana, and Latina women in general are affected by the ways in which social and religious institutions shelter these three images. Many Chicana and Latina feminists have argued that significant factors in women's oppressions are the pervasive meanings encoded in their representations of appropriate and inappropriate womanhood. Through different forms of appropriation, these women have, in turn, re-visited and re-invented the stories of these images by producing alternative empowering meanings.
The processes of constructing meanings constitute technologies of meaning. Technologies of appropriation, on the other hand, allow Latina and Chicana women to remove meanings of domination from an object and transform them through the construction of new empowering meanings. In this context, centers and margins are constantly involved in appropriation, production, re-production, and consumption of meanings. This project is concerned with how the images of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe are used as tools of both technologies of meaning and technologies of appropriation, controlling and empowering Latina and Chicana women's lives.

This analysis is framed by the theoretical models on technologies and appropriation provided by writings of Chicana feminist Chela Sandoval and science and technology theorist Ron Eglash. Through their models, I am able to position these three female icons as essential tools of these technologies as they work in the production and re-production of Latina and Chicana womanhood. Technologies of meaning and appropriation have been central for the survival of these images through centuries of social, political, geographical, and economic change. Because we can trace these images and their meanings throughout history and because of the abundant literature on them, La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe become very useful tools in the study of both hegemonic ideologies on gender and competing voices challenging them.
Dedicated to my mother, the strongest woman I have ever known.
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*La Virgen de la Guadalupe* ................................................................. 55

*Lynn Randolph’s “La Mestiza Cósmica”* ............................................. 56
After writing this thesis project, I have felt both intrigued and disturbed by the complexities of language and the various ways meanings have been contested in different aspects of my life. I will always remember when, several years ago, I held a sales position in a famous mega-mall located in Minnesota. The world-wide advertising campaign of this place included attractive “shop-for-a-weekend-in-the-U.S.” travel and lodge deals that made of the customer population a very diverse group of people. This particular advertising strategy also gave a significantly different meaning to the “sales associate” position I held, which, by no accident, happened to be very different from that of all other employees at the store. The company that hired me owned two neighboring stores connected by a door located in the back room. Since I was the only Spanish-speaking employe they had, and regardless of me being “officially” hired to work only in one store, I was in constant movement, back and forth, through the back door, not as a sales associate, but as the “official-Hispanic-token.” The number one defining element of the peculiar sales position assigned to me was not my degree in business, or my experience in personal sales, or, even less, my training in retail management. The accent-marked English that I spoke at the time kept me away from professional opportunities; the Spanish I spoke gave me a job and, with it, the opportunity to experience discrimination in the workplace at its best.
It was in the United States where I was labeled “Hispanic” for the first time in my life; this was also the first time that anyone categorized me based on my language (newest traitor/Malinchista). Growing up and having lived most of my life on the beautiful island of Puerto Rico, dancing to African rhythms, enjoying the flavor of our Indian food, and practicing the religion of the colonizer, never produced a Hispanic out of me. The strength of my identification as Puerto Rican (and the pride attached to that) was often reflected in my willingness to sacrifice the false promises of liberation that Anglo-feminism had for me for hopes of independence for my country. The label attached to me in the U.S. spoke mostly about my language, but it said little or nothing of who I am. “Hispanic” celebrates my Catholicism and my language; it even celebrates some of the blood that runs through my veins. It does not, however, speak about myself; “Hispanic” whitewashes my presence and my experience. The colors in the Caribbean, the colonizing status of my land, the struggles at home, and the betrayal of my language outside of it, all come together as tools that help me apply meanings to my surroundings and to the self inside of me. There, the Hispanic in me becomes the embodiment of the product of colonization, genocide and slavery.

As I contest the meanings of the word “Hispanic,” I contest the meanings of many other words and realities. To make sense of my worlds, the positions I occupy in them, and how I relate to others, meanings are essential. They have become a way in which I rationalize the contradictions of my life in the U.S. and my life in Puerto Rico. Through negotiating meanings I can work across and celebrate differences with others. Meanings also allow me to gain the strength necessary to protest and fight whenever necessary, to make decisions in my life, to make sense of my fragmented self, to deal with challenges,
and to be flexible to adapt to changes without letting assimilation consume me. I turn oppressive meanings into empowering or liberating ones; for instance, my self-definition as Hispanic helps me feel imposing and strong as opposed to subjugated and reduced to a concept that trivializes the heritage and realities/actualities of colonization in me. The ways in which I use these *technologies of meaning* at different moments of my life are a direct result of the complexities and contradictions of how I have been socially constructed and how I re-construct my self on a daily basis. These *technologies* have been crucial to my life all along; it has been now, though, that, through this thesis project, I realize such.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Metamorphosis:

A year ago, when I began this project, I would have never predicted that the final product would ever turn out to be what it is. Here, I explore possibilities that I have dismissed in the past and find agency in places where I previously had not. In its beginning, this project was meant to analyze the three images and stories of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe (see figure 1) as both discourses and counterdiscourses about gender that are provided inside and outside feminist debates of Chicana women. I was interested in studying the ways in which the stories encode messages about gender, the ways in which these images were kept alive for over five centuries of history, and the ways in which they have been revisited and re-told in the last two decades. I found, though, that what I was studying was beyond politics of representation and identification and that I was looking at bigger, more complex and powerful technologies of constructing meanings.

Private events in the life of a fourteen-year-old Indian girl named Malitzin, or Malinche, have permeated into spaces impossible to imagine five centuries ago. Her story has not only become a site for social theory, it has also become a crucial tool for the ways in which different groups negotiate meanings in their every day life. This story,
though, is no longer hers; the emergence of so many different stories and names have contributed to the metamorphosis of what once was the life story of a woman.

Not only have these stories survived centuries of environmental, geographical, economic, political, technological, demographic and cultural changes, but also, different elements of popular culture, in specific current published literature, suggest that they will still be here far after we become only a footnote in history books. Today, we can find references to them in famous self-portraits, history books, postmodern literature, autobiographical writings, cyborg theory, different genres of art, poetry, television, movies, and so on. Their messages will be carried onto the next century. La Malinche’s life story was used to construct dominant meanings of bad and inappropriate womanhood. As “the traitor” and “the whore,” she was re-produced through folk tales, tradition, and much of popular culture; her applied meanings supported dominant gender, class, and race ideologies.

For feminist studies, the stories of La Malinche, la Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe provide plenty of material for cultural constructionists to work with. We can look at them through the lenses of representation and find ways womanhood gets constructed through dominant discourses. Another focus would be to explore their meanings of womanhood, motherhood, ethnicity, and identity and the significance of those meanings in women’s lives, as many Chicana feminists1 have already done. They have also been analyzed in terms of the ways in which they serve to control and punish women’s mobility and freedom and to reinforce their status as second-class (and, some times third-class) citizens. These stories are also significant to transnational feminist

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1 For instance, Chicana feminists Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrié Moraga are well known for their work on this subject. See bibliography for specific texts.
theory because they have participated, and still do, in cultural exchanges; these local stories became transnational/transcultural ‘icons’ and have been in the front of international politics and struggles.

There is a relatively large amount of feminist scholarship on the subject, and there is still plenty of unexamined ground. New emerging literature on feminist cyborg theory shows that we are still far from a complete analysis of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe. Outside of the realm of theory, Mexican and Chicana women often assign empowering meanings to these icons. As women claim them as their own, as part of themselves and their history, and as other people appropriate them and turn their meanings from damaging to assertive ones, they shift their position from consumers of dominant meanings to producers of alternative and empowering ones. This phenomenon provides feminist theory with other questions in terms of these icons carrying both meanings that aid in the representations of “the Other,” as well as in representations of the ‘self.’ How can something carry simultaneously such contradictory meanings of domination/control and survival/liberation?

Through this project, I deal with all these questions and more. The more literature I reviewed, the more changes the central question of this thesis underwent, the end result is more guided and concerned with the processes and tools used for both the consumption and production of such meanings as opposed to just the meanings themselves. The processes or strategies that through centuries of cultural and structural changes kept these figures alive and powerful are what I call in this thesis project technologies of meaning.²

² For information on “technologies of power” refer to the writings of Michel Foucault.
The Central Question:

I realize that *La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe* are part of something much more complex than what I was taught while growing up in Latino culture as well as while studying in schools of feminist thought. My training in the feminist tradition of deconstructing *meaning* had kept me from analyzing ways in which the processes of producing and consuming such meanings, in the first place, are not unidirectional. Dominant meanings are not just simply produced at the centers and sent to the margins; the very nature of hegemonic ideologies make imperative the active participation of the subaltern, at least, in the re-production of these meanings.

By focusing on the dangers of dominant meanings and their hegemony, voices at the margins are often constructed as "resistance" or a "response to" imposed ideologies. What is at question here is not whether they are "resistance" or not but, the two-dimensional model implied when the focus of analysis is placed on the ways centers produce meanings and margins absorb and respond to them. The assumption that one is either the center or not neglects the constant shifting from one position to another that the intersection of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality has as inescapable. It also positions the voices at the margins as reactionary rather than as re-producers of dominant meanings and producers of competing ones. With this two-dimensional model, the complex processes and technologies used for resistance are trivialized.

In this project, I do not question the reality that margins and centers exist since I find myself not only shifting from the margins to the centers and vice-versa, but, at times, at the intersection of both (and this text becomes the manifestation of that). However, I am concerned that by not presenting a multi-dimensional model we take agency from the
margins in two ways: first, it assumes that at the margins people are passive in the production and re-production of dominant meanings, and second, it positions the meanings constructed at the margins as an ‘effect of’ rather than as a strategy of producing meaning in itself. Here, I analyze the processes of constructing meaning as technologies necessary for both the ways in which we participate in the construction of power relationships and the ways we have to manage them. We all use and participate in these processes (mostly at subconscious levels); the difference is in the meaning (itself) applied to the process. Are we producing meanings for domination or for liberation? Whose interest do these meanings serve?

I use the images of *La Malinche, La Llorona,* and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* because they clearly illustrate the concept of technologies of meaning as they differently work in the construction of both dominant and liberating meanings. As experience and language are essential ‘tools’ for producing meanings, so are these images. They are used in the creation of competing meanings that somehow rationalize concepts such as colonization, history, motherhood, identity, language, womanhood, and nationality, from different standpoints.

Through the analysis of these three female icons, I argue the following points. First, that both centers and margins in order to create and re-create social reality use technologies of meaning. Second, that through the study of these technologies we can find new ways to re-invent ‘appropriation’ as a strategy that works on the interests of those located in positions mostly lacking access to power.

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3 Here, I draw on Donna Haraway’s statement that “social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world changing fiction” (“A Manifesto for Cyborgs” 65).
Through appropriation, *La Malinche*, *La Llorona*, and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* survived for centuries, not only do they have a history of their own as Mexican icons, but they also play a part in the history of Chicanos and many other Latin American cultures. From generation to generation, from culture to culture, and from nation to nation, the appropriation of these images has given them diversity of meaning and cultural significance; appropriation as a cultural practice, *technology*, could be and has been empowering in many ways. My third point is also related to appropriation. Here, I conclude that the inclusion of these images in cyborg theory already suggests that they are far from obsolete; appropriation by new emerging literature on subjects that live at *other* intersections has given these images new meanings that will pass on into the coming millenium.

**Theoretical Framework and Structure of this Thesis:**

In the production of this thesis project, I used material that mostly could claim membership in the disciplines of Chicano Studies, Feminists Studies, Cultural Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and Cyborg Theory. The writings and ideas developed by critics Chela Sandoval and Ron Eglash provided me with a set of tools, language, and a framework in which to position this study; their works encompass more than one of these areas of study. Their writings allowed me to move beyond a microscopic lens of analysis that looks at images, to a macroscopic one that allows for a study of how *technologies of meanings* define and re-define such images, at what locations are such meanings produced, for what purpose, and its possible effects.
Technologies at the Margins:

Chela Sandoval, for instance, already identifies in her essay, *Women Prefer a Choice: New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed*, the processes of applying meanings that are relevant to the subaltern’s life as a technology part of the “methodology of the oppressed” (410). From Sandoval’s work, I borrow the idea that these processes constitute technologies that are used at positions at the margins to produce meanings. However, I see these technologies not only at the margins but also working at the centers. Our systems of dominance greatly depend on such technologies to support the status quo, and on people at the margins to be active participants in the reproduction of dominant meanings as they are active in the production of their own meanings.

The model of producing meanings that can be drawn from Sandoval’s work requires more agency from marginal positions than I am used to acknowledging. By recognizing the ability of the subaltern to appropriate “dominant ideological forms and used them whole in order to transform their meanings into a new, imposed, and revolutionary concept,” Sandoval positions the margins not merely as consumers, but also as producers of meanings (410).

Agency at the margins becomes very visible when we look at the ways in which technologies of appropriation are re-invented there. Sandoval identifies appropriation as another technology, part of the methodology of the oppressed. The ways in which appropriation occurs at the margins is different, though, than the one that occurs from the centers to the margins where, as Gloria Anzaldúa states, an appropriated thing becomes

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4 Sandoval’s essay is deeply rooted in the ideas posed by Donna Haraway in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”
“a conquered thing, a dead ‘thing’” (“Borderlands/La Frontera” 68). Sandoval’s idea of appropriation is far from that which “surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use” (“Borderlands/La Frontera” 68). The appropriation that occurs at the margins is seen by Sandoval as empowering and, in ways, a requirement of the “methodology of the oppressed.”

I position the images of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe within these dynamics. In this project, the images are considered essential tools for the technologies of meaning, which produce both dominant and alternative meanings. In Chapter Two, for instance, I explore how these images aid in the construction of a gender system that have contradictory, equally damaging representations of womanhood. I also study how these dominant meanings could be limiting women’s self-autonomy and sense of self-fulfillment as well as their role as active participants in the perpetuation, reproduction, and enforcement of dominant meanings.

However, in Chapter Three I turn my focus to examine meanings developed by the subaltern that are meant for liberation or empowerment. Here, I question how the appropriation of these tools, the three images and their stories, have assisted groups, often located at the margins, in their production of new meanings about their history, their women, their mothers, their languages, and so forth. Appropriation within the margins has had a more positive effect than that that occurs when the centers take in from the margins. In this context, and as Sandoval would agree, appropriation of tools to apply meaning has become an essential technology in the lives of the subaltern and has proved to be useful in the reconciliation of contradictory and intersecting positions.
**Appropriating Technologies:**

Another significant standpoint that informs the framework in which I place this thesis is the one provided by Ron Eglash’s article, *Appropriating Technology: Illustrations from an Anti-Racist Science Theory*. Eglash presents an analysis of technology as it is produced, consumed, and appropriated by people at marginal positions. In his article, *technology* is used in its more traditional definition, referring to concrete and visible technologies such as cars, tape recorders and, even tags. However, parallels can be traced between his analysis of these physical technologies and more abstract technologies such as those, discussed here, meant for the production of meanings.

In Eglash’s article, one of the underlying assumptions is that “an indigenous society may be at the margins of political and economic power, but their knowledge systems can produce information that even first world scientists find valuable” (66). This is particularly significant for this thesis in that, as Sandoval does, Eglash also assigns agency to the margins by constructing them as producers of information. He says that “most research in social studies of science and technology (“technoscience”) has been concerned with either production in elite contexts, or the impact of science and technology on non-elite communities” (65). He uses the examples of ethnomathematics and ethnobotanics to illustrate how this unidirectional model of producing knowledge “does not fit” in all cases.

The ways in which Eglash treats production at the margins is focused, though, on production that occurs at the centers and sent to the margins for consumption, and how, at such locations, the technology is appropriated either through “reinterpretation,”
“adaptation,” or “reinvention.” Appropriation, in this context, provides the margins with objects that are later transformed through the production of something new. From a final product with a particular use defined by the centers, it becomes an object to be evaluated, redefined, and transformed into something which possess a particular use defined by the margins.

When we incorporate abstract technologies such as those of meaning or appropriation to Eglash’s model, it becomes pressing to address that when speaking about dominant meanings, for instance “the whore” for la Malinche, it is not the meaning, but the object/subject of such meaning which is the one that undergoes the transformation. Evolution is not forced on the dominant meaning; it is removed while the object is appropriated and re-positioned in another reality. In Chapter Three I present the voices of Chicana women, such as Norma Alarcón, who transforms La Malinche from an object back into a subject by ‘reinterpreting’ her image as “the Mother.” I also present an example of the ‘reinvention’ of Virgen de la Guadalupe by using Lynn Randolph’s piece, La Mestiza Cósmica (see figure 2), where Guadalupe’s image and significance are totally transformed. “Reinterpretation” and “reinvention” are two of the three ways in which Eglash defines appropriation.

**Context and Assumptions of this Project:**

It is almost impossible to withdraw myself from the spectrum covered by this project. As Eglash’s and Sandoval’s ideas shape the basic argument of this thesis, so
does my subjectivity. The ways in which I have been exposed to these images and the ways in which I have used these technologies of meaning and appropriation make me exist in this project outside the aspects of its writing.

I have known about La Virgen de la Guadalupe since I have memory. I do not remember the time when I learned about her; for me, she has always been there. It is no coincidence that it was my mother who gave me the only picture I have of Guadalupe and that it happened when I moved from Puerto Rico to the United States (to help me in my transition from one world to the other). However, I grew up in a culture that did not adore her as the patron of its nation. I was not bombarded with her image as much as many of the subjects speaking in this project.

Mexican, mestiza, and Chicana women have had a much closer relationship to La Virgen de la Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona than I have. While La Virgen de la Guadalupe has always been in my life, La Malinche, and La Llorona present themselves to me through feminist theory of cultural representations of women. The training received in women's studies provided me with both Chicana feminist criticisms and appropriations of these three icons. Through works such as Alarcón’s I learned both traditional and alternative meanings given to these historical figures.

In this project, I merge my previous personal knowledge from Puerto Rico with theoretical frameworks recently acquired in the United States in a study of these images in Mexican and Chicano cultures. Such previous knowledge merged with the theoretical frameworks while studying the writings of Donna Haraway, who says, “identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic” (“A Manifesto for Cyborgs” 72). I found myself looking at the contradictions of all my identities and how my identity as a Puerto Rican
woman both masks and shapes my constant shifting from positions from the margins to the centers and vice-versa. Although I will never be at the center occupied by a white male, I am not powerless or passive either. This experience heavily influences the ways in which I see the participation of individuals in the processes of constructing meaning, as well as appropriating.

Another significant assumption that I add to this project is the idea that appropriation from the centers to the margins has had horrific effects in the lives of those mostly concentrated in marginal positions. In the context of capitalism, where people can just pretend they can just simply buy culture, where sacred cultural artifacts are commodified and commercialized, an underlying assumption is that this kind of appropriation is already known and understood as damaging by the reader. Here, I focus on appropriation at the margins.

Conclusion:

The conclusion to this thesis project is also the conclusion to chapter three. It takes us into an subjective exploration of the technologies of meaning and appropriation. Technologies of meaning and appropriation have often been theorized as damaging strategies developed at the centers and subjugating the margins. Here, I do not question the damages and dangers of such technologies as they are and have been used for domination. I am concerned, though, that multiple identities as well as people whose lives have been located mostly at marginal positions are misrepresented when social theory constantly represents them as passive.
Agency is a source of power that has driven many social movements into revolutionary acts documented in history books. We must address agency and power where we find them and identify those technologies that provide the means for survival as well as for social change. Appropriations that occur within the margins have proven to be a very powerful technology that must be re-examined as it has differential effects according to the purpose of its use. And, because most of these technologies are not used at a conscious level, we must take the time to examine and, perhaps, re-invent, them.
CHAPTER 2

TECHNOLOGIES PRODUCING MEANINGS OF DOMINATION

This chapter analyzes the three icons of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe and the ways in which they become encoders of dominant meanings that both shape and support gender ideologies that rule the lives of many women living in México, United States, and Latin America. I explore the origins of these icons, their stories, and their implication in women’s daily lives, concentrating on México. I also analyze ways in which women are involved in the masculinist construction and reproduction of dominant meanings. I look at the role that oral histories, a women-claimed tradition, have played in the perpetuation of the stories of La Malinche, La Virgen de la Guadalupe, and La Llorona and the teachings they pass on. The ultimate goal of this analysis is to illustrate how technologies of meaning, when used for the production of meanings for domination, aid and support dominant ideologies meant to control women’s lives.

In this chapter, I illustrate how these icons perform as tools for encoding dominant meanings in México. As it is a “norm” in United States, contemporary Mexican gender categories are also based on the feminine/masculine dichotomy, made intrinsic to a specific sex. This either/or dichotomy is also present in how concepts such as femininity and womanhood are defined and represented within popular culture. The
images of *La Llorona*, *La Virgen de la Guadalupe*, and *La Malinche* are three female figures/images present in Mexican folktales, music, poetry, movies, and literature and have been attached to their ways of life for several centuries. Mexican womanhood is trapped between dichotomous dominant meanings given to these three images: the virgin-whore, the pure-sensual, and the honorable-immoral woman.

Male-dominated institutions, such as the Catholic Church, have also influenced the Mexican cultures by, among other things, having built a solid foundation for the strictly defined and assigned categories of gender. Mexican women, often located at the margins, are affected by the ways in which these images are sheltered and reproduced by these institutions, which contribute some coherence within the existing framework of the gender ideology. For instance, the significance religious ideologies have had at the very roots of Mexican identities have a strong impact on the ways women have adopted the dominant meanings taught by religious discourses about what constitutes appropriate womanhood. Ultimately, women’s roles and statuses in Mexico are reflective of and constructed by such representations and meanings.

*Cómo somos los Mexicanos*, published by Alberto Hernandez Medina and Luis Navarro Rodríguez, is the most recent national survey about Mexican values. The responses revealed that more men than women felt they enjoy the freedom to choose and control their lives, and expressed their satisfaction with life in general. On the other hand, more women than men expressed their lack of meaning and purpose in life and expressed having felt somewhat or totally unhappy. Why do these results expose this sort of response from Mexican women speaking about Mexican values? Which institutions
influence the way dominant meanings are applied to gender in Mexico and how significant are these to people’s lives? What elements contribute to the construction of these meanings and what role they play in these responses?

It has been argued by many Mexican, Chicana, and Mexican-American feminists, that a significant factor in Mexican women’s statuses, oppressions, and strengths are the messages constructed through the narratives about La Maínche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe. They become significant icons in the life customs and traditions of Mexican family life. Their study by feminists has served to expose the impact of their dominant meanings within and outside the institution of the family, as well as how they shape codes of behavior for proper womanhood.

The following section provides the historical background of these images as they originated five centuries ago. The three stories are interconnected by meanings and their relationship to one another is undeniable. Following the historical data of the origins of these dominant meanings is an analysis of their impact in Mexican women’s lives and the concluding section explores the participation of women in the re-production of these dominant meanings.

**Historical Background:**

To attempt to provide an accurate historical background could be presumptuous on my part since I am neither an authority in Mexican and Chicano studies nor a historian (never mind my skepticism of the discipline). I am one of those believers that think history is never experienced the way it is narrated and written by those who only speak
through dominant meanings. Providing a historical background for the images under
discussion is a useful, but uncomfortable task. Aside from my own feelings and
discomfort, another limitation to providing an ‘accurate’ historical overview is typical to
folklore and oral traditions. There is an immense number of available versions of these
stories. After reading several different narratives, I realized they were all different but,
often, made reference to each other.

However difficult it is, here I attempt to sketch some ideas about significant
events and realities of colonization that cannot remain untouched in this project. Due to
the diversity of stories, I selected the book, *Quetzalcóatl y Guadalupe: La formación de
la conciencia nacional en México*, written by Jacques Lafaye, to provide some historical
background. The book’s preface is written by Octavio Paz and also provides useful
historical data. This section will use both Lafaye’s and Paz’ perception of colonial times
in Mexico.

One of the main points of Lafaye’s book is to explore the origins of the stories
and devotion to *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* in México. His narrative is mostly concerned
with the relationship of two significant icons, Guadalupe and Quetzacóatl, with the
“formation of a rational ‘conscience’” in Mexico.\(^5\) It is significant to note, though, that
since the first sight of *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* in México occurred thirteen years after
the ‘discovery’ of Mexican land, Lafaye could not escape the telling of the horrific
effects colonization had on Aztec societies and their religious ideologies. He also could
not escape mentioning an Indian woman named Malitzin (La Malinche) and her
relationship to the colonizer Hernán Cortés. As a critical note, we need to consider that

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\(^5\) As translated from the title.
Lafaye’s emphasis and interest is on Guadalupe and not on La Malinche, often represented as her opposite; such interest is reflected in the narrative of his story. To compensate for his lack of detailed information about La Malinche, I use the works of Paula Moya and Irene Blea who provide good insights about Malinche’s story(ies).

In his explorations of the origins of the stories of La Virgen de la Guadalupe, Lafaye traces back its origins in two countries, Spain and México. In the first one, Guadalupe’s origins are directly related to stories about Virgin Mary and The New Eve; such stories precede the 15th century. Although this is significant fact, I will concentrate on his narrative on pre-colonial México, our area of study. However, since Guadalupe seems to have arrived right after colonizers did and then positioned as Malinche’s opposite (as salvation), the fact that she does have a history in the colonizer’s land that predates the ‘discovery’ becomes a significant factor we cannot ignore.

*Pre-colonial and Colonial México:*

Often both La Malinche and La Virgen de la Guadalupe are associated with the Indian goddess, Tonantzin, also named Cihuacoatl. As the most important goddess of the “ancient Mexicans,” Lafaye tells his readers, her figure encoded the meanings of “our mother” or “woman of the serpent” (303). It was commonly believed that she was the goddess that provided the people with hard work, poor living conditions and many struggles in their lives. A temple was founded in her honor to which many would come from far lands to pay tribute to their goddess: “they had a tradition of praising the goddess with numerous extraordinary sacrifices” (304).
Octavio Paz, in the preface to Lafaye’s book, speaks about a figure in the religious ideology of ancient México that is parallel to *Tonantzin* Quetzalcóatl. He tells us about Quetzalcóatl being the god of the ocean and the wind, and “the Creator” (23). This god disappeared in the horizon, “at the point where the water joins the ski,” after the people of Tula were defeated in a religious war. Paz, following the prophecy, states that they waited for a long time for the return of their god; meanwhile, as direct descendants of Tula, Aztec nations rebuilt their communities. Since religion gave nations their meaning, Tula provided them with a rich religious inheritance that ratified their power and dominance over other nations in later times. The new world they rebuilt was an outcome of Quetzalcóatl’s original creation. The Aztec people were still waiting for their god to come back for his inheritance; they believed he would come back from the same horizon where he had disappeared.

The story of Quetzalcóatl later disappears with the arrival of Hernán Cortés. Aztecs believed that Cortés, who was seen coming from the horizon, was a messenger from their god. Paz indicates that “it was already too late” when the Aztecs found out that Cortés had nothing to do with their god (24). At that point, their struggle was mostly focused on their survival of the dehumanizing practices of colonization as well as the effects of the dismantling of their indigenous religious systems by forced Christianity. The image of Quetzalcóatl did not vanish completely; representations of him are still present in contemporary México. However, the power and strength his people derived from their belief in his return did abandon the atmosphere.

Lafaye’s book addresses the efforts the of the Catholic church to find “spiritual salvation for the Indians” of the “New World” in the Americas. They began to study
closely Indian religious images and found parallels and similarities between Quetzacóatl and Santo Tomás, “apostle.” “evangelist of the ‘Indias’” (34). The translation of their religion into new symbols guaranteed the Indians their “historical salvation” (34).

Quetzacóatl/Santo Tomás signified the origin of a new era and Tonantzin/Guadalupe the salvation of the mother-less Indians (22).

In 1531, thirteen years after the discovery of México, Virgin Mary presented herself to an Indian man, as Guadalupe del Tepeyac, and from this moment on she signified the “hope of salvation” and is known as La Virgen de la Guadalupe (34). Her indigenous image challenged traditional representations of Virgin Mary. Paz states,

> the most complex and singular creation of the New Spain was not individual, but collective, and it does not belong to the artistic order, it belongs to the religious: the cult to the Virgen de la Guadalupe.” (Lafaye 22)

He also indicates that this image was held above religious ideas and beliefs from both Europe and the ancient Americas to something that combined the complexities of the time (22). It integrated the supernatural with reality, Catholic and Indigenous religions, the past and the present, as well as provided something bigger than the ideas Spanish could teach the Indians about the salvation of their souls. This was the beginning of a new faith, and a new nation. The Virgin had requested that a temple be built on her name, and it was. Centuries after, the Virgen de la Guadalupe was the symbol Indians and mestizos used in war against Spain, as well as other battles to come. The Virgin’s cult “is both intimate and public, regional and national.” Paz indicates that if out of so much destruction a nation was to be built, religion would be the way to gain a national conscience (22). Tonantzin/Guadalupe became the mother of Indians and mestizos. For the Indians, she was the mother they already knew. Tonantzin. For the
mestizo she represented a good mother. Her significance in the lives of mestizos is directly related to the negative meanings assigned to the story of la Malinche.

According to Paz, the maestro’s known mother was an Indian woman named Doña Marina by the Spanish. She is also known as La Malinche and La Chingada. She was considered the “fucked one,” a “traitor” who assisted Cortés in the conquest of the land, the culture, the religion, and the language of her Indian culture. La Chingada also gave birth to his children. They became children of the man that signified the disappearance of “the creator,” Quetzacóatl, and children of the woman that “allowed” destruction of a powerful Aztec empire based on religious authority. The mestizos themselves were “the new race,” a product of conquest. As for the Spanish it was Virgin Mary who signified the New Eve/New Mother. For the Indians, Guadalupe was the new Tonantzin/Mother, and for the mestizo, Guadalupe became a new mother as well. She was the counter-figure to La Malinche, the traitor mother. For the three communities involved, the Spanish, the Indians, and the mestizos, devotion to the Virgin (whether she is Virgin Mary, Guadalupe, or Tonantzin), rose so dramatically that by the end of that century, by 1585, the festivities to the Virgin were “declared obligatory, under the code of mortal sin” (Lafaye 323). At this point, in Spain, the “Motherland,” it became a national issue in need of careful study. Spain’s intervention in the new Mexican religious ideology only served to officially translate Guadalupe from a religious symbol to a nationalistic one.
From Malinche, Malintzin, Doña Marina, or La Chingada To La Llorona:

Since Lafaye’s and Paz’ mention of *La Malinche* is not enough to provide a historical background on her image, I am forced here to use another narrative that explains her participation in such significant historical times. The following narratives are based on Paula Moya’s article *Postmodernism, ‘Realism,’ and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism* and Irene Blea’s book *La Chicana and the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender.*

The story of *Malizín* or *Malinche* is full of contradictory meanings about womanhood, meanings that can be translated to the cultural identities of Mexican and Chicana women. *Malinche* was an Aztec woman sold by her mother and stepfather to the Indians of Xicalango (Moya 130). Moya tells us she awaited the position of cacique (nobility) after her biological father’s death, but it was her younger half-brother who received parental preference. After being given away for the first time, she was passed on through different Indian groups, which allowed her to become fluent in their respective languages, until she was given as a gift to the colonizer Hernán Cortés. He used her more than as a translator; she also became his mistress and the mother of his children. She is often portrayed as both the creator of a new race, the mother of *mestizos* and *Chicanos,* and as a traitor to her Indian race, the Aztecs, who suffered dehumanizing acts at the hands of the colonizers. Lafaye’s version of the story only makes mention of *La Malinche* in opposition to Guadalupe: “the good mother.” Moya’s account, on the other hand is more focused on ‘correcting’ the historical record. Dominant meanings given to *Malinche* have permeated the Spanish language in Mexico and other Latin American countries.
La Chingada is another contemporary name for La Malinche; it means “the fucked one.” This word is used to address sexual behavior of women and/or someone in their wrong doings. Malinchista and Malinche are words typically used to signal those who are traitors to one’s culture, race, or nation. Both terms, La Chingada and Malinche/Malinchista, have their own history. The first becomes a revision of Malinche’s life as the woman who was either raped, or the woman who used her sexuality as an ‘advantage’ to survive colonialism. The second, revisits Malinche’s story as the Indian woman who became a crucial element at the center of major historical, political, economic, and cultural change. The ways Malinche’s story(ies) have been re-examined by many disciplines reflect the diversity of readings and narratives available for examination. In the next chapter we will review how Chicana feminism, for example, has revisited the story of La Malinche: “the whore,” “the traitor,” and “La Chingada.”

The story of Malinche cannot be not completed without presenting to the reader her story as it evolved into a legend, and how “the traitor” became “La Llorona.” In her analysis of Malinche, Irene I. Blea says, “she is the first female to appear in Mexican-American oral tradition as well as in written Chicana scholarship” (27). She discusses how the story of La Llorona finds its origins in her life as Malintzin. Often, she is portrayed as Cortés’ ‘concubine’ who was willing to participate in his activities. Blea makes clear in her narrative that when Malintzin was given to him, she was only fourteen years old. Tracing back the narratives of La Llorona, Blea has no other choice but to return to Malinche.

Malintzin, La Malinche, or La Llorona had a child with Hernán Cortés. At some point he decided that he would take his child with him to Spain and Malinche could never
accept that. As many Indians did, she feared that her son’s soul would never rest if he died outside his own land. She decided for “the ultimate sacrifice” and decided to end his life before Cortés took him away to Spain (32). When Malinche died, she was told that they would not allow her entrance to heaven until she got back the soul of the child she killed. Since then, she wonders around, crying, and calling for her child. She becomes, then, La Llorona or “the Weeping woman.” She has been seen by many individuals who had described her as either an old ugly woman, a young beautiful woman, or as a hybrid of woman and animal. The versions of this story vary in terms of how she killed her child, the number of children she killed, as well as the reasons for it. Some accused her of having killed her children for the sake of her sexual freedom. The legends surrounding La Llorona coincide in the understanding that she still searches for souls:

La Llorona is savage and cunning. Although she searches for the soul of her child, she will grasp the soul of any person. She is determined to get into heaven and has gone beyond haunting rivers and ditches. She also haunts the forests, graveyards, dumps, cemeteries, railroad yards, and disreputable places. (33)

Cultural constructions of gender are reflected, informed by, and reinforced by meanings encoded in the representations of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe. These are commonly found in popular culture, media advertisements, literature, and other form of cultural representations. How gender is culturally constructed in Mexico, specifically how the feminine is defined, is directly influenced by the dominance of the pervasive meanings assigned to these three female images and their stories. These images and the social institutions that reproduce and protect their meanings directly influence how gender is defined for and by the women of Mexico, the
'general' system of values that controls women's lives, and the women's own perceptions of happiness and freedom. What these three figures represent directly affect Mexican women's daily lives.

**Meanings of Domination:**

In the survey *Cómo somos los méxicanos*, respondents talked about values, religion, family, work, and politics in Mexico. Because there are many different cultures within the United States of Mexico, the study was intended to be inclusive and representative of the 'real' population and its diversity, in order to find those cultural values and meanings shared by all groups. The study was done with no intention of proving any hypothesis or cause and effect relationships. Published in 1987, this is the most recent survey available in regard to Mexicans' perceptions on human values. Other literature and testimonies used in addition to this survey allowed me to trace possible links between meanings given to the three female images, *La Malinche, La Llorona,* and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* to women's responses to this survey.

Although there are many variations to the stories of these three female figures and the ways in which these are passed on to the newer generations, what they all have in common is the Mexican folk tradition and having their messages reinforced by social institutions. In her essay *Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object*, Norma Alarcón writes,

Insofar as feminine symbolic figures are concerned, much of the Mexican/Chicano oral tradition as well as the intellectual are dominated by La Malinche/Llorona and Virgin of Guadalupe. The former is a subversive feminine
symbol which often is identified with La Llorona, the latter a feminine symbol of transcendence and salvation. The Mexican/Chicano cultural tradition has tended to polarize the lives of women through these national (and nationalistic) symbols thereby exercising almost sole authority over the control, interpretation and visualization of women. (“Chicana’s Feminist Literature” 189)

Having very few images of women that represent the various social roles and aspects of their lives, Mexican women and girls can only identify with the available/accessible images that place an important role in setting dominant meanings to the gender role they are expected to fulfill and perform:

As history progressed and was documented in the male-dominated tradition, it recorded Doña Marina as the traitor, rationalizing that her services were voluntary and that male charm and intelligence had made it possible for Cortés to conquer México. (Blea 31)

La Llorona, or “the Weeping Woman,” is a legendary character that encodes meanings of women as a prostitute, women as animalistic (how could a ‘real’ woman kill her own children?), someone who hates and kill men and children, a bad mother. These meanings of La Llorona reach millions of people through the oral tradition and through popular culture, and its image is mostly dominated by the narrative of the evil / bad mother who murdered her children because she wanted to preserve her liberty or autonomy.

La Malinche’s story encodes similar negative meanings of womanhood. She becomes the whore, traitor, a woman who sold her soul to the devil, and “la chingada.” Malinche, through her sexuality and rearing of mixed children, betrayed her nation and her people. She is not perceived as a victim of the system of slavery, sexism, and
colonization, but rather judged by the effects of her role in such an important historical era. The common use of the term *malinchista* by many Mexicans illuminates how much these meanings have permeated the dominant ideology.

Margo Glantz argues in her essay *Las hijas de la Malinche* that for the women of today to carry the meanings of *la chingada* is to not have an identity of their own, to have no choice but to wear a mask already assigned that will cover the real face (202). This mask is gender specific because even if Mexican men are also a product of *la chingada*, it is only women who are blamed for this betrayal and who are defined in terms of it. The dominant meanings assigned to the images of *La Llorona* and *La Malinche* define femininity in terms of women's sexuality and reproductive capacities and often used to define sexual mores that prohibit prostitution, premarital sex, homosexuality, and adultery.

*La Virgen de la Guadalupe* is an Indian symbol for the Virgin Mary, the mother of God. Worshiped by millions, she is both a religious and national symbol. The Virgin is a figure who encodes opposite dominant meanings than those of *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*. In terms of her purity and birthing/reproductive functions, she represents the good mother, the virgin, submissive, passive, and virtuous Christian woman. In *Testimonios Históricos Guadalupanos*, Ernesto de la Torre Villar compiled a collection of testimonies and writings that describe the manifestations of *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* since 1531. Repeatedly, the Virgin is described as the most beautiful of all, queen of flowers, girl queen, impeccable, and the virgin mother. De la Torre Villar also implies that even if the truth about the stories and miracles surrounding the image of *La Virgen*
de la Guadalupe is put into question by natural sciences, the "spiritual force" it has developed throughout the time, its existence, manifestations, consistency, and continuity of these stories are so dominant that are almost impossible to deny (8).

Because Mexicans are predominantly Catholic (88.3%, according to survey responses), the dominant meanings given to the story and image of La Virgen de la Guadalupe affects the cultural construction of gender as it applies to Mexican women's experiences. From the survey, Cómo somos los mexicanos, 63% of the population admitted their beliefs in both the miracle and their devotion to the Virgin and another 22% had doubts about the miracle but accepted their devotion to her image. Women constituted the majority group expressing their respect for religious teachings, the church, and God.

The position of a women in Mexican families and society is greatly informed by the meanings taught by the Catholic church through La Virgen de la Guadalupe. Sacred motherhood, for example, is one of the dominant meanings that directly shape women's lives. In the survey, when people were asked about the things that were most commonly shared in families, the responses had religion as first, followed by moral codes, and social attitudes. Sons and daughters said that they were closer to the mother figure rather than the father in terms of love, agreements, and respect in the family. Although the majority of responses expressed that there was a need for both mother and father figure for a child to grow healthy and happy, the mother figure turned out to be central to family life.

It is important to note that the meanings of womanhood set by the Catholic church are taught at home by the most trusting figure, mothers, in the most important social institution in the lives of Mexicans: the family. Because both church and family are such
important institutions, mothers are the ones most often associated with the spiritual upbringing of their children. Coherence between meanings taught at both institutions (church and family) greatly contributes to the dominance of these meanings as they are passed down to other generations. With this task, women are central to the reproduction of hegemonic gender ideologies and are bombarded with the images and meanings that sustain such.

In regard to social institutions other than the family, survey results indicate that Catholic Church and the system of education are institutions Mexicans trust equally, followed by the legal system, the armed forces, and the press. *La Malinche, La Llorona,* and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* are constantly present in religious, popular, scientific, and academic discourses. As stated earlier, their images and influences are found in the forms of movies, music, visual arts, folk tales, and theater, reaching the masses of the people and exposing a wide audience to these representations of womanhood. It is no coincidence that the legal system in Mexico limits women's reproductive freedom and choices.

Dominant meanings encoded by the Mexican Catholic church about womanhood and morality are clearly reflected in people’s responses about acceptable and unacceptable behavior. In the survey, the large majority of people expressed their opposition to homosexuality, prostitution, divorce, premarital sex, and adultery, issues encoded in the masculinist meanings of *La Malinche/La Llorona.* Abortion, in specific, is seen as the killing of a child and is only justified when the life of a woman is in danger due to the pregnancy. The power of these meanings over the legal system has put in great
danger the lives of women who had abortions performed illegally, or those who self-induced their abortion to prevent others from judging them as whore, promiscuous, bad mother, the one who killed her child for her liberty, La Malinche, or La Llorona.

In this national survey, Mexicans revealed the set of values most commonly shared by Mexican families and believed to keep the unit together: mutual respect, fidelity, and child bearing and rearing. In terms of individual traits, survey results indicate that passive characteristics, such as those attributed to La Virgen de la Guadalupe, are considered most important. Good manners, responsibility, honesty, obedience, and tolerance are more valued than active characteristics such as independence, leadership, determination, and perseverance (commonly defined as masculine).

This survey provides very significant information which I use to trace possibilities about the power of these images and the way meanings have been constructed around them to sustain a gender system which limits women’s autonomy and self-control. At both cultural and structural levels, these images and their meanings present themselves to and through the lives of women. Culturally, the values considered feminine are more expected and valued than those that allow for leadership and independence. These values are mostly taught by the institutions of church and the family, which work as keepers and transmitters of cultural meanings. It is no coincidence that survey responses indicated the moral superiority of femininity as well as the acknowledgement of La Virgen de la Guadalupe as an adored cultural icon. She provides authenticity to these dominant meanings of womanhood that are imposed on and transmitted by Mexican women.
Mothers are the most significant figure in the most significant institution. They play a central role in the transmission, preservation, and validation of Mexican culture's meanings on femininity. Mexican culture is abundant with stories that pass on meanings of appropriate and inappropriate womanhood. The dichotomous meanings given La Malinche, la Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe restrict women's roles and rights. The recognition of Mexicans of the family, church, and education as institutions they trust the most allow me to find even more reassurance that when these social sectors produce and reproduce representations of womanhood through the three images, these are taken very seriously. These meanings are also found in legislation that regulates women's reproductive capabilities and family issues such as divorce, custody, and domestic violence. Mexican women's lives are both culturally and structurally regulated through meanings of domination given to the three images.

The results of the survey in terms of women's perceptions of happiness and satisfaction with life derive from gender meanings assigned to and by Mexican culture, its institutions, and the gender representations of both. Meanings about women's role in the family and society include codes of behavior (what makes a good or bad mother, a virgin or whore, or a pure or sinful woman), a system of punishment (abortion rights, reproductive rights, and social and religious punishment), and limited choices (divorce, abortion, and homosexuality as unacceptable, birthing to keep a marriage and family together, and women's scrutinized position in the family as mothers).

Finally, all the existing tales, stories, legends, and manifestations of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe that have been attached to the Mexican culture and its traditions since colonial times are indicators of the power technologies of
meaning, especially when they are used for dominance. Pervasive meanings of women's role in society as well as politics about their sex, body, and sexuality are shaped by the either/or dichotomous definitions of Mexican womanhood provided by these images. A culture mostly defined by male dominated institutions such as the Catholic Church and by male-driven actions such as colonization and the imposition of Christianity depends on women’s roles in the family and society for the transmission of its meanings and the protection of the also male-dominated legal and political practices. It is no accident that in this survey, women constituted the majority group, expressing their perceptions about lack of satisfaction in life, happiness, and freedom.

**Women and the Oral History Tradition: Passing Down Meanings of Domination:**

Oral narratives play a crucial role in the study of the images of *La Malinche, La Llorona,* and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* in two different ways. First, through oral narratives of their lives we can understand the significance of these stories and their controlling meanings in women’s daily lives. Either by using these images in their narratives, or by using their meanings to explain and justify their lives, actions, troubles, or sacrifices, women use these three icons to serve as a point of reference when describing the experience of Mexican (and Chicana) womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality:

The construction of female sexuality as being in need of vigilant control appears early in the narrative in the father’s taunting of his daughters for being “pimps” for their mother. Later, after Esperanza’s mother leaves her father, her grandmother tells her that her mother left him because she likes pleasure and wants to be a woman of the street.
(...)

In Esperanza's account, it is possible to see the ways in which as a young girl she was socialized to accept certain gender and sexual ideologies. (Behar 281)

In Esperanza's life story we can see several ways in which these icons are present. Here, La Llorona's meanings of unacceptable womanhood serve as an explanation to condemn her mother's behavior. Through their use of this icons or their meanings, Esperanza (the subject) and Behar (editor of Esperanza's life) also find them as a useful tool to explain their own actions of telling her life story:

In different ways, both Esperanza and I partake of the double edge identity of a Malinche. By being willing to reveal more of herself to me than any other woman in Mexquic, more than the official version of a woman's life, more than was proper to reveal to a gringa, it can be said that Esperanza has been a traitor, translating for me in ways that transgress the norms of Mexican Rural society, where people keep their personal and familial identities as tightly walled as they do their houses. That she knows she's a traitor, even if a vulnerable traitor, is clear from her fear of other women in town getting a hold of her historias. I, in turn, have compounded this act of betrayal by translating Esperanza's historias, her "lies," for gringos to read. (Behar 20)

The second way in which oral histories become significant to the study of these images is in women's use of the oral tradition, as they have contributed to the construction, reproduction, preservation, and transformation of the meanings of these stories. Since it is on this relationship that I focus this study, it is crucial that context is analyzed as it plays key role in the construction of meaning through the oral history tradition.

Context can be understood either by including these stories and their meanings as part of the environment in which women function or by using these women's traditions and family relationships as part of the space in which these images are kept alive. These
images act as agents of gender socialization within a gender ideology in which these women function. However, when the stories are constructed as masculinist, one needs to analyze the role and participation that both the oral history tradition and the women who practice it play in the creation and re-creation of meanings to such stories. One needs feminist scholarship in oral histories to study how contexts define the role of this tradition. How stories are reproduced can support or refute sexist ideologies.

In *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Personal Narratives Group\(^6\) states,

> The word context literally means to weave together, to twine, to connect. This interrelatedness creates the webs of meaning within which humans act. The individual is joined to the world through social groups, structural relations, and identities. However, these are not inflexible categories to which individuals can be reduced. The more we considered context, the more we realized that while the general constructs of race, class, and gender are essential, they are not rigidly determinant. Context is not a script. Rather, it is a dynamic process through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment. Similarly, an analysis of context, which emphasizes these dynamic processes, is an interpretive strategy which is both diachronic and synchronic. (19)

The Personal Narratives Group discusses women's personal narratives as a genre that needs to be studied in terms of its contexts, meaning historical as well as social and familial relationships of the narrator, and the contexts in which such stories are interpreted and read.

In an analysis of the relationship between oral histories and the construction of meanings for domination, one cannot overlook those "webs of meanings within which [Mexican and Chicana women] act" and which coincide with these images.

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\(^6\) The Personal Narratives Group is a group of scholars who publish as a collective. In the case of this particular book, they functioned as the editing team.
Cultural symbols that model maternal femininity, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe, and negative femininity, such as La Llorona and La Malinche, serve to control Mexican and Chicana women’s conduct by prescribing idealized visions of motherhood. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 551)

As Norma Alarcón states, the three icons work to “exercis[e] almost sole authority over the control, interpretation and visualization of women” (189). These images become tools for the creation of meanings essential to support a gender system oppressive to women’s self-control and socialization into femininity.

Since women are ‘morally’ responsible to socialize girls into femininity and its rules, the women themselves carry on these stories and their meanings from generation to generation, in conjunction with other systems that also re-produce them as well (i.e. popular culture, church, educational systems). By doing this, women participate actively in reproducing dominant meanings that set acceptable parameters for their own behavior. In this way, context is, as the Personal Narratives Group remind us, “not a script” rather “a dynamic process through which the individual simultaneously shapes and is shaped by her environment” (19). Women, through oral narratives, shape, but are also shaped by these stories. Willingly or not, women do participate in the construction of dominant meanings about womanhood.

These processes are not merely passing down someone else’s stories and messages. As these stories are reproduced by a subject, interpretation and editing of the story in itself place the narrator as a producer and re-producer of meaning. The stories are not being passed down from object to object; they are passed down from subject to subject by their experiences and understandings of the world (context) in which they live.
The listener, her perception and experience, too, as well as the context in which the stories are told, also become important elements of the context in which these stories are going to be received, rationalized, and passed down by the listener.

Dominant meanings are understood and taken into people's lives in ways that shape their own behavior. Self as well as social punishment grants power to these meanings of domination. It is significant, though, to look at other possible aspects of the subject's life that will assist in the understanding the stories. Other meanings taught by educational institutions, family, and church, among others, provide a context in which young girls understand these stories. Consistency among ideologies of different realms in regards to gender is a significant aspect of the hegemonic power of dominant meanings. Otherwise, how would these stories permeate the diversity of ethnic, class, religious, and regional groups through Mexico, North and South America?

These dynamic processes in which society is party constructed by the stories of three popular icons can be complicated when in the context in which it happens, women participate in such masculinist construction. Is it really masculinist if women participate in the processes that assign and reproduce meanings? Are oral histories, in this context, what many feminists have claimed as a tradition that serves to empower women and to retain some of their lost history? Has the oral history tradition served solely to sustain an ideology that restricts women's behavior? Such questions need to further be examined by looking closely at the new ways such stories are being re-told, re-visited, and re-claimed. Much Chicana feminist literature is based on the analysis of these stories.
CHAPTER 3

TECHNOLOGIES PRODUCING MEANINGS OF EMPOWERMENT

In earlier chapters I have explored how technologies of meaning are used for domination, how such meanings support dominant ideologies, and the possible effects these meanings could have in the lives of Mexican women. Chicana women, as well as other Latin American women, are also presented with these meanings in different aspects of their lives and these have very concrete consequences in the way they live their womanhood. For many feminists, but especially Chicana and Mexican, these meanings for domination have not been left unexamined:

From the 1970s on, Mexicana and Chicana feminists have addressed the myth of Malinche, and several have attempted to recuperate and revalue her as a figure of empowering and empowered womanhood. (Moya 130)

They have reclaimed the three images while rejecting dominant meanings assigned to them by the “Mexican male historical imagination” (Behar 19). This chapter focuses on technologies of meanings as women use them in an attempt to create meanings that fit their contradictory lives and struggles.

Ultimately, Esperanza’s transgressions against patriarchal ideology are tied up in paradoxes. That she appropriates culturally male values that oppress her as well as other women in order to liberate and redeem herself is contradictory. (Behar 296)
However contradictory, this appropriation is a technology necessary for the production of new meanings that fit our social reality. These meanings could be empowering for many different reasons. In some of those are explored in this concluding section of this thesis.

**Revising the Stories:**

One of the ways in which Chicana feminists have contributed to the construction of new meanings has been through their effort to create awareness about the dangers of the ‘traditional’ meanings. They have applied the resources they have access to into publications with extensive analysis about dominant meanings given to *La Malinche*, *La Llorona*, and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe*. Norma Alarcón has placed much of her time and energies into dismantling the myths encoded in them. She has analyzed historical and creative writings in this regard:

> In this study, I would like to focus on the third, modernistic stage, which some twentieth-century women and men of letters have felt compelled to initiate in order to revise and vindicate Malintzin. (“Traddutora” 114)

Alarcón argues that there exists enough historical and literary evidence about how *Malintzin* was “transformed into Guadalupe’s mostinous double and that her ‘banner’ also aided and abetted in the nation-making process or, at least, in the creation of nationalistic perspectives” (110). It becomes very significant that as we focused on the specific impact dominant meanings have on individual women, we also recognize how they play a role in the construction of an ideology that limits people’s possibilities. Alarcón illuminates through her much work the relationship between dominant meanings and the different contexts in which they function.
It also becomes significant to analyze the individual particular meanings given to each image. Since an analysis attempting to deconstruct dominant meanings could be focused on either sex, sexuality, motherhood, womanhood, mestizaje, and so on. Much of this literature can be located within the disciplines of Feminist and Chicano studies. Norma Alarcón’s work becomes significant for feminist studies in that she focuses much of her analyses into finding issues that intrude Chicana women’s bodies, sexualities, and reproductive capacities:

Malitzin comes to be known as *la lengua*, literally meaning the tongue. *La lengua* was the metaphor used by Cortés and the chroniclers of the conquest to refer to Malitzin the translator. However, she not only translated for Cortés and his men, she also bore his children. Thus, a combination of Malintzin-translator and Malitzin-procreator becomes the main feature of her subsequently ascribed treacherous-nature. (“Traddutora” 111)

*La Malinche* is often ‘accused’ of having used her sexuality for her own safety, and by doing so, she prostituted herself, made of her womb the embodiment of colonization, and carried in her the signifier of the extinction of a race and the birth of a new one. *La Malinche* also had a child outside of marriage; an illegitimate child in the moral context, positioning her as the perfect representation of inappropriate womanhood.

By illuminating the meanings of domination, Chicana feminists contribute to the possibilities of cultural change. Social relations are constructed; naturally we are not born oppressed, but socially we are. To deconstruct or contest dominant meanings increases the possibilities for the adaptations or appropriations of new ones that contribute to the construction of alternative, more egalitarian ideologies.
Re-inventing Technologies of Appropriation: Developing Meanings of Liberation:

In his article * Appropriating Technology: Illustrations from Anti-Racist Science Theory*, Ron Eglash presents a model that illustrates the processes in which people located at the margins appropriate technology produced at the centers. He believes that appropriation occurs in three different ways: reinterpretation, adaptation, and reinvention of technologies. Technologies, though, in this paper, refer to abstract (mostly subconscious processes), culturally constructed strategies for the production of meanings that help us make sense of our reality as well as shape such reality:

> It is through a revision of tradition that self and culture can be radically reenvisioned and reinvented. Thus, in order to break with tradition, Chicana, as writers and political activists, simultaneously legitimate their discourse by grounding it in the Mexican/Chicano community and by creating a “speaking subject” in their reappropriation of Malintzin from Mexican writers and Chicano oral tradition—through her they begin a recovery of aspects of their experience as well as their language. (“Traddutora” 114)

Here, Norma Alarcón notes how reinvention of tradition and reappropriation of cultural icons such as *La Malinche* works positively in the lives of Chicano and Mexican writers. In this quote, Alarcón addresses appropriation that occurs between groups; however, she does not limit appropriation to the collective. She illustrates how Chicana feminist Adeliaida R. del Castillo “wants to appropriate Malintzin for herself, as one whose face reflects her vision – Malintzin as agent, and producer of history” (121).

From the margins and with a purpose, Chicana women appropriate the tools for constructing dominant meanings and in the process produce information that challenge the stability of such. To separate these processes when it comes to cultural appropriation
of technologies is almost impossible. Reinterpretation, one of Eglash’s forms of appropriation, has been perhaps one of the most publicized ways used to challenge meanings meant for domination. As Blea argues,

La Llorona deserves a more realistic image than she currently has. The facts require reinterpretation. For example, little attention is given to the fact that Cortés was a willing party with more power and influence than Malintzin. The social message of the story supports a double standard that warns women, not men, against illegitimate childbirth, premarital sex, or sex without marriage. (34)

Cherie Moraga, in her article *Traitor Begets Traitor* discusses how it is that Chicana feminists are re-interpreting the stories of *La Malinche* to provide a narrative with “a little more realistic context for, and therefore a more sympathetic view of, “Malinche’s actions” (101). Re-interpreting or, as Eglash’s article defines it, “a change in semantic association” for the story of *La Malinche* cannot exclude the contestation of dominani meanings. Moraga makes the case for Aleida Castillo, a Chicana feminist, who “contends that as a woman of deep spiritual commitment, Malinche aided Cortés because she understood him to be Quetzacoatl returned in a different form to save the peoples of México from total extinction” (100).

Another ways in which this story has been re-interpreted is based on Malinche’s relationship to her mother. Moraga argues that the mother’s betrayal of her daughter by giving her away into slavery has not been a source of criticism:

Little is made of this betrayal, whether or not it actually occurred, probably because no man was immediately affected. In a way, Malinche’s mother would only have been doing her Mexican wifely duty: *putting the male first.* (101)
Adaptation is one of the ways in which Ron Eglash’s describes appropriation. He says that adaptation requires two properties: flexibility (“technology user relationship”) and a “violation of intended purpose” (68). In the case of the three images, we can trace instances in which their meanings have been totally transformed to accomplish both the construction of meanings that serve the interest of, for instance, Chicana feminists and the positions they occupy, as well as a violation of its purpose (meanings for domination and control being transformed into meanings for liberation).

Perhaps, the most interesting case of appropriation that I found was Lyna Randolph’s piece, La Mestiza Cósmica (see figure 2). The painting portrays a mestiza woman with strong Indian traits posing as Virgen de la Guadalupe in a world at the intersection of technology and tradition. This was a perfect example of what Ron Eglash calls reinvention, “in which semantics, use and structure are all challenged” (68). The meaning of la Virgen de la Guadalupe as a strictly religious symbol is violated, transformed into an icon of cyberspace.

Her physical appearance, the clothing, and the context in which Guadalupe is positioned challenge semantics, use, and structure. Traditionally, La Virgen de la Guadalupe has had its meanings derive from its significance to gender and Christianity. Randolph’s applied meaning derives from Guadalupe’s significance to transitional times and spaces. The very origins of the image suggest that it is born out of and serves to relieve the burden of living at the intersection of two historical times, two languages, two worlds, and two cultures. Randolph’s cyborg exists between tradition and technology, between abstract and concrete worlds, and Guadalupe’s image provides meanings that allow for the reconciliation of both worlds, which merge in her cyborg image. The
Chicana cyborg uses *Guadalupe* to ease the mobility between the contradictory positions they occupy. The complete image of *Guadalupe* has been transformed into the image of a mestiza woman, dressed in modern clothes.

*Technologies of appropriation* have proved to be very useful for mestiza and Chicana feminists to transform meanings into something that reflects more accurately their complex and contradictory realities. In many of the instances in which I found appropriation, I also found a reference to meanings that help reconcile positions that fall at intersections. One of the most famous examples of this is perhaps Frida Kahlo’s *The Mask*:

*Frida’s multihued and varied ethnic background is typical of the average Mexican, who is racially a combination of European and Indian—and known as mestizo, or mixed. It gave her rich, fertile soil to tap into for her work and was her inspiration. (...) Frida presented herself and her contradictions to the world in the form of an elaborate mask. (...) But Frida’s mask is more of a mask than she was prepared to acknowledge. Her European blood was at least as important to the development of person and artist as her Indian origins, and she derived inspiration from being two things at the same time. She delighted in all the rich ontological confusion that that entailed. She exploited and explored her identity as a deracinated person, simultaneously celebrating and mourning the colonial process in her own genes. Frida identified with so much of her country’s cultural mythology. She was both La Llorona—the legendary mother who stacks Mexican folk history in song and poetry weeping for her dead children—and the proverbial daughter of La Malinche, the young Nahua slave who was the mistress of the sixteenth-century conquistador Coriés. Malinche is also known as La Chingada, the violated one. Frida’s loss of her babies in pregnancy, and the barely suppressed sexual aggression in her work, is embedded in these dual notions of grief and cultural violation. Frida’s mask is her painting.*

(Richmond 18)
Kahlo’s self-portrait transforms *La Malinche* into herself, and herself into *La Malinche*. There, she violates all dominant meanings and re-claims *La Malinche* as part of herself. She positions her body as a source of meaning in her relationship to motherhood and sexuality, as well as her relationship to her mesitzaje. Frida Kahlo, with *The Mask*, re-invents/appropriates *la Malinche* in her life.

Chicana feminists have used technologies of appropriation to redefine *La Malinche* as “the mother” as they have also appropriated labels commonly attached to them such as *chingadas* and *malinchistas*. They are accused of speaking “against their culture” when they speak about sexism in their communities as well as when they open lines of discussion about women’s sexualities, reproductive rights, sexual abuse, and women treated as sex objects. As *Malinche* did, they “speak against their own.” In this way, they become traitors to their cultures. *Malinche* is re-claimed over and over again.

Chicana feminists also live at the intersection of different cultures and languages. Much of Anzaldúa’s writings actually address her struggles with language. Through appropriation of the languages inherited from colonizers, they can produce linguistic systems that challenge dominant meanings about adequate linguistics but that still serve the purpose of encoding one’s own meanings through a language that is useful for the subaltern.

To live at intersections has been a site for theorizing for the last twenty years. Gloria Anzaldúa has make reference to the “borderlands” in which she lives but has no safe place to stand. At the Borderlands, Anzaldúa negotiates meanings between contradictory positions.
To live at the Borderlands means you are neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata*, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
That the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
Is no longer speaking to you. (194)

At the “borderlands,” Anzaldúa finds herself between different worlds. For her, *Guadalupe* 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” (30). At the intersecting and contradictory spaces occupied by Anzaldúa and other mestizos,

*La Virgen de la Guadalupe* is the symbol of ethnic identity and of tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess. (30)

Anzaldúa not only remembers and claims *Guadalupe*, she does so with *Malinche*.

At the borderlands, she knows “that the *india* in [her], betrayed for 500 years, is no longer speaking to [her].” From her fragmented self, Anzaldúa identifies *indian* as part of herself, the betrayal to that part of herself, the pervasive meanings attached to her story. That “*india*” is no one else but *Malinche*: the “raped woman whom we have abandoned” (30).

Modern cyborg theory has also found ways in which to appropriate the images of *La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de la Guadalupe*. Lynn Randolph’s painting of *La Mestiza Cós mic a* is a clear reflection of this appropriation. Between two worlds, two cultures, and two languages, the image *Guadalupe* finds its historical significance.

Randolph says,
she unites races and mediates between humans and the
divine, the natural and the technological. In my painting a
mestiza stands with one foot in Texas and one foot in
México. She is taming a diamond-back rattlesnake with
one hand and manipulating the Hubbell telescope with
another. ("Modest_Witness" 19)

Randolph’s Guadalupe stands with Anzaldúa on the “borderlands.” Anzaldúa states also
that Guadalupe “mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the
realities of spirit entities” (30). Randolph’s appropriation (re-invention) of Guadalupe
provides Chicana(o) cyborgs with a visual representation of life at those intersections.

A useful way to understand appropriation within different groups is provided by
Chela Sandoval who presents her “methodology of the oppressed” as assisting “colonized
peoples” to manage their conflicting realities. Within what constitutes Sandoval’s
“methodology of the oppressed” are a series of five technologies that have helped them
develop “the cyborg skills required for survival under techno-human conditions” (408).
From the five, two fall under Eglash’s conception of appropriation.

Sandoval presents as one of these technologies as the “process of challenging
dominant ideological signs through their ‘de-construction:’ the act of separating a form
from its dominant meaning” (410). For Ron Eglash’s model, this technology could be
translated into his conception of “reinterpretation” where the appropriation occurs
through changing the “semantic association only” (68). The second technology of
appropriation for Sandoval consists of “meta-ideologizing,” which is the appropriation of
“dominant ideological forms and using them in whole in order to trans-form their
meanings into new, imposed, and revolutionary concept” (410). This particular
technology is what Eglash defines as reinvention, where the object of appropriation
undergoes major physical and semantic transformations.
Sandoval claims that her “methodology of the oppressed” has provided people at the margins with technologies of appropriation that assist them in developing the cyborg skills necessary for their intersection between tradition and technology. With this analytical framework it would be safe to assume that cyborg beings may benefit from the ‘flexibility’ of these images to accommodate their contradictory positions. However, sometimes those contradictory intersecting points are complicated even more when we consider the case of Chicana cyborgs:

The modern Chicana, in her literature, tries to synthesize the material and spiritual conflict of her essence. Her spirit is ingrained in the roots of Mexican culture and traditions, but her body is trying to survive in a hostile capitalistic environment, and she keenly feels the technological battle of scientism vs. humanism ingrained in the roots of Mexican culture. (Lucero-Trujillo 329)

*Technologies of meaning and appropriation* help us rationalize our lives and realities whether that is at intersections or not. They have been used for both domination of subaltern groups and for their empowerment necessary for survival and social change.

**Conclusion:**

This thesis is the final most concrete product of my experiences with *appropriation*. It is it is materialized through appropriation—my appropriation of the language, technology, institutionalized requirements of “appropriate” writing, and the authority given by academic circles. In those spaces I find myself in shifting and contradictory positions in which *appropriations* become useful and, some times, a necessary practice.
I have been questioning how *appropriation* has been part of my methodology of life and how it helps me renegotiate meanings of domination for those of liberation. Both *technologies of meaning and appropriation* have helped renegotiate the contradictory positions that I occupy but, although I am and have been constantly engaging in dynamics of appropriation, it remains difficult. Rhetoric on appropriation mostly condones it as a cultural practice; of course, I understand how horrendous forms appropriation can take. However, I strongly believe that conceptualizing these processes as technologies allow us to see how complex, but powerful, they are. Whether we use these technologies for domination or liberation, the outcome is still powerful.

We must allocate time and effort into exploring these technologies further and exploring the ways in which people mostly located in marginal positions can share technologies for empowerment and, hopefully, for social change. Meanwhile, by addressing agency that exists at the margins and by exploring possibilities where agency is found, we can come up with new, effective technologies that fit the needs of those who use them in positive ways. For those mostly concentrated in the margins, the use or appropriation of *La Malinche*, *La Llorona*, and *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* to produce meanings has proven that these technologies are effective and dynamic.
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Figure 1: *La Virgen de la Guadalupe*
Figure 2: Lynn Randolph’s *La Mestiza Cósmica* (oil on canvas, 1992)