The Evolving Genre of ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe’: A Feminist Analysis

Holly Siebert Kawakami
Doctoral Candidate
University of New Mexico

and

Avinash Thombre
Assistant Professor
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Key Words: Generic criticism, feminist analysis, gender construction, Our Lady of Guadalupe

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Visual Communication Division, International Communication Association, San Diego, May 2003.

Author’s Note: Holly Siebert Kawakami (MBA-International, Thunderbird: American Graduate School of International Management, 1981) and Avinash Thombre (Ph. D. University of New Mexico, 2004). Kawakami is doctoral student in the Department of Communication and Journalism, MSC03 2240, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131. Thombre is Assistant Professor, Department of Speech Communication, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2801, S. University Ave, Little Rock, AR, 72204. Tel: 501-683-7026, Fax: 501-569-3196. Address all correspondence to: axthombre@ualr.edu

The authors thank Dr. Frank G. Pérez, Dr. Everett M. Rogers, and Dr. Karen Foss and the two reviewers for their critical comments.
The Evolving Genre of ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe’: A Feminist Analysis

Abstract

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Mother of the New World, prayed to as a compassionate Mother, a model of ideal womanhood for all Catholics of Latin America, particularly Mexicans, for over 400 years. Traditional portrayal of La Virgen constitutes a genre that differs from the contemporary genre created by Chicana artists. The present study explicates the genre of La Virgen de Guadalupe by comparing examples of both traditional and contemporary depictions to arrive at the changing gender construction of women in our society using genre criticism. Using the framework of feminist analysis, the study provides insights into the nature of inequality between genders and its power relations. By examining the changing construction of female gender, the study provides a critique of existing social relations highlighting the subtle ways in which present women are reclaiming their rights and interests. Themes explored include discrimination, sexuality, especially sexual objectification, oppression and patriarchy.
The Evolving Genre of ‘Our Lady of Guadalupe’: A Feminist Analysis

Catholics of Latin America have revered Our Lady of Guadalupe, La Virgen, for over 400 years. Also called La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Guadalupana, this saint is the New World version of the Virgin Mary. After appearing to an indigenous man, Juan Diego, shortly after the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, La Virgen became a symbol of compassion and nurturance, as well as the link from the Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin, to the newly imposed religion’s mother of Jesus. As such, she played the intercessionary role of being closer to humans than God, and more able to understand human suffering and supplication. Through the centuries, La Virgen de Guadalupe served as the ideal model for womanhood and motherhood. She also served as the “standard bearer for change” (Conde, 1995, p. 5) as the image on the flag of Mexican revolution for independence, and as the symbol of the nueva raza, the new race, of mestizos of New Spain and the New World.

In rhetoric, genre is defined as “a constellation, fusion, or clustering of three different kinds of elements (situation, substantive and stylistic, and organizing principle) so that a unique kind of rhetorical artifact is created” (Foss, 1989, p. 226). Artifacts are not all the same but must share enough characteristics to be grouped within a genre based on the description and emphasis of the generic critic. A situation does not elicit only one response; various responses are possible based on the intention and perception of the rhetors; “rhetors are engaged in action” (p. 232). The contemporary depictions of La Virgen painted by Chicana artists are connected to the resistance to and departure from the political, cultural, and religious status quo embodied in Chicana theory. The contemporary depictions chosen for this study are from among artworks where the artists
tried to draw attention to the exclusion of Chicanas from history and to the stereotypical Chicana as docile and passive (Garcia, 1990).

The present study explicates the genre of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* by comparing examples of both traditional and contemporary depictions to arrive at the changing gender construction of women in our society using genre criticism. The study also undertakes feminist analysis by providing insights into the nature of inequality between the genders and power relations. By examining the changing construction of female gender, the study provides a critique of existing social relations highlighting the subtle ways in which present women are reclaiming their rights and interests. Themes explored in here include discrimination, sexuality, especially sexual objectification, oppression and patriarchy.

**Our Lady of Guadalupe: Traditional and Contemporary Images**

*La Virgen* is traditionally depicted in church and neighborhood chapels. A remote church may have its unique depiction of *La Virgen*. *La Virgen’s* image resembles apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and phrases like Mother of God or another of her titles are associated with her.

Chicana artists have, in the past 25 years, depicted *La Virgen* in ways that are different from the traditional depiction. This essay identifies the depiction of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a genre and the contemporary depiction as a evolving sub-genre due to contrasting and changing elements. After the description of the genre, the authors describe the changes and choices made for contemporary depictions from a Chicana feminist point of view. The artifacts showing the traditional image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, contrasted with the contemporary artifacts by Chicana artists’ express the
changing role of women and construction of female gender within the Catholic and Chicano/a community.

All depictions, from the traditional to contemporary, of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* may be considered as a single genre. Anyone raised within the Mexican or U.S. Mexican American Catholic culture becomes familiar with *La Virgen* as a significant symbol of cultural heritage, faith, and hope, as well as a living saint who listens, comforts, overcomes, and empowers (Trujillo, 1998). *La Virgen* is powerful in the religious sense and therefore may be personally prayed to for miracles and protection. But she is also politically powerful as evidenced by her historical use as a symbol of unity. Mexico’s President Vicente Fox chose *La Virgen* as the symbol to signify a new beginning for a proud people (Conde, 2000, p. 5).

**Description of the Traditional Genre**

The authors viewed four traditional paintings of La Virgen available on the Internet that were painted early in the history of La Guadalupana (http://www.sancta.org/gallery/index.html). The criteria for choosing these four depictions were that these, especially figure 1, are the oldest and traditionally used in both sacred and secular space, and are familiar to people within the Chicano community. It is evident that their symbols, colors, composition, and style are all similar to one another. These depictions are centuries old and are found in large churches but also many neighborhood chapels and remote churches copy these traditional depictions. Shopkeepers or gangs (*cholos*) may commission an image of *La Virgen* for a wall, or car, or incorporate it into other iconography (Trujillo, 1998). Personal items such as nail clippers, flashlights, tattoos, and T-shirts use the image so that throughout Mexico and
U.S. Mexican American neighborhoods, seeing the depiction of *La Virgen* both within churches and along the streets is not unusual.

Figure 1. The most common traditional image of *La Virgen*  

Stylistic elements

Six stylistic elements stand out in all the traditional depictions of Our Lady of Guadalupe: the halo, angels, full-length shawl, pose, crescent moon-shaped platform, and roses (figures 1-4). Some traditional depictions, especially starting from the mid-19th century, depict *La Virgen* with a gold crown, and some show *La Virgen* with children or fighting off devils. All of these elements point to *La Virgen’s* holy and saintly status. The
arrangement of these substantial elements are prescribed and codified so that there is little variation in the traditional depiction. Even if La Virgen is portrayed on a secular surface such as a personal item or tattoo, the stylistic and substantive elements remain the same.

_Halo_

All traditional paintings show a full-body halo that radiates out behind the figure to indicate saintliness and holiness. Some halos are fiery and some are shining light. Even depictions on everyday items such as sheets, towels, or nail clippers show La Virgen with a full-body halo.

_Angels_

The presence of angels is a common feature although the number of angels may differ from one depiction to another. These angels are either all depicted at La Guadalupena’s feet or otherwise flying beside or above her. The angels look like small children, or cherubs, who are always smiling and happy. There is always one cherub at La Guadalupena’s feet who holds her up with outstretched arms on a black crescent platform. Cherubs at her feet have outstretched wings -- some are plain while others have elaborately colored rainbow wings. In figure 4, showing La Virgen in a more active posture, she protects the angels from the devils. She holds a long, sharp weapon in her hands and is killing devils.

_Shawl and Clothing_

La Guadalupena’s clothing covers her entire body and consists of a full-length gown and full-length shawl (or cloak) that also covers her head. The gown is of an orange to russet hue. The body shawl covering the head leaves only a little hair visible at the forehead and does not appear to be bound or tied. Rather, the shawl flows behind, covers
Figure 2. Traditional image of *La Virgen* with a crown (not so commonly found).
the shoulders, and drapes down to the floor. The shawl is always blue to blue-green, and has an overall yellow-star design and trim. Even if some paintings depict her in an expensive, silky fabric instead of a homespun fabric, the style overall is simple and modest.

Pose

*La Virgen* always is centered in the painting, standing in a pose with head tilted downward to either the left or right. Whether *La Guadalupena* is looking to the right or to the left, her gaze is always focused to the ground, even in the depictions where she plays a more active role. Her eyes cannot be clearly seen because she is engaged in prayer, but they seem to be calm and open. She has a pious, gentle expression, neither smiling nor sad. In most depictions, her hands are folded in prayer and a rosary is around her wrists. Even when she was depicted as more active (see Figures 3 and 4), she is posed and not in motion.

Crescent Platform

*La Virgen* always stands on a black, crescent-shaped platform. This may be a reference to the Aztec goddess and be associated with the crescent moon above the clouds (Vergara, 2001). She appears to weightlessly float on top of the shape, her robes so long that her feet are not visible upon it. One angel/cherub holds up the platform with her upon it even though it appears that the angel is not always in direct contact with it.

Roses

*La Virgen* is often thought of in connection with roses because it is part of her legend. Juan Diego, the indigenous man to whom she appeared brought back roses that she had manifested in his cloak as proof of her existence (Trujillo, 1998). Indeed, some
of the traditional images depict large red, white, and lavender roses on leafed branches surrounding her, or floating up from the bottom towards the top.

**Crown**

Two depictions that the authors examined include a crown. In one painting, the crown is prominent, large, and fitting on the head of *La Guadalupena*. Its prominence is enhanced with the use of bright color, golden yellow, and its pointed structure. In another depiction where *La Guadalupena* holds a baby, she does not wear the crown but angels hold it above her head. While some depictions of the crown have it devoid of any diamonds or jewels, in the active depictions (figure 4) the crown is full of jewels and glittering diamonds. This element reinforces her status as the Mother of Heaven.

**Infants/Children**

The presence of infants and children is seen in one active depiction of *La Guadalupena* (Figure 3). This device is also an element of substance that suggests she is the Holy Mother, and a symbol of compassion and nurturing. She is shown holding up an infant and is surrounded by five children. The infant, healthy with a big smile, is draped in white cloth. *La Guadalupena* is holding the baby high with motherly ease but keeps her downward gaze and pose intact. All children are looking up towards her with wide eyes and folded hands. There are three girls and two boys. They have shoes on but their clothes are torn in some places. Two children are on their knees.

**Devils**

Two of the active traditional depictions, figures 3 and 4, of *La Guadalupena* show the prominent presence of devils. These devils are painted as having serpent-like bodies with heads of monsters and long teeth. The depiction where *La Guadalupena* is holding a
Figure 3. Traditional image of La Virgen holding a baby.
baby (Figure 3) shows the devil at her feet in a threatening posture, breathing fire. Similarly depicted devils in figure 4 are shown in the process of being killed by La Guadalupena with a long sharp weapon. These depictions verify La Virgen’s holy status by proclaiming her spiritual power over dark forces, the devil monsters.

Substantive Elements

The stylistic elements described above develop the core substance of the image of the traditional version of La Virgen. As a saint or Holy Mother, she serves as the understanding and compassionate mother, giving unconditional love to all people who come to her. She is depicted in human form but is close to God, and therefore can serve as the intermediary between humans and God. She is shown posed with a downward gaze, an indication that her thoughts are on something else, that is, in the spiritual realm, also shown by the attitude of prayer although she is standing. Gentle and kind looking, she appears to be compassionate and sympathetic to human suffering, just as the universal mother should be.

Organizing principle

The organizing principle for a genre is defined as assumptions that crystallize the central feature of a type of discourse (Foss, 1989). The traditional depiction of La Virgen depicts the perfect and idealized woman. La Virgen is a sacred image as symbolized by, for example, the full-length halo, crown, and angels, and at the same time is a pious woman. Perfect womanhood is expressed through the pose, including the downward gaze and folded hands, as she stands with utmost modesty and submissiveness. The Catholic Church has used the image of the Virgin, Old World and New, as the role model for ideal womanhood (Trujillo, 1998).
Figure 4. Rare traditional, active image of *La Virgen* killing demons.
La Virgen, although young and attractive, wears draped clothing that covers her entire body. In addition her downward gaze and modest posture contribute to her asexual image. Any femaleness is apparently channeled into motherhood and nurturance. Her life force is spent for others. Her thoughts are on religion. She does not appear to be in touch with her own body or her sexuality. She is the patriarchal and universal idealization of what a woman should be. The spiritual and sexual dichotomy is clear; the ideal woman concentrates on the spiritual and ignores, is disconnected from, and distances herself from, the flesh. Being caregiver and healer are the ideal qualities of the perfect woman.

Description of the Contemporary Sub-Genre

The authors viewed three contemporary depictions of La Virgen de Guadalupe, ranging from 1978 to 1999, all painted by Chicana artists. The Bikini Virgin (Figure 7), by Alma Lopez, was included due to its controversial nature.¹ Then, using google.com, other examples of contemporary images were searched. The two depictions by Yolanda Lopez (figures 5 and 6), are among the earliest contemporary paintings. Following are short descriptions of each of these three representative contemporary paintings, and then description of the stylistic elements common to all. The authors then explain how the stylistic elements of the traditional depictions are carried over to and altered in the contemporary depictions.

¹ The display of La Virgen portrayed in a bathing suit at the New Mexico Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe in 2001 divided the community along the lines of religious heritage and freedom of speech. The painting became known as the Bikini Virgin.
Figure 5. Contemporary Painting of *La Virgin* as a Seamstress
Seamstress Painting

The painting in figure 5, by Yolanda Lopez (n.d. http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/women2/images/lopez1_big.jpg) shows a middle-aged seamstress seated at an industrial sewing machine. This woman, who is in fact the artist’s mother, is dressed in a pink dress with white trim. She sews on a long length of blue cloth with yellow stars and trim that spills over the machine, clearly the same design as the shawl shown in all traditional depictions of *La Guadalupena*. There are also two rose branches visible at the bottom of the painting with some open in full bloom and some in bud.

The seamstress is wearing glasses for close work, and appears to be busily concentrating on the work at hand. Her gaze is focused as she pauses from her work and appears to be looking straight at the viewer. There is a large, prominent table lamp that is placed on the table, but the table itself does not have any legs. The sky blue background is conspicuous.

Active Athlete Virgin Painting

One of most active contemporary depictions is figure 6 by Yolanda Lopez that is a portrait of the artist herself as *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (1978, http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/women2/images/lopez1_big.jpg). This painting shows a very active figure wearing running shoes who is vigorously running forward. Her teeth showing as she breathes heavily, she is beaming with energy and perhaps with excitement about the run or the race; she might be in a marathon. She wears a modern dress and because of her vigorous movement, the skirt is flying up above her knees revealing her
Figure 6. Contemporary painting of *La Virgen* as an athlete.
muscular, well-formed thighs. This figure runs with a very large halo behind her that encompasses and centers her figure. She steps on top of the angel’s wings at her feet as she races forward.

The figure is centered but not statically posed; rather, it is fluid and in motion. In addition, Lopez’ figure holds a snake just behind its head in the right hand, reminiscent of the serpent-like devils portrayed in some traditional depictions. This contemporary figure carries the limp but not dead snake in her hand, unafraid, and in control.

_Bikini Virgin Painting_

Alma Lopez composed a computer graphic entitled Our Lady in 1999 (http://www.almalopez.net/) that depicts a real Chicana young woman (figure 7), a friend of hers, surrounded by various symbols of _La Virgen_. This cyber collage features a real woman who is wearing a two-piece swimsuit made up of large roses on leafy branches. She has her hands on her hips, bare feet with one foot forward, navel showing and a tight stomach that could be the result of working out, but she is not a fashion model. Although the public dubbed this artwork the “Bikini Virgin,” the actual title is “Our Lady.” She wears a two-piece swimsuit, not a skimpy bikini.

The shawl in the Bikini Virgin depiction is full body length from the shoulders, but has imprinted a blue gray stone color showing motifs from Aztec temples; however, it retains enough of the substance of the traditional shawl to refer to _La Virgen_. In addition to the Bikini Virgin’s swimsuit being made of white, red, and lavender roses on branches, there are also large roses on either side of the lower platform that rise up to midway in the composition.
Figure 7. “Bikini Virgin”: Controversial depiction of *La Virgen*
Stylistic elements

The contemporary depictions described above have stylistic elements that are derived from the traditional genre so that they are recognizable as belonging to the *La Virgen de Guadalupana* genre although the elements are sometimes modified. The following descriptions of the stylistic elements refer to the seamstress Virgin (figure 5), the running Virgin (figure 6), and the Bikini Virgin (figure 7).

*Halo*

The halo, in the form of bright, radiating streams of light, surrounds the entire body in all the contemporary depictions. The seamstress Virgin, who is seated, has light depicted as yellow rays with red fill-in, and brown outline surrounding her entire back. The running Virgin’s halo, in long, yellow rays against a pale background and edged in red, prominently surrounds the whole body. For the Bikini Virgin, the halo has a definite outline behind the entire figure, and consists of intense, radiated yellow, shorter rays than the other two above, and is outlined in red.

*Angels*

Angels appear in the three depictions. In the seamstress version, there is one angel at the bottom, a human form with prominent wings, and a child-like face that looks up. This angel sits under the folds of the shawl, with left elbow resting on the surface and the left hand on its cheek, the right hand resting on the surface. It appears to wear the same pink with white trim shirt as the woman. Its wings are up behind it and in blue, white, and red bands of color. In the running Virgin painting, the angel is at the bottom, facing away as it is lying down acting as a bridge or runway with its wings spread beneath her running feet. The angel’s arms are outstretched although in the prone position, and this one’s
wings are also in blue, white, and red bands of color. In the Bikini Virgin depiction, the angel appears at the bottom in mature female form, topless with bare breasts, arms outstretched and holding up the crescent platform, gazing out, with monarch butterfly’s expanded wings. It appears that she emerges from the wings beneath her.

**Shawl and Clothing**

For all three contemporary depictions, the shawl is always free flowing and does not cover the head or the entire body. It serves more as an appendage or accessory to the body rather than a core part of the covering of the body. The color ranges from blue-green to dark blue. The border of the shawl is yellow to dark yellow and very prominent. The stars on the shawl also are bigger in shape and more widely dispersed over the shawl compared to traditional shawls. The shawl has many folds; sometimes the end is not visible.

The seamstress is shown sewing on the shawl; it is draped across the sewing machine still under the needle and billows to the ground. It is dark blue with large yellow stars and trim. The running Virgin holds the shawl, also dark blue with yellow stars on the outside and yellow trim, with her left hand up at her shoulder as it billows out behind her in the wind, like a sail. It is not attached to her body and she holds on to it to prevent it from blowing away. The stars on both of these shawls are larger in shape and are more widely dispersed over the surface compared to traditional shawls.

The Bikini Virgin’s large shawl is more of a mantle that loosely hangs from her shoulders and drapes to the ground behind her. Although different from the others in that it is does not have stars and is not lightweight, it has the shawl colors of dark blue background that is used for the Aztec temple architectural features, and yellow trim.
Instead of being on the shawl, the yellow stars are incorporated into the platform or stage at the bottom of the piece.

The depictions show the women dressed in informal, contemporary clothing such as a pink dress with white trim at the neck for the seamstress who also wears glasses, and a pink shirt, skirt cinched at the waist with a belt, and running shoes for the running Virgin. The Bikini Virgin wears a two-piece swimsuit made of roses and is barefoot.

**Pose**

All the contemporary Virgins are centered in the compositions, and either standing or sitting, are posed in active, outwardly directed, and ordinary postures. The seamstress Virgin sits forward in a bold position. The running Virgin runs forward, and is caught in motion, one foot in the air. The Bikini Virgin stands with her hands on her hips, one foot slightly forward, and both legs slightly curved outward.

**Gaze**

Contemporary depictions have La Guadalupena looking straight out to the viewer. The running Virgin looks out straight but as she is running very fast, her eyes are almost closed. The gaze of the other two, eyes wide open and pupils completely dilated, engages the outsider. Even though the seamstress Virgin is depicted as sewing, she is caught at the moment of looking up and out through her glasses. The Bikini Virgin, with the boldest gaze that looks straight out to the viewer, declares her confidence and independence.

**Roses**

Roses are often shown in contemporary depictions, and are shown in two of the three contemporary depictions, figures 5 and 7. Branches looking as if they were from a
rose brush, with a few roses on each, are shown at the bottom left corner of the
seamstress Virgin painting, with some of the shawl covering one rose near the angel. Two
of these roses are open, large and red, and three are in bud, soon to open. There is an
absence of roses for the running Virgin depiction. The Bikini Virgin’s swimsuit is made
up of actual branches of roses in red, white and lavender. In addition, large roses of red,
white, and lavender in full bloom are placed on either side of the figure starting from the
bottom and going up halfway on the figure.

Substantive Elements

The main substantive elements that emerge from the contemporary images is an
activeness in depiction and the image of La Virgen as a real woman. In these three
depictions, she is a woman who is doing everyday tasks and performing everyday
mundane roles such as sewing clothes and running. The Bikini Virgin does not perform
any tasks but is engaged in presentation of self through her body.

Comparison of Styles and Substances

The contemporary depictions are a departure in style and substance from the
traditional depictions although there is enough retention of traditional elements so that all
of these artifacts are unmistakably depictions of La Virgen. Therefore, the contemporary
depictions are part of the evolving genre of Our Lady of Guadalupe, possibly forming a
sub-genre. The authors consider the commonalities and differences of each of the stylistic
and substantive elements noting why they may fit as a sub-genre within the genre of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Traditional elements that are retained in contemporary depictions are the full body
halo, the shawl and its colors with the yellow star design, the angels holding up La Virgen
on the platform although the platform may be changed in form, some aspects of the pose, and sometimes roses. In any one of the contemporary depictions, enough of the traditional elements of substance are used so that anyone familiar with the depictions of La Guadalupena immediately recognizes the contemporary image as a depiction of La Virgen de Guadalupe, although the changes in style may be surprising or jarring. Changes in style in contemporary depictions were accomplished by moving the elements to different positions, juxtaposing them differently, or showing them as functionally different.

Organizing principle

The discourse of the traditional images of La Guadalupena changes in the contemporary images in that La Virgen’s holy image is demystified. Although La Virgen has long been depicted in secular contexts such as on shop or garden walls, cars, personal items, even tattoos, these are always traditional images in substance and style. All of the women portrayed by the contemporary Chicana artists are real women from the present-day world, alive, connected, and living ordinary lives. The women are not statically posed but are somehow actively engaged in the world.

All of the women depicted have dark brown or black hair with some of them having a modern short cut and some having long, straight hair but parted on one side, not in the center. The absence of crowns in all the contemporary depictions speaks about how La Virgen is a representation of present-day real women, and not necessarily the Holy Mother.

The contemporary depiction of La Virgen appears to demystify the icon by equating ordinary women, either a working-woman, a real young woman, or the artist
herself, with the traditional saint. The contemporary depictions appear to be strongly connected with the Chicano/a culture by claiming the image of *La Virgen* as their own, belonging to all women, not only to the Church or patriarchal society (Trujillo, 1998).

Enough stylistic and substantive symbols are carried over from the traditional image so that there is no mistake that the recent artifacts are not *La Virgen*. This carry-over of symbolism identifies the contemporary images as *La Virgen de Guadalupe* which troubles many viewers who recognize the symbols but see them changed or subverted in the overall artifact. For example, the Bikini Virgin caused a storm of protest within the traditional Hispanic community in Santa Fe when this painting was displayed in a public museum in 2001.

**Feminist Analysis: The Changing Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

The contrasts between the traditional and the contemporary depictions of *La Guadalupena* portray a change in discourse about the construction of female gender from two different perspectives. The traditional depiction reflected the discourse of *La Virgen* that symbolized the idealized woman and behavior of that period. For many in the Chicano/a community, that gender construction has not changed today. The traditional depictions of *La Guadalupena* manifest “the ideal way of being a woman” for women to aspire to, and men to understand and expect (Trujillo, 1998, p. ). Therefore, her role is exemplified as the universal mother with all the qualities associated with that role such as compassion, nurturance, modesty, piousness, and submissiveness (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Whereas *La Virgen* had holy power represented by, for example, the halo, shawl, crescent moon, angels or cherubs, and crown, all the real, present-day women have personal strength – a different kind of power not derived from the abstract, heavenly
realm. The retaining of the ‘halo’ in all contemporary images speaks about the transformation of women’s roles and gender construction. All these symbols honor women in their everyday roles. The recognition of this kind of power is depicted in the ordinary roles of real women as either embodying La Virgen or standing in for La Virgen.

All three of the contemporary depictions display personal empowerment and inner strength. Whether it is the seamstress who is engaged in the most ordinary day-to-day activity of sewing clothes, or the athlete who is depicted as a woman having physical strength, both display personal power. The Bikini Virgin demonstrates her self-assurance and self-confidence as an openly sexual being, another type of empowerment. All three depictions of real women embody both the strength and the motherly, compassionate qualities of La Guadalupena. The positive power associated with the present-day woman, although different from La Virgen’s traditional spiritual power as the Mother of God, manifests a true depiction of women in society (Trujillo, 1998).

At the same time, this change in image or role does not mean the shedding of traditional feminine qualities such as nurturing and compassion. The fact that the seamstress Virgin is portrayed in the activity of sewing states that the present day woman is still very much the caretaker, the mother, who attends to the needs of the family and also recognizes the low status of Chicanas in society. The athlete Virgin, even though very muscular, still wears a full flowing skirt and a big shawl, both traditional features. The Bikini Virgin, on the other hand, is portrayed as accepting of her own body, unafraid of her own sexuality. The Bikini Virgin’s pose is confident; she looks straight out of the picture. Her hands are placed akimbo, which speaks volumes about her confidence and assertiveness, as well as about her pride in her own gender and heritage. The long,
straight flowing hair, the bare midriff and legs go further to express her comfort with her sexuality. Sexuality is openly expressed -- no longer to be ignored or hidden.

The transformation in the image of the contemporary Virgin is reflective of the changes that are taking place in modern society. The artists are making a statement that as society changes, holy images and the doctrine behind them also need to change. Holy images and the roles they depict need to be more reflective of the changes that are taking place in society including the Chicano/a community. Thus, it is no longer realistic that while women’s roles and images in today’s world have undergone changes, only the older version of the idealized, saintly woman is portrayed and revered.

The juxtaposition of a real woman with the symbols of *La Virgen* is troubling to many people who are comfortable with traditional portrayals. It appears that contemporary Chicana artists are making a statement about the holiness of all women and their strengths. Rather than portraying an idealized young woman as submissive and modest but still with holy power, the newer images assume personal strength and portray strong women found in the community. Women display traditional feminine characteristics–they are nurturing and caring–and they are also strong, confident, and active, characteristics that women have always had but have not always been recognized or portrayed. To be truly nurturing and compassionate requires inner strength. To actually be *La Virgen de Guadalupe* would take superhuman strength. All the contemporary women portrayed have some of *La Virgen’s* strength; now they are beginning to express it and show it, instead of hiding it.

Another aspect of this transformation also can be seen from the active depictions of the contemporary Virgin. Contemporary images of *La Virgen* are active; women are
shown performing a task or in movement. In the seamstress version, *La Guadalupena* is performing the very ordinary task of sewing. In the athlete version, *La Guadalupena* is depicted as running hard, a non-traditional image that points to her active role in the world, standing up with pride for herself, her gender, and her heritage. This new role is again a transformation from the older role in which women were not allowed to take on responsibility in the outer world, or to actively engage in the world. In today’s world, with many women engaged in sports, this depiction is very reflective of the present day, but also it can be extended to include women in the work place, or in any non-traditional roles outside the home.

Conclusion

The core substance of the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has undergone a fundamental change from the traditional to the contemporary depictions. Whereas the traditional depictions offer an image of “perfect womanhood” or an “idealized female” that should be aspired to by other women, the contemporary depictions offer a transformation of *La Virgen* image to one more reflective of the real life and everyday scenes of women. Thus, contemporary depictions change the very core of the substance, the perfect woman, of *La Virgen* and transform it to emerge as a series of varied roles of real women.

It is on this point that the anger of the people who felt that the Bikini Virgin depiction disrespected *La Guadalupena* can be explained. Whereas the contemporary depictions change the core substance of the image of *La Virgen* from one of “perfect womanhood” to an image of “ordinary women who are performing everyday tasks,” the Bikini Virgin depicts a woman who is not ashamed of her sexuality. These changes in the
central substance of the image alter the religious icon into an ordinary woman with a sexual identity that is unacceptable to many in the Catholic community today.

The traditional version is an idealized depiction from the viewpoint of a patriarchal Church, a one-dimensional woman cut off from her own sexuality and the mundane world. The contemporary versions portray a variety of multi-dimensional women who are very much a part of the world. The Chicana artists honor ordinary women for their strength and courage in the face of many obstacles. They equate the courage and strength of *La Guadalupena* with contemporary women who display the same qualities of compassion. However, the new woman is not cut off from herself; she is in touch with herself including her own sexuality.

The contemporary versions of *La Virgen* call into question the patriarchal aspects of the Church and Chicano culture, and reflect changes in contemporary Chicano culture. Cultures are never static, rather they are dynamic. Looking at new images of *La Guadalupena* and comparing them with the traditional images leads to a better understanding of some of the changes and controversies that arise in contemporary Chicano life.
References


