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**Democratic Devotion:  
The Role of the Printing Industry in the Rise of the Cult of Guadalupe**  
By Sarah Bailey

The adoration of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe exemplifies the importance of the printing industry to the development of colonial Mexican popular religion and visual culture. If there is one symbol that represents the diverse character of Mexico's social and religious heritage, it is the Virgin of Guadalupe. It is widely accepted that the conquest of Tenochtitlán and the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac took place within twenty years of each other. Subsequently, the first documented printing press arrived in New Spain in 1539 and proved integral to the early seventeenth-century rise in Guadalupe image devotion. Initially Guadalupe worship was communicated in various forms including oral transference, visual representation and reproduction, and ultimately the printed image and word. The expansive circulation of the iconic image in print assured that the Guadalupe cult achieved democratic appeal across class, race, and gender boundaries. The importance of the printed image of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Mexico's cultural development stems from two distinct aspects of the devotion: its primacy as a sacred image and its initial position as a site of pilgrimage. It is the goal of this paper to demonstrate how printed images of the Virgin of Guadalupe contributed to the dissemination of the devotion while fostering Mexico's elevation of the image as an object worthy of worship.

Spain's use of religious imagery to convey meaning and authority to newly conquered indigenous peoples originated with the conquistador Hernán Cortés. As he advanced across Nahua territory en route to Tenochtitlán, Cortés bore before him a standard image of the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> In his destructive wake, the conquistador left a variety of Marian figures and images in place of indigenous idols atop vanquished Aztec

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<sup>1</sup> Burkhart, Louise. *Before Guadalupe: The Virgin Mary in Early Nahuatl Literature*. Albany: Institute of Mesoamerican Studies, 2001, pg. 3

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temples.<sup>2</sup> Although Cortés worshiped the Virgin de los Remedios, he was originally from the Extremadura region of Castile where a shrine to a Guadalupe manifestation of Mary was extremely popular. (Figure 1) According to D.A. Brading, the Extremadura Guadalupe was “by far the most important Marian shrine in the kingdom of Castile.”<sup>3</sup> Like all Marian manifestations, the Extremadura Guadalupe, was associated with protective qualities. Her relationship with the New World began as early as Columbus’s first voyage when sailors on the Niña made vows to honor her in exchange for safe return from their sea voyage.<sup>4</sup> The Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe likely emerged as an expression of the European Guadalupe cult, receiving her name in honor of the European devotion as well. The confluence of New Spain’s Guadalupe and her European prototype is further complicated by the presence at Tepeyac of a pre-Columbian devotion to the Nahua goddess Tonantzin. As a product of both European and Nahua cults, the New World Virgin of Guadalupe is culturally *mestiza* and thus uniquely Mexican.

According to popular legend, in 1531 the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared three times to a poor Indian named Juan Diego and demanded that he enlist Bishop Juan de Zumárraga to build a shrine in her honor atop the hill at Tepeyac. Zumárraga did not believe Juan Diego’s claims until he finally saw the image of the apparition miraculously imprinted on Juan Diego’s cloak, at which time the Bishop began construction of the Guadalupe church.<sup>5</sup> It is Juan Diego’s cloak that is believed to be hanging in the Basilica de Guadalupe today, the indelible mark of the Virgin the object of thousands of prayers a

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<sup>2</sup> Burkhart 2001: 3

<sup>3</sup> Brading, D.A. Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pg. 36-7

<sup>4</sup> Cambell, Edna. “The Virgin of Guadalupe and Female Self-Image: A Mexican Case History.” From Mother Worship: Themes and Variations. James J. Preston. Editor. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, pg. 10

<sup>5</sup> The first documented church atop the hill at Tepeyac was not built until 1550.

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day. (Figure 2) Although this myth is popularly accepted throughout Mexico as fact, the actual origins of the story are ambiguous.

Noted Guadalupe scholar, Stafford Poole, asserts that the apparition myth did not surface until the middle of the seventeenth century (more than a hundred years after the purported apparition) with the publication of Miguel Sánchez's *Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre Dios de Guadalupe* in 1648 (Figure 3) and Luis Laso de la Vega's subsequent Nahuatl version, known as the *Nican mopohua*,<sup>6</sup> published a year later. (Figure 4) Although the original image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is attributed to the sixteenth century, its only examination took place during the eighteenth century by an artist devoted to the icon named Miguel Cabrera.<sup>7</sup> Based on the presence of at least four different media, Cabrera concluded that the painting could not have been painted by human hands.<sup>8</sup> The Basílica de Guadalupe has not allowed an examination of the painting since, thus the exact date of its execution is unclear. But, as will be demonstrated, there is evidence that two-dimensional printed Guadalupe imagery was a focal point of devotion prior to the first published account of the apparition in 1648. In this context it is possible to view the apparition account as a written affirmation of the extant belief in the power of Guadalupe's image.

The fact that Guadalupe's locus of power is believed to reside in the image is not a unique phenomenon in Catholicism. As Donna Pierce notes, the Guadalupe image is "in the superior range, so to speak, of images 'not made by human hands,' rather of the

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have conflated the *Nican mopohua* with the *Hueitlamahuicoltica*, the text upon which Luis Laso de la Vega's 1649 account was based. The origins of the *Hueitlamahuicoltica* are extremely unclear and scholars like Poole also believe that the two documents are one and the same.

<sup>7</sup> Demarest, Donald and Coley Taylor. Editors. *The Dark Virgin: The Book of Our Lady of Guadalupe*. Freeport, ME: Coley Taylor, Inc., 1956. p. 154

<sup>8</sup> Demarest 153

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nature of the Veil of Veronica or the Mandylion of Edessa, both thought to have been made by contact with the original sacred personage.”<sup>9</sup> Viewed in the framework of the apparition myth, the Mexican Guadalupe image derives its power from direct contact with the Virgin Mary. As a result of its contact with the divine, the Basílica Guadalupe image then acts as a metonym for the Virgin Mary herself and is thus worthy of devotion and capable of performing miracles. Although Poole claims that there is no evidence of the conception of the Basílica image as divine prior to 1634,<sup>10</sup> confirmation that printed Guadalupe imagery was associated with miracles can be found as early as 1613.<sup>11</sup>

Mexico’s colonial printing production was sizeable and consisted primarily of religious materials and their attendant imagery, much of which pertained to the subject of the Guadalupe. One such print from 1613 by the Flemish engraver Samuel Stradanus (Figure 5) illustrates the Virgin of Guadalupe along with eight miracles associated with her devotion.<sup>12</sup> Jeanette Favrot Peterson asserts that this early depiction of the miracle-performing Guadalupe visually validated a pre-existing miracle tradition already associated with the icon: “These earliest Guadalupe images did not invent but recorded stories already circulating at the time of their production, including a conviction in Guadalupe’s thaumaturgic powers and, as a corollary, a growing belief in [the image’s] supernatural origins.”<sup>13</sup> That this image was broadly circulated is confirmed by the deteriorated condition of the plate whose surface is “so worn as to render almost

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<sup>9</sup> Pierce, Donna et al. Painting a New World: Mexican Art and Life, 1521-1821. Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2004, pg. 85

<sup>10</sup> Poole 63

<sup>11</sup> Peterson, Jeanette Favrot. “Canonizing a Cult: A Wonder-working Guadalupe for Seventeenth-century Mexico.” Not Published. p. 2

<sup>12</sup> Peterson ND: 2

<sup>13</sup> Peterson 2-3

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unintelligible certain details of the design.”<sup>14</sup> The state of the print plate indicates that as early as 1613, an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe associated with miracles was reproduced in high volume. Additionally, this print was commissioned as a broadside to be used in a fundraising campaign to solicit financial contributions for the construction of a new church to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>15</sup> The Stradanus broadside not only served as solicitation for donations, but was actually transformed into a sacred object. In exchange for the donation, the donor ostensibly purchased the print to secure protection from the Virgin of Guadalupe herself. The image thus became a spiritual receipt insuring the individual’s accrual of divine benefits, “namely a grant of 40 days of indulgence or relief from purgatory,”<sup>16</sup> in exchange for a contribution to the building efforts. This print’s association with the accession of purgatorial redemption establishes the ease with which the devotion to the printed Guadalupe image was cultivated. The notion of the printed image of Guadalupe as a source of spiritual endowment was thus evident at least thirty five years before Miguel Sánchez published his watershed apparition account mid-century. It is viable then to suggest that the popular belief in the thaumaturgic power of printed Guadalupe imagery may have influenced Sánchez’s decision to construct the apparition myth in terms of a divinely created image.

There is another integral event in the history of Guadalupe that predates Sánchez’s apparition account: the great flood of Mexico City in 1629-33. The deluge that inundated the city for four years was believed to have been mitigated and ultimately alleviated (albeit over a period of five years) by the Virgin of Guadalupe whose image

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<sup>14</sup> Peterson 7

<sup>15</sup> Peterson 6

<sup>16</sup> Peterson 6

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was brought down from the church at Tepeyac and placed in the central cathedral.<sup>17</sup>

(Figure 6) Gratitude to the image of Guadalupe was so pervasive that reproductions were distributed extensively throughout the capital, forcing the ecclesiastical council of the cathedral to restrict further production of Guadalupe images in 1638.<sup>18\*</sup> In her discussion of the Stradanus print, Peterson assigns the image to the category of the *andachtsbild*, a European form of devotional imagery that was used as an aid to personal prayer and meditation.<sup>19</sup> During difficult times when access to the shrine was impossible (such as in the great flood), a devotee could rely on his or her personal print to ask for guidance and support from the Virgin. The likelihood that these types of devotional materials were available to Mexico's poor during the great flood is reinforced by the fact that paper *andachtsbilder* were inexpensively produced and thus easily purchased.<sup>20</sup> Positioned in household shrines,<sup>21</sup> the *andachtbilder* would provide the inhabitants with protection and solace until they were able to express their gratitude to the original Guadalupe image at Tepeyac.

Miguel Sánchez's 1648 account provides the first documented visual representation of the miraculously imprinted apparition on Juan Diego's cloak. (Figure 7) The *portada* (or title page) of Luis Laso de la Vega's Nahuatl apparition account, written a year later,<sup>22</sup> (Figure 8) portrays the Virgin of Guadalupe and exhibits the image's diagnostic symbols. The financial and religious success of these two books spurred the

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<sup>17</sup> Poole 97

<sup>18</sup> Pierce 160

\* During my research at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico I came across numerous Inquisition edicts that also warned against and restricted the production of religious imagery. It is thus evident that the proliferation of popular devotional religious imagery proved a frequent nuisance to Mexican authorities.

<sup>19</sup> Peterson 10

<sup>20</sup> Peterson 11

<sup>21</sup> Peterson 11

<sup>22</sup> Poole 26

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publication of a slew of other apparition accounts all of which included images of Guadalupe (Figure 9, 10, 11). In regard to Luis Becerra Tranco's 1675 Guadalupe image, Julie Greer Johnson emphasizes the overprovision of Guadalupe imagery in Mexico's printing industry stating that this image "was the *nineteenth* known to have been printed in Mexico"<sup>23</sup> (my italics).

The democratic circulation of the image of Guadalupe did not only exist in Mexico's civic centers. At the time of its inception, the Tepeyac shrine was outside the boundaries of Mexico City proper and was, thus, a popular pilgrimage destination. Although pilgrimage in New Spain derived from a strong tradition in Europe, pre-Columbian precursors also existed. During the conquest, peripheral sites of Nahua religious worship were superimposed with Catholic meaning in the efforts to evangelize the Nahuas. Spanish missionaries (like Cortés before them) often ascribed Christian saints and objects to pre-existing Nahua religious sites.<sup>24</sup> The geographic coincidence of the devotions to Guadalupe and Tonantzin can be attributed to this conversion tactic. The Catholic aspects of the Tepeyac shrine, however, were not effortlessly translated and as late as 1576, the remnants of Tonantzin continued to irk friars like Bernadino de Sahagún who "complained that the pilgrimages to Tepeyac were only a continuation of pre-Hispanic practices and that native worshipers consistently referred to Guadalupe as Tonantzin."<sup>25</sup> The persistence of indigenous associations with Guadalupe suggests a rich

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<sup>23</sup> Greer Johnson 31

<sup>24</sup> Quirioz Malca, Haydée. Fiestas, peregrinaciones y santuarios en México: Los viajes para el pago de las mandas. México, D.F.: Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 2000, pg. 50

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, Jeanette Favrot. "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" *Art Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Latin American Art (Winter, 1992), pg. 40

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tradition of pre-contact pilgrimage that may have fostered early Nahua devotion to the Guadalupe shrine.

Pilgrimages, often long, arduous journeys, naturally promoted a sense of community among the participants. This processional practice provided an important locus for the solidification of religious group identity. As Spanish Catholicism spread throughout Mexico and infiltrated the Nahua way of life, the urge to maintain a sacralized indigenous community must have been very strong. Guadalupe, whether as a thinly veiled incarnation of Tonantzin or as a manifestation of the protective Virgin Mary, invited the disenfranchised to worship her in return for divine intercession with an angry and judgmental Spanish patriarch. I propose that the Guadalupe devotion and its concomitant pilgrimage may have contributed to the preservation (albeit marginal) of an indigenous and/or *mestizo* sense of identity. Thus, the cross-cultural appeal of the Virgin of Guadalupe engendered the early formulation of a uniquely Mexican community in an otherwise exclusionary Spanish culture. Traveling in large groups, Guadalupe pilgrims began to eek out their place in society and to define themselves as Mexican, an identity necessarily imbedded in the shared experience of devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

As loyalty to Guadalupe grew, commercial aspects of the devotion developed. Initially arising from the basic needs of pilgrims such as food and shelter,<sup>26</sup> the pilgrimage industry evolved into one that included the lucrative sale of religious souvenirs. While in Europe these souvenirs took the form of relics or religious objects such as crosses or *milagros*,<sup>27</sup> Mexican religion was more concerned with images. Victor

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<sup>26</sup> Stopford, J. "Some Approaches to the Archaeology of Christian Pilgrimage." *World Archaeology*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Archaeology of Pilgrimage, (June 1994), pg. 59

<sup>27</sup> Small body parts made of tin or clay used to gain divine healing for the represented ailment.

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Tuner asserts that unlike in Europe, Mexican pilgrimage devotions were based on representational images rather than bodily tokens or relics of a spiritual entity.<sup>28</sup> This would have been particularly true of religious souvenirs sold along the pilgrimage route to Tepeyac. As the devotion came to be understood in terms of the sacrality of Guadalupe's divine image, it is certain that the most popular souvenirs would have been printed reproductions of the image on Juan Diego's cloak. Shrines were often accompanied by a large bazaar or *feria* situated outside the sacred space. (Table 1) These lively marketplaces sold a variety of practical goods but also included votive offerings to be offered at the shrine, religious souvenirs, and printed *estampas* depicting the shrines' saint or deity.<sup>29</sup> Discussing Guadalupe's sister devotion in Extremadura Spain, William Christian provides information that is useful to the examination of the commercial aspects of the eponymous Mexican pilgrimage. Christian asserts that like her American counterpart, sixteenth-century Extremadura Guadalupe religious souvenirs were predominantly printed images. Although popular European devotions generally focused on relics rather than images, Christian avers that of the items "distributed at Guadalupe [many] were *estampas*, prints of the image, which sometimes cured people when placed on the injured part of the body."<sup>30</sup> As the Extremadura shrine is the most logical source for the Mexican Guadalupe, it can be assumed that comparable phenomena took place at Tepeyac. Additionally, Mexico's preponderance of image worship combined with the thriving printing industry strongly suggests that similar articles would have been

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<sup>28</sup> Turner, Victor. "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal." *History of Religions*, Vol. 12, No. 3. (Feb. 1973), p. 210

<sup>29</sup> Christian, William. Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981, pg. 104

<sup>30</sup> Christian 100

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available for sale at Tepeyac. That these images would have been attributed miraculous power is certain. Like the *andachtsbilder*, these *estampas* served as a spiritual receipt and awarded protection to the recipient in exchange for the pilgrim's hard-won devotion to the original shrine's image. The *estampas* were then carried over long distances and taken back to the homes of pilgrims to be situated in their personal shrines. In this way, the pilgrimage to the Tepeyac shrine and the sale of printed Guadalupe imagery therein furthered the dissemination of the devotion and in so doing consolidated the image's prevalence in Mexican visual culture.

Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe was comprised of both European and indigenous qualities making it characteristically Mexican. There is evidence that prior to the written apparition tradition, the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe was understood visually as a divine image. When the written apparition myths surfaced in the middle of the seventeenth century, this attention to the image was legitimized and deemed divine. The devotion's popularity was compounded by Guadalupe's visual domination of the emergent popular culture facilitated by the printing press. Guadalupe was easily accessible in print if not in person, and, in this way, she was widely incorporated into homes and personal devotional practices. The original Guadalupe image was a miraculous print and thus subsequent printed reproductions acted as a metonym of the Virgin Mary's divine touch seen on Juan Diego's cloak, further empowering printed Guadalupe imagery. Because the shrine existed on the periphery, it is imperative to note that the intimacy with which Mexico worshiped Guadalupe would not have been possible without the printed reproduction of her image. Concomitantly, the Guadalupe shrine provided a marketplace in which the printed image gained meaning and distribution. In

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print, the Virgin of Guadalupe image gained an authoritative role in Mexico's burgeoning identity and rapidly evolving visual culture. Guadalupe's inherent Mexican qualities and the proliferation of her image in print established the importance of the image-based devotion to the definition of Mexican society.