Alexia Schemien

Of Virgins, Curanderas, and Wrestler Saints

Un/Doing Religion in Contemporary Mexican American Literature

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For my family

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1. Introduction

Yo no soy mexicano. Yo no soy gringo.
Yo no soy chicano. No soy gringo en USA y
mexicano en Mexico. Soy chicano en todas
partes. No tengo que asimilarme a nada.
Tengo mi propia historia.
—Carlos Fuentes

In times of a worldwide rise of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, it is essential to take a look at cultures that have often been pushed aside and discriminated against. It is fundamental to understand these cultures from within in order to support their struggle to be visible in a broader context. This book is located in a broad tradition of studies on Chicano and Mexican American[1] literature and it sheds light on the development of religion in this culture and literature.

The title image of this book gives us a hint at the analyses that are to follow. The Virgin of Guadalupe is presented in the middle of the image with her glowing halo, the colorful dress, and her timid, yet firm facial expression; around her, Mexican farmers and Chicano Movement leaders are placed. The image is cut out of a mural that is placed in Chicano Park, a park located beneath the San Diego-Colorado Bridge[2] in

[1] The difference between the terms "Chicano" and "Mexican American" is significant in this study because both terms denote something similar, yet different. The term Mexican American is the general expression used when speaking about Americans of Mexican descent. The term Chicano, however, is a specialized term that depicts a person who is politically active and strives for equal rights for his Mexican American people; very often Chicano also refers to a specific time period, namely the 1960s and 1970s, when the Chicano Movement gained momentum. As Imelda Martín-Junquera points out in her encyclopedia entry on "Chicano literature": "People often use the word (sic!) *Chicano* and *Mexican American* interchangeably, but the term Chicano generally refers to the ethnic pride and unique identity emerging from the civil rights movement of Mexican Americans (roughly from the 1940s to the present). ... Initially Chicano was meant as a pejorative word; however, Mexican Americans reclaimed the name as an assertive sign of their identity. Mexican Americans, particularly those who came of age during the civil rights movement, still use the word to signal their involvement in cultural and political activism" (71). The study at hand is concerned with Mexican American works in general. The texts to be analyzed deal with political issues differently and have diverse perspectives on Mexican American empowerment and the status of Mexican Americans and their tradition in the U.S.A. In order to highlight that this is a study which concentrates on these various perspectives and not only on the more narrow perspective of a *Chicano* identity, which is closely linked to the 1960s and 1970s with its heritage-based understanding of culture, the broader term "Mexican American" will be used throughout this study. The term "Hispanic" is not considered valid in this study or in the field of Mexican American literature and culture in general. "Hispanic" is too broad a term to be useful because it denotes people from Spanish-speaking countries and therefore dilutes the idea of Mexican American heritage.

[2] The fact that the park is located underneath a bridge is especially remarkable when considering the development of Californian highways and traffic. Mexican Americans were

Barrio Logan[3] which is a predominantly Mexican American community in San Diego, California. After the Chicano Park received the Grand Orchid Prize[4] for its design and for the Mural Restoration Project, Beltrán, one of the initiators of the project, stated: "We've been here a long time and we aren't going anywhere. So it's about time our community gets recognized. Though we don't seek recognition we appreciate it when we receive it." These words perfectly reflect the analyses of literary texts that are presented in this study. Mexican Americans have been in the United States of America for a very long time but have been considered an outside group for an even longer time. This study presents their struggle for recognition and visibility by expressing their religious Otherness and in-betweenness.

Religion and spirituality have always played an important role in Mexican American writing. Dating back to colonial times, religious and cultural development have permanently been linked to one another in Mexico as well as in Mexican American culture. Religious and cultural symbols such as e.g. the Virgin of Guadalupe and cultural practices such as curanderismo are an important part of Mexican and Mexican American identity.

Many scholars have identified religion and spirituality as an integral part of Mexican American literature, but the social category of religion has frequently been comprehended as only catering to other social categories (in literature as well as in general public discourse). Religion was perceived as serving these other categories and the way they were perceived or constructed, for e.g. gender roles were negotiated with the help of religious and spiritual belonging.[5]

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forced to move out of their houses and became victims of gentrification because new roads and highways were built to improve the traffic system in California in the 1960s and 1970s. These highways were built in the neighborhoods where Mexican Americans used to live; hence, they had to move to other parts of the cities. Helena María Viramontes's novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007) is a prime example of texts dealing with this issue and presenting the Mexican American perspective on this form of gentrification in East Los Angeles, which was frequently silenced and invisible before.

3 Various muralists aspired to paint murals in this park in order to be recognized and to make Chicano art visible to all people visiting the park. It became a place of art, history, and community that emphasized the "Indian/Spanish/European/American" identity of the Mexican American community living in this area. "[B]right colors began to replace the lifeless gray concrete surfaces in Barrio Logan," ("Murals Appear") so the plan to establish a Highway Patrol Substation in this place was stopped in the 1970s already, when the muralists started spreading their art. This kind of action through art symbolizes the empowerment of Chicanos in the 1960s and 1970s. These artists strove to be recognized for their culture, art, and literature.

4 The Grand Orchid Prize is usually only given to concrete buildings—and not parks or outdoor spaces—for preserving history. In the case of the Chicano Park, the committee made an exception with the following rationale: "*These murals are part of a unique cultural heritage of the city and provide a sense of pride for the neighborhood of Bario Logan*" (emphasis in the original). For this reason, a park was honored instead of a building for the first time.

5 A closer look at this phenomenon will be taken in further chapters.