THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TO “TAKE CARE” AND TO “VENERATE”: *MORENITA*, EXCESSIVE PERSONHOOD, AND DEVOTEDNESS IN A PUERTO RICAN FAMILY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

HÉCTOR MANUEL VARELA RIOS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2021

Para Laura Vanessa (1996-1997),
who started me on this path.

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help,
or sought thy intercession,
was left unaided.
Inspired by this confidence
I fly unto thee,
O Virgin of virgins, my Mother.
To thee do I come,
before thee I stand,
sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate,
despise not my petitions,
but in thy mercy hear and answer me.
Amen.[1]

[1] https://www.vaticannews.va/en/prayers/the-memorare.html

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Being thankful for everyone that made this dissertation possible is quite the task, since the academic theological endeavor is done *en conjunto*. A few have passed away; some had a momentary yet lasting impact; many contributed constantly either directly or through others. Some helped via presence; one or two even helped by staying away. I will certainly forget more than one person below, so apologies for any careless oversight.

Within the divine, I thank Mary first and foremost. Nuestra Señora…ora por nosotres!

As a researcher, I am thankful for all respondents to interviews and visits related to my research, most especially my main informant Enrique Renta Dávila. Enrique, my dear brother-in-law, not only answered all of my intrusive and ill-formed questions but also did it with unmatched hospitality and clarity. He granted me unlimited access to private aspects of himself and his family in an area not easily talked about. My outmost hope is that I did justice to *Morenita* and to you. Gracias, hermano – sin ti, esto no sería posible.

I am thankful for mentors, colleagues, and students in classrooms and conferences that helped formulate my questions. Many were peers at The Divinity School of The University of Chicago from 2013 to 2021. Those deserving special mention include Prof. Ryan Coyne (a mentor since day one at Swift), Americia (you are part of Swift's soul), the Coffee Club (Amanda, Zac, and Nick), and peers at student-run clubs and offices, The Martin Marty Center 2019-2020 Junior Fellowship, and The Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico from 1998-2004. I must emphasize my 'Hopkins Circle' colleagues by name: Hyein, Dilara, Aaron, David, Vinicius, Chris, Barnabas, Paul, and Matthew. From all I always received encouraging words and helpful critique that not only made my work but also my humanity better.

There is one friend I made during the MA program at The Divinity School that deserves a very special mention. Shandra, you are one of the reasons I survived that program and eventually became a PhD student. You read my early writings (which were even worse then) compassionately and always offered helpful critique. You also served as companion through many tough times academically and personally – we had enough coffee and lunch to feed a small country. And you still read and accompany, as we often work on our dissertations together. You model collegiality for me. No more words…thank you.

I am thankful for Joanne Rodríguez and HTI staff, mentors, and peers for six years of continued solidaridad. Ulrike Guthrie, my HTI editor, gets a special mention – she made me realize both the writer I am and aspire to become. I will never forget the moments I spent *en conjunto* with colleagues at HTI Summer Programs and Writers Weeks and…at Princeton pubs (saludos a Raúl, Izak, Xochitl, Lis, Grace, Yara, Marlene, Joâo, Leo, Alexandra, Yolanda, Jennifer, Bobby, and tantos más). The 2019-2020 HTI Dissertation Fellowship made a huge difference for financial and mental health. I await with joyful excitement the opportunity to pay it back to HTI and forward for any and all rising Latine scholars.

I am thankful for Prof. Angie Heo of The Divinity School, my material religion teacher and dissertation reader, for her thoughtful advice and patient (ironically, and very agentic) commitment to my project. And for my HTI mentor and dissertation reader Prof. Mayra Rivera of Harvard University. I met Mayra in 1987 in college at the same time I met the woman that would later become my wife – they were roommates. I have benefitted immensely from her scholarly guidance and insightful 'tough love' yet most of all from her unconditional friendship.

I am especially thankful for my MA program advisor, PhD advisor, and teaching mentor Prof. Dwight N. Hopkins. Prof. Hopkins embodies the teacher/scholar for me. He is a critically academic yet pastoral – like he says, "I am 'both/and'." The honor of being selected as his PhD advisee is still a highlight of my academic life. His three 'C's' for writing (clear/cogent, compelling, and creative) have guided my writing for years. He has written more letters of recommendation for me than I can count. Simply stated: thank you.

I end with a heartfelt thanks to my family members and friends. To my father, who passed away in January 2020 and helped me become the fallible man I am today, and to my mother, who has always been the Best Christian I know. To my three sisters Brenda, Velma, and Neyssa. To my in-laws Chiqui y Lucy, my brothers-in-law, sister-in-law, nephews and nieces, and other family and friends. Most of all, to my children Alexandra, Héctor Manuel, and Juan David, who uprooted their lives for me yet still show me unconditional love. Muchas gracias.

And, most importantly, to my wife, Mercedes. Meche, we have been through some *things* – college, young adulthood, parenthood, career ups and downs, illness and death. You stuck with me even when I decided to quit a good job to pursue a second career. You kept this family 'in the black' for the last decade, almost by yourself, by doing what I know is very hard and thankless work. Through it all, you served as partner, reader, *paño de lágrimas*, devil's advocate, and audience. Your energy and ability to keep it together sustains me. You have my undying gratitude and only wish God would give me three more lifetimes to repay the love and support I have experienced since I met you that winter day in 1987 up until today – in 2021 we celebrate our thirtieth wedding anniversary. You are the Dream come true. Te amo, siempre.

May 2021

Introduction

> What is at stake is singularity. One pares away likeness and is, with a little luck, left with the unique.

In his book *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (2012), archaeologist Ian Hodder includes a tale about a hypothetical beachgoer's encounter with a pebble on the shore.[1] He writes about recognition, association, sensation, experience, meaning, memory, movement, conservation, ownership, and more. According to Hodder, this quotidian event bursts with multiple ways of being and of knowing. In the encounter, pebble, beachgoer, shoreline, sunset, pre-understanding, self, world, hopes, and dreams become a "unique" plural and dynamic entity – a 'thing'. What these material processes express, every one encapsulated within a prosaic encounter between a human being and an object on a beach, is a relationship being formed or activated.[2] Such was my encounter with *Morenita.* Our 'thing' began more than fifteen years ago. Being Latino and Christian, I immediately recognized who she is—a Spanish representation of the Virgin Mary—yet I recall I was more affected by a unique familiarity, as the epigraph suggests.[3] Perhaps the best evidence of this effect is that this particular dissertation would not have been written without her.

---

[1] Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 23-24.

[2] My choice of the word 'object' instead of artifact, stuff, and so many others cannot go without some explanation as the word is both easily understood and grossly misunderstood. 'Object' can refer to that which is intended (as in the 'object of study'), to that which stands outside of the 'subject' (at least since Descartes), and to mere entities in the world (the pebble). As will be seen, the word 'thing' is even more ambiguous. Also, 'artifact' can occlude non-human-made entities and 'stuff' has been associated closely with consumption since modernity. Though not without problems, object is better suited for this dissertation as will become evident in due course.

[3] David Shulman quoted in Caroline Walker Bynum, "Avoiding the tyranny of morphology; Or, why compare?" *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (May 2014): 345.

For me, being Christian has always included trying to understand my religion's ambivalent value to humanity, a search that is deeply *material*, as I understand that term. Religion is material because it is sensed, felt, physical, historical, bodily, everyday. It is 'real' in the colloquial sense of the word and 'realist' as developed by the Latin American and Latinx Mariologists seen below; 'real' because personal experience and scholarly training have convinced me that religion has real consequences in the real lives of real people, religious or not, even if one cannot ascertain with absolute (or any) precision and certainty what religion is. In my academic journey, that search of the materiality of religion has benefitted from privileged access to mentors, peers, students, institutions, conferences, religious communities, and texts across two decades; some of those privileges I made visible in the Acknowledgments.

One book especially provided an initial 'spark': Ángel Quintero's *Vírgenes, Magos y Escapularios*.[4] Even today, I distinctly remember connecting with this amazing book on many levels. Here were a dozen scholars (like I dreamed to become) from Puerto Rico (my country of origin) writing about popular religious material culture and practices (pictured beautifully in the book) and their meanings (by which I remain deeply intrigued) in the real everyday life of believers (which I am). In a real sense, *Morenita* and I share the intersectionality embodied in *Vírgenes*. Sadly, being historical and sociological in approach, *Vírgenes* does not figure

Note that I will use personal pronouns to refer to the Virgin Mary, her advocations, and the images themselves (which includes *Morenita*, of course). This will become more justified as I present *Morenita* as if she were a person; more on Chapter 2 and beyond.

[4] Ángel Quintero Rivera, ed. *Vírgenes, Magos y Escapularios: Imaginería, etnicidad y religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico*. Second Edition. San Juan: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras : Centro de Investigaciones Académicas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón. 2003. This dissertation could be seen as my contribution as a theologian to Quintero Rivera's edited volume, foreshadowed by contributor Nina Torres Vidal on p. 104.

prominently in this theological dissertation. But that early impetus, developed alongside persons acknowledged earlier and through books cited herein, coalesced into the roadmap that led to this document you are holding, an attempt at understanding one Puerto Rican devotion *materially*.

Morenita is a wooden statue of the Catholic Virgin Mary that my brother-in-law Enrique Renta Dávila inherited from a maternal aunt about two decades ago.[5] The carved image is a devotional object, that is, an object created for the purpose of devotional practices of the Christian faithful, in this case presumably Roman Catholic. Even though Enrique does not call himself Catholic and incorporates other religious orientations in his devotional practices, in interviews he did refer to his devotion as "spiritual," arguably to skirt the word 'religious' (due to its tragic history; this was implied in our conversations, as we partially share this sentiment) and yet distinct from every other 'non-religious' thing. In any case, he feels that any distinction between the 'this-worldly' and the 'beyond' is ultimately irrelevant. This is not uncommon; Quintero Rivera writes: "Especially in a world crisscrossed by conflicting ethnic intersections, the 'sacred'—contrary to the 'classic' Eurocentric prescription—incorporates and manifests the 'profane' as well; not only the mysteries of human relationship with the supernatural but also the complexities of social life."[6] I will illuminate those complex intersections using two

[5] *Morenita* ('dark-skinned young woman or girl') is the diminutive of *morena*, which etymologically derives from *moro*, Moorish—in this context a person from North Africa (RAE). A thorough analysis of ethnic background and skin color within colonial Spanish history is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it will be engaged throughout the chapters. In any case, *Morenita* is a term of endearment for Enrique and other Latinxs that use it, the tragic history of the word notwithstanding.

[6] Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, 28, my translation. I will use 'this-worldly' and 'beyond' whenever it becomes necessary to distinguish that intersection, even if I assume that they cooperate, complement, or overlap in varying degrees, just like Enrique himself assumes.

devotional objects, *La Guadalupe* and the *Cristo Aparecido*, the first in the US Latinx context and the second in a Latin American context, as background for my analyses of *Morenita*.[7]

Enrique is an artist, author, art critic, successful businessman, and overall excellent human being. As many Puerto Ricans say, Enrique is *buenagente*, good people. Most relevantly for this Introduction, his critical thinking skills are unquestionable and his faith is strong; Enrique is not deluded by cheap or facile belief. That means that his knowledge and understanding of religion is sufficiently advanced to interpret and verbalize his complex relationship with *Morenita* critically. Their relationship is deep, resilient, polysemic, multilayered—in a word, textured. Since I am interested in material religion, materiality, and material culture as they intersect Latinx-Catholic theology, those textures within their 'Christian-ness' and other material circumstances sparked my curiosity for the theological valences of their shared devotional space. Indeed, the main question that drove my research is *how* theological is *Morenita* and her devotional space, not *whether* she is theological.[8] My aim was to discern what underlies that unassailable fact. Through all this research I found that the space that *Morenita* and Enrique's family share is grounded in what I call devotedness, which I develop in Chapter 4. But I first need to define what material religion and materiality, culture

[7] I prefer 'Latinx' as an index of ethnicity instead of *Latino* or *Latina/o* because of its non-binary gender inclusivity in English. In Spanish, I would use the term *Latine*. Even though ethnicity should not have a gender *per se*, I ask the reader to allow me this linguistic and ethical choice, as there is no ethnicity without bodies.

I presume much by assigning a Latinx ethnicity to *Morenita*. As described in Chapter 3, it could be said she is Spanish 'by birth.' However, even if diasporic, all her long-lasting materialities occur in the Latinx context – she is Latinx 'by adoption.' More below and in the following chapters.

[8] I am certainly not alone in this presupposition. Latinx theologian Jennifer Scheper Hughes, seen later in Chapter 1, is one of numerous scholars whose work supports this claim. For an even more recent example (and a very womanly one, like *Morenita*), see Rima Nasrallah, et al. "Rearranging Things: How Protestant Attitudes Shake the Objects in the Piety of Eastern Christian Women," *Material Religion* 12, no. 1 (2016): 74–95.

(especially material culture) and its relationship to theology, Puerto Rico and coloniality, Latinx theology, and Catholic and Latinx Mariology mean for me.

Material religion – the academic context

As part of the so-called 'material turn' in the study of religion in the late twentieth century, scholars have emphasized the effervescent presence of objects (also known as material culture, that is, physical entities, artifacts, or equipment construed 'religiously' – in Christianity, to name a few: water, bread, books, prayer beads, images, and buildings) in religious practices in particular and in everyday life in general. David Morgan's *Visual Piety* (1998) and Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) stand prominently among the early scholarship that studies the plural and complex entanglements many Christian believers have with devotional objects.[9] In this work, the objects themselves are both the source of theory and the object of the specific method; humans and other participants are arguably secondary, and many times objects and not subject themselves. Morgan works with painted images of Christ, prominently Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*, and Orsi works with the East Harlem processional sculptured image *Madonna of Mount Carmel.* Their method is similar in that it is historical (that is, taking a mostly diachronic yet still contextual view of the devotional object), constructivist (that is, the devotee's understanding is formed through experience), and

[9] David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See notes #67 and #77 in Chapter 2 for more references on material religion.

emic (that is, from 'inside' the devotional object's perspective). The method I propose in Chapter 2 and use in Chapter 3 is indebted to both.

Devotional objects, such as *Morenita*, clearly influence devotees' whole history, both individually and communally, and this fact is verifiable by the scholar archivally and ethnographically, that is, expressed in written and oral historical accounts, informant interviews, and participant observation on individual practices and social events. One way used to describe the totalizing influence of these objects is Orsi's "popular religion," which combines "[religious] rituals, symbols, prayers, and practices…and the people's deepest values and perceptions of reality."[10] Simply stated, Christian popular religion is not only about Christian religiosity (aligning in varying degrees with institutional, 'official' Christianity) but also about subjectivity and worldview. That is, it includes also what is considered non-religious. Morgan presupposes a congruent perspective with his stated analytical grounding on "popular hermeneutics," that is, the interpretative scheme of believers that encompasses the totality of their life experience and not only what they consider religious.[11] Similarly, the Latinx religious scholars and theologians in this dissertation explore what is Latinx in particular and sociocultural in general about Latinx popular religion and hermeneutics. Asks Quintero Rivera: "To what point does sensed and practiced popular religiosity refer not only to a personal relationship of humans with the supernatural but also to the forms in which social relations are configured between humans and to the values, notions, and beliefs that are shuffled and

[10] Orsi, *Madonna*, xviii.

[11] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 19.

worked from culture itself?"[12] In other words, where does religiosity point to: the religious or social? This dissertation aims to provide one answer to that question using one Latinx religio-social "personal relationship" between the human and the divine within material and Puerto Rican culture.

Second, because of its concern with these devotees' totalizing worldview, popular religion scholarship is intrinsically constructivist, that is, it affirms that the believer's reality is formed through participation in personal and communal experiences, including in this case devotion through objects. One example is Morgan's "visual piety," meaning the "set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred."[13] Practices include prayer and other corporeal devotions; attitudes are revealed, for instance, in the images' conspicuous placement in public and private spaces; and ideas emerge from devotion and are naturalized in believers from life events (for instance, in Morgan, these ideas tend toward affect, gender, home, and memory through images of Christ). Simply stated, visual piety is world-building and, by implication, subjectivizing for believers.[14] "Structure" also entails the ongoing construction of everyday life. As Orsi writes: "[during the *Madonna*'s annual celebrations] the immigrants' deepest values, their understanding of the truly human, their perceptions of the nature of reality were acted out; the hidden structures of power and authority were revealed."[15] So, the constructivist view affirms that self- and world-structuring is

[12] Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, IX, my translation.

[13] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 2-3.

[14] Morgan's sources for these claims are the highly influential work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and several others.

[15] Orsi, *Madonna*, xxii-xxiii.

a dynamic process entangled with all aspects of the devotee's culture, that is, their total way of life. In Chapter 1 this constructivist approach will be exemplified in the Latinx context in general using *La Guadalupe* and the *Cristo Aparecido* images and in Chapter 3 with Enrique and *Morenita* in particular.

Finally, the material religion approach is inherently emic. Both Morgan and Orsi go to great lengths to infiltrate and even respectfully embody the world of the objects of study (both human and objectual), reporting from within their histories and their realities and especially in the context of their everyday; Orsi even more so, as a confessed member of his community of study. Devotional objects require not only a comprehensive look into the material conditions of their possibility but also into how their materialities transform all its participants and their contexts. Morgan parses out visual piety using the ideas mentioned above and Orsi mostly uses the concept of "domus," by which he means the porous individual and social spaces that believers construct around themselves, their close relations, and their communities.[16] Both Morgan and Orsi are careful not to misrepresent their informants or their stories while always 'taking the side' of the devotional objects and practices, exemplifying the best of an 'ethnography through the object' (more on this on Chapter 2). These scholars are also intentional about self-reflexivity. When they present the devotional object's aesthetic, that is their way of perceiving and processing cultural inputs, they are keenly aware of how it affects their own research. This 'everydayness' is an especially productive *locus theologicus* in Latinx scholarship.

[16] Orsi, *Madonna*, xix-xx.

Note that, in my version of the material religion scholarly framework, the object *Morenita* is the main source of research data. The stories and practices that surround it, the doctrinal and practical background that allegedly gave rise to its 'religiousness', and even scholarship around objects in general and devotional objects in particular are components of the 'toolbag' needed to 'mine' the object and ascertain its implications but not its sources. In other words, even if still heavily historical, constructivist, and emic as in Orsi and Morgan, my method and the resulting conclusions will be strongly objectual, that is, object-based and object-confirmed, what I later refer to as 'object-centered.'[17] I will develop these and other methodological issues further in Chapter 2 as well. In sum, material religion for me is the deeply contextual, constructivist, 'everyday' way of exploring popular Christian devotion, and Latinx devotees are no exception. Latinx popular Catholic religion is nurtured by both the culture that surrounds it and the institution that supports it. It is popular in the sense that it is the people's 'side of things' and how they make sense of their world, in the religious sense, faith-based as part of their total lived experience.

The problem with materiality

All of the authors engaged in this dissertation either directly or tangentially question the stark contrast of the term *material* (as in *material* culture) with other terms common in modern

[17] For a recent and more 'practice-centered' approach in theology, see Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry Into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). I owe much to this method, especially to its attitude toward informants and the context, "its insistence that a field of study can have '*embedded and embodied* within its life substantive contributions to theology and ethics.'" (167) Since my method is more 'object-centered' and less ecclesial, however, it remains tangential. For a provocative methodological nuance, namely of fieldwork itself *as* theology, see Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography As Christian Theology and Ethics* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011).

Western European thought, such as *formal, ideational,* and *phenomenal*, especially around religion. Indeed, in academia modeled on the 'West,' the abstract (for example, the theoretical) still rules over the concrete (for example, the empirical). These polarities, which eventually transformed into dichotomies, pervade modern thought, as seen in assumptions about nature versus culture, religious versus non-religious, and even human versus social.[18] As will be seen in Chapter 1, in the history of Christian devotional objects, an institutional conceptual (and also faith-laden) chasm developed early between the 'this-worldly' and the 'beyond' in regards to objects, for instance, between the so-called 'divine' *sign* (many times icon, but also index and/or symbol) and the so-called 'material' *idol*.

However, popular Catholic devotees are oftentimes liminal to institutional purview and control. Here, I refer to those that practice a popular Catholicism often different from 'official' Catholicism. Similar adherents in other religions do not dwell in these dichotomies and usually see the material as the preeminent site of encounter between the human and the divine. In other words, in popular religion, the everyday is usually rife with sameness, coincidence, and union, and the polarity sign-idol breaks down. That attitude traditionally grates against Catholic (and otherwise Christian) ecclesial and Western academic institutional perspectives, which thrive on difference and 'bracketing'. By the same token, scholars interested in objects in general develop theory and method from 'things' in the real world, that is, from objects and human and non-human behavior around them – in essence, joining ideas and practices in the

[18] Within academic institutions, one salient and ongoing conversation about the material revolves around maximizing students' acquisition of capital, regarding knowledge yet mostly money (in the long term), which tends to confront disciplinary silos against one another. One such example is that the allegedly 'more immaterial' human sciences are pitted against the allegedly 'more material' natural sciences and professional schools.

object itself. For these scholars, things are inexhaustible by theory. Therefore, material analyses are more inductive than deductive, bridging any chasm by uniting scholarly concepts as part of the research process. That scholarship calls their approach *materiality* or *material culture studies*, and their anti-dichotomous, inductive, and everyday objects of study *materialities.* As stated before, that object of study could refer to an idea as much as to a devotional object. The scholar of materiality is interested in the way either is present, relates, acts upon, and otherwise is or becomes material. Nuancing Kant's phenomenological dictum that "without general concepts, intuitions are blind," I suggest that materiality/material culture scholars would counter that there are neither concepts nor intuitions without the materiality of objects. Among other things, this dissertation aims to prove that devotional objects make both concepts and intuition possible by precisely dwelling within this concept-intuition union; indeed, some objects (devotional, in my case) are or become concepts, intuitions, and much more.

The conversation around 'material' has been around for millennia but it has emerged as a distinct if still disciplinarily porous area of study in Western academia only within the last half of the twentieth century.[19] In theorizing materiality, scholars have had to cope with centuries-old layers of presupposition and prejudice and start from the fact that it is an essential part of the human condition: that to be human is to be material.[20] This fact, however, brings forth underlying issues: How does materiality express itself? Is it a process or a quality? Both? Neither? For example, materiality and material culture scholars refer to agency as a materiality.

[19] One could think here of Aristotelian thoughts around matter and form, Augustine's positive assessment of material reality and culture, and Aquinas's nuances of Aristotelianism as regards the materiality of the Eucharist, to name a few.

[20] Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8.

In this dissertation, I concentrate on agency happening within a particular devotional encounter between a human and an object. So I suggest that agency is key to exploring popular devotion and its objects. But is agency intrinsic or extrinsic to the subject? For instance, when mediated by objects, is that object agentic by itself or through others? Theorizing agency is a significant part of materiality studies.[21] From Karl Marx through Daniel Miller and beyond, many scholars have studied the relationship between agency and power, agency's plural and equivocal nature (e.g., different *kinds* of agency), and agency's varying gradations (e.g., different *degrees* of agency, up to an immaterial stasis or 'patience').[22] As for the materiality-religion (-theology) union, Webb Keane summarizes it well: "that religions are material is non-trivial."[23] I suggest, therefore, that theory and method for ascertaining agency is an excellent framework to study the materialities of a devotional object and its theological valences within particular material religions.

Why agency?

Readers could question why I opt for the theory of agency when there are other theoretical avenues by which to theorize objects. There are certain presuppositions that condition the theories and method used in this dissertation. First, devotional objects are

[21] Miller, *Materiality*, 11-14.

[22] For other recent examples, see Miller, *Materiality*, 15-35. Whether both agency and patience could ever be absolute or total is debated. See, for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). New materialists would argue 'oscillation' is, in fact, of the essence of agency, for matter is always 'becoming.'

[23] Webb Keane, "On the Materiality of Religion." *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (July 2008): 231.

instruments of some sort for devotees. *Morenita*'s value is not in question; value is irrelevant.[24] This is not simplistic in this case, for this worldview entails a complex and profound intersubjective spirituality between human and object that is visible throughout Latinx popular religion (more on this in Chapter 1).[25] Second, precisely because of their agency, devotional objects are already presumed to be signs along with being other things, like meanings, so Pierceian semiotics is not needed to advance the argument.[26] Furthermore, devotional objects like *Morenita* can oscillate between semiotic types (that is, icon, index, and symbol) and can even be more than one type simultaneously depending on devotee and context. Third, devotional objects disclose themselves in the context of devotion, a social practice. Social and practice theories certainly are relevant but, again, sociality is presupposed in devotional objects and their material agency. I intentionally choose to focus more on the object *Morenita* that on the practices, though the latter serve as evidence for the object's agency.[27] Fourth, I presume that devotion and not perception or sensation to be the primary catalyst of devotional objects such as *Morenita*, so an aesthetic approach is not a priority. I want to explore agency itself and not its perceptual/sensual mechanisms. In fact, Alfred Gell's theory of agency (which I use)

---

[24] As such, materialist theories of objectification and objectual origin and consequences are not primary analytically. See, e.g., Karl Marx, "Capital, Volume One," in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1978).

[25] Phenomenological explorations that overly focus on the subject and tend to erase the object *qua* object (that is, as a mere 'appearance,' as in Kant) are then foreign to my argument; see, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, "What We See and What Appears," *Idol Anxiety*, eds. Aaron Tugendhaft and Josh Ellenbogen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Simply stated, I presuppose that the object is an image; how it is an image is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[26] Cf. Albert Atkin, "Peirce's Theory of Signs," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/, esp. Section 2.

[27] For example, Bourdieu, *Outline*; and Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, 1st paperback ed. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). This focus on the object, not the practices, also determines the method as seen above.

explicitly rejects an analysis of works of art based on aesthetics.[28] Fifth, ontological approaches are likewise less helpful, on the one hand because their questions are not relevant to devotees and, on the other, because they engage the object abstractly or 'metaphysically.' Even when the ontic analysis is more "object-oriented" or "new materialist," it is still strongly metaphysical.[29] I will, however, supplement Gell's theory with Bill Brown's concept of 'excess,' which is the ontic becoming relational (more on this in Chapter 2).[30] Sixth, although the theological and the epistemological are intrinsically related, an approach based on the formation of knowledge would also be less helpful.[31] My concern is less abstract; that is, I am interested in what is revealed when/where *Morenita does what she does*, not how or why she *is* and/or *knows*.[32]

[28] E.g., Hans Urs von Balthasar, et al., *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume 1, "Seeing the Form" (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009).

[29] Edmund Husserl is foundational to this ontological approach as related to objects. But, more specifically see Martin Heidegger, "The Thing", *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). For object-oriented ontology, see Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2002). The ontic perspective of new materialism is seen through its grounding in vitalism; see, for example, Samantha Frost and Diana H. Coole, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, And Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), especially p. 9.

[30] For recent work that tries to bridge ontology and epistemology of objects, see Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*. New Metaphysics series, Graham Harman and Bruno Latour, eds. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011). This deeply metaphysical work has some relevant insights but its focus lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

[31] E.g., Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). To clarify, I should say that I am concerned with how agency works as a component of devotion (a way of knowing the divine, specifically a theological query) and not how agency works as a component of knowledge and power (a way of knowing in general, an epistemological query). Even if both concerns overlap (that is, both are interested in 'knowing'), the difference is crucial: their implications do not overlap. For recent work on materiality and cognition, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik, *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2015).

[32] An important monograph in agency and cognitive archaeology is Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013). But my concern is more contemporary (not archaeological) and not interested in mental processes.

Finally, devotional objects are already assumed to be religious, so theories of religion are not needed.[33] In the Latinx context in general, where religion and culture coincide, such a query might already be non-sensical. For Enrique more specifically, whether or not *Morenita* is religious is not in question. In fact, as stated before, it is the aim of this dissertation to explore how *Morenita* and the materialities that surround her are not only merely religious but deeply theological (because they are agentic; they affect Enrique and his family, as will be seen in Chapter 3). That difference between the religious and the theological is explained below using US Latinx theology and its source, Latin American liberation theology. For now, since I am working in the agentic intersection between *Morenita*, an object (a product of culture) and theology (that is, human religious reflection, represented in this case by Enrique and his family), presenting my understanding of the culture-theology space is necessary.

Articulating theology and culture (and material culture) together: a justification

I presuppose a deep relationship between religion and culture.[34] If religion is material, then it has to operate within culture, the word most commonly used to describe the human way of life. In other words, religion is cultural, just as politics, economics, family, ideologies, and all other human artifacts are. A deeper analysis of how religion is cultural is beyond the scope

[33] Theories on religion are vast, from the early modern and modern *Religionswissenschaftler* to post-modern and more current critiques and interdisciplinary approaches. For one reference, see Ivan Strenski, *Understanding Theories of Religion: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

[34] A large part of this section is taken from a previously published article. See Héctor Varela Rios, "Sancochando Theological Anthropology: One Puerto Rican Heavy Soup as Heuristic", *Perspectivas* 15 (2018), available online at: https://perspectivasonline.com/downloads/sancochando-theological-anthropology-one-puerto-rican-heavy-soup-as-heuristic/. This article part was edited to fit the dissertation better.

of this dissertation; their relationship, however, is unquestioned in what follows.[35] In his influential work *Christ and Culture*, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr diffuses the issue thus: "Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts."[36] That religion (as one expression of Christ's answer) and culture (the "totality of history and life") are imbricated is unavoidable, indeed required, in Niebuhr. The challenge lies in parsing out the "answering" in terms humans can understand within the "partial" and 'conflicted' "insights" of theological "wisdom."

The specific relationship between theology and culture has been made more theoretically and methodologically precise and with more impetus in the West since the second half of the twentieth century.[37] To speak of culture and theology, certain presuppositions have to be made from the start. First, the speaker is situated in a particular context among self, selves, and other. For example, speaking about Stuart Hall's orientation in cultural studies but certainly applicable to the field in general, Lawrence Grossberg writes: "all human

[35] For an influential example of this 'how,' see Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System", *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For an astute critique of Geertz's analyses, see Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category", *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). In any case, this debate is well beyond the scope of this dissertation (whose aim is theological).

[36] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. 1st Harper paperback ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1975), 2.

[37] Examples are numerous. They include Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), esp. Volume 1 on "message and situation"; Paul Tillich and Robert C. Kimball, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), especially on theology's "publics"; Rebecca S. Chopp, *The praxis of suffering: An interpretation of liberation and political theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1986); Kathryn Tanner and Paul Lakeland, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), especially on the creative "genius" of marginalized folk.

practices…are struggles to 'make history but in conditions not of our own making.'"[38] Scholars of religion, just like religious practitioners, work and live within an unshakeable reality, a reality 'made-and-not-made' by them. If one construes culture as "the totality of history and life", theological endeavor unavoidably dwells inside culture, an ungraspable reality as a whole. In other words, theology both stands within culture and can only hope to explore (and exploit) it in the "partial". This self-evident truth is the starting point of any conversation about theology and culture, especially material culture like *Morenita*, which is ineffable in general yet revealing in its particularity.

Second, terms need to be defined, in a more general sense, from these particular struggles, self-made and conditioned by others. The definitions, for example, can be produced through Hall's concept of "articulation," "the complex set of historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structural unity out of, on top of, complexity, difference, contradiction."[39] To 'articulate' culture and theology is to be thrown into their own sites of contestation, and eventually, inevitably choose a space through which to create research boundaries that remain porous and dynamic. Regarding concepts, then, precision must be counterbalanced with fluidity. One way of displaying this awareness is to adopt a 'postmodern' worldview: for instance, by questioning the "effectivity, conditions of possibility, and overdetermination" of those tensed presuppositions that are constantly in play.[40] In this sense, articulation becomes a matter of intersectionality, which, circling back, just confirms the need

[38] Stuart Hall, David Morley, and Kuan-Hsing Chen. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 153.

[39] Hall, Morley and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 154.

[40] Hall, Morley, and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 165.

for 'fluid while precise' concepts: concepts that can be spoken 'to' but not 'of.' In Chapter 2, Gell and Brown provide such concepts. The methodology in general and specific method are also articulated with that complexity and contradiction in the same chapter.

In any case, scholarship must focus on its object of study, and the theories that will be used to study it.[41] In this dissertation, this would initially have to include some sort of graspable concepts of culture and theology. With Sheila Greeve Davaney, I define culture as "the process by which meaning is produced, contended for, and continually renegotiated, and the context in which individual and communal identities are mediated and brought into being."[42] Here Davaney describes culture as both a process and a context: the former seems to correspond well with articulation and the latter with positionality. What is crucial in this case, though, is the fact that culture is a site of meaning production and identity creation and not merely an effect, a cause. A cause of what? According to Davaney, of the many ways of being human among/between self (or selves) and other. *Morenita qua* material culture is a particular materialization of articulation and positionality, that is, a physical space through which humans articulate identity and meaning; in Latinx history and culture this is often done within or in response to oppressive structures and experiences (in *Morenita*'s case, for instance, diaspora and empire).

[41] Hall writes: "The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency" (Hall, Morley, and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 265-266) .For instance, whether one can even assume a "postmodern" worldview is debatable. This tension with theoretical constructs will go unexplored in this dissertation but is squarely on the background, especially of Chapter 2.

[42] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis", *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

As for theology, Mark Taylor's succinct definition is sufficient: "discourse (*logos*) relating to what a people holds to be sacred (*theos*)."[43] My interest here is not the false dichotomy between the profane and the sacred, but theology's discursive nature: it is also done in articulation, as culture is.[44] In addition, as theology is held by "people," not individuals, it is communal in nature.[45] One could certainly also associate this communality with theology's need for multi-contextuality and for correlation between the Christian message and lived experience: no theology is an island. For instance, the theological understanding of being human in the Latinx community that arises from devotion has to correlate with other cultural ways of being human, such as the familial, the generational, the gendered, the sociopolitical (as related to immigration, for instance), the artistic, and even the spiritual.[46]

Culture and theology as stand-alone conceptual constructions certainly are polyvalent and particularly rooted in various and complex ways. For example, in the Latinx context they are "multi-traditioned," as will be seen in Chapter 1.[47] As such, their conceptual boundaries interact with one another, and with all other aspects of human lived experience. According to Davaney, this interaction is not reductive to either, but rather leads to "distinctly different ways of being human," to an 'interwoven reality' of cultur*es* and theolog*ies* that obscures its own

---

[43] Mark Taylor, "*Votán-Zapata*: Theological Discourse in Zapatista Political Struggle", *Converging on Culture*, 177.

[44] This modern construct has already been critiqued thoroughly in postmodern thought. I will not add to that critique here.

[45] According to Latinx theologians José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero, there is no theology but *teología en conjunto*, that is, collaborative theology. Cf. *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 1997). More below.

[46] Cf. Hopkins, *Being Human.*

[47] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Mapping Theologies: An Historicity Guide to Contemporary Theology", *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds. (New York ; London: Routledge, 1996), 36.

'made-and-not-made' origin and *telos*.[48] Evidently, the negotiation between culture and theology becomes clearer if one fixes both within a particular space-time and sees both culture and theology as cultural productions, and material culture as an expression of both. As a result, a particular theology is contingent on a particular cultural moment—theology becomes contextualized. Material culture thus provides one way to 'fix' the interaction between theology and culture. In Niebuhr's terms, this is to get as 'wise' an answer as humanly possible. In my terms, it is a 'real' answer.

Puerto Rico and coloniality: the geopolitical context[49]

While a richer history of Puerto Rico is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the island is the specific Latinx culture and identity in which *Morenita* dwells and some background is needed to understand her agency, especially through a decolonial lens.[50] Puerto Rico is located in the Caribbean, in between North and South American in more ways than one. 'Discovered' by Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus) in 1493, it was previously populated by the indigenous Taíno Arawak nation. Upon Colón's arrival and subsequent colonization by other Spanish *conquistadores*, the island became and remained a colony of the Spanish Empire from

[48] Davaney, "Mapping Theologies", 35.

[49] I am Puerto Rican by birth and lived on the island most of my life, so this history is entangled in my flesh and memory in ways difficult to reference. For further details on the history of Puerto Rico besides what I describe in this dissertation, see Juan Ángel Silén, *Historia de Puerto Rico*. Segunda Edición (Colombia: Publicaciones Gaviota, 2003) and Jorge Duany, *Puerto Rico: What everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[50] Coloniality is the epistemology borne by Eurocentric colonialism and modernity that survives in many areas of Latin American and Latinx thought and beyond. Decoloniality is its antithesis—the liberation of the colonized mind. Many Latinx authors have played an important part in fleshing out decoloniality in Latin America and in other parts of the globe. See, for example, Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

the early sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. The indigenous people were decimated within a couple of decades of Colón's arrival via genocide and disease though, according to genetic studies, they persist in the DNA of many Puerto Ricans on the island and in the US diaspora.[51] Simply stated, Colón inaugurated the coloniality of Puerto Ricans, which lasts to this day via settler colonialism espoused with the nascent European modernity, if one locates its birth in the early sixteenth century, and both colonialism and modernity allied with Western Christianity in the throes of its early modern Reformations. Eventually Spanish colonialism was superseded, when Puerto Rico exchanged empires in 1898 for the United States. The island has been a self-governed yet deeply colonial territory of the US now for almost 125 years. Puerto Rico merely exchanged the flag of one colonizer with that of another.

The colonial situation in the island is religiously plural. Spain is mostly Catholic and the US mostly Protestant (making Puerto Rico mostly Christian). Yet during the last five hundred years, the population has embraced other autochthonous and diasporic spiritualities, which include Taíno, Black Atlantic, Kardecian Spiritist, Middle Eastern, East and South Asian, and other traditions. It is also culturally complex because indigenous and colonizer knowledges coalesced into a local colonized epistemology that hampers islanders in transcending their own situation. Consequently, Puerto Rico's colonial situation is politically tragically oppressive because Puerto Ricans are born second-class citizens in their own land. They have negligible power over their own destiny and dwell in a deeply fractured society. A decolonial perspective

[51] Carolina Bonilla, et al. "Ancestral proportions and their association with skin pigmentation and bone mineral density in Puerto Rican women from New York City." *Human Genetics* 115 (2004): 57-58; and Esteban González Burchard, et al. "Latino Populations : A Unique Opportunity for the Study of Race, Genetics, and Social Environment in Epidemiological Research." *American Journal of Public Health* 95, no. 12 (1971): 2161–68.

on this situation recognizes all these facts as colonial impositions and reinforces the 'autochthonousness' of Puerto Rican religion and culture both as challenge and asset.[52]

In what follows, I will often mention liberation. When I do, it will always be in relationship to coloniality. *Morenita*, Enrique, and his family are colonized subjects and, as many if not all Latinx subjects do, hope to thrive within it. However, in many instances of *Morenita*'s life, I also see efforts to subvert or transgress (to 'delink', in Walter Mignolo's sense), that is, to liberate themselves for the colonial situation. This liberation is plural and multiple, both local and regional in scope, and often spans the micro-liberations of everyday life (for example, successfully negotiating illness or economic adversity) to the macro-liberation of Puerto Ricans as people (which I know for a fact Enrique espouses as a political preference). Note that, as I refer to it, this liberation is epistemic but has material implications.[53] Within colonized life every act, small or large, that seeks to validate or increase being fully human is a liberative act. It is a key assumption of this dissertation that one of the aims of devotion around *Morenita* is the overall improvement of Enrique's family's life. Therefore, this devotion is intentionally and ultimately liberative. In what follows, I articulate what liberation means for Latinx theology.

[52] An excellent resource on this subject from a theological perspective is Teresa Delgado, *A Puerto Rican Decolonial Theology: Prophesy Freedom* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[53] I could only hope that, at some point, liberation will include national sovereignty as well.

Latin American and Latinx liberation theologies: the theological context

The plurality and complexity inherent in articulating material culture and theology together begs another question: In what theological perspective am I invested, both as Puerto Rican and Christian? Puerto Rican Christians, as Latinx colonial/marginalized religious subjects still living on the margins of empire five centuries after the Spanish *Conquista* and after more than a century of US annexation, sometimes accommodate, other times openly challenge, and more than a few times outright transform orthodoxy and its institutions according to our own culture.[54] In response to this chameleonic religious subjectivity, many Latinx theologians re-center and emphasize the creativity of their people's knowledges and understandings as part of (and sometimes in spite of) institutional prescriptions on local and autochthonous beliefs and practices with a resounding call for their collective real liberation. In this section, I present a brief history and mission and the main components of their approach.[55]

In the second half of the 1960s, Latin American liberation theology through priests, lay workers, and academics alike issued a rallying cry for change. The 1950s and early 1960s brought calls for social renewal around the globe. These decades and those following them are rife with critiques of white, cisgendered, heterosexual, and male Eurocentrism; militarization

[54] One very early Latin American (so Latinx by ancestry) record of the colonial tension between local culture and Catholicism is Bartolomé de Las Casas and Stafford Poole. *In Defense of the Indians: The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé De Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapas, against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992).

[55] Latinx theologies spring from Latin American liberation theologies but are certainly not the same thing. For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Benjamín Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002), especially Chapter 1. Latinx theologies go by many other names such as Latino/a theologies, Hispanic theologies, and Latina/o/x theologies. They emerged in a theological climate rife with liberationist aims. Black liberation theology, *Dalit* theology, and *Minjung* theology, just to name a few, also arose either at the same time or right after Latin American liberation theology. Indeed, inter-theological conversation among them has been productive and constant since that initial historical coincidence.

mainly to the detriment of the Global South; and imperial exceptionalism, mostly from the United States.[56] Inside the Catholic Church, more specifically, a response to this sociocultural renewal is expressed visibly in the *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* of Vatican Council II and its call to read 'the signs of the times.'[57] As a result of this societal upheaval and of shifting cultural attitudes within and outside of Catholicism, many within or near Latin America became deeply troubled by the living conditions of those marginalized by systemic socioeconomic and political oppression and the people's concomitant doctrinal and practical powerlessness to redress it.[58] Among the earliest proponents of Latin American liberation theology and related liberationist disciplines are Rubém Álves†, Hugo Assmann†, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Helder Cámara†, José Comblin†, Enrique Dussel, Ignacio Ellacuría†, Paulo Freire†, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Carlos Scannone†, Juan Luis Segundo†, and Jon Sobrino. A reaction to Latin American liberation theology's original paternalistic conceptualizations and approaches developed quickly after this male 'first generation,' and figures such as María Pilar Aquino, Ivone Gebara, Ada María Isasi-Díaz†, and Elsa Támez have nuanced many of its 'seminal' positions since the early 1970s and, importantly for this dissertation, in US Latinx contexts.[59] Today, Latin American and

[56] For a Latin American Catholic perspective of these issues, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), especially 13-25.

[57] Though I will not describe any further the implications of Vatican II for Roman Catholicism then and to this date, in Chapter 3 I base my understanding of Mariology on one of its foundational documents, *Lumen Gentium*.

[58] Gutiérrez writes, for example: "Among us the great pastoral, and therefore theological, question is: How is it possible to tell the poor, who are forced to live in conditions that embody a denial of love, that God loves them?" (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxiv; see also 29-33). The current Pope Francis (born Jorge Bergoglio), an Argentinian, derives directly from these conditions. For some of this Latin American and Latinx history, see Miguel De La Torre and Edwin Aponte. *Introducing Latino/a Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 97-115.

[59] The Catholic Church strongly rebuked Latin American liberation theology early on, even excommunicating some of its original proponents, in part due to its alleged close allegiance to Marxist thought (cf. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 8). In addition, many early liberation theologians were martyred by political

Latinx theologies are part of an international community of liberation theologies and continue to be developed even if already well-established theoretically and methodologically in global academic circles through a plethora of thinkers such as Marcella Althaus-Reid†, Frei Betto, María Clara Bingemer, Ernesto Cardenal†, Nancy Cardoso Pereira, Orlando Costas†, Teresa Delgado, Virgilio Elizondo†, Justo González, Otto Maduro†, Pablo Richard, Mayra Rivera, Luis Rivera Pagán, Fernando Segovia, and Juan José Tamayo, many of whom creatively expand its theological propositions even beyond theology and Latin American and Latinx contexts *per se*.[60]

Miguel de La Torre and Edwin Aponte provide one overview of the Latinx theological mission:

> to understand the Divine from within the Hispanic cultural location…to seek God's liberative will in the face of both cultural and economic oppression…to search for a common voice that proclaims salvation, liberation, and reconciliation to the most diverse segments of Latino/a culture…to create theological harmony between the U.S. Hispanic condition and the scriptural narratives…to struggle against the way Latinos/as are perceived and conceived by the dominant culture…and to provide a prophetic voice that unmasks the racism, classism, and sexism implicit in the theology of the dominant white culture.[61]

Latinx theology is 'God-talk' within particular Latinx contexts to address particular Latinx liberative concerns yet has universal implications. In other words, Latinx theology is 'thinking religion' from the specific viewpoint and experiences of US Latinxs yet is generalizable to all of humanity—something I attempt to do constructively in Chapter 4.[62] Even more important,

---

opponents for their efforts. Ignacio Ellacuría is one; perhaps the most famous is Óscar Romero, canonized in 2018. A thorough presentation of these conflicts and their history is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[60] A relevant expansion of Latin American liberationist thinking is the current 'decolonial turn,' which was inaugurated by Dussel and several other Latin American thinkers.

[61] De La Torre and Aponte, *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*, 43. Note that this overview presents one perspective and does not represent all of Latinx theology.

[62] Note, however, that one of the many critiques Latin American theology leveled early on to Eurocentric academic and ecclesial theologies was their presumption of universality; see De La Torre and Aponte 2001, 42.

Latinx theology is not only thinking but doing, actively working not only toward 'spiritual' salvation but also toward 'material' liberation from those that oppress Latinx life (for example, "racism, classism, and sexism," and so many other -isms; for Latin American theology, the "theology of white culture") through an effective communion between the divine, Latinx culture and community (which includes Latin American culture and history), and Christianity. Aquino writes: "The new voices that embody today's theological diversity demand that the dominant intellectual traditions acknowledge their own historicity, their own epistemological assumptions, and examine their contribution to the creation and preservation of this increasingly divided world."[63] Exploring the materialities of *Morenita* as a theological space aims to answer Aquino's challenge by decentering Eurocentric dominance while centering a Latinx context.

De La Torre and Aponte delineate some of Latinx theology's main goals, such as seeking equality for Latinxs in their "dominant white culture" and harmony amongst all Latinxs in the US, goals that nuance the overall liberative aim of Latin American liberation theology, which was originally directed toward Latin Americans. This liberative aim arose from the incongruence between economic oppression and Catholic discourses on grace in South America. Its focus was more local—the oppression of the poor in Brazil or Peru, for instance. In Latinx theology, that

---

Latin American and Latinx theologies affirm that these theologies are just as contextual even if they could have universal relevance; the ambivalence between particularity and universality is part of all theology. Two excellent resources on the contextuality of theologies in general are Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

[63] Maria Pilar Aquino, "Theological Method in U.S. Latino/a Theology: Toward an Intercultural Theology for the Third Millennium", *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz, eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 9.

theo-political incongruence is present but it is expanded and nuanced by direct imperial presence, displacement, and intergeneration—the situation of poor Latin American immigrants to the US and/or their Latinx descendants, for example.

As in Latin American liberation theology, Latinx theology conceives itself as a "second moment" methodologically.[64] In general, theology "surely presupposes faith," meaning that God-talk follows the religious experience, either in the theological subject or the object of study.[65] In addition, all liberation theologies come after "classical theology," meaning those previous theologies that it seeks to nuance.[66] More specifically on method, Clodovis Boff states that Latin American liberation theology has three steps: "seeing, judging, and acting," each of them respectively 'mediated' through the use of sociohistorical analyses, reason, and empirical validation.[67] 'Seeing' tries to understand the actual problem (through a critical application of Marxist theory or a dialectical approach with similar situations, for instance). 'Judging' then evaluates the problem in light of Christian tenets and traditions (for example, using the Bible). 'Acting' finally redresses the problem with concrete activity, what earlier on I called 'real'. "Back to Action is the motto of this theology."[68] This final step also feeds back into 'seeing' and re-analyzes the problem in light of current and proposed liberative actions. Many Latinx

[64] Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives From Liberation Theology : Readings From Mysterium Liberationis* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 9.

[65] I do not mean that theologians need to believe in order to do theology; for instance, that one has to be Christian to do Christian theology. Such a claim would contravene theology in academia. What I mean is that theology as an action proceeds from religion as an action. I do not mean to be redundant, but if religion did not exist, then theology would not either, for how can one do 'God-talk' if there is no 'God' to talk about?

[66] Sobrino and Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology*, 10.

[67] Sobrino and Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology*, 11-21.

[68] Sobrino and Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology*, 20.

theologians have adopted this methodology, as have I, even if heuristically and/or complemented by other scholarly analyses (such as linguistic or literary). As in its predecessor, this method is deployed at all theological "levels," namely either the "professional, pastoral, or popular."[69] Note that there is a methodological tension between the abstract and the concrete. In the Latinx context, both are equally important and support each other to benefit material life and the eventual salvation of those so-called 'non-agents,' meaning those at the margins of history.

Perhaps the most important foundational concept in Latinx theology is *lo cotidiano*, loosely translatable as 'the everyday.' It is defined as the "horizon of Latinas lived-experience" by *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz but has since encompassed other contexts of Latinx theology.[70] I write 'foundational' because it is of Latinx theology's essence: *lo cotidiano* is its hermeneutical lens and location. It is "where we [Latinxs] first meet and relate to the material world that is made up not only of physical realities but also of how we relate to that reality (culture), and how we understand and evaluate that reality and our relationship with it (history)."[71] I do not mean that all Latinx theologians deal with *lo cotidiano* (in fact, many do not). But all Latinx theology seeks relevance in lived experience, meaning that theology has to

[69] Sobrino and Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology*, 20.

[70] Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. "*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology", *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (August 2002), 6. The term *mujerista* has fallen into disfavor in some quarters of Latinx theology, as it reinforces gender and occludes ethnic difference. See, for example, Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood. *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007), especially Chapter 2. Delving deeply into this is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[71] Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*", 8.

be 'real' for Latinx theologians.[72] Since *lo cotidiano* has so many moving parts, such as epistemologies, ideologies, material conditions, nations, times, genders, and so on, it is common-sensical, messy, pragmatic, detail-oriented, intuitive, urgent, and subjective: in short, real.[73] Furthermore, *lo cotidiano* is a key *locus theologicus*, the place from which theory, method, and ultimate concern spring. Simply stated, liberating *lo cotidiano* of the marginalized and the oppressed is one of Latinx theology's main if not ultimate concern *qua* human endeavor.[74] The Enrique-*Morenita* devotional space is a liberative *lo cotidiano* space that has conditioned their family's subjectivity and worldview for five generations.

Mary and Marian devotion: the Mariological context

According to Christian theology, Mary of Nazareth is the human mother of the fully human and fully divine Jesus Christ. She has been at the center of theology since very early in Christian thought, linking Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, theological anthropology, and others under one historical figure with her own theological focus: Mariology.[75] Indeed, Christians appeal to Mary more than any other figure besides Jesus himself to understand particular aspects of belief. She enjoys this unique position due to her 'privileged' presence in

[72] This 'reality' is well laid out by Benjamín Valentín in *Mapping Public Theology* (Trinity Press International 2002), especially in its Introduction. There, he issues a call for Latinx theology to become more "public" and less "insular" in its pursuit of social justice and liberation – Latinx theology as "transcultural public discourse."

[73] Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano"*, 9-12.

[74] Isasi-Díaz, "*Lo Cotidiano*", 16.

[75] For evidence of her undisputable relevance for Christian theology in general, among others here, see Juan L. Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer: A Mariology Textbook* (Dublin, Ireland ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2006), 19.

Jesus's life.[76] For instance, Mary was there, front and center, when Jesus came to be as God incarnate and was also there when Jesus left 'this-world' for the 'beyond' after the Resurrection. Mary was present at other key moments of Jesus's earthly pilgrimage (like the wedding at Cana and the Passion and Crucifixion), and also when the *ekklesia* was instituted through/by the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost. According to the biblical witness, Mary is a unique presence between the human world and the divine world.

While I will not describe or explain Mary's interrelated 'privileges' too deeply here (because my focus is on the devotional object, not on doctrine), they bear mentioning as they are central to Mariology.[77] Note that all of these have been evidenced throughout institutional history via holy scripture and church tradition. Out of all possible human mothers, God chose Mary to be the mother of the Son of God, so 'divine motherhood' is her most important role in the history of salvation. This momentous role is supported by her privileged 'immaculate conception' (that is, her preemptive lack of the Adamic original sin) and her 'perpetual virginity' (according to Scripture, Jesus was born "not of blood but of spirit"). In the discussion of *Lumen Gentium* below, I mention some other qualities, like her 'assumption' (that is, she went straight up to heaven without dying) and her role as 'co-redeemer' alongside of Christ (if in a slightly diminished capacity), as they become more relevant. In sum, not only was she privileged to stand beside Jesus during his earthly journey and is eternally besides God in the heavenly court,

[76] Bastero, *Mary, Mother*, 22-23.

[77] All information in this paragraph was garnered from Aidan Nichols, *There Is No Rose: The Mariology of the Catholic Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015) and others here. Here and elsewhere, all dates are AD (or CE) unless otherwise stated.

but she also has privileges and roles that support and validate her personhood among God's creation. Devotion to Mary is well-justified according to Christian doctrine and tradition.

Marian devotion is evident by the early part of the fourth century, but her privileged status among believers very well could have started much earlier; after all, she figures prominently in an early intercessory prayer called the *Sub Tuum* (ca. 250) and in apocryphal literature.[78] However, by the start of the fifth century, a "more organized and public" Marian cult emerged, as seen in communal feasts, liturgical documents (such as homilies), and pilgrimage records.[79] These facts are important because although scholars traditionally assign the rise of Marian devotion to her elevation as *Theotokos* at Ephesus in 431, she was in fact very much present in popular piety for centuries before that. In other words, popular religion precedes, and most likely seems to have transformed, 'official' doctrinal decisions in this case, just as it could be said of Marian devotion in the Latinx contexts described in Chapter 1 and Enrique's 'alternative spirituality' around *Morenita.* Note that Enrique does not describe himself as Roman Catholic and includes elements of other religious and indigenous practices in his devotional practices and understandings.

Mary is not prevalent in the New Testament but she is a protagonist in several key scriptural events that justify her devotional eminence: along with the events mentioned earlier,

---

[78] Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotion in Early Christianity", *Mary: The Complete Resource*, Sarah Jane Boss, ed. (London; New York: Continuum, 2007), 130-135. The *Sub Tuum* prayer reads as follows:

"We fly to Thy protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O Glorious and Blessed Virgin." ("Holy See Press Office Communiqué", online at https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/29/180929d.html, accessed 10/30/2020.

[79] Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies", 138-139.

there is the Annunciation, the Visitation, the escape to Egypt, Jesus's birth (the Nativity), and his public ministry.[80] These movement-laced moments, bracketed between Jesus's messianic life cycle (biological/spiritual conception, death, and resurrection), cemented her place in Christian piety and devotion since late in the Patristic era. By the eleventh century, perhaps due to her identification with the Church (which by that time was wielding considerable power in both the religious and the secular realms) as both glorious and humble, Mary had gained exceptional agency in the institutional and popular spheres. Another important Marian dimension in this mid-Medieval era was her identification as *Madre Dolorosa*, in reference to her son's suffering at the Cross. As Visscher notes, "Mary therefore becomes the ideal figure with whom to identify oneself."[81] As will be seen in Chapter 1, these political-subjective aspects of Marian imagination remain an essential component in Latinx devotion, including that of Enrique and his family. Note also that this paradigmatic status immediately precedes the colonial endeavor in the Americas.

The start of the 'modern' era in Europe, with its coincidence of resurgent humanistic thought, technological advances and scientific discoveries, ongoing political upheaval among Western Church and European nation-states, and the impact of the Reformation, directly influenced Marian representation and, by implication, image-based devotion: "[these] new sensibilities…in turn led to important shifts in the public portrayal of the Virgin." For example,

[80] See, for example, Eva de Visscher, "Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Later Middle Ages", in Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 177-178.

[81] Visscher, "Marian Devotion", 180-183. Indeed, "throughout the central and later Middle Ages the veneration of Mary dominates religious culture," most especially in her roles as "Perpetual Virgin, Divine Intercessor and *Mater Dolorosa*," which produces among institutional and popular believers "meditation upon her experiences and emotions, and eager identification with her as a human being." (199)

Mary was appropriated as a political icon of imperial power, which many times ran counter to the centuries-old Marian cult of chastity, domesticity, and motherly love.[82] Ironically, however, from the start of the so-called 'secular age' (the more-disenchanted eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) to the present day, Marian devotion has not merely survived but thrived. Writing in relation to more contemporary European Marian apparitions, Simon Coleman states:

> the cult of Mary has increased rather than diminished in southern Europe [and its colonies] over the past century or more…it seems [that] apparitions of Mary have not only acted to convey political messages in opposition to the enemies of faith – reaffirming the immaculate conception in the case of Lourdes, or anti-communism at Fatima – but have also worked in concert with the physical production of new pilgrimage sites, whose reach is increasingly trans-national in scope.[83]

The ongoing intersection of socio-political affairs, Church doctrine, and popular religion in Marian devotion and Mariology, which will be seen with Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles in the Latinx context of La Guadalupe and is certainly present in the Enrique-*Morenita* devotional space, has deep roots in European history and the colonial endeavor.

Throughout its history, the Church has been deeply concerned with issues of idolatry and iconophilia/iconophobia among its members. For Coleman, Mary's intersectionality *qua* object evinces this in three ways: through the ramifications of her objectual "presence" as emblematic of both regional politics and global Catholic theology; through her 'bridging' of the objectual and the 'transcendent' (many times through achieropoiesis—'holy creation,'—which is how the Guadalupan image is rationalized); and through "multiplication" or the diffusion of "sacred power" through multiple copies of the same prototype.[84] 'Presence,' in other words,

[82] Trevor Johnson, "Mary in Early Modern Europe" in Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 363-366.

[83] Simon Coleman, "Mary: Images and Objects", in Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 398.

[84] Coleman, "Mary: Images and Objects", 398-399.

the 'beyond' in a 'this-worldly' image, is still a cornerstone of Latinx theology's theorizations of devotional objects in Latinx (regional) popular religion (as will be seen with Espín, Goizueta, and Scheper Hughes) and its tensions with 'official' Christianity. The mechanisms and consequences of 'objectual-transcendent bridging' are precisely the concern of this dissertation, particularly from the standpoint of theology in a specific context. And "multiplication" inheres in personhood and excess, as Gell and Brown describe in Chapter 2, for when 'diffusion of sacred power' is added to 'presence' and 'bridging,' Mary's theological import *qua Morenita* begins to emerge.

More recently, in the mid-1960s, Mariology was further systematized as part of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, *Lumen Gentium* or the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, one of the foundational documents of the Council, ends with a chapter on Mary, a fact that expresses in no uncertain terms her exalted status within Christianity even after almost two millennia. The chapter states that Mary

> is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit…Wherefore this Holy Synod, in expounding the doctrine on the Church, in which the divine Redeemer works salvation, intends to describe with diligence both the role of the Blessed Virgin in the mystery of the Incarnate Word and the Mystical Body, and the duties of redeemed mankind toward the Mother of God, who is mother of Christ and mother of men, particularly of the faithful.[85]

From the start, Mary's 'roles' are framed around the Triune God, the Incarnation, and the Church. Most important in this case, however, are the 'duties' that she has and that believers owe her. On these duties the passage is clear: Mary co-enables salvation but in turn also

[85] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, November 21, 1964, Chapter 8, Section I, paragraph 54; available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

demands certain actions due to her status as Mother of God and of humanity in general. The reciprocity, meaning the 'to-and-fro' of struggle and grace, necessitates co-agency. *Lumen Gentium* also states that "because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, because she belongs to the offspring of Adam [and Eve] she is one with all those who are to be saved."[86] Mary is exalted above all other created beings: above Adam and Eve, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, saints, Church Fathers, and any and all creatures before and after her. Only the Triune God stands above her. Stated simply, in Christianity Mary is what I would call the Best Human. The fact that she is also a woman (and dark-skinned, in the case of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate, *Morenita*'s prototype) is provocative in itself, but more on that in Chapter 3. Her standing as Mother of God and of humanity and the duties required of us in response to this fact make her central in human hope and salvation. Indeed, her influence is of the essence of soteriology.[87]

In *Lumen Gentium*, Mary is also specifically called "advocate" and "mediator" for the Church. Doctrinally, her advocacy or mediation is always subsumed under Christ: "neither takes away from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one Mediator."[88] However, her status as Best Human certifies her nearness to humanity, and her roles reinforce her eminence as both, becoming what I call Closest Advocate and Mediator. Being one with humanity yet above it, Mary is the perfect being for the roles. Popular religion seems to have recognized this fact very early on, as Mary became an object of piety and devotion before all

[86] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, I, 53.

[87] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, II.

[88] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, III, 62.

other creatures. Her advocacy and role as 'mediatrix' are still essential to devotees' imagination, particularly in the Latinx context.

Along with her uniqueness, this advocacy and mediation also makes Mary paradigmatic for the Church and believers. Says *Lumen Gentium*: "But while in the most holy Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle, the followers of Christ still strive to increase in holiness by conquering sin. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues."[89] Mary *qua* "model" is the most perfect guide of faithful Christian being and behaving for *cotidiano* believers, who understandably are not quite as perfect as she is. And this modeling is effected materially, by a literal and metaphorical 'turning' of the eyes toward a 'shining' Mary. Consequently, devotional objects like *Morenita* focus the needed attention and expected illumination as what I would call Perfect Christian.

Perhaps most relevant to this dissertation, *Lumen Gentium* also addresses devotion in detail. The following extended quotation emphasizes its importance for Mariology:

> The various forms of piety toward the Mother of God, which the Church within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine, according to the conditions of time and place, and the nature and ingenuity of the faithful has approved, bring it about that while the Mother is honored, the Son, through whom all things have their being and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell, is rightly known, loved and glorified and that all His commands are observed…But it exhorts theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God…Let them assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church. Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by

[89] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, III, 65.

> which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues.[90]

Even after all these centuries, the tension between Christian 'official' and popular religion is glaring in this passage. "Sound and orthodox doctrine" should be the essence of all devotional contexts, even if temporally and spatially contingent, and believers' "nature and ingenuity" is to be respected. This statement is surely made in reference to the multiplicity of Christian contexts around the globe (of which Latinx is one) and to their influence upon the local *sensus fidelium*, both of which ultimately should answer to the 'official' *sensus fidei*. For instance, through devotion Mary is "honored," yet Christ is the one to be "known, loved, and glorified" and obeyed. The institution always conceives of Mary Christologically. Yet *Lumen Gentium* also firmly warns about "gross exaggerations" and "petty narrow-mindedness," especially of "theologians and preachers." The presence of this warning in an 'official' document is ironic, since it seems like the statement ordinary believers would make against the Church *qua* institution. Indeed, the warning implicitly alleges that theology and preaching is more of a popular orientation. However, the danger truly is a heterodox interpretation or application of Mary's "singular dignity," her uniqueness and perfection. It would seem that an on-going overemphasis on Marian devotion that leads to heterodox theological and liturgical interpretations is being addressed; indeed, from the nineteenth century on, Marian devotion increased dramatically worldwide.[91] What is really provocative is that popular devotion is clearly exerting pressure on institutional spheres, questioning and perhaps transforming

[90] Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, IV, 66-67.

[91] For the prevalence of Marian popular devotional groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Bastero, *Mary, Mother*, 53-54.

'official' understandings. Finally, *Lumen Gentium* affirms that 'true devotion' is not founded on 'sterile or transitory affection' or on 'vain credulity,' but on 'true faith' that leads to 'filial love' and 'imitation.' While the rejection of human enthusiasm and/or underdeveloped faith is clear, the emphasis on proper relations between the divine and the human is most relevant to this dissertation. In other words, devotion is about healthy relationships and not about fleeting feelings or immature belief. For *Lumen Gentium,* true faith is not an end in itself but mediates the loving interaction with and profound imitation of the divine.

Mariology and Marian devotion from a Latinx perspective

As stated before, since 431 Western Christianity has considered Mary the biological mother of Jesus to be *Theotokos*, that is, Mother of God. This honor places her in the upper echelons of Christian figures. She has been theorized extensively within and outside the institution and remains essential to Christian belief and practice (and theology) around the globe. Likewise, she has been central to both Latinx institutional and popular religion ever since she was appropriated and re-imagined after the *Conquista*. Latin American and Latinx theologies have also nuanced her theological import.[92] In what follows, I will briefly present that particular perspective using the work of Latin American theologians Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer as additional background on Mary and *Morenita*.[93]

[92] Apart from those appearing below and in Chapter 1, see also Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) and the orthopraxical work of Latina Mariologists Neomi De Anda and Jennifer Owens-Jofré.

[93] Ivone Gebara, Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, and Phillip Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

Gebara and Bingemer suggest that the historical Mary is transformative of "androcentric and patriarchal" theologies ingrained in Christian orthodoxy, leading to a "human-centered," "unifying," "realist," and "pluri-dimensional" theological anthropology: the woman-Mary opens up ways of being human and, by extension, of being divine that integrate all of humanity under the *imago Dei*.[94] For Gebara and Bingemer, Mary subverts 'official' theology just by being woman. As stated before, Mary is 'perfect' for orthodoxy, what I called the Best Human. But the fact that she is biologically a woman is key, since as a woman she transgresses dominating 'manly' theologies. Her transgression is grounded on that irrefutable fact. The four dimensions that Mary brings into theological anthropology produce a more diverse, inclusive, and ultimately equitable concept of being human within Christianity. Not only is Mary the Best Human but she is also the Perfect Christian, the epitome of what it means to be a Christian self. *Morenita*'s nearness to Enrique and his family and their lasting devotion certainly make her the model of Christianness to follow and imitate, and one that transcends difference through time and space: gender difference, generational difference, and religious difference.

Mary also transgresses any "dualism by affirming the deep unity of the human being, who is both material and divine, so much so that we cannot conceive of the human being except on the basis of this reality which is proper to humans." The figure of Mary is contrary to idealism and one-dimensionality, which seeks to abstract humanity from its dynamic and diverse (and many times tragic) material situations.[95] At the same time, Mary's materialness challenges a detached, impassive immateriality of God. For Gebara and Bingemer, Mary keeps

[94] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 2-4.

[95] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 5, 7-11.

the Christian self strongly embedded in history as opposed to any romanticizing (perhaps even divinizing) intent. In other words, she is human. Anthropocentric and anti-kyriarchal Mariologies, such as of these two theologians, emphasize those who are marginalized (for example, women as they are), who are traditionally construed as passive or patients and not as active of agents in their own lives. For example, the authors write that though "previously submissive *consumers* of 'small dosages' of theology sufficient for their domestic use, women are now beginning to inquire about their own faith and their relationship with God, and to do theology, thereby becoming *producers* of this type of knowledge."[96] This agency is brought about and maintained by a faith grounded in the biblical Mary and also by a conviction about the historical Mary, Mary as a real and not-immaterial woman. By the same token, *Morenita* becomes a locus for active spiritual knowledge and understanding in the here and now, an anchor to Enrique's and her family's ingrained beliefs and dreams.

This theological transformation of the androcentric and patriarchal is sustained by a particular hermeneutic, one that affirms the agency of God in history and of humans that "live in God" while also living "in history." This interpretative lens, write Gebara and Bingemer, affirms that "there is a connection between struggles during life…and the absolute human yearning to live, to see one's existence extended in a life of justice, all one's toils rewarded."[97] Mary is emblematic of those that 'live in God' and 'in history', and therefore materializes the connection through space and time – Mary is a "realist." Indeed, through Marian devotion, this

[96] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 14.

[97] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 20-21. Perhaps just like Enrique, they call this connection "spirituality." They write: "To speak of spirituality is to speak of 'something' sustaining the materiality in which we live…to feel that Mary is accompanying us 'on the paths of life'…to organize one's life around transcendence, whatever historic form it might take on [in] different cultural environments." (25-26)

'yearning' is linked to Mary as "a kind of certain guarantee, an incontestable last resort within the insecure and fragile course of events, even if the yearning is not satisfied." Mary effectively brings together God and human, struggle and hope, doubtful existence and faithful life within the plural and complex historical and cultural contingencies of the Latinx context, while still maintaining her divine status. Mary exemplifies values that many Latinx communities in general, and Enrique and his family in particular through *Morenita*, consider central, such as compassion, humility, diversity, and solidarity with those in need.[98] This is Mary as Closest Advocate and Mediator. But where can the historical Mary be found?

As stated earlier, according to Gebara and Bingemer, Mary effects this liberation between those who 'live in history,' like her devotees, and those who 'live in God,' like her: "Mary has been the mother and great companion for many of the people's struggles in Latin America."[99] This accompaniment, as will be seen in Goizueta's work in Chapter 1, is key in Marian theology. Mary, as a material presence among her believers is not only effective through eschatological intent but also within the marginalized folks' *lo cotidiano*. This tragic pleading is materialized through "votive offerings…the symbolic expression of humankind's sufferings and martyrdoms. Photos, crutches, clothing, parts of the human body carved out of wood or wax [*ex-votos*], manacles, chains, and other objects are symbols of the restoration of life obtained through the influence of the Virgin…the wonderful, miracles, and cures take place

[98] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 22-24.

[99] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 128, 135-136. They add that Mary's "breakthrough of the extraordinary—appearance, cure, miracle—especially in the life of the poor, of those who go to the Virgin as a last resort in their harsh existence." (137-138)

in the order of human materiality or bodiliness."[100] In other words, the material or the bodily unites the worlds 'in God' and 'in history,' confirming materiality as the site of Marian divine power. *Morenita* is a companion to Enrique and vice versa, evidenced through mutual stewardship (seen later as custodia, mayordomía) in the now and beyond.

A word on dark-skinned (also known as 'black') Madonnas

Representation of Mary as dark skinned is fairly widespread throughout European geography and history. Indeed, it has been argued that this representation of women deities predates Christianity by thousands of years, their spheres of action straddling first the natural and supernatural worlds (for instance, dealing with weather and/or reproduction) and later the religious and not-religious, when some of these deities became symbols of nationhood. Dark-skinned Madonnas are prevalent in many countries between Russia and Spain thanks to these facts and others.[101] In the case of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate (*Morenita*'s prototype), Mary Elizabeth Perry writes: "The Virgin of Montserrat became especially powerful as a symbol of Catalonia…For a people trying to prevent a growing central state from swallowing up their special cultural autonomy, the Virgin of Monserrat served as a symbol of their separate identity."[102] As will be seen, Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate has a similar complex history. The skin color of these dark-skinned Madonnas could be accidental, but it is no less symbolic for

[100] Gebara, Bingemer, and Berryman, *Mary, Mother of God*, 138-139.

[101] See Małgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe : Tradition and Transformation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), especially 11-48.

[102] Mary Elizabeth Perry, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat" in Frances Richardson Keller. *Views of Women's Lives in Western Tradition: Frontiers of the Past and the Future*. Lewiston NY: E. Mellen Press, 1990, 114.

that in their own contexts.[103] According to Monique Scheer, dark-skinned Madonnas are an example of the entanglement of the religious and other cultural realms due to how images are imagined. In this case, what started as mundane (for instance, an image covered in candle soot) is then 'sacralized' through an appeal to scripture (for some dark-skinned Madonnas, the biblical book *Song of Solomon*, especially Chapter 1) and later re-construed as biblically unsound when influenced by other non-religious norms (such as changing conceptions of skin color and race). In other words, what the images are is transposed into what they mean and vice versa, until their being and meaning are both lost and therefore 'mystified.'

For the dark-skinned Madonna Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate, the mountainous location adds to her mystique, and this generates both the image's opacity and wide agency within and outside of religion. Writes Alfred Sabaté Botet: "Montserrat [the mountain in Cataluña where she was first encountered and where the abbey is located] seems to have this magical and enigmatic dimension, perhaps from its rocky and cavernous formations…[The locale is] many times associated with enchanting manifestations that have produced a multitude of literary compositions."[104] In other words, these images often feed off their primeval, and dare I say Edenic, surroundings and invest themselves with "magical and enigmatic" personas that encourage polyvalency and influence in diverse areas of existence. In addition, the dark-skinned Madonna's epidermal otherness reflects both the place of origin and

[103] One relevant quotation from Monique Scheer in "From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries" (*American Historical Review*, December 2002): "black Madonnas have present[ed] scholars with a conundrum for which no completely satisfactory answer has been found." (1412)

[104] Alfred Sabaté Botet, "Aparición, tradición y devoción en las advocaciones de la Virgen de la Merced y de Montserrat," *Estudios Marianos* 75 (2009), 240, my translation.

the continuance of their plurality and subversiveness. Writes Jude Morton: "Even now, it is generally true that at sites where Black Madonnas are found, the devotional cults around them are particularly intense, and at the same time the images and their devotees are consistently marginalized and misrepresented by religious officialdom."[105] This dual power of devotional intensity and heterodoxy is as clear in the dark-skinned Madonnas from colonial New Spain as it is in current Latin America and US Latinx communities, as will be seen in Chapter 1.

Chapter breakdown

In Chapter 1, I will first succinctly present the conflicting discourse between the material and the divine in the history of Christianity as background for its negotiation in the Latinx context. Polemics around idolatry, iconoclasm and iconophilia, and divine presence are in the background of the Latinx scholarship that I then present and the everyday popular religion and devotional objects they explore. Two devotional objects are protagonists in this chapter: *La Guadalupe* and the *Cristo Aparecido.* The Spanish-American advocation of Nuestra Señora de La Guadalupe, based on her apparition to the indigenous Juan Diego and later embodied on the *tilma* object, has transcended her religiousness as a Catholic divine image and now permeates other large areas of Latinx culture, such as art and individual/communal identity. In this chapter, I will argue for the validity of Latinx popular religion (and my implication, its material culture) as *locus theologicus*, using the work of Latinx scholars Orlando Espín, Jeannette Rodríguez, and María del Socorro Castañeda-Liles. I will then argue that Latinx popular religion

[105] Jude Morton, "Sacred Shadows: The Significance of Black Madonnas", *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 2, no. 2 (2013), 103.

is not only a *locus theologicus* but also a *fons*, a theological source, for this drawing on the work of Latinx theologians Espín, Roberto S. Goizueta, and Jennifer Scheper Hughes. This last scholar is closer to my approach, as she builds an object-centered theology using the devotional object *Cristo Aparecido* from Totolapan, México. By the end of this chapter, devotional objects as theological space and source are well evidenced.

In Chapter 2, I will produce a theoretical framework for the agency of devotional objects using the work of Alfred Gell and Bill Brown, and I present my method for ascertaining *Morenita*'s agency and its theological implications using objectual methodology and the work of Erwin Panofsky and Carl Knappett. From Gell and Brown I develop what I call *excessive personhood*. This term refers to the self-transcendent social agency of specific objects, in this case religious agency like that of *Morenita*. In this specific devotional space, it describes the agentic power of both devotee and devoted, the self-starting force that produces and maintains the desire to venerate that which is indexed, the divine. In other words, excessive personhood validates devotional agency. But how can that be proven empirically, meaning 'for real'? The answer is through the ethnographic method (i.e., using observation, participation, and interviews to get an emic perspective on devotional practices) and through the agents' (now persons'; more on this later) historical accounts in a constructivist key.

In Chapter 3, with the insights gained in Chapter 1 about the specific materialities between devotee and devotional objects in Latin American and Latinx contexts and using the theoretical and methodological frameworks on Chapter 2, I describe and analyze the devotional space in which *Morenita* and Enrique (and his family and their vicinity) dwell. First, I write biographies of Enrique and *Morenita*. Second, I explore the history of Nuestra Señora de la

Monserrate in Spain and in Puerto Rico. Third, I do form and content analysis (that is, an iconographical description and interpretation) of *Morenita* and her vicinity. All along these three steps, at first tentatively but eventually more strongly, I gesture toward what I consider theological in the devotional space. To conclude, I combine all the previous doctrinal, historical, and object-centered information (that is, Catholic and Latinx Mariology, Latinx popular religion as theological *locus* and *fons*, excessive personhood, and the history and ethnography on *Morenita* and Enrique) to tease out initial theological insights for further development in the last chapter.

In Chapter 4, I develop those initial theological insights in light of the object and of Latinx life, turning my dissertation *a posteriori* into a constructive theology. In the *Morenita*-Enrique devotional space, devotion has an *a priori* component that materialities express *a posteriori*. I call this component devotedness. This devotedness, a mutual and reciprocal love, flows from *Morenita* herself and as an expression of God's grace, and is returned by Enrique and his family through their loving *mayordomía*. I constructively describe that devotedness as creative, solidary, and radical other, using systematic and constructive Latinx thinkers and my own conclusions.[106] These are certainly not final; constructive thought is open-ended, fallible, and forward-looking by nature. But, coming full circle, the Latinx, objectual, and Mariological materialities of the *Morenita*-Enrique space yield an understanding of devotion as both taking care in the material and venerating in the divine as the dissertation's title suggests—in sum, a 'this-worldly' divine devotional space.

[106] 'Solidary' is an uncommon word in the English language. As per the *OED*, I use it in the sense of 'pertaining to solidarity.'

Chapter 1

Devotional objects: material, divine, and Latinx thought

> [Mass-produced devotional images] were not simply about the private sentiments of those who admired them; they were the very means of making concrete, uniform, and universal the memories and feelings that define the individual. This ubiquity and sameness, this pervasive familiarity, will seem militantly boring to those for whom the imagery signifies an alien world, but it is deeply reassuring for the image's adherents. Believers return to the same imagery over and over precisely because it reaffirms what they want to take for granted about the world.
>
> "take care and venerate *La Morenita*, protect [Ana], and be a good steward [of the family farm]."

In this chapter I will explore how theologians and other scholars of religion are concerned about US Latinx devotional objects, particularly statues of Mary and Jesus.[1] Generally, these statues form part of a complex lived-religious imaginary that straddles worlds and worldviews traditionally seen as dichotomous, such as the 'divine' and the 'material,' as David Morgan writes in the epigraph.[2] More specifically, in Latinx communities, many times these objects are Catholic in style and content yet have been appropriated and reimagined by local popular religion, which often combines Christian and non-Christian religiosities. In these former (and, for Puerto Rico, current) colonial locations, where religion is woven into *lo cotidiano*, the material consequences of these devotional objects become visible through their constant presence and participation not only in religious belief and practice but also in politics,

[1] As stated in the Introduction, I prefer the term 'Latinx' instead of *Latino* or *Latina/o* because of its gender inclusivity in English.

[2] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 17.

art, gender relations, and other aspects of culture. In the epigraph, we see an example.[3] As *Morenita*'s custodio, Enrique is equally tasked with both the material and the divine as they relate to the image. Indeed, theologians themselves has never been isolated from these interreligious and intracultural conversations in Latinx contexts, as evidenced by the emergence of Latin American and Latinx liberation theologies.[4]

Throughout Christian history, images have been at the center of contestation and sometimes violence, prompting debates about the risks of idolatry, iconodulism and iconophobia, and even sacramentality that continue to present day. Most of these conflicts reflect ambivalent theological conceptions of the relationship between the material and the divine. Latinx communities are not particularly exempt from these conflicts, brought over by settler colonialism and its insidious remainder coloniality, as described in the Introduction.[5] Images of Mary and Christ have figured prominently in Latinx's *lo cotidiano* since the establishment of 'New Spain' in the sixteenth century in what is now known as Latin America.[6] These images usually display nesting spheres of influence that entangle the 'this-worldly'

[3] These were the instructions received by Enrique's great-grandfather Vicente upon inheriting the stewardship of Enrique's *Morenita* and wardship of Enrique's grandaunt Ana Milagros. More on this in Chapter 3.

[4] One recent monograph that masterfully addresses a particular interaction between theology and culture in the Latinx context is Antonio Alonso, *Commodified Communion: Consumer Culture, Eucharist, and the Practice of Everyday Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021). A relevant quote: "However imperfectly, these objects and practices make manifest desires, hopes, joys, fears, hurts, anxieties, remembrances, and expressions of gratitude through objects that are neither exempt from market forces nor ancillary to the ways that faithful people experience God in the practice of everyday life. Even in their commodified state, these objects and practices testify to a theology embodied in and practiced through the limitations and possibilities of culture." (4)

[5] For coloniality as it relates to Christianity, see the recent excellent work by Raimundo Barreto and Roberto Sirvent. *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[6] The word 'image' is used descriptively and not analytically here, referring to the devotional object by its intended function. It is meant to encompass all three semiotic types (icon, index, and symbol) as sign. It is not meant, however, to index the understandings and history of the term in Christianity (as in *imago dei*, for one), though those coincidences are unavoidable as will be seen in this and later chapters.

material and the 'beyond' divine in seemingly idolatrous ways, yet are widely accepted and used as general-communal and particular-individual expressions of faith. For example, Enrique's *Morenita* is both 'sacred' and 'profane' to the colonized mind: she is a Spanish-Catholic advocation of Mary (i.e., Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate) popular in Spain and Hispanic America due to her history of religious affection and political subversiveness, and she is also a widespread expression of private and public religiosity (for example, individual piety and collective feasts) throughout Spain and its former colonies, and she is also a well-loved and active participant in the quotidian life of one Puerto Rican man and his family. Enrique's *Morenita* entangles colonialized religion and decolonializing politics, 'official' and popular religion, and Christian selves and others in one ambivalent body both 'this-worldly' and 'beyond' – her own. How does this ambivalence and conflict express itself in Christian history, which directly impacts the colonial American and current Latinx contexts?

Scholarship on Latinx popular religion and theology has always been invested in the polysemic material aspects of its multiethnic traditions and contexts. From its origins in the debates between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in the sixteenth century to Latin American liberation theology's pioneers in the late twentieth century and the more recent 'decolonial turn' born in the American Global South, scholars within or culturally and/or historically adjacent to the Latinx context have long situated culture and religion together and explored the implications one has for the other.[7] Within this scholarship, thinkers have notably

[7] The scholarship on the Las Casas and Sepúlveda debate and its implications is vast. See, for example: Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One: A study of the Disputation Between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indian* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974). 'Decolonial turn' refers to the current questioning of 'coloniality' in Latin American and Latinx contexts.

built 'theologies from below,' that is, theologies that spring from believers' contexts (not from institutions *per se*) that probe and offer respite to everyday folk. These critical and contextual theologies question the externally imposed (and almost always violently) 'colonizing' conceptualization of the divine as the opposite of the material, and also respond by proposing fruitful material solutions that grow within and seek to impact positively Latinx communities and beyond. Using this scholarship, I will ask: How have these images been conceptualized and used in Latinx popular religion and its antecedents? How have these authors navigated historical conflicts around images? What new understandings emerge from analyzing their Latinx reception? What roles do they play in devotion and otherwise? What are their transgressive meanings and possibilities within all *lo cotidiano* spaces?

Material culture does not only embody the worst consequences of colonialism. Images like Enrique's *Morenita* also demonstrate their ubiquitous and salutary influence not only within the religious sphere but also in almost every other aspect of *lo cotidiano*. Dark-skinned Madonnas like her are simultaneously sacred/holy symbols, colonial subjects, faithful life-partners, selfless yet self-ed mothers , poor and black/brown natives and immigrants, freedom fighters, muses, pop celebrities, and so much more. Many Latinx scholars focus on this plurality and diversity of these Marian devotional images. One such dark-skinned Madonna is ubiquitous in this scholarship: Nuestra Señora de La Guadalupe. Latinx Guadalupan devotion and its corresponding debates have been extensively researched, especially by Catholic scholarship. This 'Morenita' (not to be confused with Enrique's; she is a completely different Marian advocation) is an extremely popular site and medium for religion and identity in general and insights around her are paradigmatic of Marian devotion in Latin American and Latinx contexts.

I read this work also with a special emphasis on the religious *cotidiano* expressed by *La Guadalupe* and her devotional community.

In the chapter I start with a brief history of the debates around materiality and divinity. I will then explore recent Latinx religious scholarship on devotional objects: their presuppositions, theories, and methods around studies of Latinx popular religion and theology, especially in the nexus between culture, history, self, and religion seen in objects like *La Guadalupe*. To summarize, I will ask how Latinx scholarship on religion and theology theorizes the materialities of Latin American and Latinx devotional objects. I will conclude with some suggestions on how some of these insights apply to Enrique's *Morenita*.

A brief history of Christian debates around materiality and divinity[8]

The concerns voiced by scholars of Latin American and Latinx devotion using objects can be traced to debates that arose very early in Christianity. Since its inception, the faithful have been caught in an inscrutable polemic between materiality and divinity.[9] One of the foundational issues can be summed up by the word 'idolatry,' literally 'image worship,'

[8] This section only intends to present the traditional debates around idolatry and related issues as they are inherited by recent Latin American and Latinx Christian scholarship and theology. For deeper and more nuanced historical and theological analyses, see for example, Tugendhaft and Ellenbogen, *Idol Anxiety*.

[9] For instance, Scripture written a few years after Jesus's death already deals with the problem. In the New Testament, for example, Paul asks how an immaterial God is present and active in the material world: "For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity" (*The Bible*, ASV, Romans 1:20). Indeed, the Hebrew Bible evidences the same doubts: how can humans be human yet divine-like – "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26) Or, how is it possible (and required) to use the fleshly in divine worship to a God that abhors physicality – "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, *nor* any likeness of *anything* that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Deuteronomy 5:8) – and yet that same God incarnated to save humanity? The tense relationship between the material and the divine is worrisome even for early Christians (and their predecessors in Israelite religion).

conceived as the dangerous transposition of 'beyond'/divine and 'this-worldly'/material, in other words, the pollution of what is considered pure ('sacred') by what is considered impure ('profane'). While the definition and the stakes of idolatry change throughout history, for early Christian thinkers down to early modern Catholics and Reformers idolatry is not merely ritual adoration of images but a part of being human that has tragic implications for the Christian self. Tertullian (ca. 160–230), in *On Idolatry*, writes: "The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgement, is idolatry."[10] Idolatry is pervasive in human life and therefore a constant danger to Christians. According to Tertullian, idolatry was not only worship of Roman gods but *cotidiano* work done on behalf of pagan others (with few exceptions)! The all-encompassing essence of idolatry makes it central to human fallibility. This sense of idolatry as an unavoidable conflict within human nature Augustine developed further in his *Commentary on Psalms*, especially on Psalms 45, 72, 115, and 135. For example, commenting on Psalm 72:23, he writes: "He became as it were a beast in longing for earthly things…but he departed not from his God."[11] Idolatry is inevitable—human beings cannot help but become idolatrous even if still faithful.

This early 'desecration' of the material also implied an understanding of who was *good enough* or *allowed* to worship, leading to marginalization by other non-religious reasons, such

[10] Tertullian, *On Idolatry,* online at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0302.htm, accessed 6/19/2020. This early 'desecration' of the material also implied an understanding of who was *good enough* or *allowed* to worship, leading to marginalization by other non-religious reasons, such as ethnicity—an 'othering' that had terrible consequences. During the Spanish colonial endeavor in the late fifteenth century, this alliance between religious and political oppression becomes essential for the Latinx context down to the present day. More on this below.

[11] Augustine, *Commentary on Psalms*, online at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0302.htm, accessed 6/19/2020.

as ethnicity – an 'othering' that had terrible consequences. During the Spanish colonial endeavor in the late fifteenth century, this alliance between religious and political oppression becomes essential, from the theological-political justification of *La Conquista* down to the present day.

Even with this understanding about the dangers of idolatry, the use of images became widespread in Christianity during its first seven centuries, and many in that period had to reimagine it as beneficial even if needing to be strictly defined. Church Councils dealt with the issue early, starting in the eighth century and the issue of presence. They asked: Can the divine dwell in material images and, if so, how? The so-called 'Iconoclastic' Council of Hieria of 754 affirmed the evils of idolatry: "Satan misguided men, so that they worshipped the creature instead of the Creator. The Mosaic law and the prophets cooperated to undo this ruin; but in order to save mankind thoroughly, God sent his own Son, who turned us away from error and the worshipping of idols and taught us the worshipping of God in spirit and in truth."[12] Though the framework of the argument is certainly Christological, idolatry is construed as a sinful misconception of the divine within the material. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 quickly reversed this decision:

> To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic, for these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations.[13]

---

[12] *Fordham University, Medieval Sourcebook,* online at https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/icono-cncl754.asp, accessed 6/19/2020.

[13] John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine, From the Bible to the Present*. 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 55.

Again, the framework is Christological as the issue of the materiality of the Incarnation exemplifies. Yet the 'Iconoludic' Second Nicaea's "confession" affirms the worship of images as "useful," beneficial not only to Christian formation, piety, and social life, but more importantly theologically, since it helps to cement the Word and the Incarnation as "real." But, in practice, for believers accustomed to the intangibility of recited Scripture and preaching and unfamiliar with the history of theology to date, the concept of a tangible God certainly stretches the limits of reality. So, tangible "pictorial representations" make God 'real,' sensible, accessible—material. In this sense, the material is inevitable as well. Again, one cannot gloss over the "useful in many respects" in the quotation, which certainly entails political and economic windfalls for the Church, especially through its alliances with emerging European nation-states.

Even though these debates did not cease and eventually contributed to the Great Schism that created Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054 CE, in the West one can see again the issues arise during the Late Medieval Period, culminating with fervor during the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century .[14] Martin Luther in his *The Pagan Servitude of the Church* (1520), a response to attacks by Roman ecclesial authorities regarding his positions on the sacraments, calls the Pope an "idol" that his "intelligence" can discern, begging the questions of how and why Luther can and others cannot.[15] The Augustinian foundation of

[14] For an excellent historical exposition of Christian theological anxiety with the material (and the "problems" and "opportunities" that arise) between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries in Western Europe and the Western Church, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press, 2011).

[15] Martin Luther and John Dillenberger. *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings* (Anchor Books. New York: Random House, 1961), 250.

Luther's statement is evident: idolatry is unavoidably internal yet discernable in the external. That is, idolatry is inevitably material as well.[16]

It is precisely around this debate about the internal and external that one can see Luther's ideas on idols and the material. For example, in his *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), written in part as a response to the radical reformation's extreme iconoclast views, he cautions against placing so much importance on 'externals' such as images because it is only the freeing, internal presence of God that believers should be concerned with: "This is the Holy Spirit, who is not acquired through breaking images and any other works, but only through gospel and faith."[17] The issue for Luther, then, was twofold: if materiality itself was not sinful, and if the sin of idolatry was an internal condition unsolvable by external means, then using or making idols is dangerous but ultimately inconsequential. Furthermore, the material is a vehicle for divine grace because the divine dwells in the sacraments just as God indwells humanity for its salvation. And the material is also helpful for Christian formation: "Pictures contained in these books [such as the Bible] we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding."[18] In Luther, the divine finds the material useful in itself. Yet again, one needs to note the tragic political consequences of thought around images (especially around

[16] Lutheran views on idols had other more tragic consequences that I will not explore here yet that closely mirror events on 'New World' soil. For example, 'radical' reformers took Luther's thoughts regarding idolatry a step further by preaching violent iconoclasm. This violence combined with other political disaffections and lead to a Peasant War that produced tens of thousands of deaths. Luther denounced the iconoclasts but lamented these events as his fault.

[17] Martin Luther, et al. *Luther's Works* [American edition], Volume 40: Church and Ministry II, edited by Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 82.

[18] Luther, et al., *Luther's Works*, 99.

freedom from institutional overview, which could have precipitated the Peasants' War, at least tangentially), but deeper exploration of this is beyond the scope of this project.

This conception of divine agency through the material, the image directly interceding on behalf of the believer, necessitated a nuanced understanding of the presence of the divine in images. Presence was engaged by The Council of Trent (starting in 1545), which was prompted at least in part by the Reformation. Decree of Session Twenty-Five of Trent says:

> Moreover, that the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples, and that due honour and veneration are to be given them; not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them…but because the honour which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent.[19]

For the post-Tridentine Catholic Church, images are to "be given" the "honour and veneration" that they are owed, thereby locating within them a power that springs from their content but is not of them but of God. However, this power is not God in Godself; for God is not "in them" but in the image's "prototype," which is God Godself or Mary herself or Christ himself.[20] In other words, Trent rejects a direct divine presence in the material (which they would consider idolatrous) but affirms that divine power can flow through it by way of devotion because of its perceived connection to Christ, Mary, or any other sacred figure. Indeed,

> they who affirm that veneration and honour are not due to the relics of saints; or, that these, and other sacred monuments, are uselessly honoured by the faithful; and that the places dedicated to the memories of the saints are in vain visited with the view of

[19] "The Council of Trent, Twenty-fifth Session", edited and translated by J. Waterworth, online at http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1545-1545,_Concilium_Tridentinum,_Canons_And_Decrees,_EN.pdf, accessed 6/19/2020.

[20] By "prototype" I assume they mean the inspiration or source for the image; in this case, the divine figures themselves as conceived within this cultural context.

> obtaining their aid; are wholly to be condemned, as the Church has already long since condemned, and now also condemns them.[21]

In Trent, the material is not only instrumental but also productive (not "vain") in bridging the human with God, similar to Luther. However, the issue now is presence. In Tridentine thought, the divine is not really there; the image is just a representation, a 'stand-in,' what one would call 'icon'. This aspect of Tridentine theology is still foundational to the present-day Roman Catholic Church.

Concurrently with the Reformation and Trent, the Spanish conquest of the kingdoms in what is currently the Caribbean and Central and South America presented a new reality for Western Europeans: an alternative materiality, a new 'other' in the form of non-European human beings and their cultures. Christian ideologies of the time were supported by understandings of the dangers of idolatry and materiality. During the genocide now known as *La Conquista*, fear and greed quickly spawned the need for managing this very-material otherness of 'alien' bodies and 'primitive' and 'pagan' cultures. These 'others' were declared utterly 'this-worldly'/material and devoid of the capacity for divinity and, by consequence, full humanity; these beings were essentially things, instruments, stuff. Contrary to the gradual Catholicization of Spain (from the eighth to the fifteenth century), this 'American' conquest turned extremely violent very quickly (in terms of both war and disease). Worse yet, such violence was justified through 'natural law' ideologies of 'civilization' over 'barbarism' and of Christianity over 'paganism' that detractors strongly critiqued. One such critic I already mentioned was Dominican friar Las Casas, who arrived at New Spain as an *encomendero* (that

[21] Relics, pieces of human bodies venerated as saintly and holy, are not images *per se*, but are congruent to images in our case because they relate to materiality.

is, a slave owner tasked with converting slaves in return for their unpaid labor) but eventually realized the unjust and irrational basis for this political-theological system in particular and the colonial endeavor in general. Though Las Casas's writings are not exempt from what we now call racism, his reasoned and emotive defense of the Indians stands out amongst his peers at the time.

Las Casas debated these issues with humanist theologian Sepúlveda, charged by the Spanish Crown and Church authorities to justify the *Conquista* theologically in the (in)famous Valladolid Debate of 1550 (almost coinciding with Trent). In this debate, one again finds the ambivalence around materiality. Among his many arguments, Sepúlveda there affirms that slavery and conquest of these 'uncivilized' and 'pagan' people was justifiable because of their 'unnatural,' and consequently idolatrous, beliefs and practices (such as ritual cannibalism). Conversely, Las Casas argues that these peoples were not 'uncivilized' because they exhibit a social and political organization that, while alien by European standards, was still 'naturally lawful.' Briefly stated, for Las Casas, these people were simply in need of the corrective influence of Christianity. Indeed, *encomendero* and other colonizer behaviors within *La Conquista* itself were much more unnatural and unlawful for the Dominican friar due to their heartlessness. In addition, the colonized peoples' 'idolatrous' religion was comparable to that of biblical Israelites (the chosen people of the Jewish and Christian God) and therefore evidenced a proclivity for conversion, which in any case was the *encomienda* system's alleged main aim.[22]

[22] Las Casas is a controversial figure among liberation theologians, due to his conceptions of African slaves in ways similar to those of *conquistadores* toward natives of 'New Spain,' with tragic consequences. As with Luther, one cannot gloss over these facts, but delving deeper is beyond the aims of this dissertation.

Once again, the tense relationship between divinity and materiality is displayed, this time through suffering brown bodies. Central to this debate were questions about the kinds and degrees of natural and unnatural, Catholic and pagan, civilized and not, and, most important to this dissertation, of Catholic orthodox and unorthodox devotion (the latter being idolatry), all deployed in a wide material spectrum of Christian colonizer and allegedly idolatrous colonized bodies and behavior. The *Conquista* complicates even more the proper place of images in worship, mostly because it was so prevalent in both what was then considered paganism and Roman Catholicism. In other words, how can Catholics condemn image worship so forcefully in 'New Spain' if they do similarly at home? As one result, any embodiment of belief became highly suspect and disembodied practices entrenched themselves further, basically severing material and divine, one of the distinguishing marks of European coloniality. Belief in the materiality of the divine was only present in uncivilized worship, which was then termed unnatural in content and ultimately demonic in origin. The political backlash of this belief was part of the tragedy of *La Conquista* and is visible to this day.

In this section, the conflicted and often tragic history between material and divine is evident. For instance, in devotional objects, the limits of the material are confronted with the unboundedness of the divine. Catholics and Protestants alike wrestled with the possibilities of the material and the 'discovery of 'New Spain' and the 'other' further problematized image worship as both orthodox and not. The issue eventually changed from a polarity to a spectrum. These debates and attitudes and their tragic history are in the immediate background of Latinx historians of Christianity and theologians down to this century, and I suggest it is the most important lens through which to see current Latinx devotion through objects. Conversely,

Latinx scholars carry this religious history in their flesh as part of European coloniality and Spanish settler colonialism. I now turn to this scholarship, based on the devotion to one particular Marian image, to illuminate the scholars' and the community's engagement with the nuances present in the interaction between material and divine.

Figure 1 - La Virgen de la Guadalupe. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/eFwQ6igkG21dAmMm8

A reading of Latinx devotion using *La Guadalupe*

As already stated, devotional images are a key site and medium to study popular religion. One such image is extremely popular and well-studied in Latin American and Latinx communities: *La Guadalupe* (Figure 1).[23] Starting with Juan Diego's own *tilma* down to its countless reproductions and interpretations by believers, scholars, and artists through the next five hundred years in México, in many Central and South American countries, and in US Latinx communities, she has been appropriated not only as the premier standard of popular religion but also as mirror of Latin American and Latinx selves. After a brief introduction of Latinx popular religion and devotional objects (using Orlando Espín) and of La Guadalupe herself, I will explore *La Guadalupe* through two Latina scholars (Jeanette Rodríguez and María del Socorro Castañeda-Liles) in light of the spectrum between material and divine as informed

[23] I will distinguish La Virgen de La Guadalupe *qua* Mary and Marian advocation from *La Guadalupe qua* devotional object by using italics for the latter.

or performed by devotees of La Guadalupe.[24] This scholarship describes the complex meanings of devotional objects in the Latinx community and is therefore foundational to the Latinx theologians' discussions that follow this section. It also functions as a model for my own analyses of Enrique's *Morenita* in Chapter 3 because they combine the ethnographical with the devotional object in their method.

Orlando Espín has spent a considerable portion of his scholarship studying Latinx popular religion through the lens of piety and devotion. In his earlier work *The Faith of the People* (1997), he claims unequivocally that Latinx popular devotion is a generalizable material *locus theologicus* with particularly autochthonous epistemological bases.[25] Others in the US context before and after him have taken a similar stance. What makes him more relevant to this dissertation is his focused use of Latin American and Latinx devotional objects (religious texts and pictorial art, for instance) and not devotional practices *per se*, to evidence this overriding claim.[26] That is, the objects themselves, along with the beliefs and practices that surround them, reveal something intrinsic and meaningful about Latinx popular religion and its construal of material and divine. According to Espín, for example, in devotional images produced right after the *Conquista* the Godhead is paradoxically represented (either as conquering, as merciful, or as aloof, revealing ambivalent attitudes toward Empire) yet the

[24] Since the prototype of *La Guadalupe* and Enrique's *Morenita* is Mary (a woman) and the context is Latinx, I believe a Latina perspective should be favored. Sources matter.

[25] Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 2-6.

[26] For others in Latinx theology, see Arturo J. Bañuelas, et al. *Mestizo Christianity: Theology From the Latino Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995); Allan Figueroa Deck, et al. *We Are a People!: Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Francisco Lozada, Jr., et al. *New Horizons in Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003).

Christ is usually represented as vulnerable (identical to the actual life of many colonized converts).[27] Whether these representations were intentionally performed to cope and/or to disrupt is lost but, according to him, coping and disruption as dual expressions of understanding the divine conceptually and of surviving colonialism materially are already present in those images of God and Christ produced by recent converts. Therefore, Espín suggests that an analysis of these objects *qua* objects shows complex and nuanced understandings of what Christian life and being is in indigenous populations and how Latinx actual life is embodied by these objects.

Espín writes: "it is almost impossible to study any Latino community in the United States, regardless of disciplinary point of departure or methodology followed, without encountering popular religion."[28] How is this so? According to him, Latinx beingness (that is, its "*latinidad*") is inseparable from its *sensus fidelium*, the intuitive sense habituated into all the faithful to facilitate the interaction between belief and real life.[29] Even if the faithful 'agree' with the institution and its doctrines, any community's cultural knowledge and understanding (that is, its 'popular hermeneutic' in the sense of Morgan) is entangled with this *sensus*

[27] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 44-45, 48-50.

[28] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 63. Espín does not exclude non-Christian religions prevalent in the Latin American and Latinx contexts, such as the Yoruba religion (also known as Santería), Islam, and others. Both of these and more co-exist in popular religion. For an excellent exposition on this theme, see Edwin Aponte, *¡Santo!: Varieties of Latino/a Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012). In any case, Quintero Rivera, again from his own context, supports Espín's claim: "The social life between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Hispanic Caribbean fundamentally revolved around popular religiosity." (Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, XI).

[29] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 65-66. According to *Lumen Gentium*, "[The faithful] manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accept that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God." (Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 2, 12)

fidelium. That entanglement not only brings religion into cultures but also cultures into religion. Even further, as in *Lumen Gentium*, Espín argues that faith and devotion are entangled all the way down (or up), literally from 'beyond' to the 'this worldly.' This is important because if the orthodox *sensus fidei* of the Church influences Latinx popular religion and culture, then the latter can influence the Church as well. This co-influence will be seen again in Chapter 3.

Among the plethora of devotional objects in Latinx popular religion that feed and are fed by the co-influencing Catholic *sensus fidelium* and Latinx culture, two stand out according to Espín: images of the crucified Christ and Mary Mother of God. He writes: "if these two devotions, so central to Latino Catholicism, are capable of communicating true elements of Christian Tradition, they may be justifiably called bearers of the *sensus fidelium*."[30] Calling devotional objects 'bearers' corresponds well with orthodox Catholic Tridentine understanding of their role in the mediation of grace. Yet Espín characterizes the material as too passive in terms of relationship with the divine, especially when contrasted with *La Guadalupe*'s witness as reported by believers; there is a tentativeness in his words that betrays colonizing views around materiality. In any case, what one must garner from Espín's analyses is that, since the *sensus fidelium* is inflicted by both Catholic orthodoxy and Latinx culture, devotions are likewise inflicted. In more recent work, Espín nuances Latinx epistemology and religious worldviews around devotional objects further.

Almost twenty years after *The Faith of the People,* Espín's *Idol and Grace* (2014) again explores Latin American and Latinx devotion and their liberating materialities, now from the

[30] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 72.

context of (anti-)idolatry.[31] He insists "on the need for an anti-idolatrous attitude and perspective" and maintains that idolatry "is not reducible to the idea that a human-made artifact (the 'idol') is thought to be divine. Idolatry is much more."[32] For Espín, just like for Tertullian, Augustine, and Luther before him, idolatry pervades human existence. Idolatry is not confined to the sphere of religion because, as he conceptualized in earlier work, the latter's boundary is porous and the *sensus fidelium* is prone to outside influence. Indeed, an 'idol' is "anything or anyone who claims to be, or is related with, as absolute, as final, as permanently, and, therefore, as God…the idol requires repetition, obedience, and stability; questioning, hope, and change are its opposites...the idol's diametrical opposite is compassion, because compassion is not afraid of doubt, vulnerability, or unexpected possibilities and futures."[33] In other words, being idolatrous is claiming universality, uniformity, and ultimacy, that is, being a facsimile of God.By contrast, the anti-idolatrous, the truly divine, is historical, fluid, and hope-inducing. Simply stated, God is an anti-idol when materially liberating along with being divine.

Espín cautions that Christianity (and, by extension, Christian devotion) cannot become an idol itself. It needs to maintain fruitful "ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, accompanied by modesty in all claims Christians might make to [religious] exclusivity or definitiveness" and also "interculturality."[34] The emphasis on debate, modesty, and cultural openness could be

[31] Orlando O. Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

[32] Espín, *Idol and Grace*, 77. In this monograph, 'idol' always has negative valences. This could be debated, especially in the context of popular religion, where idols are sometimes construed as models. In what follows, I will keep using Espín's characterization (I agree with his narrow definition of 'idol') but I disavow any broad application of this usage as judgmental and reductive.

[33] Espín, *Idol and Grace*, 78.

[34] Espín, *Idol and Grace*, 82.

surprising in light of previous claims of the perils of porous boundaries within the Christian religion. However, Espín affirms that this dialectic is key for "traditioning," referring to the material process that engenders hope and liberation from Christian truths and experience within an oftentimes challenging *lo cotidiano*.[35] I suggest that 'traditioning' is the enduring and effective way that history/culture and religion/*sensus fidelium* interact in the Latinx popular hermeneutic, a way that diffuses any possible fear or concern with the conjunction of 'this-worldly'/material and the 'beyond'/divine due its ultimate liberative aim. Truly to 'tradition' their faith, devotees must be vigilantly anti-idolatrous: compassionate, truthful, show solidarity, and humble toward their fellow humans. 'Traditioning' further emphasizes Latinx devotional objects (that is, liberating anti-idols) as *locus theologicus* and their positive influence upon these Christian selves.

In sum, Espín shows that Latinx popular religion has particular yet generalizable epistemological and doctrinal elements, such as anti-idolatry and 'traditioning,' that support its liberating intent among Latinx culture and vice versa. But how do these elements present themselves in one current popular devotion across *lo cotidiano*? I will use Latinx devotion of La Virgen de la Guadalupe as an example.

The first extant written record of the encounter between La Guadalupe and the Nahua convert Juan Diego is the *Nican Mopohua* (in Nahuatl, 'here it is told', ca. 1648).[36] It recounts

[35] Espín, *Idol and Grace*, 130-132.

[36] This section is culled from Jeanette Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 31-36. The authenticity and import of the narrative around La Guadalupe and her encounter with Juan Diego have been debated for centuries. I steer clear of these debates, for many times they colonize themselves. For example, see Espín, *Faith of the People*, 3-10.

the Marian apparition on the hills of Tepeyac (exactly where the Nahuas venerated an Aztec goddess called Tonantzin) in December 1531 and its subsequent miraculous events. La Guadalupe appeared to the Nahua man, called herself Mary Mother of God, and tasked him to tell the bishop that she wanted him to build a temple for her at Tepeyac. After a series of miscommunications between Juan Diego and the bishop and mishaps to Juan Diego and his family, Mary provided Juan Diego with a sign that evidenced her presence to others: a bunch of roses (a flower not native to Tepeyac) that she placed on his *tilma* or cloak. When Juan Diego showed these roses to the bishop, at the same time an image of La Guadalupe appeared on the *tilma*, and the apparition miracle was proven. Her name allegedly comes from one of the Nahuatl names the Virgin gave herself, *Tlecuauhtlacupeuh*, which the Spanish understood as Guadalupe, a Marian advocation from Extremadura, Spain, popular in the early sixteenth century.[37] That, and the fact that Tepeyac was already a site for feminine divine epiphany, sealed her identification as La Virgen de la Guadalupe. The image (still on Juan Diego's *tilma*) is currently housed and publicly displayed at the Basílica de La Virgen de la Guadalupe in Mexico City. Juan Diego was canonized in 2002 by the Catholic Church.

For religious scholar and theologian Jeanette Rodríguez, research into La Guadalupe reveals something essential about the Latinx religious experience: dichotomizing colonial worldviews are broken down through devotion and piety.[38] She writes: "The truth revealed to

[37] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 45. Interestingly, historians claim that Queen Isabella of Spain, the reigning monarch during the early years of *La Conquista*, was an avid devotee of La Virgen de la Guadalupe.

[38] Quintero Rivera confirms her suggestion, albeit in his context: "[the recently colonized] peoples that took shape in the margins of the 'West'…developed their own interrelationships between the sacred and the profane which break the dichotomous Eurocentric binarism and open up new forms of analysis." (Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, X, my translation)

me by the Mexican-American women of my study is that Guadalupe tells them [the women] something about themselves as well as something about who God is."[39] One of Espín's presuppositions is validated here: Guadalupan devotion is a valid *locus theologicus* because she informs devotees "who God is." Rodríguez continues: "Our Lady of Guadalupe is often experienced as a Marian image to support and to encourage passivity in women, and thus viewed as an instrument of patriarchal oppression and control. On the contrary, Guadalupe is active and liberating."[40] The ambivalent nature of devotional objects is also on display here as seen with Espín. Just like the Godhead was both oppressor and liberator in colonial times, so is *La Guadalupe*. Note also that Rodríguez does not add the word 'religious' before "passivity" and/or "patriarchal"; La Guadalupe spreads her divinity around other *cotidiano* realms such as gender relations within *latinidad*. Rodríguez continues: "The story of Guadalupe may enable Mexican-American women to move beyond the model of silent, passive endurance to one of empowerment, defense, and help for the oppressed."[41] The liberating activity of *La Guadalupe*, evident in its particular religious devotion, encompasses both the information and the formation of Latinas (and Latinxs in general), which are burdened by machismo, Catholic coloniality, and other consequences of empire.[42]

Apart from the ability of Guadalupan devotion to subvert the colonizing attributes of 'official' religion, Rodríguez wants to illustrate *La Guadalupe* as site of empowerment *qua* Marian image, what Espín would call her anti-idolatry. For Rodríguez, *La Guadalupe* is "a

[39] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, xix.

[40] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, xviii.

[41] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, xxxii.

[42] Cf. Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, xxvi, 71.

religious experience, image, and story."[43] Beyond the image's clear performance of Christian belief and practice, the object is also another participant in the Latinx "assumptive world," "a web of inter-relation and connection that is pervasive in their [Latinas] lives."[44] In other words, the image not only embodies religious identity and history in particular but also Latin American and Latinx identity and history in general. Indeed, the image keeps thriving as both religious and not because of that complex divine-material relation. She writes: "In Hispanic culture, everything is interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent, and people identify who they are in relationship to others. In Hispanic religion, the types of relationships between people also apply to the relationship between people and the Divine."[45] In these "others," Rodríguez includes devotional objects, such as *La Guadalupe* in México and elsewhere (just as I would include Enrique's *Morenita*). Since devotional relationships between people and between people and the divine are mediated by devotional objects, the latter have to be imbricated in those relationships. And all these materialities are bi-directional: "The relationship that emerges from this religious and cultural transmission of the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe has reciprocity as one of its elements. There's an exchange—something mutual happens."[46] Rodríguez here calls "reciprocity" that anti-idolatrous empowerment. Beyond subversion, there

[43] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 47.

[44] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 115.

[45] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 60. In this "everything" Rodríguez includes "education, economic status, marital status, generation, religion, language of proficiency and preference, age, and so on…" (124).

[46] Rodríguez. *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 120.

is mutuality; *La Guadalupe* interacts with believers to liberating effect. Through devotional objects devotees are able to manage *lo cotidiano* and its many *vaivenes*.[47]

I suggest the *La Guadalupe* image is 'this-worldly' divinity for these Latinas. "For these women, she [*La Guadalupe*] is a tool by which they make meaning of their assumptive world."[48] There are at least two ways that evidence this 'toolness,' according to Rodríguez. On the one hand, for devotees *La Guadalupe* is "a source of **identification** and an enduring presence…she is consoler, mother, healer, intercessor, and woman…'she stayed.'"[49] *La Guadalupe* is 'this-worldly' (immanent) while also representing the divine (as transcendent). On the other hand, *La Guadalupe* is "a source of **strength**…[In Rodríguez's interviews] two manifestations of strength emerged, one being strength as the ability 'to do,' and the other as the ability to endure suffering."[50] For Rodríguez, the image empowers women to perform, whether this action is proactive or reactive. As a "source of identification," *La Guadalupe* expresses her own divine materiality, and as a "source of strength" she produces material liberation in others. Mirroring the tensions between activity and passivity in Mexican-American women seen earlier, *La Guadalupe* embodies the coexistence of relational proactivity and reactivity toward an ultimate liberation among Latinas. "In her image they are able to reaffirm their identity and

[47] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 62. *Vaivenes* is Puerto Rican slang for 'comings-and-goings'; see Jorge Duany, *Puerto Rico: What everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For instance, Rodríguez writes: "The assumptive world of these Mexican-American women [and all Latinxs, by implication] is one which entails struggle and limitations..." yet "The image, story, and experience of Our Lady of Guadalupe tell the people that God has not given up on them, affirms them, and is present for them. Our Lady of Guadalupe herself is there for them, protects them, and loves them" (Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 117, 120-121). This *vaivén* of struggle and grace is central to marginalized life; managing it, coping with it, and sometimes disrupting it.

[48] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 125.

[49] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 127-128, my emphasis.

[50] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 128-129, my emphasis.

develop self-esteem…a coping mechanism for those who have no other resources."[51] In sum, "the content of that relationship [between *La Guadalupe* and devotees] is that Our Lady of Guadalupe is a source of nurturance and pleasure, and the women respond with affiliation, appreciation, and harmony."[52]

One important point of coincidence between *La Guadalupe* and Enrique's *Morenita* is gender, an aspect further developed and nuanced by sociologist María del Socorro Castañeda-Liles twenty years after Rodríguez's important contribution.[53] She expands scholarship on *La Guadalupe*'s cultural and religious influence on Latinx communities by researching Latinas at different life-stages (that is, younger women – "Mujeres," mothers – "Madres," and older women – "Damas"), their varying sexual orientations and genders, and their dynamic "Mexican Catholic imagination…the intersection of the cultural and religious roots of their ways of understanding themselves and the world in the context of other social categories that shape their lives."[54] Castañeda-Liles places even more emphasis on the *cotidiano* web of relations that includes ethnicity, family, legal status, production and consumption of religious material culture, public and private devotion, spirituality, and *La Guadalupe* in the construction of womanly selves. In this crowded intersection, the material and the divine intertwine. In a telling opening anecdote, Castañeda-Liles recounts an encounter with a devotional object seller in México, whose art piece was crafted using a can of roach spray. The seller told her: "For us *La*

[51] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 129.

[52] Rodríguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 133.

[53] María del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[54] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 4-5. "Mexican Catholic imagination" sounds akin to Rodríguez's 'assumptive world' and Espín's 'Latinx popular hermeneutic' seen earlier.

Virgen is everywhere, and it is also important to recycle and not waste material."[55] In this seller's view, as one of God's representatives yet in her own way, La Guadalupe exhibits a panentheism (the "everywhere") that seamlessly combines the 'this-worldly' with the 'beyond,' the holy with the utilitarian, and ecological responsibility with sacredness in a material matrix.[56] I suggest that this episode is literally and metaphorically the meaning-making material-divine 'recycling' action that intergenerational *cotidiano* Latinx life requires—another instance of the anti-idolatry of Espin's 'traditioning' and Rodríguez's 'reciprocity.'

Castañeda-Liles argues that

> the women's Catholic devotion is fluid and moves and is shaped by their lived experience. As a result, as the women mature, the way they relate to *La Virgen de la Guadalupe* becomes more holistic and complex…This ultimately allows the participants to continue to identify as Catholic, retain aspects of Catholicism they find life-giving, and transgress some traditional limiting notions of what a good Catholic woman should be…[Castañeda-Liles calls this] (*fe)*minism…the ways in which the lives of Mexican-origin women are shaped by religion and in turn how they shape religion within the context of the social structures they negotiate.[57]

Just like Rodríguez, she argues that the dynamic force of Guadalupan devotion and *La Guadalupe* transgress the boundaries of Latinx Catholicism into everyday life. Devotion is "fluid" because it both shapes and is shaped by *lo cotidiano*. While particular in the beginning (as an individual religious practice, for example), devotion becomes "holistic and complex" as life progresses (as a way of being shared with other women, for example). 'Being Catholic' is valued for its "life-giving" aspects and yet will be "transgressed" if not liberating. And ultimately devotion is a site for the politics of "(*fe*)minism" (since *fé* is faith in Spanish, Castañeda-Liles's

[55] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 9-10.

[56] For more on panentheism, see https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panentheism/.

[57] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 24-25.

wordplay reconfigures Latinx feminism as 'faith-minism') for obtaining, maintaining, and/or increasing their gender's power (and by association, their race's, their ethnicity's, their spirituality's, and their personal, familial, and communal roles,' as well) within a culturally and religiously oppressive society. This multifaceted power, in turn, will transform that same *cotidiano* life. As with Rodríguez, Castañeda-Liles sees in *La Guadalupe* a 'this-worldly' divine site and medium that embodies mutuality, subversion, and more.

One area where Castañeda-Liles intentionally expands on Rodríguez's work is on *La Guadalupe*'s expression of sexuality. Women thinkers in Latinx gender studies have previously explored the intersection between La Guadalupe and sexuality: "For many Chicana feminists the ultimate liberation for women comes when they can publicly affirm, celebrate, and speak freely about their sexuality."[58] For them, it is precisely from sex and gender that La Guadalupe displays and emits her liberative empowerment: "Guadalupe in Chicana lesbian thought represents a powerful yet palpable female subjectivity—a familiar social agent that advocates and honors Chicana lesbian ways of knowing, caring, and loving."[59] What Castañeda-Liles wants to emphasize is the possibilities of adding that particular element of non-binary sexuality in the crowded intersection of La Guadalupe devotion which further and more clearly reveals her anti-idolatrous empowerment of Latinx women and the community. La Guadalupe as holistic "social [and political, economic, and others] agent" not merely religious and Latinx; she is both suffering virgin-mother and sexual subject longing for liberation. According to Castañeda-Liles, for many of these Latinx authors, this ambivalence is rooted in her dual origins in Aztec and

[58] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 40-41.

[59] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 42.

Spanish religion; their interaction resulted in a rethinking of indigenous divine qualities in a Catholic framework. For example, writes Castañeda-Liles, "[Chicana scholar Gloria] Anzaldúa's interpretation of Our Lady of Guadalupe argues that the split of Tonantzin [Aztec goddess] from her sexual aspects is the root of the *puta* (whore)/virgin dichotomy to which women are held to this day. This binary conceptualization of women demonizes their sexual agency."[60] In other words, the 'de-sexing' of La Guadalupe goes together with her Catholic sanctification, which in turn reinforces ambivalent misconceptions and mistreatment of women/female/feminine by the dominant men/male/masculine. These ambivalences are usually deployed through the male (in this case, Christian) gaze at women's bodies. Within this *realidad*, Latinx visual artists, for example, have endeavored to 'liberate' La Guadalupe through art: "apart from whether the artists' true intention is to make a religious or spiritual statement, one might arrive to an interpretation of the images as attempts to extract what might be perceived to be Guadalupe's inner strengths and make them visible."[61] In other words, through *Guadalupes*, artists liberate La Guadalupe, who in turn liberates her devotees in an anti-patriarchal and gynocentric (and inter-agential) space shared by all three.

Castañeda-Liles, in contrast with Rodríguez, emphasizes that transmission and reception of La Guadalupe is not uniform throughout all Latin American and Latinx communities. "For example, for Cuban and Mexican women, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a mother figure. However, they differ in how they articulate her divinity. For Cuban women, Mary is to some extent a

[60] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 43.

[61] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 44-46. For a deeper treatment of this theme, see Laura Elisa Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

'queen,' and for Mexican women, she is god-like…Puerto Rican women do not see her as a mother in the way Mexicans do. Furthermore, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* for Mexican women is both a Catholic and national symbol of pride, hope, resilience, and resistance in the midst of adversity and daily life [presumably not so for Cubans and Puerto Ricans]."[62] I understand that undoubtedly there are differences, some inculcated by church hierarchy and others habituated due to geographical, ethnic, political-historical, and other cultural specificities. These differences, however, do not erase or atomize La Guadalupe's life-giving and liberating power on all her devotees, the general within her particular. Moreover, this power is affirmed in spite of that difference because, according to Castañeda-Liles, La Guadalupe works inside/within *nepantla*, "the in-between space where there is no room for dichotomy—the space in which, according to Aztec thought, life really exists."[63] The 'in-betweeness' of race is evident amongst Latinxs because of the racial terms *mestizx* and *mulatx*, other words critical in Latin American and Latinx theologies. Indeed, I am already construing gender 'nepantlically' by using the non-binary term Latinx to encompass the whole community. Being holistic does not entail similarity or uniformity, yet it does have to include liberation. *Nepantla* within a holistic vision of *La Guadalupe* is helpful to emphasize the harmonizing agency of La Guadalupe in lieu of conceptual and cultural differences.

In sum, Castañeda affirms that through devotion

> women re-articulate what *La Virgen de Guadalupe* means to them and what she advocates as they themselves question, contest, and challenge gender expectations and family configurations that were passed on to them…this protean quality—this type of consciousness—that allows them to transgress gender roles and expectations does not

[62] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 51-52.

[63] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 53.

> suddenly emerge out of thin air. It evolves over time and is continuously shaped by the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion, and generation.[64]

I want to highlight the word 'protean' in this quotation. As utterly material, Guadalupan devotion certainly is versatile and able to adapt to distinct spheres of *cotidiano* life. It is a devotion grounded in personal and communal spiritual belief and practice and at the same time emergent with self-identity, sex/gender, and nation redolent of other material consequences, like family roles and political dreams. This devotion materializes in *La Guadalupe* and other Latinx '*nepantlic*' devotional objects (like Enrique's *Morenita*). They are divine and human, icon and hero, conservative mother and sexual progressive, provisional tool and ultimate aim.

Espín, Rodríguez, and Castañeda-Liles illustrate the dynamic and complex characteristics and consequences of Marian devotion and its corresponding objects, such as *La Guadalupe* and Enrique's *Morenita.* They show that Latinx popular religion is a productive *locus theologicus*, a space that believers and Mary coinhabit for religio-cultural information and self/selves formation. In that space, Mary materializes through objects (*Guadalupes* and other *Morenitas*) that transcend their intended purpose (as support for belief through empowering faith and self-identity) by crossing into other cultural spheres like patriarchy or gender dynamics as reciprocating anti-idols. Indeed, these liberating materialities are unmistakably coming from and going to the objects as well. In Chapter 2, I will describe this movement theoretically as

[64] Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life*, 212. I am tempted to explore further what Castañeda-Liles meant with "protean quality" as a "type of consciousness." The possibilities are tantalizing, especially in light of 'traditioning.' Yet it remains a topic for further study, one that is beyond this dissertation.

agency and develop an ethnography from objects themselves. For now, I turn to Latinx theology to ascertain a position on devotional objects from the theologians' perspective.

Popular religion and devotional objects from Latinx theology

As seen in the Introduction, Latinx theology's focus on thinking 'from below' necessarily includes theological deliberations from popular ways of being Christian. Coinciding with the resurgence of scholarship on material religion in other disciplines, theologians like Espín, Roberto S. Goizueta, and Jennifer Scheper Hughes highlight the value of Latinx religious experiences in similar ways. For them, the conflicted relationship between 'official' doctrine and 'lived' popular religion is provocative in itself; indeed, their project is grounded in the belief that Latinx theological thought can be nurtured by popular religion as well as by Scripture, tradition, reason, and *cotidiano* experience. In other words, Latinx popular religion is a *locus theologicus* because it is a theological source, not merely a location. Yet the challenge lies in the "how," as Espín writes: "figuring out *how* Latinos could historically and culturally think and image events, doctrines, or experiences has often proved more important than *what* might have been actually thought or imaged."[65] Goizueta and Scheper Hughes provide excellent examples of this "how."

Theoretically speaking, the "how" has to avoid deeply-rooted colonizing views of a epistemological break between "official" theology and *cotidiano* practice and to show

[65] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 6.

theologians "from below" (such as lay devotees) actually doing theology.[66] For instance, Espín asks: what if Latinx Marian devotion is less rooted in traditional Mariology and reveals a popular pneumatology, "an unexpected and brilliant cultural mediation?"[67] This question results from his formulation of the Latinx popular hermeneutic in the confluence between Christian orthodoxy and Latinx culture. But its more tantalizing implication is that Latinx Marian devotion is not necessarily based on *a priori* theological understandings about Mary but on *a priori* local cultural concepts, becoming theologically Catholic after-the-fact*,* that is, after comingling local knowledges and ways of being with an imposed *sensus fidei* en route to an autochthonous *sensus fidelium*.[68] Therefore, the Latinx religious subject is a productive assemblage of theological meaning not only as Christian but also as US Latinx.

As for method, the 'how' is no less productive yet perilous. In transgressive, decolonializing fashion, the study of popular religion imbibes both from traditional sources (such as the Bible or the Roman liturgy) and from non-traditional sources. Among the latter, Espín counts devotional objects such as catechisms, prayer books, and religious art that were produced by popular theologians and local artisans. He also counts popular devotion itself, which exists on a spectrum between fully orthodox and fully heterodox and manifests in the

[66] Indeed, La Casas himself could be seen as making such an argument when questioning the applicability of Eurocentric views on natural theology to indigenous populations.

[67] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 9.

[68] Espín is not alone here. Noted *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz affirms that Catholic rituals are absorbed into Latinx culture, combining 'catholic-ness' with *latinidad*: "'official' religious practices are reinterpreted and given a different meaning within culture. For example, Baptism and First Communion become rituals of passage; the Mass becomes a public ceremony used to solemnize the most important moments in the life of a person or a group of people" (Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, 63).

majority of cases as devotion to the crucified Christ or to Mary.[69] These sources were key to evangelization and subsequent pedagogy and reveal the theologies behind the production and consumption itself. Within its method then, Latinx theology must confront the colonial and the autochthonous at the level of the popular alongside of the official. There should be no consideration for any methodological 'orthodoxy,' which usually means colonized epistemologies and methods.

Even then, in his early work Espín tends to downplay the complex materialities of devotion and devotional objects as received by indigenous population:

> The colonial devotions to passion scenes, crucifixes, crosses, and the "Sorrowful Mother" had ultimately **nothing to do** with the scenes or the objects or the personages themselves. They had **everything to do** with the people's experience of vanquishment, of abuse, of being unfairly condemned and neglected by those who claimed to be acting in the name and with the authority of the true God. These devotions were and are a symbolic statement of the victims' sense of experienced solidarity with the vulnerable, crucified God, and of God's solidarity with them in and through the cross.[70]

Espín links popular devotion and official doctrine, one of the aims of his project to uplift popular religion as theological source. Devotional objects materialize beliefs and engender the understanding of those beliefs for devotees and the community that forms and surrounds the object.[71] But Espín loses the object in his description of its 'ultimacy' in his early work, perhaps due to the possible dangers of idolatry better nuanced in his later work. For him, the materialities can become idolatrous, and I agree with him on that. The form and content of the devotional object certainly influences reception because knowledge also has to conform with

[69] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 40.

[70] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 49, my emphasis.

[71] For an excellent treatment of this, see Stella Nair, "Localized Sacredness, Difference, and *Yachacuscamcani* in the Colonial Andes", *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 2 (June 2007), 211-238.

the object for it to become a symbol. Devotees have to know and connect experientially with what the object is about before imparting meaning, and there is danger there of reifying a transcendent God. But the "nothing" and the "everything" in the quotation above is too strong of a characterization; in fact, those words seem 'idolatrous' as he defines it, absolutizing, and oppressive.

I agree that the tragic experience of the colonized undeniably informed these objects as meaningful. But I suggest that the formation of the Christian subject and the meaningfulness of the devotional object depends on the literal just as much as on the metaphorical, on the sensual just as much as on the experiential, on the long-lasting just as much as on the temporally punctual. As seen with Rodríguez and La Guadalupe, other epistemological frameworks also influence the devotee. For example, La Guadalupe was identified with Tonantzin, due to the apparition's location and her biological sex. The 'vanquished' population already had their own experience with deities and sacred objects and with power asymmetries in the 'this-worldly'-material and the 'beyond'-divine realms. They also rationalized contrasts with Euro-modern 'alien' epistemology and technology and their own.[72] Indeed, the relationship between devotee and devotional object is a complex individual and communal process, a fact that Espín himself emphasizes with "traditioning." By linking these "symbols" too strongly with a particular recent experience "of vanquishment" and subsequent divine "solidarity", Espín is reducing objects to their immediate 'colonializing Christianness' and

[72] See, for example, Nair 2007, 218-219. Another relevant quote: "Inca remembrance took a variety of forms and employed most—if not all—of the senses. The emphasis on objects, senses, and experience as memory highlights the importance of material culture in Andean life…Andeans did not record their histories in texts; instead, history was constructed, construed, and enacted with material remains and one's experience with it..." (219)

discounting their almost-simultaneous appropriation as autochthonous anti-idolatrous mediators (like *La Guadalupe* was for Juan Diego). I suggest colonizer and indigenous epistemologies and experiences both materialize in devotional objects and attest to their longevity within colonialized culture. This suggestion will be evidenced by Scheper Hughes' work below and become visible in my own analyses in Chapter 3.

Espín affirms that the crucified Christ and Mary are "central" among the universe of Christian devotional symbols yet they have no religious value in themselves: "Though many of these images or paintings may have true artistic value in themselves, the religious value is usually conveyed not by beauty itself but by the work's ability to elicit feelings of solidarity and compassion."[73] Espín correctly states that objects have some value "in themselves," yet I believe he separates too strongly religious and artistic value. Furthermore, value is affectively "conveyed" by the object. However, devotional objects are instrumentalized by Espín; he suggests that religious value "usually" lies only in the affective divine agency carried by them or flowing through them. More recent Latinx theological aesthetics from Alejandro García-Rivera and Cecilia González-Andrieu would critique this strong dismissal of the theological valence of beauty.[74] Espín, however, leaves space for other possibilities for the devotional object. There is a stated difference between artistic value and religious value (which, as seen earlier with Castañeda-Liles, is not always the case), yet the divine can still emerge from the materialities of

[73] Espín, *Faith of the People*, 71-72.

[74] Unfortunately, delving into these theologians' work goes beyond the scope of the chapter and dissertation, which do not focus on aesthetics. See Alex García-Rivera. *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003) and Cecilia González-Andrieu. *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012). However, another theologian of beauty, Jennifer Scheper Hughes, is seen below because her methodology is historical, ethnographical and, ultimately, liberationist, which corresponds much better with the intent of this dissertation.

art. There is also a preference of the ethical (the "solidarity and compassion") over the aesthetic, yet not an exclusion of the latter (the "usually") in regards to religious intent.

In sum, Espín is helpful as a starting point for the discussion of the import of devotional objects, one that already presumes their agency. For Espín, devotional practices that arose early in the encounter between Europeans and 'New Spaniards' already suggest a transformational exchange between human and object. The material impact of these objects is felt by the indigenous population and transformed their selves, helping them understand not only an imposed faith but also how it should be interpreted in light of their own culture and experience both inside and outside of the tragic *Conquista*. For Espín, devotional objects symbolize both vanquishment and hope, the former an anti-value and the latter a value theologically speaking, testifying to their paradoxical objecthood. As was seen earlier with Rodríguez, Castañeda-Liles, and *La Guadalupe* (and will be seen with Enrique's *Morenita*), the objects are not only symbols but also materializations, things that make current defeat and future victory present, sensible, and logical. The other two theologians seen below corroborate yet expand Espín's astute analyses and conclusions.

In his *Caminemos con Jesús* (1995), Goizueta avers that Latinx life is also not only an opportunity for theology but also self-emergent of religious knowledges and understandings, what one might call a source, a *fons*. Just like Espín, he claims that nowhere is this *fons theologicus* more evident than in popular devotion to Christ and Mary:

> If popular Catholicism plays a key role in defining the U.S. Hispanic [Latinx] socio-historical context, two particular religious figures or symbols in turn play a key role in defining popular Catholicism among U.S. Hispanics: these are the symbols of Jesus and Mary…One might even go so far as to say that for many Latinas and Latinos, **religious faith is virtually indistinguishable from our everyday** relationship with Jesus and

> Mary…In short, Jesus and Mary function as more than explicitly religious symbols; for us, they are identified with life itself.[75]

Note that Goizueta provides a clearer and more nuanced articulation of Espín's claim about the two 'central' figures in Christian devotion. While still referring to Jesus and Mary as "religious symbols", Goizueta in the end emphasizes their influence beyond religion into "life itself." Indeed, naming faith as "indistinguishable" from life bridges religious understanding with other areas of *lo cotidiano*, such as racial/ethnic otherness, political and economic oppression, diaspora and immigration status, and all other aspects of Latinx *realidad* in the Americas. Goizueta might not mean the same thing as Espín by 'symbol.' Yet what is most important to this dissertation is that Goizueta ties devotional object and religion or devotional object and life tighter together than does Espín. In fact, it is the object itself that binds religion and life so strongly for Goizueta, as will be seen below.

Goizueta's claims above imply that, since they are more than symbols in particular, Jesus and Mary are signs in a general sense.[76] Goizueta suggests that popular religion in Latinx culture is *uniquely* Latinx. In the case of Mary, one example is the devotion to La Guadalupe – "none other is more deeply 'ours.'"[77] It is unique because the devotion is modeled on a narrative based more on the Latinx 'assumptive world' or 'imagination' (seen earlier with Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles) than on Marian orthodoxy or other Marian apparitions. More important,

---

[75] Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 30, my emphasis.

[76] I am here referring to the Pierceian distinction between icon, index, and symbol as it pertains to sign. Icons stand in for something else (for example, a statue of Mary); indexes refer to something beyond themselves that is still traceable to them (for example, smoke signals fire); and symbols point to something completely different than what they are (for example, a national flag). More on Chapter 2 when object agency is theorized.

[77] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 38.

though, this unique devotion depends more on the object than on Mary herself. Recall that the climax of the La Guadalupe apparition story is that her image appeared on a *tilma*: "the emphasis is no longer on the *story* of Juan Diego and the Lady of Tepeyac [*La Guadalupe*] but on the *miraculous image as a divine object*…The image itself is, nevertheless, of immense significance because of the many beautiful and powerful symbols it contains…both Christian and Nahuatl. Many are symbols of new life, a new beginning, and a new birth."[78] According to Goizueta, devotion to La Guadalupe is object-centered. And this sign, the imaged *tilma*, not only symbolizes plural ethnic and religious identity (that is, the blending of two religions and cultures in one object) but also iconizes Mary as protector (the *tilma* is sort of a cloak) and bearer of grace (*tilma* as bearer of roses) and indexes the creative power of God.[79] *La Guadalupe* certainly is conceived as an instrument from, and for, the poor. But as seen also with Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles, her materialities also point toward anti-idolatrous, hopeful transformation: "a new life, a new beginning, and a new birth." In sum, it is an object that not only symbolizes but signifies Mary (and God) in multiple and complex ways for believers.

Furthermore, writes Goizueta: "Perhaps the most obvious symbol…is the very color of the Lady's skin…[H]er olive skin tells the indigenous people of Mexico that she, *La Morenita*, is one of them."[80] *La Guadalupe* is mestiza. Though he certainly considers it, Espín de-emphasizes this stylistic fact in favor of her "religious value." Closer to Rodríguez's analyses, Goizueta does not gloss over this important signifying and expansive aspect of her materiality. La Guadalupe is

[78] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 43-44.

[79] The theological theme of createdness/creativity is certainly present, and in the now and not necessarily in some hoped-for future. I will expand on creativity in Chapter 4.

[80] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 43-45.

a material sign of races, ethnicities, and cultures that mingled, many times violently, and still interact. She does not represent the idea of mestizaje, for she is "one of them," and more significantly, she is a colonialized mestiza. Indeed, not only does she signify Mary in particular but *latinidad* in general. I will expand on the notion of skin color in Chapters 3 and 4.[81]

For Goizueta, devotional objects of Jesus and Mary unite worlds that European early modern theology endeavored to separate yet do so concretely: "These religious statues or figures are not mere representations of a reality completely external to them, rather they are the concrete embodiment, in time and space, of Jesus and Mary. These are, in short, sacramental images: natural, particular entities that mediate, embody, and reveal a supernatural, universal, absolute reality."[82] Even though Espín referred to devotional objects as sacramental as well, clearly there is some distance between Espín and Goizueta on this point. Recall that for Espín devotional objects were mere "bearers" of divine power, so 'sacramental' in its abstract sense as symbol or as opportunity for the divine to manifest itself. Goizueta has the same Catholic conception of sacrament in the background (he mentions Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner, for instance) but concentrates on these images' ability, still as sacrament, to relate more than to symbolize or mediate.[83] Goizueta supports this claim by making the sacramental image itself a material entity, affirming the concreteness of the divine. In other words, devotional objects are sacramental because they interact materially – these objects

[81] For a succinct yet useful recent treatment of mestizaje, see Néstor Medina, "(De)Ciphering *Mestizaje*: Encrypting Lived Faith," in *The Word Became Culture*, edited by Miguel H. Díaz (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), 71-92.

[82] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 48.

[83] See Goizueta's explanation of symbol and sacrament using Lonergan, Rahner, and others on Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 27-28, footnote #26.

"mediate, embody, and reveal" divinity *due to* their materialities. That is, they participate concretely, in reality and history. As such, God is channeled through them and also embodied in them.

For Goizueta, materiality breeds divinity; the "natural" and the "supernatural" connect *within* this concreteness of the object. Using the Eucharist as an example, he writes: "A sacramental *relationship* exists where one affirms that concrete, particular reality [the sacramenting quality of the eucharistic bread and wine], not only through the assent of faith, but also through the physiological, material act."[84] Two things must be said here. On the one hand, sacramenting is a supernatural action that happens in the 'this-worldly' or "concrete reality." In other words, it entangles the material and the divine within a particular 'real'. On the other hand, sacramenting action needs both "faith" and "physiological act," abstract and concrete at one and the same time. That unity between the supernatural 'beyond' and the natural 'this-worldly' results in an affective bond evident also through the tension between the particular and the general, as seen before with Rodríguez, Castañeda-Liles, and Espín: "The genuine love with which [the devotee] relates to the crucified Jesus or Mary is not a universal love of some purely spiritual reality…it is, on the contrary, a very particular love of this Jesus, or this Mary…"[85] In other words, the "particular love" for a very-material Jesus and Mary makes "genuine," real and honest, the relationship with the "universal reality" of God. As devotee of *La Guadalupe*, the human interacts with **this** Mary (**this** *Morenita* statue) not Mary Mother of God. The devotee cements love primarily with this object, which is custodied, caressed,

[84] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 48-49.

[85] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 49.

rewarded, and otherwise intimately cared for. There is a preference for *this* material representation over *that* disembodied belief or *that* doctrine, even when ultimately *'this*' particular stands for '*that*' universal.

Materiality also enables divinity. Goizueta continues: "Only if, by [the devotee's] actions…one affirms the *intrinsic* value of the statues—as natural, created objects—can one recognize, in and through them, the real presence of a supernatural entity."[86] As I stated earlier in the chapter, 'real presence', the question whether the divine is truly *there* in the material, has been debated since very early in Christianity, especially during the Reformation as related to the sacraments. Rodríguez discovered that one of the main rationales for Guadalupan devotion among Latinx women is presence: "she stayed," her informants told her. The implication of Goizueta's claim is that the presence of God in these objects is not the first step toward a devotional relationship. The first step actually is the object *qua* object and the devotees' actions resulting from the object itself. Notice that the origin of the relationship is reversible. In other words, the object is valuable to the devotee and then the presence becomes evident. The object's materialities, for example *La Guadalupe* as an explicit image on a *tilma*, promote the connection and make real that which is implied or expected, namely her divinity. Only through affirming the material (both "natural" and "created") can one really (truthfully and effectively both aesthetically and ethically) communicate with the divine.

My suggestion that a material-particular breeds and enables the divine-universal is grounded on Goizueta's specific Latinx theological anthropology: "every 'individual' is a

[86] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 50.

particular, unique mediation of universal humanity, universal creation, and, in the last analysis, a unique mediation of the Absolute. Each person (precisely *as a* person) is defined and constituted by his or her relationships, both personal and impersonal, natural and supernatural, material and spiritual."[87] Being human is a unique expression of humanity *per se*, of createdness *per se*, and of divinity *per se*. Indeed, in every human there is a connection, unique to that human, between these three elements of 'humanness'. These are all mediated by one another – being human cannot exist without being created (and vice versa) and being created cannot exist without being divine (and vice versa), and, transitively, being human exists through being divine as mediated by the createdness of both. Furthermore, the particular human person cannot exist without relationship at every level, even those "impersonal" and "material." I suggest that in Latinx life these subjectivating material relationships include *familia*, *barrio*, and *iglesia* (and their concomitant rituals and objects). I will develop this peculiar understanding of 'person' as relational in Chapter 2 using Alfred Gell and Bill Brown.

Goizueta has the historical debates on idolatry and iconoclasm in the background. Yet, I suggest, all become less significant when the human-divine connection is seen materially. "If this piece of wood [an image of *La Guadalupe*] merely 'points to' some external supernatural reality, not itself revealed in and through the wood, then to kiss the wood is to commit an act of idolatry. But, if this piece of wood…is itself a particular and concrete manifestation of a universal, supernatural reality revealed in and through this object, then to kiss the wood is to make the only appropriate Christian response."[88] Here in one quotation is Goizueta's answer to

[87] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 50.

[88] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 65.

the historical debates presented earlier and, I suggest, to Espín tentativeness around objects. The wood as "concrete" divinity sacralizes the material *a priori*. This is not Goizueta's 'natural theology' or a theology of nature, but a relational theology. Goizueta is decentering any conflict between divine and material within the created (a conflict he ultimately sees as contrary to Christian discourse; rightly so, in my view) and centering the divinizing relational creativity of the particular and universal within the material, between *this* human and *that* God "in and through" *La Guadalupe*.[89] In other words, kissing this particular and universal matter validates a previous human-divine relation and that materiality is precisely what turns *La Guadalupe* sacramental.

For Goizueta, this sacramental relationality enables "accompaniment": "Jesus reveals to us not only who God is (theology) but also who we are (anthropology)...the source of those communal bonds which constitute us as persons and as a people, thereby giving us the strength to confront life's vicissitudes."[90] In other words, those faith-based relations are constitutive of Latinx humanness, not only theologically but also holistically, personally, and communally. As in Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles, relations are how Latinx Christians become, know and understand, and live and thrive. That relationality extends through time and space into the divine. History and story are made present and eternal. Ancestors coexist with and guide the living. Similarly, the historically-distant Mary of Nazareth becomes a very-near accompanying *Morenita*: "[Mary] is one with her people, not in some abstract theological and spiritual way, but in the most concrete way possible, in the very color and features of her face, in her

[89] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 65.

[90] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 67.

language, and in the physical make-up and position of her body and clothing."[91] I suggest that Goizueta's 'accompaniment' is more than relational – it is agential. Devotional objects such as *La Guadalupe* and Enrique's *Morenita* reveal the Latinx-Christian person-in-action. As I stated earlier, I will explore person and agent in the human-object relation theoretically in Chapter 2. For now, I will use another Latinx theologian to further evidence this community's theological views on devotional objects.

Jennifer Scheper Hughes's astute analyses of the *Cristo Aparecido* crucifix ('Appeared Christ,' Figure 2) provide another example of scholarship that connects Latin American history and devotional objects, Latinx theology, and an object-centered approach.[92] Her *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix* (2010) spans the *Cristo*'s contested origin in the sixteenth century, through its conflicts with religious and secular authorities from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, to its current well-earned place in twenty-first century Mexican history and Totolapan spirituality.[93]

Figure 2 – The *Cristo Aparecido. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/rc7iJvX4NhvQY6Bq9*

[91] Goizueta, *Caminemos*, 70.

[92] Jennifer Scheper Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Contrary to other theologians, Scheper Hughes brings together multiple points of view, including the object's itself. According to her, this book is both a "synoptic narrative…a comprehensive view of events pieced together from disparate and varied perspectives" (x), and "'object history,' tracing the journey and survival of the physical image itself across time and space" (16). Of all the scholars mentioned in this book, Scheper Hughes' work is closest to my own.

[93] Totolapan, México is the hometown of the *Cristo Aparecido*. México is a Latin American country and not part of the US Latinx community strictly speaking, However, its historical and cultural nearness to the Latinx world and the resonances between Latin American and Latinx Catholic devotion approximate the *Cristo* so much to the

Through an intersectional study of history, doctrine, and popular religion, she shows that for the Totolapans "the *Cristo Aparecido* is not a statue but instead their beloved patron saint, a manifestation of the divine, around which their collective spiritual life is organized and finds its focus."[94] Scheper Hughes affirms that the *Cristo* is the nexus of *cotidiano* life *qua* object because it *is* (not only represents) God *qua* epiphany. I suggest that, in this sense, the *Cristo* goes beyond mere devotional object, *locus*, or even *fons*, as in Espín and Goizueta. For Totolapan devotees, this affirmation is not idolatrous because anything different would negate life itself. The *Cristo* is sacred because life is sacred (as also suggested by Goizueta) and not exclusively the other way around as suggested by 'official' Christian doctrine. Scheper Hughes's analyses are also object-centered (as in Goizueta) because the crucifix is a "visual and material testament."[95]

Scheper Hughes names two interlocutors: "Two distinct intellectual movements in the last third of the twentieth century offer me a way forward: the work of subaltern historians and that of liberation theologians."[96] This combination of the 'subaltern historical' with 'liberative theological' makes Scheper Hughes emblematic of my approach. For her, the *Cristo* is both an object of study and a personal object (the latter in Goizueta's sense):

> Simultaneously a diachronic study of local religion, a work of cultural history, and a creative study of material culture, this history of the Totolapan Cristo is, most of all, a

---

Latinx context (and the aims of this dissertation) that I found its use appropriate. I hope readers can forgive this methodological incongruence. While 'officially' a historian of religion, I do consider Scheper Hughes a Latinx theologian, as this book and her other academic and non-academic work evinces.

[94] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, vii.

[95] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 242.

[96] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, ix. She adds: "I also try whenever possible to give the people of Totolapan the last word" (x). See also her endnote #1 on p. 133. Scheper Hughes marshals anecdotal evidence, "as is held by the living memory of the old ones of Totolapan" (267). Her subaltern, liberative theological lens is evident.

> biography. The suggestion that the history of an image might be recounted as the story of a life highlights devotees' own relationship to their *santo*: they attribute him *animus*—existence, being, and agency.[97]

For the Totolapans, similarly, the *Cristo* is both a devotional object (a *santo*) and a person (a *santo*).[98] 'He' is 'theirs' through its "*animus*," that is, the materialities they perceive. Hence, idolatry in a strict sense (for example, thinking the object through ownership) in or among the *Cristo* is avoided by long-lasting shared faith and its resulting life-affirming near affect.[99] The subjectivizing capabilities of the *Cristo qua* Totolapan sign (as with *La Guadalupe qua* Latinx sign) are entangled with its objectual anti-idolatrous materialities *qua* Christian sacramental sign (as in Goizueta). Interestingly, Scheper Hughes calls the *Cristo* a "prototype" for other crucifixes. As previously seen, 'prototype' is foundational to Tridentine statements about image worship and usefulness; it will be equally important in Gell's theory of agency described in Chapter 2.[100]

Scheper Hughes starts the *Cristo*'s object "biography" from his immediate context in sixteenth-century New Spain to the present day. The *Cristo* signals mixed ethnicity due to his *mestizx* origins. Because of the masterful skill in artisanship displayed in the crucifix, the

---

[97] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 5. Note how Scheper Hughes uses personal pronouns for the *Cristo*.

[98] In Latin American and Latinx cultures, *santo* can refer to the object and to the saint. In Chapter 3, we will see Enrique surrounding *Morenita* with, in his words, other "*santos.*" In a sense, this ambivalence also foreshadows my own understanding of 'person' developed in Chapter 2.

[99] Scheper Hughes also posits that this surprising attitude could be due partly to the Catholic Church's own precarious relationship with crucifix-objects in general yet its acceptance of image-objects of the Virgin Mary and in particular of La Guadalupe in Mexico. I do not explore this aspect here. As for the Totolapans themselves, the themes of beauty and affection predominate over suffering, contrary to Espín's interpretation in the colonial context (Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 7–14).

[100] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 5. A question emerges: is the *Cristo*'s as prototype a 'what' (Christianness) or a 'who' (the Son of God)? Both? The answer lies beyond the scope of my project here because I concentrate on relationality.

Totolapans originally presumed the *Cristo* to have been Spanish in provenance (note the explicit racial othering). But devotees eventually settled on a lost-in-time Mexican source. Scheper Hughes argues that it was probably the product of a local collaboration between Spanish settlers and indigenous artists, who had a long history of image consumption in general before, and of crucifix production in particular after, *La Conquista*.[101] More importantly, these economic materialities are also religious: "These were the first generation of Mexican *santeros*, i.e., folk artists responsible for the fabrication, preservation, and repair of Christian images for local devotional use. As such, they were also agents of Christianization and vehicles for the Christian miraculous."[102] Even if it seems like the 'they' is referring to the *santeros*, Scheper Hughes here is already making her case for the plural and complex materialities of the *Cristo*: it is both devotional "vehicle" for the divine and "agent" for Christian subjectification and subjection.

Indeed, in contrast with Espín, Scheper Hughes proposes a polyvalent theology behind these artifacts: "the first generations of Mexican crosses and crucifixes worked by Indian hands were not primarily expressions of a theology of suffering, but rather were designed as objects of beauty and power."[103] Said differently, these objects were powerful by design, materially significant for both *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* experience. These images are meant to be nearer due to their literal representation of sacrifice in the midst of oppression. Their meaning is more agentic, that is, has a larger impact in the indigenous mind, because it is much

[101] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 31–36.

[102] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 36.

[103] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 46.

more material than divine for them. As in Goizueta, there is a recognition of an 'intrinsic value' of the object that leads to a spiritual appreciation: "it was the affective and emotional aspects of their prior religious practice that the Indians [*sic*] brought with them into their newly adopted religion."[104] This affective reception was successful because the indigenous populations were already attuned to receive both spiritually and materially. Some artifacts (in Totolapan the *Cristo* and in this dissertation Enrique's *Morenita*) connect with humans in ways both mysterious and evident: "For the devotee and believer, the meaning of a particular image at a given point in time is always polyvalent, necessarily complex, and ultimately irreducible."[105] And, since this connection is expressed in a matrix of devotion, practices and the object itself eventually turn theological: devotion (as a feeling) that elicits and sustains long-lasting religious understandings of a participatory relationship with the divine in everyday existence. In Chapter 4, I delve deeper into this devotion, this love, using Enrique's *Morenita*.

Earlier I stated that Scheper Hughes considers liberation theology among her two main interlocutors. More precisely, what she says is that

> Liberation theology was and continues to be not just a global movement and institutional transformation within the [Christian] Church but also a local and lived religion. That is, it is a personal and collective practice of faith that is lived out in the diversity and particularity of local cultural contexts, all the while in dynamic engagement with both the rich religious traditions and the ambiguous history of Christianity in Latin America.[106]

[104] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 51.

[105] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 84.

[106] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 135.

This rich quotation makes clear that Scheper Hughes's *Cristo* biography is theological. First, she classifies liberation theology as religion.[107] Most importantly, though, I take her to mean that for those imbricated with its insights, liberation theology is not only a 'second step' about religion but also a way of life, a discipline in the academic sense and in the bodily one as well. Second, liberation theology is also "lived out" and not only 'thought about,' individually and communally. Third, liberation theology is not done in isolation but in a "dynamic" relation through spaces and times. The liberation theology Scheper Hughes construes is deeply historical, constructivist, and emic, as per Orsi and Morgan, and anti-idolatrous and concrete, as per Espín and Goizueta. But how does the *Cristo* express theology, and how can one ascertain it? For Scheper Hughes, this is possible through the testimony of his devotees (that is, the Church, the friars, the Totolapans, the pilgrims, and others) and through their actions among the artifacts (that is, the devotions and *fiestas*), in other words, Totolapan "popular religion."[108]

One of the most important devotional practices in this popular religious (now theological) space is the statue's "care and maintenance," called *mayordomía* (stewardship) by the *Cristo*'s *mayordomxs* .[109] This discipline is carried out by "participation of a self-empowered laity" and, perhaps due to the *Cristo*'s affective connection, has a different history with the Church than what traditionally transpires: "To some extent…the Cristo Aparecido was immune

[107] Nuancing Espín's and Goizueta's views of Latinx popular religion as *fons*, elsewhere she quotes another religious scholar's "thesis that liberation theology was, in some times and places, 'an outgrowth or subset' of popular religion" (Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 162). In other words, Latinx theology *is* Latinx religion for Scheper Hughes, much like La Guadalupe *is* the Latinx self for Rodríguez.

[108] Scheper Hughes, *Biography* 136. For a recent recasting of *lo popular* in Latinx theology, see Nanko-Carmne M. Fernández, "Playing en los Márgenes: Lo Popular as *Locus Theologicus*" in *The Word Became Culture*, 93-113.

[109] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 136, 155.

to, or exempt from, the efforts of liberationist clerics who otherwise sought to purify the popular faith of their flock, to strip away the more 'folkloric' practices."[110] Beyond the perfunctory aspects of *mayordomía* (like cleaning the statue and overseeing the daily economic and religious consumption of the artifact by devotees), *mayordomxs* are charged with "defending and preserving the cultural and religious 'patrimony' of the pueblo…[this has] ensured [the *mayordomía*'s] ongoing cultural usefulness and guaranteed its historical longevity."[111] While Scheper Hughes focuses on the import of this work, I would suggest *mayordomía* is also a theological space inside which the divine is engaged, for example, through service and support, which are both aspects of solidarity.[112] I will develop solidarity further as a theological principle in Chapter 4, also using Enrique's *Morenita*.

The anti-idolatrous and personal materiality is on display among the *Cristo* as well as among *La Guadalupe*. On the one hand, one of Scheper Hughes's informants told her: "All the suffering that we pass through, Jesus sees it and suffers also…This is a concept that is the culmination of a process of education and evangelization, and for it one needs a good preparation [that is, along liberationist lines]. But this preparation doesn't just happen from one day to the next."[113] On the other hand, another informant told her: "Look, we are tranquil

[110] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 155.

[111] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 157, 158. According to Scheper Hughes, the *mayordomxs* think of themselves as faithful servants of the *Cristo* and as the material supporters of the community.

[112] Solidarity (a Latinx theological value) pervades the *mayordomía* at its pastoral and ecclesial core both in a religious and a sociopolitical sense. And that understanding has transcended generations, and rightly so, because the *Cristo* needs protection until liberation is achieved by any means possible, rebellion included. Indeed, the devotees see the *Cristo* as 'vulnerable' both materially and as a materialization of their own fragile faith; cf. Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 173–74. Yet this vulnerability is not weakness. In fact, the *Cristo* engenders flourishing not resignation; cf. Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 204–205.

[113] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 166.

but not passive, peaceful but not lazy."[114] Note the personal language. Most important, Totolapans know that liberation is a tortuous yet life-affirming process, one not only laden with suffering but most importantly also with respect and a loving God. In other words, the Totolapans' relationship with the *Cristo* is based more on a theological liberating hope (in the sense of Espín) than on ever-present duress in relation to God.[115] Scheper Hughes calls all these attributions an "aesthetics of liberation" because *mayordomxs* and other devotees "understood their participation in aesthetic terms: not only is their Cristo beautiful, but the sense of community and of *familia*…was frequently described as beautiful as well."[116]

Finally, and not surprisingly, the *Cristo* is seen as a "reactive, sentient being," what I would call a person.[117] For example, the devotees worry about his mental health ("'They [the priests] should leave,' one woman writes, 'so that the saints can be *tranquilos*'") and about his physical well-being ("He 'suffers' potential injury by many hands" – for example, due to mishandling during processions or cleaning, he has experienced broken fingers and arms).[118] Indeed, for some devotees, the *Cristo* is not an image *of* suffering, but himself suffers due to his deterioration. Another informant is more cautious: "'He doesn't suffer because he is simply an image…but I do respect the image…He won't bleed…but even so, I won't do this. I won't break off his little finger because I respect him.'"[119] Yet another informant notes: "'Sometimes his

[114] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 204.

[115] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 167.

[116] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 169.

[117] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 212.

[118] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 208–209. Scheper Hughes also presents the case of a *cristo hermano*, the *Señor de Chalma*, whose devotees are convinced 'suffers' from "compassion fatigue": his head has literally, physically, bowed over time, according to devotees because of the weight of pilgrims' requests (209).

[119] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 210.

cheeks are quite flushed, *chapeadas*, and then you can see that he [is] pleased.'"[120] For Scheper Hughes, "This Cristo is anything but dead; he lives and breathes and is active in the world."[121] In other words, the personal affective "respect" fuses with personification, making any facile disconnection between the material and the divine impossible, as it should for any created being. Accordingly, it is hard to establish a beginning or a direction for the *Cristo*'s materiality: is the crucifix's reactivity a consequence of this respect or is respect a consequence of the *Cristo*'s actions? Are his flushed cheeks a cause or an effect of devotion? The *Cristo* image manifests the ambivalent yet bi-directional and unifying feeling and acting of the divine and the human, the mutual caring and being cared for in one real, physical, *cotidiano* opportunity.

Conclusion: toward the theological in Latinx devotional objects

Scholars of Latinx popular religion and theology have conceptualized the culturally-complex and polyvalent materialities of devotional objects conceptually and empirically. Devotion is not only about piety, the religious self, or even about religion *per se.* It is also about negotiating history, doctrine, the self as a whole, and *lo cotidiano* as a marginalized entity in an inhospitable land. Current Latinx Christian devotion arose in the tragic events of Spanish colonialism and still exists in the shadow of US imperialism. Devotional objects have traditionally been at the center of a polemic that treats them as undesirable (or worse) yet eventually become signs of their self-same devotees alongside of the divine. How so? Espín shows that popular religion combines *sensus fidei* and *latinidad* into a productive Latinx-specific

[120] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 212.

[121] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 212.

sensus fidelium, even if one should still be vigilant of its idolatrous tendencies. Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles provide ample evidence of the multiple contexts and cross-over effects that Latinx devotional objects inhabit and have. Thus religious discipline (such as devotion), communal structures (such as family), sociocultural practices (such as art and politics), and sexual transgression affect ethnic identity, communal self, appropriation of history, and gender relations toward a fulfilling existence in sometimes dire circumstances.

Espín, Goizueta, and Scheper Hughes describe the theological tensions that arise between the devotional object as symbol and as sign, tensions that many times are not felt (or even relevant) in *lo cotidiano* but injected by institutional hierarchies worried with the insidiousness of idolatry. Indeed, devotional objects serve to transform and subvert beliefs and therefore underlying theologies. One example is their liberating 'traditioning' of societal and institutional patriarchal views of 'woman.' The ultimate example, Scheper Hughes' *Cristo Aparecido*, presents several insights, theological in the final analysis, that emerge from his relationship with believers. First, through devotion and *mayordomía*, the *Cristo* is honored both in suffering and hope, which in turn engenders strength and life-affirmation in individuals and the community. Second, through the colorful and joyful communal *fiestas* for the *Cristo*, the town is "transfigured and glorified."[122] This relationship, say the informants, is "*bonita*", beautiful, "but most of all beauty lies in the numinous face of their Christ, from which gentleness and love flow abundantly."[123] The *Cristo* is Beauty incarnate, just as Christ is God incarnate. Writes Scheper Hughes: "people's affection for their santo stems simply from his

[122] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 223.

[123] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 224.

very existence; the fact that he is, that he has been made manifest, and that he came to them."[124] Foreshadowed by Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles with *La Guadalupe* and by Goizueta with the sacramental and organic relationship between devotees and their objects, these materialities are theological in nature, advancing understanding about the role of the human in the divine plan and vice versa.

Latinx devotees are not concerned mainly with orthodoxy but with their material relationship with the divine, and that perspective serves to maintain devotional objects at the forefront of popular religion and culture in those communities within *lo cotidiano*. Explicit in the chapter's epigraph, the instructions given to Enrique's great-grandfather when becoming *Morenita*'s *mayordomo*, being 'a good steward' means both 'taking care' and 'venerating'. Devotion has material and divinizing aspects; said otherwise, the spiritual stewardship needs physical/affective support and vice versa. Doctrine is important yet secondary; solidarity and humility are primary. In Chapter 2, I will further develop materiality of devotional objects theoretically using Alfred Gell and Bill Brown. For these thinkers, objects are agentic and excessive; in other words, they act upon others and go beyond their own objectual limits. In Chapter 3, Latinx conceptualizations of devotional objects and theory of agency and things will be combined with historical and ethnographic details from Enrique's Morenita and Mariology in pursuit of particular theological insights of this human-object encounter, which will be developed in Chapter 4.

[124] Scheper Hughes, *Biography*, 237-238.

Chapter 2

Excessive personhood: the social agency of devotional objects

> There are several senses in which a thing may be said to 'be'…for in one sense the 'being' meant is 'what a thing is' or a 'this', and in another sense it means a quality or a quantity or one of the other things that are predicated as these are.
>
> Taking the side of things hardly put a stop to that thing called theory.

In Chapter 1, I show that Latinx devotional objects directly influence their humans in ways that nuance the colonizing material-divine dichotomy by relating intent and meaning *qua* objects. I am calling this relational, physical, sensorial, 'everyday' influence *materiality* and, especially in this chapter, *agency*. In Christian practices involving devotional objects, that agency is believed to be bi-directional: a material act (for example, an intercessional prayer) elicits or not a divine act of God in the presence of a specific devotional object (for example, a Marian image like Enrique's *Morenita*) being engaged by the human devotee. The human and the divine clearly exhibit a kind of mutual relationship in this devotional space, making it explicitly theological. But what about the object? Does divine agency emerge from the object as a 'this-worldly' source for an 'other-worldly' entity or is the object solely a bearer or vehicle of divine agency? If the former, is that agency somehow intrinsic to the object itself once it is construed as a devotional object, or is it activated by the practice (or perhaps the mere encounter) between object and human? In any case, does the object participate at all in the devotional transaction, or is the object passive? Do these questions have to be answered

'either/or' or can they be approached in the Aristotelian sense of "thing" both "predicated" and not, as in the epigraph?[1]

In this chapter I will argue that, since agency in the "vicinity" of objects (to use Alfred Gell's term) is empirically demonstrable, agency as theoretical concept is appropriate for the description and analysis of devotional objects and their consequences for the devotional space in general. In light of the questions above and using elements of the anthropological theory of art from Gell, the theory of things from Bill Brown, and what I call ethnography through the object (that is, observation and interviews, object biography, and historical and textual research on the particular object, as in Scheper Hughes), I will develop what I call *excessive personhood*, the social agency of the devotional objects explored in this dissertation.[2] This argument is ventured to sustain the larger claim that from an analysis of the agencies in the vicinity of a devotional object one can describe and analyze the theology in the space which will occupy the last chapter of this dissertation. Simply stated, the agencies of such an object express theological insights about devotion. The focus is decidedly anthropocentric (that is, theology ultimately is human discourse) but any conclusion will still be mediated 'from the side' of the object, as per the epigraph.[3]

By reading Gell, Brown, and methodologies around objects closely, I will settle on a method for objects in Latinx devotion. Gell produces a theory of agency using objects as if

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited and with an introduction by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941, 783

[2] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1998); Brown, Bill, ed. *Things.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Brown, Bill. *Other Things*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

[3] Brown*, Things*, 3.

persons, which fits my Goizueta-inspired object-oriented approach, previous Latinx scholarship on *Morenitas* and other devotional objects, and the preeminence of theological anthropology on Latinx theology, all seen in Chapter 1. Brown theorizes that objects show their polyvalent thingness as *excess*, that which enables objects to extend themselves as plural and unspecific even if particular; as seen also in Chapter 1, *Guadalupes* and the *Cristo Aparecido* effortlessly went beyond their religious intent into other spheres of *lo cotidiano* Latin American and Latinx life. Methodological discussion in general and methods in particular seen below lead to re-affirm that researching agency from objects themselves not only confirms but also yields theoretical insights due to what I call their plural, gradating, and generative meanings *qua* objects; more on these materialities later.[4] Note that these conceptual and methodological choices have more to do with the presuppositions behind the argument than with my scholarly certainty. For example, I analyze agency in terms of relationality, favoring some scholars of materiality over others; some of these others are mentioned in the Introduction. I also concentrate on the material conditions of one particular research site that might not map well in other contexts. For example, due to different experiences with colonialism, agentic relations in Latinx contexts will not coincide with Orsi's Italian American context referred to in the Introduction. The consequences of devotional materiality and its implications developed in Chapter 1 and in later chapters to come further justify this choice. In any case, many objectual theories and methods are related to—in a sense, have agency on—the argument I present, but

[4] For methodology *per se*, see for example, Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, eds, *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

I am choosing Gell, Brown, and 'objectual' methodologies mostly because of their relatability to theology in ways that will become more evident later.[5]

Gell's distributed personhood: the agency of social entities

As previously stated, agency is defined as an action performed to elicit a response. Agency has at least two components: cause, the source of or motivation behind the act, and effect, the result of the act. This conceptual polarity, however, tends to occlude the physical and metaphysical actors involved in the agentic relationship; in the case of objectual devotion, the human, the divine, the contexts, and especially the devotional object present in this social exchange.[6] In Chapter 1, Latinx religious scholars and theologians described and explained devotion mostly from its effects, that is, from what it ultimately did, expressed, and/or represented for devotees, such as empowerment, sexual liberation, anti-idolatry, or accompaniment. Here I want to focus more on the participants and the mechanics of their interactions and less on causality.[7] For instance, the Christian devotee prays to God using an object and God responds (or not). In this scenario, scholars of Latinx devotion elucidate the significance and/or consequences of prayer from this divine response and its reception and

[5] Here and elsewhere, 'objectual' means pertaining or referring to an 'object.'

[6] A fair question at this point would be why use Gell instead of Latour if I am involving "actors" in "social exchange"? My response is that, even though they are concepts familial to each other, 'person' (which Gell uses) gets much more play in theology than 'actor' (which Latour favors) and therefore is more conducive to bridge disciplinary theories and methods, in this case, Gell's social anthropology to theology. In addition, Latour primarily aims for a theory of sociality and not of agency. Perhaps future work could be done bringing Latour into the conversation. Even so, he remains relevant to the scope of this dissertation and some Latourian language and implications will still be seen or implied in what follows.

[7] For instance, Enrique's religious devotion is caused by faith. Exploring this fact is not within the scope of this project.

rationalization by the devotee. By contrast, I want to apprehend meaning and consequences from the participants themselves – simply stated, the 'how' from the objectual and human 'who' more than from the causal 'what' that Espín and others used in Chapter 1.[8]

To do so, I start with Gell's *Art and Agency*. In my view, Gell's theoretical insights on the social agency among humans and objects are extremely helpful for analyzing devotional objects *qua* agents, especially his concept of "distributed personhood," which Gell tentatively defines as "social relations [happening] in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency."[9] By analyzing these "relations" through "art-objects" (works of art; in my case, Enrique's *Morenita*) which he presupposes are agents, Gell produces a theoretical framework for agency that is generalizable yet still dependent on specific, actual encounters, in which the mediating agent, and its counterpart the non-mediating 'patient,' can be human or object. Note that Gell is describing the relations around 'objects mediating' and not the objects themselves.[10] In this dissertation, these relations have been called materialities and the act of 'mediating' is called agency. *Art and Agency* is helpful because relationality and not causality is relevant.[11]

---

[8] Note that this exchange is not independent but irrespective of context. In other words, the exchange depends on the specific material conditions, yet happens in all conditions (i.e., culture, biological/ecological setting, landscape, time period, race, gender, class, and so on). This universality, I suggest, enables my argument to transcend the Latinx context; I will elucidate on this in Chapter 4.

[9] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 7. The concept 'person,' in relation to 'object,' also has a long history in scholarship. To name a few recent voices in this scholarship: Marcel Mauss, Marilyn Strathern, Barbara Johnson, and Roberto Esposito. But this scholarship is not necessary for the discussion in this dissertation, which concentrates on personhood as agency, not on a conceptual genealogy or the socio-cultural contingency of 'person' *per se*. By "vicinity" Gell means the agent's overlapping spheres of influence, such as context, location, time, ideas, and so on.

[10] In Latourian language, these relations are called 'networks.' I found the following text helpful with the human-social concept transition in the context of objectual agency: Bruno Latour, "Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects too Have Agency," in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[11] The ultimate cause of Enrique's devotion could be faith, Mary, God, and/or so many others.

Gell begins by stipulating that art-objects are indexes, signifiers that imply some sort of causal connection to its signified. The classic example of an index is smoke, which signifies fire. But what do art-objects index? Of what are they an effect? For Gell, art-objects are indexes of agency: "the *index is itself seen as the outcome, and/or the instrument of, social agency*."[12] In addition, according to Gell, the art-object's agency is perceived through a process of "abduction," a combined inference about causation and reference to a known source. For example, smoke indexes fire. But the smoke's beholder cannot ascertain with certainty if there is a fire or not because the source of the smoke is not visible. It is only through a combination of previous experience and data about smoke (for example, the shape and color of smoke cloud or the smell of smoke) and knowledge about fire and context (for example, types of fire, weather, availability of fuel) that the beholder decides to act as it pertains the smoke. Knowledge of smoke is not enough; where there is smoke, there is not necessarily fire. Indeed, smoke by itself is not an index of agency because smoke is not a social entity independently according to Gell; it needs fire to be social, for instance. If originated socially, like around a campfire, smoke can then signify social agency (as in between people). In the case of art-objects, the beholder also cannot ascertain with certainty the origin of its sociality, or even whether the object is being social by itself; the beholder can only see/feel the object's agency. For Gell, as with smoke, this agency is neither completely induced nor deduced but 'abducted.' Somewhere between induction and deduction, abduction stands on its own as an epistemological vehicle.

[12] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 15.

Note that Gell's stipulation that art-objects are abducted as indexes is not without criticism. James Leach writes: "My objection, then, is to the theory of abduction of agency and the notion that we should treat an object as an index of something else. I point out that questions about what an object is an index of may obscure something that is very important about the object in diverse contexts."[13] In other words, Leach rejects Gell's stipulation as too reductive and anthropocentric. A similar accusation plagues several other theories of objectual agency.[14] However, this accusation is ultimately anthropocentric itself. Gell's stipulation shares agency with objects, an agency that traditionally has been exclusively assigned to other actors (usually the human) in his effort to theorize objects beyond the human. In addition, questions about "what an object is an index of" do not preclude other questions; I suggest that Leach's accusation itself reduces Gell's argument to a straw man. In the Latinx devotional context seen in Chapter 1, Gell's stipulation is the believers' stipulation: devotional objects are undoubtedly indexes of divine agency for devotees in general and I take both seriously (especially on the devotees' side because of its material implications, many times tragic). For believers, devotional objects index the divine; in other words, believers abduct those objects' agency as divine. This is presupposed by faith, so questioning this axiomatic stance on the part of believers (in the sense of Leach) is unproductive and, ultimately, colonializing (or, to use Espín's word, idolatrous).

If art-objects are indexes of agency, then they are 'social agents' in this specific sense; note that the origin of said agency is inconsequential and not necessarily Gell's ultimate

[13] Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*, 184.

[14] For example, New Materialisms and material phenomenologies are also accused of anthropocentrism.

concern (or mine).[15] He also does not claim that art-objects have intention or will or that art-objects are somehow equal to human beings because they are both social agents. Such claims would be at best animistic and not anthropologically consistent. He does claim, however, that humans are "self-sufficient" or "primary" social agents, and that objects are "secondary."[16] In any case, social agency is dynamic, not located in any entity per se, be it the human, the art-object, and other social agents because all manifest social agency is only in particular times and places. Because it is dynamic, the social agency of art-objects is *plural*, multiple in kind depending on context, and *gradating*, in a spectrum of varying degrees.[17] In Chapter 1, I described Latinx devotional objects as plural and gradating, just like the theologies behind them are. For example, *La Guadalupe*, just like Enrique's *Morenita*, not only has religious agency but also political, social, intergenerational, economic, sexual, and racial agency, and all of these agencies vary according to space and time. Indeed, different *Guadalupes* exhibit varied kinds and degrees of individual and communal agency.

I suggest, however, that Gell's classification of objects as 'secondary' agents precisely clashes with his concept of distributed personhood and, ironically, supports Leach's earlier objection. This hierarchization implies some of the animism and perhaps even the idolatry that Gell himself rejects, subjugating objects to humans along with approximating their ontological status—treating objects as if persons but always lesser. By contrast, more recent scholarship

[15] Gell does spend some time writing about origin as related to 'prototype,' but not as origin of agency but of the object itself. Recall this word was important in the Council of Trent Decree about idols and also for Scheper Hughes. I will engage this portion of the book further in later chapters, especially Chapter 4.

[16] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 17.

[17] For example, the agency of a painting is attributable to its artist, to its form, and/or to its subject matter, and maybe others, and some art-objects are more agentic that others (think of the influence of a DaVinci vs. so many other art-objects).

has no reservation in asserting that objects possess, at least partially, the "self-supporting independence" that baffled Heidegger.[18] For example, *contra* Gell, Ian Hodder writes: "things have primary agency in that they act in the world as a result of processes of material interaction, transformation, and decay."[19] Mundane examples of primary objectual agency could be object-object co-influences, such as in landfills, where discarded objects chemically interact with each other, or in many church buildings, where candle soot darkens images and the images then change the building aesthetic. Primacy is also visible in human-object interactions, as Hodder describes using an encounter with a pebble at the beach seen in the Introduction and as also seen in Chapter 1 with the object-centered La Guadalupe apparition and Juan Diego (and as will be seen with Enrique's *Morenita* in Chapter 3). Gell's own conceptualization of agency as distributed personhood makes not seeing objectual agency as primary somewhat incongruent with his own theory in light of what is discussed in this section.

Gell attributes plurality and gradation to "captivation" and "attachment," both of which are context-dependent as well. Captivation is one kind of agency, the power to grab and fascinate a human or objectual other. For instance, art-objects have the ability to transport beholders to other realities or to envision other selves, in short to captivate in mysterious and inscrutable ways. Writes Gell: "Captivation…ensues from the spectator becoming trapped within the index because the index embodies agency which is essentially indecipherable."[20]

---

[18] Martin Heidegger, "The Thing", in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 164. Leach's objection to Gell's stipulation discussed earlier implies objectual "primary" agency.

[19] Hodder, *Entangled*, 216.

[20] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 71. By indecipherable Gell means that the agency is unattributable to specific agent even it is presumed to have cause and known to have an effect within that agent and/or its vicinity; in other words, the agency is abducted (the beholder becomes 'trapped') through captivation, and the intensity of that captivation depends on the object itself and the context of its encounter with the human.

Similarly, attachment is another kind of agency, what I would call an 'enchanting' power that coalesces the formal and the functional in the art-object. Gell explains attachment using decoration of objects and how these enchant users into seeing beyond the merely formal or functional and acting according to a combination of both.[21] Captivation and attachment describe well the fluidity, plurality, and gradations of social agency of objects as evidenced through observation. *La Guadalupe* certainly is captivating and attaches to her devotees, as seen in Chapter 1. And so is Enrique's *Morenita* for Enrique, his family, and their community. For example, Enrique told me how sometimes he 'feels' a sort of 'electrical current' when he walks past his image ("me llama," he said; 'she calls me'). How this captivation and attachment express a certain religious understanding will be described more explicitly in Chapter 4 using Enrique's *Morenita*.

But how can one properly evidence social agency, given all that variation and ambiguity? Gell's solution to this problem is astute: distributed personhood. Gell defines 'person' as an entity that establishes and maintains social relations with another entity – humans are persons in this way. Correspondingly, if social, an object could be construed as a person in the same sense that a human being is a person. To be clear, Gell says that objects can be analyzed *as if* persons. Gell does not claim that objects are human-like in a strict sense; objects are 'person-like' in a broader sense, because of their 'social relationality in their vicinity.'[22] In other words, 'person' stands-in for social agent when broadly construed. This definition has two immediate implications: on the one hand, social agency (for Gell, distributed personhood) can be plural

[21] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 74.

[22] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 96.

and gradating as sociality varies in quantity and quality depending on purpose and context in relation to humans. If applied to objects, there can then be kinds and degrees of objects in regards to their sociality; some objects are more social than others, for instance. On the other hand, since this plurality and gradation applies to humans as well, then there are kinds and degrees of humans, a dangerous proposition from an ethical perspective. But note that Gell's claim applies only to agency. Since distributed personhood exists beyond the human (or the object), to consider any entity a person is to make a claim about its relationality and not its ontological status *per se*.[23]

Gell also describes distributed personhood "as personhood distributed in the milieu, beyond the body-boundary."[24] In other words, an entity's personhood, its social agency, *extends beyond* that entity's physical limit (for example, its body) toward its "milieu," to their 'vicinity.' If one is referring to a human, this person's agency is seen not only in the actions taken immediately on another entity (for example, through its limbs) but also by the actions taken by patients of previous agency that now become agents themselves. For instance, In Gell's terms, this dissertation is an effect of a human-person typing a document into a computer-person. We are both agents and patients at this point, interacting through a 'virtual'

[23] In other words, a human person unable to be social with other humans (e.g., someone in a medical/clinical vegetative state) is no less of a person in the ontic sense (that is, in the correct moral way of thinking of 'person').

This conflation of objects and humans as persons is not without its critics as well. For one, Miller writes: "in a society where objects are reduced to their personlike qualities, people also tend to be reduced to their objectlike qualities" (Miller, *Materiality*, 39). This point is well taken and is related to the previously named ethical danger around humans unable (or, worse, not allowed) to be social with other humans. In this chapter and the next, though, by maintaining my focus on a particularly devotional encounter, I sidestep ethical claims about objectification of humans in general or in their specific society. Devotees and devotional objects are undoubtedly devoted to each other and only objectify each other by choice and through love. Questions about 'non-persons' and 'objectlike humans' will be engaged more fully in Chapter 4.

[24] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 104.

document seen on a screen and being assailed individually or communally by other object-persons (a table, books, air, a glass of water, electrical current, an air conditioning system, and countless others). In addition, this document is also a person because as document-person it is interacting with me as I write, read, and edit, and will interact similarly with other human-persons and object-persons in the future (such as my dissertation readers, the printer, Pro-Quest, and the Internet). In yet another sense, this document-person is also an extension of my distributed personhood, because my agency as the writer of this dissertation is carried by this document to others. The document is at the same time patient and agent; just as I am, so my computer is, and the Internet is. The same claim could be made in the devotional context with the *Morenitas*, devotees, the Church, 'official' doctrine, Latinx popular religion and culture, Latinx theology, and God, if one takes their mutually agential interactions seriously.

In the context of social relations, distributed personhood is present yet varies in the network formed by agents in their 'vicinity.' To explain further let me use a more relevant example: a sculpture and its sculptor. In Gell's theory, these two 'persons' exhibit unceasing and entangling distributed personhood. On the one hand, the artist's agency is always present in the object, as any beholder can imagine the sculptor sculpting. On the other, this personhood entangles other human and objectual persons – indeed, an especially captivating sculpture still distributes and attaches the sculptor's agency to other adjacent sculptures, as in museums. I suggest that this is why some objects are more agentic that others – agency *waxes* and *wanes* and also *accumulates* and *dissipates* depending on the 'persons' involved and their contexts (which can act as if persons as well; for contexts have agency). In Chapter 1, one could see that *La Guadalupe* shares a long-lasting ever-changing and entangling relationship (that is, a

personhood) with believers and non-believers in a very individual and intimate level and in a communal and public level, which varies according to those human persons' qualities and quantity—what one might call a 'personal' level. In addition, *La Guadalupe* is more 'person'—what I would call a *denser* 'person'—during processions than during prayer: her agency reaches farther and wider. Enrique's *Morenita* is also denser when someone prays around her than when nobody does; when not praying, Enrique 'feels' her, yet devotional power certainly rises when praying or performing other devotional practices. These mechanisms and dynamics of agency will be seen in the stories and histories of Enrique's *Morenita* in Chapter 3. For instance, she led a very public life in the early- and mid-twentieth century (participating in feasts and pilgrimage) but during the last few decades has 'retired' to Enrique's home and more private-familial devotion.

Besides its plurality and gradation, I also suggest distributed personhood *generates* meaning in the context of devotion through images as it helps ameliorate its more corrosive connotations throughout Christian history. For one, Gell argues that Western scholarship has misinterpreted or misapplied idolatry.[25] For Gell, congruent to what was seen in Chapter 1, idolatry is part of the human condition because so is objectification; there is no logical reason it cannot be an appropriate and fruitful area of study or yield new insights about religious practices for him. Furthermore, idolatry should be explored precisely due to (not in spite of) the historical and tragic modern misuse of objectification: "[idolatry] emanates, not from stupidity

[25] He writes: "Questions of cultural foundations of belief and scepticism need not detain us, but it is still enormously difficult for Westerners and non-believers to empathize with idol-worshippers because of the bombardment with anti-idolatrous propaganda which we have experienced from the very moment we became conscious of such things" (Gell, *Art and Agency*, 116).

or superstition, but from the same fund of sympathy which allows us to understand the human, non-artefactual, 'other' as a copresent being, endowed with awareness, intentions, and passions akin to our own." Thus Gell's understanding of 'idolatry' is anti-idolatrous in the sense of Espín.[26] Simply stated, studying idolatry (as an expression of personhood around objects) generates a compassionate and ultimately liberating understanding of otherness. For a theologian, the implication cannot be clearer; for instance, in Latinx theology, about solidarity with the 'other.'

In addition, idols in devotional contexts confound the boundaries between icon, index, and symbol, to produce a fruitful analytical space for academia. Here Gell coincides with Goizueta's argument and Scheper Hughes' approach in Chapter 1. The signification of devotional objects has less to do with their form, function, or context, and more to do with the materialities. For instance, Gell writes: "all idols, I think, are 'iconic'—including the so-called aniconic ones—whether or not they look like some familiar object, such as the human body."[27] In other words, resemblance or reference to a prototype is not necessary to agency, as could be presumed from Pierceian semiotic categories entrenched through coloniality. What is necessary for interaction is the mutuality itself, the 'reciprocity,' to use Rodríguez's term. This mutuality enables image worship to generate new dynamic mechanisms of knowledge and signification, that is, new epistemologies that transcend the religious and even the image itself. In fact, for Gell, when image-objects are assumed to be as if persons (whether the human or the object itself is producing divine agency or the latter is just a vehicle is beside the point), because

[26] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 96.

[27] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 97-98.

agency as Gell defines it resides in the social relation and not in the human-person or object-person (or in the divine-person, for that matter), and that relation generates new ways of knowing about the self and others and the world. Gell affirms that "[humans] suffer, as patients, from forms of agency mediated via images of ourselves, because, as social persons, we are present, not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency."[28] In other words, from the perspective of a theologian, thinking about agency distributed among all of creation generates an understanding of humanity's place in creation itself. Again, Gell's words resonate with theological nuances of creativity and createdness, foundational in the Latinx theological anthropology seen in Goizueta and in the evidence springing from Enrique's *Morenita*, as will be seen in Chapter 4.

In a methodological sense as well, I find Gell's formulation of idolatry extremely helpful as a corrective to Christianity's corrosive history with the term. Since what drives Gell's analysis of agency more as distribution between entities and less as location in one entity or another, he implies a necessary *humility* from the human scholarly side, just like Espín did earlier with his 'anti-idolatrous' stance. In other words, research becomes one more component in the object's social network, effectively making absolute bracketing or separation from the object of study impossible. Idolatry—what I would suggest is the whole 'socio-religious life' of the idol as if a person—captivates and attaches itself to academic study. Only if the scholar is able to surmount colonializing and anthropocentric analytical presuppositions and prejudices can

[28] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 103.

distributed personhood and its implications shine through.[29] This necessary condition of my scholarly hermeneutical lens will become evident in my analyses below and in subsequent chapters.

To summarize, Gell's methodological 'sleight-of-hand' with personhood as social agency presents a fresh way of ascertaining objectual agency. Objects are abducted as indexes of agency, which creates space for its plural, gradating, and generative power to captivate and attach. Seen as if persons alongside humans, objects extend beyond their boundaries, and make themselves visible through a power that increases or decreases according to the context in which they dwell. Being primary agents, Latinx devotional objects are able to generate new insights about devotion in the Latinx context and enable new epistemologies (theological, I suggest) from their particular yet generalizable personhood, in turn demanding humility from their human counterparts and others, including researchers (as I am). I now turn to Brown and the thing-object distinction and its implications for the human (as both subject and object).

Brown's excess: the spark of social agency

Agency as the action of from one particular entity to another is necessarily based more on movement than on stasis (different, for instance, from presence as a materiality). Using Gell, one can theorize it as plural and gradating. However, there are moments when that entity is inert and an agent only potentially, at least when it pertains to human persons—the object-person inside that generative space between agent and patient, to use Gell's words, yet

[29] More on this on the methodology section below.

inactive within its agency.[30] How can one theorize this 'generativeness,' since Gell merely describes the distributive aspect of personhood and some of its consequences, such as captivation and attachment, and Latinx scholars speak about empowerment and anti-idolatrousness *a posteriori*?

In *Things* (2004), Bill Brown explores this paradox by distinguishing *thingness* and *objecthood*: "As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things."[31] For Brown, things, fleeting as they come and go, are both illuminated and obscured by more-enduring objects. He continues: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation."[32] In a manner similar to Gell, the human subject is decentered in Brown's conceptualization. To think an object in 'real life,' one needs to go beyond the subject-object dichotomy. Simply stated, objects 'assert themselves'; humans are not required. Brown also nuances Gell by deemphasizing the ontic-relational correspondence—the words 'thing' "names" a "relation" and not one entity or another. Indeed, being an object in 'life' is both

[30] Though I will not explain this any further due to its more-ontological and less-relational background, another way to theorize this distinction is with the Heideggerian 'presence-at-hand' vs. 'readiness-to-hand' when thinking about the 'toolness' of tools. Heidegger is certainly on Bill Brown's own 'toolbag.' (cf. Brown, *Things*) See, for example, Martin Heidegger, et al. *Being and Time*. Harper Perennial Modern Thought edition (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008) and also Martin Heidegger, "The Thing" and "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Note that I mean 'inert' due to the lack of human interaction. It is difficult to conceive of any entity being completely and absolutely devoid of any sociality.

[31] Brown, *Things*, 4. Note that, for Brown, things are not only physical objects, but also ideas, practices, thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, artifacts, and every*thing* else.

[32] Brown, *Things*, 4.

being-a-thing and becoming-another-thing. Hence, thing is both where the object originates and what the object becomes. Brown employs 'thing' as a concept to describe both the static and the dynamic side of objects, hence placing 'thingness' between agent and patient in the paradox above. Brown calls the more-static side of this relation "latency" and the more-dynamic side "excess."[33]

I will use 'excess' to represent that which *a priori* 'activates' agency *qua* activity or action, that is, that which enables the object to become a thing, in this case to be considered as if a person. By doing so I suggest that excess combined with Gell's distributed personhood provides a more robust theoretical descriptor for the social agency of devotional objects: *excessive personhood*. Excessive personhood combines distributive and activating aspects of personhood. I will argue that the specific Latinx devotional objects seen earlier (such as *La Guadalupe* and the *Cristo Aparecido*) and their vicinities display excessive personhood. I will also demonstrate the concept empirically in Chapter 3 using Enrique's *Morenita*.

Brown imagines thing itself as dual: on one side, things emerge from latency, an "amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by the (ap)perceiving subject."[34] Latency is a kind of conceptual region from whence things objectify, that is, become or are made material; in this dissertation, display personhood. Latency describes stasis (also: inertness or potential), that which objects are (and could be) before entering any relationship with another entity, meaning, being social or what one could call 'personal.' In a sense, latency is the realm

[33] Brown, *Things*, 5.

[34] Brown. *Things*, 5. Remember I am not concerned about aesthetics ("(ap)perceiving") in this dissertation. I am interested in the non-relational nature of latency as a kind or degree of relationality.

of 'no-thingness.' On the other, things are also "what is excessive in objects, what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects;" excess is "force as a sensual presence or a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems."[35] Excess, the 'personalizing' "force" that makes objects become other things, is foundational to my argument in this dissertation. In contrast to latency's 'no-thingness,' excess describes the dynamic (active, relational) – 'every-thingness.' If agency is conceptualized as movement, excess is its mover.[36] Excess is that which enables the object's plural, gradating, and generative primacy, to use conceptual insights garnered from Gell. Excess could be used to describe what turns pieces of sculpted wood such as *Morenitas* and *Cristos* into signs, transforming material objects into thingly agents that 'patiently' stay inside that 'amorphous' region until somehow 'excessive.' When human-borne, this cognitive action (or actionality) was called intentionality by early phenomenologists; when objectual, it is impossible, at best irrelevant to this dissertation, to define distinctly. Yet this action still can be

[35] Brown, *Things*, 5. Object-oriented ontologists, which I mention in the Introduction, use 'excess' in a similar fashion; see, for example, Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. Theory Redux series, Laurent de Sutter, editor (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 11.

Though I will not delve deeper into this here, I find Brown's use of 'magic' in relation to Gell captivating – even if he most probably did not intend this 'captivation' I feel. Gell uses James Frazer, Michael Taussig, and other scholars' ideas about (what they call) magic in his discussion of distributed personhood. This is but one example of the connection between excess and personhood I am exploiting. Note also that Brown references much of the theoretical history of objects in this sentence. He builds upon Karl Marx, William Pietz, Charles S. Pierce (and other theoreticians of 'idol'), and Émile Durkheim, among others. Some if not all of these scholars used 'magic' in relation to religion, so the magic-excessive personhood connection within this dissertation is even stronger, denser I would say.

[36] Herein lies an opportunity to show how this dissertation is less concerned with the phenomenological side of objects. Brown's 'latency' seems to be that which lies at the core of thingness, of the thing's essence. For example, in *Material Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Michel Henry writes: "To radicalize the question of phenomenology…is also to seek out the mode according to which [pure phenomenality] originally becomes a phenomenon—the substance, the stuff, the phenomenological matter of which it is made, its phenomenologically pure materiality. That is the task of material phenomenology." (2) A materially-framed phenomenology would ask what latency and excess *are* in essence. By contrast I am much more concerned with what excess *does* and what its consequences are.

validated empirically, as seen in the Introduction with the example of Hodder's pebble, a pre-reflexive thingly encounter with an object in the world, and as will be seen with Enrique's *Morenita* in Chapter 3. In addition, 'force' evokes the 'moving' ('distributing' instead of 'distributed' in Gellian terms) nature of agency, which compels objects to exceed independently of other persons.[37] Excessive personhood is made visible thus. While not explicit in Brown, I suggest also that the distinction between "sensual" and "metaphysical" presence in describing excess opens the possibility of an extra-human agency from devotional objects, in ways I earlier implied with Gell. Whether it be objectual or something else (for example, divine), agency in those specific objects objectifies devotees, their faith, the devotional objects themselves, and, ultimately, the object of their faith itself, the divine.

For Brown, excess facilitates the extension of the object *qua* object as its thingly propensity to become another thing, a thing less fleeting and more enduring as it becomes some other thing.[38] This claim seems non-sensical because semantically 'thing' is more general and 'object' more particular: how can an object become a thing? However, Brown's point lies elsewhere: precisely due to and not spite of its material particularity, the object is never singular or static, "for even the most coarse and commonsensical things, mere things,

[37] New Materialism also refers to 'excess' if more tangentially. For instance, one author calls it "thing-power." (Bennett 2010, 1-19)

[38] It might be important to note also that Brown is not saying that objects extending via excess cease to be objects. Excess, as I understand it, is about relationality, not being. So, with Miller, he would say: "just as there is no pre-objectified culture, there is no post-objectified transcendence." Objectifying is unavoidable in being relational, and objectification produces objecthood. Even if the object is still thingly (that is, generative) due to its plural and complex materialities, it is still an object because it is also an object to itself, for objectification cannot be transcended (Miller, *Materiality*, 22). I would add: at least not a non-divine object. After all, presumably God can transcend Godself.

perpetually pose a problem because of the specific unspecificity that things denotes."[39] By "*unspecificity*" Brown means the polyvalent materialities of objects already illuminated in Chapter 1 (that is, the political, sexual, and racial alongside the religious and theological) and through Gell in this chapter (that is abducted indexicality, plurality, gradation, captivation, attachment, anti-idolatrousness, and so on). Therefore, any object always gestures outside of 'patient' objecthood toward that plural, gradating, and generative thingness, in other words, what I call excessive personhood.[40]

'Excess,' however, is mostly theoretical in *Things* (2004). In other words, excess helps with the 'what' and not the 'how' of agency. Expanding his own work more than a decade later with *Other Things* (2016), Brown develops excess methodologically. Indeed, for him it is less-conceptual methods (meaning those that deal with things more empirically) that make excess more visible. For instance, Brown mentions ekphrasis, the verbal description of works of art commonly used in art history, which deals intentionally with meaning alongside form and so directly engages what is excessive in these object-persons. For example, through what Brown calls "ekphrastic poetry," Homer describes Achilles' shield as both "a static object and a living thing."[41] The poet, according to Brown, "insists, then, on a kind of indeterminate ontology, in which the being of the object world cannot so readily be distinguished from the being of animals, say, or the being we call human being."[42] Simply stated, through ekphrastic poetry,

[39] Brown, *Things*, 3.

[40] The perfect example of this logic is using the word 'thing' for any object present or readily known, for example, the TV remote. Agency, in this case due to a lack of verbal precision (or of patience, ironically), always 'falls back' onto thingness, as in 'Give me the thing! I need to change the channel.'

[41] Brown, *Other Things*, 2.

[42] Brown, *Other Things*, 2.

Homer questions ontological differences between object-, animal-, and human-persons. With his literary method, Homer breaks down human-nonhuman polarity, turning the object into a living entity, a personification of sorts but not quite: the method renders personhood not humanness upon the object—or at least evidences the personhood already present—but the object never becomes something other than an object, so in Homer's case, a shield. In this dissertation, neither Enrique nor I think *Morenita* as anything but a wooden image. However, her thingly objecthood, the excessive personhood evidenced by the ample historical and ethnographic evidence of relationality and agency in Chapter 3, turns *it* (the statue) into this specific person via a specific method—a general *it* as if a particular *her*.

For Brown, the relationship between thing and object presents other methodological opportunities. Again referring to Homer's rendition of Achilles' metal shield, Brown writes: "it is precisely the Shield's *thingness*, as opposed to its sensible (formed and perceived) *objecthood*, that registers such vitality. The matter-movement transposes the object into some *other thing* that *is* (the being of which is) in excess of any manifest object."[43] "Vitality" refers to the 'material vitalism' revealed by metallurgy as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This 'transposition' of object to thing registers as a 'vital' force, the act of 'matter moving'—in short, excess. Brown's agenda is nothing less than to "dislodge the [thing-object] binary from philosophy (compromising its specificity and its grandiosity) in order to disclose what literature

[43] Brown, *Other Things*, 5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept comes from *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) : "In short, what metal and metallurgy bring to light is a life proper to matter, a vital state of matter as such, a **material vitalism** that doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable, disassociated by the hylomorphic model" (411, my emphasis). Vitalism is foundational in the thought of New Materialists. I will not delve deeper into this here because it is more ontic and as such less productive in discussions of agency and other materialities.

and the visual and plastic arts have been trying to teach us about our everyday object world: about the thingness that inheres as a potentiality within any object, about the object-event that precipitates the thing."[44] Certainly there is a challenge here by Brown to fellow academic colleagues to transcend disciplinary boundaries. However, Brown's ultimate call is to expand the thing-object conversation from the theoretical to the *practical*, from stale thinking/talking to actively learning from/making a difference in the *lo cotidiano* object-event, in our case, inside the personhood propitiated by devotional object-devotion. Thinking thing and object as a movement disrupts any conceptual polarities because both thing and object as opportunities (in this case, of research) can be *both*: things lead to ideas evidenced as objects or objects generate ideas that turn into things.

But what can more 'object-oriented' disciplines (such as art history) "disclose" or "teach" the more 'thing-oriented' (such as philosophy), in the sense of Brown's quote above? He continues: "More simply, the worlds made manifest by Achilles' Shield might be said to figure those worlds out of which weaponry as such is forged: to figure those ordinary lives that lie behind the extraordinary actions and objects of war."[45] For me, this is where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. I suggest object-oriented disciplines tend to be more praxical, in other words, more concerned with people and their *lo cotidiano* material conditions. In the case of *Guadalupes*, the 'worlds' evidenced by the devotional object (religious, political, economic,

[44] Brown, *Other Things*, 5. The best example in the colonial context of a thing transposed from an object is the fetish, an object that indexes 'other things' not evidenced in the fetish itself, such as colonialism, modernity, and, most saliently in our case, religion, while at the same time never ceasing to be an object. For a foundational historical and theoretical discussion of fetish, see William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I." in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (1985): 5-17. I wrote about the colonial aspect of devotional objects in Chap. 1.

[45] Brown, *Other Things*, 5.

racial, sexual) express the 'lives that lie behind,' the human subjects that survive, and sometimes thrive, and the ways that they have been converted, marginalized, oppressed, and racialized, and sometimes liberated. Behind *Morenitas* there is popular religion and Latinx culture, compassion, solidarity, humility, liberation, and, more importantly, particular human *morenos, morenas,* and *morenxs.* Such is one benefit of an object-oriented method using excessive personhood, as will be seen below. Using 'person' lifts up the object but does not leave the human behind; both are equally agents in their relationship.

I suggest Brown is intentionally including humanity among his objects, and as such making a claim about alterity. The *other* in *Other Things* encompasses 'others,' those marginalized along with mere objects. Simply stated, the practical does not mingle with the political; the practical is political by nature. He writes: "*other things* [the concept] designates those things that we routinely differentiate from persons [here Brown means humans]; experiencing personhood remains inseparable from that routine."[46] In other words, to be a person is to *other* by default. The act of othering, an act of differentiation, framed earlier by Brown between objects and things, here appears between things and persons. Personhood somehow stands between thingness and objecthood, yet closest to the former. Things disclose personhood "because enmeshed as we are in the object world, we can't at times differentiate ourselves from things, or because those things however actively or passively have somehow come to resemble us." Here I find once again connection to Gell. Brown is not saying that things are persons – Gell says the same about objects – yet things are person-like and that persons are

[46] Brown, *Other Things*, 9.

thing-like. So, if humans are persons, then humans are thing-like: independent, unspecific, practical, othering. This 'thingification,' applied in its shallowest and most detrimental sense, has had major consequences for the Latinx community throughout its tragic history, as seen in Chapter 1. However, another major if contrary implication, if one theorizes this human-thing connection more deeply and ethically, is that humans, just like things defined by Brown (that is, ideas, thoughts, or contexts), are also both concepts and intuitions, meaningful both only *by themselves* and only *for others*. In other words, the devotional thingly that humans and objects both are is what enables their personhood within an intentional and properly ethical devotion. Perhaps more simply, thinking of humans as things in Brown's sense greatly expands their potential as humans. With Gell, Brown emphasizes the humility engendered by his approach.

In conclusion, if Gell in *Art and Agency* describes what social agency is and how it is apparent in human-object networks, then Brown gives an explanation of what could be its mover. Excess is a 'force' that facilitates the object's expanding itself, which in turn facilitates thingness and, by implication, personhood. In contrast, Gell describes personhood, in my view, as a field; 'person' accounts for the distribution of agency beyond the object's immediate surroundings. Taken together and expressed in more mundane terms, I suggest excess is the spark and personhood the flame of agency: the spark does not spread; the flame does, but without an original spark and continual 'sparking' there is no flame-spread. Excess, as a (perhaps *the*) necessary condition of an object's agency, makes personhood (the object's social agency) possible and dynamic. In essence, I nuance Gell's concept of social agency by combining personhood and excess into what I call *excessive personhood*. This nuance is warranted because Brown preserves a duality that humans and objects have under the

category of 'thing,' and Gell encompasses (but certainly does not flatten) humans and objects under the equivocal category of 'person.' Combined, they further visibilize human-objectual inter-agency and, consequently, the productivity and effectiveness of using objects—what one could call thing-persons—for research. Regarding devotional objects specifically, for one, excessive personhood could name both the devotional power of the object and also the divine power ascribed to it by devotees. For another, devotional excessive personhood could help describe the forceful social agency of devotion among specific believers, the community at large, and even other devotional objects of its kind and of other kinds 'in its vicinity' and beyond. Indeed, the excessive personhood of a devotional object can be seen in the long-lasting time periods and wide-ranging spaces its particular devotion inhabits. The next chapter explores these mechanisms 'from the side' of such a devotional object: Enrique's *Morenita*. But now I turn to methodology and method.

Methodology: from theories of agency and thing/object to objectual method

Through Gell and Brown, the objectual world in general and devotional objects in particular can be theorized as not polar or dichotomized but in a spectrum, bounded yet distributed. For any object, there is both the 'patient,' 'latent' object by itself and the 'agent,' 'excessive' object transcending itself. In this section, I will focus more on methodological insights already started with Gell and Brown and evaluate how they transition into an empirical approach toward devotional objects in particular, as that is what *Morenita* is. I begin by exploring foundational methodological concerns of material cultural studies. As implied above,

the distributed nature of objects, their agent-patient or excessive-latent spectrum, still produces tensions if too strongly enforced.

Material culture scholars affirm the unavoidable need to engage the object holistically, that is, using both the ideational (such as concepts or history) and the experiential (such as archives or fieldwork), and to use both for theory and for method. Too strict a division of labor between these two research components merely reifies once again both the subject-object conundrum and the reduction/flattening of that which is materially objectual.[47] Even worse, this division tends both to erase the agency of those studied who, on many occasions, know and understand more experientially, and to prioritize the agency of the scholar, in itself an example of the colonizing "tyranny of the subject" that many recent material culture researchers abhor. Excessive personhood helps reduce these biases by focusing on the relation, not on one agent or another. Writes Daniel Miller: "Upon abdication of this throne [the tyrant being 'human,' 'discipline,' or 'scholar'] we can lower our sights and face up to that which created us—that is, the processes of objectification that create our sense of ourselves as subjects and the institutions that constitute society but which are always appropriations of the materiality by which they are constituted."[48] The methodological implication is that by letting the research "create" the researcher as much as possible and not the other way around, that which is construed as 'objective' is illuminated as at least partly 'subjective.' We briefly saw a similar perspective in the Introduction with Orsi's and Morgan's constructivist approach to material religion and ethnographic method.

[47] For example, the "philosophical" and the "ethnographical" (Miller, *Materiality*, 41-46).

[48] Miller, *Materiality*, 37.

Relatedly, the inductive and deductive aspects of method must coexist in practice. In material culture/materiality studies, ideas spring from fieldwork and empirical insights from theory. The ambiguity and plurality of objects can lead to both the positive and the speculative. Too strong a categorization of ideas below theory and proof under method could stifle original, discipline-pushing work based on the plurality of objects. I suggest this was what Gell was aiming at with his abductive theory of agency—the simultaneously deductive and inductive nature of art-objects as indexes. Human interaction with objects is not a purely cognitive endeavor either; it certainly also entangles the body, the context, other selves, and other things. Not to say that the process cannot be evidenced empirically (scientifically, say), but both Gell and Brown leave space for the unknown, for the "magic"— a word used by both.

My method is an 'object biography' in the sense of Igor Kopytoff and as seen with Scheper Hughes in Chapter 1. This extended quote by Kopytoff illuminates the process:

> In doing a biography of a thing [the physical object], one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?... Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure.[49]

Object biography does justice to the whole object, to its whole "life:" past, present, future, and vicinity. In a similar fashion, by combining observation and interviews, form and content analysis, and historical and textual research, I will describe as 'thickly' as possible both by the

[49] Igor Kopytoff. "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," in *The social life of things,* edited by Arjun Appadurai (New York ; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 66-67.

"salient" social interaction between human (Enrique and his family) and devotional object (*Morenita*) and by their interaction's "obscure" underlying knowledges and understandings.[50] This framework fits the historical, constructivist, and emic approach seen in the Introduction.

There is one methodological tension: what the human says about the object and what the object 'says' about itself (which may or may not coincide) contrasts with what the scholar interprets from both. Keeping the method abductive, anti-idolatrous, non-tyrannical, and non-anthropocentric – in other words, object-oriented – might partially offset this methodological colonization. Decolonializing our method also responds to the tragic history of academic research in many marginalized communities. Writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith: "The challenge always is to demystify, to decolonize."[51] Specific to this dissertation, I must affirm that theology as an academic discipline is not exempt from the need to decolonize. Within theological scholarship, for instance, works of art have been constantly colonized for theologies of 'art.' (Paul Tillich and Alejandro García-Rivera readily come to mind here, but there are many others.) One solution is to stress the particular in lieu of the universal and the popular in favor of the 'official' or institutional . The Latinx scholarship seen in Chapter 1 provides examples of varying degrees of success of decolonizing efforts.[52]

[50] The term 'thick,' that is, laden with intrinsic meanings and understandings that condition interpretation and speculation, comes from Geertz, *The interpretation of culture*, especially Chapter 1. 'Emically', as seen in the Introduction, refers to an 'insider' stance as a scholar in relation to the object of study; I remain self-aware of my own imbrication with the subject matter and informants.

[51] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 17.

[52] For a non-Latinx example, see Paul Tillich, Jane Dillenberger, and John Dillenberger. *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1987). For a non-Latinx-specific example by a Latinx not in Chapter 1, see Alex García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003).

Object-oriented philosophy's methodology, which thinks objects as I do, contributes another tension: the also unavoidable scholarly tendency to both 'undermine' and 'overmine' objects, that is, the reduction of objects *to* their relations and the abstraction of objects *from* their concreteness. Graham Harman calls the undermining-overmining duplet "duomining."[53] Gell could be accused of duomining because of the inclusion of objects in personhood; he is overmining the substance of objects while at the same time undermining humans by reducing ontic differences. But remember this is but a methodological sleight-of-hand by Gell and not a norm to be applied generally, as would be the case in other spheres including object-oriented philosophy itself.[54] In addition, as an anthropologist, Gell never places empirical work at the service of theory. For example, he induces the concept of distributed personhood after a discussion of idolatry and the sympathetic magical practice of "volt sorcery," which 'binds' subjects through the use of both language and a physical image.[55] Brown could also be guilty of duomining due to his undermining origin for things (latency) and overmining the everythingness of thing itself (excess). But, similarly, Brown's theoretical insights are never untied from actual works of art, for example, the Homeric poem seen earlier and contemporary art-objects such as Claes Oldenberg and Coosje Van Bruggen's *Typewriter Eraser, Scale X*. Historically, the focus of scholars of religion in researching devotional objects *qua* essentially religious certainly has undermined other aspects, whether by collapsing religion into culture or by eliding non-

[53] For example, Harman, *Immaterialism*, 7-12.

[54] Harman, *Immaterialism*, 15-16.

[55] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 102-104. A common example of the 'magical' power of images is the reluctance of many people, even in Western cultures, to harm photographs of loved ones. Though whether Gell uses his examples effectively or not (or even correctly) has been debated (see, for example, Ross Bowden, "A Critique of Alfred Gell on 'Art and Agency'", *Oceania* 74, no. 4 (2004), esp. pp. 313-314), the fact remains that empirical work is central to his method.

religious aspects such as politics or self-identity and ethnicity. However, since the 'material turn,' duomining has been especially critiqued. For example, in the work of Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles seen in Chapter 1, duomining reduction and abstraction is avoided through analyzing devotional agency within the whole of *cotidiano* Latinx life and culture and using its own witness as evidence. Indeed, Goizueta skirts the problem by equating religion to life (which can never be undermined or overmined, as it is inexhaustible) and Scheper Hughes does it by always keeping the *Cristo* at the center while exploring its relations and their implications in the concrete life of Totolapans. Keeping the object grounded in its own *cotidiano* thinks the object in its own 'life.' It keeps it 'real,' one might say.

Even if one is able to negotiate methodological colonization and duomining effectively, one basic fact remains: objects don't *talk* in the literal sense and all one can do is talk *about* or *around* them.[56] If the object is religious, the stakes are raised even higher, as the (usually) non-verbal divine 'world' interacts with the objectual world in other, perhaps inscrutable, ways. The only defense against this charge is self-reflexivity, which I will discuss in more detail below. Indeed, to minimize all these methodological restrictions, I think *through* the object. The possibilities of thinking through objects has been discussed and effectively used recently.[57] If one approaches the object ethnographically, the object cannot stand alone at the center of

[56] That things do not literally talk, however, does not make them "speechless." See Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press, 2004). One relevant excerpt: "Talkative things instantiate novel, previously unthinkable combinations. Their thingness lends vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience that break old molds…the trick is to connect the dots into a plausible whole, a thing. Once circumscribed and concretized, the new thing becomes a magnet for intense interest, a paradox incarnate…Only when the paradox becomes prosaic do things that talk subside into speechlessness" (24).

[57] For example, Daston, *Things that Talk*; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*; and Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007).

research. The approach becomes a way to think about the object of study (in my case, materiality and theology in a devotional context), one more facilitator alongside other things (such as the divine, humans, other objects, ideas, and contexts). An ethnography *of* the object reifies. By contrast, using a term from object-oriented philosophy, an ethnography *through* the object, 'withdraws' the object from view while still keeping it at the center of inquiry accompanied by other things.[58]

This move entails, first, a "purposeful naïveté" about the object. As Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell write it means one must "take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming they signify, represent, or stand for something else."[59] Brown similarly writes that one should encounter "the thing baldly."[60] This emphasis on presence rather than on pre-judgment is crucial. All research is in danger of taking interpretation as fact, especially given the non-verbal agency of objects.

Furthermore, this naïveté implies a larger claim: if objects primarily do not 'signify, represent, or stand for' meaning yet are still meaningful, then objects *must be* meanings themselves, as I stated at the start of the chapter. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell affirm: "What the approach advanced here attempts to add to these routine activities is a collapse of the experience/analysis divide, such that the experience of things in the field is already an

[58] Object-oriented philosophers (OOP) affirm that the object's being resides in its 'withdrawal,' in moving inward and not outward. See, for example, Harman, *Immaterialism*, 106. While the term is still useful methodologically and referentially, its theoretical applications and consequences separate OOP from this dissertation which focuses on the relational. For OOP, withdrawal expresses the non-relational nature of objects.

[59] Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*, 2.

[60] Brown, *Things*, 5.

encounter, *simpliciter*, with meanings."[61] This claim, warranted by the context itself—meaning that devotional practices are a serious and rational undertaking—was evidenced through the meaningful materiality of objects explored through Latinx devotion in general in Chapter 1 and will be more specifically shown with Enrique and his family in particular in Chapter 3.

Second, the 'withdrawing' object potentially erases ontological difference but, in this dissertation just like in Gell, this erasure exists for the purpose of inquiry only. Ethnography through the object places equal research purchase on all participants: the divine, the human, the object, other objects, their interaction, the history, the context, and shared ideas between all without collapsing any into another. As already seen, Brown also does a similar methodological move with excess. Here, thingness springs from objecthood but neither negate, and in fact both constantly use, objects themselves. For the standpoint of methodology, all things (objects, humans, etc.) are equally objectual. Writes Harman: "My point is not that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally *objects*."[62] Since they are all equally objectual, they lend themselves equally to be researched. Again, I am not interested in the ontic implications of this perspective. It is on objectual agency and its consequences that the method below focuses.

Third, how can the object be a 'way,' a 'facilitator' of inquiry, as stated above? While not easily answered, one perspective of ethnographers through objects is that objects have more heuristic than analytical value. In other words, the excessive personhood of devotional objects models rather than explains how agency works. This becomes possible because excess can

[61] Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*, 4.

[62] Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK : Washington, USA : Zero Books, 2011), 5.

produce multiple theoretical avenues due to its inherent material plurality. We saw this theoretically already in Brown and with the Chicana thinkers in Castañeda-Liles, for whom *La Guadalupe*'s brown skin and indigenous godliness act as model for gender and sexual independence; methodologically, Henare, Holbraad, and Westell write: "Rather than going into the field armed with a set of pre-determined theoretical criteria against which to measure the 'things' one already anticipates might be encountered, it is proposed that the 'things' that present themselves be allowed to serve as a heuristic with which a particular field of phenomena can be identified, which *only then* engender theory."[63] In Chapters 3 and 4, I tease out particular theological understandings underlying a devotee's attitude and behaviors around a devotional object. I suggest that the excessive personhood of this particular devotional encounter between devotee and object models what this theology is, even if not easily apparent in, or even verbalized by, either the divine, the human, or the objectual. For instance, from the Enrique-*Morenita* encounter materialities of creativity and being-created will be discerned around two created entities. It is thus that theological insights might emerge through the object.

As stated before, ethnography through objects has to be even more self-reflexive, as it cautiously navigates the scholarly conceit of speaking for objects of study. However, this self-reflexivity has another dimension: the researcher's recognition of agency from the object of study itself. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell call this "the recursive relationship between informant's concerns and the methodological stances of ethnographers."[64] In other words, in

[63] Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*, 5.

[64] Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*, 20.

this dissertation research into the excessive personhood of a certain devotional encounter has to take into account the agency being exercised from that composite person toward the researcher because the research itself becomes part of that same personhood. Ethnography through objects presupposes this agency in this claim: just like devotees and devotional object participate in the agentic network, so does the researcher. In a way, the researcher and the object of study are mimicking the devotee and devotional object.[65]

With this methodological preamble behind me, I now proceed to describe method more specifically.

Method: ascertaining excessive personhood among the devotional object

The methods used for exploring objects vary as much as the disciplines imbricated in materiality/material culture studies; in fact, specific approaches have been developed according to the objects themselves. For instance, there is a method for medieval icons and a method for modern art.[66] Around the 'material turn' in the study of religion, examples are similarly eclectic and numerous, yet show certain proclivities.[67] For instance, across many

[65] For example, in my particular case, I have an advantage in this regard: as Puerto Rican, Christian, and a member of Enrique's extended family, I participate in at least three of the worlds that frame and anchor this specific human-object interaction. So as an observer, I have to distance myself critically from my site of study. Yet as a participant in this personhood, I have enough nearness to 'double-check' my conclusions.

[66] For instance, for medieval icons and theology, see Paul Evdokimov, *L'art de l'icône: Théologie de la beauté* (Paris: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1970), and for modern art and theology, see Tillich, Paul, Dillenberger, and Dillenberger, *On Art and Architecture*. Both are theological works, yet their methods are different due to differences in their plural contexts and of their ultimate concerns.

[67] For an excellent overview of methods within 'the material turn,' see Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society* 4 (2013): 58-78. For these methods in actual use, see, for example, *The Journal of Material Culture* (Sage 1996-) and *Material Religion* (Taylor and Francis, 2005-), and, more recently, the online journal *Primary Materials* (www.primarymaterials.org).

disciplines, the method is described using tripartite schemes, which I will adopt as well.[68] There are many excellent examples in the twentieth century alone, but I will concentrate on two, one older by Erwin Panofsky and one recent by Carl Knappett.[69] After briefly describing each, and bearing in mind the previous methodological discussion, I will consolidate the more useful aspects of both into an ethnographical and historical method specifically designed to study excessive personhood in the devotional object that occupies this dissertation, *Morenita*.

Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* has been very influential since the first half of the twentieth century.[70] His method has three stages. First, the researcher details the object's formal/physical characteristics, such as shape, colors, and materials through what Panofsky calls "preiconographical description." Second, the researcher recognizes the more ideational content of the object, such as concepts or themes present through what Panofsky calls "iconographical analysis in the narrower sense." Finally, the researcher deduces 'symbolic' meanings in the object through "iconographical analysis in the deeper sense."

Panofsky's method was strongly anthropocentric and structuralist. He saw the object strictly as the carrier of meaning centered upon the human; he presumed the object to be framed around concepts and/or symbolisms that could be 'discovered' by the researcher. Unfortunately, in my view, Panofsky also implies an incremental hierarchy between

[68] For example, Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method." *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1–19, and Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[69] I considered using Hans Belting's oft-cited work *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (University of Chicago Press, 1994) but quickly found the work unhelpful, difficult to parse out, and de-contextual. In fact, Robert Orsi's more recent *History and Presence* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016) was much more helpful but I ultimately chose Panofsky and Knappett.

[70] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

components (that is, *form* < *content* < *meaning*). However, his tripartite emphases and processes of 'discovery' are notable as an early example of systematizing material culture analysis, if only to guide research around what an object is, both literally and metaphorically.

Carl Knappett's *Thinking Through Material Culture* is a more recent influential example.[71] First, he describes the object's "*affordances*," meaning the physical characteristics that allow it to 'fit' its particular form and function.[72] For example, to be the work of art 'painting,' the object must include paint (either physical or virtual) in different colors; if it doesn't, it cannot be a painting. In addition, some paintings afford themselves better for particular purposes (for example, to be 'shown' in a public space) if they are of certain physical dimensions and weight. Of those shown, a few afford themselves better for increased longevity, for instance because of the higher quality of materials used in their creation. Others might afford themselves better for other purposes (for example, for archiving or transmission) if they are non-physical (that is, 'electronic' or digital, like this document in my computer), have a small digital footprint, and were produced with higher quality equipment.[73] Some affordances are context-dependent while others are not, but this first stage would still necessitate a thorough description of the situation surrounding the object's production and consumption. I

[71] Carl Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture: An interdisciplinary perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[72] Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture*, 111-112. Hodder (*Entangled*, 2012) also talks about 'affordances.' Malafouris (*How Things Shape the Mind*, 2013) is invested in its methodological usefulness as related to Gellian 'abduction,', especially the section on 'material agency.'

[73] Another example are non-fungible tokens (NFTs), which are dominating the art world these days. See, for example, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-12/nft-digital-artwork-sells-for-nearly-us-70-million-beeple/13241076#:~:text=The%20work%20is%20in%20the,up%20items%20that%20exist%20online, accessed 3/14/2021.

will employ a similar approach in Chapter 3 by describing context and history before the object *Morenita* herself.

Knappett then describes the object's "physical, semantic, cultural, and logical *constraints*," meaning that which limits its possibilities as a certain object.[74] In the 'painting' *qua* object example, some formal characteristics constrain, such as the fact that most paintings are one-sided and not very resistant to inclement weather. A semantic constraint would be the painting's reliance on the visual (that is, the painting's meaningfulness depends on the sense of sight only), while a logical constraint would be its unsuitability for anything else but aesthetic contemplation; simply stated, you really cannot use a painting as a hammer. A cultural constraint would be the lower tone of voice imposed by human individuals or groups when in the presence of paintings in a public setting, as if that noise level could negatively impact paint! In addition, context should be described from the perspective of constraints as well, what Knappett calls "spatial context." For instance, art made out of ice has huge constraints on its productive and consumptive 'life.' In Chapter 3, constraints will be elucidated alongside affordances.

Knappett finally explores the *semiotic* aspect of the object, meaning its status as icon, index, and symbol.[75] An icon is a representation of a reality, so the object 'painting' has to be comparable, in form and function for instance, to other paintings in order to be considered one. In that sense, similarity and community are sufficient yet not necessary for iconicity. An index, as seen above in Gell, implies a connection with its signified and as such depends on causality.

---

[74] Knappett 2005, *Thinking through Material Culture,* 112-113.

[75] Knappett 2005, *Thinking through Material Culture*, 113-116.

Subject matter is essential to indexicality, for example, paintings imbricate beholders in knowledges and experiences that access memory and shared traditions. Being so, it is possible also to speak of communities of object-indexes that share the same connection (one example would be 'black' Madonnas such as the *Morenita* 'sisters' *La Guadalupe* and Enrique's *Morenita*). A symbol establishes a reference to a concept or an idea; for example, a painting might be thought or designed to represent a 'national ideal' (for example, 'the country's freedom must be defended no matter the cost') and therefore be reproduced to discipline citizens (for instance, any painting used in conscriptions for war). For Knappett, this semiotic aspect is tied to meaning—but not exclusively so; affordances and constraints are also imbricated in signification.

Knappett's method, in contrast to Panofsky's, systematically 'withdraws' the object while maintaining it in the center, favoring relationships instead of beingness. In other words, the object becomes a facilitator and is not the only protagonist. For one, Knappett starts from materialities (that is, affordances and constraints) and not with form *per se*. Indeed, he does not assume what the object is from the start but deduces it from the analysis, that is from what the object affords and constrains. Using the example, in a sense, the object becomes a 'painting' as a result of the material culture study, meaning by assembling an object that can then join a community of 'kin' objects such as other paintings that share its affordances, constraints, and semiotic aspects, and possibly also by expanding the knowledge and understanding of 'paintings' *qua* objects. One implication of this method is that this 'assemblage' can lead to new theories about the object in question. For instance, what constitutes a painting (meaning what a painting *is*) would depend less on form and more on

how an object fits what a painting affords.[76] For example, is an art-image on a TV screen a painting? Why (or why not), if it is portable, tangible, and sight-oriented? In addition, Panofsky developed his method for icons, which are meant to 'stand in' for something as a pre-requisite, and not for indexes and symbols, which already presuppose much of what icons gesture towards. For instance, a presupposition of function and meaning erases the ambiguity and plurality intrinsic to objects, which in turn undermines their agency, that is, their excessive personhood. As such, Knappett's method lends itself much better to my approach.

Ethnography through objects, as I conceive it, has three equal and co-interacting components: form and content description, historical/textual research of the object, and observation and interviews.[77] As a counterpart to Gell's and Brown's theorization of objectual agency, and based on Panofsky's and Knappett's methods, ethnography through the object investigates the excessive personhood that some objects display socially, in their vicinity. One component (the form and content description) would ask about the object: What is it, literally? What is it made of? What are its dimensions? How much does it weigh? Which particular colors, shapes, textures, patterns, and so on, does it include? Is it composed of one single part or of multiple parts? Is it an original or a reproduction? Is it unique or one of many? What is the

[76] I owe the term 'assemblage' to Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4, 503-505. I am less interested in their definition as constitutive of the object, though, and use it for its purchase for the relational aspect of the object.

[77] My method also owes much and is part of the burgeoning scholarship on material religion. See, for example: David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010); Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); and Sally M. Promey, *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

content, i.e., what it supposed to be about? Why do I say so? Is content obvious or implied? In either case, to whom and where and when? This component visibilizes affordances and constraints. In the case of devotional objects, for example, what makes one 'fit' devotion and another not 'fit,' or what type of devotion is done with one object and what type is done with another object. The tone of this component is more literal, mostly a gathering of facts about the object. However, the excessive personhood of a particular devotional object can start to take shape or at least be hypothesized. For instance, is there something about the object's combination of color and shape that makes this object more or less attractive to devotees than others? Is there something in this particular object that makes it a more or less effective 'object-person'?

Another component (historical/textual research of the object) describes the 'life' of the object as best as possible: Where does it come from? Where/when was it made? For whom what is made? What is its 'reason for being,' if ascertainable at all? How is that 'reason' discernable from its content and/or from its past uses, if applicable? What are its areas of influence? Is it a sole individual or member of an objectual community? Is that community defined by form, content, or both? What about function? What has been the object's 'life journey'? Who has been present with the object, such as owners, users, or companion-objects? What has it done? Where has it been? What does its 'life' say about the object? What links can the researcher make to other objects physically or conceptually? This component deals more explicitly with the distribution of excessive personhood, as other things are networked with the object-person, including ideas and intentions. For instance, in what ways is 'devotion' present in this object's excessive personhood? If devotion is presupposed, what other things, such as

life experiences, support this presumption? Are there traces still visible in places long abandoned or events in the past? Conversely, what do these places and events say about the direction personhood takes? This component clearly takes a turn towards metaphor and speculation by garnering stories around the object; for instance, the plurality, gradation, and generativity of agency that seem on display in the vicinity of the object. Its indexicality starts to be revealed.

The last component (observation and interviews) would be present in earlier components as well, but also concentrate on these questions: How is the object used in 'real life'? What behaviors surround it? What do people say about it, and how do they say it? How do people move around it? What are the presuppositions of these stories and behaviors? Are there concepts or, as ethnographers say, codes related to agency or personhood that can be gleaned from the ethnographic data? In what way does the object exceed itself, transcend its vicinity? Agency is much more visible on this last component. For instance, the object is used and human behave and move in ways it affords and constrains humans, so its personhood extends through usage and other behaviors around it. Humans speak of the ways the object has behaved around them, so its excessive personhood gains verbal expression through its human partners. This component is mostly constructive as the researcher negotiates empirical data and past theory and teases out meaningful insights that emerge from the particular object and its vicinity. Indeed, all three components must remain in conversation throughout the process if these insights are to be confirmed and validated by the ethnographic data, that is, by the personhood and the persons that inhabit the space.

Conclusions: excessive personhood and ethnography through the object

I agree with Miller's claim that "things that people make, make people."[78] The agency in the object-human encounter is reciprocal and mutual. While this agency is irrespective of context, meaning it happens in all object-human encounters, indeed, in every thing-thing encounter, it is not independent of context. That is, the multiple kinds and degrees of agency depend on particular time and space. In this dissertation, the specific context is Latinx devotion through an image, a Spanish-Puerto Rican statue of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus (and God) in the Christian religion. Since the agency is visible through all participants in the devotional space (that is, object, human, context, and divine), it emerges among them all instead of intrinsically from one or another. I suggest agency springs forth and is aggregated through their encounter into what I call excessive personhood. All participants oscillate between agents and patients as persons with excess within the space. How then can excessive personhood illuminate this peculiar devotional agency in theory?

Abduction is central to devotional agency. If the devotional object is construed to be an index of divine agency, this agency certainly neither deduced nor induced but abducted. Divine agency cannot be deduced since nothing of any object by itself and/or in its vicinity would explicitly prove divine presence to human perception; indeed, evidence an irrefutable connection to Godself. However, objects of devotion are commonplace around the globe, can come from anywhere in any one specific culture, and vary widely across cultures, so devotion certainly is induced everywhere. Devotional agency, at least in Latinx popular devotion, is

[78] Miller, *Materiality*, 38.

abducted, meaning it is both inferred by the object and refers to an extra-human entity with the help of other pre-understandings. An example is religious belief and how religion itself is identified with Latinx culture as a whole. In many cases, the devotee already has an idea of what 'devotion' is or should look like, and then recognizes this opportunity in other objects encountered. In other cases, devotion is encountered or initiated pre-reflexively in a manner similar to Hodder's encounter with a pebble on the beach and to Enrique's 'electric feeling' relayed in an interview. Therefore, the devotional context is supported by a combination of induction and deduction, where a human-person is captivated and attached into an agentic relationship with an object-person. The 'excessive' in certain devotional objects connects with the human subject and abduction occurs. More details on how this happens in the particular context of Enrique and his *Morenita* will be made clear in Chapter 3.

There are kinds and degrees of captivation and attachment because there are kinds and degrees of excessive personhood. Not all devotional agents have the same kind or degree of agency even if they are the same in form and content (for example, all are religious humans or all are images of the Virgin Mary). One human devotional agent could have a 'favorite' devotional object among many objects or even among a group of the same object. For one, some human persons carry devotional objects in their wallet while other less portable objects stay at home; for another, humans center their devotion around one object in the home in the dense presence of many others, as Enrique does. In other words, in those cases the captivating and attaching power of excessive personhood affords itself better to the human-person or the context and therefore becomes denser. In addition, a singular devotional agent can employ different levels of excessive personhood throughout its life. For instance, some devotional

agents are very active publicly and then fade from view (perhaps because their excess collapsed or transformed as its distributed network collapsed, or the object became otherwise constrained, like shoved in a drawer by a careless new *mayordomx*). Others are re-activated for devotional purposes only, withdrawing again when devotion lags. Still others operate constantly in the background, part of a community of devotional agents that has no clear protagonist. These variations were evidenced with *Guadalupes* in Chapter 1 and will be seen through Enrique's *Morenita* and her vicinity of objects in Chapter 3.

These different materialities could be proof of different objectual 'personalities,' which again is almost impossible to ascertain empirically. But it is proof of the 'density' that I suggest is intrinsic to excessive personhood. There is little doubt that some devotional agents are denser than others, extending further from their objecthood and making their thingness more visible, perhaps waxing and accumulating their personhood through time. These denser objects are truly primary and generative in their human and objectual communities. For one, Latinx-Catholic devotion to La *Virgen de la Guadalupe* is stronger than ever even though it is at least five hundred years old in its primary community. That personhood has even transcended religion into politics and other non-religious spheres. For another, Enrique's *Morenita*, an image of the Virgin Mary in her Catalan advocation of La Virgen de la Monserrate, is part of a less-dense network but it still has agency all over the world and has lasted for even more centuries than *La Guadalupe*. In any case, their personhood shares at least one aspect: both are dark-skinned Madonnas, racial and ethnic others that model anti-idolatrous solidarity, humility, and liberation on many levels. It could be said that their dense individual personhoods even

intensify each other in certain contexts. In any case, density is important in devotional agency and will be clarified in Chapters 3 and 4.

Through their excessive personhood, objects show their proclivity to straddle methodologically their subjective and objective sides by diluting the subject and distributing the object of study among all participants (including the researcher). Their excessive personhood challenges any separation between thick description and emic perspective. The researcher, by immersing herself in the context, is already assuming an emic stance and becoming part of the thickness itself. In a very real sense, the research becomes part of itself. Even if this is not a unique methodological conundrum (that is, it happens constantly in ethnography), it glares more vividly through objectual excessive personhood because the intersubjective (or 'inter-objective') is present by design.

Because of this inter-objective bias, the colonizing and duomining aspects of method also stand out. On the one hand, since distance between human and object is erased for the inquiry, the imposition of outside pre-understandings is even more insidious, turning excessive personhood into an excuse to oppress other things (including other human selves) in the service of an academic exercise. On the other, an over-extension of excessive personhood and its consequences over-signifies it in the world; in other words, it makes it account for everything that happens after objects extend beyond themselves. Both of these must be kept in a delicate balance by talking *through* the object, not *for* the object and not having the object talk *for* the researcher. Indeed, the goal would be to have the object talk *through* the researcher who intentionally practices naïveté, object equality, and considers the object more heuristically than analytically.

As for method specifically, ethnography through the object skirts the 'tyranny of the subject' by equating form, content, and meaning (*contra* Panofsky) in the entire excessive personhood network. Not only are objects meanings; humans are also meanings. Practices signify yet bodies do too. Care must be taken never to favor ultimate concern over the vehicle that visibilizes it, for instance. Such carelessness would further distance what should be near: the researching subject and the researched object. Knappett presents a salutary approach: elucidating what is afforded, constrained, and signified in the human-objectual encounter by both describing the object relationally and discovering the meaning made throughout the whole process and not as a final product of the personhood or the research. In other words, Knappett shows that conditions and insights (theological, in this dissertation) occur throughout the process and are not necessarily *a priori* or *as posteriori* of the process itself.

In sum, excessive personhood is itself an index, signifying a deeper need because surely devotion is intentional, that is, it reveals both a need to know and understand and to be known and understood. In this sense, it is an index of the theological, meaning an index of the ways and means that divine power gets distributed. For one, since theological anthropology is concerned with the personal yet political relationship between humans and God, this conversation would now include devotional objects. The discipline, simply re-stated, traditionally asks: what does it mean to be a person in light of the Christian history of salvation, including creation, the Incarnation, and the continual presence of God in earthly existence? By including excessive personhood and Latinx experiences, one might nuance that question: What does it mean to be a person-agent in light of *this* Christian history of salvation *and* the tragic experiences of Latin Americans and US Latinxs? And how is that agency made visible through

human-persons and object-persons? What are the characteristics, the limits, and the potential of Latinx personhood? These questions and others will be directly addressed throughout the coming chapters using Enrique's *Morenita* as case study.

Chapter 3

Enrique's *Morenita*: devotional excessive person

> For those of us concerned with questions of ultimate meaning—the theologically minded—the arts present themselves as testimonies, material instances of God's continuing relationship with God's creation.
>
> As soon as [objects] enter into our homes, discovering a relationship with our bodies, things become special once again, as if each received its own name…These things bear imprinted on them the touch of our hands, the marks of our gaze, the traces of our experience.
>
> [Mary] occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and yet very close to us.

This chapter presents the story of *Morenita* (Figure 3) and her family and a history of her 'prototype' Mary Mother of God in her Catalan Marian advocation Nuestra Señora de La Monserrate, examines how excessive personhood is visible in these persons' materialities, and suggests what are the devotional space's theological valences.[1] This *Morenita* is a dark-skinned Madonna who resides at the home of my

Figure 3 – Enrique's Morenita. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

[1] Mary is central to Christian theology as implied in the excerpt from Vatican II in the epigraph (Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, I, 54).

Advocations, in the context of Marian belief and practices and Mariology, are the material forms in which the Virgin Mary is represented in specific places and times. Nuestra Señora is 'Our Lady' in Spanish. La Monserrate refers to the hilly landscape in northwestern Spain (near Barcelona) where the original image was found and where her abbey is located; more on the latter below.

brother-in-law Enrique Renta Dávila in Puerto Rico.[2] As many devotees of this advocation and other dark-skinned Madonnas do, Enrique lovingly refers to the image as *Morenita*. I will gather "testimonies" and "traces" (as per the epigraph) for this image's excessive personhood from several sources: biography and history on Enrique, his family, this *Morenita* and 'sister' dark-skinned Madonnas in Puerto Rico and in Spain, and Catholic Mariology.[3] I suggest that this specific excessive personhood affords three meanings and understandings from the *Morenita*-Enrique devotional space—creativity, solidarity, and radical otherness—which I develop further in the last chapter. Some guiding questions are: What is expressed about the participants' religious selves, not only as described by Enrique (her self-described "custodio") and his family, by Puerto Rican and Catalan histories of this Marian advocation, and by Catholic Mariology but also from this *Morenita* herself, for instance, her form, content, and the stories in her vicinity?[4] I suggest that this unique excessive personhood makes visible anti-idolatrous theological insights about this particular Latinx devotion that in some ways confirm what was seen in Chapter 1 with *La Guadalupe* and the *Cristo* yet in other ways show that *Morenita* uniquely affords wider theological implications that transcend her particular context.

---

[2] On Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate *qua* dark-skinned Madonna, see Elisa A. Foster, "The Black Madonna of Monserrat: an exception to the concepts of dark skin in medieval and early modern Iberia?", in Pamela Ann Patton, *Envisioning Others: Race, Color, and the Visual in Iberia and Latin America* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Nair, "Localized Sacredness"; Perry "The Black Madonna of Montserrat"; and Sabaté Botet "Aparición, tradición y devoción".

[3] González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder*, 24; Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), XX.

To differentiate the three images to which I refer in the analyses below, I refer to the original sculpture in Cataluña as *Moreneta*, to the image in Puerto Rico as *Monserrate,* and to Enrique's image as *Morenita*. The Catalan advocation *per se* will be Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate or just Nuestra Señora.

[4] Also, I will use quotation marks for informants' words taken from my research notes. For example, Enrique's term for his role and relationship with his *Morenita* is "custodio" which I translate elsewhere as 'steward.'

Enrique

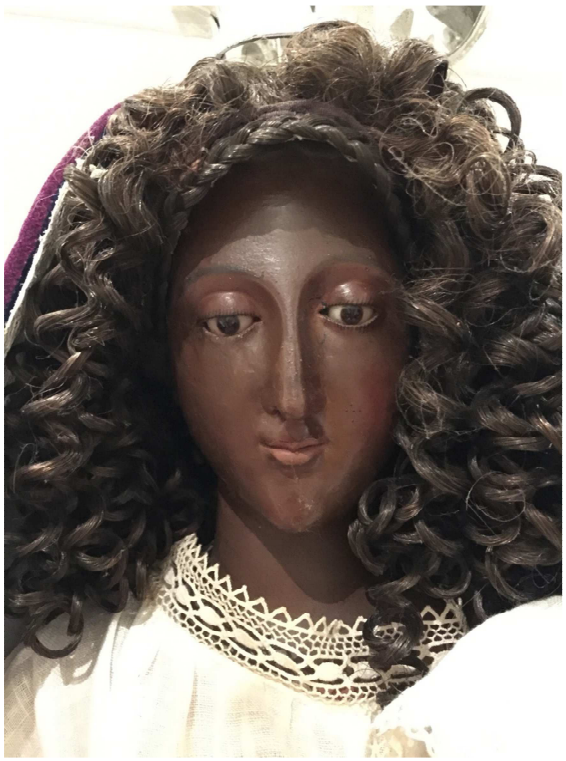


Figure 4 – Face of Morenita. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

Enrique, one of my affinal brothers, is an accomplished Puerto Rican man.[5] He was born on the island in the late 1950s and spent his childhood on the northeastern coast. He moved as a teenager to the capital San Juan, where he later attended the University of Puerto Rico and eventually became a very successful marketing executive, artist, and writer. Enrique is a 'creative' person: as of 2019, he is the Chief Creative Officer of a large advertising agency on the island, has had works of art exhibited in local and national museums, and, for the past few years, has served as a judge at the Cannes Film Festival. He and his partner have been together for over twenty-five years. Enrique has been a well-respected member of the social, cultural, and political scene of the island for most of his adult life. Most importantly for this dissertation, this human-person has a semi-private, life-long, spiritual, and loving relationship with a devotional object-person: *Morenita* (Figures 3 and 4).[6] The creativity in their relationship is something I examine more deeply in the final chapter.

[5] In kinship terminology, 'affinal' means related by law or custom in contrast to 'consanguine' (related by blood). Enrique is the partner of my spouse's youngest consanguine brother. I have known Enrique since the mid 1990s. Biographical information on Enrique and *Morenita* was garnered from countless personal conversations and visits to his home, written family histories provided in 2015 and 2018, several informal in-person and email conversations focused on this dissertation and *Morenita*, and a formal interview done in December 2018.

[6] As already seen in Chapter 1, 'spiritual' is a polyvalent word. Enrique is a devotee of Nuestra Señora in partnership with *Morenita*, an image of Mary, the mother of God in the Christian religion, yet he does not identify as specifically Catholic, Christian, or perhaps even religious. I would argue that he 'believes but does not belong' in

Morenita

According to his family's oral history (the family-person in this relationship), written down a few decades ago by Enrique's aunt, Carmen Milagros, the image was brought from Spain by the two maternal grand-aunts of her mother, Ana Milagros.[7] These Spanish diaspora members settled in the island-municipality of Vieques at some point in the late nineteenth century.[8] Shortly thereafter, the grand-aunts bequeathed *Morenita* to their niece Carmen Dávila Benítez (also known as Cambucha, Ana Milagros's mother), who lived in the municipality of Luquillo.[9] In 1909, when she was close to death, Cambucha gave the image to her first cousin, Vicente Dávila Ortíz de la Renta, on the conditions that he "take care of and venerate" *Morenita*, "be a good steward" of her family's farm, and "protect" her three-year-old daughter (Ana Milagros) until she got married and/or reached adulthood. Vicente accepted this task and also made Ana Milagros his goddaughter. He lived with his wife Eustaquia in the San Vicente sector of the Mata de Plátano *barrio* of Luquillo.[10] Every September 8, the Feast of Nuestra Señora de La Monserrate (her 'official day' on the Catholic calendar; this feast is celebrated

---

the sense of Grace Davie ("Believing without Belonging," *Social Compass* 37(4), 1990, 455-469). As will be seen, that does not mean the Enrique-*Morenita* space is non-theological.

[7] Unfortunately, this is the only datum available about origin or provenance. Note that Ana Milagros was also a distant cousin of Enrique's grandfather. See family tree below.

[8] Puerto Rico is actually a three-island archipelago: the 'main' island of Puerto Rico proper is composed of seventy-six municipalities, and the two 'island'-municipalities of Vieques and Culebra, located on the east side of the 'main' island. Note that Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony from 1493 to 1898, when it was ceded to the United States. In 1952, it became a self-governed territory, but to the present day its relationship with the US is still colonial.

[9] It would have been worthwhile to visit Luquillo and ask around the sector and/or *barrio* if people remembered *Morenita* and her life there. Alas, these tantalizing possibilities remain unexplored as of this writing.

[10] I appropriated this vignette as the title of the dissertation because it expresses the intentional materialities discussed herein. I develop this claim at the end of the dissertation. Also, note that Enrique's great-grandfather shares his name with his domicile, proof of the deep ties these persons had with their geographic location.

everywhere the advocation is present) was celebrated in Luquillo with a *novena*, that is, the public and communal prayers for the nine days before the feast day. These prayers took place in Vicente and Eustaquia's home and were attended by the whole sector, and many from the *barrio* and town.[11] On countless occasions, the family sewed new clothing especially for this celebration for *Morenita* and the *Niño Jesús* she carries.[12] On the feast day, they placed the sculpture on a cart pulled by oxen decorated with colored crepe paper, that took her to town's entrance where she was welcomed by the local priest and the rest of the celebrants, who were awaiting the procession.[13] Note that solidarity through movement is key in *Morenita*'s materialities.

From there, the procession continued to the main Catholic church at the town plaza, where the rosary was prayed and a Mass was performed in her honor. During her stay in the church, those persons (believers presumably) that had recently received/been granted a miracle/boon due to *Morenita*'s intercession gave thanks via a representation of the miracle. For example, if an arm had been healed, a small (about one-inch-long) arm, carved in metal or wax (or gold, if the recipient could afford it), was gifted to *Morenita*.[14] These gifts were pinned

[11] How and why this *Morenita* became such a central entity in the *barrio* and town of Luquillo is unexplained in the family history. Given the number of people that attended, according to the family history, probably several dozen if not more, the *novena* must have been an important community event.

[12] Enrique told me that *Morenita* owned a trunk full of clothing at some point but that it is now lost.

[13] According to the family's written history, Ana Milagros, a child for most of the early Luquillo *novenas*, distinctly remembers that the oxen became "tinted with many colors [from the crepe paper] when it rained."

[14] As can be seen in the photos, *Morenita* still has some of these offerings, called *ex-votos* in scholarship: "material expressions of thanks for miraculous healing or rescue…often accompanied by a promise or vow." (Catrien Notermans and Willy Jansen. "Ex-votos in Lourdes: Contested Materiality of Miraculous Healings", *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (July 2011), 171)

onto her dress or attached to a wire loop hanging from one of her arms.[15] After the religious ceremony ended, *Morenita* was returned home, that is, to Vicente and Eustaquia's house. All present during the procession, rosary, and/or Mass (including the priest) were invited to partake in a celebration at their home that lasted until the early hours of the next day, "no matter if that was a business day or not" according to the family history. Note that faith around *Morenita* and her devotees is firmly anchored in 'personal' and solidary relationships, that is, on shared materialities between believing humans, places, institutions, practices, and objects.

Among several written stories about *Morenita*, four are particularly provocative. Once, while playing a game of hide and seek, Vicente's son Américo (Enrique's grandfather) went to hide beneath the table where the image rested. According to him, when he lifted the sheet that covered the table to crawl underneath, *Morenita* opened her eyes and mouth in apparent surprise. Another time, a fire started beneath Vicente's house. It being a business day, the house was mostly empty, and without anyone noticing the fire spread from the lower level to the upper rooms where *Morenita* dwelled. Eustaquia went to the room and pleaded: "Virgen de la Monserrate, are you going to let yourself burn?" According to Eustaquia, the fire ceased immediately. This oral exchange reveals much of this family's understanding of devotion and of *Morenita* as interactive and co-agential. She is assumed to be a self among other selves, as if a person among human-persons, what I call a 'radical other' in the final chapter.

Upon Vicente's death, Ana Milagros inherited *Morenita* and the family farm, and married her second-cousin Heriberto (another of Vicente's sons, Enrique's great-uncle) and

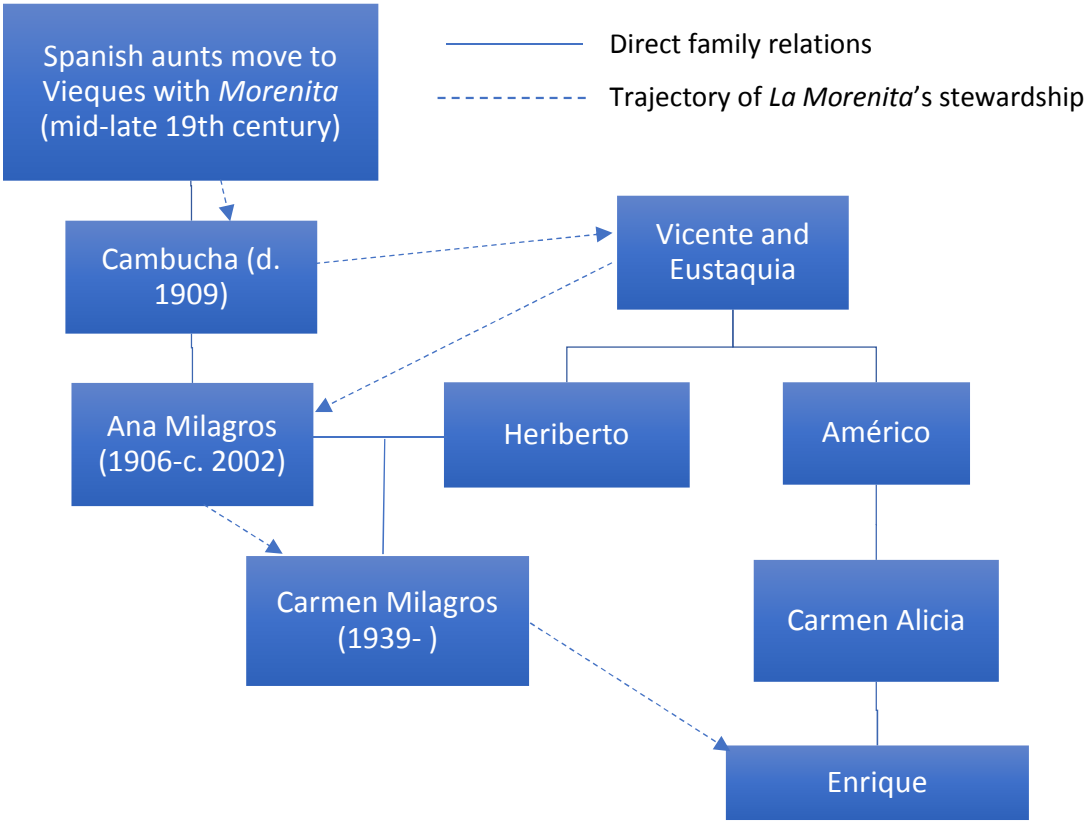
[15] This material expression of belief and gratitude is a cornerstone of Christian material religion worldwide. For example, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 1995).

gave birth to Carmen Milagros, the writer of the family history. When Carmen was six years old and playing with a ten-year old cousin in a room opposite *Morenita's* room, they both saw a heavy blanket roll towards them, a blanket they knew was stored under the table where *Morenita* was placed; coincidentally, one of Carmen's grand-aunts (Vicente's daughters) had recently passed away in the room in which they were playing.[16] Much later, when Hurricane Hugo hit Puerto Rico in 1989, *Morenita* was still in the almost one hundred-year-old house in Luquillo. Carmen was in San Juan, hours away and could only pray that *Morenita* would protect herself and the house. Luquillo was one of the hardest hit areas of the storm, devastating many homes and businesses. Yet Carmen's house was spared, surviving with minimal damage. It was Carmen and her brother Carlos, Enrique's aunt and uncle, who bequeathed *Morenita* to Enrique around 2002 "to venerate and maintain the tradition." Note the seamless co-incidence between the 'this-worldly' (e.g., natural) and the 'beyond' (e.g., supernatural), the material and the divine *lo cotidiano*.

The long-lived movement of *Morenita* within this network shows a clear preference for women, which is not surprising given her own gender, the preeminent presences of Mary and women in Latinx devotional contexts seen in Chapter 1, and her spheres of influence according to 'official' Mariology seen in the Introduction. Another salient aspect of this background on the Enrique-*Morenita* space is the ubiquity of familial networks: *Morenita* is of obscure origin yet she is an important member of the family; the family is fiercely protective of tradition and history; *Morenita*'s custody went from womanly-to-womanly family relation (even if still

[16] One can only speculate about *La Morenita*'s intention with the 'blanket roll.' I make suggestions below.

needing some manly allies and surrogates along the way); she is most often mentioned in reference to family events. Below is Enrique's family tree, including the custodianship of *Morenita* within that familial personhood:



These familial and womanly networks indicate, on the one hand, the distributed nature of excessive personhood and, on the other, *Morenita*'s affordance of fruitful, long-lasting discourse (for instance, as prototype and long-lasting anchor of the family narrative), one that turns theological by traditioning (in Espín sense) family with 'spiritual' beliefs, successive generations with faith practices, and the object-person with a Latinx-Christian self that transcends her particular objecthood toward a shared yet unique Puerto Rican *thing*—a way of being Enrique and his family.

A final yet critical point: though the human and the objectual is certainly constrained by a lack of vocality, it is provocative how this limitation is negotiated here. Simply stated, as with purely human familial relationships, sometimes vocality is not needed. Eustaquia's request for action from *Morenita* in favor of the family was worded passively. In a sense, this request encapsulates this dissertation's argument: *Morenita* is treated as if she is another person, but with what I earlier called 'this-worldly' divine power (theological in this Latinx case) due to her mutual personal relation with God and excessive personhood in *lo cotidiano*. This mutuality again confirms the closeness between the material and the divine seen in Chapter 1 and the Christian Mariological concepts that will be seen later in this chapter. However, for now, *Morenita*'s vicinity needs to be expanded with a history on Nuestra Señora in Spain and Puerto Rico.

A short history of Mary *qua* Mother of God and *qua* Nuestra Señora in Spain

While a comprehensive history of Spanish Christian devotion to Mary and Nuestra Señora de La Monserrate is beyond the scope of this dissertation, some events and facts of that history are relevant to the discussion on the space that *Morenita* and Enrique create and inhabit. Evidence shows that Christian worldviews were already widespread in the Iberian Peninsula during the late Roman and Visigothic Empires. Even though the latter was overthrown by Muslim conquerors in the early eighth century CE, early Christian identities and corresponding religiosities never disappeared. Indeed, they developed further during this period (presumably due of Muslim tolerance of Christians throughout most of the peninsula)

which lasted until the end of the fifteenth century.[17] Part of the 'pantheon' since the early years of Christianity, Mary was invested with specific areas of influence in Iberian human affairs, such as seafaring (in her advocation *Stella Maris*), health, agriculture, and fertility. Perhaps Nuestra Señora's personal longevity and resilience can be attributed in general to these wide-ranging *loci theologici*.[18]

During the so-called *Reconquista*, Christians slowly but surely conquered almost all non-Christian others from a politically-fractured Spain. They in turn converted (or at least attempted to convert), many times violently, the remaining population, including Jews and Muslims. In this period, Mary gained even more popularity in local contexts and the incipient Christian national identity and practices, especially between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries, perhaps due to her association with Mediterranean mother goddesses and to being boosted by re-conquering Catholics' re-naming of local places of worship (usually mosques) as Marian churches.[19] For example, by the sixteenth century, the Great Mosque of Córdoba became the Church of Our Lady of The Assumption, with a large Christian church built right in the mosque's center and smaller chapels in its perimeter. Mary in Spain is a Christian self yet co-constituted by Muslim otherness; note that etymologically '*Morenita'* means 'Moorish young woman.'

By the late fifteenth century, Nuestra Señora de La Monserrate had a strong following in the Iberian Peninsula. The powerful political alliance of Castilla and Aragón (which at that time

[17] Linda B. Hall and Teresa Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 17-18.

[18] Recall that I refer to the Spanish advocation Our Lady of La Monserrate as 'Nuestra Señora' to differentiate her from the *Moreneta, Monserrate*, and *Morenita* images.

[19] Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 19–27.

controlled the Cataluña region) led to the marriage of Fernando and Isabel, both strong Catholics. Moreover, Isabel was a pious devotee of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a devotion that became hugely popular and very influential in 'New Spain' (what is currently known as Central and South America and the 'Hispanic' Caribbean) through the genocidal incursions of Colón (Columbus), Cortés, and Pizarro and implicitly others like theologian Ginés de Sepúlveda.[20] Throughout their conquered lands, the *conquistadores* tended to supplant local god-images with those of the Virgin in her many advocations. In time, indigenous peoples developed an autochthonous identity that included these colonizer religious figures, primarily those associated with both war and motherhood.[21] Interestingly, one of the islands Columbus 'discovered' in his second voyage was named after Nuestra Señora, the small volcanic island now known as Montserrat.[22] Shifts on intracultural and interreligious peninsular allegiances, the violent history of empire and conversion in 'New Spain,' the ubiquity of Marian devotion in conqueror and conquered lands, and the introduction of Mary *qua* object-person into local religious practices contributed to the presence and distribution of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate in Puerto Rico and enabled *Morenita*'s diasporic life centuries later, that is, the latter's Puerto Rican excessive personhood evident in the materialities of the *Morenita*-Enrique

[20] Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 40-41. Ginés de Sepúlveda was mentioned in Chapter 1.

[21] Hall and Eckmann. *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 81. According to Hall and Eckmann, indigenous understandings of the sacred feminine as "both nurturing and frightening" also could have contributed to her favor among the native populations of 'New Spain' (85). As previously seen, Espín shares this claim. I prefer the word 'autochthonous' to 'syncretic,' which is commonly used in scholarship, because 'syncretism' colonizes indigenous epistemologies.

[22] Hall and Eckmann. *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 51. The island of Montserrat is dominated by its now-infamous volcano called Soufrière Hills.

Figure 5 - Moreneta. Taken from https://images.app.goo.gl/iDr47xs2DymcuiTx5

devotional space.[23] For more immediate background, I now turn to *Moreneta*, Nuestra Señora's Catalan representation and one of the two sister image-persons of *Morenita* seen in this chapter.

The story of the *Moreneta* image echoes many others in the European imagination: her Christian devotees hid her (Figure 5) from Arab invaders in the early eighth century in a nearby mountain known locally as Montserrat ('Serrated Mountain,' Figure 6), but promptly forgot where she was.[24] About one hundred and fifty years later, 'heavenly portents' and 'climatic spectacles' led believers to a cave where they finally found her. The devotees tried but were unable to move her physically.[25] They decided to build a chapel right there, which eventually

Figure 6 – Montserrat mountain and monastery in Cataluña, Spain. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/PMsZxXM28xFrFm1f7

[23] For a deeper and nuanced treatment of these factors and others, see Antonio M. Stevens Arroyo, "The Evolution of Marian Devotionalism within Christianity and the Ibero-Mediterranean Polity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 1 (March 1998): 50–73.

[24] Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 52-53. For detailed retellings of this legend, see Perry "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," 111; Sabaté Botet, "Aparición, tradición y devoción," 248-251.

[25] The "miraculous finding" and reticence to move are recurring themes among black Madonnas (cf. Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery," 1421-1422, 1430).

became a pilgrimage location and was extended to encompass a monastery and learning center.[26] Montserrat was 'Castilianized' as Monserrate.[27] Today, this advocation remains as popular as ever. On her September 8 feast day, she and her celebrations attract thousands of devotees in Cataluña and diasporic locations such as Puerto Rico. The mythic dimensions of this larger tale are mimicked in *Morenita*'s particular story of local and global movement: danger, longevity, resilience, identity with an oppressed social group, the rural and the urban, propensity both to relocate and to resist relocation, migration and diaspora, and the building of a communal space—all these are dynamic aspects of the excessive personhood around and within her yet fixed to specific times and spaces.[28] In this sense, Nuestra Señora is a moving, anti-idolatrous, decolonializing as-if person and *Moreneta* and *Morenita* correspond as localized object-persons of that personhood. Many of these 'moving' elements are also visible in the Puerto Rican *Monserrate* image described below. From a Christian Mariological perspective, all resonate with Mary of Nazareth: she was a persecuted 'pluri-dimensional' other (that is, woman, poor, young, Galilean, 'unwed' mother, and so on) yet was chosen by God to inaugurate a new cosmos as the vessel for Jesus Christ, Savior and Redeemer of all humanity in the Christian religion. Mary is the universal paragon of personhood; *Morenita*, one of her

[26] I visited this monastery in June 2019. It is a tourist destination, but also a place of Catholic devotion and research. Visitors are able to walk through the altar area and touch the globe resting on *Moreneta*'s hand. The image on display presumably is the original from centuries before.

[27] Ernesto Chávez Álvarez, *Las Fiestas de Monserrate* (Matanzas, Cuba: Ediciones Matanzas. 2015), 5

[28] Sarah Jane Boss avers that the monastery's location also evokes Nuestra Señora's affinity with the natural world, as in the earth and the "wild," a topic I do not explore here. Cf. Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 92-93.

object-persons, is the dynamic paragon of a 'realist' and unique Latinx-Christianity: Enrique's family.[29]

Regional and local history about Nuestra Señora and *Monserrate*

Nuestra Señora's presence in the Caribbean basin is well evidenced by the end of the nineteenth century.[30] In Matanzas, Cuba, for example, a procession was held every year, with hundreds of well-dressed devotees and onlookers in attendance, parading her from rural shrine to urban church, where a Mass was said and the celebration extended for two days.[31] In the Catholic Diocese of Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, there is a larger church dedicated to her: The Basilica Minor of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate, which also houses an image I refer to as

Figure 7 - The Basilica Minor of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate (see note #32 for image credit)

[29] 'Realist' and 'pluri-dimensional' come from Gebara and Bingemer in the Introduction.

[30] For example, see Chávez Alvarez, *Las Fiestas de Monserrate*, 9-13.

[31] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYPUQFIWSyI for a video of a 2006 procession in Puerto Rico in which *La Monserrate* was prominent and decorated. Also see Chávez Álvarez, *Las Fiestas de Monserrate*, 20-23, 54-58, 67-68. This feast is similar to *Morenita*'s feast in Puerto Rico, according to stories told by her family.

Monserrate (Figure 7).[32] According to the official history of this church, the Basilica was built between the latter part of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century. There was, however, also an ermita (small shrine) at the site since the end of sixteenth century. This ermita was built by a local farmer, don Giraldo González de la Renta.[33]

Figure 8 – Giraldo and the bull. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/gifv2DYnqX55X3Eq9

Though strictly speaking it falls outside the scope of this dissertation, the story of Giraldo's family's relationship with Nuestra Señora shows some similar characteristics and certainly carries the same religio-cultural valence as some of *Morenita*'s own stories. According to the testimony of one of Giraldo's grandsons, given to and recorded by a priest of the diocese in February 1699, Giraldo erected the ermita as a thanksgiving gesture for the intercession of Nuestra Señora when he was

[32] The information in this section was garnered from a visit to the Basilica in December 2018 and from http://www.diocesisdemayaguez.org/index.php/directorio/parroquias-y-misas/18-basilica-ntra-sra-de-la-monserrate.

[33] Enrique's great-grandfather Vicente's last name is the same as Giraldo's. Enrique was surprised about this coincidence when I asked him. Of course, 'de la Renta' just means 'from Renta' and Renta is a town in Spain; many people could have migrated to Puerto Rico from there. But the possibilities of this toponymical and maybe familial coincidence are tantalizing. This additional ethnographic and archival work, however, is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

attacked by a bull in one of his fields (Figure 8).[34] Allegedly, "when the bull rushed him, Giraldo, fearing for his life, prayed to the Virgin [Nuestra Señora] and immediately the bull dropped to his knees and lowered his head to the ground." Note that movement between Giraldo and Nuestra Señora was effected by *lo cotidiano* medium (the bull).[35] According to this tradition, there is a second miracle also attached to the ermita: Giraldo's young daughter got lost in the town's less-urbanized surrounding areas at the time (this was, and still is, a rural and hilly area) but was found healthy fifteen days later. The girl said she was cared for by an older woman, whom she described in detail but whom nobody knew or could identify. Family members and other local residents assumed it was Nuestra Señora coming to her aid. Note the similarity to the La Guadalupe apparition (Chapter 1) and many others in the European context. As stated above, the material interaction between the mythical-divine and the religious-human within *lo cotidiano* is commonplace in Marian, and specifically in Nuestra Señora, stories. The 'realist,' liberating anti-idolatrousness of Nuestra Señora is undeniable; she goes into human history to palpable salvific effect. The themes of presence, creation, and thanksgiving, expressed in conversations with Enrique and in Giraldo's story as well, have clear Mariological valences. Mary is quite ubiquitous in Jesus's earthly ministry. She is construed as Queen of the Universe, which is evident in *Moreneta*'s supporting the cosmos in her hand and sitting on a throne. The 'wilderness,' central to both narrative and painting, is a place of chaos and redemption. Mary's status as co-redeemer and mediator of grace results in devotees' thanksgiving.

[34] According to the website, this grandson's name was Francisco García Pagán, and his testimony was given at the point of death. Judging by the dates, he must have been a very old man.

[35] This quotation is my translation of the miracle narrative on the website (see note #32 for the source).

However, when I visited the Basilica in December 2018, I was struck by the 'feeling' of the whole building; it felt like *Monserrate*'s tomb.[36] That day, the Basilica was devoid of human presence and had only one door open. The inside of the Basilica (Figure 9) is relatively spartan, with very little decoration and few windows, hence empty and dark (it was not like the photo at right when I was there). It has the traditional Western Christian church layout with a nave, transept, and apse with the altar. Inside are about two dozen wooden pews and a few paintings and statues, and the whole structure sits on a wide plaza with painted concrete flooring and steel railing all around, concrete benches, and a few potted plants for decoration. The Basilica is situated on a small hill, higher than most of the surrounding town of Hormigueros, next to the parish house and a small convent.[37] There is an arched entrance at the bottom of a wide concrete staircase at street level which ends in a small plaza that surrounds the church. Midway up the staircase,

Figure 9 – Interior of Basilica Minor. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/TZYnKmfMutZjKSS46

[36] For a more detailed, and perhaps more charitable, view of the Basilica Minor and its surroundings, watch the following: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mptlmYD6sQc.

[37] The town's name means 'ant hills' in Spanish, arguably because of the hilly contours of the town's landscape. The Basilica Minor's hilly location, if at a much smaller scale, suggests Montserrat's jagged landscape.

there is a small niche with a full-size, recumbent bleeding Christ, as if recently entombed after his Crucifixion.

Figure 10 – The *Monserrate image, Basilica Minor. Photo credit: https://images.app.goo.gl/nMoQr3iBMBAMYrJj9*

The 'tomb-like' state of the empty Basilica presents an example of what I mean by the density of excessive personhood and its relationship to solidarity. Devotional objects withdraw and emerge in the presence of other persons and depending on changing contexts, what I would call an adapting solidarity. For instance, devotion to Mary *qua* Nuestra Señora has waxed and waned throughout history as cultural and historical conditions changed; *Moreneta* disappeared for centuries only to reappear when required; *Morenita* first had a public ministry as a processional image, only to 'retire' later to a more private devotional space. This tomb-like inertness also contrasts starkly with the current Enrique-*Morenita* space. Indeed, it seems like her possible future if *Morenita* is not well 'taken care of,' to use Enrique's aunt's own words, only because it seems like two sides of the same coin. *Morenita*, like other object-persons, exists as if alive in human terms, destined to become more or less 'dense' and 'personal,' hence more or less solidary, as the situation dictates.

The building's lack of decoration contrasts with *Monserrate*'s lavish abode and dress (Figure 10). The processional image, allegedly carved between 1740 and 1770, is about three feet tall, is beautifully ornamented, and stands in a large, wooden, roofed platform that needs

at least ten strong adults to carry.[38] Her skin tone is lighter than *Morenita*'s and her face is less stylized as well.[39] Surprisingly, this platform does not sit in the center of the church but in a corner in the front of the nave (near the main church entrance). The door through which I entered—the only open door—was in the transept; *Monserrate* was not the first thing I saw, or even the most prominent. She seemed almost forgotten in a corner, with stacked boxes below her. The one exception among the rather plain church decoration is the wooden altar piece (*retablo* – see Figure 7). Beautifully made, it allegedly was carved locally in 1806 and has a silver *sagrario* on the altar itself. At the center of the back wall of the apse there is a small (about 24" x 36") oil painting of Nuestra Señora, allegedly painted in the late sixteenth century or early seventeenth century, with a silver-plated frame added in 1863. Two other paintings complement this central work, of the Magi and of La Virgen del Carmen (both absent in Figure 7). The scarcity of decoration and images, even if beautiful individually and as a group, also make the space feel less dense in personhood.[40] The painting of Giraldo and the bull (Figure 6) hangs on one of the transept walls; it seems both oddly alien (since it definitely was not painted by a master painter) and at home. This 'miracle' described earlier also figures prominently in one of the two written histories that Enrique provided me. This document includes this short poem (author unknown), presumably Giraldo's prayer when the bull rushed him:

> *"FAVORÉCEME DIVINA SEÑORA DE LA MONSERRATE*
> *Detente animal feroz*
> *y pon tu rodilla en tierra,*

[38] As evidenced by the procession video; see note #31.

[39] 'Stylized' refers to a non-natural form; that is, the artist was not necessarily trying to replicate exactly the features (in this case, the face) of real human beings when sculpting the image.

[40] This inertness, however, is expected for a processional image such as *Monserrate*. See Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 58.

Que primero nació Dios,
Antes que tú animal fueras."

(FAVOR ME, DIVINE LADY OF LA MONSERRATE
Stop, fierce animal,
And drop to the ground on your knee,
Because God was born first,
Before you, animal, were.)

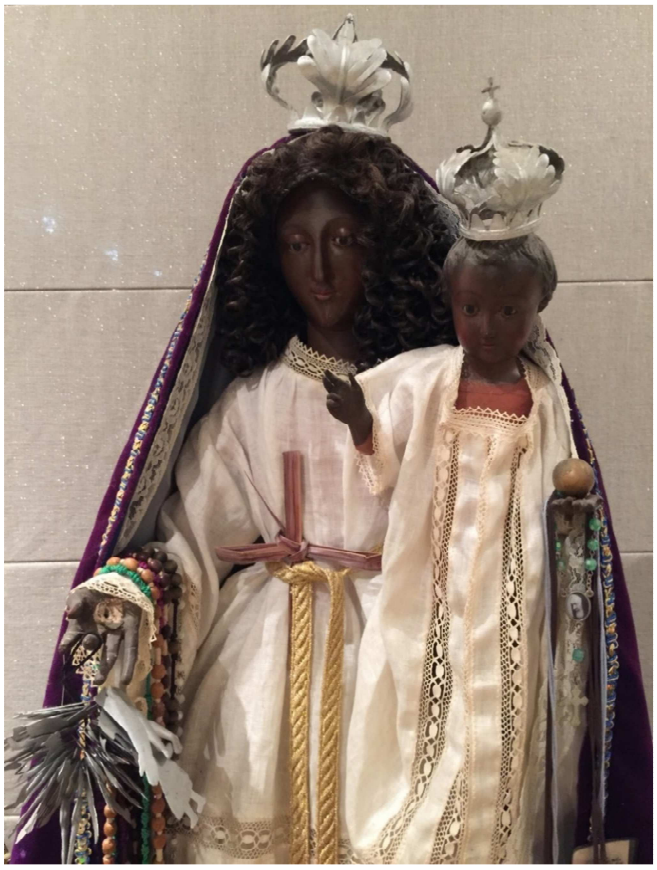


Figure 11 – Morenita close-up. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission

The document's writer also comments that *Morenita* closely resembles the *Monserrate* in the church, that is, they look like each other. I agree that there is some resemblance, yet it is only physical: *Morenita* is certainly not inert if one takes her life stories seriously.[41] She is as much a person as her humans are (at least as much as an object-person can be) and denser than her sister image-person. This fluctuating otherness permeates *Morenita*'s life and impact.

Having presented this biographical/historical background on Enrique, *Morenita,* Nuestra Señora*, Moreneta,* and *Monserrate*, I turn now to the object itself: What is the form and content of the image? What

[41] While *Moreneta* bears little physical resemblance to both, their likeness lies in their materiality, especially as related to devotee identity, family, and nation. However, as my evidence is localized around *Morenita*, I presuppose that her power comes from herself first and foremost as *Morenita qua* object-person and only second *qua* Nuestra Señora.

are some of the affordances, constraints, and meanings that surround her? What person *is* she? How does that personhood gesture toward the theological?

Morenita and her vicinity[42]

The late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century[43] image of *Morenita* (Figures 3, 4, and 11-16) is made of carved wood with pigmented skin and facial features. She is standing, her head and arms are articulated (allowing her to be 'posed' or changed to different configurations), and she is carrying an infant Jesus on her left arm.[44] Just like *Moreneta* and *Monserrate*, she has the cosmos (removable, in her case) on her right hand and the infant Jesus figure on her left (who is also removable and also has a globe). She wears a hemmed purple robe (Figure 12), and both she and Jesus wear decorated metal crowns and are dressed in white, lacy robes, hers cinched at the waist with a golden rope.[45] Neither the rest of her body nor the infant are articulated.

Figure 12 – Morenita side-view. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission

[42] All information comes from numerous personal visits, informal conversations with Enrique in 2015-2017, and a formal recorded interview in December 2018.

[43] Provenance and origin are unknown; in any case, neither is especially relevant to this dissertation.

[44] On articulated body parts, see Webster. *Art and Ritual*, 62-63. One relevant quote: "the very potential for physical movement…contributed to the 'activation' of the image, and thus to its affective qualities" (63).

[45] Note the difference in crowns, clothing colors, and other decorations between *Moreneta*, *Monserrate*, and *Morenita*, which suggests different meaning and intentionality. Scholarship refers to the latter two as "*imagen*

Figure 13 – Exvotos and rosaries detail. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

She is about thirty-three inches tall from feet to crown, her skin is polished smooth and is dark brown in hue, and her facial features are stylized: she has an almond-shaped head, elongated nose, very small mouth, painted eyebrows, eyelashes, lips, and cheeks; in fact, the infant looks less-stylized than she does.[46] She has flowing locks of black hair (non-natural as well). She is carrying dozens of tin *ex-votos* and several rosaries on her right arm (Figure 13) and has a metal safety pin with two golden letters (L and C) on it attached to her robe (Figure 14), while the infant has other rosaries and other devotional artifacts hanging from his arm. She is standing on a small wooden plinth.

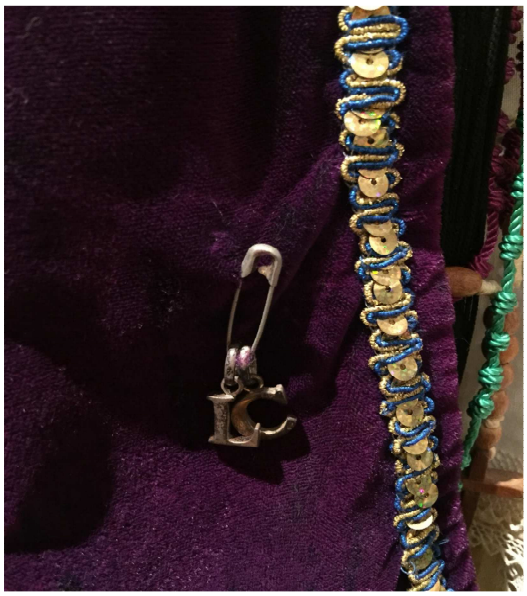


Figure 14 – Safety pin detail. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

Morenita's body, clothing, and decoration make her more 'human' and 'perfectly Christian' in my view. She is clearly still an object-person, yet closer to the human-person that Mary challenges believers to be or become. *Morenita*'s body

de vestir," clothed image. (Webster, *Art and Ritual*, 59) The original *Morenita* crown and all the rest of her clothing were lost, according to Enrique. He bought the replacement crown seen here in Argentina some years ago.

[46] On 'stylized', see note #39. I delve more deeply into skin color below.

language is more 'human-centered' and less reinforcing of colonial tropes than *Moreneta* with her queenly pose and golden coloring.[47] She is standing up with arms outstretched (unlike *Moreneta* who sits on her throne), even if her decorative crown and robe index royalty, which could be colonializing but I suggest here is meant to be construed as a measure of advocacy and solidarity as in *La Guadalupe* in Goizueta and others when combined with her other formal characteristics. *Morenita* is able to move, unlike *Moreneta* who is completely fixed in her seated position (even *Moreneta*'s clothing is sculpted). She wears her own clothes and can change her wardrobe. Her body appears to be tilting forward just a bit, just like the carried infant is. She carries the fruits of her human labor, as both a mother and co-redeemer, on her sleeves and hands, and this emphasizes her creative nature just as much as her stories and the family's devotional practices do. Her hair is visible and tangible, unlike that of her baby, Jesus. Her clothing and body get dirty and need to be cleaned, yet the clothing is white, a color traditionally associated with purity. The body underneath the clothing presumably is not solid, of less density, yet closer to a human's than *Moreneta*'s, at least from what can be seen.[48] Her eyes are more human-like as well; one can easily distinguish the pupil (the colored part) from the sclera (the white part) of her eyes. All these differences between *Moreneta*, *Monserrate,* and *Morenita* to me suggest the latter's 'unifying' decolonializing intentionality.[49] *Morenita qua*

[47] For 'human-centeredness,' see also Gebara and Bingemer in the Introduction.

[48] While this is pure speculation, I imagine that *Morenita*'s undressed body is still somewhat 'complete,' as this is not atypical in these sculptures. See, for example, Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, 63. In any case, any implications about her body do not need specifics about its final configuration.

[49] For 'unifying' and 'living in history,' also see Gebara and Bingemer in the Introduction.

Mary is absolutely a divine being but *qua* object is an*other* object: an object as if (very human-like) person, hence as close to *anthropos* as to *theos*—some*thing* else radically different.

Morenita dwells in the dining room of Enrique's home in San Juan (Figure 15). She is one among many religious and non-religious artifacts he has on display throughout and is somewhat decentered (much as *Monserrate* was in the Basilica). These other artifacts include paintings and other sculptures, the latter including Chinese and Indian Buddha statues, a statue of St. Michael Archangel, several *santos*,[50] and dozens of smaller non-religious artifacts. His house is filled with art, in addition to other more mundane artifacts such as dog toys, piles of books, and gym equipment. Notably in the dining room there are also several glass cabinets with smaller-format objects that run the gamut from the quirky to the kitschy.[51] The dining room is well-lit and densely furnished with a table, chairs, several cabinets and a smaller table, curtains on the windows, and a rug on the floor. To me it looks like a

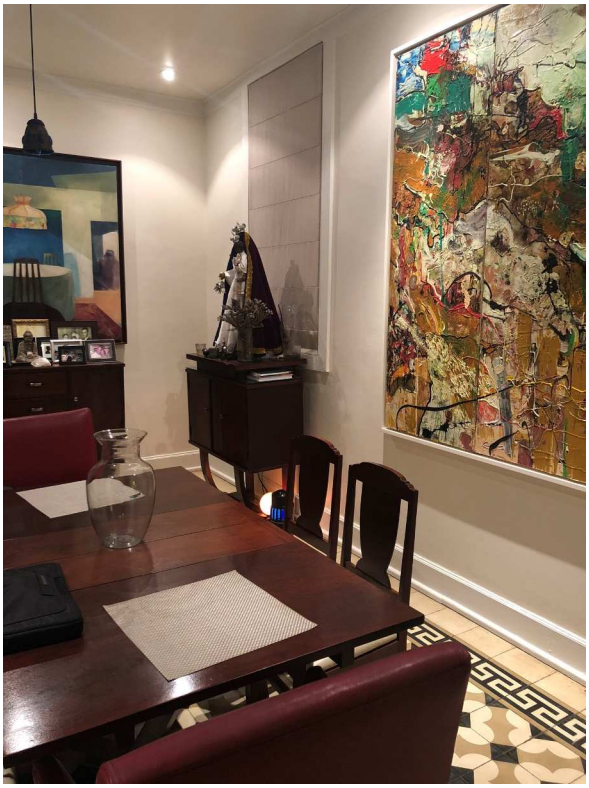


Figure 15 – Morenita's vicinity. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission

[50] Small (usually around six inches tall) wooden carvings of saints, Virgins, and other religious figures—a folk art very prevalent and well-regarded in Puerto Rico that has been studied extensively in scholarship as well. See, for example, Doreen M. Colón Camacho, ed., *Los Santos de Puerto Rico: Estudio de la Imaginería Popular* (San Juan, PR: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 2003).

[51] For example, small porcelain sculptures, cups, and toys. Enrique told me these were all valuable to him in specific ways.

museum, yet it still feels like a home, decidedly a material and divine community. There are clear similarities and differences between this space and *Monserrate*'s Basilica. Both are sacred spaces, imbued with the divine through the materialities of Mary *qua* object-person—with *Lumen Gentium*, God is "known, loved, and glorified" in both spaces through *Monserrate* and *Morenita*. However, the density of each is almost diametrically different. I suggest this difference comes from *Morenita*'s ongoing solidary fulfillment of her Marian duties. Even if her sphere of influence is more limited now in 'retirement,' she is still a constant agent (for example, mother, protector, model) to Enrique and his family. In a sense, she is more political now than ever – what is powerful about God in history and more specifically about God in this family's story.

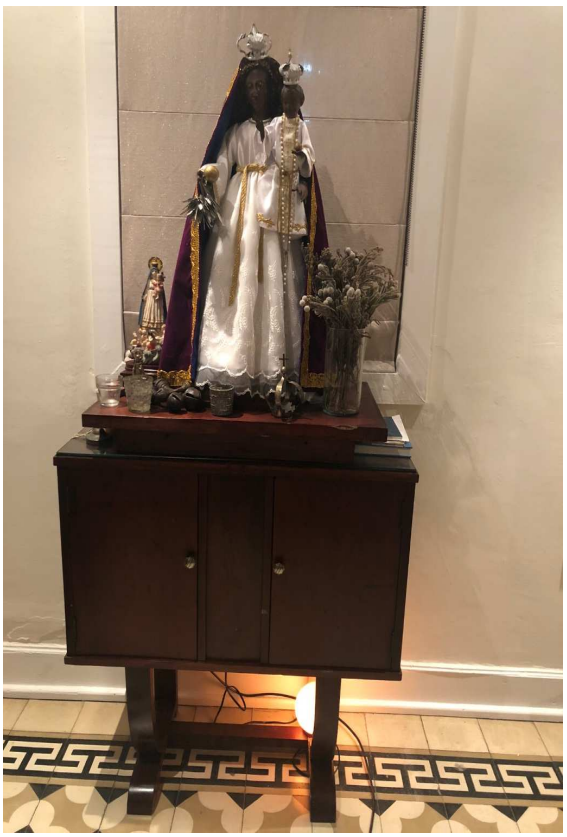


Figure 16 – Morenita and her cabinet. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission

Morenita stands on a cabinet with a top that is just a little larger than the statue's plinth (Figure 16). On top of and inside this cabinet, there are other objects: a bottle of cologne (used to "cleanse" the space, according to Enrique), votive candles and matches, and other small religious statues (the one of St. Jude and another a bell with the Hindu god Ganesh on top are particularly salient for this dissertation). During one of my visits, Enrique opened one of the cabinet's drawers and brought out a small wooden statue of a man, about four inches tall and of "African origin," with phenotypically

'African' features and 'tribal' dress. He pointed to a place on this "African man's" body where there are ostensibly specks of blood. He confessed himself "afraid" of this statue and quickly put it away in a drawer beneath the image. Despite this fear, he said he nonetheless keeps the man close to her "because of its power." *Morenita* also has a vase for flowers, which Enrique typically keeps full and fresh.[52] There were no flowers in the vase during my formal interview visit, yet they can be seen in two of the photos he sent me (Figures 15 and 16). While Enrique is understandably private about the devotion he shares with *Morenita*, he did confide in me that the practices are devotional in nature, for "veneration, petition, and thanksgiving," and that he usually "stands or sits in front of her, alone or in the company of others." He sometimes also "promises some physical object as an offering for the concession of some favor."[53] On more than one occasion, Enrique described himself as *custodio*, which I translate as 'steward' in the sense of Scheper Hughes' *mayordomo*, even balking at any suggestion of ownership.[54] In her relationship with other object-persons, *Morenita*'s politics shine brightly. She is advocate and protector, a compassionate and solidary bulwark made from creative divine power with her salvific intention expressed in the family's (micro-)historical stories.

[52] Though not especially significant in my analyses below, flowers were also there alongside *Monserrate* (see Figure 10) and in other Nuestra Señora images I came across (for example, several in Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes* and in Nair, "Localized Sacredness").

[53] Enrique's reticence to talk about his 'spiritual' practices convinced me to not delve more deeply there. However, scholarship on devotional practices in general and in the Caribbean in particular is vast and could be salutary for research around object-persons like *Morenita* (Quintero, *Vírgenes* is one of many). For instance, religious practices are rarely only about religion and often serve as decolonializing efforts. Perhaps in the future this aspect could be further explored if I gain access to the practices themselves. In any case, practice is not essential to my analysis of *Morenita*'s personhood when based on Gell, Brown, and Latinx religion and theology. As I write in the Introduction, Bourdieu, Appadurai, and others (such as Victor and Edith Turner) would provide the groundwork for an analysis using practices.

[54] This information comes from email conversations with Enrique, translated from Spanish. Notably, Enrique did not use the word 'pray' or any of its cognates in describing his practices.

Her community, a little 'church' made up of human and object persons, also draws her nearer and makes her an effective bridge to the divine. She straddles the religious and non-religious spheres with ease; indeed, she dissolves their boundaries in her 'unifying' efforts and 'othering' attitude. She fits equally well in the company of abstract paintings and of images of saints and gods. She presides over a plethora of meaningful objects, some smaller and some bigger than her. This objectual gathering is situated where human family gathers and where Enrique and other devotees gather their selves for stewardship and solidarity, creativity, and thanksgiving, in so doing bringing God into the gathering as well. There is a cosmology implicit in this gathering, with an 'ever-lasting' *Morenita* at its center and as its ground of being in history. This on-going devotional gathering is a *kairotic* event that makes devotion quotidian and *lo cotidiano* devotional and, by implication, both divine and material.

In sum, the Enrique-*Morenita* devotional space certainly is laden with memories and meanings, many of which suggest theological insights. From the image's ability to be posed to her multiple accoutrements (clothing, ex-votos, and others), from her skin to her gender, from fellow religious artifacts to fellow non-religious works of art and trinkets, from her immediate place of habitation (the dining room) to her mediated space of interaction (devotional practices), the space is dense, physically but more importantly devotionally, via excessive personhood, the devotional agency expressed by these divine, human, and objectual persons.[55] How do these meanings coalesce into specific theological insights? In what follows and in the next chapter, I look more deeply at the theological 'traces' (later named creativity, solidarity,

[55] For my discussion of 'density,' see Chapter 2, especially its conclusion.

and radical otherness) within *Morenita*'s excessive personhood witness in the experiences, stories, and events.

Morenita, excessive personhood, and the theological

By now it should be evident that the materially personal is salient in the busy intersection between Enrique and his family's history, the background of Nuestra Señora, *Moreneta*, and *Monserrate* especially within empire and colonialism*,* the *her*story of *Morenita* in diasporic and colonized Puerto Rico, and Catholic and Latinx Mariology and Marian devotion in general and in her Puerto Rican Latinx context in particular. These persons act upon each other and their world, being social agents in their overlapping devotional vicinities. As theorized in Chapter 2, that devotional-social agency, what I call excessive personhood, is the essence of this devotional space. In the rest of this chapter and in Chapter 4, I will deepen theological insights from that personhood. I have taken some tentative steps before but embrace it completely from this point forward , for *Morenita* is my main theological source as a unique devotional object. I claim that it is through the excessive personhood of the material and divine *Morenita* that Enrique and his family experiences her theologically transformative call. As Gebara and Bingemer write: "it is only from this angle that there can be a 'human word' about Mary, a word that becomes a 'divine word' for human beings. Mary, a word filled with the human desire for fulfillment. Mary, word of hope, poetic word, word combining many longings."[56] This "human word" and "divine word," Mariology and Mary herself, in this case

[56] Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God*, 17.

'unifying' 'this-worldly' and 'beyond' within the objectual *Morenita*, articulate God's liberating and ultimately salvific intent for Enrique and his family. Simply stated, God and divine agency is made visible through the devotional excessive personhood of anti-idolatrous objects such as *Morenita*.

In both a literal and metaphorical sense, *Morenita* is a member of Enrique's family and its surrounding community. For most of her life in Enrique's great-grandfather's home, she had her own room, and she still dwells prominently in Enrique's home. Her portability and durability allow her to be a resilient protagonist in this family's devotional life. In the past, she has expressed emotions, such as shock and love, for other family members, and Enrique sometimes "feels" her presence when walking by her. This tangible power also increases boons (like the longevity of family) and/or decreases banes (as evidenced by her necessary proximity to the 'African'). *Morenita* has lived in many places and even lost luggage (that is, her processional clothing). She has secured a place in Enrique's family's homes for generations and has been a companion through the good (for example, birthdays, births, and weddings) and a helper through the bad (such as family deaths, hurricanes, and illnesses). In San Vicente, the sector where she lived originally (and the nearby beach named after her – see

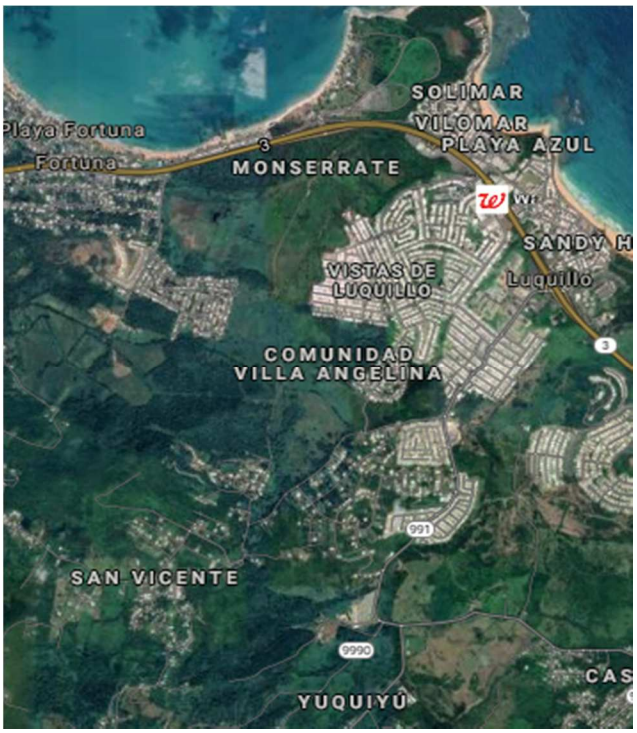


Figure 17 – Luquillo, Puerto Rico. Photo credit: Google Maps.

Figure 17), she was the reason to celebrate as a community, as well as fellow celebrant, within the hard existence of rural, diasporic, and colonized living. She has 'pulled her own weight' more than once as a member, even contributing to the family's fortunes by allowing the sale of her more valuable *ex-votos*, as Enrique told me.[57] *Morenita*'s duties are as specific as Mary's: protector, advocate, role model. Her personhood, however, exceeds the normative into the positive yet realist. In other words, *Morenita* expands and contracts her duties independent of human-persons yet depending on what is salutary to the family's present and future—what I would call her decolonial (transgressive and liberating) intent, just as *La Guadalupe* has for Castañeda-Liles.

However, as a member in constant need of protection from the weather, emergencies, material lack, and other worldly perils, she will always be a dependent, an eternal 'girl' immersed in a precarious existence from an early age. She played along with (perhaps threw a tantrum at) two child peers in Vicente's house and Enrique is reluctant to see her without her clothing. She requires (even demands) constant lavish attention, with dedicated spaces, parties, flowers, and other devotional actions. She craves close companionship, and her current custodio complies with 'object-friends' such as St. Jude and Ganesha, and even with 'object-rivals' such as the 'African.' She cannot be separated from other things, and must remain an important part of the quotidian, mundane daily life. All of these and more reveal *Morenita*'s creative human-like 'personality,' as if she is a young woman in need of closeness and reassurance, sometimes serious and at other times playful, courageous and fearful both. That

[57] *Unheimliche* resonances between Mary's domestic theological spheres of influence and *Morenita*'s domestic vicinities have sprung up throughout this journey. I have thought about these 'uncanny' theological insights around home many times. Alas, they remain for future study, along with other interesting digressions.

'personality' speaks about her and about the space itself, which reflects all persons within it. 'Othering' permeates her and the devotional space. For Mariology, Mary is somewhat fixed in her privileges and duties. *Morenita* is not so fixed, having the same "singular dignity" that grounds her Marian agency and adapting in history to changing cultural situations. Yet she (just like *Moreneta* and *Monserrate*) is also bound by the 'othering' that marks Mary *qua* Mother of God.

Morenita has always claimed her own space. Be it in her own room or a corner of a shared space, this space is constituted by interaction with her human custodians and other thingly companions. This is confirmed when contrasted with the active *Moreneta* in Monserrat and the inert *Monserrate* in her Hormigueros Basilica. This space travels with her, attracting and entangling all that cross her path, what I would also call excessive. Her early life was a mixture of public and private contact, when she mingled with her admirers in both town and country. Her later life, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first, has been marked less by movement and more by intimacy, "being there" as Enrique informed me (and as seen earlier with the Mexican women and *Guadalupe*: "she stayed," they said).[58] Movement is made for her, not by her in the strict sense, even if it is more localized and centered in one specific more-urban space—Enrique's home. Like other 'older' persons, daily excursions have been reduced to a minimum and a life of excitement has been substituted by a calmer existence, less vocal though no less lively for all involved. Her immediate space is cozy and homely, and she surrounds herself with other things of value. Even

[58] "People who believed in the Virgin's power felt her presence in the representation, not apart from it." (Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 4)

though she is clearly the queen of her space (besides being the Queen of the Universe), she shares it with others who or which in turn become more valuable, affectively and materially, through her presence. In a sense, she is more excessive, more personally dense, than *Moreneta* and *Monserrate* both because of her more intimate vicinity, full of human and objectual persons. That excessiveness makes her not dynamic but creative, not empathetic but solidary, not 'othering' but radically othering.

Not surprisingly, *Morenita*'s personhood is deeply womanly. She was brought over from Spain to the Puerto Rican diaspora by two women.[59] These women bequeathed her to a third, who in turn left *Morenita* to her daughter, who then passed the object to her granddaughter. It is only in this latest life stage that her custody has fallen to a man, and one with no direct consanguine woman descendants. Size-wise, *Morenita* towers over her objectual companions and her own infant Jesus (which are all men, by the way: Jude, Ganesha, and the 'African'); person-wise, her agency dominates all of them as well. And, obviously, Mary is woman besides being Best Human and Perfect Christian. *Morenita* has determined a clear and powerful womanly path up to this point. In the context of the Hormigueros *Monserrate*, the miracles of the lost girl and of Giraldo and the bull (a situation defused by a woman) are all salient as well.[60] In addition, in the Spanish context, devotion by female-dominated groups is not uncommon: "Other advocations are strictly local…The devotion to these advocations is often carried through brotherhoods [*cofradías*, confraternities], sometimes including women or even

[59] One is left to wonder about her history before Enrique's Spanish great-great-grandaunts. That topic remains pending for future work.

[60] Quintero Rivera emphasizes this important point on *Vírgenes,* 52.

dominated by them."[61] Just like Mary and Nuestra Señora, *Morenita* is a matriarch of one family while also being what I would call Lasting Matriarch. She is a source of identification and strength, as in Rodríguez and, more particularly, of tradition and family love.

Morenita's skin cannot go unnoticed. Why is she 'dark-skinned'? She, along with *Moreneta*, *Monserrate*, and all other Nuestra Señoras are dark-skinned Madonnas, a common and more authentic representation, according to some, of the biblical Mary.[62] It also cannot go unnoticed that her closest companions are also non-white 'others': a pauper Saint Jude (the 'protector of lost causes,' a character and depiction prevalent in Latinx communities as well), the Hindu Ganesha (known as 'the 'remover of obstacles'), and, perhaps more important, the 'African' man, the most dark-skinned of them all. However, it is only she that is thrice othered; - not only was *Monserrate* as woman the savior of the Hormigueros girl and Giraldo, she saved them as a dark-skinned and indigenous (marked as 'from the wilderness') woman while they were white, urban, and Spanish![63] While *Morenita* is racially, culturally, and 'affinally' closer to Enrique and his family, and so easier to identify with even if still a force to be reckoned with and respected, the 'African' man is also close, if one takes into account Puerto Rican history of

[61] Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior,* 12.

[62] The rationale for this authenticity is based on the biblical witness (the historical Mary is from what is currently the Middle East; as per Songs of Songs Chapter 1 (ASV), she is "black," "swarthy," "sun-scorched") and also based on the alleged provenance of these Marian objects, which is assumed to be lost to history but still traceable to biblical times. According to Scheer, the 'darkness' of these Madonnas is a "visual metaphor for authenticity" (Scheer, "From Majesty to Mystery", 1430).

I must also caution against facile connections between skin color centuries ago and race in the present, especially in the US context. For instance, the construal of black as evil in the Western religious imagination from at least the Medieval period (but not before and certainly not in Eastern Christian traditions) and the insidious ethnic constructions tied to coloniality influenced the complexities of racial (and racist) discourses from the modern period onward. What is more important here is this Mary's representation as Middle Eastern and, even more, an other to patriarchy, transgressively dark-skinned and woman.

[63] Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, 52, 59.

slavery and Enrique's own electric Latinx Caribbean religiosity. In any case, *Morenita* truly is now a black queen, a tangible expression of the possibility of extraordinary power in an other's body, expressing another challenge to the normative in institutional Mariology. *Morenita* is not only Mother of God but also the mother of humanity, and of dark-skinned humanity to boot.

Enrique and his family describe themselves in relation to her in several ways: as 'protector,' 'custodian,' and 'steward.' But they also describe her as their safeguard in times of need. Such ambivalence points to the statue's place in the family's devotion. *Morenita* is long-lived, perhaps eternal in contrast to any human lifespan. She has been passed down from generation to generation, carrying the family name and troubles on her small shoulders. It is salient that she evokes contrary emotions: joy and fear, awe and familiarity, pain and pleasure. She is always there yet is only sometimes asked to intervene. As an advocation of Mary, mother of God, she is clearly a Catholic, but is also made part of the 'soup' of spirituality prevalent in Puerto Rico and in many other regions of the world.[64] She is racially marked as an outsider but is also central in her own traditions both in Spain and in the family. These spheres of influence imbricate the otherworldly and the mundane, as they should, at least in Enrique's view. Her legacy, then, is to be wholly other, yet *there*.[65] This 'otherness' is clear in her unique personhood within the family, her direct connection with God inside the world of mortals (of which she is one; she is after all still a wooden, perishable thing), and her partnership in a long

[64] For 'soup' as metaphor for Latinx Caribbean spirituality, see my article "Sancochando Theological Anthropology: One Puerto Rican Heavy Soup as Heuristic," cited in the Introduction.

[65] I am referencing Karl Barth here. According to him, God is "absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange, yes even wholly other" (Karl Barth, "The Humanity of God," Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996, 37).

journey, geographically and temporally. *Morenita* is both Same and Other, sacred and worldly, what I called earlier 'this-worldly' divine.[66]

The practices or behaviors in the vicinity also reveal the materialities of Enrique and *La Morenita* co-agency. Simply stated, this is not a long-distance relationship. For *Morenita* is physically small, static, and local. Mary object-person and the devotee-person face each other in closeness, bodies almost touching. When the family was in peril, one matriarch appealed to another matriarch's sense of solidarity by way of individuality, about one person's place in the familial whole that was in danger. This closeness extends through space and time as well. Other family members, long dead, stood where Enrique now stands. Therefore, a communal spiritual self emerges within that small space, a trans-generational one even; the network that is excessive personhood, as a defining characteristic of the space, is constantly activated. In addition, as with all devotional companions, Enrique and *Morenita* are intentional through their interactions: there is a purpose to 'thanksgiving' or 'veneration.' These interactions are tied to material exchanges: a situation needs to be addressed, for instance, and a gift (a 'favor') is perhaps offered even if it is only a gift of loyalty. Promises are kept; power is shared. The situation is negotiated, defused perhaps by an intentional interaction.

Mariologically speaking, *Morenita* is still subsumed under Christ, just as is any other Mary. But Christ is also literally resting on *Morenita*'s hand, supported by her full womanliness. A young woman herself, she serves as mother for an infant, with all the responsibilities that entails. Not only that, but she also serves as queen of the world (which she cradles in her other

[66] She "remains both accessible and understanding…[adapting to "current needs and cultural contexts" (Hall and Eckmann, *Mary, Mother and Warrior*, 10, 13).

hand). In addition, she is protector, just as devotees protect her and even if she needs their protection. She is the adult and Jesus the infant, so in this case she reigns alongside him, a regent. Note that *Morenita*'s purple robes tend to signal royalty, different from *Moreneta*'s golden and *Monserrate*'s light blue color, and her crown is simple but prominently regal, contrasted by *Moreneta*'s understated diadem and *Monserrate*'s nimbus-like headpiece. Even further, the very-human Mary is "friend, sister, partner, co-mother; she is the woman that suffers, the woman that laughs, the woman that acts, the woman that offers, the woman that waits."[67] This is precisely why she is Best Human. As *Lumen Gentium* says: "she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and in earth."

Christians know the rest of this mother-child story well: Jesus is born, cared for, realizes and begins his divine mission, becomes a subversive to the political and religious human authorities, and is murdered; however, he eventually attains salvation for himself and on behalf of humanity in general. Mary goes from exceptional joy to unimaginable pain and bears her suffering all the way up to heaven, one of the very few humans to be 'assumed.' Likewise, *Morenita* has been through thick and thin with Enrique and his family: diaspora, war, illness, ecological disaster, and death. Her combined roles of mother, protector, and regent to a political and religious subversive indeed makes her ultimately denser, that is, more excessive, than all of humanity. Her person indexes both defeat and triumph, pleasure and pain, joy and sadness—the complete human experience. She embodies ultimate humanness, the most

[67] Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*, 107.

human a human can be, the human Enrique and his family want to be, the "model" that *Lumen Gentium* affirms.

Being subversive by blood relation, it is no surprise then that Marian devotions started early and copiously, placing her honorable self besides Christ for ordinary believers, much to the chagrin of the institution, and she has remained powerful in Latinx contexts and theology, which co-opted her figure to fight oppressive political and religious structures. Nuestra Señora is one of hundreds of Marian advocations, Mary the form and content of dozens of apparitions and popular feasts. Well known and loved outside of official religion as well as inside, Marian influence crossed the ocean with the colonial endeavor (which was carried out by those on the fringes of European society) and her brown skin immediately connected with the brown population of the Americas. Perhaps her humanness, that is, her relatable very-human life, also made her easier to enthrone and to spread geographically. *Morenita*'s story is typical: a fraught journey to the diaspora, loss, and tragedy, yet also happiness, triumph, and longevity in what is still a colonial situation (Puerto Rico). It is that story that has kept her vital and not forgotten in a church corner, only to be picked up and carried once a year, or apart, on the top of a mountain that few can access. *Morenita* is a spiritual entity with an institutional pedigree, certainly, but most importantly she is a material companion in *lo cotidiano*, embedded in the history of her devoted family. As *Lumen Gentium* suggests, *Morenita* is an "advocate" for those that venerate her and "produce" theology in her name, in the sense of Gebara and Bingemer.

Conclusion

In this chapter, a devotional object and her vicinity were encountered: *Morenita*, an articulated statue of Nuestra Señora de la Monserrate, a Catalan advocation of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Christian religion. Using family history and stories, the history of the advocation in Puerto Rico and Spain, ethnographic description and analyses of the image, and insights from Catholic and Latinx Mariology, *Morenita*'s complex biography was laid out as if she was a person in the sense of Gell and as she displayed excess in the sense of Brown. Construing *Morenita* qua person allows for her materialities to matter (in both senses: to be material and to be relevant) in the space she shares with Enrique, her family, her companion objects, and her location. Her excessive personhood describes the social agency this object has, her personality and the roles she has played, and when understood through the lens of Mariology, what its theological implications might be.

A complex and paradoxical method was needed to ascertain *Morenita*'s excessive personhood. The process is both literal and metaphoric, 'official' and popular, synchronic and diachronic, local and multinational, individual and intergenerational, and even religious and not religious. These paradoxes speak volumes of the abductive nature of the process, both fully deductive as in gathering clues to fit a specific theory, and inductive as in hypothesizing, proving, and thus establishing wider theory. For instance, some similarities with other Latinx devotional objects such as *Guadalupes* can be found, but differences abound, such as *Morenita*'s captivating and multiple 'personas'(devotional object, family member, and matriarchal icon, for instance). These multiple 'personas' could be proof of her particular agency, yet they are also grounds for an anti-idolatrous (meaning solidary, humble, and

ultimately liberative theological) understanding of divine agency due to objects such as *Morenita*. It is precisely this paradox that both enriches and obscures *Morenita qua* object.

I have only scratched the surface of all the meanings involved in these materialities. Many of their theological aspects remain for further study.[68] In the next chapter, I will concentrate on one—devotion, both as cause and effect, in other words, as what enables *Morenita* to materialize and what her materialities do. What does *Morenita* and her vicinity say about devotion? Devotion is defined as a promise, a dedication, a vow. But devotion is mostly construed as a religious or spiritual endeavor—a prayer is said and an answer is gotten. Indeed, the word devotion is co-essential with the word consecration, that is, being or making something sacred. Devotion as promise or vow is what *Morenita*'s materialities do. But what enables that devotion? Going back to my analogy of personhood as flame and excess as spark on page 125, what is the fuel of this fire? In Chapter 4, I will propose and explore one possibility, which I call devotedness, in other words, devotional love that is based on reciprocity and disinterested desire for the fulfillment of the other.

Clearly, for Enrique and his family devotion is a duty, an external expression of mutual commitment in a more-or-less prescribed fashion; prescribed by an institution, particular faith or belief, context, and actual specific life situations. However, I suggest devotion as devotedness is also an internal attitude or orientation, a way of being that molds the commitment and the committed self open-endedly and interactively. On the one hand, there is no question that both Enrique and *Morenita* are devoted to each other, their family, and their

[68] For one, I talked about home in a previous note: What is it about the domestic that grounds *Morenita*? For another: What about the relevance of family here? What does this family-person contribute to theological understanding of family?

community, just like *Monserrate* and *Moreneta* are to their own vicinities. All are committed to mutually being and making shared space special. The stories and practices are ample evidence of that. On the other, this commitment is constantly changing in kind and degree, influenced by all agents' actions, including those of an objectual nature. Giraldo's miraculous encounter with the raging bull and reunion with his daughter produced a small pilgrimage site, which in turn grew through devotion and piety to a Basilica Minor. Enrique's great-great-grandaunts had their faith grounded upon an articulated statue which then became an active member of their family through mutual care. Enrique identifies as *Morenita*'s steward even when she is clearly his protector as well. There is a vested interest in the progress of the next generation.

Hence, the devoted person cannot be described through devotional actions only: the devotee is also showing a way of being-devoted, a devotedness. This aspect of personhood is not only an *a posteriori* quality of the person, be it individual or communal, but also an *a priori* attitude. Devotedness affords devotion. This devotedness is already in Mary of Nazareth from the Annunciation, and later visible throughout her earthly life as one of Jesus Christ's close companions. It can also be seen in *Morenita*'s social being, for instance, in her intermittent agency and patience, her willingness to step in and out as needed and *how she decides to.* Many times, her actions do not need previous human intention. Devotedness is certainly present in her *custodio* Enrique. *Morenita*, in a sense, is devoted to her loved ones just as human persons are. Devotedness includes theological content important for Latinx theology and theology in general, such as companionship, solidarity, and mutual affect, yet it also takes a further step. For instance, devotedness ensures that companionship becomes support,

solidarity becomes justice, sympathy becomes empathy. It is both liberation and fulfillment. I will develop these characteristics more fully in the coming chapter.

Chapter 4

Theological insights from Enrique's *Morenita*

> Y desde el Celeste Empíreo tu manto cubra, María, a Borinquen, cuna mía, que siempre a ti te acogió… Y has que en nuestra hermosa tierra tu devoción se eternice; y siempre, María bendice, al puertorriqueño Edén. Ampárales presurosa cuando en sus males prolijos a Tí recurran tus hijos, los hijos de Borinquen.
>
> And from Empyreal Heaven, Mary, let your robe cover Borinquen, cradle mine, which has always embraced you…And make your devotion eternal within this beautiful land; and always, Mary, bless the Puerto Rican Eden. Hurriedly shelter your sons, the sons of Borinquen, when, in their long-lasting ills, they appeal to You.

In previous chapters, I have endeavored to show how *Morenita* is a devotional agent by herself and for others, an agency that Puerto Rican poet José de Diego so beautifully expresses in the epigraph about her prototype Mary.[1] In de Diego's time, Puerto Rico was dealing with the accumulated burden of four centuries of Spanish subjugation and the threat of another imperial invasion from the United States. De Diego's poetry is what I call 'real' and what Gebara and Bingemer call "realist": he pleads for Marian intercession on his cosmic cradle (Borinquen is the Castilian version of the taíno Borikén, the island's pre-Columbian name) from the actual cosmos via a 'this-worldly' divine *sub tuum* justified by a deeply-rooted devotion (it is Mary's or the sons'? Both?) among the long-suffering Puerto Ricans.[2] This devotion expresses an eternal

[1] From Diego, José De, "Escucha Virgen Pura, a los hijos de Aguadilla", unpublished, 1887, available at https://www.preb.com/articulos/escucha.htm, accessed 9/23/2020, my translation.

[2] Affect theory and theology is relevant to all the spaces here but I do not engage it more deeply due to my methodological 'object-centeredness.' One example of its relevance to my constructive approach: "What can happen theologically in affective encounters between infinitely capacious bodies is never predetermined, is always open, is ever transforming." (Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2020, 8). The resonances of that statement with this

commitment through 'felt'-material appeals. That Mary de Diego presupposes is an agent, as if a person alongside her devotees.

In the specific case of this *Morenita*, that is, Mary *qua* Puerto Rican devotional object-person, her devotional agency manifests itself beyond its expected context into Enrique's *lo cotidiano*. *Lo cotidiano* encompasses not only the popular religious (and, as evidenced, theological) spheres but also the local social-political-economic, historical, communal, Christian-institutional, familial, and all other spheres in its material-religious context as seen in general through Orsi and Morgan and in its Latinx-Christian context through Rodríguez, Castañeda-Liles, Espín, Goizueta, and Scheper Hughes.[3] I have called the distributing material expression of this agency *excessive personhood*, grounded on theoretical concepts from Gell and Brown, ethnographic insights from *Morenita* herself (based upon objectual methodology and Panofsky's and Knappett's methods, which include informant and other histories around the object and object description and analyses), and institutional and Latin American-nuanced Catholic Mariology. As a result, I have elucidated some intersections between the latter and *Morenita*, and along the way have gained insights into how *Morenita*'s personhood turns theological in her devotional-domestic-familial space; that is, how she generates God-talk in her vicinity and beyond, God-talk that in many cases is liberating in multiple ways.[4]

---

dissertation are clear and compelling. Even if affect theory as a discipline is still emerging, it has already influenced theology significantly; Scheper Hughes is but one example.

[3] For a very recent publication that explores agency of religious objects, and in Western Christianity specifically, see Christopher Ocker and Susanna Elm. *Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020). However, its disciplinary frameworks are art history, European history, and philosophy, so I did not find any direct relevance between it and this dissertation.

[4] For a very recent example of the word 'generate' in material religion scholarship, see David Morgan, "A Generative Entanglement: Word and Image in Roman Catholic Devotional Practice," *Entangled Religions - Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Religious Contact and Transfer* 11, no. 3 (January 1, 2020).

In a space where devotion is material and where material is presupposed to be entangled with the divine, such as in the Latinx context, devotion is reciprocally divine. Simply stated, not only the material is of the essence but so is the divine in the Latinx-Christian Enrique-*Morenita* devotional encounter. This association with the divine could be happening ontically but I am more interested in the relational, that is, how it happens in *nepantla*, 'in-between' the agents themselves. While its 'materialness' is evident in *Morenita*'s and Enrique's personal mutual actions (like the former's protection and the latter's *mayordomía*), its 'divineness' is the concatenation of particular, close, long-lasting, God-sanctioned, anti-idolatrous intentions and understandings that finally flower into a 'this-worldly' "realist" relationship with the divine. Some of that is visible in de Diego's poem and in the previous chapter. Ascertaining the origin or initial development of this divinity-devotion elision from its amorphous latency (in Brown's words) is speculative and goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, as stated or implied before.[5] However, the consequences of that elision are visible in its excess, that is, in the material witness from the 'present, 'bridging,' and 'multiple' (in Coleman's words) devotional object that *Morenita* is, and her unique expression of Marian "singular dignity" and "realism" as Best Human, Closest Advocate and Mediator, and Perfect Christian (in my own interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* and Gebara and Bingemer's work). The divine and the devotional are joined yet distinct visibly in this Latinx-Christian nexus, and now

[5] Indeed, my argument has never been that what one sees in the *Morenita*-Enrique devotional space is divine agency; that would be too speculative and idolatrous in my view. On the contrary, that space expresses what humans interpret as divinity inasmuch as humans have faith that God acts toward the fulfillment of creation and the created. Divinity already is of the essence of the space, but whether or not God is acting in one way or another (or how) is not to be scrutinized, even if one could. One could certainly say, however, that *Morenita*'s agency has divine aspects because of her connection with divinity (and with humanity). For an excellent argument on divine agency (albeit too metaphysical to be of further use here), see Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *The Mystery and Agency of God: Divine Being and Action in the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

those insights will be explored. I ask: How is Enrique and his family's devotion divine? Or, in other words, how is *Morenita*'s divine connection devotional?

In this final chapter, I propose a larger claim: that *Morenita* is not only as-if a person because she is an excessive devotional object but she is also a devotional object because her actions show a 'devotedness' as if she were a human-person. In other words, not only does the human love she receives almost transform her into a person, but she also displays a transcending love as object-person that makes her approach human personhood: *Morenita qua* Mary the human-person entangles with *Morenita qua* the object-person. Devotedness, for me, is an unshakeable love one person has for another usually expressed through what one calls 'devotion,' which includes material acts of love. The devotedness or devotion that has been made so clear in Enrique's family and his own loving custodianship of *Morenita* is not exclusively due to an appreciation of the object as religious/spiritual. It is also due to a dual *a priori* intuition and *a posteriori* confirmation of an essential aspect of *Morenita*'s personhood via her objectual *praxis*, an attitude that eventually afforded her individual and familial roles. Simply stated, *Morenita* is loved because she loves first and loves back.

Below I will develop devotedness further using Enrique and his family's description of her agency, Catholic and Latinx Mariological privileges and insights, and *Morenita*'s objectual qualities to explain how this object-person affords devotion in order ultimately to become devotional. Going back to my original analogy: if excessive personhood is fire. with distributed personhood as flame and excess as spark, then devotedness is fuel. In other words, the devotedness for an object is expressed through a specific 'spiritual' devotion of/for the divine and the divine devotedness expressed by this object enables such devotion on the human side.

Without devotedness on both sides, devotion dies. This devotedness is theological because it unites the human, the objectual, and the divine in one particular *cotidiano* space. In strict systematic-theological terms devotedness is grace.[6]

By enabling humans to have a dense or thick relationship with the divine, grace is constantly negotiating subjectivation and objectivation, the former being the creation and maintenance of the fully human self and the latter being the apprehension of an external reality beyond that self (in this case, the divine). In other words, humans are both subject of, and object for, God's grace, that is, receivers of love and transmitters of love from God.[7] The human capacity for love is materializing and divinizing, making human co-creators of liberating hope for the world. Similarly, *Morenita*'s 'this-worldly' divine*,* anti-idolatrous devotedness (that is, her grace) enables her objectual identity and transgressive power. In sum, devotional practices and stewardship for *Morenita* enable love of God in general but the devoted *Morenita* enables her love for *this family*. Her prototype in that effort is Mary of Nazareth due to her privileges and roles, yet also, importantly, due to her material modeling of divine grace. Mary shows how humans can strive to be as if divine.

[6] For a non-theological analysis congruent with my theological suggestion, see Perry, "The Black Madonna of Montserrat", 122-124.

[7] Adam S. Miller writes about grace in an objectual key in *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (Ney York: Fordham University Press, 2013). Object-Oriented Ontology's 'flat ontology' is unhelpful in my analyses and Miller's strong metaphysical objectivization of God does not agree with the Latinx or Enrique's real witness here. However, Miller's attempt to construe grace as 'resistantly available' and mediating between objects (in the 'flat' sense) is close to my own understanding, where grace is mediating between object, human, and divine (more textured in my account). A relevant quotation: "In an object-oriented theology, grace is the concurrently imposed *and* enabling strength that emerges in the give and take of agency." (58) Further nuances from Miller, while tantalizing, remain for future work.

This large claim is my constructive interpretation of the *Morenita*-Enrique encounter. Remember that the aim of this whole dissertation is to elucidate theological insights about this unique Latinx devotional space. But as an expression of devotion *per se*, that could suggest a need on my part for research on Christian devotion beyond the Latinx context, a wider and perhaps comparative study of devotional objects and practices in different contexts, and the connection between devotion and historical and/or systematic Western Christian theologies of devotion, piety, sacrament, or grace. However, remember that *Morenita* is the unique *fons theologicus* here; though relevant, the source is not previous scholarship (in material culture, theology, and/or otherwise) on devotion or devotional practices. Indeed, even Enrique's 'popular' devotional practices (which are certainly sacramental and pious for him) have been only tangentially relevant. In this sense, this dissertation becomes theological in a more constructive sense, less historical and systematic, because of its more-inductive, experiential, forward-looking, and ultimately open-ended approach (similar to the constructivist approach of material religion studies).[8] To restate: my goal here is to tease out local, 'realist' insights from the specific materialities between Enrique, his family, and *Morenita*. It is a very small object of study and implications are meant to be particular. Yet nothing precludes constructive thought about farther-ranging claims that transcend this object-person or her domestic-familial

[8] Writes Wyman: "Constructive theology is a method of doing Christian theology that takes seriously theological and church tradition as well as modern critiques of that tradition being something universal, eternal, or essential; it employs traditional themes and loci of theology in order to formulate useful, inclusive, fallible, guidance for living as Christians in the contemporary world, against descriptions of a systematic theological system that pretend to unveil any true essence of Christianity; and takes as its mode a good-faith engagement with parallel academic disciplines, often religious studies; an activist/crisis confrontation; or, ideally, both." (Jason A. Wyman, Jr., *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017, 167). I consider this dissertation successful to varying degrees in light of Wyman's definition.

implications (another measure of her excessive personhood). Indeed, some generalizing attempts will be seen below.

Another caveat: one should never assume that concepts are 'innocent' of their implications beyond religion and theology. *Morenita*'s devotedness is not innocent either. She can be conceived as a 'popular-religious' anti-idol in the sense that she becomes a 'this-worldly' means to a 'beyond' *telos* within the *sensus fidei* strictly limited by the institution. But she can also be conceived as a liberating anti-idol in regards to the *cotidiano* idolatries of oppression in Western Christian institutional and neoliberal society, making her theological import more political when broadly construed. That is the 'confrontational' side of constructive theology (see footnote #8) that is also implied in Borinquen's "long-lasting ills" from de Diego's poem in the epigraph. Like in the *La Guadalupe* spaces seen through Rodríguez and Castañeda-Liles, *Morenita*'s agency impacts the real by modeling an opposition of colonial, kyriarchal, and heteronormative structures within families and whole communities through nuancing and transgressing her self-identity as Mary through the material, in her case, the 'this-worldly' divine devotional space.[9] For instance, *Morenita* is not the passive Mary at the foot of the cross; she is an active bulwark against coming storms. Gebara and Bingemer illustrated a similar Mariological intent by stressing the unity of 'living in God' and 'living in history' through the divine/historical Mary. As stated before, that real anti-innocence exemplifies a devoted

[9] Queer theories and theologies have also been relevant here from the start. The *Morenita*-Enrique space is transgressive in that sense as well, but I chose to concentrate on other theological aspects. For excellent and recent scholarly work on queerness and theology, see Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). Mark D. Jordan's chapter (pp. 296-308) and Catherine Keller's response (pp. 309-313) were especially enlightening.

awareness that expresses itself in, and seeks to transform wholly, *lo cotidiano* through *this Morenita*'s materialities.

Morenita: devotedness as creativity

Figure 18 - Creative Morenita. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

Earlier, using Goizueta, I affirmed that materiality breeds and enables divinity. Enrique and *Morenita*'s plural and gradating materialities co-generate devotedness, that is, a near, long-lasting, all-encompassing love, a particular love that transcends its own particularity. This love is grounded in the close relationship between human as created and God as Creator, between *Morenita* as created and Enrique as creator (not of this piece, but in general) and between *Morenita* as co-mediator of grace and redemption and Enrique as created.[10] It is also an expression of the peculiar relation between the divine and the human, of God as Creator and of Enrique and *Morenita* as created and, I dare say, vice versa as well. What are some of the dimensions of this creative materiality?

[10] As quoted earlier, "things that people make, make people." (Miller, *Materiality*, 38).

Clearly *Morenita* is young woman and mother, just like her prototype Mary of Nazareth, sister-objectual *Guadalupe*, *Moreneta*, and *Monserrate*, and sister-human Enrique's great-great-grandaunts, Cambucha, Ana Milagros, and Carmen Milagros. Enrique, her current creative custodio, serves as a manly surrogate in this sense. Many of *Morenita*'s physical qualities (for instance, her slightly protruding chest and wider hips) suggest her womanhood. The oral tradition around her mostly involves women. Even if within her patriarchal society she is still dependent on men, the *Monserrate* miracles with Giraldo and the bull and the lost girl detail that it was the woman that saved the day. *Moreneta,* the original objectual prototype, is invested with a religious history of woman divinity and, again patriarchally, womanly spheres of activity. Their history, that is, their *her*story, is told from the perspective of women, starred in by women, and sometimes compiled by women. This creative materiality is womanly.

Only the woman's body affords child-bearing. Mary is *Theotokos* and *Morenita* is Lasting Matriarch. *Guadalupe*'s clothing signals pregnancy. Young *Morenita* holds her son Jesus in her hands, and even if they are not looking at each other, their familial love is presupposed because she is sacrificing part of her mobility for him (and we do have evidence of Mary's undeniable love in the Bible). Motherhood afforded *Morenita*'s longevity; that is, without the mothers mentioned above, she would have faded into oblivion. She is the ultimate matriarch of Enrique's family. Her power enables the family and can even control nature. The negative space inside *Morenita*'s wooden frame, where one would locate her organs, specifically her genitalia, is so sacred that Enrique is loath to touch it, even see it. In short, her motherhood is hidden, marking her divinity as well. The creative materiality is motherly as well.

Even if both womanly and motherly, *Morenita*'s creativity is transgressive. To say *Morenita* is woman and, in the biological sense, mother, presupposes her sex, categorized as one and not others. That constrains as well. *Morenita qua* Mary is limited to the womanly: the divine motherly, the miraculously conceived, and the perpetually virgin: all these privileges derive from her sex and gender first and her authority second. And any authority she has is always dependent; for Mary is *co*-redeemer, *co*-mediator. Orthodoxy sees Mary as the 'feminine' of God. However, Mary's ability to connect with folk in *lo cotidiano* creates uncomfortable beliefs and practices that 'official' theology has found difficult to manage. Her *co*-mediation is many times construed as mediation *per se.* She liberates herself from the institution and is therefore liberating for devotees. Advocations of Mary, *Morenita* being one of hundreds, have for centuries become sources of liberation: cultural, religious, and otherwise. Indeed, *Morenita*'s objectual actions are not uniquely Christian and/or womanly in particular but fully humanly in general, crossing doctrinal, gender, and other norms. The creative materiality is intentionally transgressive as well.

Morenita qua devotional object, just like *La Guadalupe*, is a socio-political subject, towering over all and, therefore, empowering all. Mary herself and by herself, however, is not only Best Human and Perfect Christian but also Lasting Matriarch, Woman/Mother-in-charge, and so is *Morenita* for Enrique's family. Even if she is always under the King (God), *Morenita* is Queen of her Universe, absolute ruler of her vicinity and beyond. Enrique and his family have revolved around *Morenita* for five generations. As devotional object-person-in-charge, her subjects are companion objects and humans. With faithful *mayordomía*, she has been eternal (in human years, at least). She is not matriarch because she is woman or mother; she is

matriarch because she has power beyond measure, only surpassed by the power of Godself. As *Morenita*, she is powerful because of her denser excessive personhood. This creative materiality is extremely powerful as well.

In Espín's theological terms, what one sees flowing is *Morenita*'s anti-idolatrous devotedness, that is, a liberating grace of God stemming from the womanly, motherly, transgressive, and powerful *Morenita qua* excessive person and not exclusively *qua* Mary. For Heidegger, the thingness of the jug lies within the space within the jug. In *Morenita*, devotedness gathers somewhere inside her created frame, within her form and content, that is, within her clothing, skin, gender, actions, and motivations. That interior space is the anti-space in contrast to the exterior devotional space – that space is her anti-idolhood. What flows from *Morenita*'s anti-idolhood is a love evident in the flowing itself, sometimes protective, sometimes playful, always devoted. In *Morenita*'s case, devotedness (as excessive, transcending grace) gathers and flows poietically from her dark-skinned flesh just as from her womanly, motherly, transgressive, and powerful material body.[11]

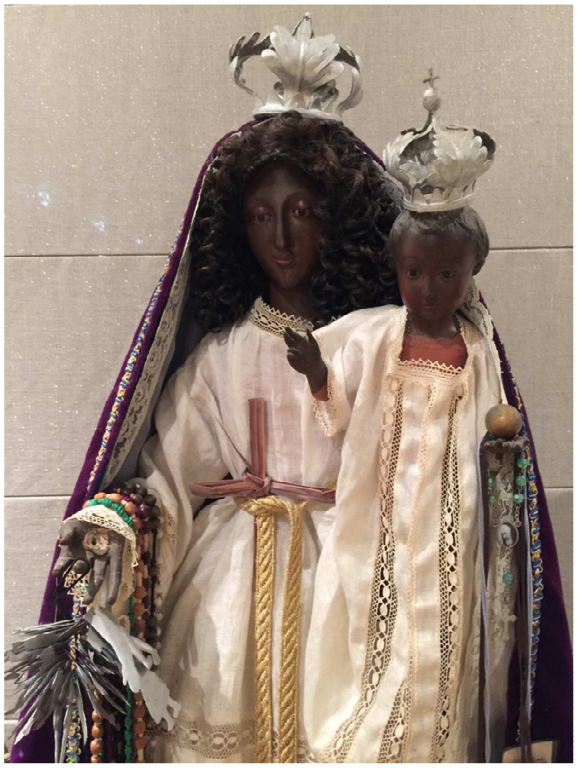


Figure 19 - Solidary Morenita. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

[11] I borrow my material understanding of poiesis from Mayra Rivera. In *Poetics of the Flesh* (2015), she writes of a similar understanding of body, the paradoxical yet liberating possibilities of its material poiesis. To summarize Rivera's complex argument, it is precisely the body's relational creativity based on the porous

Morenita: devotedness as solidarity

This anti-idolatrous devotedness is also visible in how *Morenita* models solidarity, a particular kind of grace as per Goizueta. The co-generation of devotedness between Enrique and her is grounded in family, a transgenerational and long-lived relation that enjoys its own materialities of memory and affect. For instance, for present devotedness to be hopeful, it has to connect affectively to past and future. Even then, it still needs what Miguel De La Torre calls "a note of solidarity"; it needs to have worked, 'really' worked, at some point or runs the risk of becoming hopeless.[12] In other words, in order to be considered solidary, devotedness needs to be 'realist' yet praxical. *Morenita* is as if awake to this, taking seriously her being and behaviors and their consequences, as seen throughout Chapter 3.[13]

Morenita accompanies. She has many personal friends, objectual and human alike. Her arms stretch outward and move as if promoting welcome. She stands and is somewhat tilted toward the front with her head slightly bowed, that is, she is not enthroned and aloof, but rather is more 'popular' or accessible than queenly. Her life has gone through human stages, from more-public, youthful activity to a more-private, slower lifestyle. She intervenes in her

---

boundedness of the flesh—interior/exterior, social/individual, public/private, and historical/*cotidiano*, indeed, material gateway and divinizing limit of selves, individuals, and communities—that enables hope to be fulfilled even if one is carrying centuries of oppression, an anti-idolatrousness of flesh and body. Substantial work is needed to see *Morenita* properly through Rivera's lens but I find her insights extremely helpful. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, the possibility for further development remains open.

[12] Miguel A. De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 76.

[13] 'Awake' comes from Laurel C. Schneider and Stephen G. Ray Jr. *Awake to the moment: An introduction to theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). These constructive theologians write: "there is no point to theology, no point to talk of God, Christ, or Spirit if it does not enter fully into all of what it means to be alive and present in these days of change, wonder, and challenge" (5). Also: "The challenge of theology that is truly awake to the world—theology that is real—is that it be clear-eyed in its vision of the world in which we live and real in its assessment of the consequences of theological claims in the world" (175). I suggest that *Morenita* embodies all that as if she were a person.

friends' lives; sometimes she plays, sometimes she soothes, sometimes she admonishes, and sometimes she saves. She is their Closest Advocate and Mediator. *Morenita* is a participant, not a spectator in her vicinity's life, always center stage in Enrique's *lo cotidiano*, be it sociopolitical, cultural, familial, and/or religious. As is the case with *Guadalupe*, *Cristo Aparecido*, and other Latinx excessive devotional objects, *Morenita* is visibly entangled in her humans' total way of life and not constrained at all, as others are in a dusty corner or a remote mountaintop waiting to be fêted by those that can materially afford the trip.

Morenita empathizes; her feelings are co-relatable to human feelings, as if they were human. Her eyes look straight ahead (not upward, as in other Marian images), directly meeting her beholder's eyes, indeed even more intensely than those of her baby Jesus. Indeed, since her mouth is so small and her eyes are so big, the visual is emphasized over the oral. She 'feels' greatly any real or perceived lack of companionship, 'calling out' to Enrique as he passes by and even wearing the scars of absence (of the cosmos!) on her hands like some sort of both authentic and spurious injury. She registers loneliness and loss, choosing to act when her own existence is imperiled or overlooked. She also expresses a young woman's insecurities when her personal space is transgressed. This near-human empathy brings her close to her stewards in real moments dense with joy and/or pain.

Morenita beautifies. She is perfectly dimensioned for her immediate space, proportioned both for public procession and for private devotion. Her space is well-lit both naturally—she is close to a window—and artificially—the globe lamp underneath her cabinet enables a play between light and shadow. She certainly is a beautiful Mediterranean woman with black curls and a mysterious and dare I say sexy countenance. This beauty also projects

self-esteem and peace through simplicity and faith. She lends herself to familial/religious memory and affect through her body, decorations, and ornaments. She is undoubtedly the center of attention in any room, captivating passing persons due to her proximity to the human form itself and to her size, skin, gender, dress, *exvotos*, devotional instruments, and other meaningful mementos and companions. She also attaches herself to those same humans, as she becomes unforgettable and therefore reclaims attention constantly, keeping her front and center of her vicinity.[14] Her identification with the divine suffuses the space with divine presence both pleasant and peaceful. *Morenita* is the beauty of harmony.

Something else is elucidated from size. *Morenita* is human-like in form (three-dimensional, for one thing) yet much smaller in scale than the common human body, just like *Monserrate* and *Moreneta*. Indeed, it would seem her small size should have constrained her processional life but, according to her *her*story, it has not. *Morenita*'s witness is that being an effective person has little to do with size and more to do with relationality. In physics, small size combined with proven wider agency indicates more density, more solidity. This actually reinforces my argument about these images' specific strong and long-lasting, dense excessive personhood. The combination of her sensed characteristics, her excessive meanings, and her fulfilled promises among their vicinity transcends her literal small volume and occupies a metaphorically large volume because her personhood is so solid. The same can be said to

[14] In late 2019, Enrique moved temporarily to an apartment due to construction in his home. In a recent visit, I again saw *Morenita*; this time she dwelled in the main room of the apartment, her presence now even more prominent than before.

differing degrees about *La Guadalupe*, the *Cristo Aparecido*, *Monserrate*, and *Moreneta*. All these devotional objects are dense because they are so small yet solidly solidary.

Morenita persists. Even such a solid individual presence is withdrawn into the background among a community of objects. In other words, her accompaniment is always present yet hidden in company. For instance, *Morenita*'s standing as art turns her into another (if eminent) work of art among paintings, sculptures, kitsch, and other artifacts in Enrique's domestic space. Her religious content is fused with other sacred objects, such as her companions St. Jude, Ganesha, the 'African' and *santos* in Enrique's spiritual space. Womanhood is less evident in her vicinity and secondary to its dense objecthood, perhaps due to Enrique's 'more manly' beingness. However, she persists. That is, her power is present and relational even when no devotional practice is being performed, and in that sense she is different from *Monserrate* and others.

The above suggests an actional solidarity, an empathic, harmonizing, solid, and persistent accompaniment comparable to the *orthopraxis* attitude of Latinx theology. Her lack of orality signifies her alternate solidarity, empathic and aesthetic, dense and material: she is both concerned with her people's fulfilled humanity in the 'now' and also with their silenced history in the context of past colonialism (for some) and ongoing coloniality. Note that this lack of vocality also means that *Morenita*'s personhood has to be even denser to overcome that shortcoming.[15] In this sense, *Morenita* is an expression of Mary's 'living in God' and 'living in

[15] Indeed, De La Torre sees lack of vocality as both problematic and generative, because the hopelessness produced by God's silence in light of oppression enables deeper and better nuanced understanding of faith and ethics. This is the benefit of 'embracing hopelessness.' See De La Torre 2017, cited above.

history,' a 'realist' and 'pluri-dimensional efficacy that brings the divine into the material with a purpose. In other words, *Morenita* uses her multiple gifts (creativity, solidarity, and persistence among them) to express God's liberating intent with the created, an empathy that Godself feels and which engenders a *bonita* (using Scheper Hughes's interpretation, harmonious and felt) devoted response in the here and now. This devotedness is what devotees use to survive and sometimes thrive in the oftentimes tragic circumstances, a material empathy that produces results in the disembodied (as in orthodoxy) and embodied (as in *orthopraxis*) dimensions of what's real.

Morenita: devotedness as radical othering of oneself

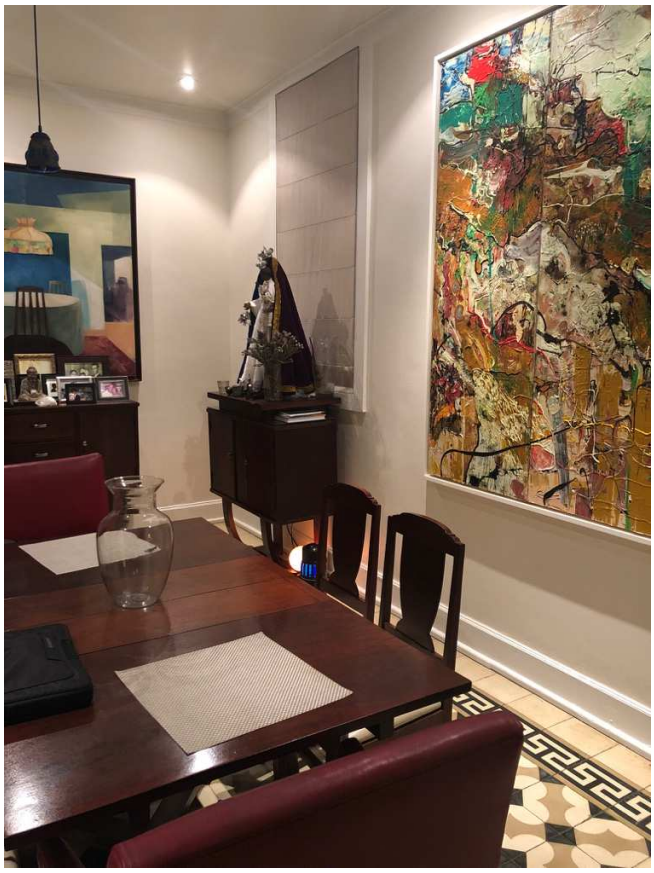


Figure 20 - Radically other Morenita. Photo by E. Renta. Used with permission.

As if human, *Morenita* trusts implicitly – through 'thick and thin', her life is in her custodio Enrique's hands. That fact by itself makes her an eternal other, her subjecthood constantly and forever objectivized by others. Similarly, Mary of Nazareth was meant to stay in the background even if destined to be at the forefront. *Morenita* is a devotional, divinizing agent, yet always also a material vessel, activated at the whim of the Wholly Other. In any case, her devotedness

manifests one of the possible solutions to the conundrum of divine transcendence and immanence: due to love (grace), an immaterial God becomes material in/for human life, a solution proposed by Latin American and Latinx women/female/feminist theologians as a response to the patronizing and androcentric immateriality of God (an example of which is seen in Gebara and Bingemer in the Introduction). However, that presence is made real for humanity through a surrender that is not necessary for grace itself—which is freely given and impossible to earn—yet validated only through *praxis*, which *Morenita* has exemplified throughout her life. In that sense, *Morenita* teaches surrendering the self for the other, what I would call a radical othering of oneself, which is by and in itself a Christological insight.

This othering is evident in the seeming paradoxes upon Mary's and *Morenita*'s bodies and object-personalities. Yet all one sees is the paradox, not their beings. As Mary, she is a brown young woman (girl, even), yet also a mother and Queen. Mary is also divine and human, as close as one could get for a begotten being (besides Jesus himself). Dark-skinned Madonnas such as *Morenita* have uncertain pasts (pagan, even) and dubious authenticities, yet they enjoy enormous spiritual authority throughout the globe. *Morenita* wears purple royal robes on top of a simple white dress, adorned with a golden belt and a palm tree leaf, queen and 'commoner' both. Textured and curvy hair frames a smooth and linear face. Her actions reveal her as both fearful and fearless. She wears a crown and many *ex-votos* made of tin, yet a single luxurious golden lapel pin and many rosaries, all equally valuable in a variety of ways. However, even with all this detail, one is left to wonder: Who are Mary and *Morenita* themselves, that is, in her unique selves? Their othering excessiveness is characterized by a paradoxical *nepantla*

latency: Mary the human-person and *Morenita* the Marian object-person are Godly power in a both material and divine vessel because of their inscrutable otherness, for one.

By the same token, to look at *Morenita* is to look at oneself as unique among other others.[16] As already seen, one of the ways humans become selves is through objectivation. *Morenita* is Nuestra Señora but in her own, unique way, just like Enrique is a Latinx and Christian man but in his own way. *Morenita* is one of a sisterhood of many *Morenitas* (such as *Guadalupes*, *Morenetas*, *Monserrates*, and others) and many more dark-skinned Madonnas around the world. However, her sphere of influence is more focused by choice; she is now more private and less public, more familial and less communal, more local (Puerto Rican) and less regional (Spanish or Latinx). Her space is more bounded (inside a house) instead of freer (as in a public church or monastery). Enrique is uniquely othered; a Latinx Puerto Rican man, by birth and by skin color the recipient of second-class status in terms of citizenship and political agency in US society. In spite of this, he has taken full advantage of his privileges, has worked hard, and has thrived, a life modeled after Mary and *Morenita*.

Being dark-skinned by itself also expresses othering to colonialized imaginations, yet *Morenita* foments equity by 're-selfing' darker skin. In the West, white skin is generally more closely associated with the European, the 'American' (meaning US-born for colonizers), and even the Christian (Mary is traditionally represented with pale skin). Black and brown skins are othered in multiple ways. In fact, in some Puerto Rican imagery, Nuestra Señora is dark while

[16] Ricoeurian implications of my analysis, if any, are beyond the scope of this work and remain to be explored later.

the infant Jesus is white as if to accentuate their difference.[17] Within this racist world, *Morenita* and other dark-skinned Madonnas show not only that diversity and inclusion are valuable, a 'pluridimensionality' to use Gebara and Bingemer's word, but that equity comes from being so radically other that the difference between self and other collapses. This is one of the many challenges *Morenita* issues to her devotees. In being Nuestra Señora, Mary, and by extension (as if) human, *Morenita* exemplifies the other as another self and not as an other. Simply stated, there is no self and other, only a communal self in devoted accompaniment.

Morenita, like any human, is at the mercy of the created world, yet epitomizes its creativity. She might last a long time with careful *mayordomía*, but she is still subject to deterioration and chaos. She is susceptible to fire, wind, and water; she needs light, stability, shelter, and a prominent location. If she falls down, she might break (she is 150 years old after all!). She loses her property easily, a victim of entropy. Indeed, even her skin color might be the product of environmental pollution. All Marian images need buildings around them and special protection from the violence of nature . *Morenita* is also othered by nature itself, revealing the weaker humanity that surrounds her stronger divinity. Mary was to give birth to God but still needed to flee from Herod and to find a shack and use a manger in which to lay the King of the Universe! This constant need radically to transcend othering externality in order to emphasize 'selfing' internality is what transforms *Morenita* into (as if) a person and thus reveals her excessive personhood (just like Enrique), the creative being who deals with chaos and

[17] See Quintero Rivera, *Vírgenes*.

uncertainty in *lo cotidiano* as any human does. Her body is site of both her greatest limitations and her biggest possibilities.

Morenita is also a colonized subject (just like *Monserrate* in Puerto Rico, *Moreneta* in Cataluña, and Mary in Nazareth) and, ironically, it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Even if *Morenita* expresses hope for Enrique and his family, they all live with the fear of partial/eventual lacks or complete loss of agency. *Morenita* turned Latinx in diaspora, by being immersed in its culture for various generations – she participated in Puerto Rican funerary and celebratory rituals; her *ex-votos* are Puerto Rican tin; her clothing and other devotional appurtenances are local; her crown is from Argentina (another ex-colonial location). Her diasporic life was been marked by oppressing othering: commodity, diaspora, family heirloom, processional image, custodied object. *Morenita* has never been just *Morenita*, even if she represents a liberated self in the eyes of devotees. It is her destiny to be *Morenita qua* this or *qua* that. It is somewhat easier to decolonize Mary of Nazareth. Indeed, this is what Latinx scholars and theologians aimed to do in much of Chapter 1 and what I aimed to do in Chapter 3 with Gebara and Bingemer. By contrast, given her past and present, it is much harder to decolonize *Morenita*. She is a decolonizing force through her personhood but is still squarely colonized as the 'feminine' of God by the institution and by deeply entrenched popular beliefs. Only her devotedness can transcend this colonialization. Her devotion to others is so radical that it transcends her own colonized self for the decolonialization of others. In other words, even if her colonized self is necessary to be *Morenita*, her devotedness is sufficient for others.[18]

[18] Drexler-Dreis has written about a radical love that decolonizes: "Decolonial love is a mode of relating to concrete persons and communities…that takes shape in the recognition of not only the failure but also the destructiveness of Western modernity" (Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity,*

Even if radical, *Morenita*'s othering is still intimate, near. Her devotedness presents a solution to the dangers of objectification that goes on in US society, especially of human beings. That humans objectify, that is, that they 'other' one other and the rest of creation, is unavoidable, as seen earlier. That process is at the core of the Christian theological 'problem' with idolatry and iconoclasm and also of the human problems of oppression and ecological disaster. However, if this othering is tempered with devotedness, that is, with an infusion of radical otherness that surrenders the self, then the self and the other entangle in a new understanding of subject and object. Simply stated, devotedness erases ontological and relational differences with those considered other, as some humans consider other humans or the world. *Morenita*'s excessive personhood transforms others into selves and objects into subjects. Said otherwise, this object-person's devotedness as radical othering is an inter-subjective force. *Morenita* teaches humans to close the gap 'in-between' each other, to think of our selves as a network of inter-subjectivizing subjects working to lift each other up; in a phrase, subjects *devoted to and for* subjects. *Morenita* is *buenagente*, good people, just as I write of Enrique in the Introduction.

Final word – to "take care" and to "venerate"

The title of this dissertation, taken from the vignette at the end of Enrique's family history, encapsulates the complex 'meta-implications' of *Morenita* as Latinx sociopolitical and religious sign, that is, the polysemic and generative "entangled worlds" of her objectual

First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019, 5). My understanding of devotedness could be an expression of decolonial love through *Morenita*.

excessive personhood.[19] To 'take care' and 'venerate' present two sides of the same coin of devotedness, one side 'this-worldly' and the other 'beyond,' one side colonized and the other decolonializing, one side human and the other divine, one side public and the other private, one side object and the other subject. The phrase expresses the 'so what?' of this dissertation: the challenge of this material-theological analysis for the practice of academic and *cotidiano* theology in general and in particular.

To take care is to be present and intentional in a loving, healthy relationship. To take care is to co-generate love, to be both creator and created of a material relationship of respect and dignity. No relationship can survive without constant creativity and solidarity. The relationship has to be materially and mutually nurtured and ultimately geared toward fulfilling the other. On the one hand, *Morenita* represents the possibility of a lack of agency (that is, patience) in the theories and methods of institutional theology without a contextual approach. An unintended consequence is that patience feeds the perception of institutional theology's irrelevance for ecclesial and other religious communities. *Morenita*, Enrique, and so many lay others just 'do not care' about theological quibbling. Yet without them theology ceases to exist. There is no theology without religion, and popular religion stands eminently within the latter.

[19] I owe the term "entangled worlds" to Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds., *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). Their understanding of 'world' is congruent with my understanding of 'vicinity' (from Gell): "multiple, interacting open systems of different viscosity morphing at different speeds." (3) I find theological thought in this book that is very close to mine, even if it delves deeper in areas not covered in this dissertation. Its agenda is also agreeable: "The volume moves in three constructively interfering waves. The first sets forth a variety of perspectives on the agency of matter…The second brings these perspectives to bear on a range of theologies, each of which animates materiality as a site of divine unfolding. And the third examines the ethical and political work that material theologies might do to unsettle the racist, colonial, and ecocidal legacies of their materiaphobic counterparts." (7). I hope this dissertation would be worthy of consideration by the theologians in it and that it fits into their materiaphilic theological effort.

Institutional theology *needs* popular religion and thought and all its complex, plural, gradating, and, yes, dare I say, sometimes less-sensical expressions. In addition, *cotidiano* theology (such as Latinx theology) also needs textured and more systematic elucidations. As in Scheper Hughes, in a sense Latinx theology *is* Latinx religion and as such *needs to care about* academic thought to contrast and compare its possibly incomplete conclusions.

On the other hand, *Morenita* challenges the relationship between doing theology *per se* and theological studies (what I would call *critical* theology). The materialities between these two have to remain viable and as unpolluted as possible by cheapened faith on one side and uninformed ideologies on the other. By the latter, I mean that both institutional and *cotidiano* theologies *need* honest and informed critique both from the inside (such as from other theological approaches and from ecclesial communities) and from the outside (such as from other disciplines and from other cultural spheres). To properly 'take care' of *Morenita* is not an easy task; it has involved decades of negotiation between familial subjectivities and societal boundaries. Simply stated, it is as if *Morenita* 'cares' for a critical engagement, thinking about consequences and implications. Similarly, theology must *take care*, as in properly manage, its own boundaries through informed critique.[20] To 'take care' implies that Latinx *cotidiano* theology cannot depend exclusively on popular religion in particular or Latinx culture in general.

[20] Of course, it behooves all theologians, and especially Latin American and Latinx liberation theologies, to remain aware of outsider colonizing tendencies. Yet, paraphrasing Eduardo Mendieta and adding some of my own language, decolonizing has to lead to an anti-idolatrous "ignorance"— the deployment of an autochthonous and local perspective that keeps theology ethically vibrant. "Latina/os must continuously negotiate their locus of enunciation from which knowledge may be claimed, produced, as it lifts the veil from the face of ignorance. But it is the social locus that coordinates an ethical standpoint, an ethical standpoint that turns toward a critique of the imperial knowledge maps that force us to be plagued by Cartesian epistemic anxiety." (Isasi-Díaz and Mendieta 2012, 263-264)

That provincialism makes an idol of Latinx theology or popular religion and cheapens or even closes off the enriching influence of other theologies.

To make sense of 'venerate,' on the other hand, is trickier. The etymological roots of venerate are love and beauty, yet also desire. Veneration can turn oppressive and therefore idolatrous very quickly. In personal relationships, to venerate could lead to abuse or co-dependency; to venerate could become the opposite of to liberate. In religious relationships, veneration could result in a surrender of religious self-identity, another problematic act for a liberating God. What I take Enrique's aunt to mean by her instruction to 'venerate' is not to objectivize in the sense of oppress but in the sense of devotedness, that is, to love *Morenita* unconditionally as Enrique loves himself. What can this teach us about theology? On the one hand, theology is not an end but a means. As God-talk, theology aims to know more about God and creation, not about knowledge itself. Enrique and his family ultimately do not love *Morenita* for herself, or even for themselves, but for the divine and because of what God does outside of Godself. Devotedness is a love rooted in the act of subjectivizing the other. Similarly, both academic and *cotidiano* theologies must aim to know more about God from their own contexts not for what is does for them but what it can do for others, including other disciplines. Critical theology cannot make an idol of itself. That was the challenge laid out decades ago by Gustavo Gutiérrez with *orthopraxis.*

On the other hand, to venerate means to desire, to want. It indicates an absence. In the *Morenita*-Enrique devotional space, that absence is filled by the presence of God. By the same token, theology's challenge is that this absence will never be completely filled, yet the pursuit of that fulfillment is of the essence of the discipline. Through mindful, well-researched, and

constructive discourse, theologians aim to fill that epistemic and hermeneutical void by uttering cogent statements about God that are always also incomplete and unfinished. These statements are also by necessity provincial and provisional, as no human discourse can completely 'circle the elephant,' that is, absolutely ascertain the Wholeness that is God.[21] But that impossibility does not preclude the possibility of 'realist' theology and its implications for 'real.' *Morenita* displays that agency and such should be the nature of our theology as well—to have 'real', excessive impact from an opaque and ineffable latency. Matter matters, theologically as well.

Nuestra Señora *Morenita*, our devoted, pray for us.

[21] I owe this metaphor to Thatamanil, John J. *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*. First edition. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.

List of References

Alonso, Antonio. 2021. *Commodified Communion: Consumer Culture, Eucharist, and the Practice of Everyday Life.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Aquino, María Pilar. 1999. "Theological Method in U.S. Latino/a Theology: Toward an Intercultural Theology for the Third Millennium." In *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, edited by Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz, 6-48. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Aristotle. 1941. *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited and with an introduction by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House.

Barad, Karen, ed. 2018. *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. First edition. New York: Fordham University Press.

Barth, Karl. 1996. "The Humanity of God," translated by John Newton Thomas. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

Bastero, Juan L. 2006. *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer: A Mariology Textbook*. Dublin, Ireland ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Boss, Sarah Jane. 2003. *Mary*. New York: Continuum.

Bray, Karen and Stephen D. Moore, eds. 2020. *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Brown, Bill, ed. 2004. *Things.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

———. 2015. *Other Things*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Brown, Delwin, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner. 2001. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. "Avoiding the tyranny of morphology; Or, why compare?" *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (May 2014): 341-368.

Castañeda-Liles, María del Socorro. 2018. *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chávez Álvarez, Ernesto. 2015. *Las Fiestas de Monserrate*. Matanzas, Cuba: Ediciones Matanzas.

Coleman, Simon. 2007. "Mary: Images and Objects." In *Mary: The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, 395-410. London; New York: Continuum.

Daston, Lorraine, ed. 2004. *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science*. New York : Cambridge, MA: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press.

De La Torre, Miguel. 2017. *Embracing Hopelessness*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

De La Torre, Miguel and Edwin Aponte. 2001. *Introducing Latino/a Theologies*. New York: Orbis Books.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press

Drexler-Dreis, Joseph. 2019. *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity,* First edition. New York: Fordham University Press.

Espín, Orlando O. 1997.*The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

———. 2014. *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Esposito, Roberto. 2015. *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gebara, Ivone, Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, and Phillip Berryman. 1989. *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press : Oxford University Press

Goizueta, Roberto S. 1995. *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

González-Andrieu, Cecilia. 2012. *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. 1988. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Hall, Linda B. and Teresa Eckmann. 2004. *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Hall, Stuart, David Morley, and Kuan-Hsing Chen. 1996. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London; New York: Routledge.

Harman, Graham. 2016. *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. Theory Redux series, edited by Laurent de Sutter. Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press.

———. 2011. *The Quadruple Object.* Winchester, UK : Washington, USA : Zero Books.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. "The Thing." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper & Row.

Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, eds. 2007. *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London; New York: Routledge.

Henry, Michel. 2008. *Material Phenomenology.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Hodder, Ian. 2012. *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hopkins, Dwight N. and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds. 1996. *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*. New York ; London: Routledge.

Isasi-Díaz, Ada María. "*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology", *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (August 2002), 5-17.

———. 2004. *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Johnson, Trevor. 2007. "Mary in Early Modern Europe." In *Mary: The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, 363-384. London; New York: Continuum.

Keane, Webb. "On the Materiality of Religion." *Material Religion* 4, no. 2 (July 2008): 230–31.

Keller, Catherine and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds. 2018. *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. First edition. New York: Fordham University Press.

Knappett, Carl. 2005. *Thinking through Material Culture: An interdisciplinary perspective.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

Kopytoff, Igor. 1988. “The cultural biography of things: commoditization in progress.” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai. 1st paperback ed. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 64-91.

Leith, John H. 1982. *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine, From the Bible to the Present*. 3rd edition. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

Luther, Martin and John Dillenberger. 1961. *Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings*, Anchor Books. New York: Random House.

Luther, Martin, et al. 1958. *Luther's Works* [American edition], Volume 40: Church and Ministry II, edited by Conrad Bergendoff. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Miller, Adam S. 2013. *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Miller, Daniel, ed. 2005. *Materiality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Morgan, David. 1998. *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press.

Morton, Jude. “Sacred Shadows: The Significance of Black Madonnas”, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 2, no. 2 (2013).

Nair, Stella. “Localized Sacredness, Difference, and *Yachacuscamcani* in the Colonial Andes”, *Art Bulletin* 89, no. 2 (June 2007), 211-238.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1975. *Christ and Culture*. 1st Harper paperback edition. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Orsi, Robert A. 1985. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Perry, Mary Elizabeth. 1990. “The Black Madonna of Montserrat.” In Frances Richardson Keller, *Views of Women's Lives in Western Tradition: Frontiers of the Past and the Future*. Lewiston NY: E. Mellen Press, 109-128.

Rodríguez, Jeanette. 1998. *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Quintero Rivera, Ángel G., ed. 2003. *Vírgenes, Magos y Escapularios: Imaginería, etnicidad y religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico*. Second Edition. San Juan: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad de Puerto Rico, Río Piedras : Centro de Investigaciones Académicas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón

Sabaté Botet, Alfred. “Aparición, tradición y devoción en las advocaciones de la Virgen de la Merced y de Montserrat,” *Estudios Marianos* 75 (2009), 225-254.

Scheer, Monique. “From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries,” *American Historical Review* (December 2002), 1412-1440.

Scheper Hughes, Jennifer. 2010. *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schneider, Laurel C. and Stephen G. Ray Jr. 2017. *Awake to the moment: An introduction to theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Shoemaker, Stephen J. 2007. “Marian Liturgies and Devotion in Early Christianity.” In *Mary: The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, 130-148. London; New York: Continuum.

Sobrino, Jon and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. 1996. *Systematic Theology: Perspectives From Liberation Theology : Readings From Mysterium Liberationis*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Visscher, Eva de. 2007. “Marian Devotion in the Latin West in the Later Middle Ages.” In *Mary: The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, 177-201. London; New York: Continuum.

Webster, Susan Verdi. 1998. *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wyman Jr., Jason A. 2017. *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.