

THEORIZING ORIGINS:  
AN ANALYSIS OF DESCRIPTIONS OF HYBRIDITY IN  
MARIAN DEVOTIONAL CULTURES

by

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long been interested in groups whose members describe themselves as devotees of Mary. Yet, in relaying the descriptions of such devotional communities, scholars too often merely repeat the history put forward by the devotees themselves. Scholars' repetition of the tale of devotional origins provided by their informants—examined here in three separate case studies, each deriving from different periods and geographic regions—problematically reifies our understanding of the past and a group's development, portraying it as an authentic account of that history. Instead, using recent scholarship on Marian devotional groups as the example, this thesis maintains that scholars should remain critical of the origins accounts provided by the groups they study and remain wary of recreating those narratives in their own descriptions of the groups.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to those who tilt at windmills; may their armor be well theorized and their knives be long.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To acknowledge those who have contributed to this thesis is a daunting task, nonetheless there are a few central people who I must mention. First, I am indefinitely indebted to Russell McCutcheon for his careful guidance, Steven Ramey for his thoughtful consideration of my ideas (no matter how abstract or peculiar), Merinda Simmons for her tenacity and Becky Read-Wahidi for her curiosity. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without their assistance and mentorship, along with collective patience and counsel of Vaia Touna, Mike Altman, Ted Trost, Steve Jacobs, Emily Crews and Richard Newton. I must also acknowledge the faculty and staff at the University of Alabama more broadly, for without their labor I would not have had the space or resources to complete this project. Specifically, Betty Dickey and the other staff at Manly Hall must be thanked. I would also like to acknowledge Julia Farnham, Jinnie Christensen and Caity Bell who have been my greatest companions in this journey, and all journeys. Without their friendship and suggestions I'm not sure who I might be and what I might write. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank those committed to service, research and teaching, including my mother who taught me the value of all three.

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## Introduction

Tucked into the rolling hills just north of modern-day Mexico City, Baroque iconography decorates Roman-basilica inspired architecture that has been constructed to honor the memory of a woman. While the woman has gone by many names in the centuries following her initial appearance, the Catholic Church and millions of contemporary Christians take her to be one of the Virgin Mary's many global apparitions. Commonly referred to as the Virgin of Guadalupe, her depiction as a woman with olive skin, hands clasped in prayer, and downcast glance surrounded by beams of white and blue light is perhaps the most globally renowned image of a Marian apparition, rivaled only by her European relatives.

In December of 1531, Guadalupe is said to have made her first appearance in the outskirts of the newly colonized Spanish viceroy that would later develop into the Mexican nation – an area we know today as Tepeyac or the Hill at Tepeyac. She is said to have consulted a local man who had recently undergone the rites that granted his conversion to Christianity from Aztec goddess-worship, who bore the baptismal name of Juan Diego and who would be visited by Guadalupe on at least three more occasions. According to Diego, the Virgin Mary had appeared as Guadalupe to speak on behalf of those occupants of 16<sup>th</sup> century colonial Latin America who descended from the – often violent and nonconsensual – blending of native populations and Spanish explorers. The resulting group of mixed indigenous-European individuals, which included Diego himself, came to be labeled as *mestizo* and represented one among the many complex social identities that emerged as a result of colonialism.

Specifically, Diego maintained, Guadalupe revealed her divine preference for those marginalized as a result of colonialism by requesting a devotional area for her *mestizo* followers. Using his *tilma* (a then common cactus-fiber cloak that had been miraculously imprinted with Guadalupe's now famous image), Diego was eventually able to convince Spanish clergy officials of her request. Thus, or so the story is frequently told at present, Guadalupan devotion began to spread throughout the Western hemisphere from its origins at Tepeyac and, in the centuries following the colonial era, providing *mestizo* devotees with an image around which to rally themselves. As a marker of their mixed heritage, the *mestizo* community would eventually take up her image in the name of Creole sentiments – marking distinct opposition to the European-born *peninsulares* (i.e., a Spanish-born person living in the so-called New World) who were then socially dominant in not only colonial Mexico but also the Americas at large. As an intercessor for those hybrid groups that emerged out of colonialism – first the *mestizo* and eventually the Creole – Guadalupe continues to be revered as an apparition of the Virgin Mary that is today seen as distinctly Mexican.

### An Origins Tale Reconsidered

So goes the traditional description of the Virgin of Guadalupe and her colonial origins – offered today by both scholars and devotees alike. This popular narrative, and the claim that Guadalupe originated as an apparition of Mary with maternal preference for *mestizo* groups, is standard in many contemporary scholarly descriptions of devotees and their associated devotional practices. In repeating an origins tale supported by Guadalupan-insiders that describes a history of hybridity, however, scholars too often do not engage critically with the narratives they describe – nor the terms and categories that they use to qualify such descriptions of a

devotional group's past. Following Bruce Lincoln's advice, in which scholars are strongly recommended not to allow the people whom they study to set the terms by which they will be understood,<sup>1</sup> this essay critiques this lack of reflexivity in scholarly treatments of informants' perspectives on Marian devotion as they have taken shape in three different national contexts: Mexico, India, and Russia. This will be done through the application of social theory to reveal far more dynamic historical aspects of what scholars sometimes represent as a simple hybrid identity that develops from distinct and uniform prior sources. Critically revisiting scholarship on these sites, and the academic discourses of hybridity and origins evident in each, demonstrates the scholarly investments embedded in work that may initially appear merely to be descriptive and thus disengaged.<sup>2</sup>

The notion of hybridity could be understood in a variety of ways and shown to be located in many pieces of modern scholarship, such as in postcolonial studies or throughout religious studies; for the purposes of this thesis the hybrid model—defined as a way of understanding modern identity as the syncretistic result of two prior primary sources that each mix, thereby producing a so-called blended secondary or Creole result—is critiqued as an oversight in the case of scholarship that can be shown merely to repeat a history of their subjects as cultural hybrids with distinct and even unique origins.<sup>3</sup> The idea of Hybridity and descriptions of blended origins

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lincoln. "Theses on Method." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, no. 8 (1996): 227 (see specifically Thesis 13).

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, this thesis will argue that all descriptions are value-driven and, thus, require describers to have a certain level of critical awareness regarding the values embedded in their scholarship. Descriptions that do not reflect on the role of the describer and their categories risk masquerading as being exempt from values, thereby authorizing their agenda as if it was removed or objective.

<sup>3</sup> The sources considered here, thus, by no means represent the entirety of scholarly approaches that make use of a hybrid model. Instead, this thesis is specifically critiquing work in which the theory of hybridity, which might support the scholar's repetition of their informant's descriptions, is absent or covert at best.

are not necessarily problematic yet, as will become clear through an analysis of each case study, they can become discursive tools for limiting our understanding of the dynamic social processes that inform the place as the describer who decides what histories are included and validated as influencing the resulting hybrid culture.<sup>4</sup>

We can see the emergence of this version of the hybrid approach to the study of identity and its increasing popularity, particularly for scholars of Guadalupe, as having been influenced by the work of the Vienna-born anthropologist Eric R. Wolf. Writing from the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was trained by those often considered to be the first generation of modern anthropologists and was a staunch culturalist<sup>5</sup> who wrote broadly on the power dynamics of social groups.<sup>6</sup> In his now often-cited article “The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol,” originally published in 1958 in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Wolf argues that Guadalupe functions as a symbol of identity by unifying “Mexican nationals” through their history of cultural hybridity.<sup>7</sup> “Occasionally, we encounter a symbol which seems to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society,”<sup>8</sup> he states, explaining how Mexican devotees view Guadalupe as the essential link between their “colonial past and independent present.”<sup>9</sup> “For such people,” he goes on to say of the original devotees, “there was for a long time no

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<sup>4</sup> This is not my own original point, as will become clear through my explanation of the theoretical foundations, although it warrants being argued here due to its under-examined use in the academic study of religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. My sources from the soon-to-be-discussed case studies are the evidence that this trend is extant and requires closer investigation by scholars of religion.

<sup>5</sup> Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy, *Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory*. (Peterborough, : Broadview Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>6</sup> Eric R. Wolf, “They Divide and Subdivide and Call It Anthropology.” *The New York Times*, November 30, 1980, Late City Final edition, sec. 4: 9.

<sup>7</sup> Eric R. Wolf. “The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, no. 279 (1958) 34-39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

proper place in the social order.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the European-indigenous culture of the *mestizos*, despite being marginalized in the immediate wake of the colonial era, appears to have been unified through collective devotion to Guadalupe wherein hybrid devotees were able to “find expression in a single master symbol.”<sup>11</sup> Through their communal reverence for Guadalupe, Mexican devotees as hybrids demonstrate that, at least according to Wolf, “[t]he land of the supernatural mother is finally possessed by her rightful heirs.”<sup>12</sup>

While this article is clearly somewhat dated, particular scholarship on Guadalupe has continued to frame the history of her devotees using a hybrid model similar to that of Wolf, as a way to describe the duality of European and indigenous influences in Mexican identity.<sup>13</sup> Since its publication in 1958, in fact, Wolf’s primary essay on the subject has been cited upwards of 500 times, among which are scholars not only in the study of religion,<sup>14</sup> but also a wide variety of interdisciplinary studies.<sup>15</sup> Especially during the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergent disciplines of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> But, as will be clarified in this thesis, this framing of devotees as hybrids is not unique to any one case study on Marian devotion nor to Wolf himself – it represents a broader trend in how scholars engage with their own descriptions, or fail to.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine M. Bell’s *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* and Peter van der Veer’s *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* are two examples from the last quarter century of scholarship in the study of religion where Wolf’s article is cited in order to support arguments about hybridity between of social groups. Specifically, both scholars describe the image of Guadalupe in a way that repeats her devotee’s descriptions of her as a distinct icon of Mexican identity and postcolonial cultural hybrid. For Bell, this argument is used in light of her discussion of the symbolic function of flags and, for van der Veer, the model supports his account of the history of nationalism and ritual behavior in contemporary India.

<sup>15</sup> This includes, but is not limited to, many works across disciplines, usually by scholars from the Americas or at least trained there following the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. While not explained here in great detail (because it is not evidence that directly supports the arguments in this thesis), these studies also extend across the humanities.

Chicanx studies,<sup>16</sup> queer theory,<sup>17</sup> and cultural criticism<sup>18</sup> produced a great deal of literature on Guadalupe using this hybrid model. Significantly influenced by Wolf's work (judging by the citations used to ground their studies), those scholars viewed the notion of hybridity (i.e., assumed modern identities result from a simple mixing of prior, distinct, and uniform sources, much as early Christianity is sometimes understood as a blend of Graeco-Roman, on the one hand, and Jewish cultures, on the other) as a means for shedding light on perspectives or complexities that they saw as marginalized or underrepresented in traditional narratives about Guadalupe and her devotees. By understanding Guadalupan devotion as a cultural hybrid, Wolf and like-minded scholars therefore appear to recover the influence of Native American groups that had previously been left out of Eurocentric accounts. Repeating devotional/insider's rhetoric of Guadalupe's devotees as a Marian devotional culture resulting from 16<sup>th</sup> century colonial origins, however, may be more problematic than it at first seems, given that it could be argued to essentialize more complex or ambiguous elements of their histories and either past or present

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<sup>16</sup> Rafael Pérez-Torres's *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins: Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture* provides a more critically oriented account of postcolonial Mexican identity, though it allows the notion of Guadalupe as a unifying image of hybridity to remain intact in a way that reflects similar assumptions made by Wolf about her as a master-symbol.

<sup>17</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza* takes a critical stance on the subject positioning done by describers, by way of her critique of male-dominant perspectives in a way that is similar to Pérez-Torres's work, although her discursive construction of Mexico and the United States enable a rather ahistorical approach to the notion of *mestiza* identity and its relation to actors in the present.

<sup>18</sup> Frederick P Bowser's "Destierro de Sombras: Luz En El Origen de La Imagen y Culto de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Del Tepeya" is one example of a study where Guadalupan devotion is described as having an authentic origin related to Tepeyac, offered by a scholar using a supposedly common history of the image of Guadalupe. This study, and those previously mentioned, are included as evidence of scholars who offer a hybrid identity-model of communities that describe themselves as devoted to Guadalupe, thereby undertheorizing their own role as the describer. Each of these studies certainly provides a great deal of insight into the history of how scholars engage with their own descriptions and theoretical orientations.

subject positions—such as, with reference to the earlier aside, differences, contests, or outright contradictions within those apparently uniform groups known as ‘Graeco-Roman,’ or ‘Jewish,’ are completely overlooked when the hybrid model is used to explain Christian origins. With regard to the example being considered in this thesis, the problem is the manner in which the hybrid model, used to understand late-16<sup>th</sup> century events onward, essentializes a much later, modern notion of Mexican national identity, by projecting it backward in time, as if it derived considerably earlier than most scholars of Mexican nationalism would date it.<sup>19</sup>

A current example from the Marian literature in study of religion where one can observe Wolf’s influence in this manner is Timothy Matovina’s most recent book, *Guadalupe and Her Faithful: Latino Catholics in San Antonio, from Colonial Origins to the Present*.<sup>20</sup> His description of devotional practices locates European-indigenous hybridity as having origins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where “the Guadalupe image, the account of the apparitions, and the historical context are means to explore the collision of Old and New World civilizations and the ongoing implications of this clash for Christianity in the Americas and beyond.”<sup>21</sup> Authorizing the Mexican nation, and its *mestizo* descended constituents, as Guadalupe’s “chosen sons and

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<sup>19</sup> Scholars tend to date modern Mexican identity as arising from events that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century depending on their interests in framing the social and political history of the area.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Matovina, *Guadalupe and Her Faithful: Latino Catholics in San Antonio, from Colonial Origins to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). In his earlier work, such as the volume of essays he co-edited with Gary Riebe-Estrella, titled *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, Matovina has similarly argued that contemporary devotees of Guadalupe orient themselves through an apparently standard and commonly shared worldview in which they view themselves and their devotional practices – as well as Guadalupe herself – as distinctly Mexican. See Matovina, Timothy, and Estrella-Riebe, Gary, eds. *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Matovina, 9.

daughters”<sup>22</sup> through his description of the history of colonialism that is unattended by a clear theory of Mexican identity and Guadalupe’s role in Mexican agent’s social orientation as hybrids, Matovina merely cites insider reports to support his strong claim that Guadalupe is “unquestionably the most revered sacred image among Mexicans and Mexican Americans.”<sup>23</sup> Matovina, as with scholars before him, therefore describes Mexican devotees as sharing a common foundational narrative that begins at Tepeyac, which standardizes community devotional practices as distinctly Guadalupan. This seeming description (but which might be better understood as an unsupported assertion) is repeated by other contemporary scholars – most notably Elaine Peña’s *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* and Stafford Poole’s *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, like Wolf, these scholars present a stabilized origin and uniform development from the colonial era to describe Guadalupan devotees as distinctly Mexican. In so doing, they join a scholarly tradition that favors what might be represented as a rather uncritical repetition of a specific religious insider’s traditional (perhaps even nationalist) origins narrative, and thus as an under-theorizing of that narrative whose effect is to authorize the interests of their informants.

Though members of this devotional group may themselves certainly chronicle their foundational tales in this manner, scholars should be wary of reproducing these narratives uncritically because the beginning of a narrative is decided on through the teller’s situated interests—for if there are any number of ways to answer the misleadingly simple question, “How

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Peña, *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011) and Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe : The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531-1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995).

was your day?” how much more complex might it be to arrive at a definitive, settled account of a social group’s origins and development?<sup>25</sup> Thus, devotional origins can be argued to be contingent on the describer’s intention in selecting just this particular point *as* a beginning.<sup>26</sup> For example, consider how Edward Said offers a useful critique of origins narratives in *Beginnings: On Intention and Method*, where he argues that these tales often contain certain theoretical pitfalls that strategically conceal the interests of the one telling them: “To ascertain what constitutes a beginning is very much to intend a particular course.”<sup>27</sup> He goes on to explain how origins and beginnings – as well as the rhetoric we use to describe them – are “neither fully explained by analyses of its historical-political circumstances nor confinable to a prior time called ‘the beginning’.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, despite how some scholarship on Guadalupe provides an apparently seamless account of when and how this form of devotion began, their accounts stabilize the origins narratives of devotees themselves, thereby authorizing a particular start and history of her devotional community (along with the interests that drive them), one that is said to result in their alleged hybrid identity today. In uncritically repeating or paraphrasing and thereby merely authorizing the traditional narrative, this approach risks overlooking or outright ignoring a multiplicity of points in colonial history as well as the interest-laden rhetoric used to describe

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<sup>25</sup> Once again, to be clear, this thesis argues that all interests are situated and, thus, worth critically revisiting.

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Guadalupan devotion, innumerable points of fusion between prior cultures throughout postcolonial history could be viewed as the beginning or origin of her devotional base, something Cornelius Conover makes clear in “Reassessing the Rise of Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe, 1650s–1780s.” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, no. 2 (2011): 251–79. Yet, when scholars do not explain why they chose to describe the history of the devotional culture as such, the utility of their description and their intentions in describing are difficult to discern and judge as more or less methodological.

<sup>27</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

them.<sup>29</sup> Thus, scholars' seemingly straightforward descriptions of the origins (such as in the case of Guadalupe and her devotional base) can be understood as somewhat problematic inasmuch as they may be the result of the scholar's interests and sympathies with the peoples being studied rather than an historical account documented through a clear theoretical trajectory that self-reflexively takes the role and possible effects of such interests into account.

When applied to previously mentioned scholarship on Guadalupe, Said's critique invites greater critical awareness in how we tell a tale of not only Juan Diego, but Mexican and other national beginnings more generally. Specifically, Said's work can be used to challenge descriptions of Guadalupan devotion as *distinctly* Mexican, where the scholar seems to assume that the origins of devotion – as well as Mexican national identity itself – are stable, uniform, and obvious. In fact, if contemporary scholars of religion qualify 'Mexican' as a syncretistic blend that develops into a cultural hybrid only after initial contact between pre-colonial cultures, certain components of the traditional Guadalupe narrative could be considered non-Mexican. For example, it has been suggested that Guadalupe's now common image on Juan Diego's *tilma* actually contains Catholic imagery that suggests it's now widely accepted image was commissioned by a late-16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish clergyman or other individual familiar with iconographic representations of the Virgin Mary from the Book of Revelation.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the etymology of 'Guadalupe' itself and archeological evidence indicates that the term comes from an Arabic word used to describe a feminine figure – some have suggested a Madonna-type

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<sup>29</sup> Or worse, as will be addressed using the work of Merinda Simmons and Vaia Touna, essentializing the heterogeneity of that multiplicity.

<sup>30</sup> This understanding of European artistic influence is supported by a variety of art historians and cultural critics, although the first comprehensive analysis that is relevant to this paper is the article "The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?" by Jeanette Favrot Peterson in *Art Journal* (1992): no 4, p. 39.

icon – once venerated by Moorish shepherders in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> It has even been proposed that Hernán Cortés, who was himself born in southern Spain, carried a wooden figurine of Guadalupe as he raided the Aztec empire and performed baptismal rites that permitted the conversion of the native populations.<sup>32</sup> Even the individual who petitioned for Guadalupe’s canonization as the patron saint of New Spain was neither Spanish nor indigenous to the Americas but, rather, was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian historian describing the miraculous survival of devotees during an outbreak of typhoid fever.<sup>33</sup> Thus, rather than being the unique Mexican hybrid produced by colonial contact (that the previously mentioned group of scholars describe her to be), some scholarship has recognized Guadalupan devotion as originating from a number of different national and even pre-national contexts that predate the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, all of which are almost exclusively European.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David Brading’s *Mexican Phoenix* provides a detailed historiographic account of Guadalupe in pre-15<sup>th</sup> century Europe, prior to being applied to a figure in the Americas in the late-16<sup>th</sup> century. Conover’s article similarly argues against the possibility of a Creole-minded or *mestizo* artist who conceived Guadalupe’s image. Among the scholars of Guadalupe mentioned in this part of the paper, he is among the more critically minded. Although, he does rely heavily on texts without a clear theoretical explanation of why we ought to authorize surviving materials as uninterested accounts that accurately document the past.

<sup>32</sup> Much like Conover’s approach, Serge Gruzinski provides a critical reconsideration of 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, disputing a homogenized view of Christian conversion efforts following the late 16<sup>th</sup> century by highlighting how Catholic agents in Latin America disagreed heavily about the performance of many ‘Christian’ practices, such as baptismal rites and idol worship, among native populations. Favrot Peterson reconsiders the history of Guadalupe, looking to pre-16<sup>th</sup> century sources, in another one of her works titled *Visualizing Guadalupe: from Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas*.

<sup>33</sup> This is another point drawn out in Conover’s article. If I were to invent a spectrum of critical engagement with the discursive elements of their description of historical origins, Conover and Gruzinski would be closer to my own sensibilities than the other studies included in this thesis. Through their careful consideration of Guadalupan devotion, I was able to envision many of the critiques made within this paper.

<sup>34</sup> Only after the Mexican church council was established and documented their failure to evangelize the local population (and, in their view, eradicate paganism) did an eerily Immaculate Conception-type painting style emerges that reflects familiarity with Book of Revelation. This

## Theoretical Foundations

The basis of this critique of the interested-nature of modern scholarship deserves to be restated, perhaps: a group's popular understanding of their own origins is not the same as a systematic reflection on a group's repetition of that tale; for even this small amount of above archival research suggests that the history of this devotional culture has been – and continues to be – contested by a number of social actors with particular and varied interests. In the edited volume *Strategic Acts in the Study of Identity: Towards a Dynamic Theory of People and Place*, K. Merinda Simmons critiques scholars' constructions of hybrid identities for this type of reliance on the uncritical repetition of traditional origin narratives. "After all, one cannot go back in time and get to the 'truth' of the matter," she notes, suggesting that "[a]ny descriptive history is a claim offered in the present and, as such, refers to current interests."<sup>35</sup> Thus, descriptions of hybridity too often rely upon the scholar's privileging of certain points of history (and thus certain speakers) over others and, as Said warned, this risks concealing the operational acts (an interests) that position one earlier point in time as *the* authoritative origin. In what she calls a "critically removed genealogy,"<sup>36</sup> Simmons explains how seeming descriptions of the origins of hybridity are often founded on taken-for-granted, thoroughly modern assumptions about hybrid categories – like the status of being *mestizo* in scholarship on the origins of Guadalupe – which scholars then use to authorize the "distinctive heterogeneity" of hybrid groups. "Thus, scholars who discuss creolization as a distinct and special occurrence, happening only in isolated cultures

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has been argued in an article by Ronda Kasl, "Milagros por la Similitud: Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Colonial Andes" (2015).

<sup>35</sup> K. Merinda Simmons. "Strategizing Subjectivity: Creolization and Intentionality in Studies of Caribbean Religions." in *Strategic Acts in the Study of Identity: Towards a Dynamic Theory of People and Place*, ed. Vaia Touna (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2019), 78.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

or spaces, must inevitably rely on an essentialist reading of the cultures into which they read it,”<sup>37</sup> she concludes, clarifying how scholars theorize the history of a hybrid by essentializing the sources of hybridity. Serge Gruzinski echoes this critique in his book *The Mestizo Mind : The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, asking the misleadingly simple question: “Through what alchemy do cultures mix?”<sup>38</sup> Like Simmons, Gruzinski contends that scholars using the notion of a stable *mestizo* identity that linearly/uniformly develops from a clear origin anachronistically mistake their modern position, in relation to understanding that category, for a ‘real’ account of history that tells the truth of what really happened. In reality, Gruzinski claims, the notion of an authentic recovery of the *mestizo* is always a false panacea that modern scholars use to make up for the complexities and inconsistencies involved in the writing of history and the continual creation of colonial and postcolonial identities.

Vaia Touna further illuminates the role of theory for scholars engaged with origins tales in the second chapter of the *Strategic Acts* volume in her chapter, where she suggests that “categories (and, through them, scholarly descriptions) actively constitute what we take to be ‘the past.’”<sup>39</sup> According to her, these modern categories of interpretation reflect interests, judgments and relationships that observers inevitably create with the groups they aim to describe, which informs the choices scholars make in recovering the group’s supposed past and authorizing their own scholarly present. Among other scholars of religion included in this volume, the contributions of Simmons and Touna provide a robust critique of scholars who – in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>38</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind : The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Vaia Touna, “Response to Steven Ramey: The Constitutive Discourse of Description.” in *Strategic Acts in the Study of Identity: Towards a Dynamic Theory of People and Place*, ed. Vaia Touna (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2019), 50.

their so-called descriptions – merely unproblematically repeat the foundational narratives provided by the people whom they study. Applying the critiques of such writers as Simmons, Touna, and Gruzinski to descriptions of devotees as hybrid products of prior, uniform sources helps to reveal how these descriptions instead construct a seemingly essential, necessary origin of that group – an origin which often, and problematically, repeats the group’s own common foundational narrative and interests in describing what is taken to be their past that leads to a specific sense of the present.

Without a clear theoretical understanding of the historical and current complexity of the group described as hybrid, scholars therefore risk reproducing certain sets of (generally undisclosed and therefore unexamined) assumptions. If we take Said, Simmons, and Touna seriously, scholarship on Guadalupe as a hybrid with discernable origins might be complicated in a number of ways, since description is (in their understanding) always value-driven and never unintentional, disinterested, or neutral. Thus, it is important to identify how scholars’ interests shape their descriptive rhetoric in order to draw greater attention to the theoretical (and, perhaps, social and even political) tendencies that enable such descriptions. Specifically, this thesis applies this critical turn by examining descriptions of Marian devotional cultures from various contexts around the world to demonstrate the problems that attend undertheorized descriptions of a particular group’s origins. This analysis of three case studies on Marian devotional cultures as hybrids from various historical contexts (i.e., Mexico, India and Russia) demonstrates the limits of the origins-emphatic approach. Consequently, I argue for greater attention to theoretical trajectories of descriptive work, as well as more nuanced rhetoric regarding group identity in future scholarship on Marian devotional cultures and the category of religion more broadly.

To return to the example of Guadalupe, Matovina describes 16<sup>th</sup> century colonial encounters in order to provide us with a traditional story of Guadalupan devotion as a Mexican practice: “Over the following century Mexico City archbishops, the viceroy and other public officials, and devotees from the general populace helped propagate the Guadalupe cult through their increasingly elaborate celebrations and facilities at Tepeyac.”<sup>40</sup> Note how this description is consistent with previously mentioned studies by way of how it supports a distinct duality between some seemingly homogenous Christian source (the “officials” / elite members of archdiocese) and a generalized local source (the “general populace” / non-elite laypeople), demonstrating a trend in which scholars of Guadalupan devotion support an origins tale by which Mexican devotees are understood as hybrids of pre-national but postcolonial influences. Studies of Guadalupe wherein scholars like Matovina theorize her devotional base as uniquely Mexican while chronicling Mexican identity through a syncretistic account of pre-colonial origins seem to suggest a lack of self-reflexivity regarding the category ‘Mexican.’ In other words, such scholarship stabilizes those modern identities by portraying them as originating from different, isolated but themselves uniform contexts that began to overlap only during the colonial era – resulting in the eventual emergence of *mestizo* groups and, according to their approach, the original distinctly Mexican devotees. However, this body of scholarship, and the assumptions of the scholars who define it, continues to problematically describe Guadalupan devotion without a clear method for identifying the origins of devotees or an explicit theory of how those origins facilitated a hybrid national identity.

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<sup>40</sup> Matovina, 5.

To better illustrate the interested nature of descriptive work in modern scholarship, consider the following three case studies, all of which derive from studies of modern Marian devotion, each of which takes place in very different national or regional settings.

### Case Study I: Mexico

The work of María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles provides a helpful example of such scholarship, providing a place where we can rethink the common notion of Guadalupean devotion as a religious practice that allows Mexicans – understood as cultural hybrids – to identify with a common origins tale, making her book *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America* a particularly useful place to make this critique.<sup>41</sup> Like much scholarship on Guadalupean devotion, Castañeda-Liles stabilizes the otherwise hybrid and consequently marginalized groups produced by the colonial era by representing them as having resulted from the mixing of two prior stable groups: the local goddess worshipping population and the imported European Christians. She explains: “Our Lady of Guadalupe came to be during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, a time when two worlds, two ways of knowing and relating to the sacred, collided and produced something new – *mestizaje*.”<sup>42</sup> Furthering her account of *mestizaje* or *mestizo* origins, Castañeda-Liles argues that devotees use the narrative of Guadalupe’s divine preference for Mexican-origin communities to confirm their identity as indigenous-European hybrids and authenticate their devotional practices as distinctly Guadalupean: “People find her a safe and mystical space in the midst of the uncertainty,

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<sup>41</sup> María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

oppression, and violence in their lives.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, she explains how her informants identify with the “brown Virgin,” describing how they “embodied the terror that the Nahua women must have felt during Mexico’s conquest.”<sup>44</sup>

Echoing Wolf’s model of Guadalupe as a national-symbol for Mexicans (and thereby demonstrating his more than fifty year old work is more timely than it may at first appear), Castañeda-Liles seems to argue that the moment of colonial contact between indigenous (Nahua) and European cultures is the origin of Mexican devotion (long before a modern nation of Mexico develops). Yet, as Simmons’s critique of “critically removed genealogies” reminds us, such an understanding stabilizes the history of hybridity between those prior groups themselves and problematically assumes that a homogenous Mexican nation state was extant in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Castañeda-Liles suggests that matrilineal communication is key in facilitating and maintaining the sense of a shared devotional history among her informants. Their communal identity is therefore a product of the personal family history as well as of Mexican national history more generally. She argues that this is supported by the devotees imagined consonance about the origins of Guadalupan devotion: “In their eyes *La Virgen* could have chosen to appear anywhere, but she chose Mexico. Not only did she appear during the colonial era of a conquered Mexico, she chose to appear to someone from the most ethnically, socially, and economically marginalized group.”<sup>45</sup> The problem of describing Guadalupe as representing a distinct Mexican identity and history of identification by devotees, as she does, lies in the lack of nuance in how scholars reveal their methods for identifying the elements of previous cultures that modern readers are led to associate with such categories. Descriptors that function as markers of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5.

hybridity – e.g., ‘Guadalupan,’ ‘Indian,’ and ‘Mexican,’ as well as ‘*mestiza*’ and ‘Creole’ – have no obvious relation to a hybrid identity produced specifically from 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin America. In such accounts of Marian devotional culture, specifically those focused on reverence for Guadalupe, such scholars demonstrate the need for a critical re-evaluation of their descriptions of these devotional groups. For instance, Castañeda-Liles’s repetition of the traditional narrative of Guadalupe is indicative of how scholars problematically prioritize the interests (via their tales) of their informants in their scholarly descriptions of them. Expanding the case studies considered in this critique is important for understanding how the problem of origin narratives is not unique to Guadalupe but is, instead, evidence of widespread inattention to theory and method in writing ethnography and history. While the representation of Guadalupe as a Mexican icon is a suitable environment for arguing that scholars come to their studies with assumptions that force them to reduce the nuance of their research, this is only one site where such an argument could be made.<sup>46</sup> Two more, hybrid examples from south Asia and Eastern Europe similarly demonstrate the shortcomings of a reliance upon intersecting discourses of cultural hybridity and national identity.

#### Case Study II: India

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the traditional scholarly narrative on Marian devotion in India differs in some ways from that of the Guadalupan origins tale, though the two cases are also similar in many ways due to how they are described as emerging from a colonial context. Much

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<sup>46</sup> That is not to say the description of origins is inevitably incorrect. Although, as is further played out in the remaining case studies, acts of description risk displacing the responsibility of the describer if we do not constantly work to confront the interests and scholarly intentions that inform our attention to this point in the history of a hybrid as *the* origin or a more authentic origin.

like scholars' descriptions of colonial Mexico, conversion efforts of 16<sup>th</sup> century Iberian travelers played a significant role in the history of Marian devotion in what is today understood as the Indian subcontinent. Having the effect of stabilizing those early conversion efforts, and the contours of the colonial era as a whole, contemporary Marian devotional culture in both areas has consistently been described as scholars using a hybrid model that limits the complexity of colonialism. So, despite being located by scholars as taking place on in their own distinct global Marian cultures, their descriptions of both groups bear stark similarity in terms of how devotional behavior and the identity of devotees is described as having developed from the fusion of a dominant, global Christianity, on the one hand, and traditions of local indigenous population on the other – giving us the modern notion of a Mexican or Indian devotee as a hybrid despite the fact that those nation-states did not emerge until after the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup>

Scholars of religion, incidentally also following the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have long been curious about the practices of those living in the Indian subcontinent and they continue to study the area from a religious studies perspective that draws on tools developed first in philology and ritual studies.<sup>48</sup> A more recent study is relevant here, however, for its direct interest in the Virgin Mary,

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<sup>47</sup> Just as various points in the emergence of the Mexican nation-state could be used to chronicle the development of something characterized as Mexican devotional culture, the history of the nation of India contains a multitude of points that could be recognized as central to its development. For the most part these points come in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and are deeply implicated in the history of colonialism, all depending on when a scholar chooses to locate the nation as a homogenized entity with clear national boundaries. (It is worth noting that contemporary Hindu nationalist might understand the nation to stretch back thousands of years, of course—providing yet another example of the interplay between origins narratives and modern politics.) In terms of work by scholars of religious studies, the work of van der Veer is again useful in understanding some of the complexity of these events.

<sup>48</sup> The fact that the academic study of religion and the notion of nation-states are seen as historical contemporaries might be worth investigating further and could perhaps explain why Marian devotional cultures are often described as related to the origin of certain nationalist identities.

or a variation of her, making Kristin Bloomer's *Possessed by the Virgin* a useful account of Marian devotion in the area.<sup>49</sup> Just as Guadalupe's devotees are described as uniquely Mexican (regardless their appearance well before the Mexican state was established), Bloomer views her informants as having uniquely Indian devotional practices, at one point suggesting, "Indian Christianity is almost as old as the historical Jesus himself"—again, extending Indian identity well prior to the Indian nation being established.<sup>50</sup> Because she does not provide a clear theory of how she understands and thereby stabilizes 'Indian' and 'Christian' identities, it is unclear what practices are qualified as uniquely Indian prior to the arrival of Christianity and how (or when) exactly she theorizes that hybridity as having begun. Despite this lack of clarity, however, Bloomer continues to describe some rather vague, original Marian devotees in India by claiming: "Some Indians, particularly non-dominant Indians, saw it as a way to negotiate oppressive circumstances."<sup>51</sup>

Those circumstances are, however, seemingly not 'as old as the historical Jesus,' as Bloomer describes the origins of contemporary devotee's marginality as being located in colonial encounters, because "[e]stablishing the importance of Mary in this (colonial) landscape was part of another Roman Catholic scheme to convert the heathens, to make Catholicism translatable into Indian terms."<sup>52</sup> One of those conversion schemes, according to Bloomer, can be seen in history of a mid-16<sup>th</sup> century figurine of Mary, then called Our Lady of Velankanni, imported into the region by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries for the purpose of outcompeting British colonial efforts in converting what both European groups then perceived to be a heathen local

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<sup>49</sup> Kristin C. Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin: Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

population.<sup>53</sup> Shortly after the arrival of the missionaries (and this figurine), as Bloomer recounts, apparitional claims first emerged from low-caste fishermen who eventually encouraged local communities to build a makeshift chapel to the Virgin: “The transnationally popular pilgrimage site of Velankanni, with origins dating back to at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is like Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, Guadalupe, and countless other shrines to Mary around the world famous for miracles.”<sup>54</sup>

Bloomer claims that the arrival of Franciscans further accelerated the construction of devotional sites, which by then had already garnered widespread popularity among the local population through their emergent identification with the Catholic image of Mary remade as Indian. Through this origin narrative, Bloomer seems to reveal the successful integration of local Indian elements into a distinctly European apparitional culture, which is the reason that “[t]o many Indians, Velankanni has also become a national symbol, and Mary is venerated as Mother India.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, it becomes unclear if Christianity arrived during Jesus’s lifetime (as Bloomer had earlier suggested), with the expansion of imperial empires in the wake of colonialism, or after the development of the modern Indian-nation state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all depending on how one defines it. Her theory of Marian devotion in India as a hybrid is difficult to discern because Bloomer relies on a loose – and somewhat ahistorical – use of the term ‘Indian’ throughout the study, without ever drawing clear boundaries for that category, let alone the compound Indian-Christian or Indian-Catholic.

To study the Marian devotional practices of what she views as distinctly Indian devotees, her study takes place in the southeast Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where informants that

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

consistently self-describe themselves as being “come on to” by Mary. Bloomer, who describes working on this project for over a dozen years, narrates these informants’ accounts of their possessions in detailed ethnographic commentary across eight chapters. Each of these women by virtue of their possession, or so Bloomer argues, can act as a “disruptive force” that provides them with a new capacity for recovering social capital previously denied to them because of their marginal position as a result of the colonial era but also due to various gender roles and other mechanisms of local social stratification. “Through Dhanam,” as Bloomer describes one of the women who claims to be possessed, “Mary was transformed from a Mary of colonizers to a Mary of formerly colonized subalterns – a Mary of suffering survivors.”<sup>56</sup> Dhanam and other marginalized devotees thus seem to view their devotion to Mary or Indian variations of her as “transforming a society, sending home oppressed, ailing, voiceless people – most often women, the lowest of the low – with a new experience of victory over malevolent forces achieved through a feminine deity.”<sup>57</sup>

Bloomer’s account of Marian devotion provides a prime example of how scholarly depictions of such practices can be strategically bound up with a series of other interests. In this case, those interests are in stabilizing the origins of Marian devotion in India, by narrating the social position of her informants – as women, as Dalit, as single mother, as tenant farmer, etc. – by means of an account of how the hybrid identity of Indian Christians can provide a potential opportunity for renegotiation of those prior social positions. Yet, much like the problematic assertions in literature on Guadalupe as a national symbol and Mexican devotional practices as demonstrating postcolonial hybridity, this description of Marian devotional culture is worth

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

critically reconsidering for how it stabilizes the notion of the Indian nation's history through a problematic and inconsistent account of its past.

For instance, the stabilization of the term 'Indian' without a clear theory of Indian identity fits Bloomer's study into a large number of works in the growing genre of current approaches to Marian devotional cultures as hybrids: studies that examine marginalized social actors in terms of the recovery of agency. Specifically recalling Said's and Touna's critiques of under-theorized descriptions and authenticity claims about origins, it seems that the decision made on the part of scholars to identify their subject(s) as a hybrid that develops from a specific and uniform point of origin is far more analytically interesting than the purported hybrid identity and its supposed historical beginnings. Keeping in mind how scholars describing Marian devotion in both Mexico and India have relied upon the apparent hybridity between local practices and global European dominance in the colonial era, I will complicate this trend with a final example that comes from the region in Eastern Europe that we today understand as Russia.

### Case Study III: Russia

Scholarship describing the history of Marian devotional cultures in Eastern Europe, unlike Latin America and India, does not necessarily locate social movements in terms of the development of colonialism – although it does document the expansion of various empires that affected the region. Instead, the history of multiple veins of Christian Orthodoxy and various artistic movements tend to be the most relevant points of historical origin upon which current scholarship draws to construct its understanding of modern devotees who identify with Mary in Russia. For the sake of brevity, this consideration of Marian devotion in that region will follow the development of the modern nation of Russia through its Soviet and then post-Soviet

movements. Specifically, the recently published collection of essays in Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov's recent edited volume, *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary and Post-Soviet Russian Culture*, seems, for our purposes, an appropriate study of Marian devotional cultures in the region.<sup>58</sup> "Throughout Russia's long history, one woman stands out among all others," the editors announce, examining the processes by which the image of Mary has been distributed, altered, and taken up as a collective symbol. They claim that "[h]er life is legendary and her image is easily recognized. She was born neither Russian nor Orthodox, but many of the country's villages, towns, and cities – such as Kazan, Tikhvin, and Vladimir – historically have claimed her as their own and she has been described as the 'heart' of the Russian Orthodox Church."<sup>59</sup> Each contributor explores the diffusive processes that mobilized some Russian representations of Mary while ostracizing others from popular devotional practice – an area of research the authors unanimously agree is largely absent from current studies.

Like descriptions of Marian devotional cultures in Mexico and India, these scholars support historically-situated vignettes of hybrid groups using a model of history that prioritizes the linear development of devotional identity from a distinct source and toward a related destination, in this case one that is uniquely Russian. Also like the previous examples, this account of Russia problematically stabilizes certain points of interest and essentializes the national identity of devotees during those points without a clear theory of why Russian devotional culture ought to be chronicled in such a fashion (i.e., why it is best understood as distinctively Russian). Additionally, it seems ironic and perhaps even negligent for these scholars

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<sup>58</sup> Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov, eds. *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary and Post-Soviet Russian Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

to suggest that “her image is easily recognized” because of how the volume draws on significant differences between icons of Mary, noting changes made to them so as to chronicle the development of modern Marian devotional culture in Russia – all of which seems to suggest that there are multiple images of Mary depending on historical context.

The identity of Marian devotees in Russia is, once again, understood as a distinct hybrid, according to scholars included in this volume, because of the culture that emerged from integration of local Russian traditions that are frequently considered part of Eastern Orthodox practices and global trends in Christianity that is often described as representative of Western Orthodoxy. While the volume does not get into the complexities of those designations and the assumptions that enable us to view them as competing or separate, the introduction does reflect on Marian devotion as a hybrid of previously separate religious entities: “The result was a visual and narrative reorientation with regard to Mary that drew on European influences as much as earlier Byzantine ones, in many ways marking Russia’s increasingly complex cultural relationship with Europe.”<sup>60</sup> Repeating this notion that Russian groups became devotees of Mary as a result of these cultural origins, these essays present groups’ identifications with a uniquely Russian Mary by describing how “[a]s much a symbol of national identity as Mexico’s Virgin of Guadalupe or Poland’s lady of Czestocuwa, Russia’s Mary facilitates a wide range of relationships among individuals and groups within Russian society.”<sup>61</sup>

For example, in his chapter, entitled “The Mother of God and the Lives of Orthodox Female Religious in Late Imperial Russia,” W. G. Wagner describes the hybrid identity of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

Marian devotees in Russia and the origins of their devotional behavior.<sup>62</sup> Though he does not provide any clear definition, Wagner theorizes the hybridity of Marian devotion as a result of Western Orthodoxy's influence over devotion to local icons. "Visually, wherever one turned one encountered the Mother of God,"<sup>63</sup> of Marian devotees at the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross in Nizhnii Novgorod the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, he says. Following the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, these devotees identified with Mary to "structure authority and shape relationships and identity not only within a monastic community, but also in relation to the world outside its walls."<sup>64</sup> The influence from outside the local devotees is, unsurprisingly, essentialized here as inherently a European and thus Western understanding of Mary, one that Wagner views as previously isolated from practices. The role of Western Orthodoxy, in his example, can be viewed in the devotional practices of members of the local Eastern Orthodoxy in which they devote themselves to Mary.

For the members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, this meant annual processions in which they publicly venerated the Oranki Mother of God icon which they borrowed from the neighboring Mother of God Monastery. Because, according to Wagner, Eastern Orthodoxy focuses more heavily on the individual's experience of the sacred (itself a problematic because essentialized notion, but one that will not detain us at this point), the community's practices demonstrates the unifying aspects of Marian devotion and he then contends that these new practices are a result of a hybridity between Eastern Orthodoxy and

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<sup>62</sup> W.G. Wagner, "The Mother of God and the Lives of Orthodox Female Religious in Late Imperial Russia" in *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary and Post-Soviet Russian Culture*, eds Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press 2018), 98-121.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Western Orthodoxy during the late imperial period in Russia. Wagner highlights how devotional practices enabled those devotees to reflect on the origins of their devotional practices in light of their hybrid identities: “The movement of the Oranki Mother of God icon to and through the city of Nizhnii Novgorod thus wove Orthodox believers of all social groups from the city and surrounding region, the convent community, and multiple sacred spaces together into a shared encounter with Mary and celebration of her active involvement both in their region’s past and in their lives in the present.”<sup>65</sup>

Yet, like the accounts of devotion in Mexico and India, Wagner problematically assumes that there is an ahistorical, essential ‘Russia’ that remains intact from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, through the Soviet era, and into the contemporary state of the modern post-Soviet nation. In a comparable chapter, Wendy Salmond argues that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a distinct mixing was observable between Madonna-like interpretations of Mary and iconographic depictions of her as sympathetic to certain political sensibilities (such as those of Lenin and his followers).

According to Salmond, their identification with Mary demonstrates how artists – like the women at the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross – used their devotion to secure their own group identity as the authentic beneficiaries of Mary’s divine preference. Much like Wagner, Salmond offers this observation by making generalized claims about the Western Mary sanctioned by the Catholic Church and the Eastern Mary supported in Russian Orthodoxy that enable us to read Marian devotion in Russia as a hybrid of the two.<sup>66</sup>

As this volume makes evident, adaptations of Mary found across what we commonly understand as Russian history essentialize her role for groups that existed at various points within

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 172.

that complex history. Just as the scholars included in previous case studies described the history of Marian devotional cultures based on their contingent, contemporary interests in relating those devotional practices to the history of the nation-state, *Framing Mary* makes anachronistic assumptions about the choices made by groups who appear to have been the original Russian devotees of Mary. Though not detailed here for the sake of brevity, icons and the structures that afford them legitimacy likely cannot be reduced to their utility for any one particular group because another group with different and even competing interests may just as plausibly use the very same icon but for different ends. Without a clear explanation for why one ought to theorize Russian culture as a closed and observable unit that persists over time and without a clear rationale for identifying religion within it, it is difficult to judge how well the book reflects the history of something called ‘Russian religious culture’ or ‘Marian devotional culture in Russia.’

### A Look Ahead

In all three of the above studies of Marian devotional cultures, there remains a tendency to essentialize the process by which the scholar has identified the hybrid identity of a given devotee, a shortcoming that assumes development from a stable, uniform origins point. By concealing or at least remaining indifferent or at least unclear as to the ways in which they define and theorize the social effects of devotion and its relation to historical development, whether it be in the colonial era in Mexico or during the Bolshevik revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian empire, these descriptions of devotees may be more prescriptive than they first appear, in that they may very well tell us more about the scholar’s research interests and modern affinities than about some quintessential hybrid identity in the distant past. The historic events that scholars themselves have deemed central to that agent’s identity and subsequent trajectory

are better understood as a discursive formation for representing history that conceals the complexity of other histories through the scholar's own selective rhetoric. Without an account of their method(s) for delineating *this* identity from *that* one, this origin and version of the nation from that one, scholars risk confusing the contingencies of their research strategies for self-evident (and historically distant) facts. Thus, the familiar narrative of a geographically or historically distant agent marginalized by structures that they oppose in an effort to recover their agency — understood as an intentional act that operates from a specific identity — becomes problematic in that both the sense of agency and the outlines of the structure in question can be an un-reflexive product of the scholar with no necessary bearing on the possible identity of that agent nor the various social groups to which they may have belonged. Even if we are generous readers who assume that these scholars are using a strategically essentialist approach, their logic for identifying what events in the past were prioritized in their claims about agents in the present should not go without critical commentary. For, as Simmons maintained, we cannot take the hybrid rhetoric of scholars as evidence of hybrid identity in the past because the notion of a “distinctive heterogeneity” is contingent on the use of heterogeneous categories by describers with interests in the present.

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