Exploring Sacred Objects And Their Meanings In Catholic Mexicano Households: Domestic Religious Practices In San Antonio

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EXPLORING SACRED OBJECTS AND THEIR MEANINGS IN CATHOLIC MEXICANO HOUSEHOLDS: DOMESTIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN SAN ANTONIO

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my Polish grandmothers Stella & Catherine

who instilled in me a love for sacred objects, and to my mother Florence who carried on our

Polish traditions.
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PREFACE

My interest in material culture, especially religious material culture, stems from studies I conducted on African religious practices in Bénin, West Africa and on my research on Santería in Cuba. During fieldwork in those locations, I was intrigued by both the similarity and the differences in religious practices of various groups and in the meanings and use of a wide range of objects in ritual practices. The objects and rituals I witnessed as part of these studies reminded me of my Catholic upbringing and the objects we used in devotions when I was young. I was raised a devout Catholic in a Polish Catholic parish and received 12 years of Catholic education. I spent my childhood immersed in performative ritual expressions—the making of altars, processions, singing, praying the rosary and devotions to Mary—all part of my religious, cultural, and ethnic heritage that shaped who I am as a person today. My grandparents, all of whom came from Poland, had religious objects in the home. One grandmother had a small altar in a bedroom—a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary and a candle. She also had crosses made of palms at each doorway, a painting of the Last Supper, and a really wonderful “Boze Blogoslaw Nasz Dom” (God Bless Our Home) plaque that had a mirrored backing and multi-colored foil background with gold lettering. My other grandmother confined herself to planters shaped like a bust of the Virgin Mary that she spread strategically around the house—she was an avid gardener. In our home we continued these practices usually with small altars dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

I became interested in Mexicano home altars after I visited my brother in San Antonio during the Día de los Muertos celebrations. I was enthralled by the idea of re-membering a deceased loved one through objects that had special meanings for them. This initial contact with the Mexicano traditions led me to investigate every day home altars for which Mexican Catholics
are noted. From my upbringing, I understood the religious significance and use of religious objects and, since I consider myself “ethnically” Polish, I also understand identifying oneself through the continuance of traditions such as language, religion, and food. It was not until I was introduced to material culture studies that I began to understand the powerful effects these “religious or sacred” objects had on a person’s sense of self and identity. Taking a little poetic license with the cliché “you are what you eat” I now think in terms of “you are what you use.” The things we choose to use in our daily life “actively” influences who we are as people. In this work, I explore the use of objects, particularly those on Mexicano Catholic home altars, in the negotiation of self and a particular identity as Mexicanos. I think the findings of this research can extend the discussion of both identity formation and material culture studies by demonstrating how one group of people use objects in their daily lives to negotiate their identity and how the objects themselves act on and with the person to reach this end.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the core of recent research on material culture is the premise that peoples’ everyday interactions with the objects in their world are important in establishing personal, social, and cultural identity. As people negotiate the material world around them, they are constantly interacting with objects. People touch, look at, and consume, as well as read and hear about a myriad of objects in their daily lives. These objects both support human needs and mediate relationships with other persons. People attach significance to specific objects that surround them in daily life that then play an active role in the development and maintenance of a sense of self and identity. Following this line of thinking, this dissertation explores a specific set of objects—Mexicano Catholic home altars—to determine the role the creation of these altars, and the individual objects on the altars, play in the negotiation of a sense of self and an identity as a Mexicano within the social structure of San Antonio, Texas. The main question addressed in this research is: how do objects, culled from the cultural memory and personal experiences of the person, participate in the social construction of a particular sense of self and identity within the context of the often conflict-ridden social milieu of San Antonio?

In general, an altar, from the Latin for “high place,” is: 1) A place, especially a raised platform, where sacrifices or offerings are made to an ancestor or god; 2) A table or stand used for sacred purposes in a place of worship (Smith 1995:41). What I examine, while commonly

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1 The literature on material culture uses various terms including object, thing, matter, materials, artifacts, stuff, or both objects and things together. The definitions of these terms are not precise and generally overlap. I have chosen to use the term “object” in this study. Following Hicks (2010) the term “object” is generally used to refer to a physical piece of the world that can be handled or moved and which was either made or modified by humans.

2 I use the label “Mexicano” rather than other available labels because it is probably the most commonly used term by people of Mexican descent in San Antonio, although “Tejano” is often used when referring to people of Mexican descent born in Texas. I have chosen to use the Spanish rather than English words to emphasize the mixed heritage and mixed existence of these people. I use “Hispanic” when referring to reports made by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Other “labels” and their meanings will be discussed later in the paper.
referred to as an altar, more precisely fits the standard definition of a shrine. A shrine is a sacred place commemorating a holy person or saint. It is marked off as a sanctuary to which persons come for prayer, devotion, or in expectation of supernatural intervention (Smith 1995:992). A shrine or home altar defined by folklorist Kay Turner is a private sacred space in the home that evokes an intimate relationship with the divine. Turner describes a home altar as a:

. . . highly condensed, symbolic model of connection [created] by bringing together sacred images and ritual objects, pictures, mementos, natural materials, and decorative effects which represent different realms of meaning and experience—heaven and earth, family and deities, nature and culture, Self and Other. . . a living instrument of communication, a channeling device for integration, reconciliation, and creative transformation. [Turner 1998:27 emphasis added]

Turner focuses on home altars as “instruments of communication” that link various aspects of persons’ lives with the Divine as well as family members living and dead. Turner uses a feminist perspective to examine how women claim space from public, institutional, and patriarchal practices for their own relationships with the Divine through their creation of home altars.

I use a practice theory approach to understand the choices Mexicano Catholics in San Antonio make in their daily lives out of a wide range of conflicting possibilities that exist within their social structure. Their choice of specific beliefs, practices, and objects they use to perform these actions transforms the world around them and contributes to the negotiation of a particular sense of self and identity. According to folklorist Aurelio Espinosa (2009), the conscious choice to create a home altar transcends institutional and national boundaries and allows individuals to contest and modify existing orthodoxies. Through the creation and use of home altars, devotees express an empowering collective memory and negotiate an identity based on their ethnic, cultural, and religious heritage that counters ideologies of assimilation. The goal of analyzing the creation and use of home altars and the objects selected for the altar is to understand how traditional Mexicano Catholic religious beliefs and ritual practices, carried in the cultural
memory of the people, and enacted through interaction with the objects on the home altar, actively contribute to the negotiation of a sense of self and in particular aids in negotiating a sense of *Mexicano* social identity. The key issue is the power of material culture to affect the person.

Material culture refers to the things humans make and use in their daily lives. Objects and their affects on persons has long been and continue to be subjects of study within the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, museum studies, philosophy, design history, folklore, and architecture as well as within the multidisciplinary field of material culture studies. Anthropologist Webb Keane summarizes much of this work in his introduction to the section “Subjects and Objects” in *The Handbook of Material Culture* where he writes,

The classic social theories usefully draw our attention to the ways in which material things, as objects of human actions and experiences, mediate the realization of human subjects. Material things index the human productive activity that went into them, they materialize social and cosmological structures that would otherwise elude direct experience, they foster the development of the person’s sense of separateness from a world that resists its desires and the self-motivated agency that acts on that resisting world, they serve as stable anchors and instigation for memory, feelings, and concepts. [Keane 2006:201-202]

The material environment is constructed by persons in a particular social context and, in turn, interactions with the objects play a role in the development and maintenance of social forms such as “institutions, rituals, practices, modes of interaction, activities, and beliefs” (Dant 1999:12-13). It is through the use of objects, and the objects affect on the person, that the person’s world and sense of self and identity are shaped.

**Field Site: San Antonio, Texas**

I chose San Antonio as my field site because of its more than 300-year history of *Mexicano* occupation and immigration that produced an overarching *mestizo* (mixed) character
for the *Mexicanos* in the area. According to Liberation theologian Roberto S. Goizueta, “Mexican Americans and, indeed, all U.S. Latinos and Latinas live a *mestizo* reality. Their lives unfold on the border between cultures, between races, between nations, between conflicting worldviews; they live in a borderland that defines their existence. They are forced to live in multiple worlds simultaneously” (Goizueta 2002:120). In addition, there is a strong tradition of the practice of a particular brand of Catholicism born out of the colonial interaction with the Spanish Catholic *conquistadores*. Studies have shown that religious beliefs and practices, which are prevalent in *Mexicano* homes in this area, are often fundamental to the definition of self. It is also important to this study that the city of San Antonio and the Catholic Church now make conscious efforts to preserve that heritage. Ecumenical theologian Thomas Bremer (2004), in *Blessed with Tourists: The Borderlands of Religion and Tourism in San Antonio*, details the processes of cultural preservation and cites the Alamo and the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park as among the main tourist attractions in San Antonio. While these sites preserve the history of San Antonio, the Missions also continue to serve the religious needs of the community. Research in San Antonio demonstrates how cultural memory is experienced in the landscape of the city and the home of individual *Mexicanos*. Using particular objects in their home altars, and the fact that they use home altars at all, plays a role in developing a sense of self and how use of these objects in the context of the home altar signals to the world at large that the individuals consider themselves *Mexicano* in an Anglo dominated society.

**Specific Aims**

This research is positioned at the intersection of three major areas of study: 1) social and personal identity formation within the context of the *Mexicano* communities within the United
States; 2) *Mexicano* Catholicism and ritual practices; and 3) the agency of objects and things in interactions with persons. This study of *Mexicano* home altars is within the purview of each of these areas. I follow the suggestion of archaeologist Mark Hall (2011), who in writing about the materiality of belief, stresses the importance of a holistic, contextual approach to ritual by examining the actions and objects within the social and historical contexts in which the ritual is performed. Therefore, I begin by placing the home altar within the context of Mexican Catholicism and the history of Spanish and Mexican development of San Antonio. The history of *Mexicanos* in San Antonio reveals issues of the changing status of Mexicans in the area that resulted in shifting identities. For most, the home altar is more than just a traditional Mexican Catholic ritual practice that reinforces values and the tenets of their religious belief system. It is also a material reflection of those values and embeds the personal experiences of the person that assembled it, narrating their story of transformation and reiterating a sense of belonging (Olalquiaga 2009:392, 398). Writing about migration and identity, Nikos Papastergiadis (1996, 2000) suggests that “as displacement, rupture and fragmentation become the dominant motifs for articulating the prevalent forms of experience in the modern world, it becomes vital to think again about how such experiences can be communicated” (Papastergiadis 2000:95). While the literature on racialization and marginalization of ethnic Mexicans in the United States is extensive, it is not the focus of this research. Rather, my concern is the process of negotiating a sense of self and identity within the extant social milieu—how individuals identify themselves with a particular ethnic group or why they use particular labels to identify themselves and what role religion plays in this process.

With this in mind, I next use three approaches to analyze the role of the *Mexicano* Catholic home altar as an object, as well as the various types of objects found on the altars, in the
negotiation of identity. It is important to first understand the reasons specific objects are selected out of a wide range of possible objects for use on the altar. A symbolic approach to these entities reveals the meaning of the objects to the individual in terms of their religious and cultural experiences. Conversely, taking a biographical approach focuses on the life history of the person “narrated” by the objects. Finally, a relational approach suggests how interactions between these objects and the people creating, using, and viewing the altars affects each in the context of negotiating identity. An examination of home altars and the objects on them, using these three approaches allows for multiple perspectives on the processes of negotiating self and identity within the social milieu of San Antonio.

**Orienting Concepts**

There are several concepts that are important to this work. Before discussing home altars in detail, it is useful to explain how I am using terms and theoretical frameworks. I begin by defining how I am using “self,” “identity” and “cultural memory” since these are often contested terms. I next provide a summary of a practice approach to social action and the role of “religion,” and “ritual” in a person’s life. In addition, a discussion of current thinking on material culture provides a guide to how objects are categorized and used by persons and how interactions with objects affect the person particularly religious objects.

**Self & Identity**

I use the term “self” to refer to “an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one’s past and future” (Ochs & Capps 1996:20). Following social theorist George Herbert Mead (1995), the development of the individual self is preeminently social. Persons understand themselves through interactions in the world around them—with people and
objects. Persons also rely on their cultural memories, family memories, and the remembering of individual experiences. According to anthropologist Brian Morris,

Selfhood is an organizing tendency which offers structure and continuity to experience; that it is a process by which we come to know ourselves and the world about us and thus involves being self-aware and reflective; that it involves having a body and a sense of personal identity; and finally, that it implies a set of recurrent behavior patterns that are intrinsically related to social life. [Morris 1994:12]

In this schema, a person’s self and identity are shaped by their actions and interactions, traditions, experiences (Ewing 1990; Geertz 1986; Goffman 2001), the objects they use in their daily lives (Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998; Tilley 2002a) and the narratives they tell about those objects (Ochs & Capps 1996:21; also Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981; Frank 1995; Hoskins 1998, 2007; Weedon 2004). According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990, 1992, 1997), there are two kinds of identity. The first is identity as “being” which is necessary and provides a sense of belonging and community. The second is identity as “becoming” which is a process of negotiating identity in new, especially postcolonial, conditions. Concepts of the self and identity are therefore dynamic—constantly shifting to account for new experiences and new contexts in which they are viewed (Hall and du Gay 1996; Rodríguez 2000).

I investigate the interactions in this process of “being and becoming” and the mutability of ideas of self and identity within the context of Mexicanos living in the Anglo-dominant power structure of San Antonio. In writing about Mexican identity, Suzanne Oboler (1992, 1995), explains that the construction of individual identity and ideas of the self are directly related to perceptions of “otherness.” Mexican people in Anglo-society are often identified by various labels and this identity interacts with their experiences, and challenges their already shifting sense of self.³ She writes that in the process of invention and re-invention, people create positive images of themselves in contrast to the negative and racist images that have been created for

³ See Chapter 2 for a discussion on labeling and otherness.
them by others. To identify oneself as *Mexicano*, or any other label, is actually a conscious choice acknowledging one’s culture history, memories, and socio-cultural background.

**Cultural Memory**

An important part of the process of negotiating self and identity are personal memories and how they affect current circumstances. Of equal importance are cultural memories. Liberation theologian Jeanette Rodríguez and cultural anthropologist Ted Fortier (2007), define cultural memory as the memories and things that are passed from generation to generation—incorporating experiences, modes of action, language, aspirations, images, ideas, values and belief systems—that influence present day actions and notions of the self. Research in cultural and collective memory has shown that language, religious practices, and the maintenance of social values are critical to retaining one’s ability to survive in the world and to retain one’s cultural identity. This line of thinking has led some Latino and Chicano studies scholars (for example, Aponte and De La Torre 2006, Goizueta 2004, Sandoval 2006, Song 2003, Weedon 2004) to propose that the retention of traditional aspects of culture, such as language and religious practices and the use of sacred objects, often serves as a survival strategy or way of maintaining personal and cultural identity within a conflict-ridden social milieu.

In *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity*, Rodríguez and Fortier discuss how cultural memory contributes to the “survival of a historically, politically, and socially marginalized group of people” by using religious practices as a form of resistance “to fight for their community and maintain a social construct to exist in the world” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:1). Cultural memory is therefore, “a process by which a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural
identity” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:1 emphasis added). Cultural mnemonics are triggers (material or immaterial) that represent, symbolize, and aid in the memory of our past experiences and beliefs. David Morgan (1998, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2012), in his studies of religious visual culture, contends that religious images and objects are universally used as an aid to remembering and transmitting the history of a people.

This view of the power of memory is similar to the classic works on collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992) and Paul Connerton (1989, 2006), wherein the memories of the group provide individuals with frameworks that allow them to make a place for themselves within the world in which they live. For Connerton, the collective memories of the group are “organized and legitimized” through social actions such as commemorative ceremonies, rituals, and bodily practices. These social actions are performative. They are embodied forms of rites performed by the participants (Connerton 1989:5). Persons, in enacting rituals or ceremonies, are containers for and carriers of their cultural memories. Connerton suggests that the revolution in communication in the last 150 years, including photography and cinematography, phonography, radio, television, video and the Internet, have created new sources of collective memory as well as new avenues for their disbursement (Connerton 2006:317).

Memory can also be contained in and transmitted through objects. Mihályi Czikszentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, writing about domestic objects and the self, contend that personal objects can represent “dimensions of similarity” between the owner and others (e.g., shared descent, religion, ethnic origins, and so on) (Czikszentmihaly & Rochberg-Halton 1981:38). The recognition and “integration” of the “dimensions of similarity” of the objects forms the emotional basis for relationships. The objects chosen for display on the home altar are culled from long-standing traditions of religious practice that derive their meanings by
association. The objects are interpreted in the context of past experiences and affiliations, and are used to negotiate the meaning of present day relationships.

**Practice Theory**

Social theorists do not have one comprehensive definition of what is referred to as “practice theory.” However, foundational to the practice approach are several twentieth century theorists, consisting of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1992); Michel Foucault (1979); Michel de Certeau (1984); and Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984). Several theorists have since tested and expanded the foundational work on practice theory including Sherry Ortner (1984, 1989, 2006); Jean Comaroff (1985); and Theodore Schatzki (1996) and (Schatzki, Knorr-Catina & von Savigny (2001). More recently, according to anthropologist John Postill (2010), the use of practice theory has expanded to a wide range of fields and topics including the study of material culture, domestic and leisure practices, social and political anthropology, strategy theory, and neuroscience. Recent scholarship using a practice theory approach has focused on the “embodied” way in which people actively engage with the world in small-scale societies—prehistoric or contemporary—or on neighborhoods, rural, or urban settings (e.g. Basso & Felds 1996; Ingold 2000; Thomas 1991; Tilley 1994). These works generally explore how people “create a sense of belonging while they move around places and spaces, naming them, and investing them with memories” and a feeling of home (Bender 2006:306). These works examine social interactions as well as persons’ interactions with the objects in their environments in negotiating their daily lives and their social identity.

Practice theorists assume there is a dialectic between social structure and human actions. The social structure shapes and constrains human action, but human actions also influence the social structure either perpetuating or transforming the status quo. A practice approach analyzes
the relationships between the established structure and how people in reality act within that structure and in turn affect the structure. Generally, and for my purposes here, a theory of practice is a theory of “the conversion, or translation, between internal dynamics and external forces” (Ortner 1989:200) that make up this dialectic. According to Ortner, practice theory recognizes that individuals have differing, often conflicting, motives, needs, and intentions and varying degrees of power and influence to affect and transform the world in which they live through the choices they make in their daily lives. Contrasts in power and influence may be associated with gender, age, ethnicity, class, or other social variables all of which affect a person’s ability to choose among a range of acceptable actions within a given social structure (Ortner 1989:12). A practice approach explains how people “react to, cope with, or actively appropriate external phenomena, on the basis of the social and cultural dynamics that both constrain and enable their responses” (Ortner 1989:200). A brief outline of the key points used in a practice approach, following Postill’s (2010) summary of the development of practice theory, demonstrates the usefulness of this approach to this research.

**Structure as Constraint**

Practice theory is largely associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) who regards practices, or the actions of individuals, as being based on *habitus*—the internalization of the social order or structure of society within the human body. For Bourdieu, habitus is

> a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. [Bourdieu 1990:53]

The term “habitus” actually comes from the earlier writings of Marcel Mauss (1985; see also 1992) however, both Mauss and Bourdieu suggest that habitus is a collective set of practices and
habits that an individual or collective group internalizes during early socialization experiences as a part of the culture of the group that include the way in which social agents carry their bodies in the world; their gait, gesture, postures. These learned patterns are the unspoken rules that “go without saying” and are not up for negotiation (Bourdieu 1990:66-67) that shape individual action in such a way that the structure is perpetuated. People's everyday actions reinforce and reproduce a set of expectations—and it is this set of other people's expectations that then make up the “social forces” and “social structures” that guide their lives (Bourdieu 1977:164).

Habitus is part of the structure of society, or doxa according to Bourdieu, that ultimately limits the choices of the social actors (persons). Another way of looking at Bourdieu's doxic habitus is Gramsci’s "hegemony." According to political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1979), Bourdieu views doxic habitus as affecting social life in a general way, while Gramsci is more concerned with how political groupings, usually in the form of classes, influence each other within the social structure. Hegemony refers to the ability of the dominant group to assert power over other classes through force, argument, or through cultural influence over time, to control the social structure. In some cases, conflicting “ideologies” may arise out of a particular social group’s awareness of domination. Ideology has been defined as an

articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] worldview of any social grouping. Borne in manifestos and everyday practices, self-conscious texts and spontaneous images, popular styles and political platforms, this worldview may be more or less internally systematic, more or less assertively coherent in its outward forms. [Comaroff 1985:23-24]

For Comaroff, ideology leaves room for negotiations of difference. Individuals and groups, being aware of contradictions and conflicts embedded in the social structure, are able to resist and potentially transform the structure by selecting from the array of practices that occur on an everyday level. The dialectic between structure and human action is therefore particular to a
specific places and times. The goal of practice theory is to understand where the structure comes from and how it is produced, reproduced, and transformed over time in a given social context (Ortner 1989:12).

**Transformative Human Action**

Social structure is not a stable unchanging, universal reality. While people act within a framework of “habitual dispositions” established by the social structure and conflicting ideologies, they also shape the social structure through their use of “strategic improvisations” or “the agent’s practice, [and] his or her capacity for invention and improvisation” (Bourdieu 1990:13). Personal strategies or improvisations are pursued in particular “social fields” which are constituted of clusters of patterned activities centered around basic social functions such as education, religion, law, or family (Swartz 1997:117-142). Exploring the premise of invention and improvisation, British sociologist Anthony Giddens, theorizes a process of “structuration” in which “principles of order could both produce and be reproduced at the level of practice itself and not through some ‘ordering’ society impinging upon individual actors from above” (Giddens 1984:376). In this model, people are active agents with the ability to choose from amongst various options the social structure and the ideology the group offers, or to defy the social order.

Michel de Certeau describes two contrasting types of practice which he calls: “strategies and tactics.” Strategies are designed to maintain the system and are only available to persons with power. The dominant group has access to a “spatial or institutional location that allows them to objectify the rest of the social environment” (de Certeau 1984:xix). The powerful control the messages embedded in the social structure, the educational system, media, advertising, the legal system, etc., to establish a stratified, ordered social reality—Bourdieu’s *doxa*. The less powerful individuals and groups lack the power and resources to develop and utilize strategies
(such as marginalized peoples). They, however, are not merely passive objects of those in power but active agents in the process. Their mode of practice is tactical rather than strategic. Individuals and groups retain the ability, either consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, to choose various tactics to negotiate daily life and contest the social order, often through the utilization of traditions passed on through cultural memory (de Certeau 1984:xviii).

Theodore Schatzki (1996, 2001) introduced a different set of distinctions between types of practices—integrative and dispersed. Integrative practices are the “explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions” that make up the structure of social life (Schatzki 1996:99). By contrast, dispersed practices include “describing, explaining, questioning, reporting, examining and imagining” (Schatzki 1996:91). Dispersed practices are the processes of understanding the rules and tenets contained in the integrative practices (Schatzki 1996:91). This distinction in types of practices highlights the decision-making process of choosing particular actions in negotiating the social world. I contend that Mexicanos living in San Antonio utilize dispersed practices to select particular actions that include the creation of home altars that can be seen as one of de Certeau’s “tactics” in maneuvering within their particular social field.

**Ritualization: Ritual & Practice**

Catherine Bell (1992), in her religious studies work, focuses on the interplay of tradition, exigency, and self-expression that goes into the process of conducting rituals. Bell integrates practice theory with ritual theory to produce a method of analysis she refers to as ritual practice or “ritualization”—a tactic used for the construction of a “limited and limiting power” which involves consent, resistance, and appropriation that continuously re-signifies and disrupts the schematic ordering of reality that was produced through the strategic practices of the powerful (Bell 1992:8). Ritual behavior produces social control by defining, modeling, and
communicating social relationships . . . to promote legitimization and internalization of those relations and their values” (Bell 1992:89). Ritual not only enacts and reinforces religious dogma and beliefs but also serves to create them. Ritual is a culturally dynamic process by which people make and remake their world. In this view, ritualized ways of acting negotiate authority, self, and society. The process of ritualization recognizes a reciprocal relation between culture, the structure of society, and the individual. The structure (in this case the Catholic Church, society, etc.) shapes the way individuals experience and respond to external events, but individuals also play an active role in the way society functions and changes through their individual agency. Practice theory and ritual practice theory (ritualization) recognize both constraints on individuals and the flexibility and changeability of cultures and social systems.

To summarize, practice theory, as well as ritualization theory, are approaches to social theory that take the human body to be the nexus of various activities or practices performed by persons within the constraints of their particular social milieu to transform the world around them and negotiate a sense of self and identity. In my analysis, the negotiation self and identity in daily life practices is contingent not only on the actions or “tactics” of the person and the interactions with other persons in the social field, but also on the personal interactions with objects as people conduct their daily lives. Following Gell, the importance of objects in these interactions and relationships is determined not only by the agency of persons but also by the agency of objects. Objects have the power to influence their viewers or users, to make them act as if they are engaging with living persons. These object-as-person interactions play an active role in the negotiation of a personal sense of self and identity. The objects people use affect them intellectually (how they think about the world and themselves), emotionally (how they feel), and physically (how they react to the engagement with the object). Interactions with objects through
the ritual use of the home altar and the objects on the altar inspire reactions on the part of the person that establish continued connections with the objects and what they represent as well as establishing specific patterns of behavior that that guide further action, feeling, and beliefs that shape the person’s sense of self and identity. In collecting research data and the discussion of home altars created and used by the participants, I examine the influence particular objects chosen for the home altar have on persons within the social and religious setting of *Mexicanos* in San Antonio.

**Religion & Ritual in Everyday Life**

An important component of this research is the role of religious practices and rituals in providing both continuity and transformation in the daily lives of individuals. In order to understand the importance of the objects on the home altar and the role of rituals enacted at the site of the altar it is necessary to first define both “religion” and “ritual.” While the definition of religion has been much debated, I follow anthropologist Clifford Geertz who first argues that religion is a “cultural system” by which he means “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols . . . by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973:89). Geertz sees religion as something eminently social and part of the structure of society that is passed on from generation to generation in symbolic form. Geertz goes on to define religion as:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to
(2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by
(3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
(4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
(5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. [Geertz 1973:90]

Symbols, according to Geertz, are “tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms” such as an “object, act, event, quality, or relation” which

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4 For literature on religion in general see Durkheim (1995, 2001); Geertz (1973); Goody (1961); Grimes (1994); Rappaport (1999); and on ritual, Douglas (1966, 1969); van Gennep (1960); Turner (1967); Turner & Bruner (1986).
serve as a carrier for a concept. Symbols are “perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs” that together formulate “a general order of existence” that expresses their worldview (Geertz 1973:91). Geertz suggests that symbols should be examined not just for their meanings, but rather for what they can reveal about culture. The focus is on the way in which symbols shape the way people see, think, and feel about the world, the self, and the relations between them (Ortner 1984:129).

For Geertz, "the world as lived and the world as imagined” (Geertz 1973:112) are contained in a single set of symbolic forms that embody religious beliefs and are enacted through ritual. Belief is thoughts—dogma and myth which is represented in symbolic form; ritual is action—the enactment of those beliefs in material form. Rituals are the enactment, materialization or “models of” beliefs that also serve as “models for” believing (Geertz 1973:114). Individuals or groups strengthen their faith as they enact their beliefs. According to ritual theorist Ronald Grimes (1994), rituals are meaningless without beliefs and beliefs must be enacted through ritual in order to survive. Rituals then are a performative and repetitive enactment of the symbolic system that guides daily life and reinforces the belief system. Rituals generally exhibit formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, and sacred symbolism (Bell 1997:138-169). Ritual combines the “model of and the model for reality” (Geertz 1973:93) in such a way that it "acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence." During ritual, according to Geertz, the “moods and motivations” of believers coincide with their worldview in such a way that they powerfully reinforce each other (Geertz 1973:90-123). In other words, it is through the continued use of religious symbols and their enactment in rituals that religion influences every aspect of human belief and behavior.
Religion for Geertz also marks out a sphere in life that puts people in touch with what is “really real . . . beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which connect and complete them” and call for “encounter” and “commitment” (Geertz 1973:112). The shared system of symbols and their enactment in prescribed religious rituals fosters a sense of community of common believers. Anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner (1982) stress the formation of community in their definition of religion. For the Turners, religion is a social institution composed of both beliefs and rituals that serve to bind or to tie individuals to each other and to deities or supernatural beings. Ritual is the means by which the religious community achieves feelings of *communitas*—a community-wide sharing of experience—promoting a sense of equality, strong personal bonds, and interpersonal loyalties (see also Rappaport 1999; Turner & Turner 1982:201; Turner 1969, 1974; Turner 2011). Ritual practices are particularly important in religious belief systems, as the Turners have argued, because they link the natural, cosmological, and social levels of order through the manipulation of symbols.

The shared beliefs and experiences of believers identifies them as members of a particular religious community that would include, for the purposes of this research, all Catholics as a group but would also single out the practices of *Mexicano* Catholics as distinct from other Catholics. In applying the concept of “communitas” to the *Mexicano* Catholics in particular, theologian and Latino immigration studies scholar Ana María Díaz-Stevens wrote,

Through religion, groups keep in touch with the past, acknowledge the present, and even project the future. Religion and its traditions give believers a sense of purpose, of belonging, and of being one with each other—with previous generations and with those to come . . . Remembering, transforming, and passing on cultural and religious traditions in new social circumstances to subsequent generations are part of the adaptation process and also guarantee in great measure the preservation of the group’s identity. [Díaz-Stevens 2003:74]

Particularly important is that religion is a long-lasting cultural phenomenon that can be used to
retain valuable social information over long periods of time. Religious beliefs and practices become part of the cultural memory and identities of the believers.

More recently, scholars have taken a practice approach to the study of religion and ritual emphasizing the “creative or revolutionary” aspects of rituals within religion that “construct, create, or modify religious beliefs” (Fogelin 2007:58). In this approach, people have choices. They choose to remember, forget, or recreate particular elements of religion through their choice of rituals to enact (Connerton 1989). Certain rituals may remain the same over long periods of time, but their meaning for society may be re-interpreted through successive performances. The practice approach to ritual emphasizes the “experiential” aspects of ritual and the effects of ritual on the social relations between ritual participants. Ritual, from this perspective, is more a process than an event (Bell 1992). As part of this process rituals may change either in their enactment or meaning. For instance, religious studies scholar Jeanne Halgren Kilde claims that believers do not always fully understand the “theological or conceptual foundations” of their religion yet they continue to practice their beliefs through very personal devotions that make them feel part of the community of believers. These “home-based rituals” that include “prayer, saying grace at meals, reading the Bible or other devotional materials, collecting prayer cards or other objects, creating home shrines [altars], displaying religious art, or watching Christian television” (Halgren Kilde 2011:242). People not only reenact beliefs in ritual they transform the ritual using them to negotiate a sense of self and identity in various circumstances.

It is my contention that the continued practice of traditional Mexicano Catholic religious practices and rituals through the creation and use of home altars and the often “sacred” objects on the altars help to constitute a sense of identity as Mexicano. People make connections with the supernatural through religion and ritual, however, religious practices are also about community
and the “family” of the church, and as a result, a particular Mexicano Catholicism (Rodríguez 2004). Anthropologists have long studied the function of religion and ritual and its part in the social structure of society but anthropology has not as fully explored the domestic ritual enactment of religious beliefs using material culture as a point of entry for analysis. The objects used in rituals are an integral part of the experience of the ritual that provoke responses. This research examines how the objects “enter into ongoing chains of causes and consequences” (Keane 2008:124) in the lives of the participants.

**Material Culture**

Material culture has been studied from a number of perspectives by scholars in a wide range of fields. The study of objects that make up material culture generally involves the analysis from various perspectives of an endlessly diverse domain of things that exist either in the past or the present, within contemporary urban and industrial cultures throughout the world. Historically, studies of material culture focused on particular properties of objects or things: “things as material matter, as found or made, as static or mobile, rare or ubiquitous, local or exotic, new or old, ordinary or special, small or monumental, traditional of modern, simple or complex” (Tilley 2006a:4). These studies often include the technologies required to produce things, material that make up component parts, their origins, association and combinations, and how things are moved, exchanged, and consumed. Much of the work on material culture, both in the past and in the present, centers on exchange and consumption. Key works derived from the study of exchange and consumption include Marcel Mauss’ influential essay, *The Gift, Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1967) and early works by Arjun Appadurai (1986); Pierre Bourdieu 1984; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1978); and later works of Tim Dant (1999) and Daniel Miller (1994, 1998). A main concern in these works has been how
objects are actively used in social and individual self-creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others. In this approach, people appropriate objects from the realm of production and exchange (Kopytoff 1986) and turn them into potentially inalienable wealth (Weiner 1985, 1992) and creative cultural products vital to their own identity formation.

Objects have also been studied using a symbolic approach, for instance Nancy Munn’s 1986 study analyzing Walbiri iconography; or the “reading” of objects as texts (e.g. Hodder 1986; Tilley 1990, 1991). Other studies focused on the “social” aspect of objects—how social relations are “objectified” or “embodied” in objects (e.g. Dant 1999; Latour 1999). Contemporary studies of material culture focus on how material culture is integral to the subject formation and social world building. In particular Pierre Bourdieu (1977) emphasized the role of everyday things in socialization processes and Arjun Appadurai (1986) established that things have “social lives”, namely different trajectories which allow them to “move in and out of the commodity state (Appadurai 1986:13). British social anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998), describes the “agency” of material objects as they are embedded in systems of social relations where they act as persons. Objects stimulate emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators; therefore, objects are both constituted by and help to constitute persons. It is through this agentive turn with respect to the study of objects that I analyze the home altars of my participants and the individual objects on the altars to determine how interactions with objects affect the person.

Most important for this research are investigations into the relationships between objects and persons and how objects can at times act as persons having the ability to affect people’s lives. However, since the topic here is objects on home altars that have religious, symbolic, and
personal meanings, it is important to first examine how objects are categorized and how they derive their meanings and significance to specific persons.

Objects are generally classified as a particular category of thing and given significance by individuals or groups such as the Catholic *Mexicano* community that forms the focus of the present study. The types of objects that are selected for use on the home altars in this community include items such as sacred objects, relics, gifts, heirlooms, souvenirs, and mementoes. Many of these objects may also be categorized as biographical objects. These objects in various ways can be seen as acting as “persons” in their interactions with human persons.

**Categories of Objects**

Sacred objects are of key importance in this research. According to sociologist and philosopher Émile Durkheim (1995, 2001), there are things in every society that are marked as sacred and set apart from the profane or ordinary aspects of life. These “sacralized” objects are part of the “symbolic inventory” of a society. The literature on signs and symbols is vast and there is little agreement on terminology. However, following the founder of 20th century linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1983) structural approach, a symbol is first of all a sign—anything that arbitrarily stands for something other than itself. A sign is composed of two parts: the signifier (sound, image, or object that is produced) and a signified (concept that is represented in the sign). The meaning of the signifier is established through associations with other signifiers that exist within a web of signifiers that are related through contrasts, oppositions, and similarities within a total sign system in a particular culture. This linguistic approach focuses on the immaterial nature of the sign—referring particularly to letters of an alphabet that make up the sign and their combination into meaningful words (Saussure 1983:1). Later scholars include material signs in the discussion. The theories of semiotician Charles
Sanders Peirce (1998), takes a different approach to conceptualizing signs. He takes into account the non-arbitrariness of many signs in the form or symbols, indices, or icons while still acknowledging that they are part of a larger sign system. Pierce refers to a “symbol” as anything that can be used to represent or stand for something else that is not completely arbitrary but has some connection to the concept portrayed.

Anthropologists who are interested in material signifiers (objects) and the concepts they signify also tend to see the link between signifier and signified as not completely arbitrary but linked to the signified in various ways. Victor Turner defines a symbol as “a thing regarded by general consent as naturally [within a particular culture] typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous properties or by association in fact or thought” (Turner 1967:19). Mary Douglas (1996) also recognizes the non-arbitrariness of material symbols and links symbols to the “physical and social experience” of the person (Douglas 1996:78). The meanings of symbols are understood within a particular group through the context in which they are used, the association with other symbols within that particular cultural system of symbols, and the personal experiences of the perceiver. Symbols can therefore be seen as “connections of codes” that deal with various aspects of life and that govern behavior within a cultural group (Berger 2008:39-40).

According to anthropologist Edmund Leach, humans use “expressive actions” such as signals, signs, and symbols that operate in patterned sets in language (oral or written) to communicate with each other. However, language does not merely connect signifiers to signified(s) but connects directly to the materiality of the everyday and to ritual exchanges (Keane 2007:2-3, 9). Leach contends that humans are also capable of producing “material symbolizations” by converting “mentifacts” (products of the mind) into material form (Leach
1981:9-10). This concept is particularly relevant to religious rituals and sacred objects. Leach states that:

If we are to think clearly about the ideas which are represented by words such as ‘god’ and ‘spirit’ we have to externalize them. We do this in two ways (i) by telling stories (myths) in which the metaphysical ideas are represented by the activities of supernatural beings, magnified non-natural men and animals; (ii) by creating special material objects, buildings and spaces which serve as representations of the metaphysical ideas and their mental environment Clearly, (i) and (ii) are interdependent; each is a metaphor for the other. [Leach 1981:37 emphasis added]

Peirce (1998), refers to what Leach calls “special material objects” as a particular kind of symbol—icons—that convey a concept by means of a close reproduction or representation of the actual object or event. In this research, the term “icons” are objects or images that can be used to represent or stand for concepts of the sacred by convention or resemblance (see also Gottdiener 1995, Langer 1977).

The artist (or maker of the icon), according to Gell (1998), is compelled by the nature of the concept or prototype represented by the symbol to produce a “faithful” rendition of the prototype according to the accepted standards that then triggers “recognition” among the viewers. The viewers and worshippers must recognize that the object is first a religious object and more importantly, it must refer back to the symbolic meaning of a particular divine personage as a means to communicate with the divine. For example, a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, recognized by her physical appearance, represents one aspect of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. This particular image, however, also represents a particular connection of the Virgin Mary with the people of Mexico when she appeared before Juan Diego and asked that they pray to her as their personal connection with God. Gell claims that the making of objects, especially art (and I would add religious objects even though the mass-produced objects would not be considered art), utilizes a special kind of technology—the technology of enchantment—a
technology which fascinates the viewer or recipient because “it is the result of barely comprehensible virtuosity that exemplifies an ideal or magical efficacy that is hard to achieve in other domains” (Gell 1998:74 emphasis added). While most religious objects on the altars are not produced as “art” objects in the sense Gell is referring to, they do “exemplify” the ideal of the prototype and in doing so the “magical efficacy” of the prototype is extended to the object. It is the artist’s ability to reproduce the prototype, or evoke the ideas represented in the prototype, that enables the icon to stir emotions and devotion in the viewer.

Sacred objects have specific meanings within the religious belief system and rules regarding their possession and use. This category would encompass many of the objects found on the home altars of the participants: statues and images of the Virgin Mary, Christ, or the saints and objects used in devotions such as prayer books or cards, medals, scapulars, or rosaries. The selection of specific representations of the divinities and the objects used in devotions is guided by the traditions of the group. Relics constitute another category usually associated with sacred religious objects. Relics are vestiges of individuals, traditions, and cultures that also serve as reminders of the past and create a sense of belonging and identity. Relics can be categorized as “sacred commodities” that can be given as gifts, exchanged, or stolen (Geary 1986:169-191). What is important to this discussion is the concept that relics are the material manifestations of the past that act as “a locus and conduit of power” that are conceived as “a potentially wonderworking bridge between the mundane and the divine” that can “arouse awe and

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5 In the religious sense, “a relic is a material object that relates to a particular individual and/or to events and places with which that individual was associated. Typically, it is the body or fragment of the body of a deceased person, but it can also be connected to living people who have acquired fame, recognition, and a popular following. Alongside these corporeal relics (skulls, bones, blood, teeth, hair, fingernails, and assorted lumps of flesh) are non-corporeal items that were possessed by or came into direct contact with the individual in question. These may be articles of clothing (hats, girdles, capes, smocks, shoes, and sandals) or pieces of personal property (cups, spectacles, handkerchiefs, weapons, staves, and bells). They can be printed books, written texts, letters, and scraps of paper bearing an autograph signature or graphic inscription. Or they might be rocks or stones upon which the impression of a foot, hand or limb has been left as an enduring testimony of the presence of a departed saint, martyr, deity, or secular hero” (Walsham 2010:11). For a discussion of relics as objects see (Walsham 2010).
enthusiasm, to foster emotion and loyalty, and to galvanize people to take dynamic action to transform their everyday lives” (Walsham 2010:13-14). While relics may appear on home altars only one of my participants actually had any on display.

Objects received as “gifts” are another particularly important category of objects in the interactions that take place at the site of the home altar. In *The Gift* (1967), Marcel Mauss theorized that the giving of gifts evokes an obligation to give back a gift on the part of the receiver, which in turn will evoke a continued obligation on the part of the original giver—a never-ending chain of gifts and obligations—*do ut des*—*I give so that you will give*. In this exchange a part of the person giving the gift—the “*hau* or spirit” of the giver—remains attached to the gift and is now connected to the receiver of the gift. As Mauss implied, this exchange works because persons may be constituted by a number of elements, including bodies, objects, names, that may be physically detached from one another while still remaining part of the person. The transaction therefore serves to bind and maintain relationships between the giver and the receiver. Feminist anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), further develops the Maussian concept of “person” and “gift” and introduces the notion of the “partible person.” Strathern affirms that “objects are created not in contradistinction to persons but out of persons” (Strathern 1988:172). Things are conceptualized as “parts of persons” not just symbolizing persons. When given as gifts, objects (that retain part of the giver transferred to the receiver) “stand in for” parts of the person and serve to mediate the relationship between the two people (Strathern 1988:178). Therefore, people give a part of themselves when they give a gift creating a bound between them whereby the giver hopes to influence the receiver in some way. Following a similar trajectory, Gell (1998:96-154), discusses the concept of “distributed personhood” especially as related to “idols” and religious objects emphasizing the person-like
nature of idols as distributed parts of the supernatural being and the objects ability to act as social agents in influencing the person.

In general, the concept of objects given as gifts that are “part” of person of the giver is important in viewing objects as active participants in relationships with persons. While many of the objects on the home altars were given as gifts to the person creating the altar; some of the objects are gifts given to the divinities as offerings. These gifts to the divinities act in the same ways as those made to persons in that they form a bound between giver and receiver—between the person and the divinity. The relationship that is formed through the gift produces the expectation of a counter-gift on the part of the divinity that continues the cycle of giving and receiving between the two entities.

Gifts, as well as other categories of objects that appear on home altars, such as heirlooms, souvenirs or mementoes, and relics, can carry a further designation because of their close association with persons. In much of the anthropological literature objects given as gifts are separate from objects as mere commodities (e.g. Appaduri 1986:11) because of the relationship between giver and receiver. Objects as gifts are exchanged between people in a state of “reciprocal dependence" and are considered “inalienable” objects by the receiver and therefore must be kept. Objects exchanged between persons who are in a state of “reciprocal independence" on the other hand are commodities and considered “alienable” objects that can be further exchanged (Gregory 1980:640) or discarded. Although, anthropologist Gretchen Herrmann (1997) demonstrates how objects offered for sale in American garage sales can be categorized as “gifts” rather than “commodities” since they retain and transmit signs of the original owners. Kopytoff (1986) calls such goods "singularized"; each time they change hands, a new provenance is added to the "life histories" of the objects.
Social anthropologist Annette Weiner (1985, 1992, 1994) defined “inalienable” objects as those that are “imbued with intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away” (Weiner 1992:6). Ideally, these “inalienable” possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family or descent group that reproduces social relationships over long periods of time. Since objects received as gifts retain a part of the person giving the gift they are considered “inalienable” and are kept. Other objects such as heirlooms and relics that are associated with persons living or dead may also be considered “inalienable” possessions as would souvenirs or mementoes associated with the person’s life experiences.

Heirlooms are another form of “inalienable wealth.” Archaeologist Katina Lillios defines an heirloom as a portable object that is inherited by kin and kept in circulation for several generations. The value of the object is determined by the memories it holds rather than any specific quality of the object itself (Lillios 1999:403). An heirloom is usually very personal such as your grandmother’s statue of the Virgin Mary passed on for use on your altar. Heirlooms tend to link people to past places and times, defining the person in a historical sense (Baudrillard 2002:73-84). Souvenirs or mementoes are images, icons, or other objects, either brought back from a pilgrimage to a sacred site or received to mark a rite of passage also could be considered as “inalienable” wealth.

Used on the altar, “inalienable” objects link the person not only to the deity and other persons but also to the past experiences of the person. Weiner explains that, “such things are symbolically ‘dense,’ filled with cultural meanings and values, and this density accrues through association with its owners, ancestral histories, sacred connotations, etc.” (Weiner 1994:394). The objects act as vehicles “for bringing past time into the present, so that the histories of
ancestors, titles, or mythological events become an intimate part of a person’s present identity” (Weiner 1985:210; see also Küchler 1988). In this way, the objects embody the biographies of the person becoming “biographical objects” that act as triggers for memories of past personal, religious, and cultural experiences and identity (see Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1998, 2007; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1994; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1985, 1992, 1994). The role of “biographical objects” in marking and preserving a sense of past and collective memory has also been explored by others such as the works of Albano (2007), Connerton (1989), Halbwachs (1980, 1992), and Neisser (1994).

Anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1998, 2007) writes that in certain contexts, some objects become so closely associated with particular persons that they come to represent that person and their life experiences. These biographical objects serve to “anchor” the owner to a particular time and place (Hoskins 1998:8) which therefore also serves to anchor identity. People, therefore, often narrate their life stories by talking about their possessions. Hoskins adds that through “telling their lives, people not only tell information about themselves but also fashion their identities in a particular way, constructing a self for public viewing” (Hoskins 1998:1). The objects on the home altar that are used in a person’s everyday life become a part of who they are as individuals and provide a mirror of the self.

The process of classification of objects into various categories, according to Igor Kopytoff (1986), is dynamic. Since the assigned designations reflect the natural features of the object as well the cultural and personal expectation of the person in relationship to the object—or how the person uses the object—the classification of an object in a particular category can change over time. In addition, objects may be classified as one type of thing by one person and as something else by another. It is through the processes of classification, and at times
reclassification, that the meaning of the object is established (Appadurai 1986:5). Objects change categories through the actions of persons. In the process, objects can be said to have “biographies” of their own as they go through a series of transformations from commodities to various categories of “inalienable” objects and from person to person (Kopytoff 1986:64). These ideas of “biographical objects” and “biographies of objects” have arisen out of the agentive turn in social theory and theories of the “agency of objects” to affect persons.

**Person & Object Interactions**

The main argument of this dissertation is that objects, in interactions or relationship with persons, have the ability to affect a person’s sense of self and identity. Archaeologist Christopher Tilley describes the important of the relationship between objects and persons when he writes: “through making, using, exchanging, consuming, interacting and living with things, people make themselves in the process” (Tilley 2002b:61). This perspective suggests that ideas, values and social relations are “actively created” through human interaction with the things in their world—the things they make and the things they use in the practice of everyday life. Objects and things are the medium through which values, ideas, cultural memory, and social distinctions are constantly constructed, reproduced and legitimized or transformed. As Tilley suggests, “differing forms of sociality and different ways of identity construction are produced through the medium of living with and through a medium we call ‘material culture’” (Tilley 2002b:61). The meanings and significance of things for people are part of their everyday lives. Through the things we make and use we can understand ourselves and others, not because they are externalizations of ourselves or others, but because these things are the very medium through which we make and know ourselves (see also Dant 1999; Gosden 2005).

The processes of making the self through relationships with objects, according to Gell
(1992, 1998), involves the notion of agency—the culturally mediated capacity to affect the world. Agency encompasses the power of “intention, causation, result, and transformation” that can reside in both persons and objects (Gell 1998:6). Gell proposes an anthropological theory of art that involves the study of the social relations between objects and person in which objects mediate social agency. Gell posits that “objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents” in that they have the power to affect both the maker and the viewer (Gell 1998:7). Following this line of thinking, objects have the power to make persons act as if they are engaging with living persons rather than objects. Gell’s theory, which has been applied to other types of objects as well as art, defines objects in performative terms as systems of actions, intended to influence the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it (Gell 1998:7). The goal is to understand human behavior in the context of social relations that involve the material world. According to Gell,

> Anthropological theories are distinctive in that they are typically about social relationships; these, in turn, occupy a certain biographical space, over which culture is picked up, transformed, and passed on, through a series of life-stages. The study of relationships over the life course (the relationships through which culture is acquired and reproduced) and the life-projects which agents seek to realize through their relations with others, allows anthropologists to perform their allotted intellectual task. [Gell 1998:11 emphasis added]

Gell considers the “social relationships” that transmit culture to include interactions with both persons and things. I suggest that “life-projects” could refer to the processes of negotiating social identity particularly in regards to the creation of home altars following Mexicano Catholic traditions and practices. Gell explains how objects can act as persons in relationship with living persons by focusing on the network of social relations in which objects in general are embedded—the relationships between the maker of the object, the object itself, and the person in interaction with the object. Each of these entities can act as agents with the ability to affect
persons. I will discuss these relationships in detail in Chapter 9.

**Material Religion**

There has been recent interest amongst scholars in investigating “lived religion” that situates objects within ritual contexts as material forms of performance and as a part of human life and activity (Rowan 2011:4). There has been a wide range of studies conducted on ritual objects including: Patrick Geary (1986) on Christian relics; Alfred Gell (1992) on Trobriand Island canoe prow designs; and Susanne Küchler (1988) on Malangan objects to name of few important works. Archaeologists have also contributed to the discussion of meaning of ancient ritual and religion by demonstrating the ways in which “ritual and religion frequently served in the past to promote particular social orders and dominant ideologies” (Boivin 2009:268).

I follow David Morgan, writing on the visual culture of religion (1998, 2000, 2005), and the social life of feelings (2009, 2012), who explains the importance of religious material culture not just as an expression of beliefs but also a “cultural production, circulation, and reception of felt-knowledge” (Morgan 2009:141). Meanings do not adhere in images but are activated by them through interactions with persons and the interactions between persons mediated by images. Morgan focuses on the “social operations of feeling” elicited by images, objects in religious practices, and the formation of a sense of community:

To belong to a community is to participate, to take part, to perform a role, to find a place within the imagined whole, which I have called the social body. Belief, it is important to point out, is not simply assent to dogmatic principles or creedal propositions, but also the embodied or material practices that enact belonging to the group. The feeling that one belongs takes the shape of many experiences, unfolds over time, and is mediated in many forms. Moreover, belonging is nurtured by the aesthetic practices that are designed to generate and refine feeling on the crossed axes of human relationships and human-divine interaction. [Morgan 2009:141 emphasis added]

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6 Visual culture studies seeks to combine object and practice, regarding the image as part of an encompassing visual field, a dynamic set of relations between social actors (or viewers), institutions, objects, spaces, imaginaries, and the sacred, the last understood as the social construction issuing from (and in turn shaping) acts of seeing (Editorial 2009:355).
The use of objects in “material practices” or rituals both enacts and reinforces beliefs and contributes to the sense of community of like believers such as Mexicano Catholics in this research.

*Home Altars*

Altars in the home, as material forms of performance, serve as sacred sites of private devotion in which persons enact their beliefs on a daily basis (Turner 1990 diss., 1998, 2008). Archaeological evidence and historical sources suggest that altars in the home have been continuous from the early Neolithic period to the present and predate the buildings of public temples and shrines. In some places, home altars substitute for lack of local church or clergy (Mendoza and Torres 1994:69). Creation of private altars in the home is significant since the home, according to anthropologist Mary Douglas, is a stable physical space in which a person’s life is “structured functionally, economically, aesthetically and morally” focusing on the “routinizing of time and space” (Douglas 1991:289). Home gives daily life physical orientation and patterns communicative and ritualized practices. It also embodies a place for memory, cultural norms, and individual ideas of identity. The home becomes “individuated and privatized” (Rapport 1995) through the organization of space and the interactions with objects chosen for use in the home. No longer just a dwelling home can be conceived as “the untold story of a life being lived” (Berger 1984:64). From an archaeological perspective, Tilley suggests that a house “is a primary locus for the production and reproduction of social relations. . . . To enter a house is to enter a body, a mind, a sensibility, a specific mode of dwelling and being in the world” (Tilley 2002a:263). (see also Basso & Felds 1996; Chevalier 1998; Kent 1990). The home altar, as part of the domestic space, is therefore also significant in negotiating a particular sense of self and identity.
There is an almost endless array of configurations for home altars depending on the person’s cultural traditions, religious beliefs, aesthetic values, as well as space constraints. Home altars can consist of as little as one image or object or extend to an elaborate assemblage. Altars appear anywhere in the home; and very often in multiple locations. Following folklorist Kay Turner (1990 diss., 1998, 2008), the Mexicano Catholic home altars I refer to in this study are primarily assemblages of objects of personal devotion and familial connections. The altar serves as the nexus of relationships between the person and the divine and between persons here on earth. The religious objects usually include statues and images of favorite saints or various aspects of the Virgin Mary—ones that have been particularly efficacious in the past. The altar may also include representations of the Crucified Christ or other aspects of Christ, God, or the Holy Spirit. These objects embody the divine and are given a special place in the home; they are made part of the family; actions and prayers are directed to them and a response is expected from them as would be expected from any person. The person at the site of the altar “binds themselves to these supernaturals through patterns of obligation, care, and love, which characterize their binding relationships with other humans, especially children and extended family members” (Turner 1990 diss. 29). Objects used in devotions and interactions with the supernaturals at the site also appear on the altars including the Bible, prayer books and pamphlets, rosaries, medals and often candles and flowers. As do photographs of loved ones and remembrances of particularly important events that serve to link the divine, the person and their family.

People use a *bricolage* of things, beliefs, and symbols of relationships that through their display and interaction act to negotiate enduring ideas of the self (Lévi-Strauss 1966). As cultural constructions, altars become symbolically dense, as Weiner (1994) has argued—so dense with cultural meaning and value that the use of the altars and the objects on them is not easily
relinquished. The altar, and the individual objects on it, becomes a powerful force in the person’s life. Even though the kind of power religious objects attain through religious authority is formal and impersonal, the affective presence of images is closely tied to the emotion generated in the believer (see Gell 1992 on enchantment). Through contemplating the signs of God on the altar, the believer transcends from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the referent. Devotional pictures and sculptures bridge the gap between the human and divine because they evoke emotion in the viewer. From the emotion comes the desire to live a better life, pray more devotedly, or feel healing comfort (McDannell 1995:25) and to find support in the larger body of fellow believers. Following Durkheim, the objects become symbols that bring the community together through participation in the sacred act.

**Studies of Mexicano Home Altars**

Specific religious traditions and practices of Mexican Americans have received little attention in religious studies; in Latino, Hispanic, and Chicano studies; or by anthropologists or folklorists. The majority of scholarly work on Mexican American religious practices has been focused on the study of traditional *curanderismo* and *espiritualismo*, the folk healing systems that intertwines medical and religious practices to treat illness.7 These practices have recently garnered more attention from medical anthropologists and related fields of study. Other accounts are of Mexican American “folk” religious practices are descriptive focusing mainly on formal public performances such as works by MacGregor-Villareal (1980) and Waugh (1989) on *Las Posadas* (A Mexican Miracle Play) and works by Cole (2011) and Herrera-Sobek (2008) on *La Pastorela* (The Shephards’ Play) both traditional performed at Christmas.

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7See early works by Chavez (1984); Clark (1959); Kearney (1977, 1978); Limón (1984); Macklin (1974); Romano (1965); Trotter and Chavira (1997); Velimirovic (1978); and more recently Trotter (2001), for studies of Mexican folk healing practices.
There is little scholarly work devoted exclusively to Mexican American home altars. Various aspects of home altars are briefly mentioned by scholars in works in connection with religious objects in general (McDannell 1991, 1995), traditional religious celebrations (Badillo 2006; Castro 2001; Espinosa 2008; Espinosa 2009; Matovina & Rieble-Estella 2002; Menard 2000), and the concept of religion in the retention of cultural traditions in the lives of Mexican immigrants (Aponte and De La Torre 2006; Goizueta 2004, 2009; Matovina 1995; Olalquiaga 2009; Papastergiadis 1996, 2000; Sandoval 2006). However, references to home altars are generally made in passing commentary or embedded in the discussion of other religious phenomena. A few works study altars and shrines outside the home created by Mexican Americans such as yard and road shrines. For example, Michael Riley (1992) uses a postmodern perspective to analyze yard shrines in Southern Arizona; and James Griffith (2006) examines the relatively new practice of erecting *capillas* (road shrines) in Sonora in articles in the *Journal of the Southwest*. Altars created for specific occasions have drawn some attention. St Joseph Altars, constructed to honor the saint on his feast day (predominantly by Italians), has been a focus of attention (McCaffety 2003; Turner & Seriff 1987). The special *ofrendas* (altars) built for *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead in both Mexico and the United States have been the focus of more extensive study by scholars (Brandes 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Haley & Fukada 2004; Medina & Cadena 2002; Salvador 2003; Scolara 1995) and attention from the media, popular press, and the Internet.

There are a few scholars that devote special attention to the study of home altars as a Mexican tradition. For example, ethnic studies scholar Ramón Gutiérrez (1997) edited a volume with contributions by several persons interested in Mexican history and art including artist Dana Salvo, historian William Beezley, curator Salvatore Scalora, and artist, curator, and Latino art
historian Amalia Mesa-Bains. The text describes the tradition of home altars as practiced in modern day Mexico. Marie Romero Cash (1998) has written about Mexican home altars in New Mexico while Gabriella Ricciardi (2006) writes about the home altar tradition in Oregon. Espinosa (2009) particularly focuses on home altars and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Turner has conducted extensive research on Mexican home altars in the San Antonio area (see Turner & Jasper 1986; Turner 1990 diss., 1998, 2008) from a feminist perspective. There are also hundreds of books in the popular press and sources on the Internet that are either photographic celebrations of home altars (see for instance McMann 1998) or how-to books for creating your own altars.

These scholarly works primarily discuss the home altar as a religious tradition and focus on their role in forming and maintaining relationships. Turner describes the home altar as an “aesthetic of relationship,” explaining,

\[ \ldots \text{through the creation and use of her altar, an}\ altarista\ \text{objectifies and reinforces the primacy of relationship through a visual articulation of its qualities. Disparate things united in the visual field of the altar become a means for expressing the potency of relationship as a force for overcoming human disparities} \]. \[\text{[Turner 1990:235]}\]

The relationships Turner refers to exist between the altar maker and the divine and with other people, particularly kin. For most scholars the importance of the home altar tradition lies in its power to connect people through a traditional expression of faith. Generally, studies of home altars analyze the symbolic value of the objects used on the altars but there has been little discussion of how and why the particular objects are selected or used in rituals of daily life centered on the altars and how the interactions with the objects affects the person. Anthropologist Patricia Gargaetas (1995) does however specifically examine the conscious choices lesbian women make in creating altars as a negotiation of their sense of self and their place in the world in which they live.
Methodology

This research is an ethnographic study derived from anthropological fieldwork employing interview and participant-observation conducted in San Antonio, Texas in three stages: a pilot study focusing on *Día de los Muertos* celebrations in November 2008, and more extensive field research in the periods of July-December 2009 (Phase 1) and August-December 2010 (Phase 2). I conducted formal, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 31 participants, ten of which I highlight in the data analysis. I also conducted numerous informal interviews with people I met while observing in the community or participating in various events sponsored by local organizations and religious celebrations.

I employed methods used in the study of visual culture outlined by David Morgan (2005) in *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, to collect and analyze data. Morgan states that earlier studies of material culture often ignored religious objects and focused on style, meaning, and patronage of objects of art. He proposes that scholars instead focus on the “social function and effects” of objects and images on the people who use them to shape their lives. Morgan describes the study of visual culture as a concentration on “... the cultural work that images do in constructing and maintaining (as well as challenging, destroying, and replacing) a sense of order in a particular place and time” (Morgan 2005:29 emphasis added). He sees religious objects and images as part of a cultural system endowed with cultural

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8 Scholars of material religion, when speaking about specific pieces of material culture, tend to use the term “image” when referring to a two-dimensional object such as a painting and the term “object” when referring to a three-dimensional object such as a statue. In general discussions, however, either term is used to refer to both images and objects even though objects and images do not necessarily function in precisely the same ways. While people do respond to both through their senses, there are important aspects of objects that are handled and used for religious devotions that require greater attention to their materiality and their ability to interact with persons (Buggeln 2009:357). For instance, David Morgan (1998, 2000, 2005, 2009, 2012), generally use the term “image” when speaking of religious material culture since he primarily discusses two-dimensional images more commonly found in non-Catholic Christian devotional practices. However, he does include examples of three-dimensional objects (which he refers to as images) in his analysis of human/object interactions and relationships. In my discussion and
memories that reflect social identity. In order to understand the “cultural work that images do,” Morgan suggests that scholars “investigate not only the image itself but also its role in narrative, perceptions, scientific and intellectual classification, and all manner of ritual practices, such as ceremonies, gift-giving, commerce, memorialization, migration, and display—thereby understanding the image as part of the social construction of reality” (Morgan 2005:30). The question in this study is: how do religious objects participate in the social construction of a particular Mexicano reality?

Morgan’s model of analysis suggests several approaches to understanding how people build, maintain, or transform the worlds they live in through their use of objects (Morgan 2005:33-47) that complements the use of practice theory. The analysis demonstrates how a particular group of people use religious objects to negotiate a sense of Mexicano identity. I incorporated Morgan’s suggestions into the interview questions that form the basis of this research. The primary data to be interpreted in this research are home altars and the objects selected for use on the altars. First, I ask why particular objects are chosen for the home altar? What “types” of objects are on the altar? What is the symbolic meaning of the object within the Catholic Church and what is the personal meaning to the person creating the altar or viewing the altar? Second, how do people use and interact with various types of objects on the altars and how does that reflect a larger pattern of practice? What are the ritual and everyday practices that utilize the objects on the altar? Third, following Gell I focus on what objects “do” in relationships with persons and in relation to other objects on the altar. How do the interactions with the objects on the altar affect the person’s way of thinking, feeling, acting, and believing? How do the objects relate or “talk” to each other within their arrangement on the altar and what

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analysis I have chosen to use the term “objects” to refer to both since the objects in my research are predominantly three-dimensional and “object” is the more common term used in material culture studies in general.
impact do these object-to-object interactions have on the person?

The interviews with the participants and the detailed examination of the various objects chosen for use on the altar focus on not only the relationships that are formed and the interactions that take place between the individual person and the divine but also on those that are formed between the person and the “physical” objects. The objects in interaction with the person and with other objects trigger actions and reactions in the person that in turn reinforce the relationship between the two. It is my contention that the people in this study have chosen to create and use a set of objects assembled into a home altar not only as means to connect with their religious beliefs but also to maintain a connection to their *Mexicano* identity. The creating of a home altar is part of the person’s cultural memory and a Mexican Catholic tradition that stands in contrast to the practices of the Anglo-dominant ideology in San Antonio and the practices of the Catholic Church in the U.S. By creating a “traditional” home altar the person is identifying themselves as a *Mexicano* Catholic. The continued daily interaction with the objects on the altar establishes a pattern of practices that reinforce and maintain the person’s identity as *Mexicano*.

**Structure of Dissertation**

The chapters in the body of this dissertation build on each other. Chapters 2 and 3 first provide the context for the study. Next, Chapter 4 details the methodology and introduces the ten participants chosen for the study. Chapters 5 through 11 present and analyze the data collected during fieldwork. Using Sherry Ortner’s (1989) four components to a practice approach, Chapter 2 explores the social, cultural, and religious history of *Mexicanos* in the Southwest United States in general and in San Antonio in particular to determine the structural framework within which
people operate and the options that are available to them in negotiating a sense of self and a particular *Mexicano* identity. This chapter foregrounds the need for, and the processes of, negotiating a particular ethnic identity for *Mexicanos* in San Antonio. I begin with a history of the settlement of the United States Southwest and the city of San Antonio by the Spanish and *Mexicanos* and the problems inherent in transnational migration, and the concurrent problem of ethnic labeling. Next, I establish the religious context for *Mexicanos* and the importance of practicing their particular brand of Catholicism and how particular practices arose in opposition to mainstream Northern European Catholicism practiced in the United States. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of *Mexicano* cultural heritage by highlighting the importance of the narrative of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to an indigenous peasant in Mexico and the symbolism in the image of herself that she left for her people. The significance of her appearance in Mexico is explained as well as her role as a national Mexican symbol and as a source of great strength for her people. Most people of Mexican descent can retell her story from their cultural memories and explain the symbolism that appears in her image.

Chapter 4 outlines in detail the methods I used to conduct the ethnographic research in the field site in San Antonio and some of my experiences while collecting data, participating and observing various activities, and conducting the interviews. I also provide a brief introduction to each of the ten participants whose stories I chose to tell about their altars and what they mean to them. Analysis of the narratives suggested I divide the group of ten participants into three categories based on their Catholic and *Mexicano* backgrounds in order to understand the relationship between their altar use, their religious and *Mexicano* heritage, and their present identification with both. The three categories are: Practicing Catholics (4), Non-Practicing Catholics (4), and Non-*Mexicanos* (2). The Non-*Mexicanos* category contains two participants.
who did not fit the parameters of the research design but are included because of their interesting stories of home altar use and the seemingly contrasting, yet often parallel, use of traditionally *Mexicano* home altars. I have included them particularly because their use of home altars supports their particular identities.

The next chapters flow out of the categories established in Chapter 4. I analyze the specific findings of the research from three perspectives—symbolic, biographical, and relational. The goal is to demonstrate the various ways objects on the home altars stimulate interactions and relationships that contribute to “reiterating the identity of the individual” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981:187, 190). Chapter 5 first highlights the personal biographies of the participants’ narratives. These narratives establish each of the participants’ religious backgrounds and social place within the community—both Anglo and *Mexicano*. Chapter 6 then describes and discusses the participants’ altars and other objects of devotion in the home and the importance of the location of these objects in facilitating their use and marking their importance. With Chapter 7, I begin the detailed examination and analysis of the objects and images used on the altars and how they participate in the negotiation of a particular *Mexicano* identity. In this chapter the symbolic meanings of the objects chosen for display on the altar is detailed. Chapter 8 explores what scholars such as Janet Hoskins (1998, 2007) have come to refer to as “biographical objects” that can be used to tell the story of persons’ lives but also may have biographies of their own as they move from person to person. In addition, I explore the phenomenon of *Día de los Muertos* celebrations held in early November—a tradition carried from Mexico and enacted in homes within the community and in various public venues. Of particular interest is the biographical aspects of the objects used on the special *ofrendas* (altars) temporarily constructed to honor deceased loved ones during the celebrations. Chapters 9 and 10
take a relational perspective to the examination of the objects on the altars. The relational perspective encompasses the interactions between the people and their altars and the individual objects on the altars and in the homes, and the interactions between the objects within an assemblage of meaning that effect the negotiation of *Mexicano* identity by the participants.

Chapter 11 moves from the discussion of altars and objects in peoples’ homes into the wider environment within which they are embedded. I discuss the importance of cultural memory and cultural landscape in reinforcing ideas of religious and ethnic identity. People not only have memories of their traditions but they see them (re)enacted and displayed throughout their community. The power of cultural memory rests in the conscious decision to choose particular memories, and to give those memories precedence in activities of daily life on a personal and public level.

Throughout these chapters I demonstrate the importance of interactions with objects during daily religious rituals conducted at the site of the home altar in negotiating a sense of self and a particular *Mexicano* identity. The ethnographic limits of this study are bounded primarily by what I have observed in San Antonio, Texas and what the participants have been willing to share with me. I do not intend to generalize to all people of Mexican descent, as not all people of Mexican descent are Catholic. Nor do all Catholics have altars in their homes. In addition, many other ethnic groups also have the tradition of home altars, including Cubans, Italians, Czechs, and Poles (Turner 1990, Morgan 2000). Home altars are also used in many other religious belief systems, however, those practices are beyond the scope of this study. The results of this study do not represent a completely objective nor comprehensive view of the participants and their altars but rather a narrative I have constructed to tell their stories. In a different place, in another time, with a different interviewer, the participants would more than likely tell different stories and
reveal different meanings or insights.

The information gained about the relationship between identity formation and personal interactions with material culture, especially religious objects and things, however, offers the opportunity to understand the powerful and pervasive ways in which people see themselves and the world, organize and evaluate it, and construct their environment with things and ideas that make the world intelligible and familiar to them. This study of the ability of people to choose aspects of their cultural memories to use in the negotiation of a sense of self, and the agency of objects to effect those negotiations, allows us to draw some new conclusions about the study of objects and their cultural engagement with persons. In addition, this study of objects used in daily interactions at the home altar adds a new perspective to the analysis of objects as biographical representations of the person using the objects and of the objects themselves. These findings can influence studies of identity, the role of the agency of objects in interactions with people, and religious rituals and practices. While the focus here is on Mexicano identity formation in San Antonio there are broader implications as well. This targeted method of examining the effects of person-object interactions could be extended to various set of objects in an array of populations.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mexicano People & Mexicano Catholicism

In this chapter I outline a brief history of the early movement of Spanish and Mexican peoples into the U.S. Southwest and San Antonio in particular. I highlight the widely different paths taken in the settlement of the area. An examination of these divergent paths reveals the points of contact and conflict that arose in the process of settlement. The repercussions that produced the marginalization of Mexican people in the United States and the problem of shifting identities are considered. I also discuss the role of the Catholic Church in the lives of the people of this area to better understand how a continuation of traditional religious practices facilitates the negotiation of a particular sense of self and a sense of belonging to a particular group. Since anthropology is the study of the social in a precise historical and cultural environment (Laplantine & Nouss 2001) it calls for an examination of cultural patterns in which the participants are situated.

Mexicanos in the United States

An extensive multidisciplinary literature from historians, anthropologists, sociologists, human geographers, and Latino and Chicano cultural area studies scholars centers on the history of the early settlement of Mexico and the southwest area of the United States including San Antonio, Texas. Topics include the movement of people from place-to-place, and the incorporation or non-incorporation of Mexican immigrants into what is now the U.S. Southwest.9

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It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to comprehensively cover this work, however, I provide a general overview of these movements and some of the resulting conflicts and tensions that affect identity. According to the literature on migration and immigration, Mexican immigrants, along with their Mexican American descendants, occupy a unique place in the story of U.S. immigration.\textsuperscript{10} They are among both the oldest and newest inhabitants of the nation. Some people from the area of Mexico were already living in the Southern and Western regions of the North American continent centuries before “Mexico” or the “United States” existed. Many more Mexicans came to the United States during the 20th century, and Mexican immigrants continue to arrive today. In addition, they experienced a very different immigration pattern than those who emigrated from European countries. People from the area of present-day Mexico, did not travel across an ocean or great distances to arrive in the territory that is the United States like European immigrants; and they did not always stay in the United States but often freely moved back and forth maintaining connections with both places. In addition, many came at a time when the land was open territory and at other times was claimed by New Spain, Mexico, and later the United States. Therefore, many do not even consider themselves “Mexican” immigrants but instead descendents of the original Spanish settlers of the land that the United States now claims (Alvarez 1991, 1995; Alvarado & Alvarado 2003; Cafferty & Engstrom 2000; Weyr 1988). Due to what scholars label an “unusual” process of immigration, people of Mexican descent in the United States, no matter when or how they arrived, are subject to unique pressures and problems of identity. They are in a continual process of negotiating a sense of belonging in this complex

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\textsuperscript{10} Migration is an umbrella term used to denote movement of people or animals from one place to another. More specifically, anthropologists use the terms migration to stand for movement back and forth between the home community and one or more host communities. Immigration denotes permanence in the host community. The terms, however, are often used interchangeably (Horevitz 2009:748).
social setting of shifting political and cultural borders.

**Shifting People & Power: Making Borders**

The movement of people in the Southwest United States and their shifting territories and centers of power could conceivably be traced thousands of years back in history. According to archaeologists, prior to European contact North America was inhabited by a wide variety of indigenous peoples most of whom were nomadic hunter and gatherer groups consisting of small bands some of which later coalesced into larger tribes. In some areas, intensive agriculture and the development of complex social organization resulted in the development of state societies such as the Olmec, Maya, Toltec, and the later Aztec Empire in the area that is now Mexico. It is posited that there may have been contact between some of these peoples through trade or through movement into new areas across the U.S Southwest during this early period of history.

Spanish colonization began in mainland Mexico in the mid 16th century, according to archaeologists and historians, to expand trade and to spread the Catholic faith through indigenous conversions. After the conquest of the Aztec Empire by Hernán Cortés in 1519, the Spanish quickly spread their control into the surrounding areas, declaring the area for the Spanish crown and naming it New Spain. The Spanish and their descendents, along with indigenous peoples and mestizos (mixed race), continued to settle the area for more than 300 years. By 1821, the lands governed by New Spain were vast and included the area of Mexico, all of Central America except for Panama and Belize, as well as the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, parts of Colorado and Wyoming. A shift in power came when the Mexican-born Spaniards, mestizos, and Amerindians who peopled the area fought a two-year battle for independence from Spain forming the First Mexican Empire in September 1821.

Three later events, according to anthropologists and Mexican border scholars Carlos
Vélez-Ibáñez and Anna Sampaio (2002), continued to shape the landscape and created the phenomenon of the border between two nations—Mexico and the United States. Each of these events involves the newly forming United States annexing Mexican land. The first was the 1836 revolt of Texans against Mexico forming the Republic of Texas and later joining the United States. The second was the Mexican War of 1846-1848 in which the United States invaded Mexico and incorporated what is now part of Colorado, New Mexico, and California (1/3 of Mexican territory) via the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848. The last was the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, when land in southern Arizona was purchased from Mexico and the border between Mexico and the United States was finalized in its present position (See Map 2.1 for the evolution of Mexican territory).

The legacy to the area is a 2000-mile boundary dividing two nation-states (Alvarez 1995:448). At the time of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo there were approximately 100,000 “Mexican” settlers in what then became U.S. territory (Weyr 1988:2). The border had in effect crossed them—changing their identity from Mexican nationals to U.S. citizens. Many of these new citizens stayed in the United States but many crossed the border to return to Mexico.

Anthropologist Robert Alvarez (1995), along with other anthropologists and
scholars from various fields, discusses how the creation of a geopolitical border dividing the newly formed nations contributed to the marginalization of people of Mexican descent. According to the literature, the border created not only two distinct nations, but also established a large area referred to as *la frontera* or the *borderland*—places where people were forced to exist between two cultures—between the Mexican and the Anglo—one foot in each and often accepted in neither. The borderland is viewed as both a physical space at the borderline and metaphorical space that transcends the border and nationhood. This situation led to a *mestizo/a* existence, one of a mixed race people living on the borders and in the margins trying to deal with constantly contested and shifting identities. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1994) suggested using the border image as a metaphor for thinking about how crossing and re-crossing borders dramatically affects life and behavior. He views the border model as a useful method to examine the continuous shifting and reconfiguration of people, their ethnicity, sexual orientation, identity, and economic hierarchy to understand how the marginalization and subordination of people influences the negotiation of multiple identities. For understanding the borderland context of interest here, there is a large literature from various fields of study that focus on the processes of Mexican immigration and on the peoples’ struggles. These works include ethnographies that trace the history of immigration, the formation of transnational networks, and the lives of

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11 Studies of the border include works that focus on the problems of the border, including: migration (e.g. Alvarez 1991; Bustamante 1972, 1976, 1978, 2004; Chavez 1991, 2006, 2012; Kearney 1991, 1995; Kearney & Beserra 2004; Massey et al 1987; Massey 1990; Ruiz & Chavez 2008), settlement (e.g. Alvarez 1991; Chavez 1994), identity (e.g. Chavez 1984; Paredes 2000), labor (e.g. Bustamante 1978; Chavez 2001), race and religion (Goldschmidt & McAlister 2004) and health (e.g. Chavez 2003; Madsen 1964; Trotter & Chavira 1997). Other scholars focus on social boundaries on the geopolitical border and the behavior in general that involves contradiction, conflict, and shifting identity (e.g. Anzaldúa 1999; Ewing 1998; Gupta & Ferguson 1992, Kearney 1991; Limón 1978, 1984, 1992, 1994; Rosaldo 1985, 1994; Sanders 2002; Vélez-Ibáñez 1996; Vélez-Ibáñez & Sampaio 2002). According to Robert Alvarez’ review of border scholarship (1995), the two perspectives have had great influence on each other.
Mexican immigrants in the United States in various locations.\textsuperscript{12} While an international political border has been traditionally defined as a distinct, physically marked perimeter encircling a nation-state; a geopolitical border also serves to define the identity of the population living within the perimeter (Gupta \& Ferguson 1992) without consideration of cultural difference and societal organization. A border serves to create \textquote{ethnic identities} that often do not correspond to territorially based identities. While a definition for the term \textquote{ethnic identity} is continuously debated, I follow anthropologist Ronald Cohen (1978) who views ethnic identity as a continually negotiated and renegotiated process through the acceptance by a person, or the ascription from outside, of belonging to an ethnic group whose members share a common heritage, consisting of a common culture, including a shared language or dialect, religion and a common ideology. In this way, contrary to the social order, a person living within the U.S. borders may identify themselves as \textquote{ethnically} Mexican, or Spanish, or Mayan, etc. Conversely a person living in Mexico, who may at some time lived in the United States may consider themselves American. The spaces within the borders—the borderlands—therefore become a \textquote{region and set of practices defined and determined by this border that are characterized by conflict and contradiction, material and ideational} (Alvarez 1995:448).

The border also produces the political, social, and cultural phenomenon of \textquote{border crossing} or people moving freely back and forth across the border. Geopolitical borders, especially when regularly crossed and re-crossed, create a particular identity that is specific to the particular historical period (Alvarez 1995; Ewing 1998; Vélez-Ibáñez \& Sampaio 2002) but

\textsuperscript{12} There are several ethnographies that trace the history and stories of Mexican immigration to the United States including: Alamillo (2006); Alvarez (1991); Behar (1993); Gomez (1973); Gonzalez (2001); Limón (1994); and Ruiz (1987). Ethnographies that focus on the struggles experienced in the United States and the importance of social networks that include connections both in the United States and Mexico include: Achor (1978); Bourgois (2003); Dávila (2004); Gaspar de Alba \& Ybarra-Frausto (2002); Gomberg-Munoz (2010); Hirsch (2003); Moore (1991); and Zavella (1987, 2011).
have consequences for future generations. Negotiating identity between the borders and in the borderlands therefore creates issues of contact, conflict, and contradiction between cultures and societies and a search for belonging or a new sense of identity.

Some political and social scientists have begun to use the term “liminal” as “a master concept” to describe the borderlands—the place between two cultures—especially in regards to globalization, migration, and immigration (Thomassen 2009:51; see also Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Horvath, Szakolczai 2009; Thomassen & Wydra 2009). Anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1967, 1969) first used the term “liminal” to refer to the middle phase in the rites of passage while moving from one life stage to another—a place and time that is often ambiguous and dangerous. Liminal in the context of immigration refers to movement from one place to another—one culture to another—a place that is also “betwixt and between” (Turner 1967) and filled with conflicting influences. In this liminal space of the borderlands people are fully in neither; but in the process of movement from one to the other, caught in between and belonging to neither. In the borderlands there is an uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes. The future (what should come after the liminal period) is largely unknown. The people in the borderlands are searching for a new identity—a place to belong that is their own. This liminality holds true for those who cross borders more or less permanently—immigrants, refugees, exiles, and expatriates and those who live a life of border crossings—migrant workers, nomads, and members of the transnational business and professional elite (Gupta & Ferguson 1992:7).

Alvarez claims that the conflict of place and identity leads to the marginalization of those who are no longer part of the dominant society, writing:

Given the differing economies and a history of conquest and domination, the Mexican-U.S. border is the best example of how nation-states negotiate, marginalize, and influence

The concept of a Mexican-U.S. borderlands describes a complexity in the histories of the people who make the borderlands and the space within the borders home—not just a division of nations but a division of people, cultures, race, and class. However, ambiguous occupying the borderlands may have been; people moving between Mexico and the United States, whether permanently or periodically, built and maintained connections in both. These connections supported them in their physical and emotional survival and helped them maintain traditions from their past, including their language and Catholic religion. The continuance of their heritage helped in the process of negotiating self and identity in their new circumstances.

*Transnational Migration & Social Networking*

Due to the geography of the border and the long span of time of the open *frontera*, movement back and forth across the border had been relatively common throughout its history. Decades of free movements of people and later active agricultural labor recruitment established a chain migration of family members and eventually of large and self-sustaining migratory social networks which linked entire communities to the both sides of the border (Anzaldúa 1999:33; Baba & Abonyi 1979; Rumbaut 1994:597). Movement back and forth continued with the recruitment of the *braceros* laborers (beginning in 1942) who helped to build U.S. railroads and worked in the agricultural fields. *Braceros* (Mexican laborers contracted by U.S. growers and manufacturers) as well as illegal migrant workers moved continuously following the seasonal harvesting of various crops. (See Map 2.2). San Antonio was a key recruiting center for *bracero* and other migrant workers in their journey north. According to historians, some continued this migration year after year, while others settled in the north taking jobs in various industries such
as manufacturing. Mexican workers were enthusiastically recruited during labor shortages in the United States and just as enthusiastically deported when the job markets grew tight extending the phenomenon of people crossing and re-crossing the border.

This constant movement led to what Américo Paredes, folklorist and cross-border studies pioneer, referred to as “Greater Mexico” to express the concept of a “borderless” Mexican community entangled in issues of globalization, displacement, and “transnationalism”—a concept paralleling borderlands and *la frontera*. Anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues defined transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Schiller, et al 1992:21). This perspective no longer regards immigrants as “uprooted” people who are eventually “transplanted” in a new environment as were most European immigrants. Instead, the transnational frame provides a more complicated portrait of migrant life, including migrants’ simultaneous participation in the economic, social, and political life of both the society from which they came and their new community of residence—whether permanent or temporary and their marginalized position within that new community (Pérez-Torres 2006).

Studies of transnational migration capture the different ways in which immigrants and
“transmigrants” integrate themselves into their new environment while creating and sustaining ties with the communities from which they come establishing “transnational social fields” that become institutionalized over time (Bustamante 2004; Massey, et al 1987; Massey 1990). These ties tend to reinforce the continuation of traditional cultural practices like religious practices and language rather than succumbing to the pressures of assimilation.

The recognition that local and regional historical relations connected the American side with the Mexican through personal, familial, and economic networks has become an important focus in Chicano and Latino studies as well as among studies in sociology and anthropology (Alvarez 1995; Massey et al 1987; Massey 1990; Sanders 2002; Vélez-Ibáñez & Sampaio 2002). A transnational approach to migration has proven a useful frame for understanding the complicated ways in which individuals, communities, organizations, and even nations simultaneously shape and are affected by migration, and for explaining the persistence of ties across generations.

The challenge for scholars is not only how to describe the people who move and live between the borders—a seemingly homogeneous group based on political demarcation and shared elements of history, multiethnic and shifting identity, and bi-national economics and politics (Bustamente 2004; Kearney & Bessera 2004; Sanders 2002) but also how to understand their lives. Scholars must also examine how lives lived in the borderlands affect identity and images of the self. Chicana Feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa describes the borderlands—what she calls that “narrow strip along steep edges” of national boundaries—as a place of conflict pitting one group against another and a place of pain and suffering that labels the people who inhabit it in pejorative terms:

The US-Mexico border *es una herida abierta* [and open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the
lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over and pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” [Anzaldúa 1999:25]

How then can an identity the people can embrace be formed? In this research, I offer a description of one way people have used to retain a connection to their heritage and an identity over which they have some control. By retaining traditional practices and religious rituals such as creating home altars, people effectively forge bonds to their heritage.

**Mexicanos in San Antonio**

While historical events and their consequences affected the entire Southwest, the *Mexicano* people of San Antonio were especially vulnerable to shifting concepts of identity. People in the area were at one time citizens of New Spain, The Mexican Empire, the Republic of Texas, and later the United States. In addition, the literature on the history of Mexicans in Texas attests to the continuing domination and subjection of *Mexicanos* in Texas by an Anglo minority.\(^{13}\) The brief history below, based primarily on works by Texas historians T. R. Fehrenbach (1978, 2000) and Jesús F. de la Teja (1995), outlines the framework for the social and economic oppression of *Mexicanos* in San Antonio and evidence of racial discrimination, prejudice, and segregation in San Antonio.

The area that is now San Antonio was originally occupied by numerous groups of nomadic indigenous people including Coahuiltecan, Payaya, Pamaya, Pataguo, Tacame,
Tamique, Xarame, Sana, Lipan Apache, Coco, Top, Karankawa, Ervipiame, and Yuta Indians. They called the area *Yanaguana*, meaning "refreshing waters" (Schoelwer nd). Spanish explorers, along with many indigenous people, made their first expeditions to the area in 1691 and again in 1709; claiming the area for the Crown and naming the San Antonio River and San Pedro Creek. They named the location San Antonio de Padua in honor of their arrival on this saint’s feast day. The San Antonio de Béxar Presidio, parts of which still remain, was founded in 1718 as the first civil settlement in Texas. The Villa of San Fernando de Béxar was chartered in 1731 with a plan to bring 400 Spanish Canary Islanders to the area to strengthen the establishing Spanish community within San Antonio. According to de la Teja (1995), this plan never fully materialized. The map (Map 2.3) provides details of the placement of some of the early historic buildings and plazas where the community gathered, along with the proximity to the San Antonio River.

Beginning in 1718, five Spanish missions were built along the San Antonio

---

14 In 1719, the Marquis of San Miguel de Aguayo asked the king of Spain to send 400 families from the Canary Islands to help populate the province of Texas. The Canary Islanders (*isleños*) were ordered to send 200 families. They were to travel through Havana, then Veracruz, on their way to San Antonio. By June 1730, twenty-five families had reached Havana and ten families had been sent on to Veracruz before orders from Spain arrived to halt the immigration. Under the leadership of Juan Leal Goraz, the group continued the journey, marching overland to the presidio of San Antonio de Béjar where they arrived on March 9, 1731. At the end of the journey, the group of *isleños* had increased by marriages to fifteen families, a total of fifty-six persons. (Handbook of Texas Online)
River by the Franciscans and Spanish representatives (Map 2.4). The first was *San Antonio de Valero* (later known as The Alamo) which is nearest to the center of the city (top of Map 2.4). Four more missions were built in the early period of settlement: *San José y San Miguel de Aguayo, Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, San Juan Capistrano*, and *San Francisco de la Espada*. The goal of the Spanish missions was to incorporate indigenous people into the Spanish colonial empire, the Catholic religion, and culture. Local indigenous peoples were forcibly relocated to the mission grounds under the protection and control of the missionaries and the Spanish state (Schoelwer nd). The missions played a key role in establishing the European and mixed-race foundations of Texas and the dominance of the Catholic religion. In general, the missionaries sought to eradicate all indigenous religious and cultural practices judged to be different from and inferior to Christian beliefs and practices.

San Antonio de Béxar was chartered as the capital of Spanish Texas in 1773, a position that lasted for 105 years. According to Fehrenbach (1978, 2000), throughout the early period the city was an important link in commerce—first connecting the frontier to the center of the Spanish base in Mexico and later to the furthest outreaches of the Mexican state in the heart of Mexico. San Antonio was later
a crucial link between markets in Mexico and Louisiana in the United States. Many of the current roads were built following early trade routes. Settlers also traveled the trade routes from both Mexico and the United States swelling the population of San Antonio. San Fernando de Béxar Church was built by 1758 in the center of town and served as the center of Spanish community.

According to historians, the five Missions in San Antonio were all secularized by 1795 due mainly to shifting ideologies among the missionaries and goals for the city’s development within the community. *San Antonio de Valero Mission* became a military barracks referred to as The Alamo. By this time, the population of the settlement had risen from approximately 500 settlers to 2,060, a number that included the indigenous peoples who had been at the missions. The population consisted mostly of poor farmers and ranchers, made up of Europeans (mostly Spaniards), *mestizos* (mixed-race), and a few black slaves (Fehrenbach 1978, 2000). San Antonio sought independence from Mexico in 1813 but was recaptured after the battles of Alazán Creek and Medina by Royalist forces. According to Fehrenbach, San Antonio was one of the most fought-over cities in North America during the Texas Revolution. It was the site of several battles, including the siege of Bexar (December 1835) and the battle of the Alamo (March 6, 1836). In January 1837, San Antonio was officially chartered as the seat of the Republic of Texas, although it was seized twice in the Mexican invasions of 1842. After Texas entered the Union, growth of the city was rapid, as it became a servicing and distribution center for the western movement of the United States. The population continued to increase with the census showing 3,488 in 1850 and 8,235 in 1860, when San Antonio had become for the time the largest town in Texas. In this period, German immigrants made up a large part of the growth, with German speakers outnumbering both Spanish and English until after 1877 (Fehrenbach 1978,
In 1861, Texas seceded from the Union and San Antonio became a Confederate depot.

After the U.S. Civil War, San Antonio became a center of the cattle trade covering the border region as well as the entire Southwest. As merino sheep became important in the surrounding area, San Antonio became an important wool market. New economic growth emerged with the coming of the railroads in the late 1800s. Most of the immigrants from this period were U.S.-born Anglos from the Southern states; however, it was Mexican workers who constructed and maintained the railroads. In San Antonio, the railroad companies built segregated labor camps near the lines to keep the Mexicans close to their work. The effect was to isolate the Mexican workers from the Anglos, which created the first colonias or barrios (McWilliams 1968:168-169).

The number of Mexican immigrants greatly increased after 1910. Many were fleeing because of the Mexican Revolution and others were attracted by the increased development of local service industries in San Antonio. An estimated 1.5 million people entered Texas from Mexico in the period between 1890 and the Great Depression of 1929 and many of them searched for jobs in the San Antonio agricultural fields (De León 2009:66). Many of the agricultural jobs vanished during the Depression and workers flocked to the city where jobs were also scarce. It was during the period of 1929-1939 that the Mexican migrants were first accused of taking jobs from Americans and were deported in large numbers McKenzie (2004:86). The accusations arose out of what Paredes called the “Anglo-Texan legend” which embodied the myth of Anglo superiority (Paredes 2000:15). According to Paredes, the Anglos considered the Mexican inferior because they were perceived as cruel, cowardly, treacherous, thieves, and degenerate by nature (Paredes 2000:15-16), Women were seen as ignorant and sensual, little more than breeders of a degenerate race (see also De Leon 1983:1-48 and Montejano 1987:220-
According to ethnic studies scholar Mario Barrera (1989), the social and economic oppression of Mexicans that had finally come to a boiling point over the lack of jobs was ultimately propelled by racial discrimination, prejudice, and isolation and segregation that resulted in the effective internal colonization of Mexicans within the United States. The prejudice that started as a result of Anglo-dominated and exploitative economic relations eventually extended to “political institutions, the educational system, and all forms of social structures” (Barrera 1989:197). In the period between 1929 and 1939, an estimated 415,000 persons were forcibly returned to Mexico often without regard to their land of birth while another 85,000 were “voluntarily” repatriated (De Genova 2002:433).

The Anglo minority continued to benefit economically from the segregation and exploitation of Mexican laborers, especially in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. The expansion of the cotton and fruit economies was completely dependent upon Mexican labor. Large concentrations of Mexican laborers were needed in the San Antonio area to support the cotton and pecan markets. The oppression and even “terrorization” of workers continued with at least one account of laborers being marched under armed guard through the streets of San Antonio (McWilliams 1968:179).

During World War II, and the post-war years, many thousands of Mexicans came to Texas looking for work—especially agricultural work—through the U.S. government established Bracero (Spanish for "arm-man"—manual laborer) Program. The Program was a war-related measure to supply much-needed workers to replace those fighting overseas. Historians estimate that by the 1950s the United States was importing as many as 300,000 workers from Mexico annually through this program. San Antonio was a Bracero recruiting center for the Program, sending Mexican migrants and local Tejanos alike to the agricultural fields in the north—
sometimes as far as Michigan and Indiana. The large influx of immigrant workers competed with native-born Tejanos and lowered wages in general. Both groups joined in the exodus to find work (see Anzaldúa 1999; Baba & Abonyi 1979; McKenzie 2004; Rumbaut 1994).

Between 1942 and 1964 more than 4.5 million workers were legally brought in under the Bracero Program (Koestler nd). This number however did not fulfill the demand for cheap labor and many more illegal workers also crossed the border to work in the United States. Many of the Bracero workers did not go back to Mexico after their contracts expired nor did those who had come to the United States illegally. Consequently, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) instituted “Operation Wetback” to round up and deport “illegal” Mexicans, especially in Texas and California. Government data indicate that by the late 1950s the INS had repatriated to Mexico more than 3.8 million mojados ("wetbacks") (Koestler nd). However, during the Korean War more manpower was again needed in the agricultural sector and immigration from Mexico was encouraged through modifications in the original Bracero Program by the enactment of Public Law 78 in 1951. This supposedly temporary adjustment was extended in 1954, 1956, 1958, 1961, and 1964 to accommodate the United States’ need for agricultural workers.


15 The legal production of Mexican migrant “illegality” and the ongoing ramifications have been studied by scholars in various fields (e.g. Bustamante 1972, 1976, 1978, 2004; Cardenas 1975; Chávez 1991, 1994, 2001, 2006, 2012;
This brief history of San Antonio settlement, colonial period, and development illustrates the tangled web of ethnic influences on the city and its cultural development. According to Latin American Studies scholar Raúl Ramos (2008), this mixed influx of peoples—from the indigenous peoples of the area, to the Spanish, Mexican indio, and mestizo settlers, to the Anglos, and finally the people fleeing the Mexican Revolution, to migrant agricultural workers predominantly from Mexico—has led to a constant struggle for place, identity, and survival that continues into the present.

According to 2010 U.S. Census Bureau figures, the total population of San Antonio, Texas was 1,327,407. The Hispanic population of 838,952 accounts for 63.2 percent of the total population—making San Antonio one of the largest Hispanic-majority cities in the United States.¹⁶

According to a Pew Hispanic Center report,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Antonio, Texas</th>
<th>Hispanic or Latino and Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 U.S. Census</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population</strong></td>
<td>1,327,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic or Latino (of any race)</strong></td>
<td>838,952 (63.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mexican</strong></td>
<td>765,963 (57.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>12,584 (0.95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvadoran</td>
<td>6,711 (0.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>3,355 (0.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>57,048 (4.29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other not Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>135,349 (10.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White alone</td>
<td>353,106 (26.60%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.1 Demographic Breakdown for San Antonio, Texas**
Source: 2010 U.S. Census

Durand & Massey 1992; Gamio 1971; Kearney 1991, 1995; Kearney & Besserra 2004; Massey et al 1987; Massey 1990; Ngai 1999, 2003; Schiller et al 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez 1996). Although there is much current interest in questions of legality, the issue is not a focus in this work. I did not ask participants for their immigration status, concentrating instead on their continued use of traditional religious practices in everyday life as a means of negotiating ethnic identity in San Antonio.

¹⁶ Figures are derived from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Table P1, Table 5 and the City of San Antonio Department of Planning and Community Development The federal government treats Hispanic or Latino as Ethnic Categories separate and distinct from concepts of Race. These Ethnic Categories can cross multiple Racial Categories. In the figures used here Hispanic or Latino are subtracted from the Race Categories to prevent double counting. The reported total by the U.S. Census Bureau was 1,327,407. The discrepancy of 879 was assigned to other cities.
people of Mexican descent make up 91.3 percent of all Hispanics in the San Antonio metropolitan area for a total of 57.7 percent of the total population (Lopez 2011). Table 2.1 shows the demographic breakdown of other ethnic groups included in the Hispanic category on the Census. Map 2.5 highlights the areas of Hispanic or Latino density in the San Antonio area. The Archdiocese of San Antonio indicates that approximately one-half of the Hispanic population reported being Catholic (Archdiocese of San Antonio). The number of Mexicanos, the historical setting, and the large Catholic community make San Antonio a rich field of the study of traditional religious rituals in the home such as the use of home altars.

Map 2.5 Thematic Map of Hispanic or Latino in San Antonio Area
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

"Yo Soy Mexicano!": Political Labeling & Identity

Identity formation, public labeling, and representation of people of Mexican descent within the United States are complicated. One of the most complex issues is racial categorization which itself has not always been consistent over time and space. Even in the colonial period, race and casta (class) identity were fluid (Ramos 2008:66). According to scholars who focus on
immigration and race (e.g. Gregory & Sanjek 1994; Omi & Winant 1994; Rodríguez 2000; Sanders 2002; Song 2003; Weyr 1988), Mexicans in the United States have historically been seen as neither black nor white and thus did not fit into the bipolar racial dichotomy. They were nonetheless seen as “other” and considered by the dominant “white” population as closer to black than to white because of their dark skin. This categorization went with being deemed inferior and therefore marginalized. While many European immigrants to the United States were considered “non-white” upon arrival, they managed to assimilate or acculturate into the dominant “white” society after a relatively short period of “ethnic” identification. It was however through the conscious construction of new ideas of self in relations to others that white Europeans were and are able to retain dominance. This hegemonic process is what sociologist Ruth Frankenberg refers to as part of the “colonial discourse” (Frankenberg 1994) but has also been labeled “race thinking” (Gregory & Sanjek 1994; Omi & Winant 1994). For immigrants from Mexico, ideas of race and “otherness” however remained an issue in the pluralist society of the United States that had social, political, and economic ramifications.

A kind of dual cultural or ethnic identity also exists for Mexicanos—not identified within Anglo-American cultural values or traditions and not totally identified with their Mexican heritage—they are somewhere in between in a liminal space (Anzaldúa 1999:85). People are constantly shifting and renegotiating identities with maneuvers of power and submission within their daily lives. This conflict of identity is made clear in the epic poem, I am Joaquin/Yo Soy Joaquin, written by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales in 1967, which became a personal manifesto of many young Chicanos when it was first published with the following opening lines:17

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yo soy Joaquin,} \\
\text{perdido en un mundo de confusión:} \\
\text{I am Joaquin, lost in a world of confusion,}
\end{align*}
\]

17 See APPENDIX B for complete poem.
caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,  
confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,  
suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society.  
My fathers have lost the economic battle  
and won the struggle of cultural survival.  
And now! I must choose between the paradox of  
victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger,  
or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis,  
sterilization of the soul and a full stomach. [Gonzales 1972]

The poem describes the conflict between the dominant cultural values and the values and identity  
of the past—the struggle for and against assimilation—and the struggle for identity.  
Anthropologist José Limón describes this struggle as a “war with the past as with the present”  
(Limón 1992:169; see also Limón 1978, 1994). Gonzales goes on to describe a journey of a  
young Chicano as he goes into the historical past of Mexicans in the United States. The poem  
comments on the difficult lives of all Chicanos in the United State and declares a rallying cry to  
all Chicanos to unite. It has been reproduced hundreds of times and performed by teatro groups  
in the United States and Mexico. The poem is required reading in many Chicano Studies courses  
during the past 30 years. It ends with the rallying cry:

\[
\text{La raza!} \\
\text{Méjicano!} \\
\text{Español!} \\
\text{Latino!} \\
\text{Chicano!} \\
\text{Or whatever I call myself,} \\
\text{I look the same} \\
\text{I feel the same} \\
\text{I cry} \\
\text{And} \\
\text{Sing the same. [Gonzales 1972 emphasis added]} \\
\]

The struggle for identity is apparent in this excerpt—what am I, what do people call me, what  
label fits my experiences?

According to Latin American historian José Cuello (1998), before the Chicano revolution
of the 1960s, there was little concept of “ethnic identity” for people of Mexican or Latin American descent. Labels were imposed by the dominant Anglo culture. Individuals were identified and labeled by their nation of origin, "Mexican," "Puerto Rican," "Cuban," whether they were born in the United States or outside of it. According to sociologist Clara Rodríguez (2000), the term “Hispanic” has its origins in the 1970 census in the United States, and is defined as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” primarily based on Spanish descent and language. The term "Hispanic or Latino" was officially adopted in 1997 by the United States Government to replace the single term "Hispanic." Regional usage of the terms differs. The term Hispanic is generally used in the eastern portion of the United States, whereas Latino is more commonly used in the western portion. However, the growing number of Latinos within U.S. society is having a major impact in economics, politics, and culture, making the Latina/o population much more visible and the use of the label Latino/a much more common. One of the most complex issues is to determine what label fits the seemingly large heterogeneous population and its various sub-groups (Cuello 1998). The process of public labeling, and representation of Latinos has become more complicated than in the past.

Cuello suggests that labels represent identities in the public and personal realm for the individuals and groups who either adopt the terms or have them applied to them. The homogenizing quality of the label Hispanic was the result of mainstream U.S. society’s indifference to the distinctions within the Latino/a population. The indifference refers to the diverse races, classes, languages, nationalities, linguistic or gendered experiences of the more than 50.5 million people self-identified as Hispanics or Latinos currently living in the United

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18 The homogenizing effect of labels does not apply solely to the label “Hispanic” but to other labels used to categorize groups: American, African-American, Whites, Blacks, Asian, etc.
Labels of identity are however no longer solely determined and assigned by the majority culture but are personally negotiated through a range of often conflicting sets of criteria. New identities are being “re-imagined and re-imaged in a complex national dialogue that is also defining the meaning of what it means to be ‘American’” (Cuello 1998; see also Anzaldúa 1999; Chavez 1984; Oboler 1992, 1995; Ruiz & Chavez 2008).

According to Latino studies scholar Suzanne Oboler (1992, 1995), characteristics of the self are reflected in the many “others” that surround each person and are considered in the process of negotiating and affirming identity for Latinos and the Latino self. Oboler suggests that these “others” include the: 1) Hispanic other as defined by institutions; 2) gendered other; 3) class specific other; and 4) racial other—whether that racial other is called Mestizo/a, the nonwhite, the white-Hispanic, the person of color, la raza, etc. There is also the 5) American other—the distinction between U.S. citizen or as a member of the population of the Americas as a whole, and 6) the Latino self as a Latin American national other: the Puerto Rican self, the Mexican self, Columbian, Peruvian, etc. Or the more politicized Chicana/o other (Oboler 1992:19). In addition, beginning in the 1960s Mexican Americans faced a new set of “others”—new arrivals from the Caribbean and Central and South America. New issues of identity needed to be negotiated within a now larger, more diverse community.

Ana María Díaz-Stevens, writing on church and society, contends that identifying with a particular ethnic group offers a sense of belonging and solidarity. Díaz-Stevens says, “Time and proximity, as well as political, educational, and other needs, have been the basis on which Hispanic or Latino solidarity has been built” (Díaz-Stevens 2003:73). For my purposes I would add the religious “other” as being significant in the formation of identity and place and a key

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19 According to The 2010 Census Summary File 1, 308.7 million people resided in the United States on April 1, 2010, of which 50.5 million (or 16 percent) were of Hispanic or Latino origin. For a detailed schedule of 2010 Census products and release dates, visit [www.census.gov/population/www/cen2010/glance/index.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2010/glance/index.html).
component in this research. Religious “otherness” of Mexicanos in the United States is discussed later in this chapter and is used throughout the analysis of home altars as a basis of distinction in negotiating personal identity.

Anzaldúa (1990, 1999) discusses the difficulties in negotiating identity for Mexicanos in the United States who straddle the borderlands—often both literally and figuratively. On one side they are constantly exposed to the Spanish influence of the Mexicans, on the other side the influence of the Anglos making it difficult to establish an identity or to determine which “label” fits their sense of self. The negotiation of labels is especially complex in Texas partly due to the varied paths of immigration. Anzaldúa writes that people feel the labels Hispanic or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latino bind them to other Spanish-speaking peoples in the Americas and deny their particular heritage. People in Texas use the label Spanish only to identify with a linguistic group or if they can trace their ancestry directly back to the Spanish settlers. She says that Mexicans in Texas, “don’t refer to themselves as American, or Spanish, or Hispanic. They chose to identify as Mexicanos, not as a national identity but as a racial one” (Anzaldúa 1999:84). This identity includes their “Indio” (70 to 80 percent) (Chávez 1984:88-90) and Spanish ancestry. According to Anzaldúa, they even distinguish between mexicanos del otro lado and mexicanos de este lado—from this land or from the other. The label Mexican-American signifies that they are neither Mexican nor American, “but more the noun ‘American’ than the adjective ‘Mexican’” (Anzaldúa 1999:84). Mexican, or Mexicano/a in Spanish, is the preferred term used when referring to race and ancestry; and mestizos when affirming both Indian and Spanish ancestry. However Anzaldúa adds, “we hardly ever own our Black ancestry” (Anzaldúa 1999:84). Other even more specific terms are used for various groups within the Mexicano label. The labels Chicano or Raza are used when referring to politically active people who were born
or raised in the United States; while *Tejanos* refers to people from Texas" (Anzaldúa 1999:84; see also Pérez & Ortega 2008).

Anzaldúa and other Latino activists (for example: Cafferty 2000, Pérez-Torres 2006, Rosaldo 1994) envision a new order—a new *mestizo* or *mestizaje*—a new sense of national identity which includes the mixed heritage of the people. Jose Vasconcelos (*La Raza Cósmica* 1997 [1925]), a Mexican philosopher, first wrote of a *una raza mestiza* or *la raza cosmica*—a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world—a race of inclusivity. Anzaldúa suggests that, “From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness—it is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 1999:99).

To complicate the matter of identity even further, Clara Rodríguez (2000) among others, suggests that individuals actually have a plurality of selves, each of which surfaces in particular situations, “one’s identity is relative and is constantly negotiated through relationships and situational contexts” (Rodríguez 2000:xi). There is the “self” you are with your family, at work, at church, with friends, and with strangers to name but a few of the situations in which a person may find themselves. Different aspects of your “self” become dominant in each of the situations. For instance your religious self may have little interaction with work or non-religious friends but comes to the forefront during church activities and family life. People are also continually modifying their sense of self as they encounter new experiences. “Identity is a production which is never complete, always in process” (Hall 1990:222; also Hall & du Gay 1996).

There are many ways that people internalize identification, especially through language and culture and in the forms of objects, images, and emotions gathered from experience and cultural memory. Traditions carried in cultural memory are one of the links that establish a
lifeline between the past and the present; between the country of origin and the adopted country in times of separation (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Rodriguez & Fortier 2007) and play a critical role in the negotiation of identity. For Anzaldúa it is food and certain smells that she claims are tied to her identity. For many people, religious beliefs and practices are fundamental to the definition of who they are. It is the role of religious practices, in the form of the home altar, in the negotiation of identity that is the focus of this research.

**Mexican Catholicism and Ritual Practices**

For many people, their particular religious beliefs and practices are part of the cultural memory that is fundamental to the definition of who they are, and help forge a connection to the past and to communities of others of the same faith or tradition. According to Halbwachs, religious practices also reproduce “in more or less symbolic forms the history of migrations and fusions of races and tribes, of great events, wars, establishments, discoveries, and reforms that we can find the origin of the societies that practice them” (Halbwachs 1992:84). Therefore, the migration of peoples, who face continual change and uncertainty, can be traced by examining the movement and adaptation of various religious traditions. New ideas, values, and traditions arise in opposition to old ideas—the memories of things past—and become part of the negotiation of identity and lives of the people in new circumstances. In these circumstance, people often choose between the old and the new or blend practices to form new traditions and identities. In the next section, I discuss how Mexican Catholic practices, very different from mainstream U.S. Catholicism, contribute to the conflicting ideas of *Mexicano* identity. I contend however, that the continued practice of traditional Mexican Catholicism is part of the negotiation of a particular *Mexicano* identity.
Religion in Mexicano Homes

According to scholars of the Mexican Catholic Church, the people of Mexico have traditionally been Catholic since the arrival of the Spanish missionaries and their concerted efforts at conversion.²⁰ They brought their particular brand of Catholicism with them to the United States. As Catholics, they were perceived as “other” vis-a-vis the dominant Protestant society of the United States. In addition, since styles of worship and ritual behavior differed greatly between American and Mexicano Catholics, rather than being welcomed and assimilated as fellow members of the Catholic Church in their new home, the Mexicano Catholics were also seen as “others” by U.S. Catholics and not truly members of the existing Catholic community.

Mexican Catholic religious practices differed from U.S. Catholic practices in several ways including not only styles of worship but also the amount of involvement of the clergy within the community. David Badillo, writing in Latinos and the New Immigrant Church (2006), explains that difference between the two styles of practice stems from the reforms made during the Council of Trent, an Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church held in the mid-1500s. American Catholicism is a product of the Council of Trent descended from Irish and English Catholicism. This post-Council of Trent form of Catholicism centers on liturgy, doctrine, and reserved and orderly religious services conducted primarily by clergy within a church. The roots of Mexican Catholicism, however, grew from the brand of Iberian Catholicism practiced by the conquistadores at the time of Spanish exploration and conquest in the New World and the influence of indigenous Indian and African religious strains. Roberto Goizueta (2004), U.S. Latino/a theologian, writes that Spanish and subsequently Mexicano religion was not affected by the Council of Trent. Therefore, Mexican Catholicism remained primarily embodied and

expressed in and through symbol, ritual, and pageantry that incurs in church, in public, and in the home of devotees both with and without benefit of clergy (Badillo 2006:185). Devotions include colorful rituals that revolve around the saints in general, feasts celebrating the local, regional, and national patron saints, icons and images, symbols, reenactments of religious events, processions, and other forms of religious expression that take place outside of the church in the streets and neighborhoods. In her writings about Latino religion, Beatriz Morales (1994) contends that the predominance of devotion to the saints in Mexican Catholicism further contributed to the discrimination of Mexicanos in the United States. The perception was that Mexican Catholics were not really practicing Catholicism, but rather a form of spirit beliefs which blend folk Catholicism with Espiritismo. Compounding the difference, Catholic priests in the United States tended to see Mexicanos as “converts” similar to how the newly Christianized Amerindians and Africans were seen by the Spanish. The Church in the United States had also seen its mission in Mexicano communities to uplift the people spiritually from a level of semi-paganism that was demonstrated by the survival of non-Christian beliefs and rituals from the religions of African and Amerindian people. Morales cites the Office of Pastoral Research and Planning (1982:12-13) as claiming that presently, this attitude is changing as the popular expression of Catholicism among Mexicanos is beginning to gain some legitimacy (Morales 1994:191).

According to Mary Odem (2004) who writes on women, gender, immigration, and ethnicity in U.S. history, the mainstream Catholic Church in the United States, was uncomfortable with, and in fact discouraged the different religious practices and styles of worship of Mexican American Catholics. Put more strongly, Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens suggests that the Church used “a kind of ‘religious imperialism’ and ‘pious colonialism’ at its best—in
which Latino ways are clearly seen to be inferior to those of the core society” (Diaz-Stevens 2003:70). Diaz-Stevens further explains these concepts,

Although Hispanics were a conquered people, missionaries often urged them to be grateful for new opportunities rather than to nurture resentment against an invading U.S. imperialism. . . the Catholic missionaries were intent on salvaging those traditions within Latino Catholicism that were not an embarrassment to their church as an ‘American’ institution. It is these missionary practices and their underlying philosophical underpinnings that we refer to as ‘pious colonialism.’ [Diaz-Stevens 2003:71]

While the reference here is to “missionary” practices in Mexico and early U.S. settlement, the same attitudes have been carried through into recent times. Odem claims that the Church’s treatment of Mexicano Catholic immigrants was in direct contrast to the treatment of European Catholic immigrants. German, Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants were allowed to form "national" or “ethnic” parishes where they heard mass in their own language, and continued familiar religious practices with priests who made the journey with the immigrants (Dolan 1992, 1994). These ethnic parish churches and clergy played an important role in supporting and anchoring European immigrant communities. The scholarship on Catholic immigrants from Mexico has in contrast pointed to a “history of insensitivity, discrimination, and assimilation efforts on the part of American Catholic priests, bishops and institutions” (Odem 2004:28). For the most part, the Catholic Church pursued a policy of assimilation or "Americanization" in relation to Mexicano Catholic immigrants that sought to eradicate certain practices including the home-based religious practice such as home altars that composed a large part of the Mexican traditional religion. In addition, specific ethnic parishes were not created to serve the Mexican communities, nor were Mexican priests available to work in Mexican communities.

According to Timothy Lee (2011), who writes on the history of Christianity, most Mexicano Catholics who felt alienated from the mainstream Catholic Church were compelled to construct an alternative support group within the Catholic Church and the community. Although
some Anglo Catholics did provide some support for Mexicano Catholics in their immediate communities. Archbishop Robert E. Lucey, archbishop of San Antonio from 1941-1969, established social justice ministries among Mexicanos in his ministry. In 1945, he organized The Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs to provide spiritual and social care for Latino Catholics in the Southwest which later became a permanent committee of the Church. Four Encuentros, gatherings of church leaders working among Latinos, were held between 1972 and 2000. In the first Encuentro, held in 1972, Latino participants recommended that the church renounce the policy of assimilation in favor of multiculturalism. Archbishop Lucey was also instrumental in establishing the Spanish Mission Band—a collaboration of Anglo and Latino clergy who ministered directly to braceros and other migrant workers in the community. In the mid-1960s, according to Lee, Mexicanos in particular and Latinos in general influenced by the progressive, activist roles of African American churches and the southern civil rights struggles led by Dr. Martin Luther King, began to openly challenge all structures that had coerced them into marginality including the Church. They were aided by the more liberal attitudes of the Second Vatican Council and the liberationist theology that began in Latin America. In 1965, migrant workers in California organized the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), led by the devout Catholic César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, to press for basic rights and better working conditions. The general Church hierarchy however did not support the movement at first for fear of alienating white Catholic growers (Lee 2011:90-92). Católicos por la Raza (Catholics for the Race) was also started in the mid-1960s in Los Angeles in an effort to fight the lack of involvement and commitment by the Catholic Church concerning Chicano civil rights (García 2008:131-133). In 1969, a group of Chicano priests in the Southwest met in San Antonio to form PADRES (Priests Associated for Religious, Educational, and Social Rights). Their goal was to
make the Church more sensitive to the condition of *Mexicanos* by presenting resolutions that included: naming native Hispanic bishops in areas with heavy concentrations of Spanish-speaking people; appointing native Spanish-speaking priests as pastors in large Spanish-speaking communities; supporting subsidized low-income parishes from a national Catholic source; giving high priority to inner-city projects involving priests more deeply in the day-to-day economic, social, and religious life of the people; and that seminary recruitment and education be expanded to include programs adapted to the needs of Mexicanos (Sandoval 2006:84). A year later a group of religious women formed *Las Hermanas* (The Sisters, in this case religious nuns) whose goal was to promote “more effective and active service of the Hispanic people by using the expertise, knowledge, and experience of religious women in the fields of education, health, pastoral work, and sociology” (Sandoval 2006:83-85).

The lack of Mexican clergy in the hierarch of the Church in the United States has continued until relatively recently. Over the past few years, fifteen percent of all new priests ordained in the United States have been of Hispanic/Latino descent. Between 1970 and the present, forty-five Hispanic bishops were ordained making up 9 percent of all Catholic bishops in the United States. Approximately half were immigrants from Mexico, Cuba, Spain, Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries. Twenty-eight percent are still active (USCCB). In 1970, at the specific request of Archbishop Frances J. Furey of San Antonio, Patricio Fernández Flores was appointed bishop as Archbishop Furey’s auxiliary—the first Hispanic bishop in the country (Sandoval 2006:89). Pope Paul VI appointed Robert Fortune Sanchez as the first Hispanic archbishop of the Catholic Church in the United States in 1974. Bishop Flores was appointed Archbishop of San Antonio in 1979, followed by Archbishop José Horacio Gómez appointed in 2004, and Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller appointed in 2010 (Cheney 2012).
Sacred Objects in Mexicano Catholicism

Mexican Catholicism is marked by its ritual practices, devotion to the saints, and use of sacred objects in devotions. The importance of objects in ritual practices stems from the knowledge that the sacred objects used during divine worship—the Eucharist, tabernacle, altar stone, and images of Christ, of Mary, his mother, and of the saints embody the holy (Gutiérrez, 1997:43-44). Sacred objects used in personal devotion are referred to as sacramentals—something that is more than a sign or symbol but less than a holy sacrament. Catholic theology contends, according to historian and religious studies scholar Colleen McDannell, that there are certain rituals and ritual gestures established by Christ Himself. Through prescribed “words and objects,” these rituals or “sacraments” are accepted ways of worshipping God and instructing people in their faith. As rituals, the sacraments are enacted or performed and require visible signs in order to be effective. It is through the sacraments that God channels grace into the faithful. From a theological standpoint, grace is the “affective presence that pours through the object or gesture being used in the ritual” (McDannell 1995:19). Sacraments therefore act as a bridge between the human and the Divine and that bridge is at times material and personal. The Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick. The Church also clearly delineates how and under what conditions these sacraments are administered and with what words and objects. In the early history of the Church, many of the sacraments were often performed in private homes. After the reforms of the Council of Trent, the sacraments were supposed to be administered only within the context of the church and only through ordained priests.

Sacramentals are actions or objects used in the performance of rituals in the home, such as objects on home altars, and are viewed as a “privatized or personalized version of the
institutionalized church” (McDannell 1995:20-21). For example, Matrimony is a sacrament but a related sacramental would be a blessing of the new home, the bridal chamber, or the expectant mother. For *Mexicanos*, the displaying in the home of the rosary or *lasso* used to unite them in marriage would be a personal practice not required by the church but an action considered a sacramental or personal expression of devotion. Sacramentals would also include such actions as making the sign of the cross with holy water, praying with a rosary, giving alms, wearing a medal, creating a home altar or shrine, tattooing the body, or eating food blessed for holiday celebrations, and the objects used in the performance of these actions. These are all common ritual actions that can be performed on a daily basis by non-ordained men and women in their homes.

The practices and sacred objects of the Catholic religion were brought to the Americas by the Spanish. Writing about the art of colonial Mexico, Clara Bargellini (2009) described the Spanish as arriving with a Catholic tradition of elaborate home chapels and missionaries’ intent on converting the indigenous people to the Catholic faith. The Franciscan missionaries arrived in New Spain (Mexico) shortly after Cortés captured Tenochtitlan. The Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Jesuits followed in succession. The Franciscans and Jesuits founded hundreds of missions in the northern reaches of the territories claimed by Spain in Mexico and the area covering present-day states California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida. Bargellini notes that nearly all of these missions were decorated with paintings, sculpture, furniture, religious objects, and vestments brought from Spain and later made by local artists. Chicano studies scholar Lara Medina describes the sacred objects made by local peoples in an interview with Teresa Malcolm,

The icons that the *mestizo* people developed incorporated Christian and indigenous elements in one object, such as a crucifix with the sun and moon placed on the cross, or a
cross made out of corn husks. . . making the connection between the Christian deity and the sacred cosmic forces and the sacred food, corn. . . The indigenous people combined the sacred images and objects of the new faith with their existing domestic religious practices—*religion casera*—of creating home altars. [Malcolm 2003]

It was common practice for missionaries to use these sacred images and objects, along with the statues of the saints and other object they brought from Spain, in teaching the people the new religion. The mobile quality of these sacred objects allowed them to be paraded solemnly through town and countryside and used in the creation of home altars (Morgan 2005:147-154). Using these objects, missionaries and informal teaching by lay Spaniards, Amerindian, African, and *mestizos* laity helped to spread the Catholic faith throughout Mexico and the Southwest (Badillo 2006:xiii; see also Keane 2007).

According to Badillo (1997, 2006), religion was center of life in colonial Mexico, with shrines or altars set aside for family devotions in the home. There is little evidence of the use of home altars in the pre-conquest era of Mexico, however, it is probable that domestic altars played a role in the lives of indigenous Mexican people and there is some evidence in the archaeological record (Turner 1990 diss.:1n20:68). Excavations at several sites in Mexico have revealed objects that are believed to have been used in religious rituals in the home rather than in public spaces. For example, William Sanders excavated an Early Classic urban village located just west of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán where he found some evidence of remains of home altars. He writes, “some type of family altar complex, comparable to the contemporary Catholic altar may have been present involving . . . figurines since they were abundant and occur all through the room complexes” (Sanders 1966:139). While there has been little detailed study of home altars in the post-Conquest and Colonial periods, there is ethnographic and historical evidence that suggests a syncretic blending of indigenous practices of the Maya, Toltec, and

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21 See also Pasztory (1992) and Headrick (1996) for a discussion of other religious object found at excavations at the Pyramid of the Sun site.
Mexica with Spanish Catholic practices.

Home devotions were usually necessary in colonial Mexico, according to Badillo, because of the difficulty of traveling long distances over poor roads to the nearest church or mission. Although priests often carried a portable altar to celebrate mass and to minister to the sick and dying in the more remote areas, they more often relied on the private home altars that were used for the daily devotion of the family, friends, and household servants. Church authority diminished after Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821 resulting in even fewer religious clergy. The lack of an institutional church presence reinforced the importance of domestic altars. The annexation of part of Mexico by the United States in 1848 further complicated matters for U.S. Mexican Catholics. They encountered discrimination in the U.S. Catholic church and anti-Catholicism in the wider culture resulting in pressure to assimilate. A distinct lack of Mexican clergy or sympathy for Mexican religious practices forced people to maintain their traditional religious practices in the home.

Writing about home altars in New Mexico, Marie Romero Cash (1998) explained that home altars were not mandated by the Catholic Church, and at times their use had been discouraged, however they were popular among other European groups that encountered the same situation as the people of Mexico as far as lack of clergy (e.g. Italian, Polish, Czech). The pressure to assimilate and “universalize” the Church in the 1940s and '50s reduced the number of people creating home altars, however many people did continue the practice in spite of the pressure to confine their religious devotions to the institutional Church activities. With the message of the Second Vatican Council to become more “culturally” receptive to its members, many returned to the practice of home-based devotions such as home altars and other sacramentals for personal devotion (Cash 1998:29-30).
Conclusion

This background provides the framework for the study of the use of home altars and other traditional practices in negotiating of sense of self as a member of a particular religious community and as a member of a particular ethnic group within the context of the dominant Anglo community. The images and objects placed on a Mexican home altar tell the story of conquest, adaptation, negotiation, and cultural complexity of transnational lives (Ricciardi 2006:563-564). The southern area of the United States was first settled by indigenous peoples of what is now Mexico and was later colonized by Spaniards and immigrants from the United States in turn, both usurping the land from its rightful owners and imposing their brand of cultural expectations. The Spanish enforced their culture values, language, and religion thereby shaping the identity of the indigenous population under their control. The Spanish brought with them a particular kind of Catholicism that focused on interactions with the supernatural through icons, images and other forms of material culture that were used not only in the church but also in the home.

With the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo a new border was established which served effectively to strand many Mexican citizens in the United States where conflict with a new set of cultural values emerged. Tensions rose over issues of language, religion, economics, gender expectations, and racial or ethnic identity. Mexicanos, who considered this land theirs, refused to assimilate into what was rapidly becoming a white, European, Protestant society. They kept their language, their traditional customs, and their religious practices which contrasted sharply with the Protestant practices and with the post-Council of Trent Catholicism that was practiced by the northern Europeans in the United States.

Mexicanos, considered mestizos or a mixed race people by the Spanish, encountered even
more marginalization based on the inability to neatly fit into the black/white racial dichotomy which existed in the United States. Neither black nor white they were definitely “other” and so marginalized and restricted in their access to jobs, education, and other rights available to the white population. In addition, Mexicanos have always been a mobile people freely moving back and forth over la frontera or borderlands making connections in the United States, but not severing ties with their homes in Mexico. They build strong social network that encompasses both locations. It is between the borders that they must negotiate an identity and a place for themselves—one foot in each culture—the Mexican and the Anglo. These are all contributing factors to a crisis of identity among Mexicanos. Traditionally labeled by the dominant society, they have consistently attempted to maintain an identity that they controlled by maintaining various aspects of their traditional culture. The continued performance of traditional rituals practices of their Mexicano Catholicism, including the creation and use of home altars, is one of the ways in which people express their identity as Mexicano.

Another element of Mexican Catholicism that helps bridge the gap between cultures and fosters a sense of distinct Mexican heritage is the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her appearance, whether literal, or mythical, to an indigenous man in Mexico represents the mixing of the two cultures—the Spanish and the indigenous—through her son Jesus Christ. The pioneer of mestizo theology, Virgilio Elizondo (1980, 1997, 2000) designates her as "the first mestiza" or "the first Mexican." He argues that Guadalupe continues to be a mixture of the cultures which blended to form Mexico. In the next chapter I present the narrative of the apparition as it has been passed down both in writing and orally for generations. I also explore the symbolism that connects the indigenous and Catholic belief systems.
CHAPTER 3

THE POWER OF STORY & IMAGE

Our Lady of Guadalupe
Queen of Mexico and Empress of The Americas

Our Lady of Guadalupe\(^2\) is considered by Catholics, and many non-Catholic Mexicans, to be Mexico's Patroness and Empress of the Americas.\(^3\) Anthropologist Eric Wolf was first to discuss Our Lady of Guadalupe as a “master symbol” that “links together, family, politics, and religion” (Wolf 1958:153). Wolf says that Guadalupe more than any other manifestation of the Virgin Mary is a symbol that joins religious belief with national identity. He sees Guadalupe as a metaphor or “a way of talking about Mexico: a ‘collective representation’ of Mexican society” and a Mexican national symbol (Wolf 1958:153). I have included this rather lengthy discussion of the apparition story and an analysis of the symbols in the image Our Lady of Guadalupe left for her people because both are embedded in the cultural memory of people of Mexican descent and play an important role in the enactment of religious rituals and in the negotiation of Mexicano identity. Father James Marshall, associate pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, told me that the story of the apparition Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego is often repeated, especially on the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12 when it is often re-enacted in the form of a play. He added that the story is a simple one that people carry in their hearts, though it is filled with powerful images and symbols. Most people can tell the story even quoting significant passages of Our Lady’s words or those of Juan Diego. For them Our Lady of

\(^{22}\) I use the terms Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady, Guadalupe, Maiden, and La Virgen interchangeably throughout—these are some of the different ways in which people refer to and address this symbol.

\(^{23}\) With the Papal Brief Non Est Equidem of 25 May 1754, Pope Benedict XIV declared Our Lady of Guadalupe patron of what was then called New Spain. Pope Pius X proclaimed her patron of Latin America in 1910. Pope Pius XII bestowed the title of “Queen of Mexico and Empress of the Americas” on Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1945, and “Patroness of the Americas” in 1946. Pope John XXIII called her the "Mother of the Americas" in 1961 (Garrido 2012).
Guadalupe is present in their daily lives. She is there to guide them through life and to offer them hope, as she offered these things to their ancestors (Interview with Father James Marshall by Mary Durocher, 2010).

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is in evidence everywhere in the community of San Antonio. Her image appears on house exteriors and interiors, in churches and on home altars, on public murals, cars, restaurants and on personal items such as clothing, jewelry, and tattoos. Her story is retold in song and poetry, popular and sacred. She has become part of the social fabric of the community—and the cultural landscape. Each of the people I interviewed had at least one image or statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a place of honor and often had several. I argue that is the interaction with these images and the retelling and re-enactment of the narrative of the apparition that keeps the Virgin and her story alive in the daily lives of her people. The image of the Virgin is a symbol of the covenant between the Mexican people and Our Lady—a covenant that offers hope and salvation through her intercession. The story and the image also connect the people to their Mexican heritage.

The images of Our Lady of Guadalupe are used for religious devotion and at times make their way into popular culture, as demonstrated in the next two figures. Figure 3.1 is a photograph of a nicho (niche or altar) on the side of the San Jacinto Senior Home near Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. This 8’ X 12’ mural was a cooperative work between the San Anto Cultural Arts organization and the seniors from the Home. The lead artists were Janie Tabares-Ornelaz and Mary Agnes Rodriguez along with project facilitators Cruz Ortiz and Alex Rubio. The mural depicts the mestizo influence of altars and devotional nichos throughout the Westside of San Antonio. This painted image of Our Lady is unusual for a mural. It is a portable, three-dimensional, three-part, wooden panel with physical, life-like representations of cacti roses—
San Anto Cultural Arts has hopes that this movable *nicho* mural will be able to travel around the city to various sites. Figure 3.2 portrays a pair of cowboy boots with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe emblazoned on them—meant as a work of art rather than an item to wear. The boots are available for sale in a local shop that carries many iconographic images of Guadalupe as well as other *Mexicano* traditional figures. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe appears on a wide variety of items, especially clothing—from everyday t-shirts to fancy apparel including First Communion dresses.

Religious studies scholar Jeannette Rodríguez (1994, 2004 and Rodríguez & Fortier 2007) writes that the lived experience of devotion to Our Lady endures because it resonates with their cultural memories of conquest and domination and offers them hope of salvation. Rodríguez links the apparition to the daily lives of the people who received and believe the story and carry it as part of their cultural memory and to their indigenous cosmology.
Rodríguez says,

Like all memories, cultural memory is a living and dynamic reality. The memory of the Guadalupe is recorded and transmitted in the stories her devotees narrate, in their devotional practices in her honor, in the naming of their children after her, and in their celebrations of her feast. Remembering and transmitting the Guadalupe experience is mainly a matter of affirming aspirations and nurturing the hope and strength needed to maintain one’s identity. [Rodriguez & Fortier 2007:15]

A Brief History of the Apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady of Guadalupe, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary, is believed to have appeared to an indigenous peasant, Juan Diego, at Tepeyac Hill just north of Mexico City in 1531, ten years after the Spanish Conquest. Juan Diego originally named Cuauhtlatoa (Eagle Speaks), was baptized Juan Diego in 1525. Rodríguez sets the apparition story within a historical context that suggests that the Aztec civilization was abruptly halted with the arrival of Hernán Cortés and the Spanish Conquistadors in 1521. She explains that after the conquest, the king of Spain sent the Franciscans to evangelize among the indigenous people in a climate of violence and oppression. Consequently, “the conquest was a sign [to the indigenous people] that their gods had been other thrown or had abandoned them. Nothing was left for them but to die.” Rodríguez adds that “in the midst of death and destruction, a great sign of hope and liberation appears—Guadalupe, the mother of the awaited fifth sun, the new Quetzalcoatl. Holy Mary of Guadalupe, the maternal face of God, the beloved Mother of God, comes to console a suffering people” (Rodriguez & Fortier 2007:17). The appearance of The Virgin in this context has therefore been viewed as an act of salvation for the Mexican people.

During the apparition, The Virgin left her image on Juan Diego’s tilma (a cloak made of cactus fibers) as a sign of her commitment to the people of Mexico as she welcomed them into

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24 Quetzalcoatl (Nahuatl: Quetzalcohuātl [ketsal'ko.a.tl]) is one of the better-known Mesoamerican deities. He is also known as the “Plumed Serpent” or "feathered serpent" (Castro 2001:193-194).
The story of her apparition exists in the oral tradition of the Nahuatl language of the local people. The first written account—the *Nican Mopohua*—is believed to have been set down by Antonio Valeriano in 1540 or 1545 although there are some disputes about the time and author. The original image on Juan Diego’s *tilma* is now hanging framed behind glass in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Tepeyac, Mexico. According to historian Stafford Poole (2006), not only has the *tilma* maintained its structural integrity for nearly 500 years, it also repaired itself after ammonia was accidently spilled on it in 1791, and that on November 14, 1921 a bomb placed at the foot of the icon damaged the altar but not the *tilma* or image. The image measures 6 1/2' X 3 1/2’. It depicts Mary as an adolescent girl, around 15 years-of-age, with an oval face and indigenous clear dark skin. According to the Catholic Church, this is the only received image that exists of the Virgin Mary—one given to the people of Mexico directly by her. Sociologist of religion Socorro Castañeda-Liles (2008) claims that the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the narrative of her apparition is considered the most common focus of shared devotion among people of Mexican descent including *Mexicanos* in San Antonio.

The choice of the name “Our Lady of Guadalupe” for this particular manifestation of the Virgin Mary had many permutations. The name she gave herself when speaking to Juan Diego was *Tlecuauhtlacupeuh*, a Nahuatl word that sounded like *Guadalupe* to Spanish speakers. They associated the name with “Our Lady of Guadalupe” from Estremadura, Spain which is one of three black Madonnas in Spain and therefore recognized her as “Our Holy Mother.” *Tlecuauhtlacupeuh* translates in Spanish as “*la que viene volando de la luz como el águila de fuego*” and in English as “she who comes flying from the region of light like an eagle of fire” (Castro 2001:240). This term also links the Virgin with the female Aztec deity *Tonantzin* for
whom the sacred site at Tepeyac Hill is dedicated. She is considered the “Mother of the Gods” and is the patroness of midwives and healers (Castro 2001:230). Due to the association of this figure as the “mother” of gods and her connection with the people, the names “Our Lady of Guadalupe” and “Tonantzín” were often used interchangeably by the people of Mexico, especially those of Aztec heritage. Our Lady of Guadalupe is referred to by many names including: La Virgen María (The Virgin Mary), Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), La Virgen de Guadalupe (The Virgin of Guadalupe), and Madre de Dios (Mother of God). She is also addressed by more affectionate terms such as: La Morenita (dark-skinned one—also La Criolla and La Morena), Virgencita (Little Virgin), Lupita (diminutive for Guadalupe), and Madrecita (Little Mother) (Castro 2001:230).

According to Latino religious studies scholar Gastón Espinosa, Our Lady of Guadalupe has led the Mexican people in many battles for freedom and equality. Miguel Hidalgo led the insurgents while carrying a banner with the image of Our Lady during the Mexican War of Independence against Spain in 1810. After the war, the first president of Mexico adopted the name “Guadalupe Victoria.” Again, in the Great Revolution of 1914 the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe led Emiliano Zapata and his agrarian rebels. César Chávez and Delores Huerta organized the United Farm Workers in 1965 and marched behind the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the fight for Mexican American Civil Rights (Espinosa 2008:23-24). Today, the Virgin of Guadalupe remains a strong national and religious symbol in Mexico and in the Americas. “Her image knows no borders. She crosses la frontera undocumented every day as immigrants swim across the treacherous Rio Grande or walk through the scorching desert carrying her image on a chain around their necks, on an estampita in their wallets, or in their
prayers” (Castañeda-Liles 2008:153). Our Lady of Guadalupe is considered by Catholics of Mexican descent to be everywhere and always available to them—her people.

**Interpretations of Our Lady of Guadalupe Apparition Story**

Not surprisingly given the brief history described above, there is an extensive literature on the apparition and image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and its meaning to the Mexican people. Castañeda-Liles (2008) counts more than 1,300 works that focus specifically on Guadalupe including an *Anthology of Early Guadalupan Literature* written by Fr. Martinus Cawley in 1984. Many more works on Mexico and Mexican religion include mention of the image and apparition. In her work, Castañeda-Liles summarizes two of the most common approaches scholars have taken to the study of Guadalupe—the theological and the historical. Virgilio Elizondo (1980, 1997, 2000) theologian and pastor of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, represents an indigenous, Catholic apparitionist interpretation in which Guadalupe transcends the human. Castañeda-Liles contends that “She is seen as a higher being to whom people can turn to for comfort and affirmation. . . Our Lady of Guadalupe becomes the mother who advocates for her children. . . [she] is the beginning of a new creation—the *mestizo* people of Mexico—in which she is the ‘mother of a new humanity’” (Castañeda-Liles 2008:157-158).

Guadalupe represents a mixing of the faiths of the indigenous and Spanish people—*la azteca* and *la española*. A major element of *Mexicano* religion centers on the concept of *mestizo*, or mixed race. When the *conquistadores* began assimilating local indigenous peoples into their culture, the indigenous people retained many of their religious traditions as they also accepted

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25 An *estampita* is a small religious card, sometimes called a holy card, with the image of a saint on one side and a prayer on the other.

the religion of the *conquistadores*. The story of the apparition embodies the mix of Indian mythology and Catholic icon and devotion to the saints that characterize *Mexicano* Catholicism. The Virgin of Guadalupe functions as a symbol of *mestizo* pride in the face of colonial oppression (Badillo 2006; Espinosa 200; Goizueta 2003; Wolf 1958). That the Virgin appeared as an Indian woman symbolizes for many God’s recognition of *mestizo* pride and history. In her appearance to a *mestizo* peasant she embodies both worlds—the past and the present. She is speaks to their cultural memories and is part of the lived experience of the people.

The anti-apparitionist, historical approach of scholars such as Louise M. Burkhart (1993) and Stafford Poole (1995) provide a counter-narrative that disputes the authenticity of the Guadalupe story and image. However Poole writes, “Guadalupe still remains the most powerful religious and national symbol in Mexico today. The symbolism, however, does not rest on any objective historical basis” (Poole 1995:225). The non-apparitionists contend that the faith in Guadalupe rests solely on the image even though it was not miraculously produced by Our Lady but was instead painted by an indigenous artist named Marcos (see also Peterson 2005). Castañeda-Liles notes that not all historians take a non-apparitionist approach. She mentions Mexican historians Fidel González Fernández, Eduardo Chávez Sánchez, and José Luis Guerrero Rosado as among those who contend that there is historical evidence for the apparition of Our Lady to Juan Diego (Castañeda-Liles 2008:154, 160). They rely primarily on indigenous, Spanish, and *mestiza* oral histories for their analysis and the fact that scientists cannot explain how the *tilma* made of maguey-fiber cloth has managed to survive for nearly 500 years.

Despite scholarly debate, people still put their faith in Our Lady of Guadalupe—a symbol that incorporates both their indigenous past and current place in time and space. Castañeda-Liles
explains this continued faith when she writes, “regardless of the historical validity of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, for Chicanas/os she is a symbol that incarnates an identity, a cultural and political consciousness” (Castañeda-Liles 2008:166 emphasis added). People have retained their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe by displaying her image and retelling and reenacting her story as part of their daily practices.

The Story of Our Lady of Guadalupe—The Nican Mopohua

While there are many translations and interpretations of the Guadalupe narrative—theological, historical, and anthropological—I have chosen to use the faith-based interpretation of Jeanette Rodríguez (in Rodríguez & Fortier 2007) as a guide to the meaning of the story to the indigenous people to whom the Virgin appeared. Rodríguez claims that the story of the apparition “reminds the people of their glorious ancestry” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:17) and brings it into their present day lives. In her interpretation of the apparition story Rodríguez makes the connection between the relationship with Our Lady of Guadalupe and the maintenance of ethnic identity through the symbolic images in the story and the continuous practice of rituals dedicated to Our Lady such as prayer, rosaries, celebrations and songs, as well as the building of many Basilicas and churches in her honor.

In addition, I have chosen to use the translation by anthropologist David K. Jordan (2006) out of the many translations that are available. Jordon has translated the text to English directly from the original Nahuatl rather than a Spanish translation. Rodríguez describes Nahuatl as a highly symbolic language that conveys subtle meanings not expressed in the words themselves. She therefore believes it is essential to the meaning to combine the translation with the Nahuatl cultural symbols and with the myths of the people to properly interpret the narrative. Rodríguez
begins her interpretation of the narrative by explaining two important aspects of the Nahuatl language that are key to understanding the text: 1) the use of disfracismos—using two words instead of one to express meaning, and 2) the use of numerology—numbers or repetition that have symbolic meaning. For instance, the number four represents completion and the number five refers to the center of the world. (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:17). Both of these are key to understanding the symbolic impact of the text to the indigenous people of Mexico in the past and to Mexicans people of Mexican descent who are believers today and who have been politically and economically marginalized people of Mexico.

As I retell the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe I include excerpts from the interpretation by Jeanette Rodríguez (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007) alongside the lines from the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Introduction: The Nican Mopohua</strong></th>
<th><strong>Rodríguez Interpretation</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NICAN MOPOHUA (&quot;Thus it is Said&quot;) and set down in order how a short time ago the Perfect Virgin Holy May Mother of God, our Queen, miraculously appeared out at Tepeyac, widely known as Guadalupe. First She caused herself to be seen by an Indian named Juan Diego, poor but worthy of respect; and then her Precious Image appeared before the recently named Bishop, Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga. 1 Ten years after the City of Mexico was conquered, with the arrows and shields put aside, when there was peace in all the towns, 2 just as it sprouted, faith now grows green, now opens its corolla, the knowledge of the One by whom we all live: the true God. [Jordan 2006:ln 1-2]</td>
<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego ten years after the Aztec nation had been subordinated into a state of alienation, suffering, and oppression. This is a time when the Catholic faith has begun to grow. Guadalupe reveals herself as coming from “the knowledge of the One by whom we all live: the true God” (line 2 at left). In Nahuatl, this phrase represents the name of one of their gods. They would have recognized this god to be their god [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:27]</td>
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</table>
The *Nican Mopohua* text records Saturday, December 9, 1531, early in the morning, as the time of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, a Nahua Indian and recent convert. He was walking toward church that morning across the hill of Tepeyac (a sacred ancient worship site of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin) to the church in Mexico City.

<table>
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<th>Excerpts from The <em>Nican Mopohua</em></th>
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<td>3  It was Saturday, not yet dawn; he was coming in pursuit of God and his commandments.</td>
<td>In Nahuatl culture, <em>very early in the morning</em>, referred not only to daybreak but also to the beginning of all time. Therefore, the apparition represents the beginning of something new, and the Guadalupe event takes on the significance of a foundational experience equal in importance to the origin of the world and the cosmos. This “new beginning” is particularly important when you consider that this “Maiden” represents the Catholic faith of the dominant culture, appearing as a “dark-skinned” person to a newly converted indigenous person. This is the beginning of the reconciliation of the church of the Spanish and the beliefs of the indigenous conquered people—an acceptance of them into the religious fold. [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:17-18]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  And as he drew near the little hill called Tepeyac it was beginning to dawn. [Jordan 2006:In 3-4]</td>
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As Juan Diego came to the top of Tepeyac he heard music and the song of birds.

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<tr>
<td>5  He heard singing on the little hill, like the song of many precious birds; when their voices would stop, it was as if the hill were answering them; extremely soft and delightful, their songs exceeded the songs of the coyoltotl and the tzinitzcan and other precious birds. [Jordan 2006:In 5]</td>
<td>In the context of Nahuatl <em>disfracismos</em>, music represented one-half of a dual way of expressing truth, beauty, philosophy, and divinity. Flower and song together manifested the presence of the Divine. We see here at the introduction the presence of song and later will see the flowers. The word for song or music appears five times. In Nahuatl cosmology, five was a symbol for the center of the world. The reference to song, then, points to another way of experiencing, understanding, and conceptualizing contact with the Divine. [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:18]</td>
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Juan Diego is so amazed by the sound of the beautiful songs of the birds he stops to look around.
He cannot believe what he is hearing. He thinks he might be dreaming or gone to heaven.

Excerpts from *The Nican Mopohua*

6 Juan Diego stopped to look. He said to himself: "By any chance am I worthy, have I deserved what I hear? Perhaps I am only dreaming it? Perhaps I'm only dozing?"

7 *Where am I? Where do I find myself? Is it possible that I am in the place our ancient ancestors, our grandparents, told about, in the land of the flowers, in the land of corn, of our flesh, of our sustenance, possibly in the land of heaven?* [Jordan 2006:ln 6-7]

Rodríguez Interpretation

Significant in the Nahuatl account is the use of the number four, which symbolized cosmic totality or completion. In the text, Juan Diego asks four basic questions:

1) Am I worthy, am I dreaming?
2) Where am I?
3) Perhaps I am in the land of the ancestors?
4) Am I in heaven?

There is a moment of silence between the time Juan Diego hears the music and asks the questions. This silence, in conjunction with the coming dawn, represents another dual Nahuatl expression that serves to link the event with the origins of creation. [Rodriguez & Fortier 2007:18]

The sound of the song is coming from the east, the direction of the rising sun which is the symbol of God in Aztec culture. According to Elizondo (1980:85), “The Sun god was the principal god in the native pantheon... She [Guadalupe] is greater than the greatest of the native divinities, yet she does not do away with the Sun.” The Virgin represents the sun, appearing in the east, and is clothed in the sun, but she is not greater than the Sun. She is part of the cosmos of both the Spanish Catholics and the Nahuatl people—a symbol of the two cosmos uniting. Juan Diego looks to the east, when the song abruptly stops, and he hears someone calling to him. He proceeds up the hill in the direction of this new sound and encounters a “Maiden” who speaks to him: "Juan, Dearest Juan Diego."

Excerpts from *The Nican Mopohua*

12 And then when the singing suddenly stopped, when it could no longer be heard, he heard someone calling him, from the top of the hill, someone was saying to him: "Juan, Dearest Juan Diego." [Jordan 2006:ln 12]

Rodríguez Interpretation

Guadalupe enters the Nahuatl reality in a way that the people can understand. She first addressed Juan Diego by the diminutive form of his name, which in Spanish is translated as Juan Dieguito—a Nahuatl form of expression conveying maternal love, delicacy, and reverence. [Rodriguez & Fortier 2007:18]
Juan had proceeded up the hill in “happy” anticipation. He was however overwhelmed by the sight he saw which “exceeded all imagination” (Jordan 2006:In 16). The Maiden stood in grandeur on top of the small hill and the scene around her was miraculously transformed.

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<td>17 her clothing was shining like the sun, as if it were sending out waves of light,</td>
<td>The text describes the “Maiden” as clothed with the radiance of the sun (line 17 at left). In Nahuatl culture, a person’s clothing, especially that of an important person, was dyed a certain color and adorned with objects or symbols that revealed who that person was, who had sent that person, or where that person had come from. The rays of sun emanating from behind Guadalupe informed the indigenous people, as represented by Juan Diego, that God formed part of her experience and personality and that He had sent this person. Guadalupe’s presence also elicits a response from the earth (line 18-21 at left). This encounter affects the world. Guadalupe, therefore, presents and represents new life to the people and to the land. [Rodriguez &amp; Fortier 2007:19]</td>
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<td>18 and the stone, the crag on which she stood, seemed to be giving out rays;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>19 her radiance was like precious stones, it seemed like an exquisite bracelet (it seemed beautiful beyond anything else);</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20 the earth seemed to shine with the brilliance of a rainbow in the mist.</td>
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<td>21 And the mesquites and nopals and the other little plants that are generally up there seemed like emeralds. Their leaves seemed like turquoise. And their trunks, their thorns, their prickles, were shining like gold. [Jordan 2006:In 17-21]</td>
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The *Nican Mopohua* does not treat this event as an apparition but rather as an “encounter” between Juan Diego, a fifty-two year-old poor villager, who is a member of the
oppressed and enslaved indigenous people and the beautiful Maiden. He prostrates himself in her presence (Jordan 2006:ln 22). He perceives her as a woman of nobility because she so magnificently clothed and is standing up. Though nobles of that time, whether Aztec or Spanish, would generally receive people sitting down showing that such an individual had dominion over the people; in the case of Guadalupe, the nobility that Juan perceives in this woman is not the dominant sort. (Rodríguez 2007:18-19).

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<td>22 He prostrated himself in her presence. He listened to her voice [her breath], her words, which give great, great glory, which were extremely kind, as if from someone who was drawing him toward her and esteemed him highly.</td>
<td>The Maiden, who has not yet identified herself, does not treat Juan Diego as one of the conquered but rather acknowledges and restores his dignity by her posture, the tone of her words, and her dialogue. [Rodriguez &amp; Fortier 2007:19].</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 She said to him, &quot;Listen, my dearest-and-youngest son, Juan. Where are you going?&quot;  [Jordan 2006:ln 22-23]</td>
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**Jordan Note on Translation**
The expression in Nahuatl *in ihïyötl in tlahtölli* translates as "the breath, the words." (Jordan 2006)

Juan Diego speaks to the Maiden and she reveals to him her identity and her desire to have a “sacred little house” built on the hill of Tepeyac.

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<td>25 and she says to him: &quot;Know, be sure, my dearest and youngest son, that I am the Perfect Ever Virgin Holy Mary, mother of the one great God of truth who gives us life, the inventor and creator of people. The owner and lord of what is around us and what is touching us or very close to us, the owner and lord of the sky, the owner of the earth. I want very</td>
<td>Guadalupe first identifies herself as “Perfect Ever Virgin Holy Mother.” Virginity was highly valued in Nahuatl culture by both men and women. They would have looked upon Our Lady as an embodiment of a pre-conquest value of their culture [Rodriguez &amp; Fortier 2007:27].</td>
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Guadalupe also identifies herself as:
1) Mother of God who is the God of Truth;
2) Mother of the Giver of Life;
3) Mother of the Creator;
much that they build my sacred little house here,
in which I will show him, I will exalt him on making him manifest:
I will give him to the people in all my personal love, in my compassionate gaze, in my help, in my salvation:
because I am truly your compassionate mother,
yours and of all the people who live together in this land,
and of all the other people of different ancestries, those who love me, those who cry to me, those who seek me, those who trust in me,
because there I will listen to their weeping, their sadness, to remedy, to cleanse and nurse all their different troubles, their miseries, their suffering. [Jordan 2006:ln 25-31]

4) Mother of the One Who Makes the Sun and the Earth; and
5) Mother of the One Who is Near.

Guadalupe identifies herself using Nahuatl duality and phrases. These titles coincide with names given to five of the ancient Aztec gods. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:19].

The Virgin then tells Juan Diego that she wants a temple to be built for her on Tepeyac, where she can bestow her “love, compassion, help, and defense on all those who come to her. Tepeyac is a site of great significance. Previously, it had been the shrine of Tonantzin, one of the major earth mother divinities of the Aztec people. Both of these figures were considered virgins. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:19-20].

Although the shrine for Guadalupe was to be erected on the sacred site Tonantzin and the local people used the name of Tonantzin when referring to Our Lady of Guadalupe for many years, there are major differences in the two entities. Madsen explains the core differences:

The adoration of Guadalupe represented a profound change in Aztec religious belief. . . Tonantzin was both a creator and destroyer. The nature and function of the Virgin of Guadalupe are entirely different from those of the pagan earth goddess. The Christian ideals of beauty, love, and mercy associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe were never attributed to the Aztec deity. The functions of the Catholic Virgin are much broader and more beneficial to man than those of the Aztec nature goddess. Guadalupe protects her children (the Mexicans) from harm, cures their sicknesses, and aids them in all manner of daily undertakings. [Madsen 1967:378]

Guadalupe is seen as a mother and protector rather than a creator and destroyer.

Our Lady of Guadalupe directs Juan Diego to take her message to the Bishop of Mexico, Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, who is a Franciscan Priest. He proceeds directly to Mexico City
where, after being delayed by servants, he eventually meets with the Bishop. The Bishop hears
his story but does not believe him. The Bishop tells Juan Diego to return another day and tell his
story again “calmly.” Disheartened at failing at his mission, Juan Diego returns to the hill where
he again finds the “Queen of Heaven” waiting for him.

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<td>50 &quot;My dear Mistress, Lady Queen, my Youngest Child, my dear Beloved Maiden! I did go to where you sent me to carry out your dear breath, your dear word; although I entered with difficulty to where the place is of the Governing Priest, I saw him, I put your breath, your word, before him, as you ordered me to. [Jordan 2006:In 50]</td>
<td>By referring to the Virgin as “Lady Queen” and my “Youngest Child,” he implies that she, too, is poor and despised, just as he is, forming a bond between the two. [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:20].</td>
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He again prostrates himself in front of her and begs her to send another messenger who the
Bishop will respect. He expresses his regret at failing in his mission. Juan Diego asks for
forgiveness from the Virgin for any pain he may have caused her by his failure to convince the
bishop of her message. Juan Diego believes that it is his fault that he was not accepted. This
sense of unworthiness reflects the status of the Nahuatl as a conquered people.

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<td>54 I beg you, my Lady, Queen, my Beloved Maiden, to have one of the nobles who are held in esteem, one who is known, respected, honored, (have him) carry, take your dear breath, your dear word, so that he will be believed.</td>
<td>The use of four terms to describe the ideal envoy represents, in keeping with Nahuatl numerology, totality and completion. 1) esteemed 2) known 3) respected 4) honored</td>
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<td>55 Because I am really (just) a man from the country, I am a (porter’s) rope I am a backframe, a tail, a wing, a man of no importance: I myself need to be led, carried on someone’s back,</td>
<td>Juan Diego believes that he is not taken seriously because he is an Indian and that her mission would best be completed if a person of higher status were sent. [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:20].</td>
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In his modesty, and with feelings of
that place you are sending me to is a place where I’m not used to going to or spending any time in, my little Virgin, my Youngest Daughter, my Lady, Beloved Maiden;

56 Please excuse me; I will grieve to your face, your heart; I will go into, fall into, your anger, into your displeasure, my Lady, my Mistress.” [Jordan 2006:ln 54-56]

The Virgin absolutely refuses to choose another messenger and urges Juan Diego to again approach the Bishop in her name.

**Excerpts from The Nican Mopohua**

58 "Listen, my youngest and dearest son, know for sure that I have no lack of servants, of messengers, to whom I can give the task of carrying my breath, my word, so that they carry out my will.

59 But it is very necessary that you, personally, go and plead, that my wish, my will, become a reality, be carried out through your intercession.

60 And I beg you, my youngest-and-dearest son, and I order you strictly to go again tomorrow to see the bishop.

61 And in my name make him know, make him hear my wish, my will, so that he will bring into being, he will build my house of God that I am asking him for. [Jordan 2006:ln 58-61]

**Rodríguez Interpretation**

She does not negate or deny the oppression that Juan Diego is experiencing, but she does “insist” on and “beg” for his involvement, using such phrases as: I beg you; I order you; Make him hear my wish. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:20].

The conversation that takes place in the text between Juan Diego and the Virgin seems to be almost a dialogue between equals. Even though Juan Diego is obsequious to the request of his “Lady” she accords him the dignity and respect of a person who has the freedom to choose. She directs him to speak in her name so he will be believed by the Bishop who otherwise may not
The expression "Ever Virgin" as a title for Mary reflects the Catholic doctrine that Mary had no offspring but Jesus and that he was without a human father. The "ever" is clumsy but conventional English in this expression. In Nahuatl, the adverb cemicac translates as perpetual. [Jordan 2006]

In response to the Virgin’s request, Juan Diego reaccepts and re-embraces his mission but is still worried that he will not be believed by the Bishop—“the Governing Priest.”

Juan Diego’s does not want to cause the Virgin any pain and is willing to take up the mission to “carry out your breath, your word” even though he fears for the outcome. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:21].

In the last line (line 66 at left) he again shows his concern for the Virgins welfare and advises her to rest until his return.

The following day, Sunday, Juan Diego attended early Mass and then returned to the Bishop’s home in Mexico City. Once again, Juan Diego told the story of the encounter with the Virgin and her message, “He [Juan Diego] knelt at his feet, he wept, he became sad as he spoke to him, as he revealed to him the breath, the words, of the Queen of Heaven” (Jordan 2006:In 72). The Bishop still did not believe Juan Diego even after extensive questioning. The Bishop asked Juan Diego for a sign so that he would know that “the Queen of Heaven in person was sending him
Juan Diego went back up the hill to inform the Virgin of his second defeat. She told him to return the next day and she would give him a sign the Bishop would believe. However, when Juan Diego arrives home, he finds that his uncle, Juan Bernardino, is extremely ill. His uncle asks Juan Diego to go to Mexico City and bring back a priest to administer the last rites. Juan Diego finds himself caught in a dilemma—go for the priest for his uncle or go back to see the Virgin. The grave illness of an uncle is of paramount importance in this culture. Rodriguez explains,

For us perhaps it would have been more important if the mother or father of Juan Diego was sick, . . . but for most of the Meso-American people, the uncle played a social role of capital importance . . . The uncle received the maximum expression of respect that one could give an adult, and he was the critical element in understanding the barrio and the people. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:21]

Juan Diego decided he must go for a priest so that the last rites may be given to his uncle saying, “because first our tribulation must leave us; first I must quickly call the priest; my uncle is anxiously waiting for him” (Jordan 2006:In 102). On his way to Mexico City, Juan Diego took an alternate route so as not to be “detained” by the Lady. However, as he was walking, he heard the Lady calling to him and saw her on the side of the hill blocking his path. With trepidation he tells her of his troubles.

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<td>109 He prostrated himself before her, he greeted her, he said to her:</td>
<td>At her questioning about where he is going, Juan Diego is ashamed and fearful. He is convinced that the sad news of his uncle’s mortal illness will cause grief for the Virgin. So he begins with pleasantries. He is also concerned that she would think he was abandoning the mission so he assures her he will return shortly [Rodríguez &amp;</td>
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Although it grieves me, I will cause your face and your heart anguish: I must tell you, my Beloved Maiden, that one of your servants, my uncle, is very ill.

A terrible sickness has taken hold of him; he will surely die from it soon.

And now I shall go quickly to your little house in [the city of] Mexico, to call one of our priests, the beloved ones of Our Lord, so that he will go to hear his confession and prepare him, because we really were born for that, we who came to wait for the painful effort of our death.

But, if I am going to carry it out, I will return here after that to go carry your breath, your word, Lady, my Maiden one.

I beg you to forgive me, be patient with me a little longer, because I am not deceiving you with this, my youngest Daughter, my Beloved Maiden. Tomorrow without fail I will come as fast as possible." [Jordan 2006:ln 109-116]

The Virgin assures Juan Diego’s and tells him not to be afraid—his uncle will not die for she is his “mother” and all will be well.

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<td>117 As soon as she heard the explanations of Juan Diego, the Merciful Perfect Virgin answered him:</td>
<td>She continues with five questions (again, a reference to the center of the world):</td>
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<tr>
<td>118 &quot;Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest-and-dearest son, that the thing that frightened you, the thing that afflicted you</td>
<td>1) Am I not here, I, who am your mother?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2) Are you not under my shadow and protection?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3) Am I not the source of your joy?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4) Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms?</td>
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is nothing. Do not let it disturb you. Do not fear this sickness nor any other sickness, nor any sharp and hurtful thing.

119 Am I not here, I, who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need something more?

120 Let nothing else worry you, disturb you. Do not let your uncle's illness pressure you with grief, because he will not die of it now. You may be certain that he is already well”. [Jordan 2006:ln 117-120]

5) Do you need something more?

In these questions, Guadalupe reveals herself as someone with authority. For Mexicans, a person with authority was a person who had the ability to cast a shadow, precisely what Guadalupe does with her mantle: “Mexicans understand authority . . . as one who casts a large shadow . . . because the one who is greater than all the rest must shelter or protect the great and small alike” [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:22].

Juan Diego believes in Guadalupe’s word and Juan Bernardino is cured. Juan Diego was relieved and “was greatly comforted by it, his heart became peaceful” (Jordan 2006:ln 122). This is the Virgin’s first miracle. Rodriguez claims that a “greater miracle occurs when the apparition of Guadalupe brings psychic healing for Juan Diego and ultimately for the Nahuatl people” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:22). Eager to complete his mission, Juan Diego asks the Virgin to give him a sign to take to the Bishop. The Virgin directs Juan Diego to bring her flowers he will find at the top of Tepeyac hill. The flowers Juan Diego finds at the top of the hill are considered to be another miracle by many. It was December, a time of harsh frost in this semi-desert rocky region.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Excerpts from The <em>Nican Mopohua</em></th>
<th>Rodríguez Interpretation</th>
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<tr>
<td>128 And when he reached the top, he was astonished by all of them, blooming, open, flowers of every kind, lovely and beautiful, when it still was not their season, because really that was the season which the frost was very harsh.</td>
<td>The Virgin touches the roses and makes herself present in them, thus inserting herself within the symbolic logic of the Indians, for whom flowers signified truth and dignity. The flowers are thus the sign of her presence that she sends to the Bishop [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:22].</td>
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<td>129 They were giving off an extremely soft fragrance; like precious pearls, as if filled with the dew of the night.</td>
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<td>130 Then he began to cut them, he gathered them all, he put them in the hollow of his tilma.</td>
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<td>134 And immediately he came back down, he came to bring the Heavenly Maiden the different kinds of flowers which he had gone up to cut.</td>
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<td>135 And when she saw them, she took them with her precious hands.</td>
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<td>136 Then she put them all together into the hollow of his tilma (cuexäntli) again and said: &quot;<em>My youngest-and-dearest son, these different kinds of flowers are the proof, the sign that you will take to the bishop.</em> You will tell him from me that he is to see in them my desire, and that therefore he is to carry out my wish, my will.&quot; [Jordan 2006:ln 128-130]</td>
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**Jordan Note on Translation**

170. *And she ordered me to the top of the little hill where I had seen her before, to cut different flowers up there; Castilian roses.* [Jordan 2006:ln 170] The use of the word “roses” has been the traditional translation and used by many in the retelling of the story including Rodríguez; although Jordan uses “flowers” and does not mention “roses” until line 170 at left when Juan Diego is telling the Bishop of the miracle of the flowers.
A "tilma" (Nahuatl: tilmahtli) is a loose, blanket-like cloak or mantle fastened over one shoulder, and worn for warmth by Mexican men at this period. Although the word tilma is in fact used in this document, the Nahuatl word used in this sentence is "qui.cuixan.ten," a verb made from tēma Vt2 = to fill + cuexāntli, a very broad term covering both clothing and sacks for carrying things (here spelled "cuixantli"). [Jordan 2006]

Reminding Juan Diego that he was “my messenger, in you I place my absolute trust” (Jordan 2006:In 139), the Virgin directs Juan to carry her sign to the Bishop so that he will believe the message and build her temple. She admonishes him to only show the flowers/roses to the Bishop and not to anyone else. Juan Diego goes to the Bishop’s palace where he again encounters disrespect and ridicule from the servants. Rodríguez explains that this type of treatment of an indigenous person such as Juan Diego by people of the dominant culture was quite common in the colonial period (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:22). In this particular case, the servants at the Bishop’s palace harass Juan Diego and prevent him from seeing the Bishop. They even try to see and then take away what Juan Diego is holding in his tilma (cloak), but Guadalupe had ordered him not to show the flowers to anyone except the bishop and he tries to comply her request but without success.

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<tr>
<td>152 And when they saw that he was simply standing there for a long, long time with his head down, without doing anything, in case he should be called, and that it looked as if he was carrying something, as if he was bringing it in the hollow of his tilma (cuexāntli); then they came up close to him to see what he was bringing and thus satisfy their curiosity.</td>
<td>This attempt to take the flowers from Juan Diego symbolizes an attempt of the dominant culture to take away the Indian’s truth. The conquerors and the dominant culture have already taken from Juan Diego and his people their land, their goods, their city, their form of government, and their reasons for being and acting. Now they want to take away Juan Diego’s symbol of truth, that is, all he has left. As a result of the Guadalupe event, it is not longer possible to take the truth away from the indigenous people. Rather, it is Juan Diego, an Indian, who brings the truth to the Spanish bishop [Rodríguez &amp;</td>
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there was no way in which he could hide from them what he was carrying and that therefore they might harass him or push him perhaps hurt him and the flowers, he finally gave them a little peek and they saw that it was flowers.

And when they say that they were all exquisite different flowers and that it wasn’t the season for them to be blooming, they were very, very astonished by how fresh they were, how good they smelled, how handsome they seemed.

And they wanted to grab and pull a few out.

They dared to try to grab them three times, but there was no way in which they could do it, because when they would try, they could no longer see the flowers, they saw them as if they were painted or embroidered or sewn on the tilma. [Jordan 2006:In 152-157]

The servants run to tell the Bishop of the miraculous flowers. When he hears their story he immediately calls for Juan Diego as he realizes that this was the proof he had asked for. Juan Diego again relates his story to the Bishop and shows him the sign the Virgin has sent.

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<tr>
<td>176 When I reached the top of the hill I saw that it was now paradise. 177 Every kind of different precious flowers were there, each one perfect, the very finest that there are, full of dew and shining so I immediately cut them. 178 And she told me that I should give them to you from her, and that in this way I would show</td>
<td>Before repeating his story, Juan Diego, subtly reminds the Bishop that he had been doubtful and required a sign, while, he, Juan Diego never doubted the Virgin’s words. As the flowers fall from Juan Diego’s tilma, the fifth apparition occurs (again referring to the center of the world). The image of Guadalupe appears imprinted on the tilma [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:23].</td>
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the truth; that you should see
the sign that you were asking
for in order to carry out her
beloved will.

180 And so that it will be clear that
my word, my message, is truth.

181 And then he held out his white
tilma, in the hollow of which he
had placed the flowers.

182 And just as all the Castilian
roses fell to the floor.

183 Then and there the beloved
Image of the Perfect Virgin
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
became the sign, suddenly
appeared in the form and figure
in which it is now,

184 where it is preserved in her
beloved little house, in her
sacred little house at Tepeyac,
which is called Guadalupe.

[Jordan 2006:In 176-184]

Upon seeing the roses fall out of the *tilma*, and the image of the Virgin imprinted on its surface, the Bishop weeps and begs for forgiveness for his prior disbelief. He places the image in his private chapel in a place of honor.

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<td>185 And as soon as the Governing Bishop and all those who were there saw it, they knelt, they were full of awe and reverence.</td>
<td>When the bishop and those around him see it, they all kneel, admire it, and repent for their failure to believe [Rodríguez &amp; Fortier 2007:23].</td>
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<tr>
<td>186 They stood up to see it, they became sad, they wept, their hearts and minds were in ecstasy.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>187 And the Governing Bishop weeping and with sadness begged and asked her to forgive him for not having immediately carried out her will, her holy breath, her holy word.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>188 And when he got up, he untied Juan Diego's garment, his tilma,</td>
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On the next day the Bishop said to Juan Diego: "Come, let's go so you can show where it is that the Queen of Heaven wants her chapel built" (Jordan 2006:ln 192). They proceeded to the site on Tepeyac and on to the village of Juan Diego’s uncle. Juan Bernardino told them that it was true “she healed him at that exact moment” (Jordan 2006:ln 203) that Juan Diego and the Virgin were speaking. The Virgin had appeared to the uncle in exactly the same way she had appeared to his nephew. She told him of her mission and asked Juan Bernardino to tell the Bishop of his miraculous healing. She also told him to tell the Bishop to name the image “The Perfect Virgin, Holy Mary of Guadalupe” (Jordan 2006:ln 208). The story ends with these last lines and the building of the chapel on the hill at Tepeyac.

**Excerpts from The Nican Mopohua**

210 And together with his nephew Juan Diego, the Bishop lodged them in his house for a few days.

211 While the sacred little house of the lovely Little Queen was built out there at Tepeyac, where she [had] revealed herself to Juan Diego.

212 And the Reverend Bishop moved the beloved Image of the Beloved Heavenly Maiden to the principal church.

213 He took her beloved Image from his residence, from his private chapel in which it was, so that all could see it and admire it. [Jordan 2006:ln 210-213]

Although the text ends here, according to Jordan, other, later traditions claim that Juan Diego eventually moved to the new shrine, where he spent the rest of his life as a caretaker. There is little more known of the Bishop or of Juan Bernardino or of the roses, and the Virgin does not reappear once she has her shrine.

This story of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe and her image in the form of
paintings, medals, and statues, has been passed on for generations. The retelling of the narrative of such a dramatic event has helped preserve indigenous elements that were the foci of repression and eradication. Rodríguez claims that, “It has also persisted as the source of a deeply felt worldview in which hope and faith, in the face of incredible devastation, can still find truth” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:27). According to Elizondo (1980, 1997), Our Lady of Guadalupe represent more than just compassion and hope. He identified four theological interpretations of this narrative:

1) Our Lady of Guadalupe identifies herself as coming from “the knowledge of the One by whom we all live: the true God” (Jordan 2006:11n 2) which implies supreme creative power.

2) Guadalupe is a symbol of a new creation, a new people. Only through a power that comes from heaven could the people of Mexico be saved from the conquest and oppression and be truly proud of their heritage.

3) The narrative addressed a need for dignity and legitimacy for an orphaned people—a restoration of a self made in the image of God and a figure of a “mother” who would sustain them; and

4) Our Lady of Guadalupe symbolizes a reversal of power—not through force—but through a mutual understanding of a shared set of symbols [Elizondo 1980:87-92].

The apparition is a sign that God and Our Lady of Guadalupe cares for the people. As part of their faith in God the people remember this story and the promise of hope and salvation that God and Our Lady have offered them. It becomes part of their cultural memories. Rodríguez explains,

Through the process that carries cultural memory, the people remember the promises of compassion, help, and defense that Guadalupe has made. Because these promises have been made, the people experience hope—a hope carried through cultural memory. As a result of these promises, the people commit themselves to the Guadalupan memory and image—that which can be read, touched, felt, seen, experienced. [Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:28]

It is the narrative and the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe that sustains them in their struggle for liberation and search for identity.
Symbolic Elements on the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe

As important as the symbolic interpretation of the story is to the relevance of the Virgin in people’s lives, the image is of equal importance. There has been considerable scholarly interpretation of the symbols present in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe as well as debate over authenticity. Most scholars do not deny the power of the image—only that the image was miraculously inscribed. For instance, Jeanette Favrot Peterson, scholar of Latino art, demonstrates through her extensive research of images of the Virgin that the image on the tilma was actually a painting done by the painter “Marcos.” She said, “In electing to give his Madonna an olive-grey skin and straight black hair . . . reformulated the new Christian deity for reasons of self-identification. The native artist co-opted the European Madonna image by converting other into self” (Peterson 2005:610). However, the symbolic representations of the image remain the same whether they come from Divine or human hands. Father Marshall conducted a workshop at which he explained these symbols and their meanings. I use his symbolic interpretation rather than scholarly examples because these offer examples of what religious leaders are actually teaching people today in the churches. He stresses that the symbolism in the image are not just static but represent action—things that the Virgin is doing and will do for us if we pray to her. He reminds us to look at her adornments for symbols but also in the position of her body for she sends us an embodied message. There is a reciprocity hinted at—details of how she will intercede for the faithful who pray to her. Praying to the Virgen is an interaction, a forming of a relationship with the Divine person through her image.

The image in Figure 3.3 is an official reproduction of the actual image that appeared on the tilma of Juan Diego. Father Marshall proclaimed at the beginning of the workshop, “Just as we are amazed as we look at the beautiful image we are also captivated by the beautiful Queen,
Our Lady, and we find the mysteries of the life, death, and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (Father James Marshall Workshop 10/2010). He then proceeded to highlight each of the symbols in turn starting with the brilliant light that surrounds Our Lady:

- **Brilliant Light.** In the image, Our Lady stands before a brilliant light that comes from the sun. Aztecs worshipped the sun god. The Aztecs believed that if the sun did not rise each day they had offended their god and would have to make human sacrifices to appease him. The rays show that since she was clothed in the sun she was an important personage. We know from other evidence that she is pregnant and the most intense part of the light comes out right in the middle of her, right where the Child would be. So that the light that shines forth from her is the “Light of the World” also symbolizing our resurrection from the dead. [Father James Marshall Workshop 10/2010]

David Brading, Latin American Studies scholar, notes that Miguel Sanchez, the author of the 1648 tract *Imagen de la Virgen María* has described Our Lady of Guadalupe as the Woman of the Apocalypse from the New Testament’s Book of Revelation 12:1 when Sanchez quoted, “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Brading 2001:5). Some believers feel this verse was a foreshadowing of the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Father Marshal continued,

- **Head Bent.** The Virgin, although clothed in the sun, is not a god herself. Her head is bent in a gesture of humility and she is at prayer. Depictions of gods and goddesses in the Aztec culture contained large eyes that looked directly ahead to show their power. Mary, with her head bowed and veiled eyes, showed she was neither a god nor goddesses, that there was a higher power above her. The Blessed Virgin has bowed her head—completely humble and submissive to the will of God.

- **Face.** The color of the Blessed Mother’s skin is mixture of the European and the indigenous—*mestiza*. It represents a marriage of both cultures. It is a sign of her embracing all peoples as a mother, especially those of mixed blood. Her appearance sends the message that we are neither Indian, Spanish, French, nor American; but all ONE people in the eyes of GOD.

- **Folded Hands.** The folded hands would be recognized by the Aztecs and by Catholics as a gesture of offering and prayer showing us that prayer is the key to the Kingdom of God.
Figure 3.3 Reproduction of the Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe Juan Diego’s *tilma*
Source: Public Domain
- **Eyes.** The eyes of the Virgin seem to have the same qualities as real eyes—the pupils contract and dilate miraculously. Much research has been conducted regarding mysterious images that appear in Our Lady's eyes. The images reflected in her retinas are said to be of the people who were present at the moment when she left her imprint on Juan Diego's *tilma*—Bishop Zumarraga, his interpreter, Juan Diego and several family members (Gonzalez 2007). This evidence has come forth at this time because of the importance now of the unity of the family—the family is in the pupil of the Blessed Mother—it is the “apple of her eye”—the unity of all of us within the Blessed Mother.

- **Hair.** The Blessed Mother’s hair is parted and it is not tied back—it is hanging loss. The parted hair signifies that she is a virgin. The untied hair symbolizes that she is a mother. Therefore, the hair parted and not tied back signifies that she is both a virgin and a mother.

- **Black Belt.** The black belt tied high around the waist is traditional among women who are pregnant. The meaning of the black belt would have been recognized by both the Aztecs and the Spanish.

- **Cuffs.** Our Lady has fur cuffs on her sleeves and around her neck. The fur is a sign of royalty, again indicating her importance.

- **Mantel.** The blue in the mantel represents the celestial—so we see Our Lady clothed in the stars.

- **Tunic.** The rose color of the tunic represents transition and change—the coming together of all people in faith and love. The color rose also symbolizes martyrdom.

- **Flowers.** Flowers are embroidered in gold thread on her tunic. In Nahuatl, flowers of nine petals represent mountains. There is only one four-petal flower that is over the womb just below the sash in the center of the tunic (Figure 3.4). This flower is the most important symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The four-petal flower signifies divinity. It signifies the plentitude of life. The Aztecs immediately understood this four-petal flower and recognized that this was God inside of her womb—the God of all space and all time—the center of the cosmos within the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Aztecs had many gods but this is the unnamed god that they would have understood—the one that made heaven and earth. Flowers in general are symbols of resurrection and life: *Flor y canto*, flower and song, from the *Nican Mopohua*. The nine-petal flowers, magnolias, are shaped like a heart. The Aztec practiced human sacrifices to the god of the moon where they would take the still beating hearts out of living victims. The magnolias shaped like hearts, represent the still-beating hearts of the victims. The Aztec would have recognized the

![Figure 3.4 Four-Petal Flower Source: Public Domain Image](image)
symbolism of this flower and the fact that this pregnant woman would have these magnolias adorn her tunic would have been seen as a sign that she is a woman whose son will offer the final and defining sacrifice of all. The magnolias also represent the nine hills of Mexico City. The one four-petal flower on the tunic represents the Hill of Tepeyac where the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego. The other flowers are arranged on the tunic in the exact relationship of the nine hills of Mexico City to the Hill of Tepeyac.

**Stars.** Stars are scattered on her mantel. When Our Lady appeared to Juan Diego at 10:30 in the morning on December 12 the stars in the sky were exactly in the same pattern as the stars that are shown on her mantle (see highlighted areas in Figure 3.5 for various constellations). Stars noted in red are those visible on the image; black stars would be on the backside of the image. The 48 stars, 22 on the right and 26 on left, appearing on the front of the mantel are of the brightest gold—fit for royalty—as if woven of golden thread. In the image we can see the various constellations One, the *Corona Borealis*, is around her head—the Crown of Stars (highlighted in gold) marking her as royalty and a Queen. The constellation Virgo, the Virgin (highlighted in yellow), would appear on the backside of the mantel in the area of her heart showing that she is a chaste woman—a virgin. The constellation *Gemini* refers to twins (highlighted in purple) and is depicted on the back side of the tunic in an area that corresponds to the knee. This is another representation of birth. The constellation *Leo*—on the back of the tunic—falls in the area of her womb. (highlighted in green). *Regulus* is the name of the brightest star in this constellation which means Little King. The Little King is positioned right at Our Lady’s womb. Three constellations on the robe represent the scorpion, the snake, and the dragon (see highlighted boxes). The snake represents the Agony in the Garden where Our Lord was very much tempted by a serpent; by the dragon; by the scorpion. All of these are surrounding the Blessed Virgin—the dragon is almost looking at the Blessed Virgin Mary face-to-face representing their face-to-face combat. She however faces any kind of
temptation by looking it square in the eye. A cross, representing the crucifixion of Jesus and the cross Our Lady will bear in her lifetime, is also visible in one of the constellations—the Southern Cross highlighted in pink).

- **Bent Knee.** With joy, with love, Our Lady runs to meet her older cousin Elizabeth and with bent knee she responds immediately to the needs of her cousin. She is a woman who goes to meet us and brings with her God.

- **Broach.** At the throat of the Blessed Virgin is a broach with a cross that is holding the garment closed. The Blessed Virgin Mary ties us together with Her Immaculate Heart.

- **Cross on the Broach.** There is a cross on her broach. The Blessed Mother very much carried the cross along with Jesus Christ as any mother would carry the cross with their child. This would be the same cross that would have appeared on the flags of the Spanish conquistadores—the same cross that would have been on their helmets. But she is not a conquistadora, she only conquers our hearts.

- **La Luz.** In the folds in her tunic you can see the letters L, U, and Z—La Luz meaning light. She is a woman ready to give birth to the “Light of the World.

- **Shadows in the Tunic.** In the scriptures the light appeared in the darkness. The dark and the light in the tunic represent this dualism. The light overtakes the darkness—Jesus comes into the world bringing the light.

- **Foot on the Moon.** The Virgin is standing on top of the black crescent moon which represents one of the gods the Aztec worshipped, called the Serpent god—the Feathered Serpent. The god of the Aztecs tempts the people just as Jesus was tempted in the Garden—tempted to despair, tempted to give up, tempted to run. However, the Virgin’s foot is squarely planted on the serpent—she crushes out the serpent in the Garden with no hesitation. She crushes out the darkness in our lives. She crushes the serpent and the falseness.

- **Moon.** The moon is black—not a common portrayal. This represents a falseness. There is something false about a black moon—something is not right about it. So if the angel represents Jesus then they have put a false crown on Jesus because the Lord of the Universe is a real king and Our Lord wears a real crown not a false crown of thorns but a real crown of glory.

- **Clouds.** The clouds in the background represent the celestial and the heavenly from which the Virgin comes.

- **Angel Holding Mantle & Tunic.** At the feet of the Virgin an angel is holding the mantle in one hand and the tunic with another hand. The color of the tunic—a rose color—signifies earthly; while the blue color signifies heavenly. The angel with his hands brings together the heavenly and the earthly. Jesus Christ is heavenly and earthly. So the angel holding the tunic and the mantle is a symbol of the Incarnation. The link between the
Divine and the human. The Aztecs would have recognized the angel beneath the Blessed Mother as a minor god, yet no god in the Aztec religion would be at the service of another god much less a person. The angel is obedient, doing the will of God, holding the folds of the mantle. And yet the angel with its wings is completely free yet he is carrying the Virgin. In Aztec culture only important people are carried—she is a dignitary, royalty.

**Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.** In 1921, someone placed a vase of flowers in front of the image as was a common practice—however, the vase contained a bomb. The bomb was set to go off at 10:30 Mass at which there would be many people. When the bomb went off the windows of the church were shattered, the marble in the floor at the foot of the image was completely gouged out and there was damage for a five-block radius. There however were no significant injuries to any people in the church, the glass over the image was not even scratched, and the image itself was not damaged at all. The crucifix that was beneath the image was bent totally backwards demonstrating the power of the explosion (Figure 3.6). What we can deduce is that Jesus was protecting His Blessed Mother. He defended her from the cross and from the cross he defends the people. [Father James Marshall Workshop 10/2010]

![Figure 3.6 Image of cross after bombing](http://monterey-tlm.blogspot.com/2010/12/our-lady-of-guadalupe-part-2.html)

According to Father Marshall, these symbols in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe define her place in the Catholic Church as the mother of Jesus and therefore the mother of all people—someone that all people can look to for hope and salvation. The inclusion of both Catholic and indigenous symbols that could be interpreted by both the Spanish and the Indian serves to bring them to together under her care in one faith. The image and the narrative of her apparition is therefore an important part of the cultural heritage of the people of Mexico. Father Marshall ended his presentation by encouraging each of the participants to meditate on what they had learned and their relationship to Our Lady of Guadalupe as they pray in their daily lives.
Conclusion

Our Lady of Guadalupe’s apparition to Juan Diego begins a relationship with the people of Mexico that serves as the foundation of Mexican Christianity—a blending of Christian and indigenous symbols that provides a connection between the two cultures. She appears to them in a way that they will understand—clothed in symbols they recognize and embodying their identity. Rodríguez claims that

Guadalupe continues to inform the need for identity, hope, and resistance to the external forces that work to annihilate difference . . . and challenges us to a more inclusive openness regarding the revelation of God and the complexity of being human. . . Her image is a carrier of eschatological hope insofar as the people visit her, look upon her, and know that everything will be fine. . . she hears, affirms, heals, and enables them.” [Rodriguez & Fortier 2007:29]

These connections continue in peoples’ repetition of the narrative and interactions with the image she left on the tilma displayed in public and in the private setting of home altars.

Although the institutional Church in Mexico accepted the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe they discouraged many of their traditional practices. The home altar, however, continued to be a private sacred space to express personal devotion often with Our Lady of Guadalupe in a place of honor. Home altars are, therefore, a part of a religious system that allows for an expression of ethnic and religious heritage that recognizes the agency and central role of the individual in their devotion to the Divine. The objects used to create the personal home altar are chosen by the individual from a myriad of possible choices and reflect, consciously or unconsciously, the identities of the individuals who made or used them. By examining the particular objects that make up the altars and talking with the creator of the altar about why they chose the objects and how they use and interact with the objects on the altar, it is possible to gain some insight into the meanings of these special, often “sacred” objects to the individual and how these objects help to negotiate their place within society.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Field Site, Activities & Participants

San Antonio is a prime area in which to observe religious practices and their meanings to individuals of Mexican descent because of the large Mexican and Catholic population. In this chapter, I describe the specific area of San Antonio that was the focal point, the research design, and details of my research activities for the three phases of this dissertation project. During fieldwork I conducted numerous informal interviews and formal, semi-structured interviews with 31 participants, which are summarized in this chapter. I highlight ten of the participants throughout the study and provide brief introductions in this chapter.

Field Site in San Antonio
West Side Corridor

San Antonio, like other western urban centers, has a mix of densely populated areas around the core city, sparsely populated areas around the perimeter, and a relatively low density rate outside of the city in areas once used as ranch land. I focused on the West Side of the core city, especially the area designated by the West Side Development Corporation of San Antonio (WDC) as the West Side Corridor (see Map 4.1 for details of the area). This corridor area begins at the western boundary of the downtown central business district (far right on map), stretches westward to Acme Road, bordered on the south by Guadalupe Street/Castroville Road and on the north by Commerce Street (Cesar Chavez Way).

According to the WDC, the total population of the area at the time of the 2010 census was 107,497 of which 95 percent of the total reported as Hispanic or Latino with more than nine
in ten claiming Mexican origin. This is a densely populated area with 6,953.23 people per square mile in contrast to 3,261.44 people per square mile in San Antonio. It is also considered a poor area with average household income in 2010 of $33,544 as opposed to $58,490 for San Antonio as a whole (West Side Development Corporation 2011). In addition, the Archdiocese of San Antonio indicates that approximately one-half of the Hispanic population reported being Catholic (Archdiocese of San Antonio).

There is a large Catholic presence in the West Side Corridor reflected by the many churches both old and new. San Fernando Cathedral, formerly San Fernando de Béxar Church (indicated by a purple circle on Map 4.1), built in 1758 was the first church built in San Antonio. It was erected in the center of town for the original Spanish and later mestizo and indio settlers.
and remains an anchor of the Catholic community. With the influx of new immigrants, new parishes were formed to meet people’s needs. There are approximately 20 Catholic parishes in the West Side Development area today, ten of which are within the West Side Corridor. Many of these churches were founded in the early 1900s. These parishes were built close together in an age when people walked to services. Members feel a close connection to their parishes often citing the parish name when asked where they live (Brischetto 2000). Many people who no longer live in the community still attend services in their “home” parishes.

**Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish**

An important community-site in my fieldwork was the people and activities at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish founded in 1911 (see blue area in center of Map 4.1 for location in West Side Corridor and Figure 4.1 for photograph of church). The church is located off Guadalupe Street, which was once part of the Old Pecos Trail heading from San Antonio to El Paso. This area was the cultural center and point of entry for most Mexican immigrants settling in San Antonio during the early part of the twentieth century and is now part of the Guadalupe Cultural Center area. According to a guide book produced by the San Antonio Office of Cultural Affairs, the area

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28 See APPENDIX C for a listing of parishes, members, and attendance.
was established as a working class Anglo settlement in the early 1900s and was populated by mostly German, Scotch and Irish railroad workers. Later immigrants seeking refuge from the Mexican Revolution came to the area to seek jobs in the cattle industry and agricultural work. In addition, many Mexican American families who remained in Texas after it became part of the United States moved to this area from downtown in the early 1900s (West Side/Murals 2002). Although a diverse population, the similarities in culture, religion and language bound them as a community with a strong identity.

By the 1920s there were many seasonal agricultural workers in San Antonio from various regions of Mexico and from rural Texas awaiting employment opportunities. Local unskilled workers were employed by the pecan shelling industry which provided cramped working conditions and meager wages. By the time of the Great Depression unemployment was widespread (Badillo 1997:74). According to Chicano Studies scholar Rodolfo Acuña (2007, 2010), the Catholic Church in San Antonio, and the rest of the Southwest, was basically a Church of the poor. Mexican residents looked to these local parishes for assistance, however not all parish priests were sympathetic to the Mexicanos in San Antonio—in fact none of them were of Mexican descent nor did they speak Spanish. Even though the vast majority of parishioners were Mexicano, they had no power or influence within the institutional church.

Father Tranchese, one of the early pastors of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, was one of the few priests to help the local people in a significant way. In addition to his spiritual duties to his parishioners, which tended to accept “folk” practices mixed with more formal practices of faith, Badillo describes the work of Father Tranchese in this way:

Tranchese adopted a paternalistic attitude towards his charges, who often disregarded the rules of Catholic behavior and adhered more to "Mexican traditions" and "holy superstition" than to a guided faith. . . He recognized that parishioners bent the rules when they saw fit. [Badillo 1997:75]
Father Tranchese also organized a wide range of community-building activities many of which remain in the community to this day. The community involvement of Father Tranchese and the parishioners of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish played an enormous role culturally, spiritually, and architecturally in the history of the city (Fehrenbach 1978, 2000; de la Teja 1995).

The parish is very active today with 250 registered families as members and a Sunday attendance of approximately 1,119 (Brischetto 2000). They have a thriving Community Center and numerous outreach programs. The church building itself is an icon in the community representing faith, devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, and community involvement. The main altar (Figure 4.2) is dedicated to the patroness of the church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, displaying her image and stained glass windows depicting the story of her appearance to Juan Diego. I spent much of Phase 2 of fieldwork participating in various activities in the parish.

**Research Design & Recruitment**

Data were collected employing an anthropological qualitative approach including participant and non-participant-observations, and informal non-structured and formal semi-structured interviews. The research design was flexible enough to retain the ability to explore
new areas as new information became available or as new insights developed. I set out to solicit interviews primarily from adults of Mexican descent or from persons who had some knowledge of Mexicano home altar practices. I used an informal snow-ball approach to find participants, asking people I met casually or was introduced to if they had an altar or knew anyone who did.

The fieldwork research was conducted in three stages—a pilot study and two subsequent phases. The pilot study was conducted over a two-week period in November of 2008 to determine the feasibility of the study site. Phase 1 research took place between July and December of 2009 and Phase 2 between August and December 2010. During these periods, I collected background information on the area, recruited and interviewed participants, and observed and participated in a variety of cultural, religious, and arts-related activities as described below. Transcription and content analysis of both the interview narratives and the photographs of the altars and the objects on the altars took place between January and September 2011.

**Pilot Study—November 2008**

I first visited San Antonio in 2008 during the celebration of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) which actually takes place over most of October and November of each year but is technically on November 2. The day is set aside to honor loved ones that have died and to welcome them back to celebrate with the living. (Chapter 8 discusses this event more fully) Individuals, as well as a wide variety of cultural and arts groups celebrate throughout the city with *ofrendas* (altars) created especially for the occasion. The *ofrendas* contain traditional Mexican and indigenous elements as well as biographical objects of the deceased. I attended many of the events that featured public displays of these altars and explored the celebrations at San Fernando Cemetery II. One of the *ofrendas* that was on public display is pictured in Figure
4.3. While each of these *ofrendas* is different, similarities do exist in the traditional items included in the assemblage. Each *ofrenda* is built in tiers or layers and each includes: candles; flowers, especially marigolds; offerings to the deceased; and a glass of water to welcome the souls back from the journey.

The people I met during this phase of the fieldwork were more than willing to explain the significance of these celebrations and the objects on the altars. The openness of the people I met during this preliminary research and the abundant evidence of the use of material culture to express ethnic identity in daily life led me to conclude that San Antonio would be a rich site for this fieldwork.

**Phase 1—July-December 2009**

I returned to San Antonio and began my research by visiting various public venues as a way to observe various activities, collect background information, and meet perspective participants. The venues included local parishes and shrines, street art, public murals, and historical sites such as the Alamo and The Missions. I also attended many events sponsored by non-profit community organizations such as Centro Cultural Aztlan, Macondo Foundation, *Rinconcito de Esperanza*, *Say Sí*, and URBAN-15 as well as various artist groups and art
galleries. I visited major cultural institutions including exhibits on religious objects and altars at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico SA, University of Texas at San Antonio’s Institute of Texan Cultures, Instituto Cultural de Mexico, Museo Alameda, and The San Antonio Museum of Art. I also visited churches and shrines within the community and ones that were mentioned by people I interviewed. Since this research is about objects, especially religious objects, and how people use them and are affected by them, I felt it important to also go to places where people buy religious and traditional objects for their altars. I therefore conducted interviews at church gift shops, shrines, religious stores, and botánicas that sell religious items to see what objects are available and how or if store owners influence what appears on the altars. I found that even Walmart and the grocery stores carried religious items for home use. While observing these places and participating in various events and exhibits, I conducted informal non-structured interviews with the people attending and the people responsible for the events. I was searching for the meaning of the particular event and how people felt about participating.

I at first purposely did not seek participants through church or church organizations as the literature showed that often people with home altars do not actively participate in the institutional church but consider devotion at the home altar to be sufficient or even preferable. I felt that by focusing the search for participants on those who attend church regularly I would miss the opportunity to talk to a wider range of people who create altars. I began my search for participants by talking about altars in the home to people I met at parties, art galleries, and public events. I had mixed reactions. One person said it would be so easy to find altars in San Antonio that all I had to do was “swing a dead cat” and the cat would land on one. Although I did not try this method, I found that it was not that easy to find participants. Some people only wanted to talk about Día de los Muertos altars or ofrendas which is a very popular celebration in San
Antonio held in early November. A few people had no idea what I was talking about or who might have an altar. Margaret, who I encountered frequently while in San Antonio, had always said that she could not think of anyone she knew who had an altar. However, when I was at her home for Thanksgiving dinner I noticed what I considered an altar in her hallway (Figure 4.4). When I asked her about this collection of objects she said, “Oh that, it’s just a statue of the Virgin I had when I was young and a collection of things I find important in my life. I also just hung those family pictures to remind me of our connections. Is that an altar?” That encounter alerted me to the problem of using the word “altar” as some people did not recognize what I meant by the term. However, when I changed the term to “shrine” people told me about outdoor displays of saints and public shrines erected by churches and other religious institutions. I did find a few people to interview and they referred me to other people they knew who had altars. I also expanded my search to include investigations of things people told me about in their interviews. When I interviewed Tanya she told me about a friend who prayed to Our Lady of Guadalupe everyday at her home altar. However, when her friend was diagnosed with cancer she told Tanya that she needed a more powerful mediator and began visiting the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe at the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate School of Theology. When the friend became too ill to make the trip she asked Tanya to go and pray for her. This story led me to
investigate the various religious shrines in the area. I realized that what shaped self-identity may also include things and objects embedded in the community that reinforced the things and objects used in the home.\textsuperscript{29} I began to explore the community more closely and paid more attention to street art, murals and the people who created them, and shrines in peoples’ yards (capillas) and businesses.

I eventually began to attend Catholic rituals and celebrations including, Sunday Masses, a special “healing” Mass, and an Adoration of the Holy Eucharist service as a way to meet participants. Having been raised a devout Catholic in an ethnically Polish parish I found myself quite familiar with these various activities. I also spent time talking to people at San Fernando II Cemetery about their celebrations for \textit{Día de los Muertos}. I attended a Mass performed at the cemetery by the bishop and several local priests for All Soul’s Day and \textit{Día de los Muertos} in 2009. A particularly moving and informative event for me was a 24-hour long celebration of the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe including a pilgrimage to another parish dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe in the nearby town of Helotes. I discovered that the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the narrative of her appearance to an indigenous man, Juan Diego, is the cornerstone of Mexican and Mexican American Catholicism.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Phase 2—August-December 2010}

Considering the problems I encountered in recruiting participants in Phase 1 of fieldwork, I shifted my strategy in Phase 2 by focusing on people I met through church—which I had avoided in Phase 1. I visited many churches in the Mexicano community and I became active in Our Lady of Guadalupe parish which is in the center of one of the most established Mexican

\textsuperscript{29} See Chapter 11 for a discussion of cultural landscape.
\textsuperscript{30} The image and narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe are discussed in Chapter 3. Details of the celebrations of the feast day are in Chapter 10.
communities in San Antonio. I participated in many of the daily activities of the parish, attended a three-session mission focused on the devotion of the rosary and the Virgin Mary, and *Posadas* and *Pastorales* at Christmas time.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Church is always crowded for Sunday Masses and the people are very active in the parish. I attended many church services; however, I also wanted to participate in the daily activities of the people in the parish. I volunteered once a week at the Senior Citizens Nutrition Center sponsored by the Guadalupana Society of the parish. In addition, I regularly attended a group that makes rosaries. The rosaries are used in parish work and are given to prison inmates, and used in missionary work. I felt comfortable in this environment since I was raised a Catholic and understood the foundation of their beliefs. I especially enjoyed the rosary-making group since this was something my mother, who had recently passed away, did when we were young children and it made me feel connected to her. This connection allowed me to see in a personal way the relationships people develop with religious objects. Even though I am no longer a practicing Catholic, the mere act of touching and working with the beads of the rosary brought back memories of who I was as a child.

I met many people who were enthusiastic about sharing their stories about their home altars and their favorite saints but a few were hesitant about inviting me into their homes. I learned a very important lesson from Yolanda when she explained why she could not invite me to see her altar, “For me it is a very private thing. I don’t let anyone come into that room. It is a place for me.” There were also several people who minimized what they had saying, “You don’t want to see that. It’s just a little statue” (personal communication, 2010). I did interview these people informally and what they told me added to the general background about the use of objects on the altar and in negotiating a sense of self. The formal interviews I conducted in
people’s homes were very comfortable and people told me amazing things. One of the participants (Chuck Ramirez) even said, “I have never told anyone the things I am telling you!”

Connecting with People

Formal Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary source of data was the formal, semi-structured, in-depth conversational-style interviews conducted in English with 31 participants who were willing to share their home altars and talk about their experiences of being Mexicano in San Antonio. These formal interviews lasted from one to two hours and on several occasions, I returned for a second or third interview. Due to the highly visual nature of the data I used digital photography as well as digital audio recording while conducting the interviews. I prepared a basic list of questions and topics to guide the interview. My initial questions centered on individual, family, and work and then proceeded to my specific interest in the altar and other religious traditions. The list served as a guide, but I never felt bound by it. Following anthropologist Mark Luborsky (1987, 1990, 1993, 1994; Luborsky & Rubenstein 1987), I let the questions serve as a stimulus to conversation—letting people tell their stories in their own way. I asked questions and listened; taping, photographing, and taking notes during the interviews. The interviews developed as dialogues between me and the participant—a give-and-take of ideas, theirs and mine. The interview produced an interaction of cultural assumptions, an exploration of their memories and my gentle probing of those memories, a balance of differences and similarities, and a sharing of religious devotions. In this way, meaning making was a negotiation between the participants and myself and was conditioned on our particular relationship (Mishler 1986:52-65; also Crapanzano 1984, 1991; Langness & Frank 1984). The narratives of the past do not always accurately reflect reality as

31 See Appendix A for Interview Guidelines.
memory and the narration of experiences always involve some sort of distortion, exclusion, fantasy, and interpretation (See Connerton 1989; Crapanzano 1991; Geertz 1986; Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Neisser 1994; Rosaldo 1980). In addition, in the process of transcription distortions and misinterpretations that may take place (See Crapanzano 1984; Gibbs 1994; Goody 1987).

The interviews, conducted in the vicinity of the altar, focused on the construction and use of the altar itself and the objects on the altar. All of the participants gave me permission to use their names except for one—a request which is honored by changing that person’s name. All of the participants also gave me permission to publish the pictures of their altars and the objects on them. I often use first names, except for Mrs. Silva, because the personal use of their name reflects the relationship we established during our time together. The altar was photographed during the interview, specifically noting its location in the home. Individual objects on the altar were also photographed as the participant was encouraged to tell the “story” of the construction and use of their altar. While I did not observe people performing religious rituals or devotions in their home, the participants did tell their stories of how they used their altars and some of their other religious practices. I did however observe several of the participants in their devotions in more formal settings.

Topics of the interview included: What objects are chosen in the making of the altar? Why these particular objects? Where did they come from? What do they mean to the person building and/or using the altar? What are the stories behind the objects themselves? What are some of the traditional objects seen on most altars? How do the objects link the owner to the self, family, others, deities? I also asked questions about the origin of the tradition, remembrances of learning the tradition, how the altar had changed over the years, and their involvement in the formal church. These questions and observations were chosen to elicit insight into the
“meanings” of the objects on the altar to the maker and determination of how the objects are constitutive of a sense of self and identity by demonstrating how relationships with the objects on the altar both reinforce and stimulate specific behaviors and beliefs. Verbatim transcripts were developed from the audio recordings. Demographic information was culled from the transcripts and a content analysis was conducted to examine the categories people use in narratives, the meanings of the categories, and the behavioral choices they make in relation to these choices.

The interviews with the 31 participants ranged over different topics, age groups, and occupations. Home altars were the sole focus of 23 interviews while the other participants talked about Día de los Muertos celebrations particularly or along with home altars. Business owners comprised five of the interviews. These were businesses that either displayed or sold religious objects. The participants expressed great enthusiasm for the research project and were delighted that I would be telling their stories about their religious practices and feelings about their ethnic heritage. The majority (71

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Descent</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3 generations</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approx. Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s – 30s</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s – 70s</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80s – 90s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Raised Catholic</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practicing Catholic</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artists</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Representative</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retail Shop Owner</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview Topic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Altars</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dia de los Muertos</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santos/Our Lady of Guadalupe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Too personal for home interview</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two of the “participants” were actually families. I included all members in this category.

Table 4.1 Demographic Categories—All Participants

Source: Author
percent) of the in-depth, formal interviews were conducted with people of Mexican descent. (Table 4.1) Of the 22 participants who claimed Mexican descent, 15 were from families that had been in Texas for more than three generations. Some of them had been in the area when Texas was part of Mexico. There were six Anglos of various backgrounds, two Cubans, a mother and a daughter, and one American Indian, although the American Indian was half Mexicano. The Non-Mexicano interviews were included even though they did not match the original criteria because they had something significant to add to the discussion of home altars or religious devotion in a mixed-ethnic community. All participants were 18 years old or over; the majority in the 60 to 70 year old range. I did not consciously select participants by gender, even though altar making has been described by some scholars as almost an exclusively female activity (see Cash 1998, Gutiérrez 1997, Ricciardi 2006, Turner 1998). Kay Turner contends that Mexicano altars are almost solely a women’s province, used as a form of resistance to patriarchy and male dominance and an expression of the nurturing mother. She writes:

The discourse of the mother is a discourse of attachment, affiliation, and relationship. The home altar is a vehicle for visually proclaiming the critical importance of this discourse and an instrument for articulating its potent effect. The altar nourishes and sustains a woman’s desire for good and productive relationships, both with humans and with deities. It also symbolically references relationships between what otherwise might be characterized as distinct domains of social, cultural, religious, and personal life. [Turner 1990 diss.:163]

For Turner, altars are about maintaining relationships that are important to women—family, loved ones, and the supernatural. According to Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten (2003), who wrote the first history of Mexican descent women in Texas, Mexican-American women's use of home altars is an expression of faith, artistic sense, and cultural heritage that has been handed down orally from one generation to another for as long as Tejanas have resided in the area. They contend that the tradition of home altars of Mexican American women is linked to
a long history of altar-making by women, with evidence in the archeological record from pre-Columbian Mexico, Spain, and the Mediterranean. It is therefore telling that one-third of the participants in my study were male—something I was not expecting. Gender however was not the focus of this research. The majority of the participants were working class people: teachers, artists, office workers, shop owners, and an auto mechanic. A majority, 87 percent, of the participants were raised Catholic and 52 percent of the total are still practicing Catholics to one degree or another. Of the four participants who were not raised Catholic, two were raised with no particular religious influence, one was raised Jewish, and one as a Jehovah’s Witness.

Selected Participant Interviews

I have chosen to highlight ten of the formal interviews as case studies. These ten are representative of the larger group of 31 formal interviews conducted during fieldwork. The demographic characteristics of these participants (Table 4.2 below) offers a wide range of perspectives on altar making and the influence the interaction with objects in daily life plays in negotiating a sense of Mexicano identity. Eight of the ten participants are Mexicano who are the main focus of the research: the López, Silva, and Udriales families, Carmen Ruiz, Jane Madrigal, David Zamora Casas, Chuck Ramirez, and Franco Mondini-Ruiz. Five of the eight are from families who have been in Texas for more than three generations—most of them from when the area was considered part of Mexico. I have also included two interviews with non-Mexicanos, Ana Spector is from Cuba and Joan Frederick is an Anglo from Oklahoma, because they had something important to say about their altars and its connection with their sense of identity.

These are all working class people, a few of whom are now retired. I include a brief history of their childhood, religious background and present situations as revealed in their interviews. The actual number of people interviewed in this group of ten is sixteen that includes
the five young adults in the López family who participated in the interview process. I included them in the chart in the gender figure only. Ages range from 38 to 68 years of age with half of the participants in their 40s. The López young adults were in their 20s. All but one of the participants were raised Catholic and four of the nine are still practicing Catholics. This number includes the three families and Carmen Ruiz. Four of the participants are artists. While all of the artists were raised Catholic, none of them considers themselves practicing Catholics. Two of the artists use religious objects that retain religious meaning and power for them. The other two use religious objects as a connection to their early years and *Mexicano* heritage without the attendant belief. I interviewed all of these participants about their home altars.

I also interviewed six of them about their participation in *Día de los Muertos* celebrations, although I interviewed many people on this topic. Chuck Ramirez, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, David Zamorra Casas, Jane Madrigal, and Joan Frederick shared their extensive knowledge of personal and public construction of ofrendas for *Día de los Muertos* celebrations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category Selected Participant Interviews</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Descent</td>
<td>8 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3 generations</td>
<td>5 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>1 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>1 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5 31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11 69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s – 30s</td>
<td>1 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>5 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>1 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s – 70s</td>
<td>3 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80s – 90s</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised Catholic</td>
<td>9 90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Catholic</td>
<td>4 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>4 40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Altars</td>
<td>10 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Día de los Muertos</td>
<td>6 60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two of the “participants” were actually families. I included all members in this category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2 Demographic Categories of Selected Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source: Author</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The López family talked of their celebration in the home. I also conducted formal interviews with a number of people on specific topics whose biographies are not offered here. I interviewed Alfredo Rodríguez, a carver of wooden santos (saints), particularly about various saints and their use on home altars in San Antonio, and Jorge Garza, an artist who uses religious imagery in his art. Father James Marshall, associate pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, spoke to me about the symbolism in the Guadalupe image. Anna Maria Fox-Baker, of UNAM, shared her extensive knowledge about traditional Día de los Muertos celebrations from various areas in Mexico and in San Antonio. Chuck Ramirez was my primary contact through all phases of the research and his case study is included here. He was not a regular home altar user but an artist who believed strongly in the celebration of the Día de los Muertos tradition and keeping alive his ethnic heritage through objects. I visited with him many times to discuss practices and helped build his personal Día de los Muertos altar in 2009. I was scheduled to again help with his altar in 2010 but he died in a bicycle accident that week.

Content Analysis

The general data collected during the research provides a context for the interviews and can be arranged into several categories. The categories include the historical, cultural, and religious heritage of San Antonio, public displays of material culture that reflect the heritage of the area; events celebrating that heritage; narratives that expound on that heritage; and an investigation of places where objects that represent religious and ethnic heritage can be purchased. A systematic content analysis of the interview transcripts, following Luborsky (1987, 1990, 1993, 1994); Luborsky & Rubenstein (1987); and Spradley (1979, 1980), and the images taken of the altars reveals a more personal look at the use of religious objects in daily life. These
narratives contain a different set of categories. Each of the interviews were delivered in three somewhat distinct sections narrated in basically the same order by each participant: 1) a history of their religious upbringings; 2) a discussion of their life experiences as Mexicanos in San Antonio; and 3) the sharing of their altar or altars and the meanings of the particular objects they selected for display on the altar(s).

The discussion of the altars and the objects on the altars revealed a layering of meanings including the symbolic religious representation of the object, the history of the object and the personal connection to the object, and the connection to the person’s cultural memories. The photographs show the location of the altars in the home in relationship to the daily routines of the occupants the juxtaposition of various objects on the altar. The objects arrangement on the altar produces what one participant called a “dialogue of objects” where the objects are talking to the user and to each other. Since dialogue is so important in understanding meaning, I use sometimes long excerpts from the interview transcripts to provide a “voice” and place for the participant in the analysis of the process of socially constructing a Mexicano identity through the use of altars and the objects on the altars.

Participant Introductions

In analyzing the interviews about home altars, I have arranged the ten case studies into three categories. The categories are based on the stories the participants told about their religious background, their continued participation as Catholics, the use of their altars, and how they are connected with their Mexican heritage. The categories include: Practicing Catholics (4 participants—raised Catholic and continue to practice their faith regularly), Non-Practicing Catholics (4 participants—raised Catholic but no longer formally practice their faith. This category includes a range of degrees of devotion based on their religious upbringing), and Non-
Mexicanos (2 participants). These categories will also be used in Chapter 5 in discussions of religious beliefs and ethnicity of the participants. Following is a brief introduction to each of the participants and how I met them arranged by these categories.

**Practicing Catholics**

This first category includes four case studies: the López family, the Silva family, the Udriales family, and Carmen Ruiz. These participants represent the typical patterns of use and construction of home altars by Mexicanos I encountered in the area. These four participants utilize their altars as an extension of their formal religious belief systems. They use the altars in their homes for devotions but they also regularly attend Mass and actively participate in their parishes. Some of them, like Mrs. Silva, are more devout in following Catholic doctrine than the others.

**López Family**

I came to know the López family through their daughter Samira whom I met at a party. I was explaining my interest in home altars and asked her if she had an altar in her home. She replied, “Of course we do, we are Mexican aren’t we!” Her statement reinforced for me the notion that many people of Mexican descent continue to create home altars. She agreed to make arrangements for me to come to her home and meet with her family. I interviewed the López family in their living room in front of their main altar over a two hour period. The whole family was there and expressed their eagerness to participate: the mother and father Fransisca and Erasmo who are in their late 40s, the oldest daughter Zyanya (age 23) who has her own apartment, Samira (age 20) who lives in the dorms at UTSA during the school year, Lusela and her boyfriend Raul Robles (age 19), and the youngest daughter Nikki (age 12). I was surprised to see the whole family there but I was able to get a variety of perspectives on the use of home
altars and the objects on them as well as various other domestic religious practices.

The father, Erasmo, is a blue-collar worker who was born in the border town of Eagle Pass, Texas. He met his wife there and they moved to a newer section of San Antonio several years after their marriage. Fransisca, his wife, was born in a small village in Mexico. She now works at a day care center. The oldest daughters, Zyanya was born in Mexico in their mother’s home town and Samira was born in Eagle Pass. The other two daughters, Lusela and Nikki were born in San Antonio. Lusela’s boyfriend, Raul, was born in Austin, Texas; however, his grandparents were born in Mexico. They all attend church regularly and one of the daughters is a catechism instructor at the church. [Interview with López family by Mary Durocher, 11/21/2009]

**Silva Family**

I met Mrs. Silva at a rosary-making group at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. She invited me to her home on the outskirts of the west side of San Antonio. She lives there with her husband of thirty-seven years and their thirty year old son Joe. Mrs. Silva is a bookkeeper for a small firm and Mr. Silva is a retired laborer. They are both in their late 60s. Mr. Silva was not at home for the interview; however, Joe occasionally joined in with a comment. He suffered from a seizure illness ten years ago and is now left with no short term memory. The interview lasted ninety minutes. We talked about the many altars in her home but also about her devotion to Padre Pío as a healer. Mrs. Silva and her family are very active in their religion—attending Sunday Mass, visiting local shrines, and making pilgrimages to more distant shrines. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

**Udriales Family**

The Udriales family was suggested to me by Fransisca López. I met with Armando and
Judy Udriales and their sons Armando and Damien in their home on the west-side of San Antonio. Both Judy and Armando are teachers. Judy teaches middle school and Armando teaches in the high school. They are both in their late 40s. The two boys, ages 19 and 21, are currently students at the university. The couple had very different early home lives. Education was important to Judy’s parents and all five of their children went to college. Judy was not even allowed to date Armando unless he was a college student. Armando also grew up in a large family but they were much poorer. His father was an auto mechanic and his mother a housewife. His father often traded car repairs for things the family needed. The Udriales told me that they take great pride in their faith and their Mexican heritage. [Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009]

**Carmen Ruiz**

I met Carmen Ruiz at a rosary service at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. She was setting up the candles and flowers before the service and I offered to help. She invited me to her home to tell the story of her family’s involvement in the growth of the parish. Carmen is 55 years old and is a teacher from a long family history of teachers. She is currently living in the parish in a house that her great grandfather built—the family has been in the San Antonio area for seven generations. It is a very small, dark, old wooden structure. She had been living here while taking care of her mother who passed away in 2009. Carmen has a daughter in college who was not home at the time of the interview. We talked about the parish history and activities in general, her personal devotion, and the devotion of her mother. Many of the parishioners showed quite an interest in the history of parish since they were due to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of its founding in 1911. Carmen and her daughter are very active in this parish and the one near the home they used to live in before moving “back home” to take care of her mother. [Interview with
Non-Practicing Catholics

The second category includes four participants. The first two, Jane Madrigal and David Zamora Casas, were raised Catholic but are no longer practicing Catholics. They are artists who have a unique take on the altar tradition that offers different insights into the use of objects. Each displays a strong connection to the altar tradition and regularly tends and uses their altars for religious devotion even though they no longer attend services in a church. I did not at first believe that these two fit the research criteria for the “typical” use and construction of home altars by Mexicanos. David, who is a friend of Jane’s, however, explained that while they both do not appear “typical,” and their altar use is certainly not considered “typical” by others, their reasons for creating and using the altars and the objects on them were the same as the other participants or, for that matter, other Mexicanos in the community. I included photographs of these two participants to reflect the diversity and yet surprising commonalities in the practice of creating and using home altars.

The two other participants in this category, Chuck Ramirez and Franco Mondini-Ruiz, use religious objects in their homes that could be considered altars or at least assemblages of religious items. They were both raised Catholic but no longer actively practice; however, they continue to use the symbolic objects from their religious past in their homes. Both are artists and have one parent who is of Mexican descent. According to what they told me in their interviews, they were raised to be Anglicized to assimilate into the dominant culture. They use the religious objects from their cultural memories to make statements about what they refer to as their “lost” Mexicano identity.
Jane Madrigal

Jane Madrigal is an artist, community activist, and mother of two young children. She recently turned 40. She and her children live in an older home on the west side of San Antonio. She was one of the first people I met when I was doing the pilot study for this project in 2008. She was a vendor (see Figure 4.8) at the Día de los Muertos celebration sponsored by Say Sí, a non-profit multidisciplinary arts program that offers young students opportunities to develop artistic and social skills. What first attracted me was her self-designed tattoo of Our Lady of Guadalupe and that she was selling traditional decorated sugar skulls that she had made for the occasion. I did not interview her until 2009 when I met her again at an art exhibition at the Guadalupe Center and we arranged for me to do an interview. I spent the afternoon at her home helping to prepare the altars, eating lunch (egg tacos), and talking about religion, ethnicity, and altars for approximately 3 hours. Jane was raised Catholic but now only practices parts of her religion. [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

David Zamora Casas

David Zamora Casas is a self-trained painter, sculptor, and installation and performance artist who is also an important curator and arts activist in the gay and Mexican American communities. I met him when he was creating a Día de Los Muertos ofrenda for Day of the Dead in the San Fernando Cathedral Plaza. I interviewed him in his small second-story apartment on the west side, not far from where he grew up. David, 48, is known for his gender-bending mode of dress and treatment of objects in his works. He is pictured in Figure 4.9 in his studio. He has a
reputation throughout Texas and the U.S. art community as a risk-taker who uses indigenous and Catholic myths and images in his work to confront bigotry, homophobia, racism, xenophobia and other types of discrimination. This reputation is borne out by the array of objects, both religious and Mexican, displayed throughout his home.

David is active in the LGBT community and is proud of his many accomplishments saying, “I curated the first gay and lesbian exhibit in Texas and it was a media event—it was the first time the queers had ever got together to celebrate Gay Pride Month.” He was raised a Catholic but does not practice regularly; he does however use religious objects in his home and in his public installations and performances. After the interview, he took me to the Little Chapel of Miracles where he often goes to pray, though admitting that he had not been there in a long time (See Chapter 11 for a discussion of the chapel). [Interview with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]

**Franco Mondini-Ruiz**

Franco Mondini-Ruiz, formerly a corporate lawyer, is now a prominent *Mexicano* artist in San Antonio. I met him at a *Día de los Muertos* party he hosted in 2009. I interviewed him at his combination home and studio then and again in 2010. He lives in a small wooden house on the West side that belonged to his great grandfather. His great grandparents moved into this house in 1939. Franco explained the importance of this home to them, “They bought this house when it was new. They were from the sticks. They were kind of country people and this would
have been a modern sleek home at the time.” He also owns the home next door which he uses as his art gallery. His extended family owns most of the homes on the block. He was raised Catholic and some of his early religious training still influences his daily life. His family was Mexican but he describes his childhood as “Anglocized” referring specifically to his Anglo/Mexican community. In our interviews, he told a compelling story of his confrontation with the material culture of his Mexican heritage and the process of renegotiating his sense of self to include this “lost” side of himself. [Interviews with Franco Mondini-Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 11/25/2009 and 9/13/2010]

Chuck Ramirez

Chuck Ramirez was the first person I met in San Antonio in 2008. He was an artist and community activist who was exhibiting a Día de los Muertos ofrenda at that year’s Arts & Eats festival. I talked to him about the ofrenda he had created for a popular restaurant owner who had passed away that year. Chuck was more than willing to share his knowledge about ofrendas and we had many interviews during my fieldwork. Chuck, 48, was single and lived on the east side of San Antonio near the King Williams area and was known for his great dinner parties. This section of town was settled by Spanish immigrants from the Canary Islands. It is an historical area of stately homes but Chuck lived just on the outskirts of King Williams which is known for its artist community. Like Franco, Chuck was raised Catholic but only remnants of his religious upbringing remain. He also came from a Mexicano family and he too considered himself “Anglocized.” His reconnection with his Mexicano heritage came later in life. [Interviews with Chuck Ramirez by Mary Durocher, 12/10/2009 and 10/25/2010]

Non-Mexicanos

In the last category, I offer two individuals as a contrast. They are not Mexicanos and
they do not have “traditional” Mexican altars, but in their own way their altars support their particular “ethnic” identity. Ana Spector emigrated from Cuba in the 1970s. She was raised by a Catholic mother and Jewish father, however, she practices *Santería*. The last case study is of Joan Frederick, who called herself a “white woman from Oklahoma,” who has embraced the Native American Indian culture and the Mexican tradition of building altars since she moved to San Antonio 20 years ago.

*Ana Spector*

Ana lives in a converted garage behind what was formerly her home on the west side. She had given the house to her daughter Annelle and her husband when they got married rather than have them wait for the daughter to inherit it. The garage is now a small three room house with a garden. I met Ana at a party at Annelle’s house. Ana was born in Cuba in 1944 and immigrated here in her early 20s. She worked in several businesses as a secretary until she married a few years after her arrival. She was raised in a Catholic Jewish family in Cuba; even living for a time in a convent when she was a young girl. She was also exposed to the practices of *Santería*, common among many of the people of Cuba. The conflict between Catholicism and Judaism in her family and the exposure to *Santería* forced her to negotiate a religious identity for herself. She chooses to honor her Catholic and Jewish heritage but practices mainly *Santería* even though she identifies herself as a Cuban Jew. I interviewed her for four hours over two sessions. [Interviews with Ana Spector by Mary Durocher, 11/14/2009 and 11/22/2009]

*Joan Frederick*

I met Joan Frederick at a *Día de los Muertos* celebration. Joan was playing the role of *La

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32 There are numerous works on *Santería* and other Afro-Caribbean religions. For example see: Brown (2003), Canizares (1993), Mouial (2002), Murphy (1993, 1994), and Thompson (2003).
*Catrina* in the procession of the souls—a role she has often played in the last 22 years since she moved to San Antonio. The figure of *La Calavera Catrina* is one of the characters created in 1910 by Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada (Figure 4.10). The character is a satire of a rich lady that cannot take it with her in death (Castro 2001:30-31). It is a very common iconography in *Día de los Muertos*. Joan is an artist, photographer, and retired teacher. She refers to herself as “a white woman from Oklahoma” where she was strongly influenced by Native American culture. She was raised neither Catholic nor *Mexicano* but has embraced the tradition of celebrating *Día de los Muertos* and the practice of making and using home altars. We met and talked informally on several occasions and I conducted a one hour more formal interview in her home. [Interviews with Joan Frederick by Mary Durocher, 11/3/2009 and 9/15/2010]

**Conclusion**

These ten case studies form the core of the evidence for this exploration of how *Mexicanos* in San Antonio use objects on their altars to negotiate a sense of ethnic identity within a marginalized social location. Eight of the ten participants claim Mexican descent—some are relatively recent immigrants while others have families that have been in the area since it was part of Mexico. For the most part, the participants were raised Catholic with the tradition of creating and using home altars for personal devotions. While some of them no longer actively practice their Catholic religion, they all still use the objects and things in their homes that
represent their cultural heritage. Two of the participants are not Mexicano but do have home altars. One of these participants was raised Catholic and brought her altar making tradition with her from Cuba. The other participant was exposed to altar making when she moved to San Antonio and has embraced the tradition as a way to express her close identification with her American Indian “family” from her home in Oklahoma. In the next chapter, I discuss in more detail each participant’s religious and Mexicano backgrounds and sense of identity based on the interviews to show how the practice of creating and using home altars is grounded in their particular backgrounds.
CHAPTER 5

MEXICANO & CATHOLIC HERITAGE

“You leave your country with nothing. So all that you see here is after the fact. I came with nothing. Just what I had on. That is why God sent you here—to hear this story—to hear my testimony. You are my right voice—because I have an accent and I cannot say it but you have in your head all this stuff and you have it here what I told you; you will be that voice.”

-----Ana Spector

In this chapter, I present the life narrative portion of the interviews for each of the ten participants that are the primary focus of this study. The stories highlight the wide range of individual experiences within the group’s broader collective experience. I feel the quote above reflects the sentiments many of the participants had even though Ana was the only participant to arrive in this country with nothing. They were each happy to share their altars with me and to explain what their religious and ethnic identity—and the journey to get there—means to them. I will discuss the altars themselves in later chapters. I want to first review the stories of the participants’ life experiences that contain evidence of how people actively choose particular practices and rituals, not generally associated with the dominant society, to negotiate an identity as distinctly Mexicano and is valuable to them. Each of the participants expresses in some way how the practice of altar making and using the objects on the altars influences their sense of ethnic identity.

Life Narratives

The narratives of the eight of the ten participants reveal several things the participants have in common. They all claim Mexican descent to some degree, they were all raised Catholic, and they all display and use religious objects in their homes—most in the form of altars. The interviews were conversational in style allowing participants to begin at any point that they
wanted and to tell their story of their home altars in their own way. This is a method commonly used in eliciting life stories and narratives from participants (Luborsky 1987, 1990, 1993, 1994; Luborsky & Rubenstein 1987). I was looking for a narrative about their religious and ethnic upbringing and their relationships with the altars in their homes, but I did not force the interview in any way. I did offer guidance and assurance that what they were revealing to me was indeed important to the discussion of home altars.

A content analysis of the participants’ interviews revealed that all but one of the participants began their narratives in the same way, but all focused on the same three themes. They began by describing their childhood both in regards to religious practices and their exposure to Mexicano traditions from their families. The participants discussed if and how they practiced their Catholic religion currently, including formal church activities and their use of home altars. They also talked about retaining their Mexican traditions, the pressure to assimilate, and how they handled that pressure. Finally, they showed me the objects on their altars and explained why they chose the items, where they got them, and how they used them. Only Mrs. Silva began with the altar itself, taking me directly to the altar in the living room when I arrived. She talked mainly about her current religious practices and did not go into as much detail as the others about her childhood upbringing—either religious or Mexicano.

I find the almost standardized way that the participants had of talking about home altars significant. I did not tell the participants that I wanted to make a connection between home altars and ethnic identity in my research; however, they were aware that I was interviewing only Mexicanos in San Antonio about home altars and may have inferred my intentions. I still think it is telling that they did not begin with the altars. It seems that they may have already been making the connections for themselves between the traditional Mexican practice of creating and using
home altars and their sense of Mexicano identity.

I present the narratives in the same categories and in the same order that I first introduced the participants. I have also included an image of an object in their home or an activity—some from on the altars and some from other areas of the house—that I felt encompassed their integration of their upbringing and their present life in both a religious and ethnic sense. These are items that the participants talked about in great length or with great feeling and might be considered heirlooms or “inalienable wealth” (Wiener 1985, 1992, 1994). The objects represent an expression of their heritage—both religious and Mexicano.

Practicing Catholics

These first four participants were all raised Catholic and continue to practice their faith. They also maintain a close connection to their Mexican heritage. Their life experiences are all quite different yet as a group they represent the “typical” altar maker in this study.

López Family

Each member of the López family—the mother and father Fransisca and Erasmo; daughters Zyanya, Samira, Lusela, Nikki; and Luesela’s boyfriend Raul Robles—told a story of the importance of altars, and religion in general, to them and their identity as Mexicanos and how they practice their faith in their daily lives. Zyanya summed it up when she stated, “My dad is second generation Mexican-American, my mom is first generation, and I am also first generation since I was born in Mexico, and my sisters are third generation. So our altars are significant in the sense that the tradition was practiced in Mexico and my mom decided to bring it here into our house.” The López family does not seem to question either their faith or their Mexican heritage—it is just part of “who they are.” They feel strongly about keeping their language and their traditions alive. Erasmo, who speaks both Spanish and English, said, “I think it is an
accepted thing now, when I was growing up it was more of an embarrassing thing—to me anyway. But now it is more acceptable to have the altars and to speak “Spanish.” Three family members, Fransisca, Zyanya, and Samira, were born in Mexico and grew up only speaking Spanish. They had trouble with speaking Spanish in school and in learning English. Zyana says “Now, the others can only understand basic Spanish but they don’t speak it and I want them to learn more and become bilingual.” Samira also feels very strongly about keeping their language and their traditions. She said, “With language comes identity—you know more about your culture and your customs. Like for that altar—altares—different things that we have on our altar, the words come from Spanish. And my sisters are getting exposed and they are learning more about their culture because they are learning all of these words that have to do with the altar.”

The López family retains a significant connection with their Mexican heritage and attributes it in part to the maintenance of such traditions as the home altar.

Erasmo and Fransisca were raised Catholic and they have carried on the practice when raising their own family. Fransisca is active in the church and Zyanya is a Catechism instructor. Erasmo, although he was raised Catholic and was an altar boy, no longer believes in praying to saints on the altar saying, “I have some conflict with the idea—why do you have to have all of these in between people—why can’t you just pray straight to God?” He nonetheless said he appreciates the presence of the altar in his home and has fond memories of his mother’s devotion to her altar and saints. Fransisca is the one who keeps the tradition of home altars alive in the home with the participation of the girls. She said, “My husband doesn’t practice the religious stuff but I tried to take my daughters to the church when they were little. And they grew up in the church and of course we have our altar in the living room.”

Each of the girls expressed a deep devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of
Mexico (Figure 5.1) and there are two statues of Our Lady on their main altar. Zyana said that at the church, “They are trying to introduce the children to the tradition and the culture of altars in catechism class. Many of the students have not been exposed to these traditions. Most significantly I teach them about the Virgen de Guadalupe . . . the most important. So I have taken the tradition from my parents and taken it for my own.” It is the devotion to the Mexican Virgin that reinforces both their identity as Catholics but also as Mexican Catholics.

Raul, Lusela’s boyfriend, was raised Catholic but his family is now Pentecostal. He said, “I really don’t claim any particular faith right now but I guess if I did I would say I was Pentecostal. . . But I know about all of the traditions because my grandmother she would always have altars set up. She was from Mexico and her altars were important to her.” Even though they no longer have altars in their home Raul said, since participating in this discussion, he realized he missed some of these traditions from his early life. He said that even though he considered himself Mexican or Mexicano, he misses the outward signs of his heritage. [Interview with López family by Mary Durocher, 11/21/2009]

**Silva Family**

The Silva family can trace their heritage as Mexicanos in San Antonio for many generations and are proud of their Catholic heritage. Mrs. Silva said, “We are cradle Catholics
and one of our beliefs is the Blessed Virgin Mary so we honor her. She comes with a lot of titles like *Virgen de Guadalupe, Virgen de San Juan*, but it is still the same Blessed Virgin Mary.” They are active in their devotion to the Virgin Mary and to the church. Mrs. Silva was just initiated into the Guadalupana Society and proudly displays her medallion. The Guadalupanas is a service group dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Mrs. Silva explained that, “They want you to be more active in the church and help out with different activities. And they give you a special blessing.” Mr. Silva is a 4th Degree Knight in the Knights of Columbus. He has been a long-time member and proudly displays photographs of his activities in full uniform with sword, cape, and feathered hat.

Mrs. Silva is very active in her faith at her home and has many statues, prayer cards, and holy medals dispersed throughout the house. One of her favorite saints is Saint Anthony who she said is “very powerful for everybody. People pray to him to recover lost things.” Mrs. Silva believes though that he is for anything. She said, “I find him very helpful; when there is something I can’t accomplish I pray to him.” She has prayer cards to Saint Anthony that her mother gave her and she makes copies for all of her family and friends. She also has great faith in *Padre Pío* (Figure 5.2). She has many second degree relics that have been touched to his body. She said, “You can pray to him for anything you need, he is very powerful, he has made many miracles.” She also has several books and audio tapes on the life and miracles of *Padre Pío*. She said that once when she was playing the tape about *Padre Pío* in her room her husband and son Joe could smell incense. Listening to these
tapes also has a profound influence on her daily life. She related this story, “I was listening to one of the audio tapes on my way to work and I had all of this energy, I did all this work like never before. It is just marvelous what he does.” The practice of her religion is a constant activity for Mrs. Silva. Her entire life centers on her active devotion to the various “santos” on her altars. This interaction with the objects in her home will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

[Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

Udriales Family

While both Judy and Armando Udriales are third generation Mexican Americans, they had almost the opposite experiences growing up. Judy’s father was a postman and her mother did not work outside of the home. They had a large family and lived on the near west-side of San Antonio which at the time was a heavily gang infested neighborhood. Judy considers her family life to have been quite “Americanized,” especially in relationship to their surroundings. Her father left for work at 5:30 a.m. and returned in time to pick the kids up from school. The dinner was always waiting on the table when they got home—very “Brady Bunch” according to Judy.

As for speaking Spanish in the home Judy said,

My mother spoke Spanish up until the time she went to school. But she never taught us Spanish because she remembered getting spanked or hit with a ruler by the nuns whenever she was speaking Spanish. She made it a rule that she was not going to teach her children Spanish. And I can remember going to first grade and people tattling on each other for speaking Spanish.

Both Judy and Armando speak Spanish now which they studied while in college. As teachers, they both felt it necessary to speak Spanish in order to connect with their students.

Armando’s family had a similar attitude toward speaking Spanish. They too remembered being punished for speaking Spanish in school and therefore did not teach their children.

Armando remembers though that the family was still very much connected to their Mexican
culture. They ate traditional foods, listened to Mexican music, and went to the Mexican Theatre and Rodeo. Judy interjected that by the 1980s and 90s it was “cool” to be Tejano—to listen to Mexican music and speak Spanish, especially after the singer Selena became so popular. Although they had different upbringings, they both now take pride in their Mexican heritage and make a point to practice some of the traditions in their home.

Although both Judy and Armando were raised Catholic, their families practiced their faith very differently which proved to be quite an adjustment when they were first married. Judy described her family’s religious life, “My mother always instilled in us prayer. When we were little, she would make us go to church but she and my dad would not go to church. Although that woman prayed so much it wasn’t even funny. She had her little altar but she didn’t go to church. She may watch it on tv but she didn’t go.” In contrast, Armando’s parents went to church every Sunday morning. As far as prayer, Armando said, “I don’t ever remember my mom teaching us how to pray or even us praying together as a family. But I always knew that they were always praying for me. So I kind of took that for granted.” Judy sums up the difference in their upbringing “My mom and his mom are polar opposites. His mom goes on faith alone. She puts her children in the hands of God. And 99.99 percent of the time everything is fine. Where my mother—your mother is more glass half full and my mother was always glass half empty—she had to pray and pray and pray, in her mind, so that things would turn out.”

Armando’s early religious life was much more connected to their Mexican roots. His aunt was a curandera and his mother and grandmother helped her in her work. She had a separate house next door to where she lived that she dedicated as her templo or temple. The house was passed down to her from another relative. Judy told me that, “She had this whole elaborate altar and she did curing and she did the cards.” Armando said that, “People that would go to her
would bring pictures and she would say a prayer and put them on or under the saint that they were asking a favor of.” She also had a man living with her, Rudy, who was trained to heal through the spirit of Niño Fidencio. Rudy would go into a trance and Aunt Olga would interpret what he said. Judy described one of the encounters,

It was odd to me because he would start praying and he would kind of go into a trance. His facial expression, everything about him, even his stance totally changed. And he would talk but he would talk in a whisper and she would interpret for him. He would be barefoot and he would put on this white thing like a gown that the priest’s wear and a red cape.

Women would come faithfully every Wednesday and Friday to consult with Rudy.

These religious practices were quite different from how Judy was raised. Her family practiced a much more Americanized version of their religion. She said,

I remember when I first met my husband his father not wanting me to know I guess it was because he knew that my family didn’t delve into the whole curandera type thing. But I can remember his dad getting upset with his mother because they took me there. . . He was afraid that I was going to get scared away seeing that. To me it was weird in the beginning and then it just became something that she did.

Judy said that they now tease their sons, calling them coconuts—“white on the inside but brown on the outside”—because they practice so few of the Mexican traditions. However, they do maintain an altar in the home and have other signs of their Mexican and Catholic heritage on display. For instance, above each door in their home hangs some sort of crucifix—often made from palm fronds that were blessed on Palm Sunday (Figure 5.3). Armando said that this was a tradition in his mother’s home that they decided to keep in
In this family there was a negotiation between Judy’s Americanized and Armando’s Mexican upbringing. Together they selected aspects of each to represent their new life together as a couple and a family which included aspects of their Mexican roots. [Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009]

*Carmen Ruiz*

Carmen began with the history of her family in Texas. She remembers what her aunt always told her, “Don’t forget, you are a seventh generation Texan. The border crossed us we didn’t cross the border. One year the border was here and then they moved it and they moved it again. So then they drew the line at the Rio Grande. When our family started in the Graytown area it was still Mexico. We were here when the border changed.” Carmen explained that her people did not move but remained in place while becoming citizens of New Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and finally the state of Texas in the United States. She has a birth certificate for one of her ancestors that was recorded as a birth in the Republic of Texas. Her cousin was able to trace the family in the area back to 1674. On her great grandmother’s side one of the birth certificates records the birth as being in New Spain, not Mexico, and another records a birth in San Tio, New Spain. Carmen represents one of the oldest *Mexicanos* in Texas among the participants. As Carmen tells her story she provides details that she has painstakingly researched demonstrating the active role she plays in tracing her genealogy and negotiating her ethnic identity.

Carmen’s great grandfather’s father originally settled in the Graytown area of Texas near San Antonio where he had 185 acres that he used for farming and ranching. Her great grandmother’s side of the family founded the town of Floresville. Most of the land in the
Graytown area is still held by family members although only about 60 people live in the city now. Her great grandfather wanted to move closer to San Antonio because of his children, he wanted them to go to school and get educated. At the time the San Antonio city limits were right at the end of their property. Her great grandfather built his house on the west side of San Antonio in 1867 and later built four others. He wanted to keep all of his children as close as possible. He knew that his sons wanted room and wanted space so he gave them land on the ranch but he gave his daughters the houses in town. When he first came to the area his children were little—two of them had not been born yet. The nine children all grew up in that first little house that he built.

Carmen’s great grandfather donated the land for the new Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and rectory in 1924. The school had not been built yet and neither had the convent. The parish hall which was the original church had been built in 1911. The parish needed the land for the new church and approached her great grandfather who was very active in the church, as was the entire family. He donated enough land for the convent, the new church building and the rectory.

Carmen summed up her family’s attitude toward the parish,

> We have been here and we have always been connected with the church. It’s home. It’s always been home. My grandmother always used to say that the umbilical cord of the family is buried underneath that church. And that actually might be physically true. So that is why we are always pulled over there and we always go over there. This church has played a huge part in my life. I think my family would be a different family if we were not tied so closely to the church.

She said that even those family members who have moved away come back to celebrate special events here at this church saying, “It’s their center point.”

Carmen lives in the very core of one of the oldest Mexican districts in San Antonio—one often ignored by the Anglo economic and political sectors. Many families have lived here for generations and it is a tight knit community. She credits this closeness to the Jesuits who have been in charge of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish,
My neighborhood would not be what it is without the Jesuits here. We would not be such a tight knit community. We would not have the communication that we do now. We would not have the things that we have now. In my mother’s generation, it was Father Tranchese. He is the one who encouraged people to take care of their own neighborhood. He empowered the people—if you want this than you have to prune it and water it and feed it and help it grow and support it and back it up and go and fight for it... So they started working as a community not just being separate and apart. So that was his formation with the community and it grew from there.

Carmen has been an active part of this community since her childhood; however, when she had her own home Carmen and her daughter attended Sacred Heart of Mary Church for Sunday service and then came back to the neighborhood to visit her parents. Since returning home to take care of her elderly mother, Carmen and her daughter began to attend services at Our Lady of Guadalupe and both became very active in church activities. Both are Eucharistic Ministers and lectors at Mass. Carmen is also a member of the Guadalupanas and has sat on the Parish Council. In this way Carmen maintains her connection to the Catholic Church, and her Mexican heritage.

Carmen is very active in her personal religious life which she says connects intimately with her Mexicano heritage. At her kitchen table, which is covered with a traditional colorfully-striped Mexican fabric, she has a small altar and her rosary making beads and tools. This is where she spends her evenings. She has also been instrumental in the continued tradition of the religious nativity folk play known as La Pastorela or Los Pastores which means “Shepherds’ Play.” The play is a dialogue that the shepherds had among themselves on their way to visit the newborn Christ Child. It also recounts their encounter with the devil during the journey (Castro 2001:182). In Figure 5.4, the play is being performed in the plaza in front of the Alamo—Carmen is one of the shepherds. [Interview with Carmen Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 10/25/2010]
Non-Practicing Catholics

This next group of four participants are artists. They were raised Catholic but do not currently participates in the “institutional” church. They do, however, use religious objects in their daily lives and in their art. They each have a unique perspective on the meanings of the religious objects that they use. As children they were encouraged to assimilate, yet they made great efforts to maintain their *Mexicano* heritage in their daily lives.

**Jane Madrigal**

It was Jane’s great grandparents on her mother’s side of the family that came to San Antonio. She said that at that time, people were fleeing the Revolution in Mexico and settled on the west side of San Antonio. The south side of the city, she said, was the home of the ancestors of the indigenous people who were in the missions and then were set free when the mission system was disbanded. When Jane was young the emphasis was on assimilation. She explained:
I was born and raised here on the Westside but I don’t speak Spanish . . . My mother and father were born here but my grandparents were very down with assimilation—don’t speak Spanish! You have to understand that kids were beaten and abused in school for speaking Spanish; very much the same way the Indians were in those boarding schools.

Even though she was raised to assimilate into the dominant Anglo society, in her adult life Jane has made a conscious effort to embrace her *Mexicano* heritage and culture. She said, “For me it is about reconnecting and understanding my own culture.” Jane incorporates Mexican traditions into the daily life of her family and is very active in local culture organizations. Although she does not speak Spanish, she is in the process of learning.

Jane has a rather eclectic religious philosophy that blends the Mexican Catholicism that was practiced in her early years with various indigenous and syncretic beliefs and practices. She has selected for herself the elements that are most useful to her and those that embody who she feels she is as a person—a *Mexicano* in San Antonio. She was raised Catholic but her mom did not keep altars although her grandmother did keep altars to the “*Virgen de Guadalupe.*” She expressed her ambivalence towards the Church and the role it played in the conquest of the indigenous people—her people,

We were Catholic because we were Mexican—not because we chose it but because it was tradition. It was part of how we were assimilated as indigenous people by Spain. With the Catholicism that came over during the conquest—they brought that Catholic religion with them—so in order for indigenous knowledge to survive it had to transform into something else. The Catholic saints were like a pantheon of figures that the indigenous people could use to mask their earth religion. Which was a religion that didn’t necessarily believe in what would be a traditional Christian God—some guy in the sky and you die and go to hell. That had nothing to do with me and my people. That was some shit that was imposed upon us. Those beliefs were all tied to colonization. We are people of the earth and our religion is of the earth.

She also talked about her falling out with the church at a young age, “My mom was Catholic but after my sister died in a car accident she lost her faith. And then when I was about 14 years old she became a born again Christian. And that was not good for me at all. It made me just despise
religion even more.” For Jane, the Catholic religion represents suffering, oppression, and death.

Even though she does not consider herself a practicing Catholic, Jane still utilizes some of the symbols of the church in her daily life and participates in some key rituals of the church. She said,

I will go into the church to light candles to the Virgen or to get my holy water. I will still do stuff like that which I know is kind of crazy. I always have holy water in my house. I even mop my house with it because it makes the energy in the house so much better. You can just feel the difference. (for wood floors: Murphy’s Oil Soap, a splash of holy water, and a capful of a nice essential oil like lavender.) It just makes everything so much calmer and nicer.

Prayer is also an important part of Jane’s life and even though she no longer considers herself Catholic she uses the Catholic prayers of her youth to intercede for and to the spirits she believes in. She said, “I just pray rosaries because it is the easiest most direct and intact system that I know. I don’t speak indigenous languages and I don’t have access to ancient chants, the Book of the Dead, but for me it is easier to pray the rosary that I know.” Jane uses rosaries given to her by her grandmother who prays the rosary every day. She expressed the hope that she too might reach a point in her life where she can pray the rosary every day, “I would like to pray a rosary everyday for my muertos, for the dead, for the people who are dying, for people that are in need of prayer right now in the universe. For all the lost souls.” Through her use of symbolic objects like the rosary and her altars Jane expresses by her religious and ethnic heritage.

Combined with her Catholic background and cultural memories of the indio religions of Mexico, Jane also practices a form of Santería, an Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion from Cuba that blends Spanish Catholic beliefs and those of the West African religion of the Yoruba. She explained how she discovered Santería,

This is what happened with me, this is how I came to be. When I was about 22ish I was living in Austin with my aunt . . . and one of the kid’s that she was watching was a son of a santero. And when I walked into that santero’s house, not knowing that he was a
santero and not knowing anything about that stuff, there was a babalowo visiting—and a babalawo was like a high priest. So when I walked into that house . . . he saw me [and] he got up to throw himself on the floor to me . . . the santero was astonished because I was a nobody [not a person of high rank in Santería]. But the babalawo said NO, she is somebody. So that is what kind of started my whole spiritual journey or saga learning about spirits . . . and having a spiritual calling.

Jane was able to study with that santero and others for many years although she was never initiated herself. Jane was also influenced by a group of indigenous women healers, curanderas. In a cupboard in the kitchen, one with a painting of the Virgen de Gaudalupe on the door, she had a whole pharmacy of herbal medicines. She said, “I was at that point in my life where I was growing my own herbs and understanding how to treat and work with the natural elements in order to heal . . . to connect with the spirit world . . . that is what it boils down to. Me being able to understand that within myself and accepting it and understanding the responsibility that goes with it.” She believes she has been called to the work of taking care of the spiritual needs of others, especially her “muertos” or the spirits of those who have died.

The object in Figure 5.5 is from one of Jane’s altars and represents the negotiation and blending of her various spiritual beliefs. The statue is a Catholic icon representing La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity) which is also a Cuban representation of the Virgin Mary and of the Orisha Ochun. In Santería, Ochun is the Orisha of love, maternity and marriage and is associated with
the color yellow and with honey. Jane has offered her oranges covered in honey and sprinkled with gold to represent her beauty. The tall votive candles are a particularly Latino practice and are available everywhere in San Antonio. The candles come either plain or dedicated to a particular saint or Orisha, an aspect of the Virgin Mary, or various “lucky charms.” A prayer is usually included on the back label of the candle in both Spanish and English to be said when lighting the candle. This particular prayer reads:

**ACT OF CONSECRATION TO OUR LADY OF CHARITY: My Queen! My Mother!** I give myself entirely to thee; and to show my devotion to thee I consecrate to thee this day, my eyes, my ears, my heart, my whole being, without reserve. Wherefore, Good Mother, as I am thine own, keep me, guard me, as thy property and possession. Amen. (Make your petition).

This display of objects, her acts of offering and prayer, embody her various religious belief systems and reflect her Mexican heritage. This is only one of many such assemblages in her home.

Jane considers herself a *bruja*, the Mexican term for witch, and explains what this means to her, “For me, because I am a Mexican and because of who my ancestors are, and because we are on this land, in this world, we didn’t travel across the ocean it is easy for me to connect and feel grounded in my traditions.” Jane feels directly tied to her ancestors, and their spirits come to her for help and offer her guidance. She claims that the philosophy of her indigenous people says that they are each connected through seven generations. Part of her spiritual awakening was a journey to connect to those ancestors. Jane explained how this process worked for her,

My ancestor were the Yaqui people and I had a mentor at that time who had me read and understand about what that meant to be Yaqui . . . they have what is called ‘dreaming women’ and the dreaming women have the ability to dream things into reality. They have the prophetic dreams. And so I have come to realize that I am a ‘dreaming woman.’ I can dream and make it happen. That is the easiest way for me to help the dead spirits—in my dreams. So a lot of it for me has become the dreams or understanding the dreams that I have and what they are trying to tell me.
Jane believes that in the Mexican culture being able to be in contact with the spirits is very natural because people are still somewhat connected to the earth. She also said that the connection is very important in understanding altars. She said, “All that knowledge goes into most altars—that understanding of our being connected with the earth, with the land, with the people, and our community which is why we even have altars.” Altars and the specific objects on her altars represent her beliefs and are utilized daily in the practice of her spiritual belief system. [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

David Zamora Casas

David spoke only briefly about his Mexican heritage although he was raised in a traditional Mexican home and speaks Spanish fluently. The influence of his Mexicano background, however, is displayed throughout his home and in his art. His religious Catholic background is reflected in these objects as well. David said, “I went to Catholic school—so I guess I was raised Catholic. But I rebuked it as soon as I could. I stopped going to church in 8th grade.” I asked him why he used religious images in his art and why he was so drawn to creating altars. He explained that, for him it is a combination of influences that come out in his art,

It’s part of memory and energy. The pagan/Catholic fusion has just morphed—like the Jesus with the hat and the mask, with a picture of me under the mask [referring to his corner altar]. And in most cases that is how the images come out. [For instance] The altar that I built at the Galleria, it’s the old one of the universe with the little baby Jesus statue but a lot of reference to indigenous Indio religious experience. He uses the symbols and objects from his life experiences as a Catholic Mexicano and the cultural memories of his indigenous past to express himself as an individual and as an artist.

David does not actually have an altar in the traditional sense; however, his religious objects are integrated into the other objects in his home and appear often in his art. His home was literally covered in religious and indigenous images along with finished art and art in progress.
The objects in Figure 5.6 are displayed on a shelf of a bookcase in the hallway that is filled with various representations of aspects of his life experiences. These objects, just part of his larger collection, are bits of his ethnic and religious heritage—the traditional Mexican dinnerware, fabric, and picture frame; the statue of a saint whose identity is long forgotten; and the marigolds used on *Día de los Muertos ofrendas*—all represent the various parts of himself.

Talking about his objects and his art David said, “I am still trying to connect with my non-European roots and a lot of that non-European backlash is because of the pompous, arrogant, elitist attitude that most Spaniards had towards the indigenous people when they came to the Americas which is relevant in this context.” David said that his rejection of the European is more about attitude, “the mistreatment of people—the inhuman way that they treated the *indios.*” In his life and in his work he plays with ideas from the Catholic, Mexican, and indigenous images of his roots and combines them with his gender-bending concept of sexuality. [Interviews with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]

The next two participants were also raised Catholic but they no longer practice their religion. In fact, neither is very religious at all. They both had very Anglicized upbringings and have deliberately worked to renew connections to their Mexican heritage in their adult lives. They collect and display objects that reflect their Mexican Catholic past.
Franco Mondini-Ruiz represents possibly the most tortured journey into his ethnic heritage as a Mexicano out of the ten case studies. I have included a somewhat lengthy life narrative here because his story demonstrates the complex process of negotiation of identity thorough objects and things. Franco began the interview by explaining that his story is about a particular kind of Mexicano experience and not reflective of all Mexicanos in San Antonio, but of many of his contemporaries who are in their mid- to late-forties. He said, “I am an artist of a certain generation and being Mexican American of a certain generation and a certain class. Many in my generation were acculturated—we were assimilated. I grew up in Bernie—I grew up in a German town. So I am a hybrid of many things going on.” Franco also emphasized the fact that his family did not have many ties with Mexico. He explained, “We are TexMex. We have been here forever; we have Spanish blood, Black blood, Asian blood and Indian blood.” He truly considers himself a “hybrid” and feels that he did not learn much cultural knowledge of his Mexican heritage from his upbringing.

Franco told me the history of his family and the various early influences on his sense of identity. His mother was working-class Mexican, not very well educated. According to Franco, she was very pretty and very ambitious so she married up. She married a pure-blooded, upper-middle class, handsome Italian who spoke seven languages and was a pilot in the Italian Air Force. His grandfather was mayor of a beautiful city in Italy. Franco described his father as a man of the 1950s—someone who thought very scientifically. He was charmed by his new wife’s culture because it reminded him of his own—even poor TexMex culture translated into something very pastoral for him. He was charmed by how simple people still were with chickens in their yards and their quaint customs. However, in other ways he was impressed that his wife
had a bank job and had a driver’s license and had her own car. Only the daughter of a prince would have that in Italy. His father eventually realized that this beautiful woman he married was from a different world than his and he did not necessarily agree with her version of life.

Franco said that he felt like he grew up in the conquest,

I eventually realized that I was growing up in the conquest with the European father and a mestizo mother that still had vestiges of indigenous culture that my father was not comfortable with. He did not like the kind of vodooish things she did with good luck amulets—the things that poor ignorant people used—that’s how he would have viewed it. His father did not perceive these practices as charming; he viewed them as superstition and his wife as a kind of “witch doctor” with her amulets and magic potions. As an example of one of her practices, Franco told me that his mother had a little empty Sucrets tin that she would keep in her underwear drawer. In it she kept a little piedra imán, a lodestone, which she would show her children. The naturally magnetic stone is believed to attract money and good fortune and ward off enchantment. This stone was something their father forbade her to have in the house. His mother also thought that all of their 30 cats were the spirits of their ancestors. He said, “That’s animism—that’s ancient.” This kind of belief was also something that his father did not understand. The objects and the knowledge of their mother’s religious beliefs were shared to a certain extent with the children but were kept a secret from their father. Also, the family only spoke English in the house. Franco said, “I don’t know if he actually forbade her or just shamed her.” Franco also pointed out that the 1960s and 70s was a time of great change in the Catholic Church through Vatican II. He said “We Catholics are being taught to be almost ashamed of all of these [religious] objects and even in these poor Mexican towns that had all these glorious things, now the churches are becoming 60s modern, sterile, cold churches.” Displaying signs of your religion in the home, especially when mixed with indigenous cultural beliefs, was discouraged.
These conflicting views of life were cause for continuous negotiations in his father’s mind and in Franco’s mind. He said,

That conflict is manifested in me: part of me is a pre-historic Indian, part of me is a Spanish friar bopping among the Indians working for me right now, part of me is a hard working Bernie boy that just believes that work will make my life better; part of me is a Catholic, Italian, hard-working. Part of me is Roman—a lot of perks come from having a dad who comes from Rome and having that confidence built in.

As Franco sees it, the result of this conflict was a shift in what was valued in his home. He said,

Everything was spiritually infused in a bizarre way... My grandmother’s real altar was a Sears refrigerator. Or a pretty box of Dunkin Donuts in the house. Or a to-go container shaped like a pirate ship from Long John Silver’s. Sacred objects became a box of donuts reflecting something nice and clean and modern.

These are the images he incorporates in his art. He said, “These were the spiritual objects of working class people.”

Franco grew up like the Anglo children in Bernie. He described the outcome of this experience, “The Mexicans had been stripped or taught to be ashamed of the form of their culture. They had been brainwashed to let that go and to grow... So, we got rid of the form but not the substance. So I was a cultural hybrid, I belonged to both worlds.” He later found that the objects that represent his Mexican and indigenous culture were “being venerated by the dominant culture.” In his late 20s, Franco discovered his heritage in a new way. Speaking of that epiphany he said,

When I became a rich lawyer I was all of a sudden in San Antonio high-society over night. I was invited to all the best parties by all of the sophisticated ladies who were mostly white. They loved Mexican culture but there would be no Mexicans at their parties—only me. They had the objects, they had the food, they had the servants, they had the form of the culture but not the substance or the meaning.

Franco said that it was from these “high-society, blue-eyed, blonde-haired ladies from San Antonio” that he learned about Mexican culture—pre-Columbian art, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, ofrendas, altares, folk art, and other material culture. Reflecting on this paradox, Franco said,
I learned about the riches of my heritage mostly from Anglos. . . the cultural aesthetes of our city. . . The most painful part of growing up in San Antonio was that so many of the cultural elites loved the form of Mexican but didn’t give Mexican Americans any credit for having the substance. When young Latinos like myself were eventually exposed to it we were totally seduced, not only by the beauty of our heritage but by its substance—its meaning as well. And we were just crushed by the realization that we’d been taught to be ashamed of what could have made us so proud.

It was the Anglos who taught him how to be Mexicano.

In this period, Franco and many of his contemporaries went from ignorance to becoming collectors of Mexican art, along with the Anglos, and learning about their culture. He said,

Eventually we began to see our heritage not only as Mexican or Mexican American; but part of something much larger—a world culture. . . It is almost some sort of cultural or object Darwinism where the cultures just slip and slide and something from one culture survives because it gets preserved by another culture.

Franco characterizes himself as part of the “Mexican born-again with a vengeance generation.”

He quit being a lawyer and became totally enraptured with all his friends who were Mexican American artists. He moved to what he saw as the mother country, Mexico City, but realized that he was not a Mexican. He said that he realized that he was something different, “I am a hybrid, I am a Mexican American. And I was trying too hard to be a Mexican—and it was my generation that was guilty of that.” This exemplifies the process of awakening and negotiation of a sense of self in a highly conflicting arena—Franco spent several years grappling with the various influences in his life and constructing a worldview that worked for him personally.

Even though Franco discovered he was not Mexican but some kind of hybrid, he was still very interested in the objects that represented Mexicano culture—his culture. He moved back to San Antonio, and along with a friend, bought an old botánica. The shop originally catered to curanderos and healers and carried religious objects, herbs, oils, and candles. He recreated the contents of the shop as a permanent exhibit at the Museo Alameda in San Antonio, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Museum, a portion of which is pictured in Figure 5.7. He stocked the new
botánica with objects that reflected his Mexican and indigenous heritage. He said,

I made it the most gorgeous store in the world for that kind of store. People from France and New York and movie stars, everybody said this is an amazing store. I really did it though because I love San Antonio and I thought the hybridity of the culture would become something bigger than we were then. In a sense, I was a mediator. I was in both worlds—I was in the Alamo Heights world, I was in the Bernie world, and I was in the West Side world—there was a generation of us. I made that store a visual symbol for that.

Franco clearly articulates the liminal space he occupies between the Anglo and Mexicano worlds, and describes his struggle to find his place.

This is also the time when the HIV/AIDS epidemic was hitting San Antonio very hard. Franco said, “I lived as if there was no tomorrow. All my friends were getting sick and dying and I thought I was going to die tomorrow.” As a result, Franco lived a very decadent life. After five years he decided the lifestyle would kill him so he got rid of the botánica. His interest in these objects did not falter. He had created an art installation based on a friend’s master’s thesis about using cultural objects as a means of political change, empowerment, and seduction. Several
important curators saw the show and were impressed. Franco showed his work all over the world after that and to concentrate on the objects he collected for his home.

Franco does not consider himself a practicing Catholic. The objects he collects and altars he builds are part of his heritage but do not necessarily reflect a devout faith in God. He explained the dilemma,

I am struggling with being a rational person or a spiritual person. Am I an atheist or am I a priest? I don’t know, maybe an agnostic. I am exploring. But do you know what I believe in right now—I believe in one word—focus. For anything worthwhile to happen it takes focus, it takes human endeavor, it is not just luck.

It is objects that cause us to focus. Franco uses as an example the Rosa de Jericó also called the Rose of Jericho or the Resurrection Plant. It is a dried moss ball that can be dormant forever but comes alive when you give it water (Figure 5.8). Franco said, “A tradition started, I guess centuries ago, that you give it coins, you give it beautiful things and you feed it and it stays alive.” He said that what he finds interesting about this, and other fetishes, and superstitions is that you are focusing on a particular object and task. So he asks is this faith or superstition or coincidence? For Franco the point may be moot, “If this helps me get money, even if I don’t really believe it, I am getting my act together enough to make sure that it stays watered. It is focusing—and whatever it takes you to focus is helpful in the long run.” The point is that he is actively engaged with the object.
which spurs his active engagement in the activities in his daily life. By feeding the plant he is also feeding himself—the interaction with the object makes him a person of action—an agent in his own life.

Franco credits who he is as an artist and as a person to this incredible cultural journey. Probably the most significant lesson he learned is contained in this summary of his experiences.

So here I was a corporate lawyer, grew up in Bernie, very acculturated, learned to walk and talk like a San Antonio white boy, top of my law school, had the best job but here I now own a botánica. However, I would make decorative pieces mixing all these things together, coconuts, plants, candles and make little shrine or altar and real faith healers would come in or curanderos or santeros and they would say—so you know what that means? They would show me in book where I had done the same thing even to using cigarettes and cigars. . . I don’t know where that came from. But my mother, who had seen newspapers, and magazines, and other cultural people interviewing me, finally told me that both of my great great grandparents were curanderos. And I said no, I didn’t know that! You never actually mentioned that! So I found out that on my mother’s side there was a practice of faith healing and working with objects.

For Franco it is all about the “dialogue of objects” – the playing with the forms and meanings of his various cultural backgrounds. Franco’s cultural journey is very similar to that of fellow artists and contemporaries. [Interviews with Franco Mondini-Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 11/25/2009 and 9/13/2010]

Chuck Ramirez

Chuck and I talked mostly about the creation of Día de los Muertos altars but also about how objects in general play a role in Mexicano identity. We talked about religious or sacred objects because he was raised Catholic, even though he no longer formally practices his religion. We talked in great length about food and the objects that go into producing, displaying, and consuming food. Chuck has an extensive collection of authentic Mexican dinnerware and serving pieces. He said,

For me, an important connection to my Mexican heritage is food—cooking traditional
foods and eating them with friends. . . Food is a celebration of life—there is nothing more loving and caring than making people feel comfortable when they come into your house and you are making dinner or people are together cooking and celebrating.

During many dinner parties at his home I was introduced to new foods and even learned to make chicken enchiladas.

His heritage is mixed; with a *Mexicano* father and an Anglo mother. His father considers himself TexMex, his family having come to the area when it was Mexico. His grandfather is descended from the Spanish Canary Islanders and his grandmother has more indigenous roots. Chuck said, “She is more the real *mestizo* kind of thing. She used to always say that she was part Comanche and that was what made her so mean. She wasn’t mean to me but she could be mean to other people though.” Chuck now considers himself *Mexicano* from San Antonio although he also said that he is fairly Anglicized, “I was born and raised as an Anglo kid because in the 60s it wasn’t cool to be Mexican. Especially for my dad, to be a working man and trying to get ahead he had to assimilate to be a white guy so we were raised on the Brady Bunch so I identified with those people. White bread and things like that. Spanish was never spoken in the house.” His *Mexicano* influence comes mostly from his grandmother on his father’s side. Chuck said his early years were rather turbulent due to his parents’ divorce and his grandmother was the one unchanging thing in his life. It is the objects that remind him of her and her home that he displays in honor of her and their *Mexicano* heritage. Chuck refers to his grandmother’s kitchen as “ground zero”—a term he said he used before it got the connotation it now has. He explained his feelings toward her and her kitchen,

Her kitchen was the only place in my entire life, while she was still alive, that had not changed from my birth. Everything was still exactly the same. My parents were divorced; we didn’t live in the same house, all the stuff had changed. Later, I had moved to an apartment—everything changes but that is the point of origin and that house was the only thing in my life that was exactly the same as when I was born.
Now that his grandmother is no longer alive, it is the objects from her kitchen that remind him of who she was and who he is. He has many of these objects displayed in his home and he uses them to create an ofrenda devoted to his grandmother for Día de los Muertos. Chuck described some of these meaningful objects, “The comal, her bean pot, and of course I have pictures of her. . . These specific objects seemed to kind of best characterize my grandmother and the love that she had. That bean pot, always going with beans, and the comal with tortillas. It is a way of connecting to my Mexican identity.”

Pictured in Figure 5.9, is a photograph of his grandmother and her comal or tortilla pan—which is now warped from its many years of continuous use. The objects are part of the ofrenda he created in 2009 for her.

Chuck’s home is full of objects that represent his Mexicano heritage and even his Catholic background. His main evidence of his background centers on the creation of ofrendas for Día de los Muertos—annually for his grandmother and often for friends who want to honor those that have died or for public exhibition. [Interviews with Chuck Ramirez by Mary Durocher, 12/10/2009 and 10/25/2010]

Non-Mexicanos

Neither of these last two participants are Mexicano. Ana was raised Catholic and Joan was not. They both however use objects in their own unique ways to negotiate their particular
sense of identity. I offer these two case studies to emphasize the connection between objects and identity. Even though the focus of this research is the Mexican community, each of these participants had given a great deal of thought into their use of altars and the connections between their particular ethnic identity, and were eager to share both their altars and their reasons for maintaining them. Ana Spector identifies as Cubana living in a Mexican-dominant community. She wants to honor her separate heritage and suffering in her and her peoples’ life experiences. Joan Frederick expressed the same concerns—she is a “white woman from Oklahoma” with a strong identification with indigenous American people. She found that she could honor this heritage by “borrowing” the Mexicano practice of keeping a home altar.

Ana Spector

When Ana heard that I was conducting research about home altars, she wanted to talk to me about her altars even though she is not Mexican because they are such an important part of her life and her sense of who she is as a person. Ana said, “I have altars but they reflect my beliefs as a Cubana. It is important to retain my identity since I live in a Mexican community and their beliefs are so different. My beliefs are part of how I survived in my life and it is important to continue to follow them.” Ana was born in Cuba in 1944 and immigrated here in her early 20s. Her father had sent her brothers to the United States when Castro began agitating in 1960 but it took her nine years to get permission to leave. She said that during that waiting period she was a “nobody.” When she described her situation, she said,

So I waited and waited and it was hell. It was a long time to be leaving—it was like you no longer belonged anymore. You are not welcome—you are not here. You don’t exist in this community. You don’t want to be here. It was horrible to survive . . . Because I was just pretending and just trying to disappear. I am telling you, if I didn’t leave this place and this country I might as well die.

Ana was determined that she would not be a “nobody” in this new land. That is part of the reason
her religious practices are important to her now. They honor her mixed-heritage and set her apart from other “Hispanics” in the community—a term no one in San Antonio uses.

Ana had a Polish father who was Jewish and a French Catholic mother who both immigrated to Cuba to find freedom. There were eight children in the family and they were very poor. At one point the nuns at the convent offered, “to take one of the children off of their hands” so Ana spent six years in the convent until she ran away and went back home to live. At home, there was constant tension over religion that caused bitter feeling and a real loss of any sense of identity. Ana described the situation in her home,

My father would not let us celebrate Hanukah because we weren’t Jews and we couldn’t celebrate Christmas because he was a Jew—so there was this kind of hole in my soul and in my heart. So I say no, I don’t want to live like this—I was 7 years old when I decided that I don’t want to be like this. Please God help me to realize and be able to have my dream come true.

Ana was also influenced by the practice of Santería that was common in Cuba. She said, “If you are born on the island and you see all this stuff and it becomes natural to you—it becomes a part of who you are. Not only heritage but the cloth that makes you a person.” These conflicting influences—religious and ethnic—finally forced Ana to choose what was most meaningful for her. She said, “And this is the way I have lived my life since I came. I feel free. I am so passionate about my religious belief and my political beliefs that I don’t let anybody stop me.”

She honors each of the religious backgrounds in some way since they each are a part of who she is. Ana explained what her altars mean to her,

So this is for me—for my satisfaction. I do know that there is a God—I could go to any church—I could go to any synagogue but I decided that I don’t believe in what a “man” says; I am going to follow my own lead. I am going to follow the lead of my heart and marry all my beliefs.

She has many altars in her home with many themes including, an altar to her Jewish traditions, an altar with Catholic influences, and an altar for the Santería Orisha.
Ana said that meeting her husband was very fortuitous. She met him in downtown San Antonio where she was working. He was a business man from Ecuador and offered her a job in his jewelry store. They got along well because of their shared Spanish background and the fact that he was a Polish Jew. Ana explained their connection, “So when he met me it was like he found somebody who he could identify with and we stayed together for 24 years until he died.” Her husband continued to practice his Jewish faith but Ana said that he did not object to her “marriage” of her different religious influences, “And my husband was for it, he never fought me, he never saw me as different because actually I was what he was—Latin born from Jewish side with all the Christians around you.” By being true to herself, Ana was able to make a happy marriage between her religion and her husband.

The object in Figure 5.10 is one of her proudest possessions and sits on her altar to Judaism. It is a menorah—or as Ana told me, it’s a *meyorah* because it has nine candles—the one with seven candles is a menorah. Her husband bought it for her as a gift. This menorah from Spain serves a dual purpose. It is a menorah for celebrating and the lighting of the candles but it can also be turned into an ordinary candelabra. In effect it can disguise itself as a non-religious object—change its identity. Ana saw this power to change and adapt as very important. She elaborated, “Sometimes we need to pretend for our survival” but the trick is to always remember who or what you really are. [Interviews with

![Figure 5.10 Ana Spector, Menorah](image)

Source: Author, 2009
Joan Frederick

Joan is neither Mexicano nor Catholic but has embraced the concept of honoring deceased loved ones in Día de los Muertos celebrations and in her daily life. Joan said,

I have been here long enough to get the idea of what Día de los Muertos is. A lot of my friends are very interested, especially Danny Lazano and Craig Penell. They opened a folk art shop on South Alamo Street in 1987 and they are the ones who started bringing folk art to San Antonio. . . their life was a work of art. They had a great influence on me.

Joan’s friends were instrumental in organizing the first Día de los Muertos procession in San Antonio, in which she participated, to remember those who have died from HIV/AIDS. This was in the beginning of HIV/AIDS awareness in 1988 or 1989. They have been holding celebrations every year since they organized it. Now there are processions all over town organized by different groups to honor various groups or individuals.

Joan said she had been exposed to Día de los Muertos celebrations since the beginning of her time in San Antonio and they have had a significant influence on her life. She participates in the celebrations but she also incorporates the ofrenda or altar in her daily life. She said,

This is my version. Everything I do is about who I am—I’m not copying them. That is their thing and this is my thing. This is something I have up all year. And you will notice that it is right in the front door so that every time I walk in I pay homage to these people that are really important to me.

The practice of creating and maintaining an altar has become a significant part of Joan’s daily life. She keeps the altar up year round adding and subtracting objects as the mood strikes her—but the altar is always at the forefront of her day as it sits just inside the main doorway.

This fotoescultura or box altar (Figure 5.11) is one of Joan’s prized objects on her altar. She has made several of these to honor her American Indian “family” in Oklahoma and also one to her dogs that died. This one contains photographs of the landscape around Oklahoma, animals
and her friends. It also contains a small jar of soil taken from “home” as well as some dried seed pods that are used in healing rituals. There is also a bundle of dried sage next to the box that is used to cleanse the home. These boxes, and the altar itself, is Joan’s way of remembering her home and in keeping in touch with her sense of identity with her “adopted” American Indian family. [Interviews with Joan Frederick by Mary Durocher, 11/3/2009 and 9/15/2010]

**Conclusion**

These case studies tell very different stories of the negotiation of identity in a historically Mexican but Anglo dominated San Antonio. Some of the participants are from families who have been in Texas for generations and they have continued in their faith and heritage. One family is first generation immigrants and brought their faith and traditions with them. Other participants were part of a generation that was aggressively assimilated to Anglo ways including only speaking English in the home. These participants have come to their appreciation of their *Mexicano* heritage in different ways, some of them have done so later in life. All of them use religious objects as part of their connection to their past—their cultural heritage—through their cultural memories.
I have included the two non-Mexicano participants not just as a contrast but as reinforcement of my hypothesis that objects shape identity. Ana Spector has been shaped by the influences of her childhood; her Cuban background, her Catholic and Jewish upbringing, and her contact with *Santería*. She continues to surround herself with the objects that represent these influences and sets her apart from the Hispanic community in which she lives. She told me, “I am *Cubana* and I am proud of that. I keep these things around me to remind me of who I am and where I came from.” Joan Frederick is not as unusual as one would think. There are many Anglos in San Antonio who display objects of *Mexicano* and even religious origin as part of their connection with San Antonio itself. When Joan was first introduced to the concept of making altars to honor deceased loved ones, it spoke to some need in her. It helped her keep and acknowledge her connection with the American Indian culture she left in Oklahoma. Her *Día de los Muertos* altar is in her entranceway all year. It is a constant reminder of how she sees herself—as part of the American Indian community in which she lived. When talking about her altar she said, “It’s so San Antonio!” The *Mexicano* tradition of altar making not only allows her to acknowledge publicly and daily her American Indian connections but to the community of San Antonio as well.
CHAPTER 6

ALTARS AS ASSEMBLAGES OF MEANING

Mexicano Catholicism is a blend of Spanish Catholic and mestizo spirituality and focus on symbol and ritual. This chapter explores the creation, maintenance, and use of home altars as assemblages of meaningful objects in religious ritual performance, and their placement, meanings, and role in negotiation of identity. Subsequent chapters will focus on the particular objects on the altar and their symbolic and personal meanings to the individual, as well as the relationships between the objects and the person and the objects to each other. I argue that religious traditions such as creating and maintaining home altars provide an affirmation of Catholic and Mexicano heritage and recognition of the participants’ continued role in it within an often conflicting social framework. I demonstrate that images and objects placed on a Mexicano home altar are an integral component of religious devotion and reflect the cultural memories of the group. The altars tell the story of conquest, adaptation, negotiation, and cultural complexity of lives lived in the borderlands.

A home altar is a visual field where ideas of a person’s relationships with the divine and their place in the world are expressed in material form. The objects chosen in assembling the altar reflect a conscious choice of these particular objects out of a range of possible objects available for use by the person to signify specific meanings. Anthropologist Mary Douglas and economist Baron C. Isherwood), suggest that people make sense of their world through visible markers since abstract concepts are hard to remember unless they are represented in physical form. “Goods assembled together in ownership makes physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes” (Douglas & Isherwood 1979: viii-ix). The act of creating and using an altar is a performance or enactment of religious tradition that has
been passed down through generations of *Mexicanos* in San Antonio. Creating an altar represents a choice to practice a particular form of religion through rituals that have been practiced in the past, and signals a sense of belonging to and sharing with a particular community—both *Mexicano* and Catholic—a process Catherine Bell (1992) refers to as “ritualization.” In an interview with Alfredo Rodríguez, he explained the importance of religious objects to *Mexicano* Catholicism by quoting something he read in an exhibit of Art of the Southwest: “We live with images of Christ and the Virgin everyday but the Anglos have locked him into heaven. We have these images in our homes on our altars but Anglos only go to church to see these things.”

Creating an altar is also a collective or social act of memory, the altar (and the objects on the altar) connects the devout viewer to fellow believers who recognize the objects of devotion (Morgan 1998:48). The creation of a home altar for *Mexicanos* in San Antonio is not just an act of devotion and search for Divine protection but also an act of displaying Catholic and Mexican heritage and the things that are important in their lives. As such, it is an important legitimating device in the negotiation of a sense of self and personal identity.

The objects on the altar represent the cultural memories of the people who display them. Anthropological theorist David Harvey stated that, “The space which is paramount for memory is the house—one of the greatest powers of integration of the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. For it is within that space that we learned how to dream and imagine” (Harvey 1990:217). Efforts made to preserve the past through objects displayed and used in the home are also an attempt to preserve the self—“a search for personal or collective identity” (Harvey 1990:302-303). Harvey argues that without knowing where we have been, it is difficult to know where we are going. The past is therefore the foundation of individual and collective identity. Continuity between past and present creates a sense of belonging and ordered meaning that
enables people to cope with the changing social environments in which they find themselves.

Following the tenets of practice theory, people tend to utilize various elements in creating their altars, combining meaningful objects from their past and present, making the altar a bridge between their Anglo and *Mexicano* cultural heritages. The process of creating the altar is a negotiation of beliefs, memories, experiences, and symbolic objects that intertwine with social relations. Each of these components simultaneously affects and is affected by the others. The altar is a social construct that is a part of larger systems of meaning, with the daily, routinized practices that occur in the home negotiating concepts of identity in reaction to the particular social setting in San Antonio. People combine and recreate ideas of the self through objects on their altars, for as anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1985) argued, social reproduction in a multicultural environment is a complex dynamic process. Like society, altars are continually reproduced and reinterpreted in their use and the objects they contain to reflect new circumstances or relationships.

**Home Altars and Space**

The location of the altar is also the result of choice—a conscious strategy of gathering symbolic objects from religious context and cultural memories that are meaningful to the person and displaying them in the home. The objects on the altar and the altar itself derive additional meaning from their display in the specific cultural context of the home. None of the objects would have the same meaning if they were in other contexts such as a museum, and art gallery, or a store. In turn, the meaning of the objects gives meaning to the home, marking it as the home of a particular type of person (Hurdley 2006:723). Landscape architect and regional planner

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Ellen-J. Pader argues that the ways in which people organize their domestic space plays a significant role in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of social identity (Pader 1993:114). The arrangement of objects in the home reflects concepts of identity through social reproduction and the structuration of the activities of daily life (Giddens 1979, 1984). Pierre Bourdieu (1977:89) similarly argues that it is largely through routinized daily actions and movements within the home that people learn about social relations and particular worldviews of those around them. The house and its arrangement of rooms and objects, and the larger social classification system it both reproduces and reinforces, is "read" with the body (Bourdieu 1977:89) and becomes part of the “habitus” of the person. The house has both public and private, formal and informal spaces, spaces whose use is determined by status or gender, and it is in living in and negotiating these spaces that people learn to live in the larger world. In the same way, people interact with the altar as they move through the house following their daily routines as well as during times of devotion reinforcing the place of ritual and religion in their lives. The arrangement of objects in the home has been conceptualized as both a “marking” practice and a performance for others that contributes to the negotiation of identity (Hurdley 2006:718). Within this framework, it is important to closely examine where the home altar is located in the homes of the participants to determine how they relate this sacred space to the community in which they live.

During the examination of the participants’ altars, I discovered that the home altars were placed in a highly visible area of the home that is open to both family and visitors—usually the living room. Social theorist Erving Goffman (2001:32) would label the living room as a "front

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34 There is a growing literature in various fields such as anthropology, social history, human geography, and environmental psychology on the role and meaning of domestic space in social life. Perhaps the most well known is Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) seminal study of the Kabyle house, where he discusses “habitus” in relation to the organization of the Kabyle house and its effects on the organizational principles of gender, age, status, and cosmology.
stage” space—open to the public and therefore more formal. Household members therefore self-consciously present their public selves as they want others to see them. The placement of the altar in the main living space not only displays the family’s beliefs to the public; it also opens up the use of the altar to anyone who enters the home. The altar is available to anyone at anytime for prayer or reflection—maintaining and reinforcing identity. What I found most interesting, however, is that altars and religious objects were not relegated to one area such as the living room but rather were spread throughout the home. The main altar in the public area of the living room was used as a “family” or group altar, with a variety of objects and statues and images of many saints and aspects of the Virgin Mary. Most homes also included individual, personal, more intimate altars in each bedroom. For instance, the López family had a large formal family altar in the living room, yet each of the daughters told me of their “private” altars in their own bedrooms. In addition to the altars, which were rather large assemblages of objects, there were significant numbers of individual religious objects throughout the home—in hallways and kitchens, and in unexpected places like bathrooms. The ubiquity of these signs of devotion and remembrance attests to the importance of these objects to the participants’ sense of self and identity in both a religious and ethnic context. Objects on the altar and on display in the home cross the border between religious icons and objects of cultural and personal memory. The altars and the objects displayed in the home demonstrate that “socially constructed attitudes toward interactions are both created and played out in the routinized negotiation of spaces” (Pader 1993:121) in the home. The objects that are chosen for display in the home, where they are displayed, and how they are used become important indications of the religious and cultural identification of their owners. The sense of identity connected with the objects is then reinforced through the continued daily interactions with the objects.
Participants’ Altars

I have arranged the discussion of the participants’ home altars in this chapter in three groups that reflect the religious meaning of the altars to the participants, which follows to a certain extent the categories used in earlier chapters where the categories were based on religious and *Mexicano* heritage. I have grouped them here by religious usage because for all of the participants, except Joan Frederick and Ana Spector, the altars represent a connection to the cultural memories of a Mexican past. However, Joan’s and Ana’s altars do represent the cultural heritage of their past. In Joan’s case, the use of a home altar is a direct result of her exposure to *Mexicano* altar building and a conscious decision to utilize this symbol to identify with her past and to her present in *Mexicano* San Antonio. Ana is using her particular type of altar to identify herself as *Cubana* in a predominantly *Mexicano* community emphasizing that she is not Anglo but she is also not “Hispanic”—she is someone with her own heritage and set of beliefs. Since all participants represent their ethnic background through their altars, I have grouped them in categories that reflect how they use their altars. The group *Mexican Catholic Altars* created their altars following traditional religious practices they learned as members of Mexican Catholic families and which they continue to practice in the traditional way. The second group, *Syncretic Altars*, combines various religious traditions in their home altars—Mexican Catholic, indigenous, and their own interpretations of an assortment of religious belief systems to form a syncretic blending of beliefs. The last group, *Non-Religious Altars*, consists of participants who display religious icons as mnemonic markers of their past but do not necessarily pray or make offerings at the altars although they are at times compelled by their religious upbringing to interact with the religious aspect of the objects.

This is a static look at what is actually a dynamic process. What is depicted is the altar at
a particular point in time that does not reflect how they have changed, or will change, over time. People continuously make changes as their moods dictate, or as they acquire new objects as gifts or remembrances of life experiences. The altars and the home in general is a fluid stage for the display of objects of significance in the lives of the participants. Following anthropologists Janet Hoskins (1998, 2007), this process can be compared to a life story or narrative that people tell about their lives—in this case using objects. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, when talking about life stories, stated that “the fabric of meaning that constitutes a single human existence is the story we tell about ourselves” (Myerhoff 1978:xv). The same can be said for the objects we display that reflect that life story. Myerhoff also argues that,

In constructing a self through stories, we define a coherent experience of ‘I’. This sense of self is actively sought, constructed and maintained by examining, selecting, interpreting, and communicating elements of one’s personal inner history and outer public history. . . [everyone] needs reflecting surfaces—audiences listen and witnesses are essential for self-awareness even when a person is their own mirror. [Myerhoff 1978:222]

Exploring the altars, the objects on the altars, and the stories the participants tell about their altars provides some insight into the meanings embedded in the altars and enacted in their use.

**Mexican Catholic Altars**

This first group consists of the altars in the homes of the López, Silva, and Udriales families and Carmen Ruiz. These are “traditional” Catholic altars in the sense that they are used for daily prayer by family members. All of these participants are active in their churches attending Sunday Mass and other religious celebrations, as well as doing volunteer work in the parish. The altars however also reflect the Mexicano heritage of each of these participants by including icons that are of particular importance to persons of Mexican descent, using traditional colors and decorations, and making traditional Mexican offerings and prayers at the altar.
The López Family Altars

The family altar in the López home is placed squarely in front of the fireplace on the main wall of the living room directly across from the front door. Samira commented, “In our family, I feel that we have always had an altar. When we come in it is the first thing we look at. It is right here in our living room.” The altar is also in the center of the home dividing the kitchen and dining room from the bedroom areas. It is located in the most public area of the home and must be passed multiple times in the day. This altar is multi-leveled including the fireplace mantel and a small low table placed in front of the fireplace itself (Figure 6.1). Reflecting Mexican traditions, there is a small Mexican flag just to the left of the altar and the altar is decorated with tissue paper flowers and banners. The fireplace mantel is covered in yellow tissue paper and the hearth is covered in purple tissue paper. The front of the altar is covered in Papel Picado made by Francisca. These are extra decorations added for the Día de los Muertos celebrations held
earlier in the month on November 2. There are also multi-colored tissue flowers adorning the altar and two vases of silk flowers on either side of the table. Centered on the mantel is a large gold crucifix. To the right, the crucifix is flanked by two decorative plates; one of the Holy Family and the other of Jesus surrounded by a group of small children. On the left is a plaster statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe, a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and a small wooden nicho for Santo Niño de Atocha—the Holy Child Jesus Christ from the town of Atocha, Spain. The small table is covered with a hand-crocheted doily. On the table is another plaster statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe, this one set in a bed of stones depicting the hill of Tepeyac. This arrangement has its own lighted candle. Other objects on the table include two crucifixes, several images of saints, an angel, a praying child figure, family photographs, flowers, and candles. On a side table to the right of this main altar is another table that contains family pictures and a few scattered images of saints.

Each of the daughters described their personal devotional space although they did not offer to show them to me. Zyanya described the simple altar in her apartment—a statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe and a candle. “I pray at my altar everyday…for me it is a form of spirituality…but I also pray for good grades.” Samira said that she also has a stature of the Virgen de Guadalupe and a candle in her dorm room. Lusela has a huge crucifix over her bed that she got in Mexico and she has other smaller crosses surrounding it, crosses she received as special remembrances of the sacraments—one from her Baptism, from her First Communion, and her Confirmation. She also has a small shelf for the Virgen de Guadalupe and a candle. She said, “Just a tiny one. I don’t have much.” I noticed that she is also wearing a bracelet made of religious medals. Lusela said, “Oh yeah, I wear a bracelet with medals. And people don’t know what it means. They started selling these at regular shops at the mall and people started wanting
them as a fashion but they didn’t know what they meant. I wear it because the saints are important to me.” Nikki, the youngest daughter, says that she prays at the family altar in the living room. She does not have an altar in her room but she does pray and light candles at the main altar. The family regularly attends church services and several members are also very active in church service groups. Their altars reflect their intense religious devotion and their respect of Mexican traditions. [Interview with López family by Mary Durocher, 11/21/2009]

**The Silva Family Altars**

The Silva family has many altars and areas where religious objects are on display (see Figure 6.2). Mrs. Silva first showed me a small altar in their living room which is placed in a corner visible from the front door (top right of Figure 6.2). The objects on the living room altar sit on a small table next to the couch making it a convenient place to pray and meditate. There are two books on the table for this purpose—a book of prayers and a copy of the Good News Bible. The main figures on this altar are a statue of the Immaculate Conception which appeared to be of carved wood or ceramic painted to look like wood and a small statue of Our Lady of San Juan of the Lakes. There are also flowers and a small container holding sticks of incense. There are two candles on the altar, the taller blue candle has images of the apostles carved on it and was given to Mrs. Silva by a neighbor. This space is open to the public and all members of the family and is used by them regularly.

Mrs. Silva next showed me her son Joe’s room. Hanging on the wall as you enter is a cross that was brought over from Jerusalem and is said to contain soil, rocks, and other substances from the Holy Land (not pictured here—see Figure 8.1). There are numerous religious objects hanging on the walls and an assemblage of objects on a small dresser (top left of image). There are two small crosses and a statue of Saint Frances Assisi. On the right hand
Figure 6.2 Silva Family Altars
Source: Author, 2009
corner of the desk is a glow-in-the-dark statue of Padre Pío that has been touched to his relic in Pennsylvania thus making the statue a secondary relic which is considered as sacred as the original whose “aura” it has absorbed (Walsham 2010:34). Padre Pio’s image is on a Perpetual Mass Remembrance card that designates Joe as member of Padre Pío Spiritual Child Association and serves to remind him that a Mass will be said in his honor at Padre Pio's tomb in San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy.

The couple’s bedroom contains several assemblages of statues and objects of devotion. Mrs. Silva started by showing me the objects on the tall dresser directly across from the bedroom door and the images hanging on the wall surrounding the space. (center left of Figure 6.2). She first showed me a pair of white ceramic praying hands that used to be her mother’s. They are displayed prominently on the center of the dresser. Above the dresser is a large framed image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Mrs. Silva said that, “The Hispanic usually pray a lot to her. She appeared to Juan Diego and now he is a saint also.” There is a statue of Juan Diego kneeling in prayer. In his hands is a chaplet to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The other images on the wall are Padre Pío with the Infant Jesus, pictures of several Popes, and an image of Santo Niño de Atocha. There is a statue of Saint Thomas Moore, the patron saint of the parish they now attend. He is draped with a knotted rope rosary and a chaplet to use while praying to him. There is also a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a statue of Saint Anthony. Just to the left of the altar is a shelf with a bottle of Holy Water, two small statues of the Virgin Mary and a small statue of Saint Peregrine.

Moving to the dresser that is next to the bed, Mrs. Silva first shows me the image of the Infant of Prague and a little red prayer book with a picture of the Infant of Prague on the front (bottom left of Figure 6.2). The other objects on the dresser are “little saints” that were on her
mother’s altar. She says that they are broken now but she still keeps them here in this “special spot” and prays to them every day. Starting from the right is the Infant of Prague, Saint Jude who is the saint of the impossible, the Blessed Virgin Mary (which resembles Our Lady of Guadalupe in her coloring), and the Sacred Heart of Mary wrapped in some lace fabric. This is an area Mrs. Silva uses for private contemplation. There is a white leather-bound Holy Bible, a book on the life of Pope Juan Paul II along with her blue crystal rosary. There is also a small white cross that was given to her by her grandson who is Episcopalian. The cross is draped with a scapular which is another sacramental. There were several other images positioned in strategic places around the house (see two areas in bottom right of Figure 6.2). There were two three-dimensional versions of images of the Last Supper in the dining area (one is pictured in the Figure 6.2—right center). One of them was flanked by two white ceramic angels. The Silva family is very devout in their Catholic faith and there are numerous prayer cards, booklets and medals throughout the home that attest to their constant interactions with the divine and the saints. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

**The Udriales Family Altars**

The Udriales family does not have an “altar” in the same sense as the López and Silva families’ large assemblage of sacred objects at which they pray regularly. They do, however, have several dedicated spaces in the public areas of their home to honor their religious ideals, family, and cultural heritage. Judy began the discussion of their religious objects by saying, “As far as our religion, I believe that the cross protects us and that is why it is at the door. I have faith that it will protect us.” They have small crosses made of blessed palm fronds over every door in the house—even the garage door. The crosses protect all the entranceways into the home. They also have a cross at the center of an arrangement of images on the main wall of the living room
In a window alcove in the dining room, there were two areas of devotion. (top of Figure 6.3). On the left is a reproduction of a painting by Leonardo de Vinci of the Last Supper. The image formerly hung in Armando’s mother’s house. Below hangs portraits of their grandparents. Judy said, “This little place was kind of dedicated to our ancestors.” On the opposite side of the alcove is a corner dedicated to Judy’s mother and her children. You can see holy cards of the Holy Family and The Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary tucked in the frame of the photographs. Judy then points out the large crystal rosary draped over the curtains (not visible in the image). Armando said, “When we got married we had this double rosary, we have it up there. It is called lasso. When you are kneeling at the altar part of the ceremony is to the rosary around the couple and it is like you become one in God.” It hangs over the window as a sign of their connection.
under God and a reminder of their *Mexicano* traditions.

The next area we looked at was in the living room on the main wall. (center of Figure 6.3) The central focus is the crucifix representing God’s protection of the family—something every family has in their home according to the Udriales. Also hanging on the wall are images of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Sacred Heart of Jesus that were given to the couple as a wedding gift from Armando’s mother. Judy said that she put the boy’s pictures with the *Virgen* and Sacred Heart because, “to me that means they are being protected.” In the center of the arrangement are several candles ready to light.

In another area of the hall, Judy showed me her collection of angels. (bottom of Figure 6.3). She had them set up on a narrow table and decorated for Christmas. In the center of the arrangement are small statues of Saint Jude and *San Martin de Porres* and a cross with a picture of Saint Francis Assisi. They told me that they have other small statues of saints and prayer cards around the house. The Udriales family is very active in the church but their practice in the home manifests itself differently than the other participants in this category. While they do not have an “altar” in the same sense as the other families Judy does pray in front of the small window alcove dedicated to her children and her mother. [Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009]

*Carmen Ruiz’ Altars*

In Carmen’s home there are two distinct altar areas (Figure 6.4). The first altar she showed me was hers. It was located in a rather large hallway that connects the living room, her bedroom, and the dining room. While it cannot be seen from the front door, it is in a central area of the home (top of Figure 6.4). The second altar is her mother’s altar which is in the kitchen (center of Figure 6.4). The centerpiece of Carmen’s altar is a large statue of the Virgin Mary of
the Immaculate Conception draped with rosaries. There are two candles on this altar; one very colorful candle with a picture of the Blessed Virgin and one white candle with a ping pong ball balanced on top. When Carmen was selected for the Parish Pastoral Council, ping pong balls were used to make the selections so she keeps it as a reminder of her service. Carmen is very active in the parish and there is a small white bottle of holy water and a round container that holds the ashes that she distributes to the home bound on Ash Wednesday. Next to those items is a framed image of Pope John Paul II with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the background.

Figure 6.4 Carmen Ruiz’ Altars
Source: Author, 2010
commemorating his visit to San Antonio in 1987. Carmen witnessed his visit. In front of that is a picture taken at an ordination she attended.

Carmen next took me to the kitchen where her mother’s altar is still as she left it when she passed away. Carmen wants to keep it as it is for at least a year. On the dining room wall on the way to the kitchen in the back of the house are several religious images. Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos is pictured at bottom right of the image. Her mother spent her days at the kitchen table across from this altar space. Because of her limited mobility, everything she needed was in this one space: her television, coffee maker, toaster, bread box, microwave and religious inspiration (center of Figure 6.4). A small cross hangs on the wall above the candles. Hanging on the cross is a necklace with a small cross her mother said that she needed to carry. The candles in the center represent the Resurrection of Christ into heaven. The blue candles are Holy Spirit candles and they are meant to be lit in someone’s memory. On top of the microwave is a small image of Saint Michael the Archangel and above and to the right, on top of the breadbox, is an image of the Holy Spirit represented as a dove sending out tongues of fire. In front of the candles is a holder for burning incense. To the right of that image is a small clay sculpture of Our Lady of Guadalupe that Carmen’s daughter gave to her grandmother. Carmen explained why the object was placed in that particular place, “My mom put it on top [of the breadbox] and I didn’t realize why she put it in a particular place until after her passing and I kind of looked at her space and realized that this is where she prayed—she could see the statue from her chair.” A small Christmas tree also stands on the bread box year round. Carmen commented on the importance of this sacred space to her mother,

That’s her altar. And the tv was her lifeline so she would pray here; she would watch EWTN [Catholic Channel], she would watch the news. And this was her altar. She would sit right here in front of her altar and this is the place where I would bring her communion. But all of these little things are things that she used and things that she
constantly had around her. And of course she had this next to her—dictionary and thesaurus—this is where she would do her crosswords and she would pay her bills here. So this was her space. She had her coffee and her refrigerator and stove. And she could see Our Lady of Guadalupe from this spot. She had her here and she had her in the candle over there. This is where she would pray at night. When she couldn’t sleep she would come and she would pray here.

This place in the kitchen has now become important to Carmen. She said it is almost like her mother’s altar is now an altar in honor of her mother—one she said she would probably keep in place until a year after her mother’s death. Carmen has also arranged some of her personal things on the table as her mother once did. She has an arrangement of prayer cards that she uses as a small altar for her prayer (bottom left of Figure 6.4) and she keeps her rosary making materials nearby. Carmen is very active in the church and her activities spill over into her home. [Interview with Carmen Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 10/25/2010]

**Syncretic Altars**

The three participants in this group, David Zamora Casas, Jane Madrigal, and Ana Spector each have several altars in their homes that closely resemble traditional *Mexicano* Catholic home altars. Their altars, however, reflect a blending of various belief systems that they have experienced throughout their lives that includes a strong indigenous influence.

**David Zamora Casas’ Altars**

David’s apartment is one large main room that serves as living room, bedroom, and work room. He treats this space as both public and private, often hosting business meetings and guests in the room. Upon entering, there is a main altar just to the left in a corner. The rest of the room is literally over-flowing with various symbolic assemblages—most of them consisting of religious objects (Figure 6.5). David mentions that he usually has more objects but he is currently using several of them in artistic works he has on display in the community. Before beginning the
interview, David stopped me to say, “First we have to light some candles—candles are really important.” While lighting candles around the room he continued, “I am remembering the first altars I would see in homes, it may have just been a saint and a candle but it was always lit—the candle was always lit by that saint.” It is important to David that we approach the altars with the proper amount of respect and reverence which the lighting of candles provides.

David explained that the images he uses are part of a symbolic layering—a layering of meaning and influences—a mixing of the traditional, the modern, and the personal to say something about religion, ethnicity, family and the self. He says that different individuals mix things in different ways and the result can be read on many levels according to the person’s own experiences—both for the maker and the viewer. He added,

Sometimes this borders on the irreverent, but not quite there. For example, I like to use male images in my altars—and I like to represent our indigenous American Indio roots by embracing the closest thing to my past within history. I used to display the saints with dildos to represent their sexuality—even Jesus. I do that because that’s the way he really is. This brings us back to the question of why do we put these particular objects on our altars. I believe we have to give sexuality to our icons—we have to talk honestly about sex. But I think it’s a reflection of my own sexuality; it has a lot to do with speaking because I feel that being invisible is not good for anyone. Or being in denial is not good or hypocrisy is not good. It is just all one in the same.

David uses the objects on his altar and on display in his home partly to negotiate various ideas of gendered identity including heterosexual, homosexual, and transgendered ways of being.

David showed me the corner altar (top left of Figure 6.5), which he considers an “average” person’s altar and not an artist’s grand altar. The focal point of the altar is a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus who is displayed playing a musical instrument. On His head is a paper hat made out of the obituary of the mother of the first man David ever loved. Above, is an image of Santo Niño de Prague and hanging next to that is a cherub painted pink and sprinkled with glitter. On the left is a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi holding the Baby Jesus. He is in his own
Figure 6.5 David Zamora Casas’ Altars
Source: Author, 2009
little *nicho*, which is adorned with red roses. There are also pictures of living people and a few candles. The flowers on the altar are arranged in a traditional Mexican copal (incense) burner. Continuing to mix images and meaning, there is a Chinese smiling dragon to the right. David commented on the juxtaposition of the objects, “I usually have a fusion of contemporary issues, like HIV, who doesn’t know somebody that doesn’t have some type of cancer, and the traditional. So it [the altar] is like a power base—it’s like an energy base.”

Across the room, next to the bed, is a three-foot cement statue of the Virgin holding the Infant Jesus (center right of Figure 6.5). Again David is playing with the imagery—the Blessed Mother is crowned with Christmas lights and chandelier crystals and the Baby is holding a doll of Mickey Mouse—mixing modern and traditional objects to tell a story. Ultimately though, the altars are constructed or created to allow people to feel in the presence of the sacred persons represented on the altar in their home. David said, “They want to feel that Jesus or Mary loves you.” Just behind and to the right of the statue of the Virgin is an assemblage that focuses on San Martín de Porres (top right of Figure 6.5). Along with the votive candle to San Martín, there are several “medicinal” remedies that combined protect his health.

David has another altar in a bookcase that he keeps throughout the year that honors friends who have passed away (left bottom of Figure 6.5). It is his personal *Día de los Muertos* altar. Some of the objects are missing because he is currently using them in public installations. The altar contains a crucifix, two doves representing the Holy Spirit, butterflies, the traditional marigolds of *Día de los Muertos* and a representation of the Aztec serpent god *Quetzalcoatl*. The plate is a traditional Mexican plate with a drawing of a heron fishing. There are also photographs of friends and loved ones who have passed away. Above the altar are two Mexican *sombreros* (hats). On the bottom shelves is an Asian influenced altar (bottom right of Figure 6.5) with
several candles, although he told me the roosters are a Mexican symbol of virility. Even though David’s altars are very public—both those in his home and in his public installations—he says they both represent him as a person and his struggles to negotiate differing influences in his life—Mexican, Anglo, Catholic, heterosexual, and gay. He said, “I think that one of the charming factors or components of home altars is that they are so personal. It’s like between you, your house, and that spirit or entity—that memory.” His altars reflect how he sees himself in any given moment and how he has changed through his experience and struggles. [Interviews with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]  

*Jane Madrigal’s Altars*  

Jane’s altars are distributed around the large living room; in fact, they are the only things that occupy the living room—there were no “traditional” items of furniture that you would expect to see in a living room. This space is the center of the home entered directly from the front door. The entire family uses the altars and Jane often invites relatives and friends to celebrate various “religious” events. The altars reflect her Mexican-Catholic upbringings, her training in *Santería*, in combination with her indigenous spiritual beliefs. When we arrived Jane first lit the candles and sprayed the house and us with rose scented oil to prepare us and the altars. She said, “When I light my candles to different saints it’s for different reasons: one’s for protection, one’s for abundance, one’s for health.” She has three main altars and a number of smaller altars and artwork arranged around the perimeter of the room (Figure 6.6).  

Each of these altars is a dedicated sacred space for her saints and her ancestors. The first altar is just to the left of the front door as you enter the house (bottom left of Figure 6.6). The objects are arranged on a cabinet painted by Jane in indigenous patterns with an image of the Aztec serpent god. Above the altar is a painting, done by Jane, of Saint Michael the Archangel
Figure 6.6 Jane Madrigal's Altars
Source: Author, 2009
battling the devil. Taped to the canvas is a prayer card of Saint Michael that she is using as a model; although as one can see, she is also using herself as a model for Saint Michael as well. The portrait was inspired by a dream she had where she had to literally become Saint Michael to defeat the devil. Flowers are flanking each side of the altar. In the center of the cabinet, are three assemblages dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. Each contains a white plate that holds a small statue, a candle dedicated to the Virgin, and an offering. In the center is an assemblage in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The five grey sugar skulls were made by Jane as part of the upcoming Día de los Muertos celebrations. The glass of water is a traditional offering to the gods. There is a pink spray bottle on the far left of the altar which Jane keeps filled with rose water to fill the room with the scent of fresh roses for Our Lady of Guadalupe. The doll on the far right represents Oya an orisha that is the goddess of the dead in Santería. Jane said that Oya is a warrior and helps her fight her battles with evil.

To the left of this altar, next to the front door, was a smaller altar (top left of Figure 6.6). On a small painted table is a statue and candle of Santo Niño de Atocha who in Santería is Ellegua. In both belief systems, he is the patron of travelers and guardian of the crossroads and is often set near the door of a home for protection. This statue sits in an offering of various grains and coins. In the far left hand corner of the living room, in a built in bookcase, is what Jane refers to as her “Muertos” altar (top right of Figure 6.6—on the left side of room). The shelves contain pictures and remembrances of her friends and relatives who have passed away—a three-dimensional album of memories. Scattered amongst the photographs are various earth elements—sea shells, feathers, and candles—along with a crucifix. There are also sugar skulls she has made and decorated for the departed. The third altar, her Spirit Guide Altar, is on the far side of the room, next to the Muertos altar. The objects are arranged around the fireplace. This
altar is reminiscent of a typical Santería altar and is a newer altar. Jane said, “In the last misa we had, the woman said that I needed to set up my own altar to my spirit guides. . . separate from the ancestors.” This altar has a painting and a statue in the center representing her indigenous spirit guide. On the left is a statue of Chango—Macho, a Puerto Rican Santería figure, with a candle in his honor. The painting on the left above the statue of Chango, is a piece she did in memory of her friend and spiritual mentor Raul Salinas. The painting on the right on the floor is a mono-print Jane did in memory of Ramona who was a commander in the Zapatista National Army and composer of the Women's Revolutionary Law. She includes these images as a tribute to her growth as a spiritual healer and defender of her Mexican heritage. The candle on the right is Saint Martha. She is entreated for control over enemies. The statue next to the candle is a woman holding two snakes. That is a spiritual representation of Saint Martha. There are also various earth elements scattered on the altar: corn, candles, incense, and flowers along with a glass of water for the spirits. There are also two small “thrones” near the window that represent Orishas in Santería—Ochun on the left and Chango on the right.

Jane’s altars are very fluid—while the main objects remain the same other objects are added depending on the season, her moods, and her spiritual needs at the time. She keeps the altars continually refreshed with various offerings, fresh flowers, and lighted candles. She scents the room with rose water for the Virgin of Guadalupe and burns incense for her other spirits. [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

**Ana Spector’s Altars**

Ana had several altars in the living room and in the bedroom of her small home (Figure 6.7). Ana said that she would probably have more things displayed if she had more room. All of these images and objects are important to her as she explained to me: “You know what I say
about things in your world—if you don’t have pictures, if you don’t have little things, little mementos, then you don’t have attachment to life. It’s like you are here but you don’t care about nothing; nothing has meaning in your life.” Ana explained that she has several altars in her home representing her “marriage” of her Jewish/Catholic and other religious influences, “They are separated but they are together. Because I respect each one as an entity. Everybody [religious influence] has their own little spot.” The first altar she showed me was on a small wall on the right hand side of the living room. Two sets of curio shelves are filled with many different kinds of angels (bottom right of Figure 6.7). Ana said, “I dedicate this to all the angels—we don’t see them but they are around and it is a beautiful thought.” This angel altar and the next altar in the
living room are in the public space of her home; the rest of her altars are in the private space of her bedroom. She shares these two altars with those who come to visit while keeping the other altars for herself alone.

The second altar, arranged on a small table (bottom left of Figure 6.7), in the living room is just to the left of the door as you enter from the kitchen. This is what she calls her “Jewish” altar. Ana said that out of the eight children in her family she was the only one to marry a Jew. She said, “This is my Jewish side and I need to recognize it.” She showed me her prayer book and a small book that belonged to her husband when he went to Hebrew school. She opened the book and showed me where he had copied his lessons. The doily is one crocheted by her mother. Ana has various items that remind her of her Jewish faith including two menorahs, a yarmulke, and a Jewish star. She said, “Everything is there—everything you need.” Ana was raised by a Catholic mother and a Jewish father and tries to represent the influence of both in her life.

The first altar she showed me in her bedroom is arranged on a dresser to the right hand side of the door (top right of Figure 6.7). This corner is dedicated to Santería. The altar contains various santos, candles, memorabilia, and objects from her home in Cuba. The basket in the center contains her offerings to the Orishas (gods) and santos—fruit, money, a cigar, perfume and other small items preferred by the Orisha. This altar is the primary site of her daily spiritual activities.

The next altar is on a dresser next to the bed (top center of Figure 6.7). It is dedicated to her ancestors. Around the altar are arranged framed photographs of her husband, her mother, her father, her brothers and her two sisters who have all passed away. There are candles and a glass of water to refresh the spirits of the ancestors. On another wall in the bedroom, Ana has created what she calls her “Buddhist Connection.” (bottom center of Figure 6.7) She likes the “oriental”
figures because they are pretty and they make her happy. She said, “So I put it there because I like it—it is not that I practice Buddhism it’s just that I like it—it caught my attention—there are so many Chinese people in Cuba—who knows maybe what they believe is right. . . It speaks to me in a way that has meaning—they are quiet and comforting.”

The last altar was in a corner on the right hand side of the bed (top left of Figure 6.7). This altar is in honor of her relatives that are still alive. There is a grouping of framed photographs on a small table a candle and some silk flowers. Most of the photographs are of her daughter, Annelle, who Ana said is her “living god.” There are pictures of Annelle as a young child, with her girlfriend, her wedding picture, and pictures of her with her husband. There was also a photo of Ana and her two brothers when they were still in Cuba. It is the only picture she has of herself from that time since she said that the family did not take many pictures. It is a little faded because it is over 50 years old. Ana is rather sentimental about this corner altar and said, “So in that little corner we are all together.” Ana referred to her altars as a marriage of the spiritual belief systems that she has experienced. She honors each of them in their own space some of which are more private than others. [Interviews with Ana Spector by Mary Durocher, 11/14/2009 and 11/22/2009]

Non-Religious Altars

The participants in this last category, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, Chuck Ramirez, and Joan Frederick, have religious objects in their home to represent their heritage, not necessarily to be used in religious devotion. Chuck declares that he is an agnostic and Franco seems to be battling with ideas of faith. However, they display various religious objects in respect of their Catholic Mexicano heritage. Although all would agree that they were raised to be Anglicized, they have come to appreciate their heritage in their adult lives. Whether they actually pray to the images is
a matter of debate—but their presence does evoke memories of rituals they once practiced. Joan was not raised a Catholic and is not Mexican, yet she uses the format of the altar to honor her strong connection with her American Indian “family” from her home in Oklahoma. While her altar does not contain Catholic religious objects, it does contain spiritual objects of her adopted people. In essence, she has adopted the practice of creating an altar to honor her non-Anglo connections and represent that complex multi-layered identity she has built for herself.

**Franco Mondini-Ruiz’ Altars**

Franco’s altars are a mix of objects from his various cultural influences. He said, “My own altars represent a very fast cultural journey.” His family did not have a lot of altars or other objects that reflected their Mexican and indigenous heritage when he was young. Although he said that, “there were Mexicans that had the Virgen de Guadalupe and all the candles, but my grandmother did have a little Virgencita but it was the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos.” According to Franco the working class Mexican Americans did not venerate the Virgen de Guadalupe. He claims that her popularity came later to San Antonio or was brought by people from a more modern Mexico. Franco said, “But if you were bourgeois you venerated the white lady not the brown lady.” The family often went to the shrine to the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos in Brownsville—the white Virgin.

Franco does now however have a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe and has images of both Virgins in his home (Figure 6.8) to which he frequently makes offerings. Franco believes that faith works through focus. He said,

> It was gnawing at me that I had roses in the winter and didn’t present them to her—Our Lady of Guadalupe. I know rationally that that is not important. I had let myself get to the place where I was not on top of things—not only did I not venerate her altar, I probably didn’t return important phone calls, I probably didn’t get a painting done, I could have gotten ahead in my life.
The purpose Franco derives from the objects and rituals performed at the altars is discipline, the reminder to focus on what you want out of life. If you maintain the level of discipline necessary to remember to bring water to the moss or bring roses to the Virgin, you will maintain that same discipline in your daily life.

Franco gave another example, “Let’s just say that my sister has cancer, I am going to pray—even I would—but by the time you are praying you are focusing so hard on something that everything else is coming together too. The energy is focused and what you do with that energy determines what will be accomplished.” The objects become symbols and reminders of where that energy is going to be focused.

Franco has many “altars” or objects displayed throughout his home (Figure 6.9). He said, “There is dialogue of objects going on here—in the house, or the studio, or the yard. I don’t know if this is just for artists but they all speak to me.” There is a mixture of various indigenous, Mexicano, and Catholic influences that all have meaning in his life. He displays some religious objects and a wide variety of objects that represent his indigenous and Mexicano heritage. The image below illustrates some of the collection: a cross draped with a rosary next to an antique metate (corn grinder), a small statue of the Mayan folk saint Maximón or San Simón, an image of the Virgin, shelves with traditional Mexican pottery and figures. The bowl of water in the bottom
Franco is an artist and a collector and considers it important to publicly display the artifacts of his cultural memory. The use of the traditional objects in the home is something that was not acceptable when he was a child. His father was Italian, not Mexican, and stressed acculturation and banished the traditional practices of Franco’s mother. Franco’s family therefore did not have altars in their home. As part of his “dialogue with objects” and revival of his Mexicano heritage, Franco has installed a traditional Mexican kitchen altar in the kitchen of his gallery (Figure 6.10). This is not a working kitchen but a snapshot of a traditional Mexicano
He has included the requisite religious objects—a cross and statues of saints—in addition to items that would commonly be seen in the homes of *Mexicanos* in the neighborhood he lives in. These items include dinnerware and particular brands of canned food and cleaning supplies that were common in the days of his youth.

Franco also has various religious objects scattered around his garden (Figure 6.11). Since he spends a lot of his time outdoors working, meeting with people and hosting extravagant parties, he arranges the outdoor space in the same way he arranges his indoor space to display his *Mexicano* heritage. He even began using his mother’s name with his own to stress the fact that he is a San Antonio *Mexicano*. [Interviews with Franco Mondini-Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 11/25/2009 & 9/13/2010]
Figure 6.11 Franco Mondini-Ruiz, Garden, including a small cactus garden to a figure of Buddha (top left); the Virgin with Child on a shelf with an Aztec god (top right); Santa Muerte—Holy or Saint Death (bottom left); a frieze of a Southeast Asian Davita (bottom center); and a carved wooden santo of St. Michael the Archangel (bottom right).

Source: Author, 2010
Chuck Ramirez’ Altars

The assemblages Chuck has displayed throughout his home would not be considered altars in the religious sense, but they are assemblages of objects that are meaningful in his life and so still serve the purposes of this project. The groupings represent the “collective memory” of his youth, of his Mexicano background, and of the memory of his beloved grandmother. He said of the objects he has selected to display, “For me, I like to use objects that are symbolic of my relationship or my connection with that person who was my grandmother and to my Mexicano background.”

As you walk in the back door, which is the most commonly used entrance to his home, there is a framed image that was his grandmother’s (Figure 6.12). The image is an elaborately rendered scene of Christ’s Passion and Crucifixion. This is a depiction of the Arma Christi (Arms of Christ) or Instruments of the Passion (Clark 1999). The wooden cross is set on a sepia tone lithograph of the crucifixion scene, the body of Jesus is gold metal, and the instruments of the Passion are fashioned out of...
silver. The entire display sits on a small table that also holds a basket of sea shells that represent the earth, water, and life, as well as vacations Chuck has taken. There is also a photograph of his grandmother taken when she was in the nursing home. Hanging just to the right is a wooden rosary and a string of gourds (not pictured) that are a common sight in *Mexicano* homes.

In the kitchen, the center of the home, Chuck has a number of assemblages of objects most of which honor his *Mexicano* heritage. Many of these objects center on the preparation and serving of traditional foods, which is very important to Chuck, and to the memory of his grandmother (Figure 6.13). A photo of his grandmother sits on top of the refrigerator surrounded by Mexican pottery (center of Figure 6.13). The religious figures (right and left of image) are displayed on shelves with more Mexican pottery Chuck has collected and uses for his many dinner parties. On the other side of the kitchen is another assemblage on a tall dresser. (Figure 6.14) Of special interest to me was the wooden crucifix hanging on the wall near the center of the assemblage. This type of crucifix opens up and can be re-assembled as a mini-altar often used to pray at a sick bed. Inside are two candles and a bottle of holy water. I have one just like it that was given to my parents when my grandmother was ill.

![Figure 6.13 Chuck Ramirez’ Kitchen Assemblages](image)

*Source: 2009 & 2010*
On the dresser, there is also an angel, another chicken, and two miniature plates of traditional food used on *Día de los Muertos* altars mixed in with the artwork. There are also several eggs representing fertility, rebirth and renewal and a *cascarones* (hollowed out polka dotted egg filled with confetti) that is used in traditional Mexican celebrations. These altars or assemblages are dynamic—they change at the whim of the maker. Each time I went to Chuck’s house he had different objects or had arranged objects in different places.

Chuck also had several assemblages of objects used on *Día de los Muertos* altars, especially old sugar skulls. (Figure 6.15) At the left is an “altar” constructed on an antique reliquary given to Chuck by a friend. It contains several old sugar skulls he has collected over the years. On top sits a figure of an Asian deity flanked by traditional lotus blossoms. There are also
paper marigolds, representing the traditional flower of Day of the Dead. There is one candle in the center of the altar and two sets of objects that represent candles: two feather dusters and two plastic bottles. At the right is another assemblage containing a large sugar skull, a rosary, and some photographs of family and friends. This sugar skull is very old. The gold foil strip on the forehead is for writing the name of the person being honored or the name of the person who receives this skull as a gift. On a shelf above is another collection with a small sugar skull and a statue of Saint Thérèse Lisieux—the Little Flower.

Chuck said that the objects he displays in his home are objects of remembrance of his grandmother and his Mexicano heritage rather than of devotion. Each time he passes on object, or rearranges them, he is reminded of the past and his place in San Antonio. [Interviews with...
Joan Frederick’s Altar

The objects on Joan’s altar (Figure 6.16) are not traditional—there are no religious statues, no prayer cards, no rosaries, no flowers. Joan said, “Flowers aren’t a big deal in the Indian culture—it is an expendable item that I normally don’t buy but I do at times put flowers from the garden.” This is an altar to her relationships past and present and it is placed right at the front door where she passes it every day. It can be seen from anywhere in the public spaces of her home. The altar contains photographs of people who played an important part in her life.
Some of them are living and some have passed away. The main focus of the altar is Joan’s Indian “brother” who died of AIDS in 1999. He was a very important part of her life. She includes many photos of him and things that were important to him as a person and as an artist. There are Indian artifacts and ornaments he would wear that identified him as an American Indian and as a member of the Native American Church. There are hawk feathers and a bundle of sage used for cleansing the spirits. Joan has also included many pictures of mountains. She said they are important because they are the “mountains you can see from his house which symbolizes the heavens.” She also has a painting that he painted for her. Joan said that the altar started out rather small but as more people died more objects and photos were added. She said, “Everything is very personal . . . The altar includes my blood family and also people that were important in my life.” She also reminded me that since she does not have a Catholic or Mexican heritage her altar is her own creation although she said she “borrowed” the idea of having an altar from the Día de los Muertos ofrendas that are common in San Antonio. She said, “This is my version—it is totally me—and it is totally colored by where I come from.” Joan has adopted the concept of the altar and its special Mexicano meaning to represent the blending of her past life and her new life in San Antonio even though she did not copy the “form” exactly. [Interviews with Joan Frederick by Mary Durocher, 11/3/2009 and 9/15/2010]

Engagement with the Altar

Each participant creates and constructs his or her own altar selecting objects from within a distinctive set of objects with shared meanings—either in terms of ethnic or religious identity—and personal objects of memory. The objects on the altars of the participants include religious statues and images, prayer cards and rosaries, photographs of loved ones living and
dead, and other personal items of remembrance. In many cases, aspects of indigenous religious practices are also included as well as objects symbolic of Mexicano ethnic heritage. The objects in relationship with each other on the altars establish a sacred place of worship and communicate to their audience a specific sense of self of the creator. The participants selected objects that represent their particular life experiences and brand of Mexicano Catholic religion that consciously sets them apart from the mainstream Anglo society. Ana Spector’s altars further set her apart from Mexicano altars by utilizing objects from her Jewish and Cuban heritage. Interactions with the sacred space of the altar and the objects contained on them, whether in private or public space in the home, create a bridge between this world and the divine—and a connection with like believers and the community of the divine and the family represented on the altars. David Zamora Casas explained the process,

People create grand formal altars and small home altars. I think it all takes place in the gathering process. Before you put it together you have to gather it all together and within that process is a time of contemplation and of sincere remembrance of the experiences you had with the particular objects and who they represent—whether sacred or human. [Interview with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]

The altars are not just a static assemblage or works of art but dynamic shifting representations of relationships both spiritual and social—a reflection of the self as a member of the Mexican Catholic tradition and as a member of the larger social group—a Mexicano in an Anglo society. Lara Medina, an authority on Chicana/o religious/spiritual history and practices, explained the difference between a passive altar and an active altar in an interview in the National Catholic Reporter: "A passive space you create one time and don't interact with it. With active altars, there is interaction constantly. You add fresh flowers, candles, you sit at it, pray at it, talk about it, add to it, and take things away. It's prayerful action and it sanctifies the home” (Malcolm 2003). Jane would not even consider showing me her altars until she felt that they were “ready” with fresh
flowers and offerings. She also prepared the room by washing the floor with rose water. The active use of the altars is also evident in the way the participants described their altars. There is continuous change and interaction with the altars and the various religious objects displayed in their homes—new objects are added as new connections are made with religious personages or persons close to them.

Interactions take place with the altars and the objects on them at the time of creation to represent a set of beliefs and to represent ideas of the self. However, the altars are also used in daily devotions to maintain and reinforce the connections that are displayed on the altar. Mrs. Silva has devotional books and prayer cards that she uses at the site of her altars. Several of the participants also had rosaries near their altars that they used in their prayers. Following Morgan’s (1998, 2012) ideas of the power of object of humans, the altar, the objects on the altar, and its placement in the room draws the persons to interaction, calling them to engage with the objects on the altar in ritual acts of devotion. According to the participants, it is quite common for the altar maker and other people in the home to engage in daily meditation before the images, to recite formal prayers to the Blessed Virgin or a saint, or petition for guidance, seek advice for her loved ones, or request divine intervention for a problem. The body of the person physically engages with the altar—they bring offerings, light candles, and rearrange objects as they perform their devotions. The physical location of the altar and the placement of objects in relation to each other and the person determine how persons use the space. A chair placed in front of an altar will cause the person to sit—a kneeler or cushion will cause the person to kneel (Baudrillard 2002).

An altar in a public space is also used differently than one in a private space. Objects in public spaces like Franco Mondini-Ruiz’s garden are primarily a display that represents his beliefs and heritage and not often used as a place of prayer. However, a private space like a
bedroom is conducive to meditation and prayer of a different sort. Even an object placed in strategic places in the home—a hallway, the kitchen or bathroom—will cause a person to pause and reflect, or say a prayer or make the sign of the cross as they pass by however briefly. Crosses or pictures of saints are often placed over doorways—liminal spaces according to Victor Turner—to protect those who stand at the ready to cross the threshold. These objects too call for a moment of recognition.

It is these actions and interactions with the altar and the objects that are chosen for the altars and displayed in the home that form what Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1992) refers to as the “habitus” of the person—the internalization of the social order or structure within the human body. For Bourdieu the physical body is the center of experience and consciousness—it is through the actions and movement of body that we learn about the world around us. The history of peoples’ personal and collective experiences and memories therefore become “embodied” in the self. Habitus is not just how people think, but also how they act, even to the smallest details of bodily movement. Habitus resides in the objects people choose to surround themselves with but also in the physical expressions of the body in their interactions with these objects—in the stance taken during prayer, in how to hold the head and the hands, in making the sign of the cross, in bowing the head in reverence, in kissing the sacred object in love and devotion, etc. Habitus is engraved on the body through words, prayer, imitation, and most definitely in the day-to-day repetitious actions of devotion at the altar.

Schatzki (1996, 2001), a central figure among more recent practice theorists, agrees that the maintenance of practices over time depends on “the successful inculcation of shared embodied know-how” (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny 2001:3) as well as on their continued performance. Because actions and bodies are “constituted” within practices, “the
skilled body” is where activity and mind as well as individual and society meet (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny 2001:3). It is therefore through repetition of the interactions with the sacred objects that people become “skilled” at performing the prescribed actions and reinforce the shared meaning of these actions that are then incorporated into their particular worldview.

**Conclusion**

Altars are assemblages of meaningful objects that represent the individual’s religious beliefs and the traditional *Mexicano* Catholic practice of creating such altars and performing prescribed rituals at the site of the altar. Gathering the objects for display on the altar is a conscious choice of particular objects that represent the person’s sense of self and ethnic identity. The participants’ altars were all very different in style, yet they did contain common elements. Most of the altars included candles of some sort, flowers—either fresh or artificial, and images of family and friends who were important in their lives; whether still living or now deceased. While they all had religious statues and images of various sorts, except Joan Frederick, the particular selection of religious objects varied. Table 6.1 tracks the frequency of the appearance of the most common statues and images. By far the most common objects on the participants’ altar are the Crucifix, images of the Virgin Mary, especially Our Lady of Guadalupe, and angels.

The location of the altar in the home in also important. It serves to “announce” the importance of these objects to all who enter. The altars are dynamic assemblages constantly in the state of flux with things added and things taken away. The altars are also the center point for interactions with the sacred and with persons represented on the altar. The person using the altar uses their body in these interactions and imprints certain physical movements that come to symbolize a relationship with and devotion to the sacred personages represented by the objects.
The objects on the altar, however, are not just passive participants in the rituals. They actively call to and engage the participants in particular actions that have deep meanings. They are active agents in the process of creation and maintenance of the altar and therefore in the negotiation of the person’s sense of self. In the next three chapters, I will discuss various approaches used to understand the meanings of the specific objects chosen by the participants for inclusion on their altars or displayed in their homes—the symbolic, biographical, and relational. Each of these approaches brings a slightly different perspective to the discussion of the meanings of these objects and things to their users and the role they play in socially constructing personal identity.
Chapter 7

THE POWER OF IMAGE: OBJECTS ON THE ALTARS

Symbolic Representations

Individuals create altars by selecting from a wide range of objects available from their shared memories and lived experiences that reflect their personal and religious life, cultural heritage, ancestral histories, and aesthetic values. The objects on the altar, be they religious, biographical, or personal, serve primarily as instruments of communication that convey and transmit information and meaning. It is important then to assess the symbolic significance of objects chosen for the altar, the codes and rituals connected with them, and the way they function in the place in which they are found (Berger 2008:44-45). The choice of religious objects on the home altar is a personal, iconic representation of the power of the Divine and the ability of communication and relationship between deities and the person creating the altar. This chapter takes a symbolic approach by exploring why people choose particular objects for their altars and where they acquire the objects. This process includes selecting categories of religious and other traditional objects, personal objects of memory, and photographs of family and friends. In the following pages, I describe the objects that are generally included on Mexicano altars and highlight those that appear on the altars of participants. Each person tells the story of why a particular item was included on their altars and what it means to them personally. The altars, as cultural constructions, become symbolically dense as layers of meaning are produced.

The home altars resemble “mosaic tesserae” as individual elements with diverse physical qualities such as color, shape, and size; and a range of personal and religious meanings are assembled and experienced as meaningful by the creators and viewers alike (Robb 1998:338). Archaeologist John Robb suggests that symbolic systems such as these work because of the
coherent ties between different kinds of meanings within the experience of the creator and viewer, which in turn make personal identity meaningful and ritual of devotions at the altar effective. Choosing particular objects, and in fact choosing to create an altar at all, is a conscious act of a person negotiating identity within a particular social milieu. Robb explains that,

Because a symbols’ meaning is not fixed but contestable, social life involves continual struggle over alternative interpretations of important symbols. Power in this view is the ability to formulate a genuine experience of the world and to resist others’ attempts to impose their views. [Robb 1998:338]

The objects chosen for display on Mexicano home altars such as statues and images of saints, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus Christ, have established meanings as “symbols” within the Catholic Church and standardized appearances that when displayed reflect a particular Catholic Mexicano identity in opposition to the dominant Anglo social structure in which the participants live. The objects on the altars not only reflect identity but also actively participate in the formation and maintenance of identity. One of the most important features of objects, according to Gell (1992), are the powerful human emotions they evoke to affect, motivate, enchant, and inspire devotion which serves to maintain and reinforce images of the self.

Morgan, (2005, 2012), describes the importance of objects in religious practices and rituals of belief by demonstrating the capacities of images and objects to structure relations with persons, the world around them, and the supernatural world. He explains:

What makes an image ‘religious’ is often not simply its subject matter or the intentions of the person who created it but the use of the image as well as the context of its deployment and interpretation. In every instance, the image is better understood as an integral part of visual practice, which is, properly speaking, a visual mediation of relations among a particular group of humans and the forces that help to organize their world. [Morgan 2005:55 emphases added]

Morgan emphasizes the “use” of the icon or image in daily life and the “belief” in the concepts embodied in the image as the critical factors in relationships between objects and persons and
persons and the supernatural. Religion and visual culture scholar Sally Promey directly links the material world with the divine when she writes,

Christian adherence to a theology of incarnation mobilizes the material world; here divinity assumes a material body, invisible grace is rendered in visible signs, the most holy sacraments (despite disagreements about their numbers and specific meanings) take shape as divine investments in sensory communication. [Promey 2011:184]

Interactions at the altar are about actual sensory experiences with the divine mediated by the objects and devotional practices.

**Santos: Religious Objects on the Altars**

The most important objects on a Catholic altar are figures or images of the Virgin, Christ, and various saints—*santos*. *Mexicano* Catholics have a particular devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Caridad del Cobre, *La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos*, *El Señor de los Milagros*, and *Santo Niño de Atocha* (Turner 1990 diss.:167-169 and interview with Alfredo Rodríguez, a participant and local *santos* carver and historian of religious veneration of objects in the San Antonio area). Out of all the participants, only Joan Frederick had no religious objects on her altar. Instead, her altar honors her connection with her American Indian upbringing and her relationships with the...
important people in her life. I found that the religious items displayed in the homes came to the person as gifts, heirlooms, mementoes of rites of passage, souvenirs of pilgrimages to various shrines, as well as newly purchased items. These objects are granted powers through their links to the divine, to the family, and to lived experiences. New items were purchased from flea markets, church gift shops, and stores that sell religious items—both traditional retail shops and botánicas. The flea markets and stores carry a wide variety of religious objects (Figure 7.1) including statues, images, prayer cards, rosaries, medals, jewelry and religious books for prayer and study. Botánicas are retail stores that sell spiritual goods to a predominantly Latino-based clientele. These shops have brought together disparate traditions of European, Native American and African religious belief systems and are adding Indian and East Asian spiritualities to them as well (Figure 7.2). The blending of influences provides spiritual help to a wide group of clients making the botánica a place that “integrates and juxtaposes multiple worlds into potent medicines for urban survival and growth” (Murphy 2010).

In discussing the various religious objects on the altars, I have arranged them by categories: the Crucified Christ, the Virgin, the young Christ, saints, religious healers rather than participants. Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from interviews with the participants.
The Crucifix

The most common religious object seen in the home is the Crucifix, the image of the crucified Christ, which is usually found in a central place of honor. Fr. Celestine Strub, O.F.M explains the importance of the crucifix in *The Christian Home: A Guide to Happiness in the Home*,

The Cross is the principal emblem of the Catholic religion; it is the symbol of our Faith, the source of our hope, the incentive to our love, the sign of our redemption, the pledge of our salvation. A beautiful and also moderately large Crucifix should be one of the finest and most cherished ornaments in the home” [Strub 1934].

The crucifix can often be seen hanging on the living room wall, in each bedroom, and at times over each door (Figure 7.3). The crucifix is also present on most altars in this study but is generally not the main focus of the altar. Only Joan Frederick did not have a Crucifix. Mrs. Silva had a special crucifix brought from the Holy Land (right of Figure 7.3) hanging in her son’s room. The cross had various objects embedded in the end points. Most of the participants had several crucifixes on display throughout their homes. The Udriales family had several crosses including the grouping on the hallway wall (top left of Figure 7.3) and a small palm frond cross over every doorway. Judy Udriales said, “I believe that the cross
protects us and that is why it is at the door. I have faith that it will protect us.” The López family had a crucifix on their altar with candle holders built in the base given to the family by an aunt (bottom left of Figure 7.3). Fransisca said it can be used as an altar on its own especially when praying at the bedside of a sick person or to administer Last Rites. Promey suggests that these objects (viaticums) remind the beholders of the religious care of the physical body; the suffering of Jesus Christ; the blessings bestowed through prayer in times of illness, trial, and death; and the hope of bodily resurrection (Promey 2011:194). Chuck Ramirez also has a cross of this type hanging in his kitchen.

There are only occasional portrayals of the Holy Trinity on home altars in San Antonio—God the Father, God the Son Jesus Christ, and the God the Holy Spirit—and none of God the Father. Although I did not see any of these figures on home altars, I did find this image depicting the Holy Trinity at a flea market (Figure 7.4). David Zamora Casas did however have several golden doves representing the Holy Spirit, and Carmen Ruiz’s mother had special candles dedicated to the devotion of the Holy Spirit on her altar as well as doves hanging in a hall way. The candles have a special spot reserved for writing the name of the person for whom the prayers are intended.

**The Virgin Mary**

Besides the Crucifix, the most ubiquitous religious objects observed in the home and on the altars are those representing the Virgin Mary. Each of the views of Mary is represented by a particular prototype that reflects the different aspects of devotion to her including: the virgin mother of God, Queen of Heaven, a protector and mediator. The most common images and
statues are those of La Virgen de Guadalupe, (the Virgin of Guadalupe) considered by many to be the “Great Mother of Mexico” and recognized as a symbol of all Catholic Mexicans (See Chapter 3 for images and details.) Each of the participants, except Joan, had at least one image or statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Even Ana Spector had a small retablo on her Santería altar of Guadalupe. The object was not there the first time I visited her home. Since she is not Mexican I asked her why should would have her image on the altar. She explained, “Somebody gave it to me and I couldn’t refuse it. It is a very old retablo. I never knew about the Virgin de Guadalupe when I was in Cuba but I like it here [on the altar].” In the center of one of Jane Madrigal’s altars is an assemblage in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Jane explained why she selected Our Lady of Guadalupe for her altar,

I like the Virgen de Guadalupe because she is the patron saint of the Mexican people. . . The people [of Mexico] on a very real level worship her—and also there is a whole unconscious level of worshipping the goddess Tonantzin through the Virgen de Guadalupe. . . I don’t actually think of her so much as the Virgin Mary—to me she is so much more than that. She represents my grandmother

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35 Retablos are religious paintings on tin or wood. The tradition can be traced to early Christian reliquary boxes and to twelfth and thirteenth century Spanish altars. Mexican and Southwestern retablos were designed for household religious devotion (Mendoza & Torres 1994:68).
because my grandmother was a Guadalupana, my great grandmother was a Guadalupana and I come from a line of Guadalupanas. So there is that tradition in my family of devotion to this particular aspect of Mary. [The Guadalupanas is a service group dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe.] [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

The image of Guadalupe means more to Jane than a religious icon; it represents connections to the strong women in her family. Images of Our Lady of Guadalupe are very popular both in public and private spaces. Her image can be seen in churches, businesses, open spaces, and in peoples’ yards and homes. She is recognized by her rose-colored gown and blue mantel (usually covered in stars) and the rays of the sun surrounding her. In Figure 7.5 is an altar dedicated to the Virgin in a church at one of the Missions. Offerings of red roses are usually made to her along with burning candles. There are a number of votive candles with her image—some scented with the fragrance of roses. Rose incense especially for Our Lady of Guadalupe is also available. On the right side of Figure 7.5 are examples of some of the items available in stores for devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Also very popular in San Antonio is La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos, (the Virgin of Saint John of the Lakes) who is widely venerated as La Milagrosa (the Miraculous One) (Figure 7.6). Kay Turner and Alfredo Rodriguez have found that representations of the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos is commonly seen on altars in San Antonio, maybe even more common than Our
Lady of Guadalupe. She is seen as the Divine Mother who supplies the most basic needs of her people. She is petitioned to locate a place to live, to secure a rental, or to pay off a mortgage. Alfredo Rodríguez read a quote from William Manson’s *Devotions of the Saints* as an explanation for her popularity, “The *Virgen de Guadalupe* is very beautiful, she loves mankind, but she lives in Mexico, her people keep her very busy with many sins and I don’t think she has much time for Texas” (Interview with Alfredo Rodríguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009). This aspect of the Virgin may feel more personal to some people. She is often dressed in elaborate clothing and jewels. These ornate statues also include real hair. This Virgin was offered for sale at a religious gift shop. In the image are also three other aspects of the Virgin Mary, the Baby Jesus, Saint Jude and Saint Joan of Arc. Another reason for the popularity of the *Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos* in this area is that there are two major shrines to her, the original in Jalisco, Mexico and another in San Juan, Texas. People from San Antonio make frequent pilgrimages to both sites. The original statue of the Virgen also travels to various churches in Northern Mexico and South Texas including a recent visit to San Antonio. Turner states that, “A Texas-Mexican spiritual relationship is thus established through reciprocal movement of image and believer across political boundaries” (Turner 1990 diss.:184). There is also a church dedicated to this Virgen on the West side of San Antonio. The altar in Figure 7.7
is in Ray’s Drive Inn on Guadalupe St. near the church. Arturo Lopez, the original owner’s brother, said that when the altar was built 40 years ago it was dedicated only to the *Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos* because Ray belonged to that parish. Ray later added the two Virgins surrounded by neon: *La Milagrosa* on the left and Our Lady of Lourdes on the right. There are also several images and statues of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as well as pictures of the Pope and a statue of *San Martin de Porres*. Patrons of the restaurant leave offerings of coins and candles, as well as pictures of loved ones to be prayed for and various prayer cards. This is the only altar in this study that had an altar with the *Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos* as the central focus, although I did find a yard shrine dedicated to her near San Fernando II Cemetery (Figure 7.8). In my observations I only saw a few images or statues of the *Virgen de San Juan* on the altars of my participants, Mrs. Silva, Carmen Ruiz, and Franco Mondini-Ruiz; however, all of the participants had one or more statues or images of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Other aspects of the Virgin also appear on home altars depending on the devotion of the person or the need at that time. Most of the participants have at least one statue of the Virgin on their altars and many have multiple statues of various aspects of the Virgin. *La Virgen del Rosario* (the Virgin of the Rosary) is one to whom many rosaries are dedicated. This aspect of
the Virgin is also known as Our Lady of Lourdes. The López family has a small statue representing her appearance to Bernadette (Figure 7.9). Another popular aspect of the Virgin on home altars is the Immaculate Conception also known as the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal. Carmen Ruiz had a statue of the Immaculate Conception as the centerpiece of her altar (left in Figure 7.10). Her great grandmother received the statue at her wedding as a member of Society of Hijas de María (Daughters of Mary). Carmen displays the statue as a remembrance of her great grandmother and her devotion to Mary and because she is named after this aspect of the Virgin. David Zamora Casas also has a statue of this Virgin that he has painted and transformed into an Aztec representation (on the right in Figure 7.10). Mrs. Silva displays a statue of the Sacred Heart of Mary (Figure 7.11) which belonged to her mother. She has draped the Virgin in a beautiful blue lace shawl. Dressing or adorning statues is quite common—sometimes to match the season or the liturgical calendar and at others to offer something of beauty and respect to the image (Mendoza & Torres 1994:67). David Zamora Casas had a generic
figure of the Virgin on display in his home—the only female figure on his altars—but he also has several statues of the Virgin that he uses for his installations (Figure 7.12). The image in bottom left is Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Other Virgins on the altars of participants included (Figure 7.13) the Virgen de Caridad del Cobre (Virgin of Charity of Cobre), a small mining town outside of Santiago de Cuba, Cuba) (on the left) and the Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos (Virgin of Saint John of the Lakes) (on the right) on the altars of Jane Madrigal and Ana Spector. The appearance of the Virgen de Caridad del Cobre on these altars is in keeping with their practices of Santería as this Virgin is patroness of Cuba, the home of Santería. She is known as Ochún in Santería and is the Orisha of the sweet
water. Ana also had a *Virgen de Regla* who is the patron saint of Havana Bay, and is *Yemayá* in *Santería*—the *Orisha* of salt water. Jane displays an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the center. Each of these arrangements contains a statue of the Virgin, a candle in her honor, and an offering of the corresponding Orisha’s favorite things.

![Figure 7.13 Virgins on Jane Madrigal’s altar](image1)

Source: Author, 2009

I was told that the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, the patroness of Poland, was also a common image although I did not see any on the altars of the participants. Her popularity here may stem from the fact that she is a dark-skinned like the Virgin of Guadalupe. Both are often referred to as *La Morena* or *La Morenita*. There is a considerable Polish and Slavic presence in San Antonio and many Mexicans attended churches that honored this Virgin. The image in Figure 7.14 was on display in the Museum of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa in San Antonio.

![Figure 7.14 The Black Madonna of Częstochowa](image2)

Source: Author, 2009
Christ

Christ is represented in various images although not usually in images of the suffering and bloodied adult Christ. However, I did observe one such image at the chapel at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Here the body of Jesus crucified is depicted in explicit detail (Figure 7.15). Father James Marshall, the associate pastor, told me that the figure is so popular that it has to be repainted often because people touch the wounds as part of prayer. For people in the parish, devotion is personal and physical—the images and objects are meant to be touched and conversation and petitions directed to them as if they were a living presence (Morgan 2005). Generally, the adult Christ is seen primarily in His image as the compassionate *El Sagrado Corazón* (The Sacred Heart of Jesus), a central image of His divine love for humanity. The Sacred Heart of Mary, also known as the Immaculate Heart of Mary, is often present in conjunction with this image or sometimes appears alone. This image represents her maternal love for Christ and her compassionate love for all people. The Udriales family and David Zamora Casas had images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Judy and Armando Udriales were given the image as a wedding present from Armando’s mother for their new home along with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.
Mrs. Silva displayed both the Sacred Heart of Jesus with other images of Jesus on a wall in her hallway (Figure 7.16). In the center of the display is the crucified Jesus. Hanging above the cross is a plaque of the Holy Family—Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus. On the left of the arrangement is an image of the Divine Mercy (top) and the Sacred Heart of Jesus (bottom) which also appears at right top. The image in the bottom right corner is Mary with the Child Jesus.

Christ is most often represented on Mexican altars in various images of His infancy or childhood—*El Niño Jesús* (The Infant Jesus) or *El Niño Dios* (The Child of God). Pictured in Figure 7.17 top left are two statues of the child Jesus, one dressed in pink with raised arms and a golden halo and another dressed in blue also with raised arms. Another common image available in *botánicas* is the infant Jesus dressed in the clothes of a particular profession. He is prayed to for guidance and success. The figure in Figure 7.17 at bottom right was for sale at Casa Guajardo and depicts the young Jesus as a medical doctor. The most common image of *El Niño Jesús* is a statue of the reclining Christ Child especially venerated during the Christmas season, but often kept on altars the year round. This figure can be purchased in religious stores as seen in the display in (Figure 7.17 bottom left). These figures are often passed down from generation to generation as was the case in the López family and several other people I spoke with. This image
requires more care than the others and is treated like a human infant. *El Niño Dios*, is traditionally dressed in special clothes that are either purchased or made by a member of the family. The Infant Jesus is dressed in the vestments of the Pope to represent his authority (top right). He is usually kept in a manger or in a basket and is covered or wrapped in a blanket as you would any baby. This Baby in Figure 7.18 was passed down from Fransisca López’s mother. They make clothes for the figure and keep him wrapped in a little blanket. Raul said that he remembered that for Christmas his grandmother would have a manger set up and at midnight they would all get on their knees and sing songs and she would rock the Baby and they would
pass it along and each person would give it a kiss. His mother was the one that got his grandmother’s Baby Jesus. Even though his mom does not continue the practice anymore, he said she still respects the tradition and was happy when she got the Baby Jesus. At the Feast of Three Kings, January 6th, the figure of the Baby Jesus is placed standing or sitting in a chair or throne (Figure 7.17 top row at right).

Another aspect of the Infant Jesus who is also dressed in elaborate vestments is the Infant of Prague (Figure 7.19). David Zamora Casas has an image of this Infant hanging near his altar. Mrs. Silva has a statue of the Infant that her sister gave her as a Christmas gift six years ago. She makes outfits for her Infant (center of Figure 7.19). They refer to Him as El Niño de Prague. According to the web site of the Our Lady of Victory Church in Prague, Czech Republic where the original statue of the Infant of Prague is displayed (on the right in Figure 7.19), the popularity of this image began in the Baroque period in Spain and later spread to Prague where the Infant got his name. The statues are dressed in garments reflecting the aristocratic fashion of that period and coincide with the liturgical colors of the Church: white is the color of innocence, purity, and holiness—for feast days, Easter, and Christmas; red is the color of blood and fire—for Holy Week, Pentecost and feasts of the Holy Cross; violet is a solemn color symbolizing repentance—for the Lenten and Advent seasons; and green is the color of life and hope—for ordinary times. On the feast of his coronation the Infant Jesus is usually dressed in royal robes with an ermine mantle. Other colors are used on special occasions. Gold can replace any color and is used for festive occasions, rose is used in times of subdued joy, and blue is often used on feast of the
Virgin Mary (Infant of Prague). The statue on the left in Figure 7.19 is in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Little Flower in San Antonio.

A very common image of the young boy Jesus is *Santo Niño de Atocha* (the Holy Child Jesus Christ of Atocha, Spain), a richly dressed young person sitting on a throne and carrying a basket and a gourd that he would give to those in need and a staff to aid him on his
journey. He is said to protect children; pilgrims; prisoners, and travelers. This statue at Casa Guajardo botánica (Figure 7.20) has had offerings of coins placed on his lap and at his feet. Jane Madrigal had a small altar with offerings to Santo Niño at the entranceway to her home. She has made offering of grains and coins as well as cigar (Figure 7.21). The cigar is a favorite of Ellegua, the counterpart of Santo Niño in Santería, who is also a guardian of the crossroads and mediator with the other Orishas.

According to Alfredo Rodríguez, there is some controversy about the origin of this figure. One story is that this image of the Child Jesus appeared to some prisoners of the Moors during the Moorish occupation of the town of Atocha, a now-lost district near Arganzuela, Madrid, Spain. Supposedly, a child was the only one that could visit the prisoners so he brought the prisoners food. The other story sets his origins in Mexico. Rodríguez said,

He has a long history here in San Antonio, and they way it evolves is that in the 1830s there was a fire in a church in Mexico and it partially destroyed the image of Our Lady de Atocha that was holding this Christ child. So they take off this image of the Christ child which is not really badly damaged, although the Virgin is, and they put him in a chair and then they have devotions to this child—this is in the 1830s. By the 1840s it has spread to Texas. . . By 1850 they built a church in Nuevo Laredo that is dedicated to him. It is about that time that the border comes into play where this side is American and this side is Mexican. So they built a chapel on the Mexican side but the devotion continues into San Antonio. [Interview with Alfredo Rodríguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009]

Rodríguez also told me a story that was popular in the 1860s in San Antonio of Santo Niño being seen on the Camino Real in Texas.

Two men in a wooden cart come into San Antonio and they got stuck in a sand bog. The men were beating their oxen and unable to get out. They said a little boy came out and helped them, he said a prayer and they were able to pull their oxen out of the sand. They came back to San Antonio and told the story—saying that Santo Niño was alive—they saw him on the road. They supposedly had evidence in the back of their cart of the footprints of a child. [Interview with Alfredo Rodríguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009]

Rodríguez added,

Around that time you see beautiful paintings of him in family chapels in San Antonio.
Santo Niño was considered a protector of people on the road, much like Saint Christopher. If you were travelling from San Antonio in the colonial period, you would say a prayer to him because once you reached the city limits you would be subject to attack by Comanches, Apaches, or bandidos. [Interview with Alfredo Rodríguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009]

The figure of Santo Niño de Atocha is generally petitioned to protect the home and travelers, but particularly in Texas where it is believed that he appeared to help stranded travelers and is therefore thought of as belonging to the area.

Mrs. Silva has an object on her altar that represents Santo Niño de Atocha although she does not have a statue. She said, “My grandfather used to have a little statue of him and I have a neighbor who has a statue of him. They usually have a little thing that you can put money so that you won’t be without money.” The López family has a figure of Santo Niño that resembles the one Mrs. Silva described. (Figure 7.22) The nicho has the words Bendito Hogar Plateros carved on it which is a blessing for the home. Her mother brought her this figure from Zacatecas, Mexico where there is a large church in his honor.

Jesus at the Last Supper is also a common image seen in many homes, usually in a kitchen or dining room. The Udriales family, Mrs. Silva, and Franco Mondini-Ruiz all had images of the Last Supper in their homes—Mrs. Silva actually had three images in her kitchen. The image in the Udriales home formerly hung in Armando’s mother’s home. The image is generally a reproduction of the mural completed by Leonardo Da Vinci in 1498 depicting Jesus and his apostles at their last meal before his crucifixion. The Last Supper provides the scriptural basis for the Eucharist, also known as "Holy Communion" (Evans 2005:114-118).
Santos

Santos or saints are also frequently chosen for display and devotion on home altars as statues, framed images, medals, or on estampita (prayer cards). The saints act as links between the person and God. The person has a personalized relationship with the saints similar to their relationships to other human beings. The relationship is based on dependency and the granting of favors by those who are more powerful. “The Hispanic perception is that saints are to be depended on for favors, curing illness, facilitating problems that emerge in daily lives” (Morales 1994:191). Mrs. Silva commented on the variety of saints to choose from, “What I love is that there is a saint for almost anything you want to pray for. That’s what I love.” Erasmo Lopez remembered the saints in his mother’s house, “Every door [hanging over it] had some saint. I never really asked what they were I just saw them there. They were just part of our lives.” There are reminders of the saints everywhere, on the altars, scattered around the house, and on medals people wear on their clothing or around their neck. In an interview Alfredo Rodriguez informed me that these devotions were originally brought with the various missionaries during the colonial period: Franciscans in most of the southwest, Jesuits in northern Sonora in Arizona, and the Dominicans in central Mexico. The devotion to these saints spread throughout Mexico and the Southwest. The Franciscan Order brought San Francisco de Asisi (Saint Francis of Assisi), founder of the Order who is considered a protector of animals, plants, and all innocent things. The López and Udriales families and David Zamora Cassas each had statues of Saint Francis on their altars (Figure 7.23 on the right). Francisca López had brought her statue on a trip she took to Italy. Mrs. Silva and the Udriales family had statues of San Antonio de Padua (Saint Anthony of Padua), the most famous of Saint Francis’s followers who is petitioned to find lost things and to make good love matches (Figure 7.23 on the left). The Jesuits brought with them images of
the Spanish native and founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) *San Ignacio de Loyola* (Saint Ignatius of Loyola). Mrs. Silva was given an image of Saint Ignatius that she keeps over her doorway to protect the family from people with bad intentions. *San Martin de Porres* (Martin of Charity and Saint of the Broom), the Black saint of Peru, patron of social justice and harmony, of people of mixed race, and the poor was brought to the area by the Dominican Order of which he was a lay brother (Figure 7.23 at center). The Udriales family and Ray Lopez of Ray’s Drive-In both have statues of *San Martin*. Each of the figures is depicted in the robes of their order and is holding objects that signify their special calling.

Mike Casey, another participant, told me an interesting story of why he has a statue of *San Martin* prominently displayed on his *Día de los Muertos* ofrenda even though these altars...
not usually have religious objects per se and as Mike himself said, “I am not at all religious—and absolutely not Catholic.” He displays *San Martin* solely because the saint was the child of a white father (Spanish) and black mother. Mike’s family, who considers themselves “white” and proud contributors to the settlement of San Antonio, had recently found out that they had a “Black” ancestor. His grandmother tells the story that her grandfather was the first man injured in the war for Texas independence being shot in the right shoulder in the battle at Goliad on October 9th in 1835—which was actually before the war started but it was a battle between Texas settlers and the Mexican soldiers. When visiting the Institute of Texas Cultures which has a section for each ethnic heritage that contributed to Texas development, they discovered a video of Congress woman Barbara Jordon explaining the contributions of Blacks to the development of Texas. She was saying “... and among the Blacks in Texas that we are proudest of is Sam McCulloch the first man injured in the war for Texas.” This of course was Mike’s ancestor who they had just found out was actually a “Black” man. By choosing to put *San Martin* on his altar, Mike is claiming his Black heritage and displaying his new found identity for all who see the statue.

The Dominicans also brought *San Antonio Abbot*. Alfredo Rodríguez described the devotion to this saint, “He had a pig—some say he cured people with the fat of the pig and some people say in represented avarice and greed. Now they pray to him for chickens and pigs that are sick.” Other saints include *San Judas* (Saint Jude Thaddeus, Apostle) patron of impossible causes and *San Cristóbal* (Saint Christopher), protector of travelers. I did not observe any images of Saint Christopher; however, I did see a number of statues of Saint Jude (Figure 7.24). He appeared on the altars of Mrs. Silva (center of Figure 7.24), the Udriales family and Franco Mondini-Ruiz. Judy has a special bond with Saint Jude, she said, “My mother named me for St
Jude and she would pray to him to please go the throne of God and lay her request in front of him. That is basically how we pray to the saints.” I also saw several yard shrines devoted to Saint Jude (right in Figure 7.24). The shrine (left in Figure 7.24) was built by the owner of an auto repair shop on the Westside. Again, you can see that he is usually depicted in a light robe with a green mantel. He wears a necklace with the image of Christ representing the imprint of the Divine Countenance that was entrusted to him by Jesus.

Other Santos include Juan Diego to whom Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared. Mrs. Silva has a small statue of him on her altar draped with a chaplet for special prayers intended for him (Figure 7.25). She also has a statue of Saint Thomas Moore who is patron of the parish she attends. Ana Spector has a statue of Santa Barbara who represents Changó in Santería. They are very powerful, representing lightning and thunder and
are petitioned for wealth, abundance, and success. The Udriales family and Mrs. Silva had statues of Saint Joseph. Mrs. Silva said, “Saint Joseph always finds jobs for me.” Jane Madrigal had a statue of Saint Martha. She said, “I like Saint Martha because she was one of the first Saints that came to my rescue when I was a young artist being taken advantage of by people trying to exploit me. I lit a candle to her and that was the end of that. She takes care of business FAST!” Saint Michael the Archangel is also a very popular image. Jane Madrigal displays an image of him prominently in her home (Figure 7.26). Figures of angels in general are quite common on home altars. Ana Spector and Judy Udriales have entire altars dedicated to angels of all types. Ana explained why the angels are important to her, “I dedicate this to all the angels—we don’t see them but they are around and it is a beautiful thought. I have angels in every color in every material, in every position—I even have dark ones. And Christmas ones. All kinds of angels. Every angel that I can find.” She placed a small angel that I had brought her on the shelf and said, “Now every time I see that angel, I will remember you.”

Angels are also displayed on the altars of David Zamaro Casas and Carmen Ruiz.

There are also several saints that are petitioned for particular illnesses. Mrs. Silva has images of Saint Lucy and Saint Odelia that she prays to protect her eye sight. Ana Spector has two statues of San Lazaro (Saint Lazarus) who is the patron of lepers and those with cancer (Figure 7.27). He is usually depicted as suffering with his many wounds and accompanied by at least one dog. Saint Peregrine is also prayed to for skin ailments, cancer, and HIV/AIDS. Mrs. Silva has an image of Saint Peregrine who she prays to for protection against cancer. Mrs. Silva
said that, “The story of him is that he had cancer, he was dying and he felt Jesus touching him from the Cross and he found out after that his leg was fine—he had cancer in his leg and was very close to dying. So people pray to him for leg things but he is really the cancer saint.” According to Alfredo Rodríguez, another saint that is prayed to for skin ailments and cancer is San Roche. (Figure 7.28) He was brought to San Antonio with the settlers from the Canary Islands and was popular in the colonial period Rodríguez carved the figure at right after he found mention of one of his ancestors leaving a statue of San Roche in his will. He is also depicted with a dog that according to legend played a role in his survival. Alfredo Rodríguez related part of the legend,

He lived in France during the time of the plague and he was helping people who contracted plague and he actually contracted the plague and he goes off to the country side to die. And when he is there a dog supposedly brought him bread. Now the idea was that this was a dog that belonged to a wealthy landowner on his estate, he brought him bread and by bringing bread he nursed him back to life and he was able to go back and take care of more people. [Interview with Alfredo Rodríguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009]

I did not see any statues of San Roche on home altars however, I understand that he is still very popular in the Philippines.

Another image that is very popular in businesses in San Antonio, and in some homes, is
San Martin de Cabellero (Saint Martin of Tours)—the patron saint of business owners. He is usually depicted on horseback giving aid to a beggar. Born in Hungary during the late Roman Empire, he was a centurion in the Roman army. Legend has it that one day, while riding his horse, he came upon a near-naked beggar and cut his cloak in half to give the poor man a covering. That night he had a dream in which the beggar appeared to him as Jesus, so he quit the army and became a monk in Italy. He was later promoted to the rank of Bishop of Tours (in France) but always lived a simple life and gave a great deal to charity. The image (Figure 7.29 on the left) was hanging near the cash register at Leticia’s Restaurant. Business owners usually put coins in the frame to aid him in his work and to petition for help in their businesses. He is also frequently used as a good luck charm, and good luck packet can be purchased to hang in your business usually above the door (Figure 7.29 on the right).
A very controversial santo is the image of Holy Death or Santa Muerto. I did not see her in any homes but images were available in many botánicas—I saw more of these figures in 2010 than I had seen in 2009—and David Zamora Casas did use an image in one of his installations. Devotion to Santa Muerte, also known as La Flaca (The Skinny Lady) and La Niña Blanca (The White Girl) began as a popular movement within Mexican Catholicism among the poor and has since developed into an autonomous religious institution. Though not officially recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church, Santa Muerte’s popularity has spread significantly in the last ten years, especially in crime-ridden communities where she is called upon for healing, prosperity, protection, and vengeance. The figure of the Santa (Figure 7.30) often holds a scythe, which represents justice, and a globe, which represents dominion over the whole world. She is often depicted as a skeletal woman wearing a white cloak or sometimes a wedding dress, although in San Antonio she was available in many colors. Her devotees are primarily the poor, but more recently she has become the patroness of those in the drug cartels. Drug dealers pray for safe passage and a peaceful death. (Gray 2007). Alfredo Rodriguez told me the story of a local connection,

About ten years ago, there was a student who was kidnapped, a UT student, going down there on spring break never came home. They found out he was kidnapped. The drug dealers sacrificed him to Holy Death. They boiled his body down and they had his bones that they were using for their religious practices. It was really, really sad. [Interview with
Alfredo Rodriguez by Mary Durocher, 12/6/2009]

He also said that in the past people prayed to her for a peaceful or easy death especially soldiers and the families of soldiers. His grandmother had kidney disease and the family prayed to Santa Muerte for a peaceful death for her. He said that now however the meaning is changed.

Popular devotion to healers and folk saints exist in many homes in San Antonio. Padre Pío, Saint Pío (Pius) of Pietrelcina in Italy, is a particular devotion even before his canonization by Pope John Paul II in 2002. He is very important in the spiritual life of Mrs. Silva. She has numerous images, prayer cards, and second-degree relics touched to the body of this saint (Figure 7.31). He is probably most famous for his bearing the stigmata of Christ for over 50 years. Among his other gifts were bilocation, prophecy, conversion, reading of souls, and miraculous cures. His intercession is sought as a healer. Don Pedrito Jaramillo (1892-1907) and El Niño Fidencio Constantino (1906-1939) are also called on as powerful healers although they are unrecognized by the Church but informally “canonized” by the people who venerate and pray to them. Both were considered great curanderos (healers) and special advocates of the poor. Their images on home altars usually take the form of photographs; however, more recently statues have begun appearing. I saw several of these in the botánicas, and Franco Mondini-Ruiz has a small statue of El Niño Fidencio. Don Pedrito lived for twenty-six years in the community of Los Olmos in South Texas where he attended to the health needs of newly-immigrated Mexicans. After his death his fame continued to grow and his tomb at Los Olmos is still a pilgrimage shrine visited annually. El Niño Fidencio lived and practiced healing.

Figure 7.31 Padre Pío glow-in-the dark statue and Mass Card
Source: Author, 2009
in the town of Espinazo, Mexico. The label “El Niño” (The Child) refers to his boyish appearance and high-pitched voice. Also known as *El Niño Guadalupano* (Child of Guadalupe), this male saint is sometimes portrayed dressed in the robes and mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe but more often in a white shirt with black pants and black tie. Those dedicated to *El Niño Fidencio* honor him with the creation of elaborate home altars called *tronitos* (thrones). Armando Udriales’ aunt conducted healings in her *templo* through the mediation of *curandero* Rudy who was trained and worked through the spirit of *El Niño Fidencio*. The Udriales family, however does not petition him for healings.

**Other Religious Objects**

The majority of religious objects on the altars represent Christian traditions or the syncretic representations of Santería. An indigenous Aztec influence can be seen in the altars of David Zamaro Casas, Jane Madrigal, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, and Chuck Ramirez. There are also objects that represent other religious belief systems that the participants have been exposed to in their life experience and chosen to represent on their altars. Most noticeable is the objects that signify the Jewish faith of Ana Spector. She has a special area in home where she has these items on display when she is not using them (Figure 7.32). Ana and David also display objects with distinctly “Asian” meanings. Ana has several figures of the Buddha each of which has a special meaning. She told me that the one in the middle with the children climbing on him is a symbol for plenty (*Maitreya*, the Laughing Buddha). David displays the Chinese Smiling Dragon (bottom left) that
symbolizes strength, intelligence, generosity, and goodness. The dragon also protects from harmful energy. Joan Frederick displays religious objects that reflect her American Indian “brother’s membership in the Native American Church (Figure 7.33).

Religious objects on the altars varied enormously, depending on the beliefs and needs of the individual participant. Some of the objects were new; however, most were handed down through the family or given as gifts. The results of age and use can be seen on many of the objects yet they are not replaced. The objects are chosen not for how they look but rather for what they mean. Anthropologist William Madson (1967) argues that people are generally not concerned about the value of the object or its appearance—to them a paper image or a plastic resin image will do. For other families it is very important to have a santo that is very old that was handed down from a family member. Others collect old religious objects because of a connection with the cultural memories of the past rather than their personal memories. The objects nonetheless speak to each of them and reflect their ideas of who they are as individuals at
any given point in time. Cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (2002) describes collecting as a “mutual integration of object and person” claiming that the objects contribute to “the creation of a total environment, to that totalization of images of the self that is the basis of the miracle of collecting. For what you really collect is always yourself (Baudrillard 2002:91). The objects, whether old or new, represent pieces of the self—identifying the person as a certain type of person, one who considers these religious and/or ethnic objects part of the lives. As an example of collecting religious objects for their cultural rather than religious meaning, Chuck Ramirez had an old wooden santo on his kitchen altar (Figure 7.34). He was not sure which saint the carving was supposed to depict but he kept it as a representation of that type of Spanish missionary art. He does believe however that it might be San Pasqual, the patron saint of housewives and kitchens, and so thinks it is fitting that the santo have a place of honor in the kitchen.

**Symbolic Objects—Offerings**

While religious images serve as the central focus of interest on the home altar, candles, flowers incense, bells and other personal objects form a part of the language of sacred devotion and connection with a community—both religious and ethnic. The altars are multi-vocal containing layers of meaning that reflect the identity of the individual who built the altar (Turner 1967:50). Candles symbolize the light of faith, a physical connection and offering from the living to the divine. “By nature of its burning, energy-expending glow, the candle perfectly represents
the heat and dynamism of an ongoing relationship between….but the relative instability and fleetingness of relationship is also marked by the burning, wavering flicker” (Turner 1990 diss.:184). Candles need to be frequently burned and constantly renewed in the maintenance of the sacred space.

The mere act of lighting a candle is an act of devotion. Several participants would not even begin the interview about their altars until they had lit at least a few candles. When I arrived, Jane Madrigal first lit the candles and sprayed the house and us with rose scented oil to prepare us and the altars. She said, “When I light my candles to different saints it’s for different reasons: one’s for protection, one’s for abundance, one’s for health.” Candles are also burned in the time of special need. Each of the participants had candles of various sorts on their altars and in other areas of their home. Armando Udriales told of how his aunt would put photographs of the people she was praying for under the candles. She would then light the candle and say a prayer for their special intention. David Zamora Casas and the Udriales family have “electric” candles on their altars. For David, the candle represents friends who have passed away in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The candle on Judy’s altar is for family members who have died, including one of her children.

Incense plays a similar role for some participants. Jane Madrigal burns rose incense for Our Lady of Guadalupe in remembrance of the miracle of Her leaving roses in the tilma of Juan Diego and as an offering to Her. She also sprays rose fragrance in the air. The scent or smoke rising in the air is an offering and signal to the sacred beings that someone is petitioning for aid. Mrs. Silva also had incense at her living room altar. Copal is the traditional incense used on Mexicano altars. Bells are also sometimes used for this purpose of signaling. Ana Spector has several bells on her altar that she uses to signal that she wants to communicate with the spirits.
David includes butterflies on his altars because, as he said, “butterflies have double meanings—the beauty and fragility of life and the resurrection after death.”

The offering of flowers is also a major component of devotion at the altar. Most of the participants had artificial flowers on their altars, either silk or paper, at all times. Many bring fresh flowers to the altar on a regular basis, the scent again being part of the offering. Jane Madrigal had us bring flowers so her altars would be complete for the interview. She especially asked for roses for Our Lady of Guadalupe. Jane explained the importance of the flowers on her altars,

Flowers lift your spirits. . . Flowers are what heals the spirit. They say that all of our illnesses have a spiritual component and you can heal anything with a plant but you can only heal the spirit with the flower because the flower is the part of the plant that has the direct relationship with sun and you need that sun energy to heal the spirit. [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

Jane sees flowers as not just a thing of beauty that she offers the images but a key component of healing body and soul. David expressed these feelings somewhat differently saying,

I like to have flowers whether they are fresh or silk on the altars because flowers are magic and flowers are enchanting and they are of the earth, but they are fleeting but they are so beautiful. When you give somebody flowers you are telling them—I love you. You are really making a statement. Flowers are an enchanting spell. They are magic, they are alive and then they shrivel up and wither just like humans. [Interviews with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]

Flowers are part of what makes the altars a special, sacred space set aside for prayer and remembrance. Often particular flowers have special meanings like roses for Our Lady of Guadalupe in remembrance of the roses she gave to Juan Diego. Marigolds are an important Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) symbol used on ofrendas honoring deceased loved ones. These yellow and orange flowers are a symbol of death, referred to as the "flower of the dead" and their scent is said to call the spirits to visit this world. In the Nahuatl language, they are known as cempazuchitl, cempasuchil or zempasuchitl. Many of the participants had artificial marigolds on
their home altars. Flowers, representing life, death, resurrection, and the beauty of nature are a key component on home altars.

**Connections: Family & Friends**

Home altars are more than a bridge to the sacred and to the person’s past experiences; they also serve as a connection to loved ones, living or dead—a place where communication takes place between the two realms through the inclusion of photographs on the altar. Family photographs are almost always found on altars and the participants in this study are no exception. The photographs on the altar mark a historical moment in the life of the person pictured and the viewer—a moment, according to philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes (1981), that is already passed as soon as the photo is taken. For Barthes, the meaning of a photograph is not the representation of a literal object but rather the existence of the subject in a particular moment in time and the memories and experiences that are aroused in the person viewing the photograph. He argues that there is an obvious meaning (the *studium*) to each photograph that corresponds to the symbolic images that can be understood by any person who views the image as part of the collective memory of the group. However, the viewer on another level, utilizing a code that only they can know (the *punctum*), understands the photograph of someone they know or a place they have been. Barthes writes, “The punctum punctuates the meaning of the photograph (the *studium*) and as a result punctures or pierces its viewer” (Barthes 1981:27). Details in the photograph and connections the view has with these details penetrate the generalized, collective meaning producing an emotional, bodily response. It is the connection of the viewer to the images represented in the photograph that elicits meaning and precipitates a deep reaction. For example, Ana Spector keeps a photograph of herself as a child on one of her altars (Figure 7.35). Most people viewing the photograph would be able to tell from the details that it is an old picture
of what looks like four girls posed for a typical family photograph. A fence and what looks like a garage is visible which might also indicate a family portrait. Even if Ana points out which of the girls is her (bottom left) it would still be difficult to tell much more about this image. In fact, it is the only picture she has of herself from that time in Cuba since she said that the family did not have money to take many pictures. It is a little faded because it is over 50 years old. Ana is rather sentimental about the corner altar that holds this picture and several pictures of her daughter. Ana actually has two altars where she displays photographs. One is for living members of her family and one for those who are deceased. Around the altar to her “muertos” are arranged framed photographs of her husband, her mother, her father, her brothers and her two sisters who have all passed away.

Photographs also serve as mnemonic devices for the history of family life. The photographs represent a permanent record of bonds between people. Theorist and photographer Susan Sontag asserts that photographs are a “portable kit of images that bears witness to a family’s connectedness” (Sontag 1977:8). She adds that they can also be “ghostly traces” that supply the token presence of dispersed relatives stating that, “Often photographs are all that remain of members of an extended family” (Sontag 1977:15). The photographs on the altar provide a connection to the past, the present and the future—the sacred and the worldly—by bringing the images and what they represent together in one place. Jane Madrigal includes a photograph and memorial service pamphlet on her “muertos” altar for a friend who has recently
passed away (Figure 7.36). She includes a glass of water to refresh his spirit and a sugar skull as a memorial to the sweetness of life. Each photograph on the altar symbolizes the bonds that exist among the members of family and is a means to preserve what Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992) refers to as their “collective memories.” The individual in preserving their own memories also reinforces and strengthens the memories of the group as a whole whether that group be the family or the larger ethnic community. Arranged on the altar they trigger more than just memories of what is portrayed in the photograph itself; they reconstruct the images and emotions of the event and the relationship between people. Memory is not a “snapshot” in our mind and the photograph is not the event “captured” on film. Halbwachs defines individual memory on the basis of its social dimensions:

If we were to examine the way in which we remember, we would recognize that most of our memories come back to us when our family, our friends, or other people recall them to us . . . It is in society, that man [sic] acquires his memories, that he recalls them, that he recognizes them, and that he locates them. . . . I do not need to seek out where the memories are, where they are kept, in my brain, or in some corner of my mind to which only I would have access, because they are recalled to me from outside, and because the groups to which I belong continuously offer me the means to reconstruct them. [Halbwachs 1992:169]

Hallbwachs’s claims that we only “remember” things when other people who also experienced the same event are with us and we recall the memories together. The more contact we have with the people we interact with the sharper the memories will be; if we do not stay in contact with our family members either physically or through photograph, the memories will begin to fade. Memories need to be brought out in the light and need to be fixed in space. “Memories are
motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (Bachelard 1994:9). Displaying images of loved ones on the altar is one way of keeping the memories alive—especially for those who have died but also for those that live far away.

All of the participants had photographs of family and friends displayed prominently on their altars and around their homes. As Fransisca López approached their family altar in the living room the first thing she showed me was a picture of her grandmother, Fema, her mom’s mom who died six years ago. This photograph was positioned at the center of the table in a place of honor. Speaking of the photograph she said, “Things like this brings back memories and keeps things alive.” There are also more family photographs on the altar, one of her uncle that died two years ago and a photograph of her brother Larry. There is also a photograph of her mom and her daughter that depicts her mom in her garden outside of her house. I also noticed some pictures on a side table. Erasmo said it was a picture of his grandparents and their house. The photograph shows the profusion of pictures of the saints all over the house, mixed with pictures of the family—a blending of important persons in her life. The López, Udriales, and Silva families have numerous family photos displayed throughout their homes.

Probably the most dramatic use of photographs on the altars was represented by the images on Joan Frederick’s altar. As a photographer, it is logical that she would use the medium of photography to re-present her life story. The photographs include the important people in her life including her parents, uncle, and grandfather who are now passed away. There are also photographs honoring and celebrating the lives of friends that are still living. Joan includes pictures of herself because she wants to remember her relationships with these people saying, “every moment is special.” Joan said that her altar started out small but as more people died she added more photographs and objects. Joan also includes several fotoesculturas dedicated to her
American Indian “brother,” her “chosen brother,” and one to her dogs who have also passed away. (Figure 7.37).

The technique of fotoescultura is uniquely Mexican. It began in the Districto Federal in the 1930s to commemorate significant events in the lives of Mexican and Mexican-American families. Photographs of individuals are cut and shaped to fit on a thin hand-carved wooden sculpture to give a three-dimensional effect. Mementoes are often added. The sculptures are generally housed in simple wooden frames or boxes and incorporate the mediums of photography, painting, and sculpture (Garza 2003). These altars in a box started as an art project for Joan’s class one Halloween. She wanted to expose her class to the traditions of honoring loved ones who have passed and to this art form. The boxes dedicated to her Indian brother include pictures of him and scenes from the landscape of the area. There are also feathers and a small bottle of dirt from his grave. The box dedicated to her dogs contains pictures of her dogs and one of their dog collars. It also includes a picture of Joan holding the dogs as puppies.

In addition, Joan had a separate altar for her American Indian brother, across the hall from the main altar. (Figure 7.38). There are pictures of him at various ages and a picture of
them together. There are also two lambs that represent his profession as a rancher and a container of sheared lamb’s wool. Draped across one of the picture frames is one of his Indian beaded necklaces.

Anthropologist Rebecca Empson (2007), in her study of family chests in the homes of Mongolian nomadic people, found that when people are dispersed across the landscape, objects or things displayed in a special space in the household can allow for the “containment” of relations that can no longer be enacted. Empson has shown that through the use of photographic montages displayed over the family chest and the spatial layout of the house Mongolians construct flexible ways in which to incorporate members of the family who are no longer present for whatever reason. While people may be necessarily absent, due to constraints of nomadic herding, historical pressures of migration, and political persecution, relations can be imagined and contained through the construction of different sites of memory in the home. Focus on the display of these relations in households demonstrates some of the ways in which objects and people are mutually constituted by process of objectification. These things are the product of relations that, in turn, allow people to make further relations when they are viewed or displayed. In essence, the memories are maintained and shared. Franco Mondini-Ruiz makes a practice of displaying photographs of
relatives, people he knows, and people who have passed away prominently in his home. In Figure 7.39, he has “contained” this collection of memories in a traditional Mexican serving platter he has collected. At other times he displays the collection as a collage. The point is that he has these photographs available to constantly remind him of his connections and who he is. Some of the people he sees frequently but others he has not seen in a long time. Having the photographs on display also allows others to view them and remember shared experiences. While not a religious example these chests in the home and Franco’s photo displays seem to have a good deal in common with religious altars as far as iconographic value and their binding affect with family and friends in distant places. *Mexicano* home altars draw together (contain) the supernatural and loved ones who are spread across a transnational landscape.

**Personal Objects on the Altar**

While the altar is a site of worship and devotion, it is also about connections and remembrance represented by photographs but also by personal objects. Other objects on the altar vary from person to person according to personal taste and life experiences. They encompass the ordinary and the extraordinary—things you might not expect on a religious altar. Yet, in looking at the altar as an iconic assemblage which signifies the identity of the person, it is perfectly
appropriate that this power should embrace items which formally do not seem to fit the “religious” theme of the altar. “The altar is a stage for the active performance of relationship…framed within a belief in the relationship between the human and the divine” (Turner 1998:246). In part this is achieved through what Mihályi Czikszentmihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton call a process of integration. Personal objects combined with religious objects on the altar come to represent “dimensions of similarity” between the owner and others (e.g., shared descent, religion, ethnic origins, and so on) (Czikszentmihaly & Rochberg-Halton 1981:38). Dimensions of similarity form the emotional basis for relationships as that are produced by the visual accumulation of items on the altar. Particular items on the altar follow a long-term pattern of meaning by association; objects are interpreted in the context of past experiences and affiliations, but these same things are continually brought to bear upon the meaning of present day relationships and the various circumstances that affect them.

Conclusion

Objects chosen for the altars have deep personal meanings—religious, familial, and cultural. In this chapter, I have detailed the types of objects that generally appear on altars and in particular those of Mexicano Catholic altars in San Antonio and my participants’ altars. The categories included religious icons and images and their symbolic and personal meanings, traditional Mexican objects, personal objects of memory, and photographs of family and friends. These objects were all chosen because of their particular meaning to the person making or using the altar. From another perspective, the objects can be seen as “biographical” as they intertwine with and reflect the daily life experiences of the person. The objects tell a story of the person’s lived experiences—devotions that are important to them, petitions they have made and had granted, pilgrimages they have made to various religious sites, stages of the life cycle they have
passed through, and people they have loved along the way. In this way the altar tells a story of an important part of the person’s life—or at least the person tells the story through the objects. In the next chapter I will examine the objects on the altars from this “biographical” perspective.
CHAPTER 8

BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS

Triggers & Objects of Memory

“These things on the altar—that is your life.”
-----Ana Spector

The home altar, as an assemblage of meaningful objects, is a multi-layered representation of relationships and connections both sacred and secular. This chapter takes a “biographical” approach that explores the connections between the objects and the persons’ lived experiences. An analysis of this type can answer many questions related to identity: What life stories can be told through these objects in relation to religious beliefs, ethnic identity, and personal relationships? What do these objects and stories say about the life story of the altar maker? How does interacting with the objects on the altars affect the users’ present life and beliefs? Is there change in the objects on the altar, and if so why—what has been the instigating change in the person’s life? Considering objects biographically reveals something not only about the objects themselves but also about those who acted upon them. Biographical objects are both tangible parts of the person’s past as well as of their present because of the feelings and emotions with which they are invested or what they are able to evoke in the person viewing them.

Biographical Objects

While not everyone had biographical objects on their altars, or was willing to show them to me, I can provide some examples of various types of what I deemed to be biographical objects. Implicit in the categorization and re-categorization process of objects into biographical objects is the notion that objects or things do not always remain what they were. Anthropologist
Nicholas Thomas points out that in many cases “objects are not what they are made to be but what they have become” (Thomas 1991:4). The assigned category of the object changes through interaction with the person using it. I offer two examples of this line of thinking that clearly demonstrates this concept. The contrast is not always as evident with other biological objects. The first example appeared on Chuck Ramirez’ *Día de los Muertos* altar for his grandmother. He talked at length about the importance of his grandmother’s tortilla pan (on the right in Figure 8.1) and the meaning that is carried in the pan—memories of his grandmother caring for him as a young boy and concepts of security and safety. The pan for him also symbolizes his ethnic identity that he derives from his grandmother who is pictured in the framed image on the left in Figure 8.1. Chuck, however, no longer uses the pan to make tortillas, even though the making of ethnic food is important to him. The pan has ceased to be a kitchen tool but has been converted into a biographical object and object of memory. Chuck uses the pan to narrate the story of his childhood and the love of his grandmother. The second example was an object in the home of Jorge Garza, an artist and one of the participants not highlighted in this paper. He said that while he did not have a home altar per se he did create a small *nicho* that contains several items that were on his mother’s altar (Figure 8.2). He does not use this object as a religious shrine as his mother did but keeps it instead in memory of her and his connection to her. Garza explained,
The whole idea of the altar in my home wasn’t so much having it in my home to pray to; it was more just sort of a memory of the way things were when I was a kid at home. . . I would say that the objects that I display and use in my work are more things that reflect who I am as far as the cultural that I come from, not necessarily who I am as a religious person. I identify with these things because I think that they speak to my background as both Hispanic and Catholic but they are not necessarily objects that are used to pray to. [Jorge Garza interview by Mary Durocher 2009]

As Jorge was talking about his mother and the shrine, which is placed in his dining room as she had it in her home, he realized that the entire dining room was a “shrine” to his mother’s memory as it also contained the dining room table that her father had made and the dishes she had received as a wedding present. Garza said that having these objects here provides a constant in his life—a place where he can go back and reflect while viewing or using the object. Both of these objects are “biographical” in the sense that they are used by the person to narrate part of their life story. The objects link them to very important persons in their lives as well as to their Mexican heritage.

**Religious & Ethnic Objects**

Other objects on the altars, while clearly biographical, also, to some extent at least, maintain their original meanings and uses. Two objects that refer particularly to “ethnic” heritage as well as family connections belong to Ana Spector and Mike Casey, although most of the participants had various objects that represented their *Mexicano* heritage. Ana

![Figure 8.2 Jorge Garza’s Mother’s Nicho](image)

Source: Author, 2009

![Figure 8.3 Ana Spector’s Hebrew Prayer Book](image)

Source: Author, 2009
showed me several objects that she displays and uses to honor her Jewish upbringing including two menorahs, a yarmulke, and a Jewish star that she has arranged on a small altar in her living room. She said, “Everything is there. Everything you need.” She also has a string of twelve wooden disks with metal symbols that are linked together with fine silver chain. She explained the hidden meaning of this object, “These represents the twelve tribes of Israel—this is where everybody came from—even the Blacks. . . the beginning of the beginning. Each disk has a different symbol. And this itself is a symbol but if you don’t want people to know what it is it can be a belt.” This object has religious and symbolic value; however, it also links Ana to her family and to the larger family of all humanity. Ana also keeps a small Hebrew prayer book that belonged to her husband when he was a child (Figure 8.3). This book provides many layers of connection for her. Also pictured in Figure 8.3 is a small doily crocheted by her mother that connects her to her family and home in Cuba.

Mike Casey, who does not have a home altar that he uses daily, recently purchased a statue of San Martin de Porres, which he displays prominently on his Día de los Muertos ofrenda. The statue of San Martin honors the recent discovery of a “Black” ancestor in what was thought to be a thoroughly Anglo family history. Mike displays the statue proudly with pictures of his ancestors from the early settlement of San Antonio (Figure 8.4).

David Zamara Casas also uses
religious statues to anchor his past. A statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the focal point of his main altar. Jesus is wearing what David called His “little Inquisition hat” that is made out of the obituary of the mother of the first man he ever loved (Figure 8.5). David said, “He is my best friend in all the world—we grew up together, we went to parochial school together, and his mother’s death was really a powerful influence on me—I just took it really personal.” David has a santo in another area that he could not identify but he did explain why that statue was there, “I can tell you that he [the santo] represents someone that was special to me that knew all the saints. This lady, this one here [showing a photograph], Connie, she was an expert on colonial art so this santo represents her to me. She really taught me a lot about altars, but I don’t know who he is.” Many of the objects David had on display on his altars have personal connection to people he knows. He said,

I believe there is energy in everything—everything that is physical has some type of energy, if it is a photograph of someone or if it is a letter they wrote you it just triggers connection and history and the fact that they are gone it is a more conscious effort to keep them here because they are gone. So I have pictures of Connie and I talk to her every day: I say ‘Hi Connie.’ I say hello to my father. And it is the place where they live in memory and I interact with them. [Interviews with David Zamora Casas by Mary Durocher, 11/11/2009 and 11/18/2009]

It is this combination of objects and images that hold various connections for David.

Mrs. Silva also had religious statues on her altars that she calls her “little saints.” These statues were on her mother’s home altar. She says that they are broken now but she still keeps them in this special spot to honor them and her mother. The centerpiece of Carmen Ruiz’ altar is
a large statue of the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception which she has draped with rosaries. This statue holds great significance for Carmen,

That Virgin Mary was given to my great grandmother when she was part of the Society of Hijas de Maria. Now a Hija de Maria is a young lady who is not married, who doesn’t know anything about a man and so you would join the society. So once you got married—you already had your ribbon and your medallion. When you got married before you exited the church they would take off your medallion and give you the statue for your home because now you are a married woman. And then you could join as a Guadalupana. So when my grandmother became a Guadalupana she was given the medallion of that society but she still had her statue. So that statue is very important to me. [Interview with Carmen Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 10/25/2010]

This statue of the Virgin connects Carmen through several generations of women in her family, all of whom were members of the Society of Hijas de Maria and the Guadalupanas of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish. Carmen also has another close connection to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception that she represents by displaying her driver’s license. She explained her reasoning,

When my mother got married she had two sons, my brothers. She wanted to have a girl and for some reason she was not able to get pregnant again. And so my grandmother would tell her to pray to the Immaculata Concepcion and tell her that if you give her a daughter you will name her Concepcion. So that is why I have my driver’s license here to remind me of this promise. So that statue means even more to me because I was named after the Immaculate Conception” [Interview with Carmen Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 10/25/2010]

Concepcion is actually Carmen’s middle name. It is not always easy for an outsider to determine a connection between a personal object on the altar and it meaning

**Personal Objects**

Many objects on the altars are obviously connected to the biography of the person such as photographs or souvenirs of special places visited. The biographical connections to other objects are not as obvious. For instance, the Udriales family had a special corner in the dining room dedicated to Judy’s mother who recently passed away (Figure 8.6). This space is a mixture of obvious and non-obvious biographical connections. As she turned on the electric candle Judy
told me about the space,

I have this little place here. These are pictures of my mom. I had a baby that passed away and I have this angel that represents the baby that passed away and these [dolls] are my two boys that my mom took care of. This is the Baptismal candle the priest had given her at the funeral. And this is one of the rosaries. This is an old-fashioned door knob from the house she grew up in. [Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009]

These objects all provide connections to her mom, her past life, and her current life. You can also see holy cards of the Holy Family and The Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary tucked amongst the photographs connecting all of them to the Divine Family. Judy also includes dolls that represent her two sons on her angel altar.

Jane Madrigal also has several dolls on her altars. Some of the dolls represent various spirits of the Orisha. In the center of the top shelf of her “Muertos” altar is a figure representing her main spirit guide—an indigenous woman whose name she does not know—who assists her in helping people (Figure 8.7). Jane said, “I know this because we participated in misas which are like séances in order to communicate with the dead.” On another altar she has several statues that also represent her Native American Indians spirit guide. Leaning against the altar, is an image Jane painted, a pink cross on black background, in memory of the Women of Juarez. She said, “For over ten years hundreds of women working in the maquiladora (export assembly plants in a free trade zone) in Juarez have been turning up dead. They are usually murdered
going to or leaving work. All these murders remain unsolved.” The cross is an honor to them and a reminder of the struggles of her people—women and Mexicans.

Joan Frederick had several personal objects on her altar relating to her connection with her “chosen” brother, which I have mentioned before. She also has a ball of string in front of a photo of her mother. Joan told me this story about the string, “I called her one day to ask how she was doing and she said that she had just had the best day—she had spent all day in the garage rolling up the string she had been saving for years—she saved it in the tool closet.” The string serves as a reminder of her mom’s personality now that she is gone.

There was one object I could not identify on Mrs. Silva’s altar; actually neither could she; however, this is the story she told about it,

Oh, that belonged to a Santo Niño de Atocha which is this one [shows me an image hanging on the wall], he carries this little thing here, I really don’t know what it is. They had a Mass at the Basilica of the Little Flower and they had Santo Niño and they had little candles. A lot of people from Mexico really believe in him that he heals. I guess he is Baby Jesus. My grandfather used to have a little statue of him and I have a neighbor who has a statue of him. They usually have a little thing that you can put money so that you won’t be without money. My grandfather used to have one like that. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

The object represents the Santo Niño de Atocha, whom she greatly admires, but she does not have a statue herself. Still there is this connection between the object and the Niño and her
family. At times, objects are displayed on the altars solely because people like them. I noticed a figure in a glass egg next to the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes on the López family altar (Figure 8.8). I asked the family if it represented the child Mary. Samira laughed and said, “No it is not a saint. It is just there—sometimes we put McDonald’s toys and my mom puts random figurines and dogs.” People display things on the altars that make them happy and may not have any connection to religion, family, or ethnicity. People seem to combine their various interests and aspects of themselves in this one special space.

*Objects of Place*

Ana Spector was the only participant who had immigrated to San Antonio from another country. While others included iconic images or objects that reflect their *Mexicano* heritage, Ana displays objects that remind her of everyday life in Cuba. The shells on the altar and in the china piece represent the island of Cuba and are an offering to the *Orisha* (Figure 8.9). Ana also had two little pieces of pottery and a maraca that were made in Cuba. She has had them for many years and they bring back memories of her home. She displays these objects around *Santa Barbara*, a key figure in *Santería* as the counterpart to *Chango*. Jane Madrigal and David Zamora Casa also have several objects that
represent nature and the earth: shells, branches, corn and corn husks, feathers, etc.

**Commemorative Objects**

Objects can also become associated with life-transforming events and rites of passage and therefore become filled with special meaning and connected to the biographies of persons (Kopytoff 1986). The rights of passage connected with the Catholic Church can include marriage, birth and Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confirmation. Other life cycle changes such as graduations, job promotions, and other life achievements may also be marked on the altar. The Udriales display the *lasso* (rosary) that was used to unite them in marriage. They also display their sons’ academic and musical achievements as well as one son’s advancement to Eagle Scout. Carmen Ruiz displays her daughter’s trophy next to the statue of the Virgin and photos of a friend’s Ordination.

These types of displays were important in most of the home altars I saw. I had specifically noticed some medals on ribbons hanging next to the López family altar and asked whose they were and why they were on the altar (Figure 8.10). Francisca told me that the medals were awarded to Nikki for her academic achievement. Her family expressed great pride in her achievements and displays the medals for all to see. Francisca said that “She is in 7th grade and they are already asking her to take the SATs.” Nikki was somewhat embarrassed by the attention but was proud to confirm that she would be taking the exam soon—a major step in life.

Carmen had some stones at the foot of the Virgin
on her altar. She said they are from an ACTS Retreat she attended. An ACTS Retreat is a three-day Catholic retreat presented by laymen and women. Talks and activities focus on Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service (ACTS). Carmen explained what the stones mean,

> When you go on an ACTS Retreat they tell you that you need to name what causes you to be heavy in your life and in your religion. And so you name it and so it is up to you when you want to throw it away. And I haven’t thrown these away yet. I am still carrying them. Soon I will throw them away. [Interview with Carmen Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 10/25/2010]

The stones represent the burdens in her life; each of which tells a story of a struggle she must overcome.

Each of the objects described is “biographical” in that they tell a story about the person who created or uses the altar—either to the person themselves or to someone who is familiar with their meanings. The person may also tell their stories through the objects which each have a special connection and meaning for the person. The objects connect the person to the past in the present. The objects signify the person’s “sense of self” in a material way. As I have demonstrated, it is not the physical characteristics of objects that make them biographical, but the meanings assigned to them as significant personal possessions.

There is another type of altar that plays a key role in traditional Mexican religious practices—the ofrenda (offering) created for Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead to welcome the return for the day of the spirit of the deceased loved. While these altars were not the primary focus of this study, they did play an important role in fieldwork and in the interviews since you cannot go anywhere in San Antonio in October and November without seeing objects relating to this day or talking about it. These altars are created with “biographical objects” that reflect the life history of the person or persons being honored. Since these objects and altars play such a critical role in the lives of Mexicanos and many Anglos in San Antonio, I have chosen to include
them in this chapter about biographical objects. While I did not see personal *ofrendas* created in the home; I did see many “personal” *ofrendas* that people created for display in public spaces, and *ofrendas* created by artists commissioned by public and non-profit institutions in the community.

**Día de los Muertos Ofrendas**

*Día de los Muertos* or the Day of the Dead is a holiday (or festival) that has been celebrated in parts of Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, and other areas in Central and South America to honor the lives of the ancestors and the continuity of life. (Castro 2000:79-80). The Day of the Dead is also celebrated in many areas of the United States in which the Latino heritage exists. November 2nd is the official date for Day of the Dead, although it is generally celebrated between October 31st and November 2nd. This celebration has a complex history that has been transformed through the years, garnering attention from scholars from various fields (e.g. Brandes 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2006; Haley & Fukada 2004; Medina & Cadena 2002; Salvador 2003; Scalora 1995), popular media, and the Internet. According to anthropologist Judy King (2003), the original celebration can be traced to many Mesoamerican indigenous traditions, such as the harvest festivities held during the Aztec month of *Miccailhuitontli*, ritually presided over by the "Lady of the Dead" (*Mictecacihuatl*), and dedicated to the spirits of children and the dead. In the Aztec calendar, this ritual fell at the end of July and the beginning of August, but in the post conquest era it was moved by Spanish clergy to coincide with the Christian holydays of All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2) a time now called *Todos Santos* (All Saints). This celebration is believed to "welcome the souls of the dead" who return each year to enjoy the pleasures that they once had in life and visit with their living relatives (Castro 2000:79-80). It is a time to renew connections with loved ones (both living and dead) and honor
the lives of the deceased by displaying objects that were important to them when they were alive. The objects used in the celebration are therefore profoundly “biographical” of the deceased as they trigger memories of the lives of the deceased and the time spent with loved ones. Perishable items such as food, tobacco products, or alcoholic beverages that the deceased enjoyed in life are on the altar as well.

People traditionally celebrate Día de los Muertos in their homes and at the gravesites in the cemeteries, according to Latino scholar Ricardo Salvador (2003) Between October 31st and November 2nd, offerings of food and drink are prepared for the dead. Ofrendas (altars or offerings) are set up in the home displaying personal objects, favorite clothing, signs of occupations or hobbies, favorite foods and possessions of the deceased family member. Where photography has become more widely accessible, portraits of the deceased being honored as well as other family photographs are also displayed on the ofrendas. On November 2nd, family members visit the gravesites of their loved ones. They decorate their graves with flowers, enjoy picnics consisting of favorite foods of the deceased, and socially interact with others at the cemetery. This festive interaction with the living and the dead is an important social ritual that brings families and friends together as they recognize the cycle of life and death that is part of human existence not an ending. Mexican poet, essayist, and political thinker Octavio Paz wrote about his people's relationship with death saying and their celebration, “The Mexican is familiar with death, . . . jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, and celebrates it. It is one of his favorite playthings and his most steadfast love" (Paz 1994:57). Although this celebration is associated with the dead, it is not a morbid or depressing time, but rather a moment full of life, happiness, color, food, family, and fun—a time of joyous remembrance. In many areas, an all-night candlelight vigil takes place by the graves of the family members. At San Fernando Cemetery II
on the west side of San Antonio, a Mass is held every year near the gates of the cemetery in honor of the deceased. When I attended the Mass in 2010 it was co-celebrated by the Bishop and several priests and hundreds of people attended. The whole occasion is festive, and everyone talks of the dead as if they were still alive.

The main focus of the celebration is the multi-leveled ofrenda or special altar created to honor and welcome the deceased. While there is an infinite variety of styles for these altars, dictated by region and personal taste, there are several traditional elements that most people include: (See Figure 8.11)

1. Photos of loved ones and images of favorite saints.
2. Candles—purple represents suffering, pink celebration and white hope.
3. Favorite foods and sweets of the deceased.
4. Yellow & orange marigolds or other fragrant flowers—symbolizing life’s brevity. Also known as "the flower with 400 lives," marigolds were thought by the Aztec to symbolize death. It is believed that the scent of the petals forms a welcome path for the spirits to return to celebrate with the living. Petals are scattered to form a path for the spirit to follow.
5. Pan de muertos (Bread of the Dead) which is...
flat bread baked in the shape of skulls, skeletons, or crossbones.

6. Tamales, moles, chiles, and enchiladas which are foods traditionally eaten on special occasions.

7. Whimsical calacas or calaveras (skeletons) depicted in everyday poses, singing, dancing, working (Figure 8.12) and skulls molded from a sugar, then decorated with icing, glitter and foil (Figure 8.13). The sugar represents the sweetness of life, and the skull represents the sadness of death. I was told that the ants seen crawling on the candy skulls, and also the food, represents the souls of the deceased “eating” the offerings left for them.

8. Copal incense, a resinous sap of a Mexican tree, has been used since the time of the Aztecs. It is burned to guide the spirits of the departed home and to ward off evil.

9. Water to quench the thirst after the long journey.

10. Salt to remind us of life and the loved ones’ tears.

These are the most traditional items seen on the ofrendas. Some people include soap and a towel so the spirits can clean up after their journey home.
Another decorative item that is often used during Día de los Muertos celebrations is colorful tissue paper cut into intricate designs, papel picado, that people hang in banners around the ofrenda and their homes. (See Figure 8.14 for examples of papel picado.) Tradition has it that the custom stems from the Aztec use of banners in ritual. The patterns are usually calaveras (skeleton) characters created in 1910 by Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada (Castro 2001:30-31). The color of the tissue paper used varies. Black represents the Pre-Hispanic religions and land of the dead, while purple comes from the Catholic calendar to signify pain, suffering, grief, and mourning. Pink is for celebration. White is for purity and hope. Yellow and
orange represent the marigold and sun and light. Red represents the blood of Jesus; and for the indigenous, the life blood of humans and animals (King 2003). These paper decorations are also used throughout the year at various celebrations.

Many “modern” as opposed to “traditional” altars may not have all of the items listed above but they will have photographs of their loved one alone or with members of the family and biographical objects that reflect the person’s interests in life and favorite foods. Figure 8.15 contains close-up images of objects on the ofrendas. Prominently displayed are photographs of the person being honored—either pictured alone or with friends and members of the family. The ofrendas also include the deceased’s favorite beverages such as coffee, Big Red, or beer; and food that represent traditional Mexican offerings or favorite foods of the deceased. Biographical objects such as bronzed baby shoes, golf paraphernalia; favorite perfume;
and gardening utensils are also displayed. Religious objects that the deceased held particular devotion for are sometimes included even though these altars are not religious in nature.

The first ofrenda I saw was created by Chuck Ramirez at the San Antonio Arts & Eats Festival. Chuck was honoring a local restaurant owner, Viola Barrios, who had been killed earlier in the year (Figure 8.16). (There were actually many altars created in her honor throughout the city that year.) He prides himself in keeping within the traditional practices for creating altars but he also includes objects that might not be considered traditional. His altars are however always biographical—all of the components of the altar speak to her presence. The stove is the centerpiece of the altar. This object did not belong to Viola but is something Chuck keeps to remind him of his grandmother. Since Viola was a restaurant owner and famous cook in
San Antonio, he felt it was more than fitting to use the stove as the focal point. Inside the oven he placed many objects that reflected her life—photographs of Viola, awards that she won, brochures from her extensive travels throughout Europe with her friends. There are also photographs of Viola scattered over the entire surface of the ofrenda. On the stove Chuck had a chicken stew that she always served to friends in her home—not in her restaurant. Chuck listed the personal items on the altar saying,

I have created the ofrenda in a traditional altar way with personal effects provided by the family. I have family photographs, her favorite foods, the ingredients to many of the recipes that go into the delicious dishes at Los Barrios (the restaurant she owned), Spanish albums and a record player, alcohol to toast, her favorite carnations—fuchsia pink; her bundt pan she always made bundt cakes for everybody. A lot of people here acknowledge that bundt pan—she would always say she made it from scratch but it came from a box—so I included a box cake of Moist Deluxe Duncan Hines. I have her apron here and I have her shawl. She loved lemonade so I have lemonade here to share with people. She loved sweets—so I have sugared fruits and oranges. She also loved chocolates. But she wasn’t complex in her chocolates—she liked Hershey’s kisses and little chocolate bars so that is what I have here. She was a collector—she never threw away anything so I have some assorted things here [Interview with Chuck Ramirez 2009]

Along with her personal objects, the ofrenda also contains “traditional” objects. Chuck included candles and marigolds—even scattering petals on the ground. He has a small copal incense burner. Instead of the glass of water he has provided lemonade—her favorite. Along with her favorite foods he also provides fruits, vegetables, and spices indigenous to Mexico. The only thing missing is calacas or skeletons, which Chuck believes, are not really part of the older, more indigenous celebrations.

The celebration of Día de los Muertos in San Antonio has traditionally been a private ritual—in homes and at the cemeteries. In the last thirty years or so, the celebration has become more public, while retaining the traditional meanings and practices of the private celebrations. Centro Cultural Aztlán organized one of the first public celebrations in 1978. Since then other events, such as altar displays and parades, have been hosted by Say Si, the Guadalupe Cultural
Arts Center, The Missions, The Alameda, Texas Institute of Cultures, and many local libraries, art galleries, museums, churches, businesses, and community organizations throughout the city. The public attention to *Día de los Muertos* stems partially from the renewed awareness of pride in *Mexicano* ethnic heritage fostered by the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I also heard stories from several people that it was the interest of *Mexicano* artists that sparked the city-wide public celebration of the day, especially artists in the LGBT community. It seems that two local artists and activists, Danny Lozano and his partner Craig Pennel, opened a folk art shop in 1987 on the west side of San Antonio in an area where many artists lived and worked. Franco Mondini said that nobody had done that before, “it was rather all embarrassing until him—he made it cool.” The shop, *Tienda Guadalupe*, became the center point of the artist community—both *Mexicano* and Anglo—including many of the artists I interviewed. Author Sandra Cisneros is quoted by Gregg Barrios (one of my participants) in an article in the *San Antonio Current* describing the scene at the time,

> “Tienda Guadalupe was not just a shop. It was a salon,” Cisneros said. “I saw Danny [Lozano] as the trendsetter that sparked a whole *movimiento*, including Franco [Mondini-Ruiz] and me, and Ito [Romo], and so many visual artists, writers, and theater people. Everybody, whether they were wealthy people from King William Street or down-and-out artists, all classes and sexualities, colors of people, would gather there for events.” [Barrios 2007]

Joan Frederick told me that the opening of the shop coincided with the beginning of AIDS awareness and many of Danny’s friends were dying of AIDS at the time. He organized the first procession in San Antonio to remember those who have died from AIDS. She said they have been doing that ever since he organized it in 1988 or 1989. “Now there are processions all over town but back then it wasn’t cool yet.” Since Danny’s death in 1993 of cancer, local artist Terry Ibanez has organized a yearly “*Muertos*” parade in his honor held on *Día de los Muertos*.

Another participant, a *Mexicana* artist and shop owner who is not a member of the LGBT
community, disputed the importance of the shop and the people that surrounded it in bringing *Día de los Muertos* to the forefront in San Antonio. She claims that people had always celebrated privately and many were creating public displays before these artists rediscovered the practice. It is safe to say though that there are many factors that contributed to the new found popularity of *Día de los Muertos* in San Antonio. However the practices were renewed, the meaning of the celebration remains the same—to honor deceased loved ones by following traditional *Mexicano* practices. These public displays reinforce existing practices, renew lost interest, and introduce Anglos to new ideas. These celebrations are therefore multi-layered and multi-vocal rituals acting as a bridge between cultures—the *Mexicano* and the Anglo. They are performed in a context of multiple overlapping borders—the borders between the living and the dead, the *Mexicano* and the Anglo, the public and the private, and between various communities—as the meaning of this tradition has been adopted and expanded to meet various needs.

Traditional *ofrendas* are created in public spaces both as a commemoration of the deceased and as a vehicle for teaching ethnic heritage. *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) and *Instituto Cultural de México* annually create traditional altars representing practices from different areas of Mexico each of which have their own traditions. School children tour the exhibits to learn about the tradition. Anna Maria Fox-Baker, of UNAM, shared some of the photographs from previous years (Figure 8.17). Each of the *ofrendas* has a distinct style yet they all contain very similar elements. The altar on the top left is unique in that it consists of a suspended table set for dinner with the deceased. The altar below it is all white and displays several angels many of which are crying for the deceased. Most of these *ofrendas* feature marigolds prominently. The image in the top right, from *Instituto Cultural de México*, even has a path of marigolds leading to the altar for the souls to follow.
Figure 8.17 Ofrendas at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México & Instituto Cultural de México
Source: Author, 2008, 2009, 2010 & Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México with permission
The ofrendas in Figure 8.18 are special. The one on the left is for a child. It is a widely held belief that the souls of the children (angelitos) return first, on November 1st, and food and gifts appropriate for their age are set out for them—very often small toys and candy. The two altars on the right were made for those souls who have no relatives to honor them. Offerings were provided so the spirits will not be angry and alone.

The style of the ofrendas change for each individual and over time. Franco Mondini-Ruiz said though that it is the form that changes—not the substance. In the figures below I demonstrate this variety by showing altars displayed in various venues. The ofrendas in Figure 8.19 were all created by individuals or families and displayed in the courtyard of San Fernando Cathedral. They all look very different yet the traditional items can be seen on each of them. Only two of these ofrendas contain “religious” objects (top center and bottom right).
Figure 8.19 Individual Personal Ofrendas displayed in San Fernando Cathedral Courtyard
Source: Author, 2009
The ofrendas in Figures 8.20 was made by school children and displayed in El Mercado a historical shopping district. It is one large altar honoring family members and celebrities.
The ofrendas in Figure 8.21 are fotoesculturas or box altars done by young children.
Artists are also commissioned to create large ofrendas in public spaces such as these two that David Zamaroa Casas assembled in San Fernando Cathedral Plaza in 2008 and 2009 (Figures 8.22 & 8.23). The ofrenda in Figure 8.23 was dedicated to children—“Los Niños/Los Angelitos.”

Artists tend to take some liberties with tradition while retaining the original intentions. David includes indigenous objects in his displays. Personal ofrendas built by artists are also displayed in galleries like those in Figure 8.24 at Centro Cultural Aztlán.
Figure 8.24 Artist Ofrendas at Centro Cultural Aztlán
Source: Author, 2009
I include ofrendas here that deviate most from the traditional yet still maintain the meaning. In Figure 8.25 are two DVD ofrendas made as part of a project by students at Say Si. Instead of photographs, videos were made of people talking about their deceased loved ones. The two ofrendas pictured below were created by family-owned businesses. The ofrenda on the left (Figure 8.26) honors family members, staff, and customers who have passed away. The ofrenda on the right (Figure 8.27) is dedicated to the owner’s grandmother and is on display in the window of her shop. The figure wears her grandmother’s dress and braid and has her photograph as its face. She has roses in her lap and favorite items scattered at her feet. What is most striking is that you can see yourself reflected in the glass of the window.
I observed hundreds of ofrendas and participated in numerous events in the three years I was in San Antonio for the Día de los Muertos celebrations. I was also able to help create several ofrendas. My brother and I created an ofrenda for our mother (Figure 8.28). It contained some of the traditional elements but was mostly composed of biographical objects. We found the process of negotiating what biographical objects to include very challenging—what represented our mother to me did not always coincide with what my brother thought. I also helped Chuck Ramirez create an ofrenda for his grandmother (Figure 8.29). This altar was very traditional. Chuck taught me the meaning of each object as we added it—the candles, salt, favorite and traditional foods, water for the deceased, flowers, photographs, and the tortilla pan.
Figure 8.29 Chuck Ramirez’ Ofrenda for his grandmother
Source: Author, 2009
The last ofrenda I helped create was one dedicated to Chuck Ramirez who had died in an accident on November 6, 2010. This spontaneous ofrenda, altar, shrine, sprang up at the site of the accident, which happened to be around the corner from his home (Figure 8.30). Friends gathered and contributed items to the assemblage—both of a traditional and biographical nature. Candles were kept burning for the entire week. In addition, another type of memorial arose on
Facebook the social networking Internet site. Friends, casual acquaintances, and family posted messages to the site, including photographs of Chuck and his art. The photographs reflect his personality and experiences he had with his many friends. As I write this, I stopped to check his home page and people continue to leave messages and photographs; especially on his birthday, anniversary of his death, and Christmas which he loved.

**Día de los Muertos Celebrations at the Cemetery—San Fernando II**

Another important aspect of honoring the lives of the deceased during the *Día de los Muertos* celebrations is the celebrations that extend to the gravesite. These are very personal activities, although a Mass is held on the evening of November 2nd. I did not interview people at the cemetery but spoke to some of them about the activities. People come to the cemetery to prepare for their loved ones’ return. They clean and decorate the graves, using traditional flowers, religious images, and objects that remind them of the deceased. Some even construct *ofrendas* on the gravesite. Families spend the day at the cemetery enjoying each others’ company, telling stories of loved ones, playing games, and eating traditional foods. Many families stay on until dark using camping lamps to keep the vigil. The next figures highlight the activities that take place at the cemetery. Figure 8.31 includes images of cleaning and decorating the gravesites and families enjoying picnics at the site. In the bottom left is a roving Mariachi Band provided by the cemetery to serenade the celebrants. People would request their loved ones’ favorite songs or the band would play traditional Mexican songs. Figure 8.32 contains close-ups of the decorations and biographical objects on several of the gravesites. The image in the center is a small *ofrenda* that was created at the site. The bottom left image is a child’s grave with a stuffed animal. People also include photographs of their loved ones along with images saints or the Virgin Mary.
Figure 8.31 *Día de los Muertos* activities at San Fernando Cemetery II
Source: Author, 2009, 2010
Figure 8.32 *Dia de los Muertos* grave decoration at San Fernando Cemetery II
*Día de los Muertos* is not the only day families honor their deceased loved ones at the cemetery. The images in Figure 8.33 were taken at Christmas. These seasonal decorations and occasional “biographical” objects also reflect the intimacy that is evident in the *Día de los Muertos* celebrations. The arrangement in the center actually had music playing.
All of the participants, except Ana Spector, participated in Día de los Muertos celebrations in some way—the artists more than others. I asked Ana why she did not celebrate Día de los Muertos since it is so popular in San Antonio. She replied,

For us, Día de los Muertos is on every day. For me, and I know for a lot of Cubans, relatives are not completely gone. They are around. To me my mother is like an angel and if she sees me in pain or in trouble, I know that even though her body is not here her soul is around. Because you know, life is lonely so you can use your departed ones as a source of strength and you remember the good times. So I always have in my bedroom all the pictures of all the people that are gone. I have actually more pictures of them than I have of the living. [Interviews with Anna Spector by Mary Durocher, 11/14/2009 and 11/22/2009]

Ana has continued to honor her deceased loved ones in a way that is familiar to her and part of her heritage. She told me that she had actually been uncomfortable with the practice of Día de los Muertos that is so common in San Antonio until I explained the meanings of the various objects such as the calaveras (skeletons) which she had considered a sign of evil. She said she is now thinking of joining in the celebrations as another way to honor her loved ones.

**Biographies of Objects**

In addition to objects exhibiting the “biographies” of persons, acting as triggers of memory for personal narratives, Igor Kopytoff (1986) introduced the notion of the “cultural biographies of things” suggesting that each object is a “culturally constructed entity endowed with culturally specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986:68). The movement of objects in their “life times” from person to person or from one type of object to another, and their eventual “use” in one form or another is determined by the relationships that exist between the objects and the persons who possess them during their lifetime. In effect, the goal is to look at objects in the same way we look at persons. For instance, while objects, such as the Ramirez’ tortilla pan, may start out as commodities
people may convert them into possessions by endowing them with a personal identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981) and meaning. Objects can therefore have life stories of their own that relate to the persons who have owned or used them as they move from the position of being a mere object to the subjectivity of having “a name, a personality, a past” (Mauss 1967:55). Arjun Appadurai (1986) discusses these shifting perceptions of objects and their sometimes continued movement from person to person as the “social lives” of things. Kopytoff claims that it is through the stories of the movement of the objects that we can understand the connections between people and the objects they use and their cultural memories. The biographies of many of the objects already discussed is evident—Carmen told the story of how her statue of the Virgin was passed from her great grandmother down to her, Mrs. Silva received many of her mother’s statues, and the Ramirez family tortilla pan. These objects were handed down in the relatively recent past. Alfred Rodríguez, the santos carver, however, uses archival records to trace his ancestry from the beginnings of San Antonio settlement through the movement of various santos. He uses colonial records and court documents to trace santos left in wills that date back to the 1700s. He said, “I found one ancestor who actually had a San Roche, it was actually one of my Canary Island ancestors who had listed it in his will. What I found is that when they immigrated to Texas they brought this particular image with them from the islands.” Very old santos are important in tracing family history and religious devotion in the past. In this case the “biographies” of the objects are directly connected to the “biographies” of the person. Chuck
Ramirez, David Zamora Casas, and Franco Mondini-Ruiz each have at least one of these old santos. Even though in most cases, they cannot identify the saint and there is no family connection with the object, they still feel that they are important markers of ethnic identity. They display their santos in prominent locations in their home. Franco has his Saint Michael the Archangel standing guard at the front door of his home (Figure 8.34).

Conclusion

An important element of home altars, especially ofrendas for Día de los Muertos, is biographical objects and photographs of family and friends. Biographical objects are important for what they evoke more so than for what they are. As Jean Baudrillard (2002) suggests in the case of antiques, biographical objects occupy an anachronistic or suspended position in time. The objects take on a mythological character in that they no longer serve a functional or practical purpose in the present, but serve instead to signify the ghostly presence of a particular deceased loved one (biographical subject). As the tangible representations of the absent subject, the objects acquire subjective attributes—becoming more like persons (Baudrillard 2002:75). The “authenticity of biographical relics [objects] is relative neither to the objects themselves, nor to their function but to the system that frames them: that is to their relationship with the subject (Baudrillard 2002:76) as they interact with the objects on the altar. It is therefore the interactions and relationships between the person and the objects and the objects to each other that forms the bonds between them, the Divine, and loved ones, drawing them into the present from the past and the heavenly realm. It is also the narratives these objects trigger that help maintain these relationships.

Each time a participant showed me an object from the altar or ofrenda they also told a
story—of how they acquired the object, who the object represented, stories of that person’s life, and stories of how they used the object in their daily devotions. This narrative process was clearly evident in the interview conducted with Grandmother Emma at San Fernando Cemetery II on Día de los Muertos. As an American Indian storyteller who walks two worlds—part Apache, part Mexicano—she tells stories that blend both of her traditions. I was with her at the

cemetery as she created and described a traditional ofrenda for a video crew from the Institute of Texas Cultures (Figure 8.35). As she described the components of the altar, she also explained the importance of remembering loved ones by honoring them with these altars,

My mother used to say that there were three deaths: the death when our physical body ceases to function; when our hearts no longer beat of their own accord, when the space we occupy slowly loses its meaning; the death when you are buried returned to mother earth, out of sight; and the death when you are forgotten. We talk to are ancestors and
they come to us and they guide us in this life. So you have to learn to listen. We remember what they meant to us and what they still mean. They may be remembered in a good way or in a bad way but they are not forgotten. [Interview with Grandmother Emma by Mary Durocher, 11/2/2010]

For Grandmother Emma, as for most of the participants, it is important not just to create the altars or ofrendas but also to use them to interact with those represented on the altar—to make a connection. She lit the candles and burned the incense. (The candles were in glass bowls to protect the flame from the wind.) She brought the traditional pan de muerte for the ofrenda and her relatives favorite foods—tamales and enchiladas. These objects were not just for display and representation of her loved ones but also for the viewers of the altar to eat and share with her relatives. For her, the interactions and relationships are as important as creating the altar.

The interactions and relationships at the site of the altar between objects, things, people, the divine, and the ancestors are all a part of an integral process of incorporation and identity formation. It is through the interactions of all components that people are able to negotiate a particular sense of self. I will discuss the interactions between people and the objects they chose to display on their altars and the objects interactions with each other in more detail in the next chapter.
Relational Approach

I have previously discussed the symbolic meanings and biographical aspects of the objects on the home altar to suggest a number of reasons why particular objects are chosen in the creation of the altars and how they are ritually used in daily life to negotiate *Mexicano* identity. Objects on the altars represent Catholic beliefs, personal devotions, cultural heritage drawn from cultural memories, and relationships with family and friends. The altars are sacred sites of personal devotion and symbolic representations of personal relationships. The most important aspect of this research however is on how interactions with these objects, singularly and as assemblages of meaning affect the identity of the individual. I am concerned with the types of interactions that take place between the objects and the person using or viewing the altar, the relationships people create with sacred beings through the objects on the altar, and the objects interactions with each other. In this chapter and the next one, I will take a relational approach to examine the effect of the “physical” nature of the object has on the person using them and on each other.

Gell describes a matrix of relationships that explores the domain in which “objects merge with people by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things” (Gell 1998:12). A basic understanding of the concept of objects acting as persons (or having agency) is necessary before it can be applied to the objects that are displayed on the home altars. Accordingly, I will first define the terms Gell uses—agent vs. patient and artist, index, prototype and recipient. The *agent*, whether person or object, has intentions and the ability to act—agency. The *patient* is a thing or person that is causally affected by the agent’s
actions—in this case the person or persons creating or using the altar. Each of the four entities that are in relations with each other—agent, index, prototype, recipient—can act as agents or patients at any given point in time depending on the circumstances or context. The categories are all relational. Generally, the index is the material object or thing that is produced by the artist to affect the recipient in some way. The artist is the maker of the index whether the object is created out of imagination, replication, or under the direction of the prototype or another agent. The prototype (of an index) is the concept or image represented by the index visually. The recipient is usually the person viewing or using the index and is the one acted upon although they can also be the agent (Gell 1998:12-27). Gell contends that there are various types of agent/patient relationships linking indexes, artists, prototypes and recipients since each entity can be either agent or patient. Each entity can be the cause and the effect at different moments.

Probably the most familiar of Gell’s scenarios in relationship to art is artist acting as agent and index as the patient—depicted by Gell in the formula Artist-A → Index-P (to be read as: artist as agent acts on index who is the patient/viewer/user of the index/object). This reflects the artists’ transformation of the materials into the index (object/painting/sculpture) by force of their agency, intentions, and creativity. This configuration is present in the production of many objects, but most especially in the creation of art such as Monet’s Water Lilies, Rodin’s The Thinker, or my grandson’s finger-painting project.

The configuration most important to this research is what Gell calls the “idol formula” in which the prototype causes “the index to assume a certain appearance, and exercises social agency vis-à-vis the recipient” (Gell 1998:40) as would an object representing a divinity.\(^36\) The formula for this scenario is Prototype-A → Recipient-P. An example would be the creation of a

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\(^36\) I use the terms idol, icon, statue, image, god, or God interchangeably and generically referring to divine personages whether they be God or gods, saints, or aspects of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The artist must incorporate the religious concepts of this Virgin and as such reproduce the index (object/statue/image) in a prescribed fashion in order for it to be recognized and be effective. The religious object, "the idol" in Gell's term, becomes "a locus for person-to-person encounters with divinities ... [and] obeys the social rules laid down for idols as co-present others (gods) in idol-form" (Gell 1998: 125, 128). The more accurate formulation would actually be Prototype-A → Index P. The concept, narrative of her apparition, and teachings of the Church dictate the appearance of the index or statue or image—the clothing she wears, the colors used, the roses at her feet, and the cherub holding up the cloak. Each of the objects in Figure 9.1 represents Our Lady of Guadalupe. While they are made of different materials, and each is slightly different, they are all recognizable as the one specific aspect of the Virgin Mary—Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Santos carver, Alfredo Rodriguez, described the many hours he spent researching the proper characteristics for each of the figures he carves. He said this process could be quite an effort for many of the less popular saints whose image and story are not well known. Several of
his carvings are depicted in Figure 9.2 with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the center.

Gell contends that the opposite configuration could be operating at the same time

**Recipient-A → Prototype-P:**

Thus an idol is simultaneously an index through which the god mediates his [its] agency over his devotees, who submit to him in the form of his image; but at the same time, the devotees actually have power over the god via his image, because it is they who have made, installed, and consecrated the idol, it is they who offer sacrifices and prayers etc., without which the god would hardly be so consequential. [Gell 1998:40]

In effect, the prototype is the agent because it dictates the appearance (and use) of the index/object while at the same time the recipient is acting as agent on the prototype because the prototype would cease to be meaningful without a recipient.

A complementary formulation is the artists’ effect on the recipient noted as **Artist-A → Recipient-P**. The artist as a social agent has the power to affect the recipient through his skill and creativity even though bound by the constraints of the prototype. A good example is the wide variety of depictions of the Crucified Jesus. Those that include the physical body of Jesus
range from an abstract representation to a detailed anatomical rendering complete with hair and seemingly bleeding wounds. Another example is the creativity expressed in some statues of the Virgin Mary. This statue of the *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre* in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba (Figure 9.3) is elaborately adorned in jewels, pearls, gold and fine fabrics. It is the intention of the artists to move and motivate the recipient to devotion.

**Recipient-A → Index-P** stands for the recipient or “spectator/viewer” as the agent that commissions or causes the index to be created, in the sense of patronage or market demand (Gell 1998:33). Since believers of the efficacy of statues of divine personages desire the objects, they also cause them to be created. Images and statues of Our Lady of Guadalupe as well other saints are produced because people want them in their homes. Actually, the image of this Virgin also appears on many items that are usually considered part of the secular realm, such as t-shirts, key...
chains, mugs, jewelry, “dashboard” statues for the car, etc. because of the popularity of her devotion and her importance as a Mexican national symbol. The “practical” objects on display in Figure 9.4 were for sale at a local flea market. Similar items were also available in a wide variety of retail establishments such as religious stores, gift shops, grocery stores, etc.

**Agency and Religious Icons**

The basic premise of Gell’s anthropological theory of art that is relevant to this research is that objects, in this case religious and biographical objects, are to be treated as persons as sources of, and targets for, social agency.” The religious icons and objects on the altar can be viewed as persons because they are “co-present being[s], endowed with awareness, intentions, and passion akin to our own” (Gell 1998:96). The icon is a physical representation of the prototype, usually in human form, whose likeness is mediated by the artist. This process can be written in the formula \([\text{Prototype}-A \rightarrow [\text{Artist}-A]] \rightarrow \text{Index-P}\) where the primary agent is the prototype or god and the secondary agent is the artist. Idols are not portraits but the visual form the god dictates for the idol. The agency in this case is religiously stipulated, “‘faithful’ rendition of the features of the accepted image of the body of the god, triggering ‘recognition’ of the god among his worshippers” (Gell 1998:99). There is a link retained between the icon (index) as a representation of the god (prototype) and the god itself making the icon a “(detached) part of the prototype.” (Gell 1998:104). Therefore, the icon is a “person” (prototype or god) that can be in an active relationship with the worshipper. Blessings or grace are received by the person as a result of interactions and through the power of the god’s agency in the world. The object/index/icon as the agent works on the person/patient to affect transformations or inspire devotion.
Seeing is Believing

According to David Morgan (2009, 2012), seeing is part of the “embodied experience of feeling” which is intrinsically part of all religious practices. Humans acquire information and order various forms of association through the “fellow feeling” or “sympathy” that is aroused while “seeing” shared sacred objects during rituals. A strong sense of community is established through these shared emotions. The formula Gell would use to describe the act of “seeing” is Index-A → Recipient-P which he terms the basic formula for “passive spectatorship” where the recipient or patient views the index and “submits to its power, appeal, or fascination” (Gell 1998:31). The agency of the index may be physical, spiritual, political, or aesthetic as in the physical representation of a particular icon and the spiritual meanings attached to it. In effect then, the “seeing” of a saint in prayer or service to God inspires piety, devotion, and identification. The very nature of the index provokes emotions and actions. Alfred Gell explains that seeing is a physical bridge between one being and another and between people and icons. Gell quotes art historian Stella Kramrisch as saying, “Seeing is a going forth of sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped. While the eye touches the object, the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated” (Gell 1998:117). Gell, in his study of Hindu icons, found that the “ocular exchange” between the icon and the devotee provides an orienting focus and is the key to the process of animation and connection (Gell 1998:118). This connection with the sacred object allows the viewer to also focus their attention and prayers in place and time.

This imagistic devotion is a visual act and it is accomplished by looking into the eyes of the image—union comes from eye contact. The eyes of the image, which gaze at the devotee, mirror the action of the devotee gazing at them. The eyes of the Virgin Mary (Figure 9.5) seem
to be real eyes gazing in understanding and acceptance at the viewer waiting for dialogue to begin. The image-as-mirror is doing what the devotee is doing, therefore, the image also looks and sees (Gell 1998:118). Seeing is not a passive collection of visual data, but an active focusing, touching with the eyes and therefore knowing. The relationship between the icon—the image of the god manifested in material form—and the devotee is social in the same sense that persons interacting with each other is social. The eyes of the image are therefore the nexus of engagement, the portal for entry into and communion with the internal being of the icon (Morgan 2005). Figure 9.6 contains a collection of icons from the participants’ altars or found in shops selling religious items. I provide these images to demonstrate the icons’ “readiness” to see the devotee in worship. Notice that most of the icons are looking directly at the devotee—seemingly waiting for interactions. The forward positioned eyes especially evident in the eyes of Jesus both as a baby and as an adult. Most of the saints also look the devotee straight in the eye or they are gazing upward to the heavens demonstrating a pose the devotee should imitate. The eyes of the Virgin Mary seem to vary depending on the aspect being represented. At times, she is looking directly at the devotee; at other times, she is gazing downwards—head bowed and eyes almost closed. (See also Figure 9.10) Our Lady of Guadalupe is always portrayed in this way (bottom right of image in
Figure 9.6 Icons’ Eyes “Seeing” the Devotee
Source: Author, 2009 & 2010
Figure 9.6). Father Marshall explained the importance of this pose in a workshop he gave on Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe where he explored the symbols in Our Lady’s image,

The Virgin, although clothed in the sun, is not a god herself. Her head is bent in a gesture of humility and she is at prayer. Depictions of gods and goddesses in the Aztec culture contained large eyes that looked directly ahead to show their power. Mary, with her head bowed and veiled eyes, showed she was neither a god nor goddess, that there was a higher power above her. The Blessed Virgin has bowed her head—completely humble and submissive to the will of God. [Father James Marshall 10/12/2010]

The image shows that the Virgin is not God but a servant of God. Her bowed eyes are a sign of respect and humility in His presence as she demonstrates to the devotee the proper way to approach Him. Communication with the eyes is important for humans and for icons.

In *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (2005), David Morgan uses the term “gaze” rather than “see.” Gaze is defined as an action more specific than seeing, "To fix the eyes in a steady intent look often with eagerness or studious attention (merriam-webster.com). Seeing therefore is not passive but is an active means of engagement with objects and images. Morgan has extended the definition to convey a perspective derived from a person's history, the history of the subject (object) of the gaze, the environment within which the seeing takes place, and the purpose of the seeing in what he refers to as the “sacred gaze” (Morgan 2005:3). A “sacred gaze" denotes any way of seeing that invests its object—an image, a person, a time, a place—with spiritual significance. According to Morgan, it "designates the visual field that relates seer, seen, the conventions of seeing, and the physical, ritual, and historical context of seeing" (Morgan 2005:4) He contends that looking at an image or icon puts the viewer in presence of what they want to see or venerate—in the presence of the holy. The act of focusing or gazing at the image forms a connection between the viewer and the physical object and the reality of the supernatural personage they feel is manifest in the object. The gaze draws the viewer into the reality of its representation—the object itself is connecting
the viewer with the personage it represents. The painting of Saint Thérèse by her sister Celine (Sr. Genevieve of the Holy Face) in Figure 9.7 contains images and symbols that the viewer can interpret as being within the realm of the sacred—the halo on her head, the presence of angels in the clouds, and the figure standing on the world all represent the heavenly. The clothes she wears identifies the figure as a member of the Carmelite Order and the roses further identify the figure as Saint Thérèse the Little Flower. In this way the object becomes someone recognized as a person with a particular story and has the power to affect reactions and actions in the viewer (Morgan 2005:259) somewhat in the same way as Gell’s theory of the index. For Morgan, the artist is the medium or intervening agent whose task is to both create and be astonished by the object as the viewer will be. Seeing is an “act of worship, an observation of awe, but also a constructive act that transforms the spiritual into the material” (Morgan 2005:20). There is, therefore, a triadic interaction between the celestial, the artistic agent, and the viewer that are carried out in the practices of everyday life and “indexed” in the object.

David Morgan claims that the act of seeing “relies on an apparatus of assumptions and
inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and culture practices” that evokes imagery within the imagination (Morgan 2005:3). Vision is not passive. Viewers enter into a relationship with the image in which they are expected to participate imaginatively; calling on their past experiences, assumptions, expectations, and beliefs to provide the information that the image itself only represents. The viewer “learns while he sees and what he learns influences what he sees” (E. Hall 1990:66). For instance, gazing at an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe elicits images from the narrative of her apparition, other images of the Virgin, and past experiences of prayer and ritual directed to her which combine to affect the present experience. There is a tacit agreement, a compact or a covenant, a link to dogma that a viewer observes when viewing an image “in order to be engaged by it, in order to believe what the image reveals or says or means or makes one feel—indeed, in order to believe there is something to believe, some legitimate claim to truth to be affirmed” (Morgan 2005:76). The viewer therefore acts on faith. Through the “sacred gaze,” the image draws the viewer into the spiritual world and causes them to act in particular ways. Anthropologist Michael Taussig writes, “To see (or to know) is to be sensuously filled with that which is perceived, yielding to it, mirroring it—and hence imitating it bodily (Taussig 1993:44). Seeing, gazing and contemplating, and praying are not the only forms of interaction with the icon and through it the prototype. As Taussig has claimed, viewers are compelled to also imitate the image and engage with it bodily as they would with a person.

Going back to Gell’s idea mentioned earlier that devotion is a visual act whereby the image acts as a “mirror”—the devotee looking into the eyes of the icon, while the icon looks at the devotee, and they each see the other looking at them—I want to mention briefly the use of actual mirrors on altars. Figure 9.8 contains three _Día de los Muertos ofrendas_ that incorporate mirrors. The _ofrenda_ in the top right was created by David Zamora Casas who told me, “mirrors
are the entrance in and out of the afterworld through which the ancestors return.” He said that is the reason he often includes them in his altars (bottom of center of ofrenda). The mirror also includes the image of the observer as part of the ofrenda as well as reflecting the image of the observer seeing or looking. Rebecca Empson (2007), in her work on chests kept in Mongolian homes that display kinship connections, discusses this dual nature of mirrors. She contends that the mirror at the center of a display of family photographs provides a view of “exemplary personhood” for the person standing in front of the chest (Empson 2007:132). She uses the term “exemplary” because the phenomena achieved in front of the mirror cannot be attained in “real”

Figure 9.8 Día de los Muertos Ofrendas with Mirrors
Source: Author 2008, 2009 & 2010
life. The person in front of the mirror can see themselves “pictured” along with their relatives whose photographs are displayed around the mirror placing the person firmly in their presence. The workings of this “reciprocal” mirror is clearly demonstrated in the ofrenda on the left. At first glance, it might seem that the people in the mirror are actually a large photograph that is part of the ofrenda itself. On closer inspection, the viewer notices that they are in the “image” and have become part of the ofrenda—they have been literally drawn into the assemblage and are actively participating in the ritual on several levels. I did not ask if participants “consciously” used mirrors on their home altars in this way; however, I did notice that many altars are placed on dressers that have mirrors. Franco Mondini-Ruiz said that he specifically created the ofrenda (bottom right of Figure 9.8) in front of a mirror for this reason. A similar effect of mirroring is also demonstrated in the ofrenda Margarita created in her shop’s window (See Figure 8.28 in Chapter 8).

**Bodily Engagement**

Seeing is not the only means of interaction. Promey writes that “in the embodied experience of human perception the activation of any one sense elicits others too” adding that the use of objects in religious practices is not just about physical seeing but “consistently choreographs expanded sensory and imaginative interrelationships as well (Promey 2011:184). Religious images are often touched or kissed to elicit the agency of the index to answer a pray or cure an illness. Prescribed prayers may be recited and offerings or sacrifices made. Particular indexes/icons are petitioned for specific requests including: illness—with specific saints for each illness, lost causes, success in business, protection, and salvation. The formula for icons that are petitioned to effect a particular cause should be extended to [Prototype-A] → Index-A → Recipient-P. The prototype directs the production of the index that then exerts agency over the
recipient. Using the example again of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the concept of the Virgin as a holy being and the “received” image of her physical being at the apparition dictates the appearance of the index that then works on the recipient. In this case, the artist is not the agent.

The bodily engagement with objects, images, and icons is what anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney refers to as “corpothetics”—a process of bodily empowerment through actions that transforms objects into powerful deities through the devotee’s gaze—“a sensory embrace of images” (Pinney 2004:22). From this perspective, the objects on the altar are agents or active participants in the actions that take place at the site of the altar. The postures of the icon inspire certain prescribed movement in the devotee. According to Ronald Grimes (1994), belief is meaningless without ritual practices that enact the beliefs. Like Victor and Edith Turner (1982), Grimes sees religion and ritual as performance. Therefore, rituals, such as actions at the site of the altar are “a choreography of actions, values, objects, experiences, places, persons, words, thoughts, memories, fantasies, hopes, and feelings” (Grimes 1994:90) that enact the inner person in their relationships with the divine.

There are various forms of bodily engagement with the icon whether the “actor” is the icon or the devotee. While the icon does not possess the physical ability of movement, it can act “invisibly” or as Erving Goffman (2001) would say “offstage.” The being the icon represents (prototype) can make the crops grow and the sun shine, it can answer prayers, etc. All of these “actions” have consequences that are visible in the world demonstrating the icon’s social agency (Gell 1998:129-135). The anthropomorphic aspects of the icon make it more accessible as a social being. However, certain aspects such as eyes, nose, and mouth also mark the icon as having an inner spiritual presence that can act on the devotee. I have already discussed the icon “seeing” the devotee. In addition, the icon as an animated social agent also has the capacity to

37 See more about “miracles” and answered prayers in Chapter 10.
“hear” prayers and petitions. This ability is an important aspect in the continued practice of such rituals. If the icon did not “hear” and respond to petitions, the devotee would no longer believe in the religious efficacy of the icon or for that matter of the god (Gell 1998:121).

The visual iconography of sacred icons can be “read” as human persons standing ready to receive and direct the devotee in their devotions through the conventionalization of their “body language” and symbolic attributes. (See Figure 9.6 above and 9.9 for other body stances.) Icons of Jesus Christ and many of the Virgin Mary have their arms spread to the supplicant offering the grace of God. They are gesturing to devotees in an open invitation to initiate contact. Other icons of the Blessed Mother Mary have eyes cast downward from heaven in a sympathetic anticipation of the devotees approach. The figures of Saint Thérèse, The Little Flower, (Figure 9.6, bottom center and Figure 9.7) has her head tilted in anticipation of the devotee’s request. Several of the icons maintain these poses—commonly seen in “human” communicative interactions. In the figure of Juan Diego (Figure 9.9 top row center), he is gazing down at the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe she left on his tilma reminding devotees of the story of the apparition ready to have the devotee come to him for aid. In other images he is gazing straight in the devotee’s eyes. Another “action” commonly depicted in the posture of icons is the bended knee (Figure 9.10). The icon is not static but is in a dynamic process of interaction with the devotee. The icon is not passive but actively going forth to greet the devotee—knee bent and hand extended—ready to establish a relationship and inspiring the devotee to do the same.

Some of the icons are even more “active.” San Martin de Caballero and St. Joan of Arc are portrayed riding a horse in defense of their faith. Saint Michael the Archangel is portrayed wielding a sword in the battle with evil. All of these bodily positions and “actions” are meant to
Figure 9.9 Physical Attribute and Postures of Icons
Source: Author, 2009 & 2010
inspire devotion and imitation by the devotee. For example, Jane Madrigal painted a portrait of Saint Michael the Archangel battling the devil (center left in Figure 9.9). Taped to the canvas is a prayer card of Saint Michael that she is using as a model, although as you can see, she is also using herself as a model for Saint Michael. The portrait was inspired by a dream she had where she had to literally become Saint Michael to defeat an evil in her life. More often imitation takes the form of prayer and devotion to the divine.

The icons may also be viewed as “active” in other ways. They may appear in prayer with folded hands. Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (in Figure 9.6 top left) or Mary portrays them with a lifelike, burning heart. The images point to their sacred heart, signaling a desire for intimate, truly “heart-to-heart” communion with the viewer (Turner 1998:170). The Udriales had an image of the Sacred Heart hanging in their living room that was a wedding gift from Erasmo’s mother. Judy said, “His mother told me when she gave me that picture that that particular pose of Christ where he has the two fingers pointing at his heart—*he is blessing the couple*. And that is why she gave us this picture when we got married.” (Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009 emphasis added) The icon is actively engaged in the process of granting grace and protection. The icon in Figure 9.9 top center is blessing the devotee with his right hand as he would have in life as a member of the clergy. Some icons display their empathy for the devotees by vivid
portrayals of their suffering on earth. Saints that are commonly petitioned for healing often portray the wounds of their diseases—San Roche, Saint Peregrine, and San Lazaro (pictured Figure 9.9 bottom right) exhibit the ravages of cancer or leprosy. Saint Lucy, prayed to for eye health, carries a plate on which rest her eyes that she lost in martyrdom. St. Agatha, another martyr and patron saint of breast cancer sufferers, carries her breasts on a plate. While icons of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, are usually shown surrounded by small animals especially birds, he is sometime seen bearing the Stigmata (wounds of the crucifixion) of Jesus Christ (Figure 9.9 bottom center—figure in brown). These attributes of the icons help the devotee see the icon as human—suffering, for their faith and willing to grant aid to the faithful. The most obvious example of empathy is the depictions of the suffering Jesus Christ on the cross (center Figure 9.9) who Catholics believe died for the sins of the world and offers salvation to all who believe in Him.

The artist produces the icons with prescribed features that make them recognizable to the devotees through the agency of the prototype. These physical characteristics or attributes identify the icon and at times “suggest” particular “actions” that can be performed in the daily lives of the devotees. The icon (index) affects the recipient by inspiring devotion with particular attributes and actions that often have predetermined consequences (such as praying to a particular saint for a particular ailment). Images of the Virgin Mary usually portray her standing on a globe of the world representing her status as Queen of Heaven and Earth. She is also often seen standing on a snake—crushing out evil in the world. Many of the saints are garbed in robes that represent the Holy Order to which they belonged or sometimes founded, suggesting the importance of devotion to God. San Lazaro, a poor leprous beggar, is portrayed clothed in rags barely covering the wounds of his illness and walking on crutches yet ready to offer aid to the suffering. Many of
the martyrs are shown with objects that are reminders of the narrative of their martyrdom. Saint Barbara is shown with the tower her father locked her in before executing her, and a sword depicting her fight for her faith (Figure 9.9 top right). Many others are shown holding a crucifix.

The objects that the icons hold, or are pictured with, are central to the interaction with the icon—both in terms of identification and in devotion. Examples of other objects that icons I found in this research display include:

- Book of Gospels—usually held by one of the Apostles. Serves as encouragement to read the Gospels as a form of devotion.
- Figure of the Baby Jesus—held by many icons, including the Blessed Mother, signifies the devotees’ membership in the Family of God and the Church.
- Keys—provide entry to the Kingdom of Heaven and the Church and are often held by Saint Peter and icons of popes who are also saints.
- Cross—Many of the saints, especially martyrs, hold crosses to demonstrate their faith as should the faithful.
- Tongues of Fire—represent the presence of the Holy Spirit. Saint Jude Thaddeaus is depicted with the flame of the Holy Spirit on his head and holding an icon of Jesus directs us not to doubt the salvation of the Lord Jesus.
- Lilies—a sign of purity often seen with the Blessed Mother or one of the martyrs, admonishing the devotee to keep a pure mind, body, and soul.
- Broom—San Martin de Porres, sometimes known as “Martin of Charity” or as “The Saint of the Broom holds a broom as a representation of his humility and the way he dedicated himself with love to even the most menial of tasks—an example the faithful should follow.
These are just a few examples of objects that icons (objects) use to affect the devotee (recipient/patient) in some way following Gell’s theory of object-person relationships. They serve to establish a dialogue and a model to follow in devotion. Interacting with these religious icons on the altars has been discussed in earlier chapters. Praying at the site of the altar, dressing the saints, bringing offerings, lighting candles, and touching, kissing, or embracing the icon are all active means of engagement. At this point I would like to highlight the significance of a few particular objects of devotion—those that are believed to have been “received” directly from the divine personage.

“Received” Images & Objects of Devotion

Certain images and objects are believed by Catholics to have been directly “received” from divinities, usually the Virgin Mary, to be used in devotions and prayers. For example, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego asking to have a church built in her honor in Mexico to welcome all of her children to worship. She left an image of herself imprinted on Juan Diego’s tilma—the only received image of Mary or the saints (see Figure 3.4 for a photograph of the original image). This would follow Gell’s theory of prototype as artist who produces the index or image which is then reproduced by human artists to affect the patient—using the equation

\[ \text{Prototype-A} \rightarrow [\text{Index-P}] \rightarrow \rightarrow \text{Artist-A} \rightarrow \text{Index-A} \rightarrow [\text{Recipient-P}] \].

In this scenario both the prototype (divinity) and the artist are acting as agents to affect the patient or viewer. These objects are gifts from the “Mother of Creation” to all her children and as gifts they retain a part of her “holy” person. As gifts, they also require a counter-gift or action on the part of the devotee to make the connection complete (Mauss 1967) usually in the form of prayer and devotion. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was perceived to be given primarily to the
people of Mexico and has become a symbol of their Catholic heritage. The other received objects were given to Catholics in general.

According to Catholic beliefs, the Virgin Mary also appeared as Our Lady of Fátima, also called Our Lady of the Rosary, to three village children for six consecutive months in 1917, with requests and prophecies to save the world from eminent danger. She did not leave an image or sacred object but beseeches her devotees to 1) sanctify their daily lives by reciting the Morning Offering; 2) pray the rosary daily; and 3) consecrate themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and wear the scapular. Both of these sacred objects, the rosary and the scapular will be explained below.

Jesus Christ appeared to Visionist nun Marguerite-Marie Alacoque for a period of eighteen months beginning on December 27, 1673 (Figure 9.11). In her visions, Christ informed her that she was His chosen instrument to spread devotion to His Sacred Heart. Jesus promised her that He would bless every place where an image of His heart is exposed and venerated (Catholic Online). Promey suggests that the spatial emphasis on “place” in Christ’s promise elicited practices of displaying images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (and the Immaculate Heart of Mary) in homes and in miniaturized objects such as holy cards, pocket shrines, medals, scapulars, badges, pins, and jewelry that could be carried for the personal bodily protection of relatives and friends and of those who served in the armed forces. Promey further claims that devotion to the Sacred Heart incorporated a long set of traditions relating hearts and homes, “where practitioners understood the sacred hearts to offer shelter and protection, to surround them as they took responsive refuge in divine love” (Promey 2011:190). Christ also instructed her to establish a prayer devotion that has become known as the Nine Fridays and the Holy Hour, and asked that the feast of the Sacred Heart be celebrated.
Promey contends that “Christian adherence to a theology of incarnation mobilizes the material world; here divinity assumes a material body [or tangible form], invisible trace is rendered in visible signs. . .take[ing] shape as divine investments in sensory communication” (Promey 2011:184). These tangible objects and images provide object that the believers can touch, interact with and carry with them. They are a testimony to others who believe in its power, a personal reminder of spiritual community and connection, and an assertion of anticipated sacred transformations already under way.

In 1214, the Blessed Mother is also said to have appeared to Saint Dominic (pictured with a rosary in Figure 9.12) in answer to his prayers for help in converting sinners and those who had strayed from the faith. She instructed him to preach the rosary against heresy and sin. In the 15th century Blessed Alanus de Rupe (Saint Alan of the Rock), who was a learned Dominican priest and theologian, is said to have received a vision from Jesus about the urgency of "reinstating" the rosary as a form of prayer. In 1571, when Moslem Turks were ravaging Eastern Europe, Pope Pius V asked all of the faithful to say the rosary and implore our Blessed Mother's prayers,
under the title Our Lady of Victory, that our Lord would grant victory to the Christians (Thurston & Shipman 1912).

According to Pope Paul VI in Apostolic Exhortation Marialis Cultus, 62, the rosary is essentially a contemplative prayer, which requires "tranquility of rhythm or even a mental lingering which encourages the faithful to meditate on the mysteries of the Lord's life." During the month of October 2010 Father James Marshall, associate pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, held a series of workshops on the history and importance of the rosary in daily Catholic devotion. According to Father Marshall, the rosary is primarily an object used to keep track of the reciting of repetitive prayers. It is an instrument used to focus the attention on the ritual of prayer and on the contemplation of the Divine. He said that using a system for counting prayers probably originated in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism as early as the year 900 B.C. Religious people would pray using small objects to help them count their prayers such as pebbles, sticks, and knotted cords to make sure that the proper number of prayers were recited. Eventually beads made out of coral, glass, amber, or different woods became the most common form. By the third century, the practice of using beads for praying had become common among Eastern Christian monks. As the practice spread to Western Europe, the beaded strings were referred to as “chaplets,” which comes from the French word for wreath or crown, since it was common for people to wear metal ornamental bands embellished with beads of stones on their heads.

Father Marshall explained that in the early Catholic Church it was common for believers, as a means of prayer and penance, to recite all 150 Psalms of David found in the Old Testament using a string of 150 beads. Between the 1000’s and 1400’s, when devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary was spreading rapidly in Europe, it became a popular practice for her devotees to recite the
psalms as a means of prayer and honor to her. A popular legend of the day told the story of a youth to whom Our Lady appeared while he was reciting Hail Mary’s. As each prayer left his lips she gathered it in her hand and it became a rosebud. According to the story, the Blessed Virgin made a crown out of these rose flowers and put it on her head. Because of this connection with Mary, the word “rosary” (which comes from the Latin word *rosarium* or rose garden or garland of roses) started coming into use to describe chaplets and their prayers. Originally, rosaries consisted of three parts of 50 beads each, plus a crucifix. The most widely used rosary for daily devotions today includes, a crucifix and five sets of 10 beads on which a Hail Mary is said. Each 10 bead section was called a decade, with each decade representing a sacred mystery. The Lord’s Prayers is said on the beads dividing the decades, along with the recitation of special meditations or thoughts or a quotations from the Scripture.\(^3\) Over time, praying the rosary daily has become an important Catholic devotion and has taken many forms.

Today the terms rosary and chaplet are used interchangeably, with chaplets more frequently used to refer to devotions that honor specific saints or causes. There are hundreds of “chaplets” in the Catholic tradition—innumerable configurations of beads. According to Father Marshall, all are intended to deepen our devotions. The variants of the chaplets or rosaries represent different sets of prayers said to honor a particular saint of representation of Mary or Jesus many of which were given to the people in apparitions. Besides the five decade rosary to the Blessed Virgin Mary, that is most common, there are also many other configurations devoted to her. During Father Marshall’s work shop a variety of rosaries and chaplets for special devotions, made by the women of the parish, were on display in the center of Figure 9.13. Surrounding the central image are close-up images of some of the various chaplets and rosaries on display.

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\(^{3}\) See APPENDIX D for prayers of the rosary and examples of various “chaplets.”
There are rosaries and chaplets of various lengths and prayer combinations devoted to the life and suffering of Jesus Christ (bottom left) and to particular saints or causes such as the Chaplet of Padre Pio (bottom center), Chaplet to Saint Michael (top center) and the 12 Step Chaplet (top left).
Another important daily religious practice is the wearing of a scapular. Our Lady of Mount Carmel appeared to Saint Simon Stock in 1251 in answer to his appeal for help for his oppressed order. She appeared to him with a scapular (from Latin, *scapula*, shoulder) in her hand and said:

*Take, beloved son this scapular of thy order as a badge of my confraternity and for thee and all Carmelites a special sign of grace; whoever dies in this garment, will not suffer everlasting fire. It is the sign of salvation, a safeguard in dangers, a pledge of peace and of the covenant.*

The tradition of wearing the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the protection it offers has spread.³⁹ (See figure 9.6 top right for image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel holding the Brown Scapular).

In 1830, Saint Catherine Labouré, a member of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, received a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception in which she was instructed to have a medal produced to honor the Virgin (Figure 9.14). On one side is the image of the Immaculate Conception and the prayer "*O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.*" The other side contains images of both the the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of Mary. There is also an emblem with an “M” transposed by a cross that signifies the Blessed Virgin at the foot of the Cross when Jesus was being crucified. Many Catholics, including

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³⁹ There are eighteen types of scapulas approved by the Catholic Church including The White Scapular of the Most Blessed Trinity, The Red Scapular of the Most Precious Blood, The Blue Scapular of the Immaculate Conception, The Black Scapular of Help of the Sick, and The Blue and Black Scapular of St. Michael the Archangel (Hilgers 1912).
myself, believe that if worn with faith and devotion the medal will bring grace through the intercession of Mary at the hour of death (Glass 1911).

**Interacting with Religious Objects Not on the Altars**

There are many types of objects that devotees utilize in their interactions with the icons for prayers or petitions for help in their daily lives including the rosary, scapular, and religious medals. Just as different saints or representation of the Virgin have different meanings to different devotees depending on personal preference and the relationships, miracles, needs, devotion, history and experience with the saint or Virgin; so do the means of communicating with them depending on the individual histories, and experiences. Some of the exchanges take place at the site of the altar while other locations of sacred object in the home and devotional activities may vary. While these objects may not be part of the active engagement with the altar, they do nonetheless trigger remembered physical attraction of the body—bowing the head in passing, making the sign of the cross, kissing the icon, etc.

Several of the participants had figures and images of the Crucified Jesus in various places in the home including the altar. Many had small crosses over each door to protect the occupants as they enter and leave but also to protect from evil entering. Mrs. Silva’s sister placed a prayer card of *San Ignacio de Loyola* over Mrs. Silva’s door to deter people with bad intentions from entering their home (Figure 9.15). Even though the prayer to *San Ignacio* is not said each

![Figure 9.15 Prayer to St. Ignatius Loyola](Source: Author, 2009)
time, it is part of the memory of the body to somehow acknowledge its presence. Images and icons, such as this prayer card, scattered around the home are generally meant to be interacted with in passing. I particularly like the glow-in-the dark icons (Figure 9.16) that can be seen when the lights are out. They extend the time for face-to-face interaction and provide protection in a spiritual and practical way—especially the nightlight in Figure 10.6 in Chapter 10.

Mrs. Silva had a large assortment of religious objects that she kept on her altars or in other areas of their home. Devotion to Padre Pío is particularly important to her. She had a framed mini-poster of Padre Pío (Figure 9.17). He is a favorite devotion for Mrs. Silva and she has many images of him throughout the house. The poster has been touched to Padre Pío’s relic making it a secondary relic and very powerful. Mrs. Silva also had several images of Padre Pío in her son Joe’s room. In one, he is giving a blessing—he placed it near the head of Jesus on the Cross. There is also a prayer pamphlet and a small statue of the saint on his bookcase (Figure 9.16). Joe showed me the scapular that he keeps in his wallet that he keeps in his wallet (Figure 9.18 at left). It was given to him when he was in the nursing home by a woman who has a lot of
faith in its powers. Mrs. Silva has other scapulars and many religious medals dedicated to various saints and aspect of Mary however, she wears the medal of Our Lady of Guadalupe every day (Figure 9.18 on the right).

Mrs. Silva also has several prayer cards and pamphlets. She showed me one titled “Pray with Saint Anthony.” (Figure 9.19) She explained that St. Anthony is very powerful,

They always pray to him for lost things. But he is for anything. I find him very helpful when there is something I can’t accomplish I pray to him. This [pamphlet] used to be my mom’s and I made copies—there are a lot of little prayers on it. I made copies for my family so they could each have one after my mother passed away. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

The Udriales family also has a strong faith in Saint Anthony. In fact, the practices of praying to him to find lost things is even common in non-Catholic Anglo cultures—“Tony, Tony, look around. Something’s lost and must be found.”

There are also small icons that are meant to

![Figure 9.17 Small poster from Padre Pio’s Shrine](image1)
Source: Author, 2009

![Figure 9.18 Joe Silva’s Brown Scapular (on left); Mrs. Silva’s Our Lady of Guadalupe Medal (on right)](image2)
Source: Author, 2009

![Figure 9.19 Prayer to St. Anthony Pamphlet](image3)
Source: Author, 2009
be portable—either carried with the person outside the home or displayed in automobiles. For example, Saint Peregrine is the patron saint of cancer patients. Small statues and medals can be purchased to leave by the sick bed or wear on the person (Figure 9.20) as a petition for help in dealing with the illness. Armando Udriales mentioned the common practice of burying a statue of Saint Joseph upside down in your yard if you are trying to sell your home. Armando actually has mixed feelings about using images and icons to petition God for aid. He explained, “I know that a lot of other religions say that we worship graven images, but we don’t feel that we are worthy to pray straight to God in most cases and we ask for them to intercede for us. We are not worshiping them in the way that you would worship God.” However, after saying this he then said, “If you are trying to sell your home you should bury Saint Joseph upside down in your yard.” In religious gift stores and botánicas you can actually buy a special statue for this purpose. I found this home selling kit at Casa Guajardo. (Figure 9.21) The kit comes with a small plastic statue and a prayer that
you say when you bury the Saint Joseph.

Another object ubiquitous in homes, on persons, and even in automobiles is the rosary. Most of the participants had rosaries on their altars, either displayed draped on the icons or positioned ready for daily prayer. As a part of daily devotion, rosaries are also carried in pockets, in purses, or worn on the body like jewelry. The rosary is not only available for prayer at any time it also marks the person as a believer. The rosary may take various forms when carried on the person, worn on the body as jewelry or displayed in public. Usually it is in the form of a single decade chaplet that can be worn as a bracelet or displayed on the rear view mirror of an automobile (although sometimes whole rosaries are displayed in automobiles as in Figure 9.22). These special rosaries are available at most locations where religious objects are sold. Other forms of the rosary, besides the beaded chaplets, include a small metal disk meant to be worn on the thumb which is often referred to as a “driving” or “pocket” rosary (see Figure 9.13 top right) and an image of a rosary embossed on a plastic sheet like a credit card that is meant to be carried in a purse or wallet. All of these rosaries can be used to display religious devotion and affiliation but can also be used inconspicuously when praying in public.

Assemblages—Objects in Dialogue with Objects

I have discussed the possibility of individual objects acting as persons in interaction with
living persons by nature of their power or agency to affect the person. The objects on the altar also act together as a group—an assemblage of objects of meaning—that through their relationships with each other affect the person as well. The objects assembled on the altar derive their meaning from contextual association that draws from collective memory (Connerton 2006:318) and religious symbolism. For instance, the religious icons acting as a group on the altars, in relation to each other, form a “communion of saints” a phrase taken from the received text of the Apostles’ Creed, "I believe in . . . the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints. . ." According to Catholic doctrine, the term “communion of saints” refers to the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head. The earthly and heavenly realms are therefore in a constant interchange through the objects interaction on the altar and "every pious and holy action done by one belongs and is profitable to all" (Sollier 1908). Even Carmen Ruiz’ altar the single statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in interaction with the other religious items still draws her into communion with the entire body.

In all cases the religious objects interact with the biographical, the familial, and the Mexicano to form a whole that affects the actions and mediate the identity of the person. The objects on the altar work together to communicate to the viewers and reinforce the connections they portray—between persons and the Divine; between persons and their relatives living and dead; and between the creators’ past and present life experiences. Interactions among the objects and between the objects and individuals strengthen those connections and aid in negotiating a sense of the person’s self.

The various objects in relation to each connect disparate aspects of a person’s life and even varying religious beliefs. The religious icons form connections with the photographs and
the biographical objects bring kin together and closer to the deities. The individual personages represented by the icons connect with each other in solidarity in their purpose to aid the devotee. Icons from various aspects of the devotee’s life interact to form a cohesive unit. For example, Ana Spector has two images on her “Buddhist Connection” altar that she feels directly connect and speak to her Jewish roots. There are statues of peasants on either side of Maitreya, the Laughing Buddha (The Buddha has a little smudge by his mouth where Ana offers incense to him.) One is holding a chicken and a rooster and the other is holding grapes (Figure 9.23). She explained their significance, “Grapes represent wine and life and this is food which is in the Bible. And here you have the grapes and they were able to produce wine. I see a connection between the grapes and the wine here and in the Jewish tradition and in the Catholic Church.” The rooster is also a symbol common to Santería and the Catholic religion. Even though the objects are on separate altars, they provide continuity from one aspect of her life to another.

Similarly, the objects on the ofrenda in Figure 9.24 connect various religious belief systems in their juxtaposition on the altar bringing them in to one view of the world. Against the backdrop of an ancient Aztec ritual stands Saint Thérèse the Little Flower and Saint Jude.
Between these two Catholic saints is an image of the Aztec sacred jaguar. On the lower half of the left panel is a small image of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception while on the lower half of the right panel is a photograph of folk healer Niño Fidencio. (I could not identify the image on the upper right panel however I believe it is another popular folk healer.) These icons all reflect the varied heritage of the person being honored with the ofrenda.

The last example of the dialogue of individual objects with each other speaks more directly to Mexicano heritage in relationship with Catholic religion. Chuck Ramirez mixes objects that reflect his Mexicano and Catholic background along with his art and his passion—cooking. Tucked in among the Mexican pottery and art work around the kitchen are religious images and remembrances of his grandmother. An image of Our Lady of Guadalupe hangs next to a santo in the kitchen (Figure 9.25 on the left). A small glittery statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe is tucked in with cups from Mexico (center). There is also a cobalt blue glass Virgin in the bathroom (right). I saw several of these glass Virgins in people’s homes—some made of clear glass that people often fill with colored water. They may have once contained holy water but nobody who had them seemed to remember what was originally in them as they had not
bought them new but had found them in thrift shops or flea markets. Chuck’s arrangement of object blends several aspects of his life into one large picture.

The effects of the arrangement of objects in the home to the lives of the occupants is discussed by Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* (2002:15-29). He claims that the arrangement of objects (he is discussing furniture) in the home offers a “faithful image” of the familial and social structure. Following Baudrillard, I contend that the placement of the altar and various other objects throughout the home also reflects these structures and serves to reinforce them. In discussing room and furniture in the home Baudrillard writes that each

> has a strictly defined role corresponding to one or another of the various functions of the family unit, and each ultimately refers to a view which conceives of the individual as a balanced assemblage of distinct faculties. The pieces of furniture confront one another, jostle one another, and implicate one another in a unity that is not so much spatial as moral in character. Within this private space each [object] internalizes its own particular function and takes on the symbolic dignity pertaining to it. [Baudrillard 2002:15]

Baudrillard could just as easily be referring to altars or religious objects displayed in the home or the individual objects themselves in relation to the whole. They each work together, through their interactions, to affect the character of the person in whose lives they are embedded. I think this
argument works equally well for Chuck Ramirez and Franco Mondini-Ruiz who do not have centrally located altars and those participants whose altars are the main focus of the home. Chuck and France do not have “traditional” altars displayed in the main area of the home in the same sense as the other participants. Their objects were scattered around the home; yet taken together form a broad picture similar to the individual altars of the others. Their entire homes are a showcase from their collective memory and life experiences that mediate their identity as Mexicano and Catholic, as are the homes of all the participants. The interaction and relationships between various assemblages and individual objects within the home has the same effect as the individual altars.

Conclusion

Gell’s theory of an anthropology of art is complicated; however, I believe that it explains how objects, particularly religious objects, through their agency can act as persons in their interactions with human persons and other objects. Gell delineates two types of agency—primary and secondary. In art, the artist is generally the primary agent. When dealing with religious objects it is more often the prototype or the index that is the primary agent with the power to dictate its appearance (Gell 1998:37). It is the agency or power to affect the patient or recipient that is all important. Of course, central to the theory is the index or object itself and the context in which it arises and is utilized both on the altar, in the home, and within the daily life of the person. I have focused here primarily on the “physical” nature of the objects displayed and how they foster action in persons, how the objects interact with persons, and how they interact with other objects in the context of the altar and the home in general. The next chapter focuses on particular objects used by the participants, their interactions, and some of the consequences.
CHAPTER 10

A DIALOGUE WITH OBJECTS

Personal & Public Interactions

Meaning is not found in the object or in the person alone but in the moment of interaction between the two (Pinney & Thomas 2001). The objects’ meanings do not exist outside of the moment in which people interact with them and assemble them into meaningful formations such as home altars. The objects on the altar act as containers of cultural values and memories. They are in essence “objectified forms of psychic energy” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981:173) that actively participate in relationships and interactions. The altars are not just mere displays where people select particular objects to reflect their religious beliefs and ideas of the self, but a stage for social engagement with the objects on the altars—with the representations of the divine, the photographs, and biographical objects of loved ones, and mementoes of their past.

Personal Relationships with Icons

The devotees’ relationship with the icons is personal—“they are known in the flesh” (Turner 1998:114) not only as embodiments of the sacred, but as bodies that require not only devotion, but also sustenance, attention, respect, affection, and care especially in Mexicano communities. There is a “careful etiquette in the relationship between people and sacred images, an etiquette that marks the devotee's understanding of the animated image as an agentive and powerful being capable of bestowing blessings” (Kendall et al 2010:72). Kay Turner suggests that the images are treated like family, a living presence that is touched and caressed—worn with use (Turner 1998). Believers use, handle, move, speak to, dress, and proudly display sacred icons as well as bring them offerings and gifts. This process occurs in the home and in the public
worship setting. David Morgan, in *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (1998), described such public interactions at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. I was surprised to discover his use of this example of visual piety as his observations and analysis matched mine (as did our photographs). He wrote:

> The patron saint extends his left foot from beneath his robes; this gesture has been interpreted by the faithful as initiating physical interaction, for the foot is worn smooth by kisses and stroking [Figure 10.1]. Near the sanctuary the Virgin of the Sacred Heart looks down on the viewer. She is painted with polychrome realism and gestures with one hand to the viewer and the other to her heart, the emblem of her compassion. Fresh flowers are placed daily at the base of the image; and array of candles burns before the image, and a prie-dieu invites the devout to kneel in prayer and commune with the benevolent Mother of God who intercedes on behalf of her faithful. [Morgan 1998:51]

Morgan’s description of the signs of devotees’ interactions with icons nicely summarizes my observations and the discussion so far. Icons’ imitation of human bodies and movement draws the devotee into person-to-person interactions—touching, kissing, kneeling, and praying. As Morgan observed in the Cathedral, people spend time in their devotions—lighting candles, reciting various prayers or the rosary, bringing flowers or small tokens of appreciation and thanksgiving. At the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe at the Oblate Missions, people follow Juan Diego’s example and bring the flowers to place at the Virgin’s feet as he did when he came down from the hill top as Mary requested. Evidence of this devotion is visible in Figure 10.2. There are also special niches at the shrine for candles.
People sometimes leave other tangible tokens of their devotion or representations of their prayers with icons on public display. For example, at San Fernando Cathedral people leave photographs and personal objects at the foot of a wooden replica of a famous crucifix in Guatemala, the *Milagroso Cristo Negro* or Miraculous Black Christ of Esquipulas (1595), which hangs in the narthex (Figure 10.3 at left). People express their devotion by leaving items including: photographs of babies, children, families, and military personal; hospital identification bracelets; and letters and handwritten notes in Spanish and English which represent tangible evidence of the person for whom the prayers are said (Morgan 1998:52). These objects represent what is often referred as the “partible” (Strathern 1988) or “distributed” (Gell 1998) person. In this exchange of leaving tokens of one’s’ self, following Mauss’ discussion of the *hau* of the gift)
a part of the person leaving the token remains attached to it serving to bind and maintain relationships. People also light votive candles and place flowers at the foot of the cross. After praying they would cross themselves, frequently touching either the photograph of their loved one or the feet of Christ before leaving. People also leave photographs on the image of Jesus Crucified at Casa Guadjarde (Figure 10.3 on the right) a botánica that sells religious objects and items used in healing rituals. When I was there, a woman was showing her friend a photograph she had placed there two years ago and told the story of how the child was cured of their illness. Devotees leave these tokens almost anywhere the Crucified Jesus is displayed in public and within reach, especially churches and shrines.
In private settings, devotees give icons objects to hold or make offerings and gifts. David Morgan suggests that if icons seem real to the devotee through religious beliefs, then the connection is made concretely real through physical interactions. He writes, “Interacting with sacred images—dressing, praying to, speaking with, and studying before them, changing their appearance in accord with seasonal display—is a common and important way of making them a part of daily life” (Morgan 1998:50). Carmen Ruiz draped her grandmother’s statue of the Immaculate Conception with a rosary that she made. David Zamora Casas’ statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was wearing a hat, a mask, and is playing a flute. In fact, David plays with the iconography of many of his icons mixing religious, indigenous and artistic representations to both honor the deity and his aesthetic eye. He has a cherub he painted pink and sprinkled with gold glitter. His concrete statue of the Virgin with the Child Jesus is adorned with Christmas lights instead of a crown or halo and the Baby Jesus is holding a toy Mickey Mouse. These may be “unconventional” adornments however; they are definite signs of interaction.

Mrs. Silva especially demonstrated a “personal” relationship with her icons. For instance, she draped her statue of San Martin with rosaries and a religious medal (Figure 10.4). She encircled her small statue of Juan Diego with a chaplet (beads for one decade of the rosary) dedicated to him. She also made clothes for various icons on her altars—a practice I found quite common. Saint Anthony however is her favorite. She prays to him to find lost things. Her icon of Saint Anthony (Figure 10.5) is very old and
shows signs of use. His head has been broken off several times and she continues to fix the statue rather than get a new one. Mrs. Silva pointed out the little red cloak she made to keep the Baby Jesus warm. She also had a crown and little gold shoes made for the Baby Jesus from one of her rings. It is very important to her that the statue of Saint Anthony retain its attributes no matter how old it may be. She has even repainted the book, rosary, and ropes of his habit; yet evidence of touching the statue during her devotions is still visible on the painted blanket of the Baby Jesus. Mrs. Silva cares for her icons and altars as she does for member of her family.

Franco Mondini-Ruiz interacts with his icons in a different way. He believes in the importance of making offerings to the images, especially roses to Our Lady of Guadalupe. He told me of feeling recalcitrant when he did not bring roses to the Virgin when they were blooming in his yard one winter. The habit of bringing Her flowers had been broken, and with it he felt the weakening of the connection. It is these repeated acts of devotion through physical objects that reinforces the bond with the supernatural. Franco also maintains an altar in honor of his friends Danny and Drew who have passed away. They were also instrumental in the resurgence of Mexican art in San Antonio. He said he was recently thinking about the bowls of water he keeps on the altar to refresh their spirits,
I always maintain the shrine when I pass by filling up the two bowls on the altar. As I do that I get a bowl for myself. It is almost like having *communion* with your friends. And I think about Danny and Drew they are getting their water and I am getting mine. It is as though they are looking out for me too. You see about three years ago I let myself get really sick and dehydrated and I almost died—I still don’t drink enough water. But now the daily ritual of passing by the altar is just a daily reminder to give myself the water and care I need too. [Interviews with Franco Mondini-Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 11/25/2009 & 9/13/2010 emphasis added]

Offerings to saints, Our Lady, or to the spirits of departed friends establishes a connection, a communion, between the living, the dead, and the divine, uniting the heavenly and the earthly. Grandmother Emma, one of the participants, told me that her mother would always put a little glass of water, fresh grass, and a little *cazuelita* with beans and rice, and tortillas out for *San Martin de Cabellero*. The beans, rice, and water were for him and the tortillas were for whoever he fed along the road. The mother of *santos* carver Alfredo Rodríguez, has a statue of *San Juan Miñero* who is prayed to for success in business and in love. When the devotee attains what they are praying for they will put something around his neck, usually a heart. Or they will pin a heart onto an image of him. This practice is similar to leaving *milagros* or *ex-votos* with the icon. *Milagros* literally translates as miracles. They are tiny tokens of the body or body parts usually made from some sort of metal such as tin, silver, or gold, that are left at churches and shrines or attached to icons and images. *Milagros* symbolically stand for the needs of the devotee and are left in supplication or in fulfillment of a promise they made to the figure.
(Castro 2001:158-159. These tokens are quite important in Mexicano devotion, although I did not see any on the home altars. One participant did have a few pinned to a wall surrounding a Sacred Heart of Mary nightlight (Figure 10.6) used for protection in a spiritual and practical sense. Ana Spector has a statue on her “Buddhist Connection” altar that has a removable hand. According to Ana, Chinese legend states that the devotee removes the hand of the icon when petitioning for help in finding love. When the petition is granted the devotee returns the hand. Alfredo Rodríguez told a similar story about statues of Saint Anthony that are made with a removable Baby Jesus. When you petition him for help you take the Baby away and give it back when the petition is granted.

In a different tradition, Ana Spector and Jane Madrigal make offerings to their santos and Orisha on their altars. Ana places a decorated basket holding offerings in the center of her Santería altar (Figure 10.7). She explained the purpose of the basket and some of the items she has placed there,

This is the offering plate and in the offering plate there are many things. You ask them [the santos or Orisha] and they tell you what you need to give. This is beautiful, beautiful. You put in things that they like, money, sweets and candy, rum, tobacco because they are African, cookies, whatever they ask for. [Interviews with Anna Spector by Mary Durocher, 11/14/2009 and 11/22/2009]

Ana puts perfume in the basket for the Virgen de Caridad del Cobre/Ochún because she is a lady and the apple is for Santa Barbara or Chango. The statue of Santa Barbara (Chango) is directly to the right of the basket. She is dressed in red and carries a sword. Ana said, “She is very, very strong and she had two sexes.” Chango is one of the most powerful Orishas in Santería. The offering basket also contains prayer cards dedicated to various Catholic saints that Ana likes. She is particularly devoted to San Lazaro or Babalu Aye as he is known in Santería (Figure 10.9). This is an important santo for Ana since He was a leper and is petitioned for aid in times of
sickness. She often performs *limpias*, cleansings or healings for those in need of help. There was also a small statue of him on the altar that Ana gave me as a gift so that I could appeal to him for strength, explaining that, “The love is shown here—the dog is licking his wounds. That gives you strength. He is the only one that came back from the dead. He is very strong—whoever is sick, even people that are Anglo, they can pray to him for strength.” As you can see in Figure 8.9 Ana has made *San Lazaro* a cape.

Jane Madrigal maintains an altar to her patron saints and *Orisha* spirits. She makes offerings to three apparitions of the Virgin Mary and their *Orisha* counterparts (See Figure 7.12 in Chapter 7). The *Virgen de Caridad del Cobre* was given an offering of five oranges covered
with honey and sprinkled with gold glitter, which is an offering for money. The *Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos* was offered finely milled flour which is a traditional offering to *Ochun*. Our Lady of Guadalupe is surrounded by red roses dusted the glitter. Jane keeps a glass of water on the altar as a traditional offering to the gods. She also keeps a pink spray bottle on the altar which is filled with rose water to fill the room with the scent of fresh roses for Our Lady of Guadalupe.
Jane Madrigal also has a special relationship with the spirits on her Muertos altar. The altar (Figure 10.8) contains pictures and remembrances of friends who have passed away and her ancestors. Scattered amongst the photographs are various offerings of earth elements—sea shells, feathers, and fire from the candles—along with a crucifix. There are also sugar skulls she has made and decorated for the departed. Nine glasses of water are arranged on the shelves to refresh the spirits when they visit her. Jane indicated that nine is a prescribed number. She also burns copal incense and sage to cleanse the area. Jane explained connection with the dead,

I am a medium and I have a super strong connection with the dead... I can go to them for help and they come to me for help... There are times I can feel the Muertos near me and they want to take care of business themselves. And so as a medium you let them come into your body and let them take care of business... So for me it is significant, my ability to connect with them and keep them happy and going. They do for me and I do for them... They protect me from danger in this life. [Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

Jane has one particular Muerto who has protected her often. She said “I have this one muerto who is a very tall African... and whenever there is danger I can feel him near me so I know something is going to happen. And since he is very tall, and as you can see I am not a tall person, but when he is around I feel very tall.” He empowers her to be able to handle the situation herself by making her tall and strong. She also said, “It is important to gather in memory of and pray the rosary for the dead. And that’s one of the things that I have done for dead people that show up at my door, I will pray a rosary for them. I know it’s Catholic but it is system to address the dead to help them see the light or to move on.” Jane burns incense for the Muertos and said that, “When my daughter was little (she is now 10) and I would burn the incense she would say: I can see the ancestors coming. And she would say that the children come first. Then the elders and last the adults. So that would mean that my sister was here.” Jane explained what praying to the saints and the ancestors means to her,
In Christianity, you pray to God and the idea of God is so great and vast—I can just imagine people praying to God and all these prayers go unanswered because it is just so much. But when you have a patron saint or you pray to your ancestors their responsibility is strictly to you. They are there because they’ve got your back—not the whole universe or the whole western civilization. But they are specifically for you. So that is why it is important to have your altars or have your candles lit, because it is about remaining connected to them and giving them light, giving them prayers and sending them energy and they in turn protect you and bring you good things and open doors and keep you out of danger. Like, I don’t have insurance; I just got my candles lit. I go on a pray and hope that everything is going to be all right. I don’t have a 401K or retirement or any kind of job security and I know that that is really important for some people and it would be nice but I don’t have it. So it is important in terms of being safe and being secure and understanding and having faith and believing……because that is another major issue that you need to believe and faith and not just light a candle and expect it to work. If you don’t have faith it won’t work—you create your own reality. So if you believe that lighting a candle to the Virgen will help you than that is your reality. . . It’s all you.

[Interview with Jane Madrigal by Mary Durocher, 11/18/2009]

Jane’s narrative demonstrates a very active and personal relationship with the spirits through objects. She petitions and directly receives aid from her Muertos for help in her own life but also to enable her to help others. Offerings and prayers are crucial to the interactions with the deities through the mediation of the icons. People pray to honor the deity, give thanks, and to ask for aid.

Candles on the altar are a very important part of the interactions with the icons, signaling the devotees’ presence at the altar. Any kind of candle can be used for this purpose; however, there are special votive candles that are used for particular intentions. These usually have an image of the icon printed on the front and a prayer to be recited when lighting the candle on the back. Several of the botánicas will also “prepare” the candle for the devotee by inserting a slip of paper with a name or intention and special herbs and oils that will help reinforce the prayer. This is not a practice sanctioned by the Catholic Church. It is however very common in Mexicano religious practices and in religions such as Santería. Ana Spector has a particularly powerful seven-day votive candle to the Las Siete Potencias Africanas (7 African Powers). This is a very
powerful devotion in Santería used primarily by lay practitioners. The chromolith label depicts the central Orishas and their corresponding santos (Figure 10.9). In the center of the label is pictured the crucified Jesus along with various objects associated with his passion and death. This depiction is called the Arma Christi, Arms of Christ or Instruments of the Passion (Clark 1999). Ana explained her understanding of the central figure, “Here is Jesus or Olofi [Jesus crucified] he is also represented by the rooster. The rooster is very important because he is the only one that speaks the truth. Remember when Jesus was being denied by Peter and Jesus told Peter ‘You will deny me before the cock crows twice.’ He is the one that deals with death and dying.” Surrounding the central image are seven medallions connected by a chain. They include: Santa Barbara/Chango at top center; to the left are La Virgen del Cobre/Ochun; La Virgen de Regla/Yemayá; and Our Lady of Mercy/Obatalá. To the right of center are pictured St. Francis of Assisi/Orula; St. John the Baptist/Ogum; and St. Anthony of Padua/Eleggua. Below the image, the chain interconnecting the medallions, hangs tiny tools including a sword, a battle-ax and a lance along with several types of hammers. These are the tools of Ogun who is the god of metal and the patron of Ironworkers in Santería. He is a powerful Orisha who is believed to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for his devotees. These tools mirror the tools found among the Arma Christi. The prayer that is recited when lighting the candle “asks for spiritual peace, material
prosperity and the removal of obstacles that cause misery” (Clark 1999).

**Miracles through Prayer**

One of the reasons people pray and interact with the icons is for aid in some crisis in their lives. While miracles, curings, and healings were not the focus of this research, a few of the participants related dramatic stories of how intercession through objects affected their lives in some way. As mentioned above, *Padre Pío* is very important to the Silva family. Mrs. Silva told me the story of her niece who had a tumor in her knee and went through an extensive eight-hour surgery with the possibility that they were going to amputate her leg. Mrs. Silva bought her niece an item of jewelry and sent it to Pennsylvania to be touched to *Padre Pío’s* relic and then she sent it to her niece. Her niece is now cancer-free and walking even though they did have to take a lot of the knee off. Mrs. Silva also credits *Padre Pío* with saving her son’s life. She said that when her son was ill she had a lot of Masses said for him from the *Padre Pío* mission and now “My son is a walking, talking miracle. He had a seizure about 10 years ago and they kept telling me that he was not going to live but I prayed to *Padre Pío* and he doesn’t have his short term memory but he is with us.” Mrs. Silva has such a strong belief in the powers of *Padre Pío* that she gave everyone in the family one of the glow-in-the-dark statues of *Padre Pío* for Christmas. She has also received images of *Padre Pío* as gifts from family and friends, which she displays in her bedroom. Her favorite is the one with *Padre Pío* holding the Baby Jesus. She told me that “When he heard confessions he used to have a little Baby Jesus in a manger next to him.”

Mrs. Silva also showed me a prayer card and relic for Father Michael J. McGivney (Figure 10.10). She told me that they are trying to make him a saint and of the miracle he performed on her behalf when she prayed to him to save her two nephews who were stabbed in a fight. She told this story,
Two of my nephews had gone to a night club and they got stabbed—a case of mistaken identity—so the younger one they stabbed him right in the kidney area and then the older one went to defend him and they stabbed him right here real deep. They were both in different hospitals. So I went to the hospital and they wouldn’t let us in but I did get to see the other one so I touched the relic of Father McGivney but I also prayed to Padre Pío and my sister-in-law told me that the next day she couldn’t believe it; all the swelling that he had right here in the kidney area was completely gone, all the bruising was gone, and I said well it was Father McGivney and Padre Pío. And the other one I did not get to until I week later but I still went in touched him to the relic. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

Mrs. Silva had several medals and prayer cards placed around the house, on statues, in dishes, or loose on the altars. She proudly shows me her mother’s medal that she wears now. On one side is the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and on the reverse is an image of The Sacred Heart of Jesus. (Figure 9.16 in Chapter 9). She also told the story of how another medal saved her life one day.

One time I was wearing a little medal of the Virgen de Guadalupe that had little rhinestones on it. I was working at a Ford dealership, I was 19 I had just graduated high school. And this man had stolen these people’s truck and had actually killed a couple. And he went to Catulla and wrote a lot of hot checks there. And then he sat there in my office, because I would do the book work there, and he kept telling me that he knew my father and I knew that wasn’t true because my father had been dead for many years, and he had a scar here. He was trying to buy a new vehicle and telling my boss that he was going to go and get the money. Anyway, I had this little medal with the rhinestones and the next day I had heard that that man had escaped from a prison in the area and he was heading to Mexico. I think she protected all of us because if he had wanted a car he could have just taken it from us. He had already killed two people. And they never caught him. [Interview with Mrs. Silva by Mary Durocher, 12/15/2009]

Mrs. Silva puts great faith in these medals of various sacred personages. She even gave me a medal of Padre Pío to safeguard my journey home.
Alfredo Rodríguez told an old family story of a healing miracle. When his grandfather was a boy he had a sore on his leg and he asked his older brother to go see Don Pedro Jaramillo, a curandero, from the Mexico-Texas region, who was in the valley at the time in Olmos Creek visiting. His brother came back with a feather and some holy water and told his brother that he had to pray and make the sign of the cross three times a day and eventually he would heal. His grandfather did as he was directed and the wound healed. Ever since that day he always had an image of Don Pedro on his altar. Zyana López tells the story of how Our Lady of Guadalupe saved her life in a serious car accident. Her aunt who was in the car with her at the time of the accident always carries a small image of the Virgen with her. Zyana’s uncle found the image in the wreckage of the car the next day. Zyana now also has a strong devotion to the Virgen saying, “I almost lost my life five years ago in an accident and so I pray to the Virgen de Guadalupe because it was a very scary thing for me” (Interview with López family by Mary Durocher, 11/21/2009). Even her uncle who is a Muslim, believes it was the Virgen of Guadalupe that saved them.

Ana Spector’s miracle is of a different nature. Ana showed me her statue of the Virgen de Regla (Figure 10.11), the patron saint of Havana Bay, who is Yemayá in Santería. This santo is very special to Ana as she credits her with delivering her from Cuba and she brought this statue with her. Ana explained what happened,

To get out of Cuba it is very hard—very difficult—there is only the sea or the sky. They had across from Havana a little chapel to the Virgen de Regla. So I crossed the bay in a little boat and I went to that chapel—there was nobody there just the Virgen de Regla, Yemayá, and me. And I say Mira, listen to me, if you are who they say that you are, you get me out of here. Got me out of
here now! And about two or three weeks later they gave me a piece of paper and said that I had 24 hours to leave Cuba. [Interviews with Anna Spector by Mary Durocher, 11/14/2009 and 11/22/2009]

These are all tales of the very real consequences of interactions with icons/objects/deities.

**Limpias**

Many of the people I spoke with also told me of traditional practices—*limpias* or cleansings—used for physical or spiritual healing that involved various everyday objects. The practitioner, usually a *curandero* but in some instances a lay person, has several methods at their disposal to effect a healing including: a little broom made of herbs (sage, rosemary, or other healing herbs) to “sweep” away the evil influence; herbal water, holy water, or alcohol sprinkled over the person in the form of a cross; an object such as an egg to draw out the evil; or their hands to sweep over the body pushing away the evil spirits. The intent is to expel the hostile forces and to impart spiritual strength (Castro 2000:139-140). Prayers are recited while these actions are being performed such as the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, or the *Las Doce Verdades del Mundo* (Prayer of the Twelve Truths of the World) a version of which appears below:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages, Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me one, one is the Holy House of Jerusalem where you live and reign forever. Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me two: two are the Tablets of Moses, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me three: three Trinities, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me four: four Gospels, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me five: five wounds,
Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me six: six candelabras, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me seven: seven words, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me eight: eight agonies, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me nine: nine months of Mary, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world brother well I want you to tell me ten: ten commandments, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me eleven: eleven thousand virgins, (repeat former truths). Amen.

Of the twelve truths of the world good brother I want you to tell me twelve: twelve apostles who accompanied our Lord on the cross, (repeat former truths). Amen. [Vazquez 2009]

The soothing effect of the actions of the healer—the sweeping and touching—and the soft chanting of the prayers produces an almost trance like state in the person which is comforting and reassuring (Trotter & Chavira 1997:82). Jane Madrigal and Ana Spector both told of performing limpias for people in need. Jane combines the actions with reciting the rosary and lighting candles for the person.

The López and Udriales families both spoke of healing practices, especially the “egg washing” which was mentioned by almost everyone I spoke with—even Anglos. Fransisca López explained that they take an egg and say a prayer over it and then pass it over the body and then break egg into a cup—the egg draws the sickness out. Judy Udriales explained how the practice works,

You get a clear glass of water and you take an egg and you would say the Apostles’ Creed. You would pass the egg over the body and you would break the egg in the water
and you look at it. Erasmo’s aunt and his mother and grandmother would tell me that if there were bubbles in it that meant that someone had given him the *mal de ojo* (evil eye). It wasn’t that they were wishing him bad, like with him [her son] he has just recently come out of his shell, but because he has green eyes and green eyes in our culture is unusual he would be very shy because people would always go up to him and whenever he would get sick they would say “you need to pass an egg over him.” What that meant was draw out the envy. They didn’t touch him but the envy would make him sick. And so you draw out the envy. Because the egg is drawing the envy out. (Interview with Udriales family by Mary Durocher, 12/1/2009)

Judy added another story of an egg washing experience: “Now I heard story of his brother, his brother is very handsome and his eyes are light, and I remember his aunt saying that at one time he had the evil eye so bad that when she broke the egg there were spots of blood on the egg.”

Erasmo added, “That is what they did to deal with illnesses because they didn’t have the money to go to a doctor. So you came up with home cures. They even have a t-shirt now that says ‘Everything is OK, my grandmother rubbed me with an egg’.”

The families recounted several other common practices performed by people in their homes using everyday objects. Fransisca said that when people die they put a glass of water under the casket so that the soul will have something to drink on their journey because you do not give them any water when they were dying. Her daughter, Lusela, remembered that the priest used to come and bless the house and the chickens and ducks on Saint Francis’ feast day. Erasmo told of another home remedy or cure, “I don’t know if you do this but it is sort of like when you put a little red thread, you wet a little red thread and you put it on baby’s head to stop them from getting hiccups. Or you can put a coin on there.” These are Mexican “folk” tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation and form part of the belief system of *Mexicanos* living in the United States. Erasmo commented that these practices, which use the saints and prayer to heal, are part of their heritage that the Catholic Church frowns on.
Public Engagement with Icons/Objects

Objects on the altars both set the stage for and motivate bodily engagement that affects relationships with people and with the Divine. The focus in this chapter has mainly been on interactions with icons as part of a Mexican Catholic belief system. David Morgan contends that, “Believers need visual signage to direct their behavior, to communicate with one another, to transmit values from one generation to the next, to conduct ritual with one another as well as to engage in commerce with the unseen” (Morgan 2000). These objects or signs are not only important to the individual person but to groups of people as well. So far, the discussion has been about interactions and relationships with objects in the relatively private setting of the home. Interacting with the icons in a group setting passes these traditions on to younger or new members and contributes to the establishment of community. Group celebrations are conducted in homes, in churches, and in other public venues. They can be large elaborate events or relatively small ones. Francisca López’ mother started a tradition of holding a family rosary and dinner in honor of Our Lady Queen of Heaven every year in August. Francisca said, “She makes a special soup, chile con carne, and she invites all of the neighbors.” Before she died, she asked one of her nieces to continue the tradition. The niece has held the celebration every year at Francisca’s father’s house.

Jane Madrigal holds an “Ellegua Party” every year on the Feast of Three Kings in honor of the Orisha she received in Santería. Since Ellegua is also the Santo Niño de Atocha, who is a child, she makes it a children’s party inviting both her and her children’s friends. Jane sets up a big altar with all her santos and various traditional food offerings (Figure 10.12). Everybody brings candies, fruits, and inexpensive gifts for a gift exchange amongst the children. There is feasting and games throughout the evening. When the children leave at the end of the evening
they are allowed to go to the altar and take what they want. Jane said, “It is so moving to see them embrace the altar like that.” She feels it is a good way to celebrate her beliefs and pass them on to her children.

**The Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

The Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe held every year on December 12th is an important event in the *Mexicano* community of San Antonio. It is celebrated in many parishes with twenty-four hours of activities beginning with a consecration and rosary to Our Lady. The parishes of Our Lady of Guadalupe in San Antonio and the nearby town of Helotes conduct a
joint celebration each year. Each parish holds their own celebrations but alternate the hosting of a dinner after the pilgrimage from the church at San Antonio or Helotes.

Displaying the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is particularly important on this day as the symbols within the image convey important messages to Her people. Along with the statues and images of Our Lady in the Church and on the vestments of the priest, many in the congregation also don images of Guadalupe. Periods of public and private prayer are interspersed with Mariachi groups and Matachina dancers. Activities throughout the day and night consist of prayers, rosaries, music, feasting, and bringing offerings of flowers to the Virgen. The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe’s appearance to Juan Diego is often enacted by children in the form of a play. The story is a simple one, though it is filled with powerful images and symbols. Most people can tell the story even quoting significant passages of Our Lady’s words or those of Juan Diego. This is a story they carry with them in their hearts. To them Our Lady of Guadalupe is present in their daily lives. She is there to guide them through life and to offer them hope, as she offered these things to their ancestors. Figure 10.13 is a photograph taken at a reenactment of the Guadalupe apparition story at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.
Local children represent the various characters. In the scene pictured here, Our Lady is in the background overlooking Juan Diego displaying the Miracle of the *Tilma* to Bishop Juan Zumárraga and his servant. Juan Diego opens his *tilma* and the roses he has gathered on the barren hill pour out and the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe appears.

**Dancing the Message of Hope and Joy**

The celebration of Our Lady’s Feast Day is a solemn yet joyous event. Through her apparition Our Lady of Guadalupe began a personal relationship with the indigenous and *mestizo* people of Mexico. She entered directly into the NahuaT world appearing with the dark skin of the people. She appeared to them in a way that they understood—clothed in symbols they recognized and embodying their identity. Jeannette Rodríguez claims that “Her image is a carrier of eschatological hope insofar as the people visit her, look upon her, and know that everything will be fine. . . she hears, affirms, heals, and enables them . . and challenges us to a more inclusive openness regarding the revelation of God and the complexity of being human” (Rodríguez & Fortier 2007:29). She initiated a divine-human dialogue with the encounter with Juan Diego, she serves as the foundation of Mexican Christianity—a blending of Christianity with indigenous symbols. These connections continue in peoples’ interaction with the narrative, the image she left on the *tilma*, images and objects that have been created to commemorate her appearance that are displayed in religious settings, in public, on the body, and in the private setting of home altars.

There are some key symbols in the “body” of the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe that relate particularly to the celebration of her Feast Day. Father Marshall explained the significance of the Blessed Mother’s bent knee and the position of the flowers near her hands that look almost like *maracas*—a traditional musical rhythm instrument played by traditional *matachines* dancers
Figure 10.14 Matachines dancers and Mariachi bands at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
Source: Author, 2009 & 2010
on her Our Lady’s Feast Day. When they hold the instrument, they hold it in the same way the *Virgen* is positioned, with their knee bent, while they shake the maracas and dance. According to Father Marshall, the Blessed Mother is shaking that instrument and dancing as well. He declares, “She is full of life. She is the first *matachina*. She is the *exempla*—the one that we look to teach us how to dance and rejoice and celebrate the Coming of the Holy Spirit” (Father James Marshall interview 2010). The *matachines* dancers are part of the Spanish/Indian religious traditional referred to as the *matachín* ritual complex that has remained largely intact over the years. The *matachín*, a term of Arabic origin meaning maskers, is a mock battle dance usually between good and evil with clear regional variations. The regional differences are reflected in the characters portrayed in the dances including the *abuelo* (grandfather), *toro* (bull), *la malinche* (an Indian maiden said to have played a role in the Spanish Conquest of Mexico; also a times refers to princess or harlot), and others. In addition, regional differences are seen in the dance paraphernalia, including objects carried by the dancers, such as the *palma* (palm), *flecha* (arrow), or *pluma* (feather). In much of Texas, the *matachín* costume reflects not only the resilience of the tradition, but the transformation the ritual has undergone over the years. The *naguilla*, an embroidered skirt worn by dancers, now incorporates glass beads, sequins, silk ribbons, colorful handkerchiefs, bells, and at times, flattened bottle caps as decorative items. *Guaraches*, or sandals that were originally worn in the dances, are frequently replaced with boots or tennis shoes (Mendoza & Torres 1994:67).

During the twenty-four hour celebration of the Feast Day of Our Lady at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, various mariachi bands play during the festival, usually for one half hour (see image in center of Figure 10.14), alternating with dance troupes that perform as *matachines* (Figure 10.15). Each of the dance troupes has their own costumes that combine symbols of the
Aztec people with symbols of Our Lady of Guadalupe and they dance under a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The group highlighted here was led by a drummer (image top right) Notice the picture at the right, bottom row—the dancers are positioned just as Father Marshall described. Their knees are bent and they are dancing with joy and in celebration. The masked performer, in the image at top left, represents evil. He is a tempter and tricks people into doing wrong. Part of the dance is for the dancers, representing the people, to capture and disable the tempter so that people can live righteous lives. In the small image at left center the tempter is depicted as an old man by a different dance troupe of matachines dancers. Most of the dancers have Our Lady of Guadalupe’s image on the back of their costume (Figure 10.15).

![Figure 10.15 Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Matachines Dancers](image)

An Aztec group also participated at the Feast Day (Figure 10.16). Attired in traditional ceremonial garb they blessed the area with copal incense, sage, and prayers (top left of image) before beginning the dance (bottom right). After dancing, they sang indigenous songs for three hours as part of the midnight vigil.
Figure 10.16 Traditional Aztec dancers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church
Source: Author, 2009 & 2010
The celebrations also included a pilgrimage from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Antonio to the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Helotes, Texas—a distance of about 30 miles. People walked down the streets behind the banner of Our Lady (Figure 10.17 at center) singing songs and saying the rosary. When they arrived there was a short service and a dinner. Each year the churches take turns hosting the pilgrimage and dinner. Foods traditional served at holidays were available at all times in the community center, including *tamales*, *menudo* (tripe soup) and *champurrados*, Mexican hot chocolate beverage made with *masa* (corn hominy).

People in the audience also participated in the celebration in various ways, which included recitation of the rosary in Spanish and English at points throughout the day. In Figure 10.17, at bottom right a woman has joined the *matachines* dancers and paused to genuflect before the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a sign of reverence. People brought flowers as offerings to place on the altar, mostly roses. Pictured in the center at left is a silk rose with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe imprinted on it that was placed in the midst of fresh red roses. Children posed for pictures at the altar as they came up with their flowers. The ones pictured above were performers in the dances but other children also had their pictures taken, many dressed in traditional or holiday attire in honor of the day. One woman I saw brought her statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe from home to participate in the community-wide celebration. I asked her if she had come to have her statue blessed by the priest but she said that she had just wanted to bring her to the celebration.

The image at the top of Figure 10.17 shows several people bringing flowers to the altar. By the end of the twenty-four hour period the entire altar area was filled with vases of flowers. The man in the foreground of the image did not bring flowers; however, as he slowly approached the altar he began to sing the *Ave Maria* which was his offering to the Virgin. A
Figure 10.17 Participants from the audience at Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day celebration
Source: Author, 2009 & 2010
phenomenon I did not photograph was people approaching the altar on their knees—sometimes starting at the street, proceeding up the steps and down the length of the aisle before reaching the stairs before the altar where they knelt in prayer. I was told that this was a common practice for many of the faithful. Jorge Garza, one of the participants, told the story of how his mother prayed to the Virgin of Guadalupe at home and at church:

She had, and it is still there, a kneeler, I don’t know where she picked it up. In her bedroom there was this area dedicated specifically to the Virgen de Guadalupe. So she would pray to the Virgen everyday while kneeling there. What was really neat was that she would have her daily prayer right before noon—she would start it in the kitchen on her knees and she would go on her knees through the house praying the rosary until she got to the bedroom. And when she got to the bedroom where her kneeler was she would then get onto the kneeler and finish her prayers there. And when we would go to church, not for Mass, she would do the same thing. She would begin at the entrance of the church and she would go on her knees all the way to the communion rail. And we would wait for her at the front of the church and of course we were supposed to be praying but we were waiting for her. [Jorge Garza interview by Mary Durocher 2009]

All of these movements or “stances” of the body are what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) referred to as bodily *habitus*: genuflecting at the altar, making the sign of the cross, fingering the beads during the rosary, bowing the head in prayer that are almost un-conscious but serve to make up the “social forces” and “social structures” that guide their life. Even I was moved to make the remembered movements, even though I have not participated in religious services recently and had never participated in the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The movements and their meaning return—part of my cultural memories of my Polish Catholic upbringing and devotion to the Virgin Mary. Even as I recall the events of the day and record them here, I feel a sense of the reverence that encompassed the church that day. I can even smell the roses and the copal burning—which triggered the urge to light a votive candle I had brought back. Even though these were *Mexicano* images, symbols, and words, they nonetheless spoke to me in ways that I understood and reacted to emotionally linking me with my own particular ethnic identity. It
must be much more powerful for people who practice these movement and rituals regularly.

**Conclusion**

The objects on the altar are agents or active participants in the actions that take place at the site of the altar and therefore are interacting with the person. They both inspire and participate in the devotional rituals of the person. Ritual is performance, action, and practice of designated rites that transmit meaning and form part of the *habitus* of the person. Rituals are actions or activities that are repeatable, regular, and recognizable in a given cultural context. By performing a ritual such as devotion at the home altar, participants indicate to themselves and to others that they are part of a community of believers—that they accept the ritual and the beliefs that it is based on as opposed to other existing belief systems. No other form of communication works in this way. By taking part in a ritual, the participants tell themselves and others that they are willing to publicly accept the conventions established by the ritual. Acceptance, in turn, brings with it the obligations to follow the mandate of the belief system (Rappaport 1999:193-194). The social order is not based on "invisible, ambiguous and private" sentiments alone; it depends on the "visible, explicit, and public" actions of a person. "Action is socially and morally binding" (Rappaport 1999:195). Ritual performance reinforces a part of the social order.

Catherine Bell (1995) uses the term ‘ritualization’ to focus on how certain ritual actions or behaviors are strategically different from other actions or behaviors saying that, “ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other more quotidian, activities” (Bell 1995:74). Ritualization is a culturally specific strategy or tactic (following de Certeau) that sets apart the “sacred” from the “profane” (Durkheim 2001) and designates certain things as transcending the power of human
actors. The term "ritualization" used to describe ritual in this way defines it as a culturally strategic way of acting. These actions and interactions form social relationships that are carried out within a particular social field that the person has the agency to manipulate. By choosing particular objects and interacting with them in particular ways, whether prescribed or personal, the individual reinforces both Catholic and *Mexicano* identity.
CHAPTER 11

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF SAN ANTONIO

The focus of the previous chapters constituted a micro-level analysis of participants’ home altars, the objects on the altars, and personal sacred spaces that was the primary focus of this research. While conducting the interviews and during casual discussions with people, however, it became apparent that the display and use of Mexicano and religious material culture is not limited to the home or even to particular places such as churches or community organizations but extends to include the entire environment. Objects that symbolize the Mexicano and religious heritage of the people of the area are scattered throughout the community and serve to sustain and reinforce the cultural memory and ideas of Mexicano heritage. I came to realize that the participants exist in a larger “cultural” environment in which they interact with a wide variety of people but also images and objects that affect their sense of self. Each of the people I spoke with insisted I visit their favorite places—to see the churches where they worshipped, which shrines they liked, which shops and art galleries they preferred, and even which murals they liked most in the neighborhood. Therefore, this chapter examines the macro-level environment or the wider “cultural landscape” in which the private sacred spaces of the home altars are embedded.

According to anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1990) who developed the concept of “proxemics,” a description of how people behave and react in different types of culturally defined personal spaces, people actively create both public and private space and the space that in turn molds the individual. Archaeologist Martin Hall includes the objects within the public space when he describes the urban landscape as recursive. “It is shaped by expressions of identity and, in turn, shapes the formation of identity” (Hall 2006:204). Hall adds that the
cultural landscapes are “palimpsests in which buildings, street layouts and monumental structures are interpreted and reinterpreted as changing expressions of relations of power” (Hall 2006:189). The landscape is contested, actively worked and re-worked in relation to “differing social and political agendas, forms of social memory, and biographically become sensuously embodied in a multitude of ways” (Tilley 2006b:7). As such they are always in process, rather than static.

Space, place, and landscape are terms that are often used interchangeably even though they have distinct meanings. Place is the more generic of the terms, while space denotes a place and the events and activities that occur within it. Landscape is defined as “series of named locales, a set of relational places, linked by paths, movements and narratives” (Tilley 1994:44). Naming places transforms the “physical and geographical” into something that is “historical and socially experienced” and brings the place into the “social discourse” (Tilley 1994:18). In the literature there are many kinds of “peopled” landscapes: a country house landscape, a plantation landscape, a historical landscape, settlement landscapes, landscapes of migration and exile, etc. (Bender 2002b:103). The specific term “cultural landscape” was first introduced by German human geographer Carl Sauer (1963) to refer to the built environment—the interaction between human activity and creativity and the natural landscape (see also Lawrence & Low 1990; Low 1996a, 1996b). Sauer stressed the agency of people and their particular cultural heritage in shaping the built environment. His classic definition of cultural landscape reads, “The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result." While a formal theory of “culture and space” does not exist; other scholars use terms such as Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) “ethnoscape” and Michael Kearney’s (1995, Kearney & Bessera 2004) “transnational space” to
refer to the effect of distinct ethnic cultures on local communities in a global environment through day-to-day interactions and face-to-face relations that produce and reproduce particular beliefs and practices. Through networks of kinship, friendship, work, and place, stable communities are developed within a transnational context. This process also fits within Anzaldúa’s (1999) discussions of the borderlands or la frontera—a place between borders and nations where people continuously negotiate a sense of identity.

According to Amos Rapoport (1990) who focuses on how culture, human behavior, and the environment interact, it is people who create landscapes through human action and the choices they make in following a particular system of rules that refer to lifestyles, values and norms, and worldviews to recreate what they see as an “ideal” environment—one that reflects their cultural memories and heritage. This process takes an actor-centered theoretical approach to practices in everyday life as proposed by Bourdieu (1976) and others. In this model, the focus is on any type of “practice” that is transmitted culturally (i.e. learned or taught to other individuals as members of a common social group) and make up part of the habitual behavior of the community. The systematic choices that are made as to what to include in the present day environment and what to preserve from the past is what leads to particular styles of ethnic influences on material culture within the community (Rapoport 1990:37). Cultural landscapes consisting of a variety of natural features as well as built or constructed elements that incorporate the values of the group and serve as cues that remind people of the cultural heritage resulting in the repetition of particular patterns of behavior. Heritage anthropologist Barbara Bender suggests that as we look at the cultural landscape we “consider how we move around, how we attach meaning to places, entwining them with memories, histories and stories, creating a sense of belonging . . . We have seen that landscapes are experimental and porous, nested and open ended.
Bender adds that the experience of the landscape is “... a sort of ‘stocktaking’ at points along the way, but it might be more accurate to think in terms of ‘ambulatory encounters.’ As people go about their business things unfold along the way, come in and out of focus, change shape and take on new meanings” (Bender 2006:306).

It is the interaction within the cultural landscape in the daily lives of people in San Antonio that is important in this research. Visiting or even passing by The Alamo or El Mercado (The Market Square) evokes narratives of the past to which people belong. The Mission, San Fernando Cathedral, local Churches and shrines remind people of the long history of the Catholic Church in San Antonio. Murals and artwork on public spaces throughout the city attest to the continued meaningfulness of these symbols in the daily lives of people. Each of these public displays reflects a particular aspect of what it means to be Mexicano in an Anglo dominated setting. Establishing connections with a cultural landscape therefore helps negotiate a sense of cultural and ethnic identity as it makes people “feel they belong to one place, one region” (Leader-Elliott, et al 2004). The cultural landscape serves as a reminder of the social and personal memories and histories that are woven around the objects in the community both in official and oral histories and traditions. According to Thomas Bremer who studies religion and its effects on tourism in San Antonio, “The making of place always involves the making of identities, and, conversely, the construction of identity always involves the construction of place. Thus place and identity emerge together in a relationship of reciprocal meaningfulness” (Bremer 2004:4-5). People therefore derive meaning from their surroundings and people contribute to the making and maintenance of their surroundings both in the past and in the present.

The cultural landscape is not however a static environment. The objects that were and are constructed by the community to establish this particular cultural landscape are in constant
flux—with things being added or taken away. Certain sites become more popular and others lose favor. What is most important to this research is the interactions that take place within this environment. These interactions include those between the objects themselves which together make a whole landscape in which people interact and between the people and the objects. This is not a static environment. People “use” the objects in the environment not only to remind them of their heritage but to actively maintain or re-produce their sense of belonging to a particular group by their engagement with these sites. For instance, people still choose to shop at El Mercado and they regularly worship at the churches, missions, shrines, and other religious sites—attending services, praying, lighting candles, bringing flowers, and other offerings. The murals within the business districts and in the neighborhoods are not only created and maintained by the people themselves but are part of their conversations. The murals are discussed, commented on, rated, and admired both for their message and for their beauty. People often touch the image as they walk by or make the sign of the cross while saying a brief prayer. I have even seen flowers and candles brought to the site of the murals. These objects within the “cultural landscape” are all sites of active engagement in a variety of ways.

**Historical Landmarks**

The history of the city of San Antonio played a key role in shaping the landscape of the Southwest and the shifting constructions of ethnic identities (de la Teja 1995; Fehrenbach 1978, 2000). Influence from the time of Spanish and Mexican occupation and dominance of the area, as well as indigenous influences, remain as a reminder of past events and cultural heritage. Old Spanish building and walls remain beside modern buildings. There is still evidence of ethnic enclaves: descendents of the Canary Islanders, indigenous peoples of both North American and
Mexican descent, Germans, and other European groups, in the midst of the Anglo communities. It is the displays of material cultural heritage that give San Antonio an environment rich in historic meaning and make it the “premier ethnic capital” for the *Mexicanos* in the United States (Arreola 1995:519).

Two of the most prominent historic sites are The Alamo and The Missions—both of which were established shortly after the arrival of the Spanish. Beginning in 1718, Franciscan missionaries and Spanish representatives established five missions along the San Antonio River. The first mission built and probably the most well known was *Misión San Antonio de Valero*, more commonly referred to as The Alamo. The Battle of the Alamo was fought on March 6, 1836—over 100 years after the mission was built. The site of The Alamo (Figure 11.1) has been a source of historic pride and a major tourist attraction since its restoration by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas in the early 1900s. People told me that you cannot claim to have visited

![Figure 11.1 The Alamo—Misión San Antonio de Valero](source: Public domain)
San Antonio unless you have visited the Alamo and The Missions.

The four other missions are *San José y San Miguel de Aguayo, Nuestra Señora de la Purisima Concepción, San Juan Capistrano, and San Francisco de la Espada* (Figure 11.3). In 1793, the five missions were secularized by Spanish officials and the mission lands were distributed to the remaining Indian residents. The mission Indians continued to work the fields and slowly began to participate in the growing community of San Antonio. San Juan Capistrano is still an active parish. The missions are maintained as part of the National Park Service and are frequented by tourists and used for local celebrations, festivals, and art fairs. A young girl is performing a tradition Mexican dance at an art fair (Figure 11.2 on left). People often have their wedding and *Quinceañera* (celebration of a girl’s fifteenth birthday) photographs taken on the grounds and in the chapel as their mothers had before them (Figure 11.2 on right).
Figure 11.3 Missions at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park
Source: San Antonio Missions http://www.nps.gov/saan/photosmultimedia/photogallery.htm
San Fernando de Béxar Church was founded in 1731 and is the oldest, continuously functioning religious community in the State of Texas (Figure 11.4). The present building was built in 1738 at the geographic center of town and served as the center of the Spanish community. In 1874 Pope Pius IX designated San Antonio as a diocese and San Fernando Church as its cathedral. It is still an active parish today and is also visited by tourists and pilgrims. The plaza in front of the church has recently been renovated and is used for community gatherings. The interior of the church (Figure 11.5) reflects Spanish influence in the ornate carved retablos of the saints behind the original altar and the Baptismal font at the entrance to the church, Mexican influence with Our Lady of Guadalupe, and its historical presence with the tomb for the heroes of the Alamo. Historical monuments of this sort reflect the long-standing
presence of *Mexicanos* in the area and their role in the history of the city.

**Religious Landscape of San Antonio**

Morgan (2000) writes that religion depends on visual symbols and signs to reach the community of believers. These signs are necessary to “direct their behavior, to communicate with one another, to transmit values from one generation to the next, to conduct ritual with one another as well as to engage in commerce with the unseen” (Morgan 2000) Visual religious symbols embedded in the cultural landscape of the community serve to remind people of their beliefs and to demonstrate their presence to others.

After the secularization of the missions the chapels remained as a symbol of the religious community and continued to serve their former communities. San Fernando Cathedral served the Spanish and later the original Mexican descendents. As the population of San Antonio grew new parishes were formed and new churches built. One of these new churches was Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish which was founded in 1911. Figure 4.2 and 4.3 in Chapter 4 depict the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe that is held by the people of the parish. There are also new stained glass windows along each side of the church (examples of six windows in Figure 11.6) that were designed to exemplify, in abstract and interpretive designs, the traditional European symbols of the Church with motifs from the indigenous Mexican art, architecture and color preferences. The people of the parish are very proud of the stained glass windows and several of them took the time to show me each window and to tell me the story of the image as they understood it. The church produces a *Visitor’s Guide for the Stained Glass Windows* that provides the meaning of the symbols in the stained glass. These six images in particular represent the blending of Catholic and indigenous symbols and mythology. Following the images is a brief
The medallion top row on the left represents the Castilian roses that grew miraculously on Tepeyac Hill where Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego in 1531. The cactus and keywork represent the native Mexican soil and culture on which this miracle appeared.

In the image top row center, the Cross forms the background upon which is superimposed the Mexican *quetzal* or plumed bird symbolic of the divinity and part of the Aztec legend that foretells the arrival of *QuetzalCoatl*, the God-man. So, although the people of Mexico mistook Cortez to be that God-man, they were led to the truth of faith in Jesus Christ who died on the Cross for the salvation of all people.

In the bright white, green and red of the Mexican flag, in the image top row right, the butterfly represents the rising from defeat, the resurrection of a people with and in Christ. It hovers over the two snow-capped volcanoes, *Popocatepetl* and *Ixtacihuatl*, between which can be detected a rising sun.

The abstract figure in the bottom row on the left is that of *Huitzilopochtli*, the Aztec god of war soaring over a sand dune from which sprout palm branches. This recalls Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday prefiguring his conquest and glorification won only through the apparent defeat of his Passion and Death.

In the image in the center of the bottom row, the *Ojo* or all-seeing Eye of God at the top of a triangle representing the Blessed Trinity sees the suffering of the native peoples of the Americas in the European conquest and destruction, the potential for rebirth in the bird (phoenix) representing new life. This new life is brought by the Good News of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel.
- The last image, bottom row right, represents another style of phoenix, a symbol of resurrection, and also representing the struggle of Cesar Chavez, Mexican American labor leader, and the hope of new life among farm workers. The flames represent the presence of the Holy Spirit as well as the aspirations of Mexican Americans in Aztlan. [Visitor’s Guide for the Stained Glass Windows]

Stained glass windows adorn many churches throughout San Antonio and those I have described are just a representative sample from the church where I focused my research. However, one image at the Church of San Juan de los Lagos is particularly important to the community. This stained glass window (Figure 11.7) was commissioned to commemorate the journey of the statue of the Pilgrim Virgin, La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos, from the shrine at Jalisco, Mexico. This event marked the first time the statue had made the pilgrimage in the history of Texas. The city of San Juan de los Lagos is the second most visited pilgrimage site in Mexico, after the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.
A Rose Window (Figure 11.8) located on the south wall of Mission San José church. The window is quite a local attraction because of its mysterious name. Rose windows are usually round and made of stained glass. It is believed that the window actually was named after Rosa, the fiancée of sculptor Juan Huizar who sculpted it in 1775.

**Public Shrines and Grottoes**

Public sacred spaces such as shrines and grottoes are also very important in the *Mexicano* community of San Antonio. One participant told me that she goes to church on Sundays as part of her religious obligation and she uses her home altar to pray for everyday things, but when she is faced with a particularly difficult problem she often visits one of the public shrines dedicated to the figure she feels will be most helpful to the situation. One of the most well known of these shrines is St. Thérèse of the Little Flower National Shrine and Basilica. According to a church pamphlet, The National Shrine of the Little Flower is the first National Shrine dedicated to Saint Thérèse. Architecturally, it is said to be one of the grandest buildings in San Antonio. Historically, it highlights the missionary work of the Discalced Carmelite Friars and the faith development of the West Side of San Antonio. The church was founded by Spanish friars who came to San Antonio from Torreon, Mexico in 1926. The church and shrine were intentionally built in an undeveloped area of San Antonio which had long been home to first generation immigrants from Mexico. Along with wanting to carry out their mission of fostering the evangelization of the Christian body, the Fathers also wanted to enrich the lives of the community by giving them a “royal house” to worship in. Surrounded by sacred objects in this symbolically significant space allows parishioners and visitors to reflect on their faith and the spiritual richness of the church.
The shrine to Saint Thérèse (Figure 11.9 top row) is located on the left side of the nave and gives some idea of the embellishments included in the design of the church. The wrought iron grill work is made of trailing rose vines with leaves and rose buds. Also included in the image below is a side altar to Our Lady of Guadalupe (bottom row center). There are two outdoor grottoes on the grounds. The one pictured in the bottom row left of Our Lady of Lourdes and Saint Bernadette is behind the church, next to the small gift shop. A small grotto dedicated to
the Sacred Heart of Mary is on the grounds of the parish school which is across the side street from the church.

In the lower level of the church is a Perpetual Adoration Chapel for the Holy Eucharist (Figure 11.10). It is my understanding that twenty-four, hour continuous adoration is a relatively new practice suggested by Pope Benedict XVI, in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, No. 67, March 13, 2007. Previously, short periods of time, usually one hour, were set aside during particular times of the year or once a week for Adoration of the Holy Eucharist. These chapels are considered very sacred places and their sole purpose is the personal interaction with Jesus Christ through the Holy Eucharist which is on display in the object of the monstrance or *ostensorium*.

There are several of these chapels spread throughout the community. They are for private devotion and people spend as long as they like in prayer at any time of the day. It is also a practice to have people scheduled for specific times so that there is always someone in the chapel. The parishioners at Our Lady of Guadalupe had just created a small chapel in an unused room in the Community Center when I was there in 2010 which the people I met used frequently.

I also attended a “Healing Mass” at the Perpetual Adoration Chapel built underneath the...
grotto at the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate campus. The service began with the praying of the rosary, followed by a Mass for the intentions of the sick and then a laying on of hands by four healers blessed by the priest. Each of them had their own techniques for praying over the individual who came before them. The healing part of the service lasted for over an hour with each individual approaching the healer of their choice. Healing services are quite common throughout the community. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate campus also has an outdoor Stations of the Cross and numerous other grottoes on the grounds including this one dedicated to St. Joseph and the Baby Jesus (Figure 11.11). The main shrine is built into a man-made hill. Visitors reach the grotto to Our Lady of Guadalupe—Tepeyac de San Antonio Grotto of the Southwest by climbing to the top of the hill using the staircase that is off to one side. The grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes is in a cave on the other side of the hill (Figure 11.12).
Figure 11.12 Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Shrines of Our Lady of Guadalupe & Our Lady of Lourdes
Source: Author, 2009
People visit the site to pray and light candles. They also take home holy water from a special font that is located to the left of the shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes. Outdoor Masses, rosaries, and other celebrations are conducted regularly.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa is on the east side of San Antonio in a neighborhood that has a concentration of Poles, Czechs, and Germans. It was erected in 1966 in celebration of 1,000 years of Polish Christianity. The influence of this Virgin is strong in the Mexican community because of her dark skin and the fact that many of the residents attended Catholic schools where the teachers were Poles or Czech and stressed devotion to Our Lady of Czestochowa rather than Our Lady of Guadalupe. The shrine is operated by the Seraphic Sisters. The complex includes a chapel and museum (Figure 11.13). The façade of the building contains several niches with statues of saints with the Polish emblem in the center. The main niche contains a painting of Our Lady of Czestochowa. The grounds also contain a separate Perpetual Adoration chapel, an outdoor Stations of the Cross and several outdoor shrines (Figure 9.14). Also pictured are images of some
of the Polish memorabilia from the museum.

David Zamora Casas took me to his favorite place to pray, one not run by the Catholic Church—*El Senor de Los Milagros* or The Chapel of the Miracles (Figure 9.15). It is also known as the Ximenes Chapel for the family that first built the chapel in their home. It has been part of the Rodriguez Family since the late 1800's. In 1793, when the Spanish government ordered San Antonio de
Valero secularized, Juan Ximenes asked for and was granted permission to move the Crucifix along with some other items from the Mission Valero to their family Chapel. Legend has it that he carried the cross on his back the entire way. The present chapel was constructed in 1813.

[Interview with Rudolfo & Irene Cantu Rodriguez, Little Chapel of Miracles, 11-17-09]

According to legend the chapel was named *El Señor de los Milagros* because of the strange or miraculous manner in which the cross was made (Figure 11.16). The maker of the original cross could find no material to make the figure of the Christ. To make it life-like he required the lining of a membrane of a kid or lamb, also a certain fluid to preserve it. He searched everywhere for an animal to use, even offering to buy the young kid of a woman who lived outside of the village but she refused to sell her kid to him. A few minutes after he left her he heard a gunshot and the woman came running after him. She said that a gun that had been leaning against the side of the house had fallen over and killed the kid. She insisted he take the kid believing that it was a miracle that it had been killed in this way. After fashioning the body of Christ out of the kid membrane he still needed the special fluid which he had not been able to find. He searched the church storehouse again and found a partially filled jar of the fluid—just the amount he needed to finish the figure—the second miracle (de Zavala 2007). This legend highlights the importance of such sacred objects in the spiritual lives of the people.

Evidence of the many miracles and answers to prayers that are attached to the surface of the loin cloth as small *milagros* or medals that represent the focus of the prayer or the ailment that has been cured. People also leave photographs of loved ones they are praying for attached to statues and tucked into the frames of the many images (Figure 11.16). One of the images in the corner is filled with photographs of service men and women who are in the prayers of those who visit. Along with the crucifix, there are many statues and images that line the walls of the chapel.
People light candles, touches the icons, and spend a few minutes in prayer and conversation with the images.
The participants also told me of a number of shrines and grottoes in public spaces not associated with churches. A grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes is set in the center of the campus of the University of the Incarnate Word (Figure 11.17). Outdoor Masses and rosaries are conducted at this site.

Another shrine (Figure 11.18) is located at the Southwest School of Art in downtown San Antonio on the school’s Ursuline Campus which is the former home of the Ursuline Convent & Academy, originally founded in 1851 as the first school for girls in San Antonio. These shrines are visited not only by students of the school but also by the general public.
Throughout the cultural landscape of the Mexicano community, the lines between artistic, religious and cultural symbols often blur and overlap resulting in icons such as the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing as often in yard shrines and on car windows and biceps as in churches and shrines. Much of the art of the people of San Antonio is thoroughly integrated into the everyday beautification of the homes and yards that make up what some urban planners call Mexican American “housescapes.” Daniel Arreola (1988), whose focus is on Mexican-American borderlands and place-making, explains the phenomena when he writes:

The Mexican American housescape consists of an ensemble of elements including fence-enclosed front properties, exterior house color, and outdoor religious shrines. These traits appear to be part of a complex historic code that has antecedents in pre-Christian Iberia
and pre-Columbian Mexico. The forms have been successfully adapted to changing circumstances over many generations and remain viable and visible signatures of Mexican American barrio landscape. [Arreola 1988:314]

The exteriors of the homes themselves are often decorated with religious images. Our Lady of Guadalupe (Figure 11.19) appears on the front of a home on a main thoroughfare on the West Side. This painting was part of an extensive front yard beautification project. The inclusion of this figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe attests to the devotion of the people to her image and the message she brought the people of Mexico.

Many streets in the Mexicano communities contain fenced-in yards decorated with small shrines, called capillas (yard shrines) or nichos (niches), dedicated to either Our Lady of Guadalupe or one of a number of favorite saints. These shrines face the street to celebrate the
Catholic faith of a family and to honor in the shrine the patron saint or *Virgen* in the shrine who granted a prayer. A 1986 exhibit at the San Antonio Museum of Art entitled *Art Among Us/Arte Entre Nosotros* was the first of its kind to examine this folk art within the Mexican American community. Folk art has been defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1976:1480) as part of a cultural system that fosters the continuation of traditional art forms which are inseparable from the identity of the community in which it exists. The symbols and objects used in these creations shape the individual’s sense of self by displaying the connections that exist from within the cultural memories of the people while actively touching lives on a day-to-day basis. Folk art helps create a feeling of unity and pride within the community and helps residents negotiate the challenges of living within an Anglos dominated social milieu, according to cultural anthropologist Americo Paredes (1982). This struggle for both survival and maintenance of a unique cultural unity has resulted in distinctive aesthetic. While many of San Antonio’s Westside residents do not call themselves artists, the creation of beautiful objects for the home and yard displays their beliefs that are immediately recognizable to community members.

Many members of the community rely on their creative ability to use what is at hand to express their sense of identity in their displays. The curators of the SAMA *Art Among Us* Show call this a “bits and pieces” aesthetic, similar to Lévi-Strauss (1966) “bricolage.” Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains, scholars of Chicano/o art, refer to this process as *rasquachismo*. Mesa-Bains writes that,

In *rasquachismo*, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least . . . one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. . . In its broadest sense, it is a combination of resistance and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and preserve with a sense of dignity. . . Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials. . . The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*. [Mesa-Baines 1996:156]
Ybarra-Frausto describes *rasquachismo* as a “continual effort toward developing an enhanced art of resistance—an art which is not a resistance to the materials and forms of art, but rather a resistance to entrenched social systems of power, exclusion and negation” (Ybarra-Frausto 1990:67). This pervasive beautifying of the yard with flowers and figurines, tile and cement work, creates a look that is the West Side’s residents own as is demonstrated in the yard shrines in Figure 11.21. Notice the various materials, old and new, used to construct these shrines. One yard shrine (Figure 11.20) is unusual in that it does not contain a statue of the Virgin or of any saints but one of an angel surrounded by hand-made figures that seem to represent members of the family.

Also very common in *Mexicano* neighborhoods are the house number plates with religious figures. On the house in the image below in the top center is a house number plate with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.
Figure 11.21 Yard Shrines
Source: Author, 2008-2010
Public Murals—Writing on the Wall

Private yard shrines are not the only art that embodies community pride. Since the 1960’s Chicano movement, public murals have been a form of cultural and political expression in many cities with a large Latino populations including San Antonio. Artists and residents of the community began using the walls of city buildings, local businesses, housing projects, schools, and churches to depict Mexicano culture and heritage resulting in a cultural landscape where inhabitants regularly encounter, and often interact with, images of their shared cultural memories. The murals represent the traditions that distinguished them from mainstream Anglo culture. According to Mendoza and Torres, the act of creating these “objects” is a conscious attempt to shape the landscape. The prime objectives of contemporary mural-making is social protest and cultural identification. “Hispanic muralism is a social barometer of the culture, society, and polity of each respective generation. As a community technology of the barrio and inner-city ghetto, its ubiquity in North America’s Hispanic communities is unmistakable” (Mendoza & Torres 1994:77). While the murals convey important messages to the people in the community they are not just static works or art. They change over time as people repair them or replace them with new images and add new murals to the neighborhood. They are not just objects on display but are engaged with by the people as they pass by—prayers may be said or offerings may be made. For example in Figure 11.37 the young girl seems to be embracing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The mural in Figure 11.25 was specifically re-done to include an area for offering to accommodate the volume of flowers and candles left by people who visited the mural.

Chicano muralism took inspiration from the pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas, who recorded their rituals and history on the walls of their pyramids, the Spanish settlers who
produced images that represented the doctrines of the church and the state, and Mexican revolutionary-era painters José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siquieros, known as los tres grandes, who painted murals in Mexico and the United States in the post-revolutionary period (Acosta nd, Castro 2001:163-164; Mendoza & Torres 1994:77). Present day themes of the murals promote political action and raise consciousness and ethnic pride by educating the community about their Mexicano ancestry and their struggles for equality and civil rights. Themes included pre-Columbian indigenous symbols and motifs that reflected a mestizo (mixed-race) heritage and a Mexican cultural nationalism; Aztec symbols that represented cultural pride and national loyalty; symbols of Our Lady of Guadalupe and other Catholic religious figures that reflect the faith of the people. The syncretic blending of Spanish, Indio, American Indian, and current Mexicano styles, spiritual and social themes, and artistic techniques is evident in all of the murals in San Antonio.

Chicano artists endeavored to paint murals for the people so they went directly to the barrios (neighborhoods) for inspiration, support, and workers. According to the guidebook to the Westside Murals created by the San Antonio Office of Cultural Affairs, the creation of murals in the city is still a community-based process that combines compromise, cooperation, and creativity (West Side/Murals 2002). Muralists sought to paint and make public the history they knew—a history based on “oral traditions, legends and myths” (Romo 1992:136). Contemporary mural artist Alex Rubio (in Figure 11.22 with volunteer) grew up in the Mirasol Housing Projects on the west side of San Antonio. As a youth, he was recruited by the Community Cultural Arts Organization to be a
crew leader for their mural program based at the Cassiano Homes Housing Projects. Rubio’s experience inspired him to pursue a career as a community-based artist, engaging San Antonio community members in mural art, community outreach, and youth arts education.

**Cassiano Home Murals**

According to the San Antonio Neighborhood Tours web site, the Community Cultural Arts Organization was formed in the 1970s under the direction of chief artist Anastacio "Tacho" Torres. The Organization’s first commission was the more than 200 murals in the Cassiano Homes public housing development. The development was built on the Westside in 1953 by the San Antonio Housing Authority as a public housing community for families. The community consists of 499 units of two-story buildings that cover several blocks. The intention of the mural project was to instill a sense of ethnic and neighborhood pride in the community and to keep the local children out of trouble. Community organizers and youths met with residents to hear stories of the area to gather ideas for murals. As a result, most murals depict popular Mexican-American historic and religious figures. I toured the housing project and photographed most of the murals. I have included several in Figure 11.23. The images depict a variety of themes including: Our Lady of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego, Moctezuma II awaiting the arrival of Hernan Cortéz, an Aztec corn god, *la frontera* in the U.S., immigration, traditional Mexican bull fighting, family values, and a memorial to Zapata.

The murals are maintained by local artists and members of the community to repair damage due to age or graffiti. The grey area between Our Lady and Juan Diego is a temporary fix to cover marks made by graffiti. The people of the community take great pride in the public display of their heritage. The Cassiano murals make a statement about the people living in the community—their past heritage, their struggles, and their lives today.
Figure 11.23 Cassiano Homes Murals, Public Housing Development, Community Cultural Art Organization
Source: Author, 2009
Murals also grace the walls of many local businesses. The Community Cultural Arts Organization was approached by the owner of a business who wanted to prevent constant graffiti (see Figure 11.24 for a composite of the entire mural). Given the name of company ("Guadalupe Lumber"), the artist in charge decided to paint a mural of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Since the creation of the mural in 1991, the building has not been "tagged" with graffiti—a testament to the importance of this symbolically rich “object”. The mural relates the apparition story of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac and the presentation of the *tilma* filled with roses to the Bishop.

![Figure 11.24 Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, 1991, Community Cultural Arts, Guadalupe Lumber Co.](image)

*Source: Author, 2009*

*San Anto Cultural Arts Program (SACA)*

The Community Cultural Arts Organization eventually disbanded, but the mural project of San Anto Cultural Arts (SACA), a non-profit organization started in 1991, continues to produce community-generated murals. The groups first mural was intended to call attention to the senselessness of the gang warfare that was tearing the Westside community apart at the time of its inception. The focus of the mural—education, history and *Mexicano* culture—serve as sources of strength and hope for the community. This first mural, "Educacion," (Figure 11.25) was created in 1994 by three artists with a group of community adult and youth volunteers.

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40 I was told by several people that the term “San Anto” is a diminutive for the city of San Antonio to be used only by *Mexicanos* living in the city. The term reflects their sense of “ownership” and belonging to the cultural heritage of the city.
The “Peace and Remembrance” mural (Figure 11.26) was completed in 2001 on the corner of San Patricio and Trinity Streets by San Anto Cultural Arts artists Crystal Torres, Angela Ybarra, Julie Ibarra, Katie Bone. The mural is San Anto’s and the communities artistic response to tragic neighborhood issues. Several years back, after the violent deaths of Charles “Chucky” Hernandez, neighborhood teens spray painted a mural on this same wall, in memory to Chucky. After a year, that mural was painted over. The neighborhood wanted to continue the memory of Chucky and others who had died of violence in this barrio but the goal was to do it by presenting an image that would make people think of the idea of peace when confronted with violence. The crew thought of happy scenes: the park, friends who support one another, religious symbols that give them strength, the idea of Our Lady of Guadalupe being active in their lives. The ideas came together in the mural they created. This mural is dedicated to all people of the
immediate community who have been victims of violence.

The mural was designed by an all-women crew of four artists—all in their early teens. A group of youth volunteers went door to door in the neighborhoods surrounding the mural site to gather names of those who have died due to violence. After only two blocks they had five pages of names. The names of the victims are on the wall at the far left hand side (not pictured above). A close up of the names appears in Figure 11.27. The mural and wall serve as a functional altar for the surrounding community. Flower holders are mounted onto the wall at the foot of the cross in the center of the mural so that residents are able to remember and memorialize loved ones by interacting with the space.
Mary Helen Herrera, a resident living in public housing on the Westside, was inspired to create the mural “Comprando y Prestando” (Buying and Lending) (Figure 11.28) which depicts her dream of an economically self-sufficient community. The mural uses traditional Aztec images to show people sharing, buying, and trading with one another through their own gifts and the gifts of the earth. She created this mural (object) to bring her dream to the community.

Figure 11.28 Comprando y Prestando, 1996: Mary Helen Herrera
Source: Author, 2010

“Leyendas Aztecas,” (Aztec Legends) one of the largest hand-painted murals in the city (Figure 11.29), was conceived by artist Israel "Izzy" Rico working with the San Anto Cultural Arts program. Working with 60 community residents and students the work took a year to complete. The mural contains images from Aztec mythology including a jaguar warrior, an emperor dressed as an eagle, and an Aztec priest. It depicts the stories of (left) Creation of the Race; (center) Quetzalcoatl—God of Life & Wind and Mictlantechutli—God of Death; (right) Birth of Huitzilopochtli. The figures depicted in the mural are a direct link to the past heritage of the Mexicano community and serve as a learning tool for them and the wider community.
The mural “Dualidad,” is located in Plaza Guadalupe across the street from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church (Figure 11.30). The mural was created by Victor Ochoa who was a Muralist-in-Residence at San Anto Cultural Arts in 2005. It incorporates indigenous symbols of maize, cactus, the sun, a temple and a depiction of the celebration of family life.

When I spoke with Father James Marshall, associate pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, he expressed some concern about the use of “pagan” images in many of the murals. He
said that reminding the people of former gods distracted them from their devotions to the One True God. Residents I spoke to, however, said they were proud of their heritage and did not feel a call to worship their old gods but felt pride in the public recognition of their shared past.

While there are many murals with indigenous themes and ones devoted to social action and a call for civil rights, there are also many solely religious-themed murals. The offices of San Anto Cultural Arts program are located in the heart of the "Westside" community. A mural of the Suffering Jesus is displayed on the wall facing the street (Figure 11.31). A mural of Saint
Frances of Assisi is painted on the side of a business in the same neighborhood (Figure 11.32).

There are many murals in the community created by local artists, residents, and business owners. For instance, the mural by Theresa Ybanez (Figure 11.33) honoring Emma Tenayuca who worked tirelessly to organize and better the lives of San Antonio's laborers, especially the pecan shellers.

“Seeds of Solidarity”, created in 2005 by Jose Cosme and Mary Agnes Rodriguez (Figure 11.34), honors significant figures in the Westside community including Father Tranchese, Emma Tenayuca, Raul Salinas, David Gonzales, Rosie Castro and Patricia Castillo. According to the web site, the building is occupied by Hope Action Care, a community-based non-profit organization dedicated to providing health education and support services to the disabled, low-income and homeless in the community (West Side/Murals 2002).
There are several commissioned mosaic tile murals on businesses throughout the city of San Antonio. One of these works of art was part of a city-wide effort to enhance the lives of the people and include the art of the people in the built environment. The mural “Brighter Days” (Figure 11.35) at the Center for Healthcare Services depicts the struggle for mental health and is meant to encourage people on the path to self-empowerment. Muralist Adriana Maria Garcia was inspired by conversations with the clients, staff, and health care professionals at the center.

In another citywide effort to brighten the highly-trafficked corridor along Guadalupe Street, the Guadalupe Bridge Project Committee commissioned local artist David Gonzalez to design these vinyl banners that hang from the Bridge’s light poles (Figure 11.36). Their richly-colored designs highlight cultural icons and emulate the Mexican form of papel picado—cutting intricate designs and patterns from colorful sheets of tissue paper. While the

![Figure 11.35 Brighter Days, 2007: The Center for Health Care Services](image)

Source: Author, 2009

![Figure 11.36 Street Sign](image)

Source: Author, 2010
designs usually reflect a variety of celebrations and symbols, these all represent various depictions of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

**Public Images of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe is a common theme for public shrines, yard shrines, and murals—a testament to her wide-spread devotion. One of the largest works honoring Our Lady is located on the side of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center on Guadalupe Street. It is proclaimed to be the largest depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe outside the Cathedral in Mexico City, standing 40-feet tall. It is, in fact, a replica of a veladora (votive candle) dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The three-dimensional, ceramic mosaic *La Veladora* (Figure 11.37) was completed in 2006 and was dedicated to the victims of the 9/11 attacks. There is an eternal flame shining from the top that is meant to serve as a neighborhood beacon.

*Figure 11.37 La Veladora of Our Lady of Guadalupe*  
Source: Jay Lee, 2008 with permission
People from the community bring roses and light candles at the foot of the mural. Ana Spector participated in a short film that depicts her trying to light this large votive candle in prayer (Pray Big- Size Doesn't Always Matter [www.youtube.com]). The work was designed by Jesse Treviño who was born in Mexico and raised in America. Observers say that Treviño’s work stems from his inextinguishable spirit, expressing his personal and ethnic identity.

Other images of Our Lady are scattered on businesses throughout the community (Figure 11.38).
One that I found most interesting is the "Virgen Indigena" pictured at the bottom of this figure. It was designed by three artists: Jane Madrigal, who was one of my participants, Jose Cosme, and Louie Alejandro. The scene depicted is the classic image of the dark-skinned Virgen of Guadalupe, however, she is surrounded by a border of indigenous Aztec figures and symbols. Although you cannot see it in this image because it seems that the children are kissing the feet of the Virgen, the angel that is supporting the figure of Our Lady is portrayed as a young Mexicano youth. I was told by neighborhood residents that this was one of the favorite images of the Virgen in the community. One resident told me that she was sad when they touched up the paint on the image recently because the face of this Virgen is not as pretty as the previous one. This comment gives an indication of the relationship people form with these images. The images are not only part of the cultural landscape of the community; they are also part of the people’s lives and personal devotions over time.

My intention in this chapter was to offer some insight into the cultural landscape of the community in which my participants live and interact. The built landscape of historic sites, churches and shrines, public and private art provide constant reminders of the heritage of the people and allows for frequent interaction with objects produced from their cultural memories. Human geographer Divya Tolia-Kelly (2004), studies re-memory through artifacts in the process of identity formation and writes that material cultural provides:

Nodes of connection in a network of people, places, and narration of past stories, history and traditions. Solid materials are charged with memories that activate common connections to pre-migratory landscapes and environments. These memories signify geographical nodes of connection which shape and shift contemporary social geographies. . . Material cultures, through their installation, are critical in the formation of new political identities, carving out new landscapes of belonging. These new contexts for material artifacts refigure the narration of the past imbued within them. Memory is an important political tool, grounding both individual memory and collective cultural heritage stories. [Tolia-Kelly 2004:314-315]
The connections people make with the cultural landscape of their community are not just reminders of particular people, symbols, or events but also the stories and narratives that go along with them. Stories of the mythology of ancient religious beliefs, stories of conquest and survival, and stories of the history of San Antonio all become important in their daily lives.
CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation research explored a specific set of objects—Mexicano Catholic home altars—to determine the role the creation of these altars, and the individual objects on the altars, play in the negotiation of a sense of self and identity as a Mexicano within the social structure of San Antonio, Texas. The main question addressed in this research considered the way in which objects culled from the cultural memory and personal experiences of the person, participate in the social construction of a particular Mexicano sense of self and identity within the context of the often conflict-ridden social milieu of San Antonio. To date, the effects of religious objects on persons in other than a strictly “spiritual” sense has not generally been a focus in material culture studies. The goal of this research was to extend the discussion of the interactive relationships between material culture and persons to include religious and other forms of material culture in daily life.

I used a practice theory approach, primarily following Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1992), Michel de Certeau (1984), and Sherry Ortner (1984, 1989, 2006), to analyze the role of religious beliefs and practices in the daily lives of the participants in this study. Using this perspective, I examined the relationships between the established social structure of San Antonio with its wide range of conflicting possibilities for action and the choices Mexicano Catholics actually make in their daily lives. Their choice of specific beliefs, practices, and objects they use to perform particular actions, culled from their cultural memory and personal experiences, transforms the world around them and contributes to the negotiation of a particular sense of self and identity. The use of home altars is a key element in the practice of traditional Mexicano Catholicism that is part of the cultural (Jeanette Rodríguez and Ted Fortier 2007) and collective (Maurice
Halbwachs 1980, 1992; Paul Connerton 1989, 2006) memory. These are the practices that are passed from generation to generation—incorporating experiences, modes of action, language, aspirations, images, ideas, values and belief systems—that often stand in conflict with other forms of action within the social structure.

Instrumental to my analysis was Alfred Gell’s (1998) anthropological theory of art that focuses on the way in which objects used in daily life influence the user and viewer of the objects, to make them act as if they are engaging with living persons in the person’s negotiation of a sense of self and *Mexicano* identity. Gell argues that human-object interactions are mediated by both the agency of persons and objects. Gell describes various ways in which material objects have “agency.” Objects can both influence person-to-person social relations and can act as “persons” in person-object interaction. Objects are theorized to be acting as persons because they have the power of intention, causation, and transformation that can affect both the maker and the viewer. Objects stimulate emotional responses and are invested with some of the intentionality of their creators; therefore, objects are both constituted by and constitutive of persons. This perspective suggests that ideas, values and social relations are “actively created” through human interaction with the material elements in their world—the things they make and use in the practice of everyday life. Objects and things are the medium through which values, ideas, cultural memory, and social distinctions are constantly constructed, reproduced and legitimized or transformed.

Following these two approaches, I first described the historical trajectory that produced the social structure in which *Mexicanos* in San Antonio are confronted with conflicting ideologies and practices. Recognizing that individuals are able to influence, create, and transform the world they live in as well as themselves, I demonstrated that the use of traditional *Mexicano*
Catholic home altars is one of de Certeau’s “tactics” or choices made by the participants of this study to construct a world that includes their cultural heritage in opposition to the dominant Anglo social structure. Religious practices, such as creating altars in the home, not only connect the person to the Divine but also establish the devotee as a member of a particular community of believers. Continued interactions with the objects on the altar reinforce group as well as personal identity. I next focused on the interactions between the person and the objects and the affects various types of objects had on the negotiation of self and identity.

**Mexicano Identity**

The history of the San Antonio area illustrates a tangled web of ethnic influences that contributed to its social, political, and cultural development. People arrived in the area in various waves of migration and immigration. The first settlers included the indigenous nomadic Amerindians and early Spanish, Mexican *indio* and *mestizo* settlers. Later waves included Anglo immigrants from the United States and Europe, Mexicans fleeing the Revolution, and modern migrant agricultural workers that came mainly from various areas of Mexico. The points of contact and conflict that arose in the process of settlement, migration, and immigration produced the marginalization and shifting identities of persons of Mexican descent that continues to the present day. *Mexicanos* in San Antonio have been portrayed by Chicano Studies scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) as a people with one foot in each culture—Mexican and Anglo—trying to build and maintain relationships in both. As a consequence, they are involved in a continual process of negotiating and contesting identities. A person’s self and identity are shaped by the world around them and their perceived place in that world. A person’s actions, traditions, experiences, and their interactions with persons (Ewing 1990; Geertz 1986; Goffman 2001; Mead 1995; Ochs & Capps 1996) and objects (Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998; Tilley 2002a) all
contribute to a sense of self and identity.

Historically, people of Mexican descent in San Antonio have been considered different or “other.” For example, they were labeled as “mestizos” or mixed race by the Spanish and then later as “Hispanic” or “Latino” by the Anglos that dominated the social structure of the area. They have consequently been marginalized and restricted in their access to jobs, education, and other rights. According to Suzanne Oboler (1992, 1995), these various labels and stereotyped identities interact with a person’s lived experiences and often challenge their already shifting sense of self. Another area of marginalization and “otherness” stems from the form of *Mexicano* Catholicism that is part of their cultural heritage and memory. *Mexicano* Catholicism was structured by Spanish Catholicism and indigenous influences and is different from the dominant Protestant religions and the post Council of Trent Catholicism present in the United States. More dependent on ritual, symbolism, pageantry, and domestic practices, it is a religion of emotion that goes beyond dogma. This is what sets it apart from other religions. *Mexicano* Catholicism is performative and is marked by its ritual practices, devotion to the saints, and use of sacred objects in personal rituals that include the creations of home altars.

Being labeled as “other” led to pressures within the *Mexicano* population to assimilate—to act more like Anglos. Assimilation, which entails the relinquishing of traditional language, food, religious practices, modes of dress, and ways of acting, is not always possible or desirable. While some persons of Mexican descent successfully assimilated, many others deliberately chose not to change. Various factors influence the ability to assimilate more or less successfully. What is at issue here is the use of traditional *Mexicano* Catholic home altars as a way to resist the pressures to assimilate. By choosing to continue certain practices revived from their cultural memory *Mexicanos* in San Antonio have been able to negotiate a particular sense of self and
Mexicano identity as well as preserve these practices for future generations.

**Creating a Sense of Self, Identity, and Belonging**

The analysis of the home altars of the participants in this study details the tactical process of invention and re-invention whereby people create a sense of self, identity, and belonging to a particular group by choosing traditional Mexicano ways of doing things and the specific objects they use in their daily lives. Identifying oneself as Mexicano, Spanish, Tejano, or any other label, is a conscious choice acknowledging one’s culture history, memories, and socio-economic background. The narratives the participants related about their cultural heritage and life experiences indicated their recognition of the role that creating and using home altars plays in the construction and maintenance of their identity.

The ten participants highlighted in this study fall into three categories that reflect their Mexicano and Mexicano Catholic backgrounds. The first two consist of Practicing Catholics (4) and Non-Practicing Catholics (4). The third group consisted of Non-Mexicanos (2). The eight participants in the first two categories were all of Mexican descent and had been raised with traditional Mexicano Catholic practices. The participants in the Non-Mexicanos group were not raised with Mexican or Catholic traditions. I included their stories because of the way in which home altars figured in their negotiations of their particular identities. The stories of the two individuals in the latter group have numerous similarities to the traditional Mexicano home altars in the study. All participants, regardless of background, expressed the importance of maintaining connections to their heritage through the enactment of various rituals and the use of particular objects, although they have taken different paths to accomplish the goal.

The four participants in the “Practicing Catholics” category—the López and Udriales families, Mrs. Silva, and Carmen Ruiz—continue to practice their Mexicano Catholic faith by
both enacting and believing in the tenets of the institutional church in the manner passed down in their families. In a preliminary interview, I asked Samira López if she had an altar in her home. She replied, “Of course we do, we are Mexican aren’t we!” Her comment reflects this group’s attitude regarding the naturalness of continuing traditional *Mexicano* practices that act as a form of devotion, a reflection of their *Mexicano* identity, and a means of maintaining that identity. The López family retains close ties to Mexico. Mrs. López and the two oldest daughters were born in Mexico, while Mr. López was born in a border town. The other girls were born in San Antonio. They have seamlessly maintained their heritage—speaking Spanish in the home and continuing to practice their *Mexicano* Catholic religion. They also make frequent trips to Mexico to visit family. Mr. Udriales maintains a particular pride in his aunt who was a *curandera*. Mrs. Silva and the Udriales’ are second generation but still maintain their traditional practices. Carmen Ruiz’ family has been in San Antonio for several generations always maintaining close ties to each other and to the Church. Their family donated the land to build Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

The four participants in the “Non-Practicing Catholic” group—Jane Madrigal, David Zamora Casas, Franco Mondini-Ruiz, and Chuck Ramirez—are all second generation San Antonians and were also raised with *Mexicano* Catholic traditions. They however no longer follow the tenets of the institutional church. Nonetheless, they do continue to use bits and pieces of their religious heritage as part of an effort to honor that legacy. Each person in this group told a story of the pressures to assimilate that they had felt in their early years. Mexican traditions, speaking Spanish, and the practice of traditional *Mexicano* Catholicism were discouraged in their homes. It was not until they became adults that they recognized the importance of claiming *Mexicano* identity by using traditional objects such as home altars in their daily lives. Franco
Mondini-Ruiz explicitly details his “cultural journey” from an “Anglocized white boy” to his later appreciation of his Mexicano heritage that represents the experiences of the other participants in this group. Franco said he first came to the realization that “the Mexicans [in his community], had been stripped or taught to be ashamed of the form of their culture. They had been brainwashed to let that go.” In his late 20s Franco discovered his heritage in a new way. He found that the objects that represent his Mexican and indigenous culture were “being venerated by the dominant culture . . . [by the] high-society, blue-eyed, blonde-haired ladies from San Antonio.” On further reflection he said,

When young Latinos like myself were eventually exposed to it [objects of Mexican culture] we were totally seduced, not only by the beauty of our heritage but by its substance—its meaning as well. And we were just crushed by the realization that we’d been taught to be ashamed of what could have made us so proud. . . Eventually we began to see our heritage not only as Mexican or Mexican American; but part of something much larger—a world culture. [Interviews with Franco Mondini-Ruiz by Mary Durocher, 11/25/2009 and 9/13/2010]

Franco characterizes himself as part of the “Mexican born-again with a vengeance generation” and uses home altars and other displays of traditional Mexican objects throughout his home to rekindle his Mexicano identity. Chuck Ramirez relates a very similar story of early assimilation and (re)discovery. Jane Madrigal and David Zamora Casas seemed to face less pressure to assimilate although only David speaks Spanish. Both have continued the use of Mexicano Catholic home altars from their youth.

Ana Spector and Joan Frederick make up the Non-Mexicano category. For Ana, the influences of her childhood including her Cuban background, her Catholic and Jewish upbringing, and her contact with Santería figure into how she has shaped her identity. She continues to surround herself with the objects that represent these influences and set her apart from the Mexicano community in which she lives. She told me, “I am Cubana and I am proud of
that. I keep these things around me to remind me of who I am and where I came from.” Joan, like many Anglos in San Antonio, displays objects of Mexicano and even Mexicano Catholic origins as part of her connection with San Antonio itself. When Joan was first introduced to the concept of making altars to honor deceased loved ones, she said it spoke to some need in her—as a way to keep and acknowledge her connection with the American Indian culture she had left in Oklahoma. When talking about her altar she said, “It’s so San Antonio!” The Mexicano tradition of altar making provides a way for both of them to acknowledge their identities—Ana as Cubana and Joan as San Antonian.

**Home Altars: Maintaining Mexicano Identity**

Altars in the home serve as both sacred sites of private daily devotion that reinforces faith and as objects used in the negotiation of self and identity. The fact that devotions have a material presence in the home is important since the home embodies a place of memory, cultural norms, and individual ideas of identity. The home gives daily life a physical orientation patterning both communicative and ritualized practices. My research demonstrates that creating an altar in the home, stemming from the persons’ Mexicano Catholic cultural memory, is a tactic used to both resist the adoption of Anglo “ways of doing things” and aid in the negotiation of a particular Mexicano Catholic identity. Continuing the practices that are part of one’s heritage reinforces personal identity and preserves these traditions within the community for future generations. Before exploring the interactions between persons and objects that affect identity, I found that it is important to understand why particular objects were chosen in the creation of the altars.

A home altar embodies the personal experience and remembrances of the person that assembled it. The objects selected in the creation of the altar are part of what Annette Weiner
(1985, 1992, 1994) refers to as the “inalienable wealth” of the person—objects that have been given significant personal meaning. The objects on the altars of the participants in this study were culled from various categories of objects and derive their personal meaning in different ways. The majority of the objects on the altars had religious significance. Many of these objects were purchased from various “retail” outlets—religious supply stores, gifts shops at shrines, *botánicas*, and even grocery stores. Other objects were heirlooms passed down in the family—sometimes through several generations, gifts from friends or family, souvenirs from pilgrimages to sacred sites, or mementoes of rites of passage.

Religious objects on the altars, according to Catholic dogma, are symbolic representations of the power of the Divine. The objects are not “Divine” in and of themselves as in some other religious traditions but are nonetheless considered “sacred objects” used in devotions to the Divine entities. The form of the icon—whether a statue or image—is a faithful reproduction of the agreed upon physical aspects of a particular Divine entity. The icon is important not for the material it is made of but for its physical presence that brings the Divine entity to “life” and serves as a focus for devotion and communication between the entity and the person using the object.

While there was a variety of religious objects on the altars of the participants in the study, many of the objects exhibit a particularly *Mexicano* aesthetic that serve to reinforce *Mexicano* identity. For instance, the Mexican national symbol, Our Lady of Guadalupe, appears on almost all of the altars in this study. It has been argued by various scholars, particularly Eric Wolf (1958) and Jeanette Rodríguez (1994), that Guadalupe symbolizes the mixture of cultures that form Mexico and her people. *Mexicano* devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe connects them to the Catholic Church as well as other people of Mexican descent throughout Mexico and the world.
Other images and statues of the Virgin Mary as dark-skinned are a particularly important feature of the altars, especially *La Virgen de del Cobre* and *La Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos*. The dark-skinned *San Martin de Porres* is also quite common. Most of the participants had all of these entities on their altars. A devotion to the infant or child Jesus is prevalent in *Mexicano* homes in various forms especially the Infant of Prague and *Santo Niño de Atocha*. While these religious objects are chosen for their symbolic meaning within a *Mexicano* context, other icons are chosen based on personal preference or the efficacious actions of the deity in the past. Entities known for their healing powers that worked among *Mexicanos* such as *Padre Pío* and *Niño Fidencio* and other “healing” saints such as Saint Perregrine and *San Lazaro* are important objects on many home altars. These “healing” entities were particularly present on Mrs. Silva’s altars.

David Morgan (2005, 2012), emphasizes the use of religious icons or images in daily life and the belief in the concepts embodied in the image as the critical factors in relationships between objects and persons and persons and the supernatural. Interactions at the altar are about actual sensory experiences with the divine mediated by the objects and devotional practices. While statues and images represent Divine entities that are part of a *Mexicano* Catholic belief system, other objects represent actual ritual action on the part of the person including objects used in rites of passage or objects collected during pilgrimages. Other objects become “religious” or “sacred” because they are used in the performance of personal devotions. These include such items as rosaries, prayer cards, medals, candles, incense, flowers, etc. that commonly appeared on the participants’ altars. Sometimes ordinary objects become extraordinary when connected to cultural memories and displayed in the assemblage of other significant objects.
Some objects that appear regularly on the participants’ altars have a very personal nature. Photographs of family and friends are quite common, forming a link between the person who creates the altar, their loved ones, and the divine. Other objects are seen as “biographical” as they intertwine with the daily life experiences of the person and are designated as “inalienable” possessions. According to Janet Hoskins (1998, 2007), the objects “tell” a story of the person’s lived experiences—or the person tells the story through the objects. Many of the objects on the home altars “tell” of the devotions that are important to the participant, petitions they have made and had granted, pilgrimages they have made to various religious sites, stages of the life cycle they have passed through, and people they have loved along the way. Each of the objects connects the person to the past in the present. The objects signify the person’s “sense of self” in a material way. Chuck Ramirez’ grandmother’s tortilla pan is an excellent example of a biographical object. He displays this pan prominently on his “altar” to his religious and cultural background as Mexicano. When explaining why he displays a tortilla pan in such a prominent place in his home he also tells the story of his life. While viewing this tortilla pan reminds Chuck of his grandmother and of his upbringing, he also that said using this pan, or one like it, in preparing traditional foods actually makes him feel more Mexicano.

Of particular interest is the biographical aspects of the objects used on the special ofrendas (altars) temporarily constructed to honor deceased loved ones during the Día de los Muertos celebrations in early November. The objects used in creating these altars represent the “lives” of the person and their particular experiences. The objects on the ofrendas act as links to loved ones who are no longer present. Ideas of “biographical objects” have arisen out of the agentive turn in social theory and theories of the “agency” of objects where objects can seem to act almost as persons in their interactions with human persons. Similarly, objects can be seen as
having biographies of their own as they move from person to person and change categories from mere commodities to objects designated as particular forms of “inalienable” wealth.

During the examination of the participants’ altars, I discovered that the home altars were generally placed in highly visible areas of the home, referred to by Erving Goffman (2001) as “front stage” spaces. Placing the altar in the center of the home facilitates the creation, maintenance, and transformation of social identity according to social theorists Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) as well as landscape architect Ellen-J. Pader (1993). The continuous interaction with this main feature of the home becomes part of the “habitus” of the person. While this family or group altar is available to anyone at anytime for prayer or reflection for those living in the home, it also displays the identity of the residents to guests. People visiting the home may also recognize these objects as sacred items of personal devotion and be compelled to interact with the objects that are also a part of their cultural identity. Visitors not familiar with the use of home altars may inquire about the meaning of these objects in the home adding to their knowledge of other cultural traditions.

What I found most interesting, however, is that altars and religious objects were not relegated to just one area such as the living room but rather were spread throughout the home. These objects were integrated into every aspect of daily life in the home. Most homes included individual, personal, more intimate altars in each bedroom. For instance, the López family had a large formal family altar in the living room, yet each of the daughters told me of their “private” altars in their own bedrooms. In addition to the main altars in the living room and the personal altars in the bedrooms, there were significant numbers of individual religious objects throughout the home—in hallways and kitchens, and in unexpected places like bathrooms. The ubiquity of these signs of Mexicano Catholic devotion attests to the importance of these objects to the
participants’ sense of self and identity in both a religious and ethnic context.

Objects chosen for display and use on the home altar typically have deep personal, religious, familial, and cultural meanings. The home altar is not just a material reflection of the participants’ values and personal and cultural histories through which they reiterate a sense of belonging. The altar also serves as a locus for interactive ritual practices that reinforce those values and the tenets of belief systems. The materiality of the objects act as a focus of devotion and impels particular actions. The participants describe how they interact with the altar and the individual objects on the altar in a physical way—touching, arranging, caring for, looking at, and praying to them—while the objects actively respond by supporting human needs, stimulating emotional responses, and instigating actions. These interactions reinforce religious belief and a sense of belonging to a particular community of believers. Therefore, it is more than just possessing and displaying the religious and biographical objects that is significant; the interactions and relationships with the objects also play an important role in creating the person’s sense of self and *Mexicano* identity. Important questions addressed in this analysis were how do persons’ use the objects in daily life and what do the objects “do” to affect the person.

**Interactions with Objects**

Following Alfred Gell (1998), I examined the role of specific objects in the interactions that take place and the relationships that are formed between the person and the objects at the site of the home altars. This relational perspective includes the interactions between people and their altars, the individual objects on the altars and in the homes, and the interactions between the objects assembled on the altar. The objects displayed in a group on the altar form a sacred space of devotion and exchange. The individual religious objects are treated by the participants not
only as embodiments of the sacred but also as persons. As persons, these religious objects require not only devotion, but also sustenance, attention, respect, affection, and care—concerns that are especially important in *Mexicano* Catholic traditions in the community. The participants in my study tended to treat the objects as family members—as living presences. The icons are seen, spoken to, touched and caressed, dressed, and rearranged—to the extent that many were worn through such continuous interactions. The icons are brought offerings and gifts that establishes a connection or a communion between the person and the Divine entity, uniting the heavenly and the earthly. Communication takes place at the altar through prayer and the use of various objects of devotion. Candles are lit, flowers are arranged, and the air is “cleansed” with incense. Two of the participants, Jane Madrigal and David Zamora Casas would not even show me their altars until they were properly prepared. David insisted that the candles be lit before we began the interview. Jane had me bring flowers to arrange on her altars and she sprayed the room with rose essence and lit traditional Mexican copal incense before she would speak to me about her altars. Rosary beads are used to keep track of prayers and prayer cards direct specific intentions. The icons in turn give something back to the person through their gaze, their bodily stance, and in answering prayers. It is through these physical interactions that objects act as “persons.” The objects, as persons, stimulate an emotional response and trigger further actions that reinforce their meanings.

**Seeing is Believing**

Seeing or looking at the objects on the altar is probably the most ubiquitous form of physical interaction between the person and the objects. In this analysis however “seeing” is not passive but an active part of a relationship with the object. Morgan (2005, 2009, 2012) actually uses the term “sacred gaze” rather than “see” when analyzing these interactions. The sacred gaze
is the act of focusing or gazing at the image—touching with the eyes and therefore knowing—that forms a connection between the viewer and the physical object and the reality of the supernatural personage they believe is manifest in the object. The gaze draws the viewer into the reality of its representation—the object itself is connecting the viewer with the personage it represents. The relationship between the icon—the image of the sacred manifested in material form—and the devotee is social in the same sense that persons interacting with each other is social. The eyes of the image are therefore the nexus of engagement, the portal for entry into and communion with the internal being. Morgan claims that the act of connection or relationship that is formed through the sacred gaze relies on a set of the embodied assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and culture memories that calls to the person imagine themselves interacting with another “person” in the form of the icon. This “embodied experience of feeling” is intrinsically part of all religious practices. According to Gell (1998), in seeing the icon the person submits to its power, appeal, or fascination. This connection with the sacred object allows the viewer to also focus their attention and prayers in place and time. The act of seeing or gazing forms a physical bridge between the person, the icon, and the sacred being represented by the object. The relationship or union comes from eye contact. The eyes of the image, which gaze at the devotee, mirror the action of the devotee gazing at them. The eyes of the Virgin Mary (Figure 12.1) seem to be real eyes.
gazing at the viewer waiting for dialogue to begin. Through “seeing” objects with shared sacred meanings persons also acquire information and order various forms of association that foster “fellow feeling” or “sympathy” with other believers. A strong sense of community is established through these shared emotions.

The anthropomorphic aspects of the icon such as eyes thus make it accessible as a social being and social interaction possible. Aspects such as eyes, nose, and mouth mark the icon as having a physical as well as an inner spiritual presence that can act on the devotee. The icon “seeing” the devotee is not the only physical activity displayed. The icon is also believed to have the capacity to “hear” prayers and petitions. This attribute is an important aspect in the continued practice of such rituals. If the icon did not “hear” and respond to petitions, the devotee would no longer believe in the religious efficacy of the icon or for that matter of the sacred being it represents. Being “seen” and “heard” by the icon, and simultaneously by the entity it represents, and being “answered” encourages further interactions on the part of the person. A belief in these concepts also reinforces the identity of the person as a Mexicano Catholic.

**Bodily Engagement with Icons**

There are various other forms of physical engagement with the icons on the altars, besides seeing and hearing, that have visible consequences in the world and that demonstrate the icons’ social agency—the ability to affect persons. The bodily engagement with objects, images, and icons referred to as “corpothetics” is a sensory embrace of images—a process of bodily empowerment through actions that transforms objects into powerful entities (Pinney 2004:22). While the icon does not possess the physical ability of movement in these interactions, it can act invisibly. For instance, the being the icon represents can make the crops grow and the sun shine, it can answer prayers, etc. The objects on the altar are also agents or active participants in the
actions that take place at the site of the altar through their physical presence and appearance. The postures of the icon inspire certain prescribed movement in the devotee. They draw the devotee into person-to-person interactions—touching, kissing, kneeling, praying, lighting candles, making the sign of the cross, reciting various prayers or the rosary, and bringing flowers or small tokens of appreciation and thanksgiving. Mrs. Silva especially demonstrated a “personal” relationship with her icons. For instance, she draped her statue of San Martin with rosaries and a religious medal. She encircled her small statue of Juan Diego with a chaplet (beads for one decade of the rosary) dedicated to him. She also made clothes for various icons on her altars—a practice I found quite common.

The visual aspects of sacred icons are “read” as human persons standing ready to receive and direct the devotee in their devotions through the conventionalization of their “body language” and symbolic attributes. Icons often have their arms extended to the supplicant offering the grace of God (Figure 12.2). They are gesturing to devotees in an open invitation to initiate contact. Icons generally have eyes cast downward from heaven in a sympathetic anticipation of the devotees approach or head tilted in anticipation of the devotee’s request. These are poses that are commonly seen in “human” communicative interactions. Another “action” commonly depicted in the posture of icons is the bended knee (Figure 12.2). The icon is not static but is in a dynamic process of interaction with the devotee. The
icon is depicted actively going forth to greet the devotee—knee bent and hand extended—ready to establish a relationship and inspiring the devotee to do the same. For instance, the bended knee of the icons is mirrored in the actions of the devotees in the *matachines* dancers at the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Some of the icons are even more “active.” *San Martin de Caballero* and St. Joan of Arc are portrayed riding a horse in defense of their faith. Saint Michael the Archangel is portrayed wielding a sword in the battle with evil. All of these bodily positions and “actions” are meant to inspire devotion and imitation by the devotee. Often imitation takes the form of prayer and devotion to the divine reinforcing the faith of the participants and establishing their membership in the community of the Church.

**Interactions between Object**

This analysis has focused on the possibility of individual objects acting as persons in interaction with living persons by nature of their power to affect the person. The objects on the altar also act together as a group—an assemblage of objects of meaning—that through their relationships with each other affect the person as well. The objects assembled on the altar derive their meaning from contextual associations that draw from collective memory and religious symbolism. For instance, the religious icons acting as a group on the altars, in relation to each other, form a “communion of saints” a phrase taken from the received text of the Apostles’ Creed, "I believe . . . the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints. . ." According to Catholic doctrine, the term “communion of saints” refers to the spiritual solidarity between the faithful on earth and the saints in heaven in unity with the mystical body of the church under Christ its head. The earthly and heavenly realms are therefore in a constant interchange through the objects’ interactions on the altar. Even on Carmen Ruiz’ altar, the single statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in interaction with the other religious items still draws her into
communion with the entire body.

The religious objects on the altars of the participants in this study interact with the biographical, the familial, and the Mexicano to form a whole that affects the actions and mediates the identity of the person. The objects on the altar work together to communicate to the viewers and reinforce the connections they portray—between persons and the Divine, between persons and their relatives living and dead, and between the creators’ past and present life experiences. Interactions among the objects and between objects and persons strengthen those connections and aid in negotiating a sense of the person’s self.

**Cultural Landscape**

Finally, this study moved from the examination of altars and objects in peoples’ homes into the wider environment within which they are embedded. I discovered that the participants in this study and their home altars are positioned in a particular cultural landscape that reinforces personal actions and rituals as well as provides another category of objects that are a part of daily practices. Objects that symbolize the Mexicano and religious heritage of the people of the area are scattered throughout the community in the form of historical sites, public ritual sites, churches, shrines, yard shrines, and public murals. These “objects” were created by Mexicanos to re-present values and beliefs; they serve to sustain and reinforce the cultural memory and ideas of Mexicano heritage. Visiting or even passing by The Alamo or *El Mercado* (The Market Square) evokes narratives of the past. The Mission, San Fernando Cathedral, local Churches and shrines remind people of the long history of the Catholic Church in San Antonio and constitute places of devotion. Murals and artwork on public spaces throughout the city attest to the continued meaningfulness of these symbols in the daily lives of people. Each of these public
displays reflects a particular aspect of what it means to be *Mexicano* in an Anglo dominated setting. Each of the ten participants highlighted in this study named various aspects of the cultural landscape that they were particularly fond of encouraging me to visit them to get a feel for their *Mexicano* influence on San Antonio. They suggested that establishing connections with a cultural landscape also helps in the negotiation of one’s sense of cultural identity as *Mexicano*.

The cultural landscape of San Antonio serves as a reminder of the social and personal memories and histories that are woven around the objects in the community both in official and personal histories and traditions. The power of cultural memory (re)enacted and displayed throughout their community involves the conscious decision to choose particular memories, and to give those memories precedence in activities of daily life on a personal and public level.

**Future Implications**

It has been my contention that *Mexicanos* in San Antonio use traditional religious practices, especially home altars, to negotiate a sense of self and a particular *Mexicano* identity in their complex world. The practice of creating home altars serves as a bridge spanning not only geographic spaces but also connecting people with each other and to the supernatural as well as connecting the past with the present. The traditional practice of creating and using home altars ties a person to the past and establishes them as a member of a community in the present that shapes that person’s identity. Of key importance are the interactions with objects during daily religious rituals conducted at the site of the home altar. Objects, with their capacity to act as persons in interactions with humans, actively participate in the process of identity negotiation.

The information gained about the relationship between identity formation and personal interactions with material culture, especially religious objects and things, offers the opportunity
to understand the powerful and pervasive ways in which people see themselves and the world, organize and evaluate it, and construct their environment with things and ideas that make the world intelligible and familiar to them. This study of the ability of people to choose aspects of their cultural memories to use in the negotiation of a sense of self, and the agency of objects to effect those negotiations, allows us new insights into the study of objects and their cultural engagement with persons. In addition, the study of religious objects in the home adds a new perspective to the analysis of objects as biographical and objects of memory.

These findings can influence studies of identity, the agency of both people and objects, religious material culture used in daily rituals and practices, and the built environment in which they live. Further studies of home altars and the cultural landscape in San Antonio and other *Mexicano* communities may also allow for generalization to wider groups of people. Investigating the material aspects of Catholic religious rituals could be expanded to other Catholic communities, not just immigrant groups, as well as other religious groups. The methods used to investigate religious material culture could also be used to examine other types of objects that have an impact on the negotiation of identity.
APPENDIX A

Interview Guidelines

In-Depth Interview Topics

*Topics relating to religious beliefs in general:*
- Religious Affiliation of members of the household:
- Have you always practiced this religion?
- What church do you attend?
  - How frequently?

*Topics about altars:*
- Do you have a special place in your home for personal devotion?
  - What do you call this place? Do you call it an altar?
  - Where is it? Is it in more than one place?
- How long have you kept an altar in your home?
  - From whom did you learn the tradition of altar making?
  - How far back in your family does this tradition extend?
  - Do you remember seeing or hearing stories about older relatives’ altars?
  - Are altars mostly a tradition of women or of men?
- How do you use this space?
  - Is the altar used for daily devotions?
    - What kinds of prayers do you say here?
    - How and when did you learn these prayers?
  - What is your daily routine? When do you pray at the altar?
    - What else might you do—light candles, burn incense, bring flowers, bring offerings, etc.?
  - Is the altar used for special devotions—novenas, group rosaries, feast day celebrations?
    - How does the use of the altar for special occasions differ from how you use it every day?
  - What special petitions or uses of the altar have you made over the years?
    - How have you made these petitions?
    - Did you promise something in return? *(pilgrimage, milagros)*
      - How was that promise marked?
    - Which saints or Virgins have you petitioned the most?
      - For what reasons?
      - What were the results?
  - Is this place used by other members of the family?
    - Do they use it in the same ways that you do?
- Is your altar dedicated to a particular saint or Virgin?
  - How do you feel about this holy figure?
  - What special qualities does this figure possess?
  - Why is your belief in this particular figure important to you?
- How long has this saint or Virgin been your patron or that of your family?
○ Have you had other patrons?

- How did you acquire this image or statue?
  ○ Has it been in your family, did you receive it as a gift, did you purchase it?
  ○ On what occasion did you receive it or why did you receive it?
  ○ If you purchased it, why did you select this particular holy figure?
  ○ Where you instructed on how to care for it or use it? By whom?

- Who are the other statues or images on your altar?
  ○ How did you acquire them? When? Why these images?

- Do figures on your altar change?

- What other objects are on your altar?
  ○ Where did you get them?
  ○ What do they mean to you? What is their purpose?

- Why are the things on your altar arranged the way they are?
  ○ Have they always been this way?
  ○ Why would they change?

- Why is the home altar tradition important to you?
  ○ Why do you think this tradition of altars in the home is important to Mexican Americans? Do all Mexican Americans have altars?

- Do you know any stories about the saints or Virgin, or have you heard of any miracles they have performed?

**Topics related to Día de los Muertos ofrendas:**

- Is the building of ofrendas traditional in your family?
- Have you yourself built an ofrenda in the past or is this your first one?
  ○ If it is your first ofrenda, why did you decide to build it?
  ○ If this is not your first ofrenda, how many have you constructed and for whom?
- Did you build the altar in honor of someone in particular? More than one person?
- How are they related to you?
- What objects represent the person being honored?
- Why did you select those objects?
  ○ What is the meaning of the object for you? For the person they represent?
  ○ What will you do with these objects after you disassemble the altar, if you do so?
- What have you included anything that is not specific to the person being honored?
  ○ Why did you include those objects?
- What objects might be traditionally seen on all ofrendas?
  ○ Are you aware of the symbolic meaning behind the inclusion of these objects?

**Yard shrines and other outdoor religious displays:**
*Similar to topics above but directed towards objects and meaning of outdoor display.*
**General:**

- What other Mexican Catholic traditions do you practice? How did you learn about them?
- Why do you practice these other traditions?
  - What about your family and friends—do they practice these traditions?
- What other Mexican traditions do you practice? Food, language, piñatas, etc?
  - What about your family and friends?
- What other activities do you enjoy?
- **Would you like to tell me anything else about the home altar tradition? Or about yourself?**

**Botánica Owner Interview**

Conversational-style, open-ended interviews with owners of stores that sell spiritual/religious items would be similar to the topics used for the in-depth interviews but from the perspective of the person providing objects for the altar. Some additional topics could include:

- Do you make suggestions as to what should go on an altar? Based on what?
- Do you prepare items in a particular way?
  - I am thinking here of votive or novena candles.
- Do you give advice on how to care for these items? physically, spiritually?

**Casual Interviews**

*(Similar to topics above but directed towards objects on the body and their meaning. Usually intended as very brief encounter or initial contact for in-depth interview.)*
APPENDIX B

I Am Joaquin
by Rodolfo Corky Gonzales (1972)

Yo soy Joaquín,
perdido en un mundo de confusión:
I am Joaquin, lost in a world of confusion,
captured up in the whirl of a gringo society,
confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,
suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society.
My fathers have lost the economic battle
and won the struggle of cultural survival.
And now! I must choose between the paradox of
victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger,
or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul and a full stomach.
Yes, I have come a long way to nowhere,
unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical,
industrial giant called Progress and Anglo success....
I look at myself.
I watch my brothers.
I shed tears of sorrow. I sow seeds of hate.
I withdraw to the safety within the circle of life --
MY OWN PEOPLE
I am Cuauhtémoc, proud and noble,
leader of men, king of an empire civilized
beyond the dreams of the gachupín Cortés,
who also is the blood, the image of myself.
I am the Maya prince.
I am Nezahualcóyotl, great leader of the Chichimecas.
I am the sword and flame of Cortes the despot
And I am the eagle and serpent of the Aztec civilization.
I owned the land as far as the eye
could see under the Crown of Spain,
and I toiled on my Earth and gave my Indian sweat and blood
for the Spanish master who ruled with tyranny over man and
beast and all that he could trample
But...THE GROUND WAS MINE.
I was both tyrant and slave.
As the Christian church took its place in God's name,
to take and use my virgin strength and trusting faith,
the priests, both good and bad, took--
but gave a lasting truth that Spaniard Indian Mestizo
were all God's children.
And from these words grew men who prayed and fought
for their own worth as human beings, for that
GOLDEN MOMENT of FREEDOM.
I was part in blood and spirit of that courageous village priest
Hidalgo who in the year eighteen hundred and ten
rang the bell of independence and gave out that lasting cry--
El Grito de Dolores
"Que mueran los gachupines y que viva la Virgen de Guadalupe...."
I sentenced him who was me I excommunicated him, my blood.
I drove him from the pulpit to lead a bloody revolution for him and me....
I killed him.
His head, which is mine and of all those
who have come this way,
I placed on that fortress wall
to wait for independence. Morelos! Matamoros! Guerrero!
all companeros in the act, STOOD AGAINST THAT WALL OF INFAMY
to feel the hot gouge of lead which my hands made.
I died with them ... I lived with them .... I lived to see our country free.
Free from Spanish rule in eighteen-hundred-twenty-one.
Mexico was free??
The crown was gone but all its parasites remained,
and ruled, and taught, with gun and flame and mystic power.
I worked, I sweated, I bled, I prayed,
and waited silently for life to begin again.
I fought and died for Don Benito Juarez, guardian of the Constitution.
I was he on dusty roads on barren land as he protected his archives
as Moses did his sacraments.
He held his Mexico in his hand on
the most desolate and remote ground which was his country.
And this giant little Zapotec gave not one palm's breadth
of his country's land to kings or monarchs or presidents of foreign powers.
I am Joaquin.
I rode with Pancho Villa,
crude and warm, a tornado at full strength,
nourished and inspired by the passion and the fire of all his earthy people.
I am Emiliano Zapata.
"This land, this earth is OURLS."
The villages, the mountains, the streams
belong to Zapatistas.
Our life or yours is the only trade for soft brown earth and maize.
All of which is our reward,
a creed that formed a constitution
for all who dare live free!
"This land is ours . . .
Father, I give it back to you.
Mexico must be free. . ."
I ride with revolutionists
against myself.
I am the Rurales,
coarse and brutal,
I am the mountain Indian,
superior over all.
The thundering hoof beats are my horses. The chattering machine guns
are death to all of me:
Yaqui
Tarahumara
Chamala
Zapotec
Mestizo
Español.
I have been the bloody revolution,
The victor,
The vanquished.
I have killed
And been killed.
I am the despots Díaz
And Huerta
And the apostle of democracy,
Francisco Madero.
I am
The black-shawled
Faithfulwomen
Who die with me
Or live
Depending on the time and place.
I am faithful, humble Juan Diego,
The Virgin of Guadalupe,
Tonantzin, Aztec goddess, too.
I rode the mountains of San Joaquin.
I rode east and north
As far as the Rocky Mountains,
And
All men feared the guns of
Joaquin Murrieta.
I killed those men who dared
To steal my mine,
Who raped and killed my love
My wife.
Then I killed to stay alive.
I was Elfego Baca,
living my nine lives fully.
I was the Espinoza brothers
of the Valle de San Luis.
All were added to the number of heads that in the name of civilization
were placed on the wall of independence, heads of brave men
who died for cause or principle, good or bad.
Hidalgo! Zapata!
Murrieta! Espinozas!
Are but a few.
They dared to face
The force of tyranny
Of men who rule by deception and hypocrisy.
I stand here looking back,
And now I see the present,
And still I am a campesino,
I am the fat political coyote—
I,
Of the same name,
Joaquín,
In a country that has wiped out
All my history,
Stifled all my pride,
In a country that has placed a
Different weight of indignity upon my age-old burdened back.
Inferiority is the new load . . .
The Indian has endured and still
Emerged the winner,
The Mestizo must yet overcome,
And the gachupín will just ignore.
I look at myself
And see part of me
Who rejects my father and my mother
And dissolves into the melting pot
To disappear in shame.
I sometimes
Sell my brother out
And reclaim him
For my own when society gives me
Token leadership
In society's own name.
I am Joaquín,
Who bleeds in many ways.
The altars of Moctezuma
I stained a bloody red.
My back of Indian slavery
Was stripped crimson
From the whips of masters
Who would lose their blood so pure
When revolution made them pay,
Standing against the walls of retribution.
Blood has flowed from me on every battlefield between
campesino, hacendado,
slave and master and revolution.
I jumped from the tower of Chapultepec
into the sea of fame—
my country's flag
my burial shroud—
with Los Niños,
whose pride and courage
could not surrender
with indignity
their country's flag
to strangers . . . in their land.
Now I bleed in some smelly cell from club or gun or tyranny.
I bleed as the vicious gloves of hunger
Cut my face and eyes,
As I fight my way from stinking barrios
To the glamour of the ring
And lights of fame
Or mutilated sorrow.
My blood runs pure on the ice-caked
Hills of the Alaskan isles,
On the corpse-strewn beach of Normandy,
The foreign land of Korea
And now Vietnam.
Here I stand
Before the court of justice,
Guilty
For all the glory of my Raza
To be sentenced to despair.
Here I stand,
Poor in money,
Arrogant with pride,
Bold with machismo,
Rich in courage
And
Wealthy in spirit and faith.
My knees are caked with mud.
My hands calloused from the hoe. I have made the Anglo rich,
Yet
Equality is but a word—
The Treaty of Hidalgo has been broken
And is but another treacherous promise.
My land is lost
And stolen,
My culture has been raped.
I lengthen the line at the welfare door
And fill the jails with crime.
These then are the rewards
This society has
For sons of chiefs
And kings
And bloody revolutionists,
Who gave a foreign people
All their skills and ingenuity
To pave the way with brains and blood
For those hordes of gold-starved strangers,
Who
Changed our language
And plagiarized our deeds
As feats of valor
Of their own.
They frowned upon our way of life
and took what they could use.
Our art, our literature, our music, they ignored—
so they left the real things of value
and grabbed at their own destruction
by their greed and avarice.
They overlooked that cleansing fountain of
nature and brotherhood
which is Joaquín.
The art of our great señores,
Diego Rivera,
Siqueiros,
Orozco, is but another act of revolution for
the salvation of mankind.
Mariachi music, the heart and soul
of the people of the earth,
the life of the child,
and the happiness of love.
The corridos tell the tales
of life and death,
of tradition,
legends old and new, of joy
of passion and sorrow
of the people—who I am.
I am in the eyes of woman,
sheltered beneath
her shawl of black,
deep and sorrowful eyes
that bear the pain of sons long buried or dying, 
deaf on the battlefield or on the barbed wire of social strife.
Her rosary she prays and fingers endlessly 
like the family working down a row of beets
to turn around and work and work.
There is no end.
Her eyes a mirror of all the warmth
and all the love for me,
and I am her
and she is me.
We face life together in sorrow,
anger, joy, faith and wishful
thoughts.
I shed the tears of anguish
as I see my children disappear
behind the shroud of mediocrity,
ever to look back to remember me.
I am Joaquín.
I must fight
and win this struggle
for my sons, and they
must know from me
who I am.
Part of the blood that runs deep in me
could not be vanquished by the Moors.
I defeated them after five hundred years,
and I have endured.
Part of the blood that is mine
has labored endlessly four hundred
years under the heel of lustful
Europeans.
I am still here!
I have endured in the rugged mountains
Of our country
I have survived the toils and slavery of the fields.
I have existed
In the barrios of the city
In the suburbs of bigotry
In the mines of social snobbery
In the prisons of dejection
In the muck of exploitation
And
In the fierce heat of racial hatred.
And now the trumpet sounds,
The music of the people stirs the
Revolution.
Like a sleeping giant it slowly
Rears its head
To the sound of
Tramping feet
Clamoring voices
Mariachi strains
Fiery tequila explosions
The smell of chile verde and
Soft brown eyes of expectation for a
Better life.
And in all the fertile farmlands,
the barren plains,
the mountain villages,
smoke-smeared cities,
we start to MOVE.
La raza!
Méjicano!
Español!
Latino!
Chicano!
Or whatever I call myself,
I look the same
I feel the same
I cry
And
Sing the same.
I am the masses of my people and
I refuse to be absorbed.
I am Joaquin.
The odds are great
But my spirit is strong,
My faith unbreakable,
My blood is pure.
I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.
I SHALL ENDURE!
I WILL ENDURE!

Source: http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/latinos/joaquin.htm
### Faith Communities in San Antonio Westside

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roman Catholic Parishes on San Antonio's West Side</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Number of Families</th>
<th>Sunday Attendance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>West Side Corridor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Our Lady of Good Counsel</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1,800</td>
<td>895</td>
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<td>Our Lady of Guadalupe</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1,119</td>
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<td>Sacred Heart</td>
<td>1899</td>
<td>1,386</td>
<td>1,127</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Fernando: San Francesco di Paola</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>353</td>
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<td>San Juan de los Lagos</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>600</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Agnes</td>
<td>1923</td>
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<td>1925</td>
<td>650</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<td>St. Jude</td>
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<td><strong>Total West Side Corridor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Other West Side</strong></td>
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<td>Christ the King</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>694</td>
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<td>Holy Family</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<td>Holy Rosary</td>
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<td>Immaculate Conception</td>
<td>1933</td>
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<td><strong>Immaculate Heart of Mary</strong></td>
<td>1912</td>
<td>292</td>
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<td>2,000</td>
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<td>St. Dominic</td>
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<td>1904</td>
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* Highlighted Parishes indicate large proportional difference between members and Sunday attendance.

Making Connections on San Antonio's West Side: The Neighborhood Transformation/ Family Development Project
Robert R. Brischetto, With the assistance of Victor Azios, Ronaldo Morales, Mary Moreno

For The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Baltimore, MD June 14, 2000
Praying the Rosary & Chaplets

There are numerous places to get instruction on how to pray the rosary. I found a copy of this instruction pamphlet on the website of the Sacred Heart Tri-Parish in Colorado (http://thesacredheartchurch.org/pray_rosary.html). This type of pamphlet is usually available in churches and at religious gift stores or retail outlets. Each chaplet has its own set of prayers.
Prayers of the Rosary to the Blessed Virgin
(In Mexicano communities the prayers are often said in Spanish or alternating with English)

The Sign of the Cross
IN the name of the Father, † and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The Apostles’ Creed
I BELIEVE in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified; died and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day He arose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

The Our Father
OUR FATHER, who art in heaven, hallowed by The name: Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread: and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation: but deliver us from evil. Amen.

The Hail Mary
HAIL MARY, full of grace; the Lord is with Thee: blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the Fruit of Thy Womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Glory be to the Father
Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

The Hail Holy Queen
Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy! Our life, our sweetness, and our hope! To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn, then, most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us; after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus; O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

V: Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.
R: That we may be made worth of the promises of Christ.

Let Us Pray
O God, whose only begotten Son, by His life, death, and resurrection has purchased for us the rewards of eternal life, grant, we beseech Thee, that meditating upon these mysteries in the Most Holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain, and obtain what they promise: through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.
Mysteries of The Rosary
(Recited between decades and chosen by day of the week or special intention)

The Five Joyful Mysteries
Monday & Saturday

   The Annunciation: Humility
   The Visitation: Charity
   The Birth of Our Lord: Poverty, or detachment from the world
   The Presentation of Our Lord: Purity of heart, obedience
   The Finding of Our Lord in the Temple: Piety

The Five Sorrowful Mysteries
Tuesday & Friday

   The Agony in the Garden: Contrition for our sins
   The Scourging at the Pillar: Mortification of our senses
   The Crowning with Thorns: Interior mortification
   The Carrying of the Cross: Patience under crosses
   The Crucifixion and Death of Our Lord: That we may die to ourselves

The Five Glorious Mysteries
Wednesday & Sunday

   The Resurrection: Conversion of heart
   The Ascension: A desire for heaven
   The Coming of the Holy Ghost: The Gifts of the Holy Ghost
   The Assumption of our Blessed Mother into Heaven: Devotion to Mary
   The Coronation of our Blessed Mother: Eternal happiness

The Five Luminous Mysteries
Thursday

   The Baptism in the Jordan
   The Wedding at Cana
   The Proclamation of the Kingdom
   The Transfiguration
   The Institution of the Eucharist
Rosaries & Chaplets for Particular Devotions

Devotions to the Virgin Mary:
- the seven decade Franciscan Crown Rosary representing the seven joys of Mary’s life and the 72 years of her life.
- The Chaplet of Divine Mercy—58 beads On the ten beads are added the words “have mercy on us and on the whole world”
- Seven Sorrows of Mary Rosary contains 52 beads—Seven Mysteries, one Our Father and seven Hail Marys. This is a devotion instituted in the course of the thirteenth century, in honor of the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, endured by her in compassion for the suffering and death of her Divine Son.
- The chaplet of Our Lady of Guadalupe—21 beads Meditation and prayer on the four apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe.
- Crown of Twelve Stars of Our Lady of Mercy Chaplet—17 beads An ancient devotion of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy based on the Book of Revelations (12:1) “And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothes with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”
- Our Lady Star of the Sea—15 beads Stella Maris is the patroness of the men who sail the seas. Saint Bonaventure reminds us that she also “guides to a landfall in heaven those who navigate the sea of this world in the ship of innocence of penance.”
- The Chaplet of the Immaculate Conception—15 beads Composed by St. John Burchmanns, SJ and recited by him daily to obtain, through the intercession of Mary, the grace to never commit any sin against the virtue of purity.

Devotions to the Life and Suffering of Jesus Christ:
- The Stations of the Cross Chaplet—51 beads
- The Chaplet of the Holy Face—39 beads Said in reparation for the offences done to the five senses of Our Lord, Jesus Christ in His passion, and entreats God for the triumph of His Church.
- Beads of the Sacred Heart Chaplet—38 beads (33 representing years of Our Lord’s life) Focuses on the marvels of the Lord’s Love and the inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart.
- Chaplet of the Seven Wounds of Christ—36 beads

Devotions to Saints:
- The Chaplet of Saint Joseph—61 beads, divided into 15 groups of 4 bead, each group for a mystery of the rosary.
- The Chaplet of Saint Michael—40 beads Based on the revelation, the Archangel Michael had told in an apparition to the devoted Servant of God that he would like to be honored, and God glorified, by praying of nine special invocations. These nine invocations correspond to the nine choirs of angels: Cherubim, Seraphim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.
- The Chaplet of Saint Therese—25 beads Little Flower Rosary commemorating the 24 years of St. Therese’s life.
- The Chaplet of St. Patrick—12 beads Through the intercession of St. Patrick, may God Almighty strengthen one’s faith, and grant the grace of faith for others.
• The Chaplet of St. Jude—9 beads This chaplet has 9 beads with a Saint Jude medal at one end and a crucifix at the other. Saint Jude has been asked to intercede in hopeless causes.

Devotions for Special Causes or Intentions:
• The Chaplet of Conversion—33 beads Five sets of 5 bead separated by a bead. Requested by Our Blessed Mother for the conversion of the souls of the world in these times that are serious and urgent.
• The Serenity Pray Chaplet—12 Steps—12 beads Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the prayer for use in a sermon around 1934. The prayer was circulated by the Federal Council of Churches and later by the United States Armed Forces. The prayer is more widely known after being brought to the attention of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1941 by an early member.

There are also the Good Deed Beads of Saint Therese (10 beads). These are large beads that are meant to be hung on the kitchen wall, perhaps with your key rings. Every time you do a good deed you take it down off the wall and move the bead to keep track of your good deeds.
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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING SACRED OBJECTS AND THEIR MEANINGS IN CATHOLIC MEXICANO HOUSEHOLDS: DOMESTIC RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN SAN ANTONIO

by

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Major: Anthropology
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Anthropological literature in the study of material culture argues that person/object interactions are important to the construction and maintenance of social relations and personal identity both in the present and through time. It is through relationships and interactions with things that people come to “know who they are” (Tilley 2007). This line of thinking has led some Latino studies scholars to propose that the retention of traditional aspects of culture, such as religious practices, often serves as a way of negotiating personal or cultural identity in an ever changing social milieu (Sandoval 2006, Aponte and De La Torre 2006). This paper explores the relationships formed with the objects used on traditional home altars in the Catholic Mexicano community of San Antonio, Texas to demonstrate how objects help maintain connections with past and present religious, personal, and cultural traditions and identities.

Traditionally Catholics of Mexican descent have relied on home based devotions such as home altars therefore the objects used on these altars are charged with sacred meanings. The objects chosen for use on the altars are also imbued with very personal meanings. Objects once considered ordinary “commodities,” are transformed into “inalienable” possessions closely
associated with particular persons who are remembered on the altar (Weiner 1994). Objects in this way are given “biographical” meanings of personal identity (Hoskins 1998). The assemblage of culturally-determined objects on the home altar provides not only a sacred space for devotion but also a space to display and renew personal relationships and social and ethnic identity. The objects on the altar represent aspects of the user’s negotiated self identity: religious, personal, and cultural.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

MARY E. DUROCHER

Mary E. Durocher is a cultural anthropologist with research interests in religious belief systems, material culture, life narratives, and identity. Fieldwork sites include Detroit; San Antonio, Texas; Benin, West Africa; and Santiago de Cuba, Cuba. She received a M.A. and a B.A. with honors from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. As a graduate student, she served three years as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and later as adjunct faculty teaching General Education Anthropology courses and developed several new religion courses. She also participated in Wayne State’s Office of Teaching & Learning Summer Institute on Online Learning to develop new online General Education courses. As coordinator of the Anthropology Department Material Culture Lab, her responsibilities included organizing, cataloging, and coordinating use of the materials used in the teaching of anthropology. Ms. Durocher has published several co-authored articles on aging and material culture and two co-authored book chapters in the interdisciplinary work “Nobody’s Burden: Lessons from the Great Depression on Old Age Security.” She has also delivered presentations at professional conferences on themes related to her dissertation.

Prior to graduate school Ms. Durocher was co-founder and partner for fifteen years in the public relations firm of Durocher & Company, Inc. (later Durocher-Dixson-Werba, LLC) where her duties included office management, production assistance, and financial research.