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**“How Do We Help Everybody Heal?”  
Implications of Guadalupan Devotion at Dolores Mission Parish**

*Jennifer Owens-Jofré*  
*Seminary of the Southwest, Austin*

Throughout her work, Ada María Isasi-Díaz often wrote of her experience of “invisible invisibility” as a Latina woman—not simply of being ignored, but of being totally ignored.<sup>1</sup> She wrote of the impact such invisible invisibility can have on the psyche, of the way it can lead to “question[ing] not only the value of our specificity, but the very reality of it.”<sup>2</sup> She also spoke of the impact of what some scholars now describe as microaggressions, or “underhanded slights that assault the souls of oppressed groups.”<sup>3</sup> She described one microaggression she often heard from her White feminist counterparts, who would say, “I don’t think of you as Latina,” which she perceived as negating her very essence. Invisible invisibility takes many forms, of which this microaggression is just one.

This article explores the nature of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe at Dolores Mission Catholic Parish in Los Angeles, as well as its function among her devotees there.<sup>4</sup> It explores the

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<sup>1</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Toward an Understanding of Feminismo Hispano,” in *Women’s Consciousness, Women’s Conscience*, ed. Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Christine Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (Minneapolis: Winston-Seabury Press, 1985), 51-61.

<sup>2</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Viva la Diferencia!” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 99.

<sup>3</sup> Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber, *Microaggressions in Ministry: Confronting the Hidden Violence of Everyday Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Dolores Mission Church is in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles in East Los Angeles. The parish serves its community with an array of religious, social, and economic resources.

impact of that devotion on perceptions of gender within the community as well as on the faith-based activism in which members of the community engage. While I did interview some men for this project, my focus is the experience of the women, especially the lay women leaders in the community, all of whom are Latina. It is a humble attempt to make visible what is largely invisible to those outside the parish and the neighborhood. As Ellie, one of the women I interviewed, put it, many of the women in the parish do not have access to the resources they need to attend college or university, yet they have many gifts to offer, gifts that often go unrecognized in other contexts, gifts made visible in the context of volunteer leadership in the parish.<sup>5</sup> This article makes visible the women's devotion as well as its implications for perceptions of gender and for faith-based community organizing.

While I originally gathered this data almost four years ago and analyzed it in the early stages of my dissertation writing, I see the data and its interpretation as important for today because they shed light on the insights grassroots Latina women have about the practice of their faith: insights like theirs are, at best, still underrepresented in theological construction. Making space for those insights—beyond the boundaries of the parish community of which the women leaders of Dolores Mission are an integral part—can help those who are not members of that community see more clearly not only the women's gifts for devotion and leadership, but also how their devotion and leadership serve healing and liberative functions in the parish and in the neighborhood.

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<sup>5</sup> Ellie Hidalgo, interview by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, via telephone, October 23, 2017.

## Problem Statement

While my intention here is hardly to rehearse the vast literature on Guadalupe, Chicana feminism, and related subjects, I will underline salient issues in the debates among Chicana feminist scholars as they are pertinent to *marianismo* in the context of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In brief, Chicana feminist scholars like Anna NietoGómez and Ana Castillo express concern that devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe necessarily breeds gender-based oppression.<sup>6</sup> Although Ana Castillo concedes in her later writings that there are instances in which the opposite could be true of Guadalupan devotion, major thinkers from Chicana feminist literature on the topic often problematize devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, citing concerns about sexism in their arguments.<sup>7</sup> I bore these concerns in mind when I determined the two questions that drove the research behind this article: How does devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe function in Dolores Mission parish community? What impact does this devotion have on perceptions of gender and on faith-based community organizing?

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<sup>6</sup> Anna NietoGómez, "La Chicana—Legacy of Suffering and Self-Denial," in *Scene 8*, no. 1 (1995): 22-4; Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (New York: Plume, 1995), 117.

<sup>7</sup> NietoGómez, "La Chicana," 49; Norma Alarcón, "Tradduttora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism." *Cultural Critique* 13 (Autumn 1989), 58-9; Norma Alarcón, "Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzín/or Malintzín: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press: New York, 1983), 187; Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (New York: Plume, 1995), 109; Laura Pérez, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 259. Pérez notes that Chicana feminist artists often have reinterpreted Our Lady of Guadalupe in feminist terms, largely in response to the charges of patriarchal manipulation of her image.

## Methods

### *Epistemology*

I employ a constructivist epistemological framework in my research. Within this approach, researchers and participants construct meaning mutually: the interaction between at least two people builds meaning.<sup>8</sup> Two people looking at the same phenomenon may construct meaning about it in radically different ways but still have valuable contributions to make in the meaning-making process. This notion is particularly important in considering the perspectives on Guadalupan devotion that the women of Dolores Mission shared with me because it allows me to tap into the multivalence of these perspectives.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a constructivist framework undergirds the importance of further conversation with the women of Dolores Mission to understand whether or not the way I am interpreting the perspectives they shared with me is accurate; this return to the women interviewed is a hallmark of Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz's method.

### *Methodology*

The methodology I employ is grounded theory. Initiated by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, grounded theory does not attempt to map the theories of other academicians onto the experience of the community; rather, it allows the experience of those who participate in the research to speak for itself, to the extent that that is possible. It is an inductive method of analysis that works wholly from gathered data to move from data to code to theme to category to theory. Particularly pertinent is the fact that grounded theory allows one to generalize within the sample collected, but not beyond it.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspectives in the Research Process*. (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 9.

### *Methods*

I utilize primarily two qualitative research methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation, writes qualitative researcher Danny Jorgeson, “aims to generate practical and theoretical truths about human life grounded in the realities of daily existence.”<sup>10</sup> Jorgeson explains that the method of participant observation is particularly helpful (1) when there is little research in the field on the issue being studied; (2) when the perspectives of those within the community and those outside it differ significantly; (3) when the issue being studied is not immediately visible to those outside the community; or (4) when the issue being studied is actively being hidden from those outside the community.

On the issue of Guadalupan devotion among women at Dolores Mission, I opted to use participant observation, especially in relation to the novena in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, because of Jorgeson’s second and third points. Anecdotally, I have encountered a number of stereotypes about Guadalupan devotion when White Catholics or White feminists ask about my work. Often, the person who holds the stereotype (e.g., “They are worshipping her,” “Those women are oppressed”) has not had significant exposure to the community that holds dear the practices I observed at Dolores Mission. Some aspects of Guadalupan devotion, like the procession on December 12—the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Catholic Church—are quite public, with a procession through the streets immediately in front of the parish church, while others, like the preceding nights of the novena that take place inside the church, are not visible to the public.

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<sup>10</sup> Danny L. Jorgeson, *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 14.

For the study, I conducted participant observation of the novena in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 3-11, 2015) as well as of a planning meeting for the novena, which Rosa facilitated and in which the heads of all the Christian Base Communities at the parish participated (November 23, 2015).<sup>11</sup> I also attended the celebrations in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the morning and afternoon of December 12, 2015. In addition, I attended Mass at the parish on all four Sundays of Advent, on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and on the Feast of the Holy Family (November 29, 2015; December 6, 2015; December 12, 2015; December 13, 2015; December 20, 2015; and December 27, 2015).

To gather the interviews, I used snowball sampling and purposive sampling. In snowball sampling, participants refer the researcher to other persons who they think might be willing to participate in the study.<sup>12</sup> In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on particular characteristics they possess.<sup>13</sup> Here I used a combination of these two sampling styles, asking leaders in the community whom I already had interviewed if they could recommend other members of the community based on their devotion to Guadalupe or their involvement in related ministries at the parish. Due to the style of sampling I used, the findings of this study are generalizable within the sample but not beyond it. However, they can contribute to conversation

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<sup>11</sup> A novena is a nine-day long experience of prayer, in which those who are praying ask for special graces. The name “novena” comes from the Latin for the number nine. One of the legacies of liberation theologies emerging from Latin American contexts, Christian base communities (CBCs) are small gatherings of the faithful who reflect on Scripture in light of their lived experiences in an ongoing way. At Dolores Mission, this tradition continues, with members of the CBCs also allowing their reflection on Scripture to guide the ministerial efforts they organize.

<sup>12</sup> Kristin Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 149.

<sup>13</sup> Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*, 131.

about theory on devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. That theory, however, is not generalizable beyond the boundaries of the sample collected.

During the first stage of the study, which ran from late November of 2015 until early January of 2016, I aimed to conduct interviews with fifteen people. I spoke with fourteen people altogether, twelve women and two men. Of the twelve women, four serve as lay ecclesial ministers who work at the parish (as pastoral associate, pastoral assistant, parish secretary and director of religious education, and youth minister), one directs the Guadalupe Homeless Project,<sup>14</sup> and seven serve as volunteers in varying capacities within the parish community. Three of the volunteers self-identified as homemakers and four of them work outside the home: one running her own beauty salon, another working in the accounting office at Homeboy Industries,<sup>15</sup> the third serving as a program coordinator for a local social service agency, and the fourth doing independent contract work as an interpreter. The two men served as associate pastors at the parish at the time. Although the pastor was willing to meet with me, we were unable to connect for an appointment during the time I was on site. Of the fourteen interviews, seven were conducted in Spanish, six were conducted in English, and one was conducted in both languages. The majority of the interviews were conducted on the parish grounds, usually in the interviewee's office or in a multipurpose room. Two women invited me into their homes near the parish when I asked to interview them, and I conducted one interview in a participant's beauty

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<sup>14</sup> The Guadalupe Homeless Project has been providing meals and overnight shelter at Dolores Mission Church to men facing homelessness for the last three decades. It has recently begun to shelter older women in response to an increase in homelessness among this population.

<sup>15</sup> Homeboy Industries, born at Dolores Mission and now an independent nonprofit, works with, and provides work for gang members. Its intervention and rehabilitation efforts have become widely known through the book *Tattoos on the Heart* by its founder, Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle.



salon before she opened her shop for the day. I conducted two interviews by phone after I had returned to the San Francisco Bay Area, where I was living at the time.

The heart and second stage of this study took place from late November 2016 until mid-February 2017, during which time I lived with a family with whom I had connected through the parish. Humberto, who had served as a music minister at Dolores Mission for many years, and Maru, who works in the administrative offices at Homeboy Industries, head the family that opened its home to me during those months.<sup>16</sup> I had interviewed Maru during the pilot study, and after the interview had ended, she and I spoke at length about questions she had for me. We talked about everything from our common Catholic faith to the Movement for Black Lives, which was active in both the cities we called home. By the time she had finished interviewing me, both of us were in tears, and she had invited me to stay with her family should I return to the community for further conversation in the months ahead.

Shortly before I determined that I would, in fact, return to Boyle Heights, I reached out to Maru, and she, Humberto, and I worked out the terms of my stay with her family. During those three and a half months, I lived in the family's guest room and the couple and their two adult sons welcomed me into their daily routine, even inviting to me to join their extended family for a Christmas celebration. Maru and I often visited with one another during our morning routines, bumping into one another while making *avena* (oatmeal) and listening to a CD of praise songs to Our Lady of Guadalupe that one of the sons, Erick, had given Maru as a gift some time before. Erick took over as director of music ministry after his father retired and Maru sang in the choir.

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<sup>16</sup> The name of the parish, its associated nonprofit organization, the gang recovery program, and their respective employees, are real. I have consent forms signed by all participants in this study, granting me permission to use their given names, but in some cases I have used pseudonyms.

Conversation over weeknight dinners often turned to topics related to music ministry at Dolores Mission.

Throughout my time in East Los Angeles, I continued my participant observation of the Dolores Mission community and re-interviewed all the participants in the first stage of this study as well as thirteen new interviewees. Twenty-seven people participated in total. Sociologist Kristen Luker uses the term *ethnography* and the term *participant observation* almost interchangeably, and she explains that the focus of the observation involved in such work is on building theory. One factor differentiating the two terms has to do with length of time in the field. As Luker puts it, "If you get to go home at night, it's participant observation, and if you don't, it's ethnography."<sup>17</sup> Another consideration is the length of time spent in the community. Because ethnographies tend to be years-long endeavors, I describe my work at the parish as participant observation. I went to someone else's home each night, but I did so for a little less than six non-consecutive months. To my mind, that does not qualify this study as an ethnographic one.

Twenty-seven people participated in the in-depth interviews I conducted in the winter of 2016-2017. I conducted follow-up interviews with the fourteen participants from the first stage of the study and expanded the sample to include other lay women in the parish who have a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the pastor of Dolores Mission parish, the music minister, the founder of Homeboy Industries, and two Jesuit priests who serve there. I spoke informally with my tour guide at Homeboy and he signed a consent form that allows me to write about our conversation that day. Of the twenty-seven interviews conducted, thirteen were conducted in Spanish and fourteen in English. In the pre-interview conversation with the participants, I asked

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<sup>17</sup> Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*, 156.

them to let me know in what language they would be most comfortable conducting the interview, as several of the interviewees were bilingual. Twenty women gave me permission to interview them and I interviewed seven men, also with their permission. All the women are lay women involved in the parish and two of those twenty women are on the pastoral team at the parish. Six of the men are Jesuits (five priests and one deacon), and one is a lay man. Two of the Jesuit priests, the Jesuit deacon, and the lay man are on the pastoral team at the parish. The findings that follow are based on an analysis of the interviews conducted. I organized the themes I found in the data during the eight weeks I allotted for coding into two sections: one dealing with physical healing and another dealing with emotional healing, drawing on the work of a scholar of religious studies and a theologian to understand them better.

This decision to put the themes emerging from the data in dialogue with the work of these scholars is a point of departure from the writings of Isasi-Díaz, who used an emic approach, which interprets the data from the perspective of the community being studied. I used a combination of an emic approach and an etic approach, which interprets the data from the perspective of those outside the community in question. Isasi-Díaz's use of an emic approach prompted her dialogue with members of the community about her findings. Although I did go back to the community to ask two key contacts there about my findings, I was not able to follow up with all interviewees during the week I spent in Los Angeles in October of 2017. Dialogue with a few of the participants is not sufficient to justify a fully emic approach, even if my intention had been to use that approach. Because I fell short of that goal, I put the findings I have in dialogue with the theoretical perspectives of Robert Orsi and Orlando Espín.

## Findings

The primary theme that emerged from the data has to do with types of healing: physical healing associated with Our Lady of Guadalupe as well as inner or emotional healing as a result of devotion to her. That emotional, inner healing is often connected with faith-based community organizing. In this section, I treat the two themes separately. In the first instance, I draw on the work of historian and ethnographer Robert Orsi to make sense of the physical healing narratives. In the second instance, I draw on the work of theologian Orlando Espín to flesh out the connection between emotional healing and community liberation. I define emotional healing here as the psychological resilience the women experience as a result of their devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. I define community liberation as action taken in the neighborhood surrounding the parish that leads to restorative justice. *Las caminatas por la paz*—"the peace walks"—which are all at once commemorations, devotional processions, and constructive protest<sup>18</sup>—are a prime example of this connection between emotional healing and community liberation. I use Espín's epistemological network of suffering as a frame for my findings on the topic.

### *Using Orsi's Third Way to Interpret Guadalupan Devotion at Dolores Mission*

One of the foremost experts on the history of American Catholicism, Robert Orsi brings together methods from history and from sociology to examine the lived experience of Catholics in the United States. Orsi currently holds the Grace Craddock Nagle Chair of Catholic Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. While his early work, especially *Thank You, St. Jude* and *The Madonna of 115th Street*, bridged history and ethnography to tell of the lived

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<sup>18</sup> See below in the section on popular religion, suffering, and Orlando Espín's approach.

experience of Italian Catholics in New York and Chicago,<sup>19</sup> Orsi's later and more recent work, including *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* and *History and Presence*, explores the empirical methods he uses in religious studies.<sup>20</sup> I use his work here for its utility in capturing the complexity in relationships between human and divine beings.

Traditionally, in religious studies scholarship, two approaches to what research participants describe as miraculous have dominated the discourse. The first is to pathologize the participants: explaining the experience of the miraculous with the language of psychology enables us to explain why a person is, for instance, mentally unwell or delusional. The second approach, more apparently sympathetic, is often described as a functionalist approach. A functionalist approach suspends disbelief long enough to acknowledge that the experience in question is true for the person telling of it. It then asks the question, "What function does this experience serve in the life of this individual?" At the very least, this second approach enables the researcher to withhold judgment on the question at hand.<sup>21</sup> The latter approach informed the formulation of my research questions.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Harold Morales, "El Cristo Guatemalteco de Baltimore: Theorizing 'Presence' in Transnational Ways of Being-in-the-World," paper presented at the Religion in the Americas Program Unit, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, November 20, 2017, Boston, Massachusetts.

After I had formulated my research questions and while I was examining the resulting material, Orsi published *History and Presence*, which offers a third approach to such questions.<sup>22</sup> Rather than psychologize away the experience of research participants or take an arguably condescending stand that allows the experience to be real “for them,” Orsi posits the possibility that humans and divine beings interact with one another in everyday circumstances. Taking for granted the realness of such encounters, Orsi writes of the crux of the issue in this way:

To understand any experience, including an experience of real presence, involves relationality, conversation, doubt, and ambiguity. It entails tracking back and forth between one life and other lives. ... No life is so thoroughly embedded in given structures of meaning, discourse, and power as to be fully accounted for by them, just as meaning, discourse, and power are rarely hermetic, coherent, unidirectional, and stable.<sup>23</sup>

Embracing a posture of epistemological humility, Orsi grants that a complex matrix of interpretation supports the meaning-making project and that this matrix is particularly pertinent to encounters between humans and special or divine beings.

Narratives of physical healing were commonplace in the testimonies accompanying the nine nights of the novena in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In addition, several lay women in the parish spoke of physical healings they attributed to *la Morenita* during their interviews. Further, at the celebration in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, 2016, the pastor of Dolores Mission, Fr. Ted, said to the congregation after the closing prayer, "We often like to

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<sup>22</sup> See n. 20 above.

<sup>23</sup> Orsi, *History and Presence*, 61.

talk about the miracles of Our Lady of Guadalupe, but Mary wants to bring us closer to her son, and we know about his miracles from the Gospels."<sup>24</sup> That the pastor of the parish felt the need to remind those gathered there of the orthodox approach to miracles in Catholic teaching is telling of what could be happening in conversations taking place among the parishioners at Dolores Mission.

I will highlight here three narratives related to physical healing: from Eugenia, Erick, and Elena.<sup>25</sup> Each exemplifies a different approach to physical healing. Eugenia's story exemplifies faith in a healing that is on its way. Erick's story is one that appreciates the faith of others for the healing that has happened. And Elena's story tells of a healing that has happened.

First, as Eugenia put it,

*pues creo que cualquier problema o algo que uno tiene pues va y le pide. El, cuando nos toca el rosario, a mi me toca un ministerio como le dicen un y a otra persona otro y a otra otro y así, en el rosario. Y cuando y allí cuando estamos en eso allí, le pedimos, es por esto, por el otro, y yo cuando los hice ahora que nos toca, yo lo hice en secreto, pero le estaba poniendo a mi hermana porque ella ya estaba en el hospital. Sí.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Phrasing taken from my field notes of December 12, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> I refer to the two women using their pseudonyms.

<sup>26</sup> Eugenia, structured interview by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, December 20, 2016. Eugenia preferred to speak in Spanish. My translation of her words is: "Well, I believe that whatever problem or issue that you have, well, go and ask her [about it]. When we say the rosary, to me, it is a ministry, like they say, one to another, this way, of the rosary. And when ... we are in that over there, we ask her, it is for this, for that, and when I do it now, we say it, I do it in secret, but I was saying it for my sister because she is still in the hospital. Yes."

In this way, Eugenia tells us that her sister is still in the hospital and that she (Eugenia) is saying the rosary in secret, in hopes that her sister will be healed.

Second, Erick told of his father's healing and the appreciation he showed Our Lady for that healing through the erection of a statue in her honor in the backyard of their family home. He described it this way:

The other one I know of is when my own dad got sick a couple of years ago, or several years ago ... He attributes a lot of his healing to Our Lady of Guadalupe, too. ... In our back yard there's a statue like a little shrine to Our Lady. And he built that, I guess, as a thank you ... I don't know if he had a *manda*. I haven't heard any stories of my dad having a *manda* or anything like that. but you know, he erected that shrine as a sign of gratitude and I guess, a veneration because, like I said, he attributes a lot of his healing to her ... her intercession, her power.<sup>27</sup>

In this instance, the speaker is silent about his own perspective on the physical healing, but he expresses appreciation and respect for what is true for others. In this way, he embodies the functionalist approach to such physical healings.

Third, Elena testifies to the physical healing of a family member in this way:

*Yo pienso que si porque mi yo no sé la fe de mi hermano, la fe de mi hermano es muy grande. Yo tengo un sobrino que el antes era monaguillo de aquí de la iglesia y el estaba muy grave de le dio leucemia y yo siempre a ella le pido, le pedía por el por su salud, por su salud. Y el está con vida, esta con su tratamiento*

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<sup>27</sup> Structured interview with Erick by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, January 12, 2017. Earlier in the interview, Erick explained that a *manda* is an agreement between Our Lady of Guadalupe and the devotee that the devotee will make a pilgrimage to see her, for example, if the prayer request is granted.



*de leucemia. Tiene ya yo creo tres años con su tratamiento y el es muy joven. El tiene diez y nueve años, el es muy joven. Diez y siete o diez y ocho años. El es muy joven. Y este al como lo vimos al punto de la muerte a como lo veo ahora pienso que es un milagro de Dios y de la Virgen de Guadalupe que el está vivo. Sí.*<sup>28</sup>

Neither a booming voice from the clouds nor a clap of lightning, but rather a combination of the handiwork of God and of Our Lady of Guadalupe alongside his leukemia treatment has sustained the life of Elena's nephew.

Orsi's hermeneutical approach allows for the kind of diversity and the kind of complexity one encounters in these three ways of relating to physical healing narratives. He hardly encourages a once-and-for-all interpretation of what is happening in the richness of these narratives. Rather, he allows them to speak in their complexity, encouraging those who interpret them to learn from that complexity, rather than trying to make it out to be something neater and more easily understood than it actually is in its lived reality.

#### *Espín's Popular Religion as Epistemological Practice of Suffering*

Orlando Espín has been a leading voice in systematic theology from Latinoa perspectives for a generation. He writes on Catholic theology from a Latino perspective, especially on topics related to traditioning and Tradition and popular Catholicism. His major works include *The Faith*

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<sup>28</sup> Structured interview with Elena by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, January 15, 2017. I translate Elena's words this way: "I think yes, because, as for me, I don't know, but the faith of my brother ... is very great. I have a nephew who was an altar boy before here at the church, and he was very seriously ill, he had leukemia, and I always asked her [Our Lady of Guadalupe] for his health. And he is alive, he is, with his leukemia treatment. He still has it, I think, three years [he has been doing this] treatment, and he is very young. He is nineteen years old ... seventeen or eighteen years old. He is very young. And this, [from] being at the point of death to being as I see him now, I think this is a miracle of God and of Our Lady of Guadalupe that he is alive. Yes."

*of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism, Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope*, and *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*.<sup>29</sup> I chose to engage Espín's work here because of the breadth of his influence in Latinoa theology on the topic of popular Catholicism and because of the utility of his notion of an epistemological network of suffering for the examination of my findings.

After a close reading of Orlando Espín's chapter "Popular Religion as an Epistemology (of Suffering)" in *The Faith of the People*,<sup>30</sup> I use Espín's epistemological network of Latinoa popular religion as a frame through which to view preliminary findings from my study at Dolores Mission. In conversation with the women of Dolores Mission, I learned of *las caminatas por la paz*—the peace walks—which the women initiated in the 1990s, when gang violence in the neighborhood was at its height. These *caminatas* are nonviolent walks through the neighborhood culminating in the celebration of Mass on the site where a member of the community has died as a result of violence. Following Espín, I argue that the expression of popular religion—of popular Catholicism in particular—that *las caminatas por la paz* embody is a sophisticated way of making meaning of the reality of the violence to which members of the parish are exposed. Further, I assert that, in the instance of *las caminatas por la paz*, this particular practice not only makes meaning of suffering but also contributes to the process of individual and communal healing.

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<sup>29</sup> Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Orlando O. Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), and Orlando O. Espín, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology* (Malden, MA, Oxford, UK, and Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Espín, *The Faith of the People*.

In fleshing out his notion of Latinao popular religion as an epistemology of suffering, Espín writes of the epistemological network of Latinao popular religion.<sup>31</sup> He explains that a network shares data across “interconnected nodes” of communication.<sup>32</sup> These nodes within the epistemological network of Latinao popular religion can be understood as belonging to four categories: beliefs, ethical expectations, rites, and experiences.<sup>33</sup> Each node of the epistemological network mutually enriches the other. For Espín, these four nodes are the conditions of Latinao living as well as its results, constituent of *experiencia*.<sup>34</sup>

Citing statistics that speak to this reality, Espín explains that “Latinos in the United States do suffer, and they suffer as the group at the bottom of this society’s ladder.”<sup>35</sup> He is quick to note that his exploration of this question of suffering is not a justification for suffering, but rather an exploration of how Latinx individuals and communities make meaning of it. In doing so, he reminds us of the apparently paradoxical way in which many of the Latinx faithful speak of the will of God and of the need to fight against that will when it causes suffering. “In other words,” Espín writes, “God both chooses to permit evil and chooses to empower us to stand against it. Furthermore, it seems that there is an explicit effort, on the part of Latinos, not to simply accept the will of God but to actively seek to change it when it appears to be unfair!”<sup>36</sup> Espín tells us

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<sup>31</sup> Espín, 163.

<sup>32</sup> Espín, 163.

<sup>33</sup> Espín, 163-165.

<sup>34</sup> Espín, 164.

<sup>35</sup> Espín, 166.

<sup>36</sup> Espín, 168.

that Latinx folks “suffer *latinamente*” when (1) they draw on religious resources to explain their suffering, and (2) they challenge that suffering through popular religious means.<sup>37</sup>

*Viewing las Caminatas in Light of Espín’s Theory*

I use Espín’s epistemological network of Latino popular religion (beliefs, ethical expectations, rites, and experiences) to frame my findings.<sup>38</sup> First, Espín breaks down beliefs into three categories: beliefs “ about God and the sphere of the Sacred (e.g. *Virgenes* and saints); about life (human and otherwise) and living; and about human social and familial roles.”<sup>39</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will focus on beliefs about one of the many *Virgenes*, Our Lady of Guadalupe, about life and living, and about human social and familial roles.

While the twenty-seven participants in this study have each have a unique relationship with Our Lady of Guadalupe, they all agreed on two things: (1) she and Mary the Mother of God are one and the same and (2) Mary/Guadalupe has a positive impact on their lives. In looking at Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Marian apparition, it is important to note that the women in this research have an organic way of relating to her. Gloria describes this phenomenon as the same *Virgen* with different mantles.<sup>40</sup> As she put it, “It’s always Our Lady of Guadalupe, you can see (motioning to her necklace, which bears an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe), I always have her with me ... And she takes priority. But then there’s the Immaculate Conception, there’s the Assumption of Mary, and so we celebrate her with different mantles.”<sup>41</sup> Another participant,

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<sup>37</sup> Espín, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Espín, 163-5.

<sup>39</sup> Espín, 163.

<sup>40</sup> “Gloria” is a pseudonym.

<sup>41</sup> Structured interview with Gloria by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, January 7, 2016.

Alma, who lost her husband to illness several years before our interview, described the positive impact her relationship has had on her life in this way:

It's one of the best relationships someone could have, I just think it's a marvelous thing. I feel [her] very close to us, so it's beautiful. Being that I am single, and I don't have a husband, or I don't feel afraid or need of having other relationships... Why, if I have her? She's the only one I can count on, the only person I can talk to, so to me it's the most beautiful relationship. Woman to woman, carrying [each other's burdens], no worries.<sup>42</sup>

In both these quotations, we see the kind of intimacy that characterizes the women's relationships with *la Morenita*.

Beliefs about life and living focused on the theme that individual healing is not possible without communal healing from structural violence. For many of the women at Dolores Mission, the two types of healing are interrelated. As the young people in the neighborhood, through the opportunities made available through Homeboy Industries, engage the economic structures that prevent them from having access to meaningful work, they now have work in which they can invest. Further, through the services the organization provides (e.g. therapy, legal aid, GED preparation), homies and homegirls are able not only to work toward individual healing, but to prepare themselves to exercise their agency more fully within those existing structures, addressing the structural violence in these systems as they and their neighbors feel called.

Beliefs about human social and familial roles among interviewees focused on perceptions of gender, especially on the notion of husband as head of household. In conversation with women in the community who were married and who had felt called by the community into

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<sup>42</sup> Structured interview with Alma by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, January 12, 2017.

ministry, this theme was prominent. For example, when I asked Rosa about how she came into the leadership role she currently plays at the parish, she had this to say about the role her relationship with her husband had in making the decision: "*Mi esposo es la cabeza en el hogar. Tengo mucho el apoyo de mi esposo, él siempre me estaba animando, 'Tú puedes. Házlo. No tengas miedo.'*"<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Rita spoke of her husband in this way:

My husband is one of the main people that has supported me, through all my age [sic], I was a community organizer here at Dolores Mission for close to about ten years. And he supported me with that, and I have been doing this kind of work [with] survivors of violent crime. I started working with it in 2008, and last year actually [I began] working here in this new ministry. So he's been really supportive and allowed me to go to [the] prison; I used to [work with] the group with men and women [there], now I only do with men.<sup>44</sup>

In both instances, a common theme emerges of a wife going to a husband for support in making a decision about work outside the home. In both instances, the wife regards her husband as head of the household, but also as a source of support. These descriptions call to mind the attempts of some scholars to retrieve *machismo* in productive ways—namely, looking to the head of the household as the head of an extended family who offers the kind of support described above and guidance in decision-making.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Structured interview with Rosa by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, December 2015. My translation of her Spanish is: "My husband is head of the household. I have a lot of support from my husband. He was always encouraging me, 'You can [do it]. Do it. Don't be afraid.'"

<sup>44</sup> Structured interview with Rita by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, via telephone, January 2016.

<sup>45</sup> See Fernando A. Ortiz and Kenneth G. Davis, "*Machismo*," in *Hispanic American Religious Cultures*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 339.

In Espín's second category, ethical expectations, several of the participants who reported participation in *las caminatas por la paz* voiced an ethical expectation that is born of and reflects principles of restorative justice. As Valerie Miles-Tribble has written, "Restorative justice is rooted in a mutuality of righting wrongs as an ethical alternative to punitive blame that simplistically disregards more complex underlying factors of wrongdoing for each party involved."<sup>46</sup> The parish's pastoral associate (the lay ecclesial minister on staff who works closely with the pastor to lead the parish) described it this way:

So in this case, the action to eliminate gangs could have been done with the perspective of demonizing the gang members and trying to just kick people out and giving up on people who had made wrong choices. Instead the action was done with the idea of, how do we bring healing into peoples' lives, both those who have committed crimes and those who have been victims of crime? How do we bring healing to everybody? How do we create an off-ramp to gang activity? How do we show young people that there's another path that they could get out of this and they could develop better lives? So I'm just so grateful to this community that its prayer has always led them to think holistically, and to think about including everybody. So when people say *m'ija*, *m'ijo*,<sup>47</sup> it means everybody,

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<sup>46</sup> Valerie Miles-Tribble, "Restorative Justice as a Public Theology Imperative," *Review and Expositor* 114 no. 3: 371.

<sup>47</sup> Affectionate and familiar terms for younger people with whom one is in relationship, literally "my daughter," "my son."

even the young boy who's stolen a bicycle and is (laughs) vandalizing and/or doing graffiti. It's like, how do we get him back on track?<sup>48</sup>

A spirit of inclusion marks this ethical expectation.

In Espín's third category, rites, the women of the community have crafted a rite—*las caminatas por la paz*—that points to the ways in which devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe empowers them to be agents of change in their local neighborhood. Our Lady of Guadalupe plays a central role in the decision of the women of the parish to participate in the peace walks: they describe her not only as having guided their discernment to initiate the walks, but also as accompanying them as they actually do the walking. They make a pilgrimage to the place where their neighbor was murdered, and their presence there, alongside the celebration of the Mass, makes a new meaning of what has happened there. The space is transformed from one that marks death to one that honors new life, from one characterized by the isolation of suffering to one that celebrates communal healing, from one of darkness to one of light.<sup>49</sup> The *caminatas* offer a public witness to the pain the community has suffered, standing for light, for restorative justice, for resurrection, for new life in the midst of death and suffering, for hope. Death does not get the last word, as the participants reclaim this ground for holiness, for God, for community.

Beyond those categories, *las caminatas por la paz* provide a breadth of experiences as diverse as the participants in this study. A number of themes emerge from the experiences of the *caminatas*, but I will focus here on just two: (1) *La Morenita* protects the women, particularly so during the *caminatas*. They describe her as covering them with her mantle as protection in daily

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<sup>48</sup> Structured interview with Ellie by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, February 8, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Informal interview with Ellie by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, October 23, 2017.



living, but especially during the *caminatas por la paz*. (2) Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, especially when it is communal, can break the isolation that individual members of the community may feel, especially in the wake of tragedy.<sup>50</sup> The *caminatas* are one expression of that movement from isolation and brokenness to community and healing. As the women of the parish sing songs of peace as well as songs honoring *la Morenita*, they tell of Our Lady of Guadalupe calling them forth into the neighborhood; one even went so far as to describe her as “leading the march.”<sup>51</sup> In this particular community, *las caminatas por la paz* not only make sense of suffering but are also an initial step toward spiritual and emotional healing.

### Conclusion

This article has summarized my findings as they pertain to the function of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe at Dolores Mission Parish as well as to its implications for perceptions of gender and faith-based community organizing. It has provided a brief glimpse into the faith lives of the lay women leaders who recognize how intimately interconnected individual and communal healing are in their Latinx parish and the surrounding neighborhood. For the women of Dolores Mission, liberation from interpersonal and structural violence is not possible without the kind of spiritual and emotional healing they encounter in their devotion to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*.

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<sup>50</sup> Informal interview with Ellie by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, October 23, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Structured interview with Gloria by Jennifer Owens-Jofré, January 7, 2016.