

Building a home from what you've learned

A thesis on the intersections of religion, construction of culture, and developmental knowledge represented into form.

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I was born in the United States, but raised in the setting of a traditional Mexican household. Amidst the liminal space of that classification-not an absolute Mexican, yet not a perfect American, I create a broader understanding of living with two perspectives and merging them into one identity. Social fragmentation is a phenomenon in which people in society relate through categories of culture, language, and economic class. In this paper I will talk about my experience as a first generation Mexican/American. The intersections of religion, familial history, and development of knowledge are the subject matter of my sculptures.

Recalling religious symbols

The icon of la virgin de Guadalupe was a typical image in my house. My parents were raised heavily influenced by Catholicism, so tales of religious idols were commonly mentioned. My mother would share stories of the virgin's apparitions to an indigenous man named Juan Diego. She said that he gained a following of native people because of this blessing. "As The apparition story relates, the Virgin Mary revealed herself to Juan Diego, a Nahua converted to Christianity, on the hill of Tepeyac outside of Mexico City in December 1531. She wanted Juan Diego to build a shrine dedicated to her on that very spot. When Juan Diego was unable to secure the approval of the bishop-elect, Juan Zumárrga, the Virgin bolstered his credibility by giving him physical proof of her apparition in a bundle of flowers and a painting of herself on his cape".¹ I understood the audience had faith in this idol, but moreover, the indigenous people unified because they had a sense of community. Among the vast number of religions in Mexico, Catholicism is one of the most practiced in the country. The Spanish brought their religion during the colonization of Mexico. The depictions of the Spaniards holy icons represented people with light eyes and fair skin. The natives did not see themselves in those religious figures. In the sixteenth century, the icon of the Virgin De Guadalupe became a symbol for the plebian people of Mexico. This religious figure presented itself with the same characteristics as an indigenous person. The sacred idol evolved into a unifying component for Mexican people. "Heavily influenced by the apparition accounts, historians have considered the major accomplishments in the devotion of Guadalupe to show the formation of Mexican nationality".² The

¹ Cornelius Conover, *Reassessing the rise of Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe*, (University of California Press,2011), 252.

² Cornelius Conover, *Reassessing the rise of Mexico's Virgin of Guadalupe*, (University of California Press,2011), 254.

connotations of this image include faithfulness, well-being and loyalty. All these morals have a sacred value in Mexican culture. The Virgen de Guadalupe continues to be a motif that connects generations of people to Mexican nationalism.



Fig 1. *Trinity*, blue stone and digital photo print, 2019

The three-tiered structure contains images that encompass these ideas. This sculpture brings together all aspects of religion, familial history, and learning experience. Using the title, *Trinity*, as an entry point, the sculpture immediately alludes to something divine. The top stone has an image the Virgen de Guadalupe on one side and an image of my 2nd great-grandparents on the back. This stone is at the highest point to signify the extensive value that religion and family carry in Mexican heritage. The second stone contains an image of myself on the front and my huaraches on the reverse. The self-portrait refers to self-acknowledgement in life and the huaraches are functional cultural objects that connect you to physical world. Finally, the stone on the bottom has a photograph taken by me of my father at a jobsite. On the back is another photograph taken by me of my parents in the living room. This stone signifies the supporting elements of labor and family that encompass this structure. The piece composes fragments charged with cultural meaning to transmit a relationship with the real world. It mimics Catholicism's remark to the holy trinity by building three fragments into one structure.



Fig 2. *Virgen de Escultura*, Stone, cement, steel,

fabric, 2018

I speak of Mexican Nationalism as if I were born in that country. Although I am not directly connected, my relationship with the nation's pride is still present. I cannot fully represent Mexico or someone Mexican, but in some circumstances, I'm still labeled as one. At other times I am too American for my Latino peers. It is clear that we cannot always see what is physically represented. Using the Virgin de Guadalupe as a portal, the negative space symbolizes the idea of a constructed nationalism. Although there are generational and regional gaps between people of Latinx descent, we all find a common ground in this symbol. It functions as an underpinning not only for love of a country, but more importantly the adoration for its people. "The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe allowed these young men to feel freer to come together with their fellow ethnics and co-nationals to celebrate their identity as Latinos, Mexicanos, and what they referred to as *halfies*."³ Holy symbols serve a purpose beyond their religious significance. These emblems form a community based on years of story-telling. They collapse the differing social attributes of people and culminate into the idea of loving your neighbor.

³ Macarena Gomez-Barris & Clara Irazabal, *Transnational meaning of La Virgen de Guadalupe: Religiosity, space, and culture at Plaza Mexico*, (Culture&Religion 2009), 347

Constructing your cultural identity

The importance of family has always been one of the most valuable factors of my culture. We grow as people, whether that growth be personal or regional ;we never forget where we came from. The idea of family is supposed to guide us with self-acknowledgement and form a lifelong support system. We feel the responsibility to care for those like us through troublesome and good times. This moral is one that keeps me grounded with my definition of culture and provides motivation to continue making art.



Fig 3. Digital photo print, huaraches, 2019

“Culture for a society, a group, or a person, is a continual process of sustaining an identity through the coherence gained by a consistent aesthetic point of view, a moral conception of self, and a style of life which exhibits those conceptions in the objects that adorn one’s home and oneself and in the taste which expresses those points of view. Culture is thus the realm of sensibility, of emotion and moral temper, and the intelligence, which seeks to order these feelings”.⁴ In figure 3, the objects seen on the wall can be found inside someone’s home, possibly stored away in the closet or tossed on the floor in the living-room. The sentiment of ordinary life is conveyed by the arrangement of each image. It designs a way to understand the feelings experienced by common people. The emotions of Individuals like you and me. People are connected by culture. For each individual, cultural identity is shaped by their lived experience. Society makes it so that humans can associate with certain people’s set of values. There are various ranges to

⁴ Daniel Bell, *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*, (Basic books 1976), 36

consider when thinking of who's part of your community. We relate in many different ways. "As a discipline, sociology is based on the assumption that variations in the behavior of persons or groups in the society are attributable to their class or other strategic positions in the social structure, in their interest, attitudes, and conduct on the basis of distinct social attributes: common age, sex, occupation, religion, urban-rural location, and so forth".⁵ This traces back to the phenomenon of social fragmentation. We are easily divided and affiliated by our social attributes.

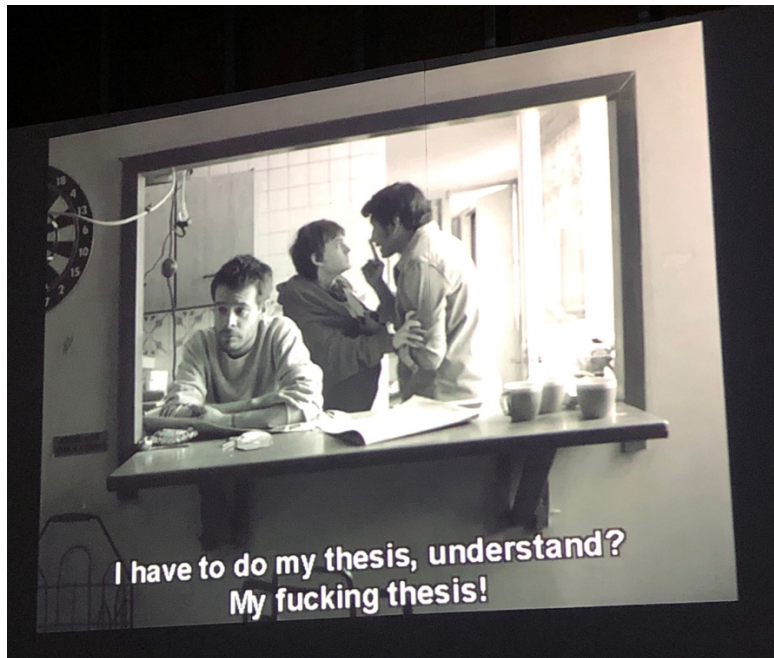


Fig 4. *Güeros*, Alonso Ruizpalacios,

2014

This image is a still from a movie titled *Güeros* by a director named Alonso Ruizpalacios. The film takes place during the student strikes of 1999 in Mexico City. Two college slackers confine themselves in their rundown apartment. Sombra and Santos are on strike from the protest. Sombra's little brother, Tomás, is sent to Mexico City to live with him because of his troublesome behavior. Tomás brings with him a cassette his brother and father would listen to by a musician named Epigmenio Cruz. Tomás reads in the paper that his favorite musician is gravely ill. Their quest to find Epigmenio becomes a road movie of misadventures. This film is essential to my research for many reasons. The first being the title of the movie. The term *Güero* is often referred to someone with a light skin tone and also someone with economic wealth. To those

⁵ *The cultural contradictions of capitalism*, (Basic books 1976), 37

individuals raised in Latin American countries, I am considered a güero and in America, I can easily be mistaken as another ordinary white male. My physical appearance, along with being first generation Mexican/American, is another aspect to the building of cultural identity. I associate myself with the characters from this movie because of our common social attributes. Tomás is enamored by Epigmenio's music which dates back to the 1960's era of classic rock. The exposure to this genre of music crosses borders across the globe. It was a period of rebellion generally seen in the characteristics of young teens. This feeling is part of being young and connects us by age, whether it's your current age or an age already lived. The shared experience links us to these individuals. I identify myself with Santos and Sombra because they are college students, but also by their interest and attitudes. I understand their frustration with writing their thesis when it feels as though the world is under a revolution and they sit stagnantly in their apartment. There are moments when I feel this way too. Based off who you are, we want to change the world, but sometimes it's hard enough staying alive.

Labor for income and labor for education

Masonry work has a long history in my family. My grandfather was a stone mason, so is my father, and the title was passed on to me. My dad is one of seventeen children. Their family grew up very poor, so they all had to work at a young age. The necessity for income interfered with their ability to attend school in Mexico. In their early teen years, most of my uncles and my father crossed the border illegally into the United States. They were in search of work to continue providing for their family. The long work hours impeded any chance for an education in the United States. My father was able to set aside enough money to open his own masonry business. His labor set a foundation for my education in America. Although I have this privilege, the education system has set obstacles for me to fail. The system is designed for me to leave behind a life of education for a life of labor. Like many families in the United States, the importance of education is implemented at a young age. The education system is seen as a structure to better your future. My parents made this concept very clear, but education for Hispanic people is much more than going to school to gain knowledge. Education is a system of values that guide our moral compass. "*Educación*" is a conceptually broader term than its English language cognate. It refers to the family's role of inculcating in children a

sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning. Though inclusive or formal academic training, *educación* additionally refers to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others".⁶ This version of education prepares us for a world outside of an educational system. I'm interested in the idea of labor within an institutional system and the labor performed in the setting of blue-collar work. Artists use similar or the same building techniques as trade workers. There are guidelines to building structural forms in and outside of viewing spaces. These same methods are applied, but the artist's labor is valued in the art object, whereas in the case of a blue-collar worker, the value of labor is regarded to a lesser degree. One reason for building is the necessity for income and the other is an inclination to create.



Fig 5. Stone, CRT TVs, video, clothes, 2019

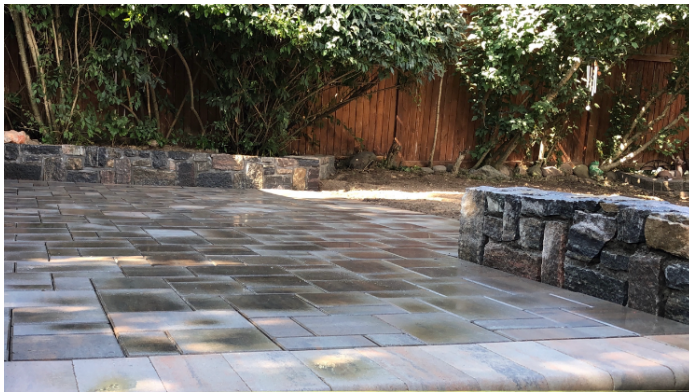
The next piece describes my situation as a stone mason while also being a full-time college student. The video piece built inside the stone structure was filmed in the fall of 2018. On my days off, I worked with my father and the rest of the week I attended classes. The idea of labor in exchange for money and work for artistic expression was a new topic in my artwork. I accomplished this in a time-based medium to capture the body's motions of labor in real time. This leads me to the next video in this sculpture. This performance is a recording of me balancing an arch made with the stones used from our work-sites. Instead of buying the material from a stone supply company, I use site-specific material to build sculptures. In this video, the

⁶ Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*, (State University of New York Press. 1999)23.

body is forced to change its movements according to the position of the stones. The action of labor then appears to look like a dance where the stones are leading. The bottom of the sculpture seems to be supported by a pile of clothing. The clothes used were my work attire and my everyday wardrobe. Worn objects contain a visible story. The boots are clearly used in a work setting, but they are taken out of that context and are formed into an art object. The end result in both cases is a finished structure.



Fig 6. Blue stone walk way and patio, 2018



Patio with pavers and retaining stone wall,

2018

These next few images are projects done in Westchester, New York. It is almost impossible for a home to exist without some type of stone work. Stone is the material that keeps a home intact. Patios are used as a space to gather with friends and family. A patio is a platform for human engagement. This is true because of the parties and summertime barbecues held on this floor. Individuals use this space as a location for gathering and in this way, it forms a home. Another thing to consider is the way the laborers work the land

of the homeowner. All the work made for the home is property of that owner. I can compare this to permanently installing an artwork in someone's house. It seems like a privatized version of public art. There are numerous hours invested in the architecture that decorates an individual's house. The labor of this artwork often goes unrecognized if it is not seen in real-time. Eventually, these structural designs lose its beauty overtime and then they are used only for their function. They exist there until it's time to decorate the house again. Lastly, this brings me to my final thought of performing labor for another person's home. I can argue that masonry is an artwork built outside of a designated studio. I view jobsites as temporary artist studio spaces. Like an artist's studio, it is a location where an artwork is created. The artist and stone mason work similarly by imagining the form and design of an artwork. The end result differs because it is contrasted by creativity and utility. At some point all houses need maintenance which creates a steady source of income for the stone mason. Another difference is that an artist is inspired to create based on their creativity and drive. In most cases, the artist doesn't make money off their artwork because it doesn't have a practical use. It is difficult for an artist to sustain themselves by selling their imagination.

Final thoughts

Although I am no longer a practicing catholic, I continue to have some type of faith in this world. I put my trust in my artwork and to the things in life that feel true. I believe in my community of people. I know that Latino people will always give me a lending hand and I will always represent them. My identity has never been placed in such a framework than when I entered college. I used to think that my identity was split in two perspectives that merged into one view, but the truth is that it's all a constructed personality. Identity is part of the dynamic nature of being human. It is the decision of the person and how they want to be referred or labeled. I think of the working-class family I was born into and the family I made in my time at Purchase college. As artist and family members, we must support one another in order to excel in life. We teach and learn from each other to succeed in the areas most important to us. It is time for me to use the acquired knowledge from the masonry trade and from this institution to make my home in the real world.