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# *The Lady in Blue: a Mexican American Cultural Studies Approach*

Anna Nogar

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- 1 Two years ago, when I began considering how I would organize my project on the Lady in Blue, the 17<sup>th</sup> century bilocating Spanish nun Sor María de Agreda, I encountered a complex conundrum. The information I had gathered about the relatively obscure regional figure's mystical visits to the Americas spanned four centuries. It was characterized by remarkable historical accounts regarding her evangelization of indigenous tribes, a fascinating feminist colonial literary history, transatlantic political intrigue, and a surprisingly regular emergence of folkloric, literary and artistic renderings about the Lady in Blue. The colonial-era narrative nonchalantly surfaced through a variety of media- an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Franciscan missionary's exhortatory letters to his brother friars; the bibliographies of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico's printing presses; a 20<sup>th</sup>-century play on central New Mexican tribal traditions; a 1917 Mexican American folk history of the Alamo; and a late-20<sup>th</sup>-century mural stretching across the dining room wall of an abandoned Catholic boarding school. Each of these diverse artifacts contributed a piece to the puzzle of where the Lady in Blue's narrative had traveled, how it changed as it moved, and what it signified at any point during its movement. Indeed, the question of how to frame a diverse collection of materials on a complex topic became this project's major methodological challenge.
- 2 To explain the critical rationale I currently apply to the narrative, the topic of this paper, some background on the subject of this project is in order. The narrative of the Lady in Blue surfaced in the context of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish exploration and colonization of the northern frontier of New Spain. The narrative relates a type of colonization that is uniquely transatlantic: the narrative's protagonist Sor María de Agreda remained cloistered on the Iberian Peninsula, while experiencing a series of mystical missionary journeys that took her to present-day eastern New Mexico and western Texas. According to the reports of Fray Alonso de Benavides, the region's religious administrator in the late 1620's, her evangelizing visits resulted in the conversion of the region's Jumano tribe to

Catholicism. Fray Benavides arrived at this conclusion because tribal members displayed evidence of Catholic catechesis, including making the sign of the cross and requesting baptism from the friars, well in advance of visits from Franciscan missionaries. According to subsequent Spanish accounts, the Lady in Blue (as she was called for the blue-gray color of her habit) traveled not only to the Jumano tribe, but to other indigenous groups living in the northern frontier of New Spain. She continued to inhabit the region, metaphorically at least, for the next three hundred and fifty years, resurfacing in unexpected contexts and via a variety of media.

- 3 The Lady in Blue's narrative assumed a variety of forms throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fray Benavides and Sor María composed several of the narrative's originary documents, including the friar's 1630 and 1634 *Memorial*, and a letter of approbation to the friars stationed in New Mexico attributed to both nun and friar. The letter and 1634 *Memorial* discuss the nun's experiences as the Lady in Blue, the tribes and landscape she witnessed during her travels, and the missionizing ends she furthered while present in the region. A subtext of these documents was the fact that Sor María had no authorial control over how the Lady in Blue narrative was presented; she attested to as much when questioned by Inquisitorial church authorities regarding the authenticity of her travels. These documents and a small number of other significant works, including one described in the following paragraph, formed the textual basis for the Lady in Blue narrative.
- 4 Upon Sor María's death in 1665, her *vita* (or saintly biography) was written to help promote her case for sainthood; the Lady in Blue narrative is presented as one of the events exemplifying Sor María's sanctity. The dissemination of Sor María's *vita* is a defining characteristic of the Lady in Blue's trajectory, intimately bound up with the nun's own prolific writing. Most editions of Sor María's controversial and widely-read Marian tract *La mística ciudad de Dios* included her *vita* (and thus the Lady in Blue narrative) as a preface. The popular text is catalogued in unexpected and far-flung locations, in the 18<sup>th</sup>-and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Franciscan mission libraries in California and New Mexico, and in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century collection of New Mexican governor Diego de Vargas. The image presented in one of *La mística ciudad de Dios*' Mexican printings, featuring Sor María and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Conceptionist scholar Duns Scotus, was carved into the facade of the Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción church in Landa, Mexico in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Renown of the Lady in Blue narrative grew during the colonial and late colonial periods as a result of the wide, unpredictable dissemination of texts that contained it, many of which were written by Sor María herself.
- 5 Through the accounts of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers and missionaries to northern New Spain, the Lady in Blue became understood as part of the conceptualized landscape of the region. 17<sup>th</sup>-century Texas missionary Fray Damián Massanet and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Sonoran explorer Lieutenant Juan Mateo Manje testified that the tribes they met during their travels had been visited by the Lady in Blue. The founders of the Californian missions, Fray Junípero Serra and Fray Francisco Palóu see her in their motivation for becoming missionaries in the region and reflected in their labors, as their letters, biographies and diaries attest. Via her presence in various historical accounts about the region (colonial and peninsular, religious and secular), the narrative of the Lady in Blue became part of the inscribed regional history of the present-day American Southwest and northern Mexico.
- 6 Renderings of the narrative transitioned from the genre of historical documentation to that of folkloric representations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Texas, the Lady in

Blue left the state's famed blue bonnets as a gift upon her final visit, stopped the flooding Sabine River in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and presented the gift of "clear sight" to generations of San Antonian women. In Arizona, the Lady in Blue prevented the shelling of a church to its foundations during an 1857 American filibuster campaign, while in New Mexico, a traditional *alabado* praises Sor María and her writing. The narrative's folkloric renderings provided a basis on which early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Texan Mexican American cultural activists, including Adina de Zavala and Jovita González, could resistively stake their identity and history in the face of the largely Anglo re-writing of Texan history. Far from slipping silently into the past, the Lady in Blue continued to surface through popular recollection, asserting her place as actively in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as in the 17<sup>th</sup>.

- 7 Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, authors and artists have continued to draw from the tradition of the Lady in Blue. Many of these more contemporary renderings emphasize specific facets of the narrative (the protagonist's femininity, the representative currency of bilocation, the colonizing objectives) to create readings different from those the narrative originally evoked in its audience. The narrative is recast in novels by Mexican American authors Ana Castillo (*So Far From God*) and Luis Urrea (*The Devil's Highway*), and Spanish author Javier Sierra (*La dama azul*), in dramatic works, poetry and short story, and through various artistic media. These contemporary works indicate a degree of intentionality on the part of their originators in selecting the Lady in Blue for their works; as she lies just at the edge of collective memory, she does not merely surface in such works- her narrative is summoned.
- 8 The variety, depth and span of these artifacts presented a complex critical conundrum. I was not convinced that eliminating particular subsets of this material (the folklore, for example, or the colonial history) would do justice to the versions of the narrative these subsets contained and transmitted. On the other hand, forcing all the material into an awkward, uncomfortable mating with a single mode of critical analysis did not fit the bill for the way I had begun to think about the Lady in Blue's narrative. Cleaving close to how the narrative functioned in any particular context seemed to be the most accurate means of characterizing the material, of defining how it functioned in a given medium and at a particular time. The most desirable analytical model would allow for a variety of responses that could speak to the artifacts under consideration: a colonial-literary interpretation of the religious and historical documents from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries; an interpretation discussing the portrayal of Sor María's uniquely feminine mysticism and her writings within the Church; and a cultural studies approach when discussing the content and function of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century folklore about the Lady in Blue. The overall analytical mode had to allow for the best analysis to be applied to a given set of information; as the sets varied, so should their analysis.
- 9 Serge Gruzinski's *Images at War* offered a critical viewpoint that addressed the approach the Lady in Blue narrative demanded. Gruzinski treats the topic of images, their production, consumption and resistive meaning in Mexico, beginning in the colonial period. As Gruzinski acknowledges, the question of "where and how to interrupt the exploration of an *imaginaire* that continuously redisplay itself in spite of the usual period classifications, and the necessarily limited specialization of the researcher" (Gruzinski 4) presents particular challenges in developing a project such as the Lady in Blue's. Gruzinski concludes that, in spite of the challenges presented by studying a continuous entity along its trajectory, such analysis offers unparalleled insight into the entity itself and how it and its context work on each other; abbreviating the discussion of the

narrative to a particular historical period deeply limits its presentation. Gruzinski further comments that “[the *imaginaires*] have whatever ‘reality’ and content that an age, a culture, a group consents to give to them” (Gruzinski 5). Here, Gruzinski affirms the approach the Lady in Blue’s narrative required; he asserts that to understand an *imaginaire* (or, in the case of the Lady in Blue, a narrative) in a particular context one must focus on how that context defines and responds to the *imaginaire*. This requires that the researcher employ a critical methodology appropriate to each context, and that she allow for the narrative’s meaning and function to transform under the influence of different environments. Through Gruzinski’s approach, the various elements comprising the Lady in Blue’s narrative were freed to transcend artificial historical boundaries and to be viewed as a unity.

- 10 It thus became as clear that the critical framework should not only do justice to each subset of material, but also demonstrate how they relate to one another, in order to give rise to a history richer and more complex than a simple collection of artifacts. The resilience and recurrence of artifacts about the Lady in Blue required a consideration of the parts as constitutive of a whole, as elements defining the narrative’s movement and evolution. The analytical model would not only need to accommodate various types of analysis, but also to position the narrative’s manifestations such that their relationship to one another was emphasized, creating a continuous narrative history. Previous studies on specific episodes of the history (the Lady in Blue within the genres of colonial mission narrative, or her role in a particular modern novel) did not relate these elements to the overall narrative history. By virtue of their focus, such studies inadvertently divorced related stories from one another, creating a sense of discontinuity. In this project, I wanted to connect these various discrete histories, to highlight how each presented a different facet of the narrative, while collectively contributing to the overall story of the Lady in Blue. For this reason, the critical framework needed to allow for this correlation and connection. Furthermore, this analysis could shed light on precisely what qualities inherent to the Lady in Blue narrative proved engaging over the course of hundred of years.

Having established the breadth of the artifacts pertinent to the Lady in Blue (spanning 370 years and of various genres), and the overall analytical objectives (achieve critical integrity for the project’s sets of materials while developing a narrative history), there remained the question of the narrative’s subject. The legend of the Lady in Blue is fundamentally a miracle narrative, in which the female protagonist simultaneously is cloistered in Spain and evangelizes to indigenous groups in the Americas. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century historians, including Charles Fletcher Lummis and Frederick Webb Hodge, were concerned with whether such an event were historically verifiable or possible, and as such, tended to judge the “validity” of the narrative on that basis. However, as Benavides scholar Cyprian Lynch, OFM, comments in his notes to the friar’s 1630 *Memorial*, questions of this nature (that is, regarding Sor Maria’s sanctity, revelations and bilocation) are “primarily theological problems whose definitive solution lies beyond the competence of the historian” (Lynch 59). This is not to say the issue of whether or not bilocation actually happened is peripheral; as Lynch demonstrates, it simply cannot be addressed within the limitations of this project.

In addition, this line of questioning did not credit the narrative’s currency. Rather than showing how the narrative lived and was vibrant, this interpretation assumed a physical presence was necessary, and that such a presence was either fraudulent or impossible. Neither of these options held in the context of the historical artifacts I encountered. I chose, instead, to focus on where Lady in Blue did appear in the letters and diaries of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Franciscan missionaries, in their missions’

libraries, in the journals of explorers, in the histories of the region and of the Franciscan order. The presence I sought to track was one that was concrete and definable: wherever the Lady in Blue appeared conceptually or representationally. I became more concerned with where the Lady in Blue was documentably present and what this presence meant for those who interacted with it. The critical lens of cultural studies provided the best means to achieve sufficient distance from the material, discuss it contextually, and create a coherent narrative history about it.

- 11 More specifically, because the bulk of the material concerning the Lady in Blue originates in the American Southwest, Greater Mexico and Mexico, and because the themes at the heart of the narrative pertain to dialogues on colonization and resistance, this investigation orients towards the field of Mexican-American cultural studies specifically. Since she has left her clearest trail in the history, literature and folklore of the Southwest, and since her transatlantic, colonial narrative primarily deals with and reflects on the populations that occupy Greater Mexico, Mexican American cultural studies offers a natural theoretical framework for her story. Issues of nationality, gender, religion, otherness and colonization are the significant factors that have determined how the Lady in Blue narrative was born and developed, and how it has come to be understood and used in the Southwest. That I choose to apply a Mexican American cultural analysis to the text does not exclude its interpretation, of course, through a different cultural studies framework, or via an entirely different analytical framework. But given the history of the narrative's movement and the content of the narrative itself, the application of a specifically Mexican American cultural studies model is appropriate.
- 12 The critical approaches deriving from particular works in Mexican American cultural studies offered a means both for considering the materials on the Lady in Blue, and for discussing them in a coherent fashion. In this sense, this project is profoundly influenced by the fundamental structures of groundbreaking studies by modern Mexican American cultural studies critics, specifically those of Américo Paredes, José Limón, Richard Flores, and Domino Perez. These critics' works exemplified approaches to the narrative material that shared much with Serge Gruzinski, but also provided superb, precise models for how to take into account the material. The analysis of the diverse body of artifacts about the Lady in Blue would not have been possible without these structures to inform how to create meaning and a history around them.
- 13 Américo Paredes' 1958 study on the Greater Mexican *corrido*, *With His Pistol In His Hand*, is the foundation from which many subsequent projects in Mexican American cultural studies have derived their critical structures. He states in the book's introduction that his initial objective was to study the *corrido* about Gregorio Cortez. He finds, almost to his surprise, that the book became "two books in one" (Paredes xi): the study of the *corrido*'s protagonist, Gregorio Cortez, and the social conditions under which his history unfolded, as well of as the ballad (and thus legend) itself. The book is a work about "the life of a man, of the way that song and legend grew up around his name, and of the people who produced the songs, the legends and the man" (Paredes xi), and also about the *corrido*—"of its development out of actual events, and of the folk traditions from which it sprang" (Paredes xi). Paredes' approach in *With His Pistol In His Hand* shows how to study the historical-mythical figure, and demonstrates a means for understanding the interplay of the legend with its environment. By thinking through Paredes' approach, studying the context of a historical figure, and the communities and tensions that created her legend, the assortment of materials pertaining to the Lady in Blue narrative began to take shape. Paralleling Paredes' method, the narrative of the Lady in Blue takes on new structure and

depth as it is shown to be the story of a nun, the conditions that popularized a narrative about her, and the various tensions and environments that propelled the retelling of her story.

In José Limón's Mexican American cultural studies text *Dancing With the Devil*, the varied artifacts constitutive of the Lady in Blue narrative find a model for conceptual unity. An ethnographic reflection on the Mexican American community of South Texas, the book's wonderfully intricate analysis draws on a "range of expressive culture concerning this sector in relation to its socially dominated condition" (Limón 7). Limón creates a type of ethnographic text that he sees is in short supply, an "integrated [work] addressing popular folkloric forms, scholarly discursive practices, mass media, and written literary forms in one interpretive universe always with a close attention to political economy" (Limón 12). Limón thus examines a diverse collection of materials, from late 19<sup>th</sup> century Texan ethnographies by both Anglos and Mexican Americans, to the cultural practices of the working-class Tejano community. In each of these artifacts, Limón identifies a metaphorical Devil: the element representing the "ideological response of a people [...] to a history of race and class domination" (Limón 14). He thus seeks to identify what Frederic Jameson termed the "political unconscious" (Limón 14) of the Texan Mexican American community, ultimately discovering a dynamic much more complex than a binary of resistance or domination. By analyzing discourses diverse in genre, intent, and mode, Limón reveals that which what is consistent to the texts: the complex, vexing Devil with whom the discourses' authors wrestle. The complicated tensions, attitudes and reactions underlying the relationship between the Mexican American and Anglo communities in Texas drive the texts Limón examines.

While the Lady in Blue's various manifestations may not conceal a devil of the same nature as that which Limón uncovers, his approach does open her artifacts to a reading that searches out a similar unifying, compelling characteristic. By applying Limón's model to the Lady in Blue's narrative, I seek to uncover what lies at the heart of her narrative that induces its appearance both in 18<sup>th</sup> century friars' diaries throughout New Spain, as well as on the dining-room wall of St. Katharine Drexel's 20<sup>th</sup> century boarding parochial school for Native Americans. What tensions or implications inherent to the bilocating nun's narrative draws in those who portray it?

- 14 Domino Pérez's forthcoming book *There Was a Woman* treats the Greater Mexican folk figure La Llorona, examining her origins and her evolution in the folkloric, literary and pop culture artifacts depicting her. In tracing the history of La Llorona, Perez makes a case for her indigenous origins and examines revisions to the indigenous account arising from the changing racial, religious and cultural dynamic in Mexico that resulted from the Spanish conquest and the imposition of European values. From this historical basis, Pérez establishes the normative or traditional elements of the folkloric tradition concerning La Llorona. Pérez categorizes the folkloric and contemporary depictions of La Llorona based on their deviation from this normative narrative, on who creates them, and on the nature of their cultural effect. Her elegant and robust analysis connects the legend's historical sources to its development within the Mexican American community, and its subsequent pop culture, literary and artistic renditions. Perez finds that identities of self and other are deeply embedded in the question of how La Llorona is used, by whom and to what ends.
- 15 In her examination of La Llorona's evolution from her colonial-era origins, Pérez argues convincingly for the changing significances, underlying motives, and inscribed readings the figure of La Llorona has assumed over nearly five hundred years. The sheer variety of artifacts, and Perez's incisive examination of them, illuminates where La Llorona



originated and where she is going in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Lady in Blue is not as iconic as La Llorona, the artifacts defining her narrative's history bear resemblance to those Perez encounters in characterizing La Llorona. My study of the Lady in Blue's legend borrows much from Perez' approach, as her examination of La Llorona looks to and defines the traditional narrative, while deconstructing her representation in specific contemporary contexts.

- 16 Finally, Richard Flores' *Remembering the Alamo* studies the development of the Texan trope of the "Battle of the Alamo," examining the political, social and racial factors that shaped the event into its present foundational fiction. Flores states that his work is not a traditional history, "nor is it principally concerned with the events of 1836" (Flores xv). Flores instead discusses how the Alamo "is *remembered* through various genres of public and popular culture" (Flores xv). Flores examines how both particular organizations, and more widespread societal pressures conditioned the construction of the Alamo's "history," exposing those parts of the Alamo's history that have been suppressed and emphasized through its numerous tropic reconstructions. But Flores' main objective is not "picking through the rubble of fact and fiction, discarding the invented and upholding the real" (Flores xv); rather, he seeks to define what is accomplished through or suggested by the remembering, as "remembering is a deeply embedded social practice that informs the present" (Flores xvi). Flores' treatment of both the content of the trope and the way it interacts with its social environment is particularly applicable to the study of the Lady in Blue narrative.
- 17 Flores is primarily concerned with how the retelling of the Alamo trope has affected the concept of the self, particularly within the Mexican-American community in Texas. He writes that, whether stories recounted about the Alamo are true or not, "they inscribe our present and shape our future; stories of the past are linked to the formation of selves and others" (Flores x). The *effect* of repeatedly telling such "stories of the past" may be their only objectively "true" quality; in Flores' analysis, the retellings of a particular version of the Alamo reinforced the dynamic of domination between Mexican American and Anglo communities in Texas. Regardless of how such texts change, the final result is that they provide "narrative representations and public imaginaries that help us to make our way through the world" (Flores x). The most profound reality of the Alamo narrative, as of the Lady in Blue's, lies in where and why it was invoked and modified, and how its reception shaped its audiences' perception of themselves and their worlds. The recounting of the Lady in Blue narrative embodies this truth and, through Flores' critical approach, can be thus appreciated.
- 18 This project is, in the end, about a narrative that emerges in multiple places at unpredictable times, that is transformed as it relocates, and whose essential dynamic has remained engaging over centuries of its retelling. In researching and documenting the Lady in Blue's narrative, culling her out from the footnotes and peripheries of other histories, I establish the breadth and depth of her influence as a uniquely transatlantic, colonizing representational figure, unravel her role and significance at specific historical moments, and work through the tensions at the heart of her narrative.
- 19 Methodologically, the history, legend and expression of the Lady in Blue narrative are comprehensively interpreted through the critical lens of Mexican American cultural studies. Because I have chosen to focus on the trajectory of the narrative, comprised of a wide variety of materials unified by the narrative itself, the analytical framework applied is of vital importance. In the case of the Lady in Blue's narrative, the structure imposed



on the material itself defines the project. Beyond simply offering a means of interpretation, the approach allows us to grasp the central critical questions more firmly, to see the connections among its elements, and finally, to feel just what it is about *this* story-- a cloistered Spanish nun mystically traveling to the Americas and converting indigenous tribes-- that continues to fascinate over centuries.

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## ABSTRACTS

The peripatetic four-hundred year trajectory of the transatlantic Lady in Blue narrative demands a unique analytical approach to effectively contextualize its diverse manifestations. This paper discusses the methodology employed in the study of this multifaceted 17th-century colonizing narrative, drawing from the field of Mexican American cultural studies, particularly the works of Américo Paredes, José Limón, Richard Flores and Domino Perez, and from Serge Gruzinski's *Images at War*.

La trajectoire déambulatoire de la narration transatlantique de la Dame Bleue exige une seule approche critique afin de contextualiser correctement toutes ses manifestations. Il est donc question, dans cet article, de la méthodologie employée dans l'étude de ce type de récit complexe, produit sous la colonisation au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. En outre, il s'agit aussi de montrer comment la structure de cette méthodologie résulte du champ d'études culturelles mexicano-américaines, et plus particulièrement des travaux entrepris par Américo Paredes, José Limón, Richard Flores et Domino Perez, ainsi que de l'ouvrage critique *Images at War* de Serge Gruzinski.

La trayectoria peripatética de la narrativa transatlántica de la Dama Azul exige un acercamiento crítico único para contextualizar eficazmente sus manifestaciones diversas. Este trabajo trata la metodología empleada en el estudio de esta narrativa multifacética de la colonización del siglo 17, que deriva sus estructura del campo de estudios culturales mexicanoamericanos, en particular de los trabajos de Américo Paredes, José Limón, Richard Flores and Domino Perez, y también del trabajo crítico de Serge Gruzinski *Images at War*.

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