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The Photography of Graciela Iturbide: Transcending Colonization and Oneself

Noelia Andrea Caceres

This paper will analyze some of the works of contemporary Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide (born 1942). My sources include the 2017 exhibition catalog *Revolution and Ritual: The Photographs of Sara Castrejón, Graciela Iturbide, and Tatiana Parceró*, particularly the essay “The Flight of Images” by Marta Dahó, as well as interviews with Iturbide in which she describes the stories behind her art. In this paper, I will show how Iturbide’s work speaks to how the Mexican population and culture transcended the history of colonization, particularly works like her *Virgen de Guadalupe Chalma, México* (Our Lady of Guadalupe, Chalma, Mexico) (2007) and *Primera Comunión, Chalma, Estado de México* (First Communion, Chalma, State of Mexico) (1984) (fig. 1). In addition, I will discuss how her works speak to me personally as a Latin American native and also how they tell us about her own personal traumas. Before I dive into several examples of the Surrealism-influenced works of Iturbide, I would like to briefly shed some light on the history of photography in Latin America and on some of Iturbide’s artistic influences.

Photography in and throughout Latin America is quite similar in some aspects. Photographs reflect the social, historical, and political “aesthetics” of the region (Young). In the nineteenth century, photography in Latin America usually followed major artistic trends from abroad and catered to European audiences and aesthetics. However, as soon as the twentieth century rolled in, photography in Latin America became more complex and more “homebound,” we could say. It became homebound, or focused on regional culture, especially in the way that themes in photography became centered around indigenous and national modern industrial elements. These are elements that Iturbide refers to and brings forward to the public in her works.

Documentary photography became very culturally prominent during General Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries and in the era of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920. To take one example, the photographer Agustín Víctor Casasola left behind an archive of 600,000 photographic plates from this period, in which he even captured revolutionary leaders’ images (Young). In addition, at this time, portrait photography expanded in Latin America as it also flourished worldwide, due to the rising power and wealth of the middle classes. In the area of artistic photography, in the twentieth century, the most prominent figures in Mexico were Tina Modotti (originally from Italy), Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Lola Álvarez Bravo, and Kati Horna (born in Hungary). Manuel Álvarez Bravo, for example, found opportunities to come into contact with international art photography in the 1930s and 1940s, when Mexico attracted international modern artists and also himself became famous abroad. His work was rooted in Mexico’s indigenous past, like Iturbide’s would be later (Young). Iturbide would adopt and fashion this theme of his work into her own.

Graciela Iturbide was born in Mexico in 1942. At the age of twenty-seven, she enrolled in the Centro de Estudios Cinematográficos at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Her main goal at that time was to become a film director (Iturbide). Due to her curiosity about photography, she worked for a time under Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who had become known by this time for representing Mexican cultural heritage and the indigenous roots of the Mexican

people (Abbaspour). During this time, she accompanied him to various locations during travels for his work. After traveling across Latin America, she herself was commissioned by the Ethnographic Archive of the National Indigenous Institute of Mexico in 1978 to photograph Mexico's indigenous population (Iturbide). With this commission, she began following the footsteps of her teacher Álvarez Bravo.

Iturbide was interviewed online in 2017 by Ted Forbes. In the said video, she mentions a saying by Brassai, the Hungarian-French photographer, that she had held on to for many years, that photography has “to do with intuition and with dreams” (Forbes). A lot of her work, she continues, has been related to her own premonitions and dreams. Many have commented that her work is very reminiscent of Surrealism. Iturbide loves both Dada and Surrealism, but she believes that Surrealism is not a style that artists can practice today, as it was a style related to a particular “stage where the artists formed those groups” and “belongs to Dalí, to all of them, to Bretón” (Forbes). Simply put, she believes that Surrealism is pertinent to the time in which it was created. We must remember that Surrealists created art that had to do with the unconscious mind and used techniques like the irrational juxtaposition of images. Although Iturbide may not consider her work Surrealist, it is clear that she was heavily influenced by the movement.

Iturbide's photograph *Foto del avión, de adolescente* (Photo from an Airplane, from Adolescence) (date unknown) is one of her earliest known works (see Dahó 84 for a reproduction of this image). This was an image Iturbide had taken before her studies and training in photography, but it seems to mark her future traveling through her home country and then transporting her home to museums and galleries worldwide. It speaks to me personally because I have taken countless images from planes overseeing the world below. I have said goodbye to the motherland and have longed for it since. Images like these can mean so many things to different people. It opened a door for Iturbide that she had unconsciously stumbled upon since her main goal at that time was not to be a photographer.

In addition, on a related note, as I read more about Iturbide, I wondered why her photographs were black and white. Her photos are black and white because she was inspired by Álvarez Bravo, whose works were also lacking color, and as a form of acknowledgment of her past, as she used to own a black and white camera. She has said, “when I take color photos, I feel like it's Disneyland.” She also believes that photography in black and white is “more real than color” (Gresh). She attempts to photograph reality, and that is the best way that she can represent it.

Upon study of Iturbide's larger body of work, I believe that Iturbide loves to work with Mexico as her major theme because she firmly believes that Mexico is culturally strong and that it always has been. I think her work conveys that as a country and as a unified people, Mexico has always been culturally powerful and compelling, even during ancient times when premodern religious practices were practiced. Before colonization, the indigenous populations of Mexico thrived on their own, like many ancient civilizations. These people left a legacy, strong enough that part of it still persists today. Iturbide's native Mexican culture is ingrained in the way that she works, particularly in the way that she asks her subjects for consent, making sure that she respects the wishes of people who do not want to be photographed (Gresh). Mexico and the elements that make up Mexico are the main characters of her images. The history of the indigenous population and how their culture survived for generations, transcended the horrors of colonization, and still

lives today is key to her work. Iturbide strives to understand her homeland, as well as to understand and find peace with death, as I will discuss below. As with Iturbide's work, in all its forms, art comes from somewhere and is inspired by someone, something, and some place.

During one of her travels, Iturbide visited Chalma, Mexico, known for its religious festivities and sanctuary (Gray). Around the 1530s, Augustinian friars visited the area and learned that the local indigenous community made pilgrimages to a sacred cave named Chalma. They pilgrimaged there to make offerings to Ozteotl (Gray). This god took various forms, either as a deity of human destiny, night, or even the god of war. In response, the friars preached to the community the evils of idol worship and blood sacrifice and began converting the natives of the region to Christianity. The story goes that after the friars began their conversions, an unknown person replaced the god's statue with a life-size image of a dark Christ on the cross. The cross was taken to a church there after over one hundred years and thus became the first sanctuary of Chalma (Gray).

One of Iturbide's works is entitled *Virgen de Guadalupe, Chalma, México* (Our Lady of Guadalupe, Chalma, Mexico), dated 2007 (see Dahó 80 for a reproduction of this image). In this image, we see the outline of the mandorla of Our Lady of Guadalupe, yet the figure, the lady, is absent. The landscape in this photograph extends beyond the surface of the object of interest. The sky becomes part of the painted surface of the shrine, and the clouds melt together, creating a sense of the "realness" of the image that merges with our own reality. The rich religious history of Chalma is similar to what occurred in other places in Mexico, like Tepeyac Hill, where Our Lady of Guadalupe is said to have appeared. In pre-Columbian times, it was the shrine of the Nahua goddess of the earth and fertility (Dahó 81). As in Chalma, the shrine here was replaced because of the influence of Spanish colonizers. Dahó describes in her catalog essay on Iturbide the subject of the photograph of Our Lady of Guadalupe as "the trace of a removal: the destruction and replacement of images affected by the Spanish conquest" (81).

Another photograph by Iturbide, *Primera Comuni3n, Chalma, Estado de México* (First Communion, Chalma, State of Mexico) (1984) (fig. 1), is the portrait of a girl on her way to her first communion. She wears a ruffled, white dress made out of lace. She holds a bouquet, and on her face, she wears a mask of a skeleton. Behind her the church's gates lie open, as people begin to flood into the location to behold the promise that the girl will make to God. Dahó writes, "These are celebrations that unite Catholic rites and indigenous traditions, where the elements of carnival and even of the grotesque often prevail" (83).



Figure 1

Graciela Iturbide, *Primera Comuni3n, Chalma, México*
(First Communion, Chalma, State of Mexico), 1984,
<http://www.gracielaiturbide.org/muerte/attachment/15/>.
Reproduced with permission of the studio of Graciela Iturbide.

Iturbide's *Juchitán de las Mujeres* (Women of Juchitán) (1979–89) is a series that contains countless images of the people of Juchitán, a village in Oaxaca. In Juchitán, women are considered especially vital. They are the heads of the management of the region's markets, and they also participate in political struggle. In addition, the people of Juchitán accept homosexuality within their community, which is very rare in Mexico's sociocultural history and in the rest of Latin America (Dahó 85). Iturbide met and worked alongside these women who entrusted her with sharing their ways of life through photographs. The most famous image from this collection, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca* (Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca) (1979) (fig. 2), has flown across the world and has been reproduced in so many mediums. The woman in the photograph was a woman who sold iguanas in the market and placed them on her head because it was more practical than carrying them (Dahó 86). The purpose of this image is not to create an idea of exoticness or to invent a story; rather, it shows how Iturbide engages with the people who she meets during her travels and, as mentioned previously, asks for consent to take these images, creating a bond of trust. Iturbide travels through Mexico and engages in creating memories and learning about her country through photographs, trying her best to show what and who Mexico is.



Figure 2

Graciela Iturbide, *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca* (Our Lady of the Iguanas, Juchitán, Oaxaca), 1979, <http://www.graciela.iturbide.org/juchitan/01-2/>.
Reproduced with permission of the studio of Graciela Iturbide.



Figure 3

Graciela Iturbide, *Pájaros I, Cementerio de Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, México* (Birds I, Cemetery of Dolores Hidalgo, Mexico), 1978, http://www.graciela.iturbide.org/pajaros/dolores_hidalgo/.
Reproduced with permission of the studio of Graciela Iturbide.

Iturbide also has a series dedicated to birds. This series helped her to interpret San Juan de la Cruz, a mystic poet of the Counter-Reformation era who wrote in a poem about the lone bird's qualities, and who was a source of inspiration for the series. One of the aims of the series is to interpret his words about the lone bird: "one, it flies very high; two, it does not enjoy any company even of its own species; three, it has no particular color...." (Forbes). Her photograph entitled *Pájaros I, Cementerio de Dolores Hidalgo, México* (Birds I, Cemetery of Dolores Hidalgo, Mexico) (1978) (fig. 3) depicts a flock of birds flying in the sky. The picture is in black and white, and although it depicts a gathering of birds, I refer to San Juan de la Cruz's words that the lone bird "has no particular color" in order to interpret this work. Another source of inspiration for her was the medieval Sufi poet Attar of Nishapur. She does

not mention which of his works in particular inspired her, but after a brief investigation, I discovered that she has elsewhere discussed his poem “The Conference of Birds,” a poem in which Solomon and David decipher the language of birds. In this poem, all of the birds gather to make a journey to find God, and in that journey, they find themselves (Forbes).

Iturbide, I dare say, had an epiphany during one of her journeys in the town of Dolores Hidalgo, a journey during which she discovered something about herself, perhaps a sense of darkness inside of her that needed to be released to move on and find herself. Her daughter Claudia had passed away in 1971 at the age of six. After Claudia’s death, Iturbide became obsessed with taking photographs of “angelitos,” or little angels. “Angelitos,” as they are called in Mexico, are babies who have died. Her obsession lasted up until 1977. In that year, during one of her travels to Dolores Hidalgo, she encountered a family with an “angelito” in a little casket. She asked for permission to take a photograph, and thus the photograph *Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, México* (1978) (fig. 4) was created. Taking a picture of a deceased child, as Iturbide describes it, is a delicate process and must be done carefully (Forbes). Coming from a Hispanic background, I know that, culturally, death is a significant occurrence and must be respected and even venerated in some instances.



Figure 4

Graciela Iturbide, *Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, México*, 1978, <http://www.graciela.iturbide.org/muerte/attachment/05/>.
Reproduced with permission of the studio of Graciela Iturbide.

Iturbide followed this family on their way to the cemetery, and on their way, they encountered the body of a dead man with his skull exposed. I regret that I was not able to find detailed information on the photograph that Iturbide took of this man who was lying dead on the ground in the middle of the cemetery, his head severed and mutilated (see Forbes for a reproduction of this image). Subsequently, when the family buried the “angelito,” there were thousands of birds in the sky who were the birds that had fed on the man’s corpse. The image that she took of these birds is the image discussed earlier, *Pájaros I*. Iturbide called these birds the “birds of death” and described this moment as a realization and a message from death saying “stop, stop, stop,” indicating to her to cease using such images of death as a coping mechanism to grieve her own daughter’s death (Forbes). Since this incident, she has never again photographed dead children.

I find it interesting how art in all its forms serves as a well that draws out our inner selves into whatever form of art or music that we possess talent in. Artists use their skills to create new and beautiful things amid pain and desolation. At the same time, they heal their own personal experiences of horror. Graciela Iturbide is a woman and photographer who, through her art, visualizes the survival of cultural beliefs that transcended colonization, which survived due to the Mexican people’s sense of the importance of their culture, thus striving to keep it alive and not forgetting where they came from. Her photography, which captures death, is connected to her search for peace, meaning, and personal healing. Her images are symbolic of mourning, discovery, and identification with Mexican culture.

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