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Revisiting Juchitán: Witnessing an Indigenous Mexico Within the Latin American Archive

Michelle G. de la Cruz

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REVISITING JUCHITÁN:
WITNESSING AN INDIGINEOUS MEXICO WITHIN THE
LATIN AMERICAN ARCHIVE

by

MICHELLE GABRIEL DE LA CRUZ

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019
Revisiting Juchitán:
Witnessing an Indigenous Mexico within the Latin American Archive

by
Michelle Gabriel de la Cruz

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Revisiting Juchitán:
Witnessing an Indigenous Mexico within the Latin American Archive

by

Michelle Gabriel de la Cruz

Advisor: Katherine Manthorne

Throughout archives of photographic collections, as one discovers the focused, artistic selective process of images that become part of a photographer’s collection, one must venture further and ask: will these choices be decisively remembered by an individual or collective audience or actively be dismissed, misunderstood, and denied presence? For my master’s thesis, I will be analyzing Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide’s photobook, Juchitán de las Mujeres, a photo-collection of the women-empowered indigenous society in Oaxaca, Mexico which erupted during Latin American photography’s prime in the 20th century, turning away from a deeply exoticized past and towards a celebration of Hispanism as part of the Latin American photographic archives. Throughout the Anglo-American spheres of scholarship, collections much like Iturbide’s are easily displaced and silenced, covered over with voices that disrupt sacred histories with exoticized narratives. Juchitán de las Mujeres contests that silence through its intimate collection of photographs in an attempt to capture the essence of human solitude under the surface of the ethnographic. Despite attempts of providing a direct perspective into Juchitán society, critiques of Iturbide’s work question whether the collection truly challenges previous colonial documentations or, instead, perpetuates the cycle of “Other”-ing and exoticizing cultures limited within the trope of
“magic realism,” an artistic realm restricted to pure fantasy that is often applied to Latin American literature and art.

In this thesis, I define the archive as an artistic collection specifically shared with the public, a place of memory commemorating the work of an artist and their subjects. This will be used to describe Iturbide’s photographic collections that she has curated and presented to the public, specifically what she has created as a result of her experiences in Juchitán. My personal work and interaction within Latin American photographic archives have driven me to question the effect of the artistic choices made within Iturbide’s collection, a photographer who deliberately defies the gendered, magic realist order by reimagining it and creating new methods of seeing. The careful deliberation of images by the photographer and decisive action to share the collection publicly reveal the intended and unintended reactions to the archive overall. Ascribing meaning to the collection thus becomes strictly relative socially, culturally, and individually; it walks along the fine line between the artist’s intention and the public audience’s reaction. This begs the archival investigator to ask: whose accounts and narratives of a society are verifiable, worthy, and acceptable to be part of a national and continental growing photographic archive? Who has the final selective power in the archive, for what purpose and why? This thesis addresses Iturbide’s artistic efforts and distinct photographic vision to create new witnesses for the growing photographic archives of indigenous societies through the perspectives of the subjects themselves, new methods of seeing Mexico, of Latin America, of the world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to firstly thank Katherine Manthorne for allowing me to encounter the photographic work of Graciela Iturbide firsthand in the budding years of my academic career and for her unwavering patience and care in helping me bring this project to its fruition.

I thank my thesis workshop colleagues for those colorful evenings in that horribly lit and constricting room that will haunt me to this day, for being so mindful of every photograph, every line and being so invested in interweaving our projects together.

I thank my family for constantly pushing me (sometimes frustratingly so) in my academic career.

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Lastly, I thank my partner, Kent Ishimoto, always—*always* for his love and patience in my life that keeps me curious of the infinite wonders of the world. I look forward to meeting you over and over and over again.

This project is dedicated to the late Meena Alexander who, although had a short presence in my life, greatly inspired and motivated my work within the archives—particularly of my own.

Together we piece together the fragments of the archive, of yours and mine, that colonial narratives have long silenced.
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INTRODUCTION:

“La cámara fue un pretexto para conocer mi país.”

The camera was a pretext to know my country.

- Graciela Iturbide

Within the photographic archives, one who encounters a selected artist’s archive discovers the selective process of images that decidedly become part of an artist’s collection, to be remembered by an individual or collective audience. Encountering these archives requires the investigator to consider the long journey of memories and experiences that have been selectively documented and shared, as well as those dismissed and denied presence. Yet, throughout the American sphere, collections of colored communities are easily displaced and silenced, forged over with colonial voices that disrupt sacred histories with exoticized narratives. Graciela Iturbide’s photobook, Juchitán de las Mujeres, contests that silence and presents an ethnographic collection of photographs of the women-empowered Juchitán indigenous society in Oaxaca, Mexico in an attempt to capture the essence of human solitude. Despite Iturbide’s attempts of providing a direct perspective into Juchitán society, critiques of Iturbide’s work question whether the collection truly challenges previous colonial documentations and instead perpetuates the cycle of “Other”-ing cultures, especially one that is paradoxically limited by the vast magical realm it creates within Latin American culture. The choices made within the collection, of all photographic collections, of careful deliberation of images and decisively sharing with the public eye reveal the intended and unintended reactions to the archive overall. Meaning becomes relative in social, cultural, and individual contexts and walks along the fine line between the artist’s intention and the audience’s reaction through interpretation and interaction. This begs the
investigator to ask: whose memories and accounts of the past are verifiable, worthy, and acceptable to be part of the archive? Who has the final selective power in the archive, for what purpose and why? These are the questions that persist.

Throughout my thesis, my research will be divided into five parts, an introduction, three chapters, and conclusion. The chapters will summarize as follows: Chapter 1) Iturbide’s impactful upbringing as a Mexican woman, mother, and photographer, deriving from a concentration of film towards becoming protégé to fellow renowned Mexican photographer, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, that would shape and ultimately lead to her decade long journey and documentation of Juchitán alongside a historical unpacking of magical realism pervading all of Latin American art; Chapter 2) an in-depth, personal analysis of selected photographs and subjects of Juchitán de las Mujeres, reflecting on Iturbide’s perception and intention towards an open perception and interpretation to Oaxacan society and her curation of this photo-collection by closely working, living, and learning among the people of Juchitán; and Chapter 3) an examination of critiques to the collection as a whole, whether Iturbide’s intentions escapes the “magic realist” order and exoticized nature that Latin American photography is overall seemingly confined to or re-envisions and counter-critiques that “re-witness” the archival collection with agency in a new age of Latin American photography.
Graciela Iturbide was born in Mexico City during 1942 as the eldest of 13 children and was raised in a conservative, patriarchal Mexican family household. Growing up as a child, having a household filled to the brim with her siblings, Iturbide remembers her father taking photographs of all of his children. Looking back through her own family archive, in a personal article Iturbide herself wrote titled “Interpreting Reality,” she recalls: “In our house, there was a wardrobe and a box inside that held all my father’s pictures. For me, as a child, it was a great treat to go to the box and look at these photos, these memories … For me, the pictures were the treasure of the household.”1 Throughout her youth, Iturbide attended and lived at Catholic boarding school run by nuns in San Luis Potosí, marrying after her graduation at the age of nineteen.2 In her mid-twenties, raising three children, Iturbide explored her unexpected love of filmmaking at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM (The National Autonomous University of Mexico). In “wanting so much to do something with [her] life,” UNAM presented to Iturbide the various textures of Mexican life that was not accessible in her sheltered adolescence.3 Though already attracted to the art of images, both capturing and interacting with them, filmmaking had never crossed her mind. This discovery would lead to Iturbide directing films of her own and acting in others, one of which she would win the award for best actress of the year.4 Despite now being acknowledged as one of the most highly

4 Ibid., 119.
respected photographers of Latin America, had she not explored her interest in film-making firsthand, she would not have met renowned Mexican photographer, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, future mentor and friend. Further recalling, Iturbide exclaims:

[A]s luck would have it, it was in film school that I met Manuel Álvarez Bravo. He was teaching senior classes; almost no one was attending them because the students all wanted to be film directors … No one went because everyone considered photography to be filmmaking’s poor relation. Bravo not only let me into the class but also immediately asked me to be his achinchincle. In Mexico, the achinchincle is the bricklayer’s helper, the carpenter’s helper. Of course, I couldn’t believe it.5

By inheriting the love of photography from her father and through the teachings of Bravo, Iturbide used photography as a means of exploring identity, both for herself and for the mexicanidad of her country’s people. “I got my first camera when I was eleven, but I never thought about being a photographer. Seeing Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s book of photos and his invitation to become his assistant—perhaps because of some Oedipal complex—changed my whole life.”6 Photography for Iturbide became the medium that allowed her to travel as a lone individual and document what she encountered throughout her vast experiences all across the world.7 Whether it dealt with gender or cultural means, photography became the tool for Iturbide in capturing the strength, dignity, and exploration of identity of people, of individual souls, and her own self within society.

As a Mexican woman, Iturbide captured and questioned in her photographic work what it is and what it means to be a Mexican citizen and a woman, identities that are simultaneously intertwined and separate. When Graciela encounters tragedy as a young mother, she turned to photography for solace and understanding, an ongoing and plunging venture into her unravelling identity. Living through the age of a feminist wave when women fought for their rights, Iturbide

5 Ibid., 121.
6 Ibid., 119.
captured the essence of the powerful women in her own culture and herself. Through photography she depicted the experiences of the strong Mexican women across the nation, combining it with her very own personal experiences, beliefs, and identity. From then on, Graciela has embarked on a photographic journey that has taken her throughout her native Mexico, from the Sonoran Desert of the Seri community to Juchitán in Oaxaca to Frida Kahlo’s bathroom, to the United States, India, Japan, and beyond.⁸

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Among Iturbide’s first explorations was of the Avándaro music festival, Mexico’s answer to Woodstock in the U.S., which resulted in the photobook, *Avándaro*, that explores the counterculture of Mexico in the early 1970s. In 1978, Iturbide was commissioned by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute), among other selected photographers, to work alongside the writer of their choosing to document different Indigenous communities in Mexico. Iturbide first chose to explore and photograph the Indigenous group of the Seri, located within the Mexican state of Sonora, the most remote and smallest group of the various projects being undertaken at the time. In her venture, Iturbide recruited the anthropologist Luis Barjau to work alongside her, helping in retrieving “key details from the community’s past and present, cosmovision, employment, relationships with others, and Indigenous language” (Gardner, pp. 5). Her desire to truly be immersed in the Seri’s everyday life explores another source of insight into the community that greatly testifies to her artistic vision that would lead to her breakthrough in her photographic career.

In 1979, Iturbide’s photographic career hit a breakthrough when the renowned Mexican painter Francisco Toledo requested her personally to do a series of intimate photographs of his hometown, Juchitán, a Zapotec society in Oaxaca, Mexico. The photobook and essay that resulted, titled *Juchitán de las Mujeres*, focused on the matriarchal nature of the Zapotec Indian community and documented the powerful role of women in the society: women as healers, as political leaders, as merchants, as sexual sirens—women who are not just sexual, but unapologetically sexual. Documenting the society closely over nearly ten years from 1979 to 1988 and having lived among the people herself, Iturbide published the photobook of Juchitán in

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Figure 2. Iturbide, Graciela. *Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas*. 1979.
1989, skyrocketing her photographic career beyond Latin America and across the globe. Those unfamiliar of the photographer or the larger body of her work may be familiar with Iturbide’s iconic photograph of “Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas” (Our Lady of the Iguanas), the portrait of the proud Juchiteca in the flowered huipil, a traditional Indigenous garment for women of Central America, whose head is adorned with a radiating crown of eight live iguanas.\textsuperscript{11} The camera angles upward toward her “heroic” profile, appearing calm and self-contained, with eyes gazing beyond towards an unseen horizon. Her shining black eyes in the photograph have none of the “furtiveness or defiance that are stereotypically associated with a reclining woman,” nor does the photograph itself present a sentimental picture of motherhood. It has both “heroic and quotidian qualities that make the image accessible yet challenging.”\textsuperscript{12} Through this portrait, as well as the rest of Iturbide’s photographic archive, an investigator of Iturbide’s photo-collection encounters the fantastical reality that Iturbide depicts, images that encapsulate a magical realm that both escapes from and invites the viewer. Thoroughly inspired by Hungarian-French photographer Brassaï, one of the most influential photographers in Iturbide’s life and career, one quote in particular drives Iturbide’s work: “Life cannot be captured by realism or by naturalism, only by dreams, symbols, or imagination.”\textsuperscript{13} Blurring this line between reality and fantasy, intertwining the mythic and factual, Iturbide perfectly and indirectly reflects the concept of magical realism. While originally found throughout Latin American literature, magical realism is now dispersed all across Latin American art techniques and narratives, a play of visual forms in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Iturbide, “Interpreting Reality,” 119.
\end{flushleft}
the modern world. Such a technique is common in interpreting Iturbide’s work, woven by the
magical visual forms that are vividly awoken through her photographic narratives.

In further understandings of this artistic form, Erik Ching, Christina Buckley, and
Angélica Lozano-Alonso’s edited work, Reframing Latin America: A Cultural Theory Reading
of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, as well as Mariano Siskind’s article, “Magical
Realism,” state that magical realism is a literary style that began in the late 1940s and rose to
prominence in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s.14 Magical realism emerged when a group
of Caribbean and Central American writers, Arturo Uslar Pietri, Alejo Carpentier and Miguel
Ángel Asturias, reformulated the concept from European trends and proposed it as an aesthetic
style directly deriving from the hybrid nature of Latin American culture and society, with roots
deeply embedded in an Indigenous history.15 This style is also known as the Boom as its authors
gained incredible international acclaim for their work, notably for blurring the lines between
reality and fantasy through playful literary imagination.16 With the narration of fantastical events
as if they were everyday occurrences, this genre is “typified by a narrative that moves back and
forth in time and/or space, often with little or no warning, leaving the reader with a sense of
confusion.” 17 The style and subject matter of Boom author’s writings often presented the
perspective of marginalized and silenced peoples, specifically of Indigenous traditions. With the
incorporation of Indigenous themes, Boom authors thickly emphasize the magical elements that
founded their culture as a pretext to understanding the foundations of Latin American identity.
Such elements are derived from the religions of these Indigenous cultures, typically based on a

14 Erik Ching, Christina Buckley, and Angélica Lozano-Alonso, Reframing Latin America: A Cultural Theory
Reading of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2007), 270.
15 Mariano Siskind, “Magical Realism,” The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature, edited by Ato Quayson,
16 Ching, Buckley, and Lozano-Alonso, Reframing Latin America, 270.
17 Ibid., 270.
belief that is closely linked by a bridge between the spiritual and material worlds, distinct from Christianity. Through this link of the supernatural and the natural realms, magical realist authors envision themselves approaching a deeper and truer sense of Latin American identity. Through their writing, they celebrate Latin America’s distinctiveness. As Siskind states, one can interpret magical realism as the moment of Latin American cultural emancipation, “when the region gives itself, for the first time, an aesthetic identity of its own, markedly differentiated from those inherited from Europe.”

Among the early essays in the emerging stages of magical realism, Pietri explored the cultural potential of connecting universally modern narrative techniques claimed by Western, European voices with local histories, narratives, and subjects. In Pietri’s collaborative effort with Carpentier and Asturias in reforming the technique, he writes “It was a reaction … against the kind of descriptive and imitative literature that was being written in Hispanic America, but also a reaction against the usual submission to European trends and schools.” In the same essay, Pietri continues to describe how this aesthetic style was founded in learning how to see Latin America with Latin American eyes, or as Siskind depicts, learning to naturalize a type of strangeness that was specific to Latin America:

Read with European eyes, a novel by Asturias or Carpentier can be seen as artificial or as a disconcerting and unfamiliar anomaly. It was not an aggregate of characters and fantastic events, of which there are many good examples since the beginning of literature, but the revelation of a different situation, unusual, that clashed with realist patterns. For Hispanic Americans themselves, it was a rediscovery of their cultural situation … The criollo world is full of unusual and strange magic.

This 1975 essay, as Siskind points out, would ultimately affect the general understanding of magical realism as a now clearly designated non-European aesthetic form.

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18 Siskind, “Magical Realism,” 833.
19 Ibid., 839.
Persisting debates regarding the ways in which to characterize the term itself are demonstrably a central part of the aesthetic and critical tradition of magical realism. Yet, the conflicting definitions of magical realist style, as Siskind affirms, has nothing to do with the paradoxical oxymoron implied in the articulate writings of the extraordinary realms that portray a conventionally conceived reality.\textsuperscript{21} Instead, magical realist narratives attempt to bridge the contradiction between its two terms, “to depict reality as naturally interposed by magic and by phenomena that ordinary common sense cannot explain.”\textsuperscript{22} The world of magical realist texts, Siskind persists, “is one where the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist without conflict, without even calling attention to one another’s otherness.”\textsuperscript{23} Despite this, divisions continue to veer the understanding of magical realism into diverging paths, as Siskind states:

What divides specialists is whether magical realism is (a) a faculty of artists (inherited from a romantic lineage that conceives the poet as seer) to unveil the spiritual determinations of the real in order to shed light on the marvelous that constitutes it, and cannot be explained through a rational logic of causes and consequences; or (b) whether it is a code of representation that accounts for particular cultural formations where the historical experience of modernity coexists with a perception of the supernatural, understood in the broadest possible sense. To state it differently: is magical realism a universal aesthetic that unveils the supernatural core of the real anywhere, or is it an aesthetic that belongs organically to non-Western, or rather marginal, cultures?\textsuperscript{24}

Siskind’s criteria for a “specialist” utilizing magical realism within their work can be deemed as a medium presenting either their own phenomenal experience and narrative within any part of the globe or a Latin American-specific style of phenomena that unphased by those who lack the non-Western, non-European experience. For the photographic archival work of Iturbide, such depictions of magical realism are not simply dependent on these criteria alone. It will, however, uncover and expand upon the complexities that magical realism presents and attempts to re-

\textsuperscript{21} Siskind, “Magical Realism,” 834.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 834.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 834.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 834.
create within a strictly Indigenous world.

As a reformed Latin American concept, separating itself from European traditions and styles, there are evidently inevitable struggles in understanding magical realism, particularly within the Western realm. However, it exists as a concept unwavering and unaffected by Western thought, a concept that is aware of its necessity to re-signify colonial territories and pasts as a responsibility of forming a decolonial present and future. Magical realism is a perception of the ways in which the magical intersects the real as a narrative mode that uplifts the postcolonial experience of the underdeveloped world and inspires new narratives to come forth through various artistic means. Magical realism thus creates a new, decolonized space for narrative, “one not already occupied by the assumptions and techniques of European realism.”

Although these attempts in the creation of inclusive stories by Latin American artists inherent of a Indigenous culture, Western perceptions may interpret and remember these works situated in a primarily exotic frame, perpetuating and re-living the eroticizing “Other”-ing of a colonizing past in a struggling contemporary present that seeks to move on.

One cannot deny that throughout the photographic historical archive of Mexican photography, as well as Latin American photographic archives overall, there persists the similar struggle against exotic ethnographic representation, through magical realism indirectly re-creating an “exotic” realm in the West. In an essay about Iturbide’s work, Marina Perez de Mendiola discusses the manner in which Latinx people have been portrayed in photography historically, particularly in Mexico. As Perez de Mendiola states, “the past twenty-five years is particularly resonant with a kind of ethnographic visual representation marked by exoticism and racist underpinnings … giving the viewer a fresh perspective of societies typically seen as the

Other.” Attraction to Indigenous societies shrouded in an exotic intrigue within a colonial past undergirds its contemporary present. Mexico has been a site of revelation that has held a long-standing attraction particular to its Western audience, with a vast guest list of Euro-American modernists who have lived, worked, been inspired by their travels in Mexico, including to name few: Langston Hughes, Sergei Eisenstein, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, and Leon Trotsky. Mexico’s peculiar hybrid of the modern and the ancient, echoing magical realist conceptions in its multi-layered history, have made it an “ideal” and “attractive” site as a land of projected fantasies and reverie for twentieth-century artists and writers. Through adopting modern surrealism and ethnography in the 20th century, photography proceeded in capturing a reality deeply in question, artists and writers expanding their field of selection dramatically. The “primitive” societies of the planet were increasingly available and seen as “aesthetic, cosmological and scientific resources.” Once European and Western artists claimed their “rediscovery” of Mexico, so began the internal process and personal responsibility on the part of Mexican culture of recognizing its own “Otherness.”

The theme of re-exploration of identity in “Otherness,” of depicting experiences in a fantastical view through magical realism, relates heavily to Graciela Iturbide’s roots and it is evident all throughout her intimate photographs. Outright describing herself as a foreigner in her own country, Iturbide’s photographs bear witness to the theme of exploration on countless occasions. Graciela Iturbide emphasized in one conversation the following points:

Maybe finally, photography for me is my ritual. To go out with the camera, to observe, to photograph the most mythological aspects of people, to go into the darkness, to develop,
to select the most symbolic images … I don’t believe in anything, but I seek the rituals of religion, the heroes of religion, the gods.29

The symbolism of the mythic and essence of the real pervade throughout Iturbide’s vision in her photography. It is reflective of Iturbide’s almost exclusive use of black-and-white photography, which upholds her use of the abstract in presenting her visual narratives, as it obstructs the viewer from equating her photography with direct reality.30 The utilization of black-and-white photography acts as intentional method employed to force her viewers to see her visual subject matter in a different light and a different gaze.31

When encountering Iturbide’s photographic collection, portraiture is a key theme commonly found in her work. Breaking apart from traditional European photographic conventions, of ethnographic styles that exoticize their subjects, Iturbide’s stylistic portraiture forces her viewers to consider Latin Americans with other gazes, pushing for a specific style for Latin American portraiture to be seen. In this unique approach, Iturbide develops innovative, yet relevant insights that make the study of this style heavily significant in the contemporary age of photography.32 Although in her photographic upbringing this rejection of European aesthetics was not direct, one sees this unique element prevalent in Iturbide’s work throughout her mentor’s own photography. In one example, displayed in Álvarez Bravo’s photograph of *El Señor de Papantla* (The Man from Papantla), one can see the break from the European tradition of ethnographic posing, an aspect Iturbide further develops in her own oeuvre. In the photograph, Álvarez Bravo depicts a man of Indigenous background standing against a concrete wall, dressed in light colored long-sleeve shirt and pants, arms crossed with a sombrero (hat) in one hand and a

31 Ibid., 182.
32 Ibid., 182.
knapsack hung across his chest. At first glance the man, dressed in traditional clothing, appears to display the exoticism so often captured by the European eye. However, the twist that makes this portrait so distinctly stand apart from typical Western and European gazes of Latin America is that the Indigenous man refuses to look at the camera. In a critical re-reading of Iturbide’s photographic work, Nathanial Gardner discusses this portrait within his article, “Visual Witness.” Particularly, Gardner describes the portrait’s stylistic distinction from the European gaze as follows:

Although the man, dressed in traditional clothing, appears to display the exoticism so often captured by the European eye, the image presents an important twist: the indigenous man (sic) refuses to look at the camera. The subject refuses to be complicit with the camera’s gaze, although, he does not appear to be exercising his right not to be looked at. This portrait offers visual testimony of a type of subaltern agency that offers new life regarding how Latin American portraiture can be interpreted.33

Graciela Iturbide’s portraiture within her photographic work, especially those including and revolving around women, evokes a visible divergence from conventional European traditions in photography. Iturbide’s portraits in her photographic work do not identify with these conventions. Her photographic collection, instead, offers the viewer a distinct and native view of Mexico and Latin America. Indirectly mirroring magical realist innovations in rejecting European stylistic choices and re-inventing the ways of visualizing Latin America, the investigator who encounters Iturbide’s photographic archive is able to witness the unconventional portraits that challenge the exotic Western gaze.34 However, Iturbide does not limit herself in simply provoking normative photographic perceptions. All throughout her work, Iturbide actively challenges the misinterpretation of magical realism by Western audiences that

33 Ibid., 184.
34 Ibid., 184.
has long since attributed Latin America as a sight of only exotic creatures, presenting a reality that she intimately knows as home.

In an interview Gardner has with Iturbide herself, she admits, “Yo no creo en el realismo mágico. Es algo que hizo Francia para ensalzar a los escritores.” Iturbide, whose images have most often been described as magic realist, strongly denies to Gardner that her images were meant to be interpreted as magic realist at all. In photographs that arouse mythic narratives, magical realism, for Iturbide, does not exist. Rather, she finds magic realism to exist purely as a European concept to describe what was foreign, constraining what was “different” to the realm of the “Other.” For Iturbide, this is an inaccurate depiction of how to see her photographic subjects, of understanding any Mexican narrative or Latin American narrative as a whole from a foreign lens. If Graciela Iturbide suggests that her photographs must be read with a gaze that is not magic realist, then how must we as investigators witness this archive in order to help us develop other approaches in understanding her photographic work (as well as that of other Latin American photographers)? In other words, what are the keys to understanding her work and other visual narratives produced in Mexico, as well as all throughout Latin America?36

Graciela Iturbide’s photographic archive of the Juchitán society invites the viewer into a reality of multiple interpretations. Through Iturbide’s photographs, investigators of the archive are drawn to the Juchitecas’ “elaborate blouses, flowing skirts, ample bodies, and the dignified way that women move through space with something Istmeños refer to as gracia (grace) and presencia (presence).” She presents this world through her lens in its most true essence, while being mindful of her subjects’ complicity and agency in how they wish to be interpreted and

36 Ibid., 175.
understood. As a site well-known for exuding magical realism, Iturbide’s Juchitán asserts itself against normative ethnographic structures within European and Western photography by showing a Mexican reality that is unapologetically free. A matriarchal society that is unaffected and unphased by Western heteronormative standards, the Zapotec region of Oaxaca is a place where women are visible and vocal within the public spheres of society. (Taylor, 815). However, some critiques of the photographic are, reasonably so, concerned of gender discrimination and exclusion throughout this archive, whether these images perpetuate the primitive myth they wish to obstruct. Yet, this mythic matriarchal utopia, one that exudes femininity and independent existence that has long inspired magical realist narratives of an exotic and erotic realm, is simply a reality. What exactly is the reality that Iturbide wishes us to see?
Iturbide’s decade long documentation of the matriarchal Zapotec community of Juchitán provides a lens into witnessing the powerful role of women within the society: women as healers, as political leaders, as merchants, and as sexual sirens—women who are not just sexual, but unapologetically sexual. Accompanying the photographs almost in harmony is a lyrical essay written by Elena Poniatowska found in the beginning of the photo-book. In Poniatowska’s essay, utilizing a magical realist narrative, she mythologizes the region as a lusty garden of earthly delights, where “public space, economic exchange, and erotic humor are exclusively feminine domains.”37 In an excerpt, Poniatowska writes, “Man is a kitten between their legs, a puppy they have to admonish, ‘Stay there.’”38 The “unending sexual activity” of Juchitecan people, as Poniatowska depicts, is one heavily inspired by wild animals in heat, where “[t]he he-turtles come to spend themselves on the she-turtles; they make love until death finds them … Juchitán is in heat all year long … The wind spreads ocean musk upon the land of Juchitán, musk that inflames desire. And hope.”39 Poniatowska’s essay seeks to rewrite the colonial narratives that have exoticized and eroticized Juchitán women and, instead, empower them by reifying their cultural norms through their own voice. Through her lyrical writing, Poniatowska’s words uplift the Indigenous society in creating their own identity to be seen, who has been scandalized by the foreigners that persist in misinterpreting them.40 Instead of distancing outsiders who encounter

the collection, Poniatowska invites the investigator to understand the Indigenous language of Zapotec spoken among them, of which lingers and empowers them through nourishing their linguistic traditions, describing Zapotec as “sweeter, more docile than Spanish … a woman’s language.”

Poniatowska continues, praising Iturbide’s intimacy and care with translating this language through her photography:

If anyone has been granted the gift of tenderness, it is Graciela Iturbide, no wonder she has been able to portray even the most intimate wrinkle of Juchitán … [H]er photography translates the cloud language of the valleys of Oaxaca, and the features of its spirit as they are lifted out of the developing fluid, into Spanish. She hangs them up to dry and fixes the water of her eyes on paper.

Iturbide’s photographs of Juchitán women compose a surreal archive of a woman-centered society in tune with rhythms of the supernatural and the natural worlds. These photographs suggest that “the bounty of the sea, the fertility of the soil, and the electricity in the relentless warm breezes all contribute to the unique sensuality of Isthmus culture.”

With each image, one rarely finds any captions or names accompanied alongside it. Presenting these images accordingly, the briefest of labels to allow the investigator to interpret this fantastical reality that Iturbide sees. The most emblematic of this collection, as mentioned in chapter one, is the photograph of “Nuestra Señora de las Iguanas” (Figure 1). This photo of “Nuestra Señora” enjoys international fame not only for its stunning visual impact, but also because “it reinforces the popular view that Isthmus women constitute a kind of Amazonian elite,” a vision typically celebrated throughout Western scholarship for exoticizing Indigenous culture. Yet, it emphasizes that women within Juchitán are empowered and acknowledge that

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41 Iturbide, Juchitán de las Mujeres.
42 Ibid.
43 Taylor, Malinche Matriarchal Utopia, 820.
empowerment as individuals and that this knowledge is unremarkable among them. It is the everyday culture and lifestyle. This iconic photograph illustrates a magical reality of Juchitán that exists without the invasion of exotic tropes and stereotypes, an empowering realm that Iturbide attempts to portray to the viewers.

In an interview with Fabienne Bradu, Iturbide reveals the underlying reality of the iconic photograph of “Nuestra Señora.” While the portrait portrays the woman, named Zobeida, epic and heroic in her posture with the crown radiating around her head, one must be considerate of its backstory, of any photograph that an investigator may encounter. In her search of one of the many market women whom she had heard carry iguanas on their heads, “if anyone saw the contact sheet of the Lady of the Iguanas … they would see that the woman is dying of laughter.” It is only in this momentous photograph alone do the iguanas keep still and Zobeida appears serious and contemplative. It is in this very moment, casual and hearty in its backstory, that a market woman would be transformed into an iconic international feminist icon. Iturbide further explains in her interview that:

For the book on Juchitán, Elena Poniatowska wrote a text that, in its own right, is an interpretation. Many feminists in Japan or England, following the text of Elena Poniatowska, believed in the existence of a matriarchy in Juchitán and went there to interview the [actual] lady of the iguanas; and they asked her, “Are you a feminist?” and [Zobeida] answered, “Of course I’m a feminist. Ever since my husband died, I support myself.” In this fashion, many myths are created.

Graciela’s images almost always permit multiple interpretations, thereby satisfying, as she puts it, “the fantasy of each viewer.” In her photographs, there are small glimpses of moments of reality, woven with the magic realist concepts that would pave through the 20th century in Latin

46 Bradu and Iturbide, Graciela Iturbide habla con Fabienne Bradu, 28-9
47 Ibid., 29.

American art. Moments that would seem surreal to the common passerby actually reveal an everyday reality of this society.

Throughout Iturbide’s archival collection of Juchitán, women are found in the majority of the photographs, whether among others or by themselves. One may find within the collection women enjoying community with their arms around one another, veiled and covered up or bare and naked, working in the market and fields, dancing freely (Figure 3) and drinking happily (Figure 4). In many, Iturbide captures the women looking directly into the camera lens, while in others they are looking away. Despite occupying almost every page of Iturbide’s photo-book, each woman is distinct in their character and manner of being portrayed. Navigating through the city in these photographs, the investigator finds women who are open in their actions and are free in their being. Iturbide’s images of the Isthmus Zapotec of Juchitán, according to scholar Analisa Taylor, defy the usual stereotypes of feminine ideals in Mexico. These photographs present Indigenous women, who are typically portrayed as forward and aggressive, as a challenge against the stereotypic representation of the submissive woman who prevails throughout Mexico generally.48 By portraying Juchitán women in multifaceted depictions that encapsulate agency in vulnerability and strength in community, Iturbide presents an Indigenous reality of the Isthmus Zapotec that is not limited to a sexual fantasy, but simply an everyday reality.

In Juchitán, Graciela illustrates women in their most “natural” state: women as nursing mothers (Figure 7), women as caregivers, women as preparers of food, and women who are in rhythm with their natural elements and supernatural gifts. Iturbide’s images of the Isthmus Zapotec, according to Analisa Taylor, “invariably center upon the piercing gaze of self-assured Indian women.”49 Sherry Ortner, a cultural anthropologist, posited that many societies across the globe typically associate women with nature and men with culture.50 In this manner, it is not simply that women are in fact closer to nature but rather, they are thought to be “more natural” than are men, presumed to be governed more by the biological processes of reproduction and devoted to satisfying the family’s physical needs. A connection to affective labor, labor that is often biological and intended to produce or modify emotional experiences in people, there is a demonstrable significance in Juchitán society where this labor among women is highly valued and heavily appreciated throughout the culture. Within Iturbide’s photographs, the investigator will find women encompassing this leading role as family provider, uplifting motherhood and caretaker as not a passive role, but as an empowering one.

49 Ibid., 830.
50 Brandes, Graciela as Anthropological Photographer, 100.
Figure 6. Iturbide, Graciela. *Na’Lupe Pan*. 1986.

Figure 7. Iturbide, Graciela. *Curación*. 1988.
Throughout the photographic corpus, just as women are in tune with the natural realm, women of all ages are depicted in association with the supernatural through rituals of cultural tradition. Several photographs of Juchitán women are shown highlighted against a background that mimics the rays of the sun, quite reflective of those that surround the iconic “Virgin of Guadalupe.” In one photograph, the “rays” are symbolized through the marks of a badly defaced wall, almost enshrining the elder Juchitán woman against the contrasting sporadic paint splatter behind her (Figure 6). Not all of the sacred imagery, however, are derivative of Catholic tradition spread throughout Mexico. A well-known portrait shows an elder Zapotec curandera (healer) appearing to apply her supernatural gifts through placing her hands and a coin on the head of a young girl (Figure 7). An interpretation of this photograph can be seen as the elder woman transferring and sharing her knowledge through his gesture, a passing of the torch for the society’s youth (Figure 7). The interaction and relationship among women with nature and the spiritual supernatural pervades strongly through Iturbide’s collection.

Navigating through the spiritual realms of the Juchitán, Iturbide also captures the connections among species within the natural world, documenting playful representations of Juchitecas interacting with the other animals they live alongside. Much like “Nuestra Señora,” women are in contact with many of the animals in Juchitán, portrayed in some to be carrying chickens (Figure 8), dismembering rabbits, holding statues of crocodiles and walking away from a gathering of iguana corpses almost runway style (Figure 9). In a few images, they are disguising themselves with a bull’s head in one instance and in another a giant crab, each held up to the face as if it were a mask, choosing which parts to share with the viewer and which to hide. Through these photographs, these subjects explore performance of identity through the parts of other species and creatures via their own cultural customs. The women are thus transformed into
half-human half-animal creatures, into humans who are integral and inherent parts of nature.\textsuperscript{51}

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\begin{figure}[h]
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\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 100.
As a society tied to its traditions, blood can also act as a significant role in the spiritual rituals and relationships among the women and men. Within the Juchitán collection, one finds the photograph that Iturbide titled “El rapto” (the Abduction) (Figure 10). Through this image, one sees a young girl likely within her adolescent years, lying in bed with her arms close to her head, flowers covering and adorning her body cloaked in a white dress and white bedsheets. To the casual observer, the picture can easily portray a victim of violence. Iturbide, however, explains otherwise the actual meaning of the image as follows:

*El rapto* makes reference (*sic*) to a time when two youngsters from the countryside want to live together. The boy decides to abduct the girl, but the act is planned by both parties in concert. They go to the boy’s house, where he deflowers her with his finger. The boy’s family is aware that their son has the girl, but the girl’s family is not, and the following morning, the boy’s family looks to see if there is blood, if the girl really was a virgin. Then, there is a fiesta and they sing erotic songs, and seek out the girl’s family. They show them the bloody handkerchief to prove that she was a virgin and that she was in fact
deflowered. Afterwards, the girl remains in bed for a week and then the wedding ceremony is performed in church.\textsuperscript{52}

After knowing this reality, Iturbide’s portrait is an image of the girl during one of the days of her weeklong bed rest. It is well known among social anthropologists of Mexico that this sort of “abduction” is a prelude to formal marriage vows.\textsuperscript{53} Variations of the custom exist throughout the Mexican Republic, mainly under the name of “the robo” (theft). Additionally, the practice existed until recently throughout southern Europe as well; in Spain it was called \textit{llevarse la novia} (carry away the bride).\textsuperscript{54} The tensions visible within this photograph demonstrate the tensions with the viewer who is unknowing of the cultural traditions specific to this region. To the outsider, the photograph can easily portray a young woman who engages in a sexual activity for the first time with her kidnapper. Through this perspective, it can be difficult in envisioning how Iturbide is uplifting Juchitán women and celebrating cultural traditions rather than applying a traditional ethnographic reading of this specific event. Yet, through this image, Iturbide obstructs a seemingly blurred and painted over utopian fantasy of the society and illustrates a truthful reality that the investigator can now witness. Iturbide establishes through images much like “\textit{El rapto}” the underlying truths of Juchitán that were hidden under a façade of sexual delights; traditions and norms that are not just culturally specific but are deeply embedded in this Indigenous society that Western audiences read as exotic with ease.

\textsuperscript{52} Bradu and Iturbide, \textit{Graciela Iturbide}, 100.
\textsuperscript{53} Brandes, \textit{Graciela as Anthropological Photographer}, 98.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 98.

It would be unfair to say that Graciela Iturbide’s photography is guided by a notion of the strict division between men and women. While there are few Juchitán men in the photographs, Iturbide’s documents them in an equally distinct and particular way to their role in Juchitán society: in support of the women and their strength in the household. This can be seen in the two of the few images that Iturbide selects for her collection that have a woman and a man in the same photograph. One portrays a woman seated with a crocodile statue laid across her lap, gaze away from the lens, with a man standing behind her, one hand on top of her shoulder as he gazes directly into the lens, a look that can be interpreted as pride; both appear to be slightly grinning (Figure 11). In another photograph, an older man and woman are found seated, both wearing delicately handmade flower crowns around their heads, with the man appearing to be pointing in the direction of the woman (Figure 12). With these relationships, Iturbide shares that in Juchitán society, “the men work on farms and in factories, but they give money to the women,” the latter of whom are “independent, at ease with their bodies and comfortable with their power, which,” as Iturbide says, “came from control of the purse.”55 Other separate, individual portraits of men portray one man holding an erotic mold in its suggestiveness, another of men drinking among each other, and another shows a man in the market working. For Iturbide’s portrayal of Juchitán, her diverse portraits and imagery are too varied and complex to allow for simple binary oppositions of gender roles. Men and women alike appear in photographs filled to the brim with religious symbolism and animal spiritualism. Despite Iturbide’s focus more on women than on men, Iturbide’s dominantly female world admits of no generalities among genders. The women Iturbide depicts within her photographs are often interpreted as strong, proud, stately, yet there are numerous images where they still displayed weakness, humility, or a blatantly playful

approach to life—all facets of a colored, humane reality. As such, Iturbide aims simply, within her photography of Juchitán, to portray women in a manner that defies the usual image of la mujer abnegada (the self-sacrificing woman), as one can find that many of Iturbide’s portraits of the Zapotec and Mixtec Indigenous people do. Each portrait that Iturbide shares from this photographic archive conveys an individual spirit and life rather than a faceless gender role.56

While Iturbide explores aspects of Indigenous life in all its rich religious and cultural symbolism, she seeks to reveal, above all, not just the beliefs and behavior of any particular tribe, but the emotional textures and fibers of each unique person, regardless of gender or ethnic identity. In so doing, Iturbide transcends the descriptions and ethnographic labels of a given group of people and communicates, translates the range of emotion and individual spirit common to all humanity. Sifting further and further within her photographic collection of Juchitán,

56 Brandes, Graciela as Anthropological Photographer, 101.
Iturbide documents a society that is fluid in gender identity and normalizes a multiplicity of gender and sexuality, including free expression of gender and sexuality. Among the photographs, Iturbide portrays intimate portraits of a transwoman, Magnolia, whom Iturbide befriended throughout her years among the Zapotec. In one photograph, Magnolia is wearing a long floral gown, clad in a large shell necklace, and looking upwards in a thoughtful fashion, with a small compact mirror showing her side reflection (Figure 13). In the other, she is shown wearing a summer dress and a sombrero, posed playfully while gazing directly into the camera (Figure 14). In interviews discussing Magnolia, one can find that she belongs to a group of crossdressers known throughout the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as muxes, a local derivative of mujer (woman). Within Stanley Brandes’ article, Graciela as Anthropological Photographer, muxes constitute a prime ethnographic example of a third gender: “[A]mong many peoples, the Zapotex included, we find multiple genders, which are groups classified primarily according to behavioral and
cultural characteristics, rather than anatomy alone." Zapotec people consider muxes to be neither men nor women, but instead as a third gender in itself. This third gender is defined, as Taylor describes, by the muxes’ occupational roles, a specific case for the city of Oaxaca, as they are classified primarily for their domesticity, rather than their choice of dress or sexual orientation. Following carefully as to how these portraits are posed, particularly in Magnolia’s first portrait, they reveal a muxe self-image, reflecting how that individual specifically desires to be seen themselves, a theme of which Iturbide commonly shares throughout the Juchitán archive. Among these images in particular, one may encounter a collection that is free in interpretation, but it still reflective of an ethnographic reality that is fluid in shaping perceptions of Zapotec society, most especially with regards to the formation of an individual, personal identity. In challenging Western ethnographic studies of Indigenous people, these images of muxe identity present a perfect challenge against the Western gaze that may impose its own cultural standards of gender identity representation. Anthropologist Lynn Stephen emphasizes that muxes are not simply defined within compact gender categories by Juchitecans, but instead the terminology refers specifically to gender attributes and actions. As Stephen argues, the Western terminology of “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” and “bisexual” might be wholly inappropriate in describing the sexual behavior of muxes. There is no singular muxe experience, as Iturbide depicts, but rather a multiplicity of experiences, as prevalent all throughout Juchitán.

57 Brandes, Graciela as Anthropological Photographer, 98.
58 Ibid., 98.
Figure 15. Iturbide, Graciela. *Conversación*. 1986.

Figure 16. Iturbide, Graciela. *Fiesta*. 1986.
Retracing to Perez de Mendiola’s essay, the author asks whether modern photography from the mid-20th century and onwards could possibly share the same ethnographic lens present through the end of the 19th century, a period that framed the Indigenous people within the concept of primitivism, exoticism, eroticism, and its multiple ideological definitions, or whether it offers an alternative way of foregrounding them.60 Although Iturbide’s images certainly arouse the ethnographic curiosity, through documentation of an Indigenous society historically seen within the primitive, exotic, and erotic, they effectively escape these former constricting stereotypes and tropes. Iturbide’s approach to photographing the life in Juchitán was not the traditionally distanced one of the 19th century documentarian. Iturbide chose to become well-acquainted with the Juchitán people, to ensure the individuals she worked with were “complicit” in the way she would photograph them and the way they chose to be photographed. Stating in her interview, Iturbide shares that “[i]t wasn’t only that they gave me permission to take photographs, they also suggested themes and showed me things. I discovered the Zapotec people through their eyes, and through my own at the same time.”61 In deeper and intimate detail, Iturbide shares with the investigator how she shared life with Juchitán; more than just willing photographic subjects, Iturbide and the women of Juchitán were collaborators and close friends.

Further in her interviews, she discloses:

In Juchitán, I went to the market, I stayed with the women, those strong, fat, politicized, emancipated, marvelous women. I discovered the world of women … They’re strong women, physically large, and the whole time they were telling jokes and erotic tales in Zapotec—at times they translated for me, at times not … I lived in their houses. They cared for me, they took me to the market, they in a way adopted me … It wasn’t only that they gave me permission to take pictures, but also that they took initiative and showed me things. I came to describe Juchitán through their eyes, but at the same time through mine.62

61 Brandes, Graciela as Anthropological Photographer, 102.
62 Bradu and Iturbide, Graciela Iturbide, 30-31.
Through Iturbide’s eyes, the investigator finds an intimate experience of an individual who was immersed in the town of Juchitán and truly engaged with all of the people she encountered. In these shared moments, Iturbide challenged the stereotype of Indigenous women and Mexican women, dismantling it through the multitude of different portraits among the identities that were explored—establishing that there is not one identity that is representative of an entire culture and that these identities are not restricted to gender binaries nor exoticizing tropes of a magical realist narrative that is misread by Western eyes. In doing so, Iturbide’s entire archive of Juchitán counters the post-colonial narratives that have long eroticized and exoticized the Indigenous people of Juchitán, women more generally so, by subverting the Western gaze through a magical realist lens that actually captures the underlying cultural truths. Through her craft, Iturbide attempts to decenter an imposing Westernized feminist gaze of Juchitán and asks the viewer to use a method of witnessing this society through the archive with mindfulness and empathy.

While Iturbide attempt to harmoniously illustrate an Indigenous society within an archival history of colonial narratives that is unapologetically women empowered and unconcerned of typical Westernized gendered roles, some who encounter this photographic and ethnographic archive of Juchitán people are not easily persuaded. Iturbide’s photographic archive of Juchitán, as Iturbide has stated herself that her collections permit multiple interpretations through the “fantasy of the viewer,” certainly asks the investigators to not be easily swayed. While this statement challenges Westernized photographic means of documenting Latin American people and their culture, it similarly continues to leave open the possibilities of Western interpretations that remove agency from the Juchitecas that Iturbide hoped to restore. The inevitable criticisms of these interpretations are necessary in understanding an artist’s intentions within their curated archive, emblematic of the tensions of tendencies to Orientalize,
fetishize, and “Other” Indigenous peoples. While we, as investigators, do not want to fall into the traps of imposing Western colonial standards onto photographed subjects, these methods are significant in the comprehension of the struggle between an artist’s intention and their archive’s interactive relationships that stem from the audience’s reaction.
CHAPTER III:
“THROUGH THEIR EYES AND MINE”
Encountering the Indigenous Photographic Archive

While Iturbide’s photographic archival collection of Juchitán is ethnographic in nature and spiritually personal at its core, critiques of Iturbide’s collection, such as Leigh Binford’s article of “Normalizing Juchitán,” perceive that it perpetuates the “Other”-ing, fetishizing, exoticizing, and eroticizing that Iturbide actively attempts to avoid. Binford claims that Juchitán de las Mujeres portrays indigenous Mexicans in a way that reaffirms rather than challenges Western liberal discourses about them. While Iturbide reassures investigators of the photographic archive that she has developed an intimate relationship living among the Juchitán society for well over a decade, Binford is concerned that Iturbide’s construction of “ethnographic realism” mixed with “contrived studio-style portraits” limits the women within the “Other”-ing scope. While this particular staging, at times, was requested by the Juchitán women themselves, Binford insists that it only further exoticizes them within their own environment. This reaction resulting from interacting with Iturbide’s photographs of Juchitán pose several questions: Who exactly has control over their image? Can a photographed subject exoticize themselves, despite claiming agency through requested staging and posing? How does this all apply within a world depicted by a photographer who does not rely on Western gender binaries? Critiques such as Binford’s are significant in presenting the inevitable discourses brought forth from the curation of an artist’s archives, one that is subject to the biases of both the viewer and the creator, as well as the false narratives that may emerge.

As seen throughout the photographic collection of Juchitán, Binford asserts that

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Iturbide’s thematic vision of rendering daily life as a surreal reality is the very cause of this exoticization. Binford states particularly that by “obscurring or masking her subjects’ faces, interposing between them and the camera some foliage, hands, or a screen; alternatively, photographing women with their backs to the camera or facing away from it” are what further exoticize them in many cases. Additionally, as Iturbide’s photographs of Juchitán evidently portrays women much more frequently than the men within her archival collection, Binford claims that Iturbide’s preference in documenting the Zapotec women is a “disservice” to the men. Specifically, Binford is concerned with how sparsely Iturbide documents the men within her photographs to look “old, weak, decrepit, helpless, and/or vice-ridden.” Throughout his analysis, Binford focuses on an example of one of the few portraits of men within Iturbide’s photographic collection that shows an elderly man of a heavier set, sitting isolated and nearly naked, holding an erotic statue of a phallus on his lap. In another photograph Binford mentions, the subject is similar except the object appears to be a drinking vessel in the shape of a naked woman, with the vagina sealing the vessel’s mouth. Binford claims that:

Each man’s body is framed by the picture’s edges, which touch arms and head, imprisoning them, as the men in a Laconian sense imprisoned by their desire (for a large phallus with which to impress woman, for woman herself). The supplicatory gestures, symbolic confinement and laconic physiques subvert the threat implied by the sexually explicit props. These men do not threaten women.

In Binford’s perspective, the men within these photographs are not given the justice of a “proper” portrait that the Juchitecan women were allowed. It almost reads as if Binford is threatened by a power structure that does not align with his own perceptions of the world.

Although Binford is rightfully concerned by the ethics in a photographic archive of Indigenous

64 Ibid., 245.
65 Ibid., 244.
66 Ibid., 244.
67 Ibid., 244.
people and a magical realist narrative that further exotizes them, he simultaneously ignores agency of the Juchitecas who actively participated in the photographic construction of their likeness. In addressing concerns of disservices to Juchitecos and Juchitecas, Binford adds that by including men within a women’s world, the realm of *Juchitán de las Mujeres*, men must do the “extra work, since in the absence of commentary they will be taken to represent the larger universe of men.”68 Binford pushes his concerns forward with Iturbide’s rendering of Juchitán, ultimately concerned by the problems faced by photographers seeking to present non-Western Others, issues that many (not only in academia) are ethnically concerned by for the proper representation of indigenous peoples. In particular, Binford asserts:

> Yet her photographs also sanction gender inequality in Juchitán by denying that it exists or, even worse, by suggesting an inverted hierarchy of female dominance. They encourage readings of parts of indigenous Mexico as a dignified, savage and free, sexually liberated utopia without significant conflict but also lacking in the knowledges and machines that make the “civilized life” of urban Mexicans (including the artist) bearable, rewarding and powerful. Like the ethnographic community studies that dominated the anthropological literature of Mexico in the 1950s and 1960s, [Iturbide] treats Juchitán as an isolated microcosm that serves as a nostalgic reminder of the past, rather than seeking to show how these seemingly different worlds—those of urban *mestizo* and rural indigenous Mexico have been, and continue to be, the products of a skewed interdependence.69

Despite Binford’s pressing concerns of perpetuating the “Other”-ing trope that is common throughout Western discourses of Indigenous peoples, Binford disregards Iturbide’s personal intentions and relationships in documenting Juchitán. Binford neglects to note her completely non-Western perspective, as she is a Mexican woman exploring the experiences of the people, cultures, and languages of her home. While Binford’s claims may challenge the archival and ethnographic purpose of Iturbide’s collection in arguing that it perpetuates the colonial and eroticized perception of Indigenous communes, it may also be a self-revealing anxiety of

68 Ibid., 244.
69 Ibid., 248.
Western societies with women in power, especially Indigenous women, similarly perpetuating a contained magic realist perception of Mexico. Binford’s arguments further limit the Indigenous society of Juchitán as a town that is continually silenced within Western academic discourses by imposing the same Western gaze that he fears within ethnographic archives.

Although Binford’s criticisms are concerned with gender discrimination and biases that Iturbide’s collection may reveal, his critiques similarly continue to impose Western ideals on an indigenous Mexican society that is unconcerned of such standards. Some of the Juchitán women and trans-women, of whom are dissociated from the Western exoticized gaze, specifically request Iturbide to stage and pose them in ways that provide the subjects agency, dissolving a colonial gaze in their history through the power of photography. It is interesting where Binford is concerned by the two photographs with the elderly men and the erotic sculptures in their hands, a solemn and isolating analysis of the photos that seemed contained by the particular framing Iturbide chose. However, Binford’s reading into this framing ignores that this stylistic choice is seen throughout the rest of Iturbide’s photographic collection. If Iturbide’s “framing” of men’s validation in her photographs denied them agency, then this stylistic choice contained and restricted all of the photographed subjects, despite Iturbide proclaiming their freedom. By limiting the photographs of men in a manner that exudes sex and primal nature through objects, Binford presumes this connotation to be negative, despite acknowledging Juchitán to be a sexually free place. In contrast, referring back to Figures 11 and 12 in chapter two, the men can also be seen in purely supportive roles within the community, the household, and throughout the culture and society, uplifting the Juchitán women and equally providing their share. The concerns of a gender unfairness through Binford’s dualistic study of a comparative analysis of Juchitán women and men undermines the larger, inclusive body of work that Iturbide perceives.
The Juchitán that Iturbide portrays within her archive is one that is unaffected by the Western hegemonic gender structures of the past that Binford is evidently stuck in. With particular focus on these concerns of gender specific views of Juchitán, Analisa Taylor in her article, “Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico,” states that while many of these scholarly, artistic, literary, and mass media approaches to the Isthmus Zapotec culture, much like Binford’s, envision the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as a matriarchal society, in doing so they conceptualize matriarchy as a simple inversion of patriarchal domination. These approaches are inconsiderate of the multi-dimensionalities of gender that are evident and significant throughout Juchitán society. Through this one-dimensional perception of Juchitán, such criticisms paint a picture of Isthmus Zapotec women as “brawny Amazons who lord it over meek and subservient men.”

Throughout her work, Taylor demonstrates an intimate understanding of the Isthmus Zapotec community that Juchitán derives from through a film analysis of the documentary *Blossoms of Fire*, directed by Maureen Gosling over a similar decade-long period to Iturbide’s journey, indirectly paralleling Iturbide’s earlier film background. The documentary, like Iturbide’s photographs, aims to portray Juchitán in its true reality that obstructs eroticizing narratives within mass media. What Taylor discovers, through the lens of Gosling, is that Isthmus Zapotec society is not limited in viewing the world through a dichotomous sort of “—archy” (patriarchy, matriarchy, or otherwise). Instead, as Taylor states, “the culture reaches beyond these binary oppositions that conflate male and female with dominant and subjugated, active and passive, modern and traditional, public and domestic, productive and reproductive labor to focus on traditional Zapotec gender roles as they are locally

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Juchitec sociologist Marina Menenses contrasts Isthmus Zapotec notions of gender complementarity with Westernized, Euro-American feminisms’ emphasis on gender equality. The difference, as Menenses explains, is that the distinct tasks men and women perform are considered equally valuable within society, providing both with income, prestige, and independence (Taylor, 821).

Despite being an entirely different artistic medium, Gosling’s *Blossoms* is supportive of the rightful portrayal of a true Juchitán, uplifting Iturbide’s efforts through intimate connections of the Juchitecan people. Many of the women and men interviewed in *Blossoms of Fire* draw connections between the central roles that women play in public spheres and the Isthmus Zapotec tradition of openness about non-heterosexual social identities, even if these roles and norms might not appear “traditional” to outside observers. As noted in chapter two, the Juchitán identify a third gender of *muxé*, which Iturbide discovers when meeting the trans-woman named Magnolia. While Binford pointedly marks his concerns of ethnographic portrayals fetishizing a world that is exclusively open of different gender identities, he ignores the fact that these realities continue to exist without the Western gaze in the first place. In *Blossoms of Fire*, a man named Eusebio is seen ceasing in sweeping his home to join in on the many interviews held in the documentary. With a tender smile, Eusebio reveals that since his wife had become ill, he had become *muxé*. In distinct contrast to Magnolia, for Eusebio, it was clear that being *muxé* had more to do with the kind of work he was engaged in than with sexual difference. To be *muxé* is to be keeper of the house, he implied. These examples illustrate that individuals arrive at gendered identities by performing certain tasks and only secondarily by outward appearance or sexual identification. Through this particular scene alone, Binford’s gender dichotomous

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73 Ibid., 823.
critique elucidate the Western anxieties with multitude of gender identities that are, in actuality, unaffected by an overpowering sexuality that outsider narratives forcibly stereotype Indigenous societies as.

Binford’s claims that acceptance of male homosexuality, and any other “unorthodox” expression of gender and sexual identity, is a by-product of women’s superior social status.\(^7^4\) These claims disclose a Western unease of the very possibility of a world where gender equality seems to exist, a reality that may seem too magical realist to Western critique. Finding dignity in the “savage and free” are exotic aesthetics for Binford and other Western criticisms in describing Indigenous ethnographic archives, yet these specific traits are inherent of an Indigenous Juchitecan reality that is empowered by such identifiers.\(^7^5\) The contrast between Binford’s presumption of Juchitán gender norms and the portraits Iturbide perceives of Juchitán women’s and muxés’ relationships to the public sphere is that feminine identity is synonymous with the capacity to earn a livelihood and to determine the conditions of personal and collective dignity. Through feminine identity as a foundation for the cultural, there lies empowerment in living and staying true to one’s cultural roots, unconcerned of whether outsiders view these actions as primitive and uncivil. Where Binford is also mistaken is that the “exotic” and “fetishizing” tropes that he finds within the Indigenous society of Juchitán is not only part of their reality but is also prevalent throughout Mexican culture. Many of the purportedly matriarchal elements found in Isthmus Zapotec culture can also be found throughout Mexican society. Looking further within the country itself, “we can see that women all over Mexico serve as administrators of family finances and informal networks of community organization.”\(^7^6\) Much of what we point to

\(^7^4\) Binford, *Graciela Iturbide*, 248.
\(^7^5\) Ibid., 248.
\(^7^6\) Taylor, *Malinche Matriarchal Utopia*, 837.
as evidence of matriarchy among Isthmus Zapotecs, of which Binford finds escapable within the Indigenous society of Juchitán, can be found in other parts of Mexico, yet investigators of the archive, including those who appear to be aware of the culture, have been conditioned to turn a blind eye to it.77 (pp. 837)

What Binford critiques in his concerns of reaffirming Western liberal discourses of Indigenous ethnographic archives discloses the hidden hegemonic power structures of a Western gaze imposed on photographed subjects who claim agency. While Iturbide’s photographs, as Binford addresses, display Juchitecan folks in a surreal and dreamlike realm exoticized to outside viewers, these photographs through their contextual reality do not reinforce Western gender binaries or fetishizations of colonial pasts, but rather that Binford and others perhaps imposed them on her photographs. Despite denying the incorporation of magical realism within her work, Iturbide indirectly establishes how an aesthetic style commonly attributed to Latin American works that empower Latin American identity could easily be misused and misinterpreted through non-Latin American perspectives. Western critiques, among other non-Zapotec, non-Indigenous, and non-Latin American critiques, must be mindful of the mistake in easily interpreting Indigenous ethnographic archives within Latin America that may reflect the continent’s magical realist elements, but reveal the honest realities of an existing society simply in its everyday world.

As Lois Parkinson Zamora, renowned scholar in the comparative study of literature of the Americas, has argued, magical realism works at “erasing and redrawing the lines between fiction and history for particular political purposes.”78 In other words, magical realism should not be

77 Ibid., 837.
78 Lois Parkinson Zamora, “One Hundred Years of Solitude in comparative literature courses,” Approaches to Teaching Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: MLA, 1990), 31.
considered strictly as an aesthetic form that can be produced anywhere, under any sociocultural conditions, but as a discourse that emerges from cultural formations and is utilized in rewriting postcolonial narratives of the postmodern world. This postcolonial potential is developed further in Michael Taussig’s conception of the politics of magical realism. Taussig envisions magical realism as the opportunity of “rescuing the ‘voice’ of the Indian from the obscurity of pain and time. From the represented shall come that which overturns the representation.” Although Taussig is drawn to the potential within magical realism as not solely an aesthetic stylistic choice for artists and writers to re-create and re-invent new political and cultural practices, he strongly warns, as proven through Binford’s critique, that this aesthetic has much too often acted as instrument of a hegemonic re-appropriation, “a neo-colonial reworking of primitivism.”

However, this does not deny, for Taussig, the potentiality of magical realism of a cultural and political project that might restore the voice of the popular, the subaltern and the premodern.

Discovering critiques such as Binford’s are helpful towards understanding the placement of Iturbide’s collection within the photographic archives. The viewer’s gaze has proven within this critique that it is essential in understanding the varied interpretations that result from a photographic archive such as Iturbide’s collection of Juchitán, especially one that seems to be fetishizing an Indigenous group. It invites and challenges perceptions that clash within a photographic archive, especially when the artist’s intentions contrast against the audience’s depictions, asking the investigator to question the multifaceted perceptions of memories that can easily be forgotten. This affirms the inter-relationships that result from encountering an artist’s archive and asks the investigator: Can artists be held responsible for how others interpret their

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80 Ibid., 172.
81 Siskind, “Magical Realism,” 851.
work? Marcy E. Schwartz and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello in their edited work *Photography and Writing in Latin America* emphasize the exact problematic of the Western gaze on indigenous cultures:

> These collaborations of photography and writing go beyond responding to and documenting contemporary multimedia realities. In fact, they are the legacy of European New World exoticism, expansion, and colonization and reflect the consequent policies of racist discrimination and social marginalization that independence in the 19th century institutionalized within a discourse of otherness. A reliance on both the verbal and the visual became and remains one of the representational strategies in the continuing quest for autonomous cultural identification in a postcolonial context.\(^{82}\)

In unravelling her femininity and *mexicanidad* throughout her work, whether intentional or not, Iturbide’s archival project of Juchitán is reflective of a circular history of impositions of Western perspective and otherness. While the project indirectly upholds a responsibility of challenging otherness and the Western ethnographic lens, it requires the investigator to venture deeper into the relationship of Western views on indigenous culture, to further understand the resulting identity of Mexico. In the preface to *Images of Spirit: Photographs by Graciela Iturbide*, Roberto Tejada states that Iturbide’s images highlight an underlying rift between belonging and citizenship by portraying a sort of “outsider culture” by larger divisions of people.\(^{83}\) The identity of Mexico, as Tejada interprets, that Iturbide portrays in her photographs heavily express the culture derivative of social and political changes in Mexico since colonization. Since her works are a direct, poetic look at this resulting identity of Mexico, the Western view becomes even more important to investigate.\(^{84}\) There is a tendency within the First World to “perceive these artistic creators from the Third World as exotic, their work often marginalized, viewed, and

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experienced outside the mainstream galleries, theatres, museums, and concert halls.”

In encountering Iturbide’s photographic archive, one is required to not only confront the historical and cultural framework regarding photography of indigenous people, but also the inevitable circumstances of another who does not perceive this selection of images as positive for Mexicans overall. This responsibility that is not only assumed for the photographer, but the investigator and audience as well.

In encountering any archives, the investigator must include the complex institutional implications in dealing with archives of people of color. Museums, among other institutions that archive works, in general have had a long history of marginalizing people of color, which can surely complicate the exhibition of Iturbide photographic archives, as well as any exhibition of Latinx photographic archives. While the intentions of an artist, collector, or museum may be deemed “good,” there is an undeniable long history of oppression that may distort their intentions. Yet, part of the selection process is a determination on the part of the artist and/or collectors is to ultimately have the work shown, have their vision communicated to a wider audience, and educate the public about other cultures. An object is always a reflective sign of its origin, but it also may be symbolically reinterpreted over and over again. While a photograph by Iturbide will always be a sign reflecting Iturbide herself or the actual event depicted in a photograph, the same photograph may become a symbol for something else by someone else, all inherently dependent on who collected it, where and when it is placed, and among whom it is placed or shown with. Although a photograph, especially within the case of the photographic archive of Juchitán, may be a symbol for collectors and a subject worthy of educating the public

in a purely ethnographic sense, there is still the pressing possibility for other concerning interpretations of these images once they interact with the public realm. The photographic archive thus acts simultaneously as a device for providing new context for a photo while still holding an immense contextual past from its origin of creation. The questions that press a curated archive then is when do we, as investigators, consider the gaze of the audience and how much can we ultimately hold an artist responsible for the interpretations of their work? As Latin American photography has had a long history of acting as the vehicle for Indigenous people to be placed in the position of the other this is, unfortunately, a problem with which fellow artists and archival institutions still grapple. Despite these persisting struggles in artistically documenting an Indigenous society wealthy in its freedom for expressing identity, culture, and history, photographers like Iturbide continue their work in confidence of overcoming this Western need throughout the privileged world in satisfying a hunger for the “exotic.”

To say that Graciela Iturbide’s photography is guided by a dualistic notion of the strict division between men and women is to ignore the immensely varied and complex characters within her collected archive that are unphased by Westernized binaries. While Iturbide’s focus is indeed on the women of Juchitán, where women are often interpreted as strong, proud, stately, the investigator still encounters numerous images where the women freely displayed weakness, humility, or a downright playful approach to life. No stereotypes or generalities are to be found within Iturbide’s perception of a womanly realm, each photograph documenting an individual spirit and “pure emotional texture of each unique person” as opposed to a faceless gender role, regardless of ethnic identity. As Iturbide discloses within her interview with Bradu regarding Juchitán:

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87 Ibid., 45.
In Juchitán, I went to the market, I stayed with the women, those strong, fat, politicized, emancipated, marvelous women. I discovered the world of women … They’re strong women, physically large, and the whole time they were telling jokes and erotic tales in Zapotec—at times they translated for me, at times not … I lived in their houses. They cared for me, they took me to the market, they in a way adopted me … It wasn’t only that they gave me permission to take pictures, but also that they took initiative and showed me things. I came to describe Juchitán through their eyes, but at the same time through mine.”

Opposing concerns against oppressive qualities of an ethnographic archive, critics like Cuauhtémoc Medina interestingly say that “these images of Indians were actually consumed by European and American audiences to reassure themselves ‘that something survives the ongoing devastation of colonialism.’” In a way, such a process normalizes the exoticization of indigenous groups, while simultaneously relieves the burden of the Western gaze at fault for perpetuating otherness. This asks Indigenous peoples to apologize for an existence that does not reaffirm Western culture. The people photographed cannot help how others perceive them and while it is the responsibility of Iturbide to make sure she truthfully captures her subject matter, it is not the responsibility of the Juchitán to live in a way that conforms to Western ideals. Iturbide appears to be unphased by the suffocating structures of Western academic discourse and judgment and has given herself the permission to make her own path of image-making and the relationships the come forth from them, “trusting the powers of empathy to personalize and extend the humanist tradition of picture-making.” Yet, to remind the investigator, each photograph created by Iturbide is made with the intention and acknowledgement of open interpretation, permitting multiple interpretations that satisfy “the fantasy of each viewer.” The Western colonized and exoticized gaze that accompanies ethnographic photography may be

89 Bradu and Iturbide, *Graciela Iturbide habla con Fabienne Bradu*, 25-6, 30-31.
92 Bradu and Iturbide, *Graciela Iturbide habla con Fabienne Bradu* 29.
inevitable, but it is important to consider and understand towards a contemporary process of
decolonization within the archives, the aims of a magical realist world, particularly within the
documented vision of the indigenous Juchitán. It is Iturbide’s desire to share the enchanting lives
and sorrows of which she was allowed access to and granted permission to share, a society that
was more than a mere photographic subject, but an open collaboration as close comrades sharing
a vision with the world.
CONCLUSION:
“LONG LIVE THE WOMEN OF JUCHITÁN”

Graciela Iturbide’s imagery spread throughout her photographic archive of *Juchitán de las Mujeres* and the rest of her artistic works is visually captivating, intriguing, and engaging and rightfully merits critical discourse for Latin American ethnographic archives of Indigenous groups. Iturbide’s photographic oeuvre creates a specific witness, or photographic vision, of Indigenous communities like Juchitán, of Mexico, and of all of Latin America. It brings forth the symbolic and ritualistic experiences of magical realism encountered in the quotidian experience in Mexico as well as Iturbide’s personal experience that can be utilized as an empowering tool or misused as a fetishizing trope. In further exploration of these specific experiences within Iturbide’s archive, this offers the archival investigator other avenues of understanding that can be employed to approach this artist’s work, ones that promise potential for this archive as a key in understanding Latin American visual culture in a postcolonial world. The identification, criticisms, and discussion of those significant textures in Iturbide’s photographic testimony, present within Iturbide’s own intentions and critiques such as Leigh Binford’s, studied here allow a broader manner of interpreting her ideas and understanding of the artistic Latin America that is not restricted by a magical realist aesthetic.

Through Iturbide’s photographic archive, the investigator is able to appreciate the ways in which social identities are dynamically constructed and concepts of tradition and social mores are not necessarily conservative or heterosexist according to restricting hegemonic binaries.93 By juxtaposing fantasy and reality through a lens of multiple interpretations not limited to magical

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realism, investigators of the archive begin to see the tensions between how social identities and agency are constructed in nationalist discourses, particularly Western critiques that impose their gaze on these photographed subjects, and how they might actually be lived and imagined within Indigenous communities in Mexico.\textsuperscript{94} Encountering the archives, evident through the critical discourses that resulted from Iturbide’s photographic archive, invites and opens discussions for silenced and colonized narratives of people of color, especially Indigenous groups. Particularly with the Isthmus Zapotec of Juchitán, pressing concerns what might be gained or lost if we buy into the idea of an alluring gynocentric paradise under a magical realist guise in Oaxaca, Mexico. As Analisa Taylor pointedly asks, “what might these images of gender and sexual freedom limited to one specific, remote region tell us about how national identity has been imagined—gendered, sexualized, and racialized—within a wider field of Mexican visual and literary production?”\textsuperscript{95} The lively and spirited images of an empowering, woman-centered culture among Isthmus Zapotecs that seduce the viewer contrasts deeply with the central metaphors with which cultural nationalists and Western hegemonies of artistic interpretation have constructed as the foundational myths of modern Mexican identity.\textsuperscript{96}

The notion of a matriarchal utopia presents us with an appealing counternarrative to the disempowering exotic fetishizing of an Indigenous Mexican society, with Juchitán presenting itself as a society that is inherently empowered by its mythic Indigenous roots. Through the “fantasy” Iturbide presents, the investigator must ask whether this myth, by presenting carefully selected images of Indigenous women’s empowerment onto one specific region, “may serve to legitimize nationalist discourses that imagine women, especially indigenous women (\textit{sic}), as

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 824.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 817-8.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 817-8.
passive and powerless yet paradoxically self-serving and treacherous.⁹⁷ As Taylor rightfully presses the investigator of the archive of Juchitán, especially Western viewers who encounter Indigenous ethnographic archives: Could we ever see past the binaries of masculine and feminine, modernity and tradition, public and domestic realms of life, as well as productive and reproductive labor, in our understanding of how gender and sexual identities are lived in Mexico and elsewhere?⁹⁸ Such questions stem from Westernized misconstructions of Juchitán society limited by a misuse of magical realist perception as a strictly exotic and sexual realm. Yet, as covered throughout this archival study of Iturbide’s photo-collection, unpacking and disassembling this misuse and misreading of this aesthetic style can be pave the way for a method of mindful understanding of Indigenous groups in the postcolonial and postmodern realm.

The notion that magic realism is too frequently employed to describe Latin America is, as discussed by Nathanial Gardner, not new within critical discourses. Yet, perhaps because of the ease with which magic realism is associated and employed as a stylistic choice in depicting the “Other,” theoretical body outside of Latin America that uses magic realism to describe Latin America continues to grow.⁹⁹ This usage of magic realism often and commonly views Latin America in a framework of folklore and exoticism, of myth and surrealism that omits and neglects other valid representations and discussion of the region.¹⁰⁰ Iturbide was not the only one to caution against using magic realism to interpret her work. In an article on the history of Latin American photography and its key creators, Amanda Hopkinson interestingly employs a short anecdote by author Gabriel García Márquez to stress the magical realism’s overuse in regard to

⁹⁷ Ibid., 818.
⁹⁸ Ibid., 818.
Latin America: “If I watch a parakeet fly up out of a mango tree in my garden, I’m witnessing a daily reality. Publish it in English and I’m doing magic realism.” 101 Although the overapplication of this term typically regards Latin American literature, Hopkinson similarly warns against applying magical realist aestheticism to photography across Latin American. 102 However, as the trend of magical realism has and will continue to be utilized, it must be used properly and rightfully to uphold and empower Latin American identity and artistic style as its founders sought. Despite Iturbide actively denying the existence of magical realism within her work, magic and fantasy run strongly throughout her imagery, as described perfectly by a European critic: “Visual poetry and magic run through all her works, providing a powerful bridge between the subjects which interest her and the reality she observes.” 103 (Friis, Hasselblad 12).

For Elena Poniatowska in her lyrical essay of the Isthmus Zapotec town, Juchitán is “not like any other town,” because the women within this community own the streets and their own bodies:

You should see them arrive like walking towers, their windows open, their heart like a window, their nocturnal girth visited by the moon. You should see them arrive; they already are the government, they, the people, guardians of men, distributors of food, their children riding astride their hips or lying in the hammocks of their breasts, the wind in their skirts, flowered vessels, the honeycomb of their sex overflowing with men. Here they come shaking their wombs, pulling the machos toward them, the machos who, in contrast with them, wear light colored pants, shirts, leather sandals, and palm hats, which they lift high in the air as they shout, “Long live Juchitec women!” (Poniatowska 1993, 133–34)

For Iturbide, Poniatowska’s poetic interpretation of Juchitán is crucial in understanding that from one photographic archive an infinitude of interpretations will branch and be part of the ever-

102 Ibid., 524.
growing narratives that will be part of it forever. The archive is an open reflection of the innerworkings of an artist and reveals carefully placed strings that weave an artist’s work altogether. Juchitán, one of the many intimate journeys Iturbide has taken within her photographic and personal life, is a presentation of Iturbide’s own interpretation of reality through the photographic lens. As she states herself:

With the camera, you interpret reality. Photography is not truth. The photographer interprets reality and, above all, constructs his own reality according to his own awareness or his own emotions … Without the camera, you see the world in one way; with the camera, another. Through this window, you’re composing and even dreaming about this reality as if, through the camera, you are synthesizing what you are with what you’ve learned of a certain place. Then you make your own image, your own interpretation. The same thing happens to a writer as to a photographer: it’s impossible to capture the truth of life.  

The unconscious obsession that we photographers have, according to Iturbide, is that wherever we go, we want to find the theme that we carry inside ourselves. The camera for Iturbide is the foundational pretext for exploring life and culture all around the world. Thus, all of her photographic work is unapologetically “egocentric,” as she says, “It is about what Graciela Iturbide saw when she was taking photographs around the world, nothing more. I am showing how I interpret things through all the influences in my life.”

In the realm of Latin American photography, what are the images that define contemporary Mexico? Through Iturbide’s photographic archive of Juchitán, the investigator finds a seemingly matriarchal utopia that is relentlessly undefined by hegemonic gender binaries and is empowered and tied to its Indigenous identity. As investigators, we encounter a society that upholds women of all personalities and presents a society of gender inclusivity. Iturbide’s

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105 Ibid., 121.
experience in Juchitán reveals the vivacious and fragile life in the Isthmus Zapotec, of the inherent relationships of the natural and supernatural. In Juchitán, the investigator discovers each and every carefully selected piece of a whole, fragments that take on more meaning with each picture, a nation reimagined image by image through the “fantasy of the viewer.”

In the concluding parts of Bradu’s interview with Iturbide, revealing personally what the Indigenous world of Juchitán had given her as an individual person rather than as an artist, Iturbide intimately replies:

Knowledge of the culture of my country and consciousness of marginality. From [those women] I learned that their culture is different from mine. It changed me to learn that there exist other worlds, remote from and at the same time close to us … I probably learned to see a bit through their eyes.”

Without a doubt, a great deal of Iturbide’s work has focused on the lives and rituals of indigenous peoples in Mexico and beyond. However, this work is also a personal quest for identity, based greatly upon the experience of sharing the lives that have kindly been shared with her. The operations within an ethnographic archive, richly entrenched in its own ongoing history and evolving culture, are straightforwardly complex; its initial vision, intention, and curation will inevitably be skewed upon its entrance into the public realm of critique. As investigators, we are required to understand the contextual history behind an archive, particularly one that is “different” from what we normally encounter, as well as the relationships that develop and stem from it. To willfully ignore these criteria is to completely dismiss impactful and unique stories, societies, and individual lives. The photographic archive of Juchitán, coupled with the vision of Iturbide and the Zapotec, is not only a significant contribution to the ethnographic studies of an indigenous society long perceived under a Western colonizing and exoticizing gaze, but a

107 Bradu and Iturbide, *Graciela Iturbide habla con Fabienne Bradu*, 38.
photographic work of enchantment and wonder to the fragility and beauty of life in all of its cultural diversity.
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