

Review — *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition* by Gaspar de Alba, Alicia and Alma López (eds)

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The image of La Virgen de Guadalupe is highly visible in Mexican and Mexican American culture, as evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of statuettes, portraits, memorabilia, tattooed bodies and graffiti art. She has been connected to notions of identity and nationalism as well as religious tradition, with visual representations appearing in prominent national and social events such as the Mexican Revolution and the United Farm Workers protests in California. In their edited collection, *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition* (University of Texas Press, 2011), Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López provide a unique and intimate view into the consequences of visual feminist revisions of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Written as part of the Chicana Matters Series, this collection gathers a host of respected scholars in the field of Chicana feminism, history and theory. Both López and Gaspar de Alba are noted Chicana lesbian feminists and students of Chicana feminism will be familiar with the works of novelist and theorist Emma Pérez and historian Deena Gonzalez (recently listed as one of the fifty most important living historians in the U.S. today).

The piece of art at the centre of the controversy, entitled "Our Lady", was part of the exhibition "Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology", held by the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The inclusion of "Our Lady", a digital image of a brown-skinned woman with bare midriff and legs, standing proudly and gazing out at the viewer, angered local Catholic representatives and Chicano nationalists to such a degree that their vocal opposition to and organised protests against the artwork brought the Museum to the attention of the national media. The controversy raised a myriad of issues including the separation (or lack thereof) of state and religion, freedom of speech, artistic expression, religious expression, gender, sexuality, economy, immigration, race and tradition.

The book is structured around the notion of chiasmus, a figure of speech that offers a way of exploring opposing ideas by reversing the second half of an expression, thereby offering a new insight into the original idea. Gaspar de Alba offers Mae West's famous line "It's not about the men in my life, but about the life in my men" as an example of chiasmus in her introduction to the collection. In a similar way, each chapter takes

arguments made in opposition to the art of López and repositions them from a feminist perspective. Five of the eleven chapters also employ the chiasmic structure in their title and as a structuring trope. While most of the arguments against “Our Lady” bemoan the lack of respect for the traditional Catholic representation of La Virgen de Guadalupe, *Our Lady of Controversy* confronts the heteropatriarchal structures of the church, reinforced by traditional ceremony, and asks: Who owns the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe? Why can't women re-imagine her in ways that enable identification and not just veneration?

Luz Calvo's essay *Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Work of Alma López*, provides a solid grounding of the Nahua and Hispanic religious and artistic symbols found in both the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe that is said to have miraculously appeared on the *tilma* (cloak) of a native Indian in 1581, and also in the digital image of “Our Lady”, created by Alma López in 1999. The layers of storytelling, history and mythologies woven into the artistic images expose the reader to the complex nuances at play in the work being protested. For readers unacquainted with the story of La Virgen de Guadalupe, this essay also provides a glimpse into the social, cultural and historical issues at play as well as the religious. All of these points are taken and expanded on by other contributors to the collection. The problematics of male-centred discourse in issues of female representation are discussed by Clara Román-Odio, Emma Pérez, Christina Serna, Kathleen Fitzcallahan Jones and Catriona Esquibel Rueda. The more personal writings by Alma López at the beginning and conclusion of the book decisively outline the personal impact of the protests on the artist, while curator Tey Marianna Nunn provides an insightful reflection on contemporary Latina/o art as well as the personal and political implications of her involvement with the “Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology” exhibit.

Each chapter, original in its own right, builds upon points and opinions raised in other chapters, giving the entire collection a sense of communal dialogue and debate rather than simply a collection of isolated voices speaking within the rubric of a common theme. This idea of community is furthered by the inclusion of an 18 page appendix of 'Selected Viewers Comments' from the original exhibition. Both positive and negative remarks are transcribed into this section, giving a chance for both sides of the community to carry their point even into the publication of a book clearly arguing in favour of the art and artist. Moreover, included in the book is a CD of 'I Love Lupe', comprising a video interview with artists Ester Hernandez, Alma López and Yolanda López (no relation). This digital chapter integrates the notion of the original exhibition, “Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology”, by combining digital technology with the traditional book format. By allowing a community of artists speak directly to the reader, the DVD also illustrates how Alma López is actually part of an ongoing Chicana artistic tradition of reinterpreting La Virgen de Guadalupe.

The book constitutes a rich source of historical, political, feminist, religious, social and

artistic issues pertinent not only in New Mexico but also in the wider Chicana/o community. The recent protests in opposition to "Our Lady" being exhibited in University College Cork as part of a Chicana exhibition give testament to the importance attributed to the representation of the Mother of Christ in patriarchal Catholic communities. They also highlighted the necessity for a book like *Our Lady of Controversy* in other Catholic communities, in order to create spaces for women to openly question that patriarchal tradition. The editors have provided a comprehensive, scholarly rebuttal to arguments against feminist revisions of a female figure within their own religious tradition. A definitive read for anyone interested in American and Mexican religious studies, feminism, Chicana art, history or political science.