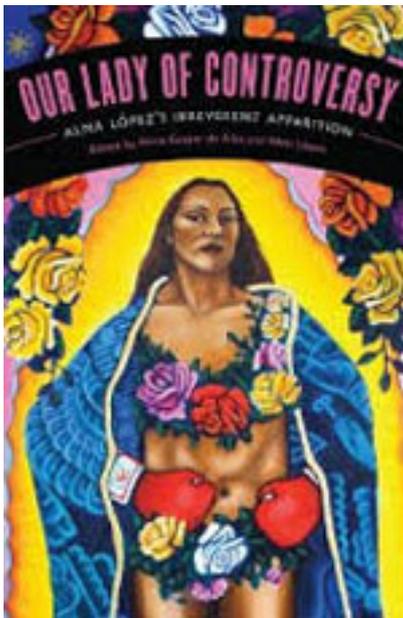


***Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition* edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López**

Michelle Martin-Baron | Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López, eds. 2011. *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition*. Austin: University of Texas Press.



In 2001, Chicana artist Alma López, curator Tey Mariana Nunn, and Santa Fe's Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) unexpectedly found themselves at the center of a heated controversy. As one of four featured artists in an exhibit titled *Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology*, López's mixed media piece "Our Lady" had been printed on postcards advertising the opening of the exhibit, where it had caught the attention of the Hispanic religious community and the Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. This digital print, "featur[ing] performance artist Raquel Salinas as an assertive and strong Virgen dressed in roses and cultural activist Raquel Gutiérrez as a nude butterfly angel" led to numerous protests, threats to the artist, curator, and museum, and a maelstrom of sensationalist journalism. The contested image and the controversy it garnered are at the heart of the edited collection *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López's Irreverent Apparition*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Alma López. While ostensibly a narrow topic, Gaspar de Alba, López, and their contributors prove that all of the fuss over this single image resonates over much larger terrain, invoking philosophical and practical concerns ranging from the rights of artists, religious and spiritual expression, the representation of queer sexuality, and the state

of feminism within the Chicano and Hispanic communities.

Centered around the concept of chiasmus, or, the inversion of language in order to expose a second, hidden layer of meaning, *Our Lady of Controversy* employs both queer themes and methodology. Many of the authors employ chiasmus as a mode of critique, either in their chapter titles or in the framework of their arguments. This chiasmus methodology serves simultaneously as a queering, or a rendering strange of (hetero)normative, male-centric visual and linguistic discourse. While these types of juxtapositions are prevalent in the theoretical development of the authors' claims, they are also featured through the organization of the volume itself. Written work is interwoven with images, primary source documents, such as photographs, letters, newspaper clippings, and speeches, and entwined with scholarly discourse. This blend makes *Our Lady of Controversy* an invaluable resource and nuanced rendering of a complex situation.

Beyond the innovative methodology and structure, the volume accomplishes a number of impressive, interlocking tasks. First, it provides a platform for exploring the oeuvre of an important figure in contemporary American art (and specifically Chicana feminist art). This is the first book length study of Alma López's art, and it does justice to the richness and complexity of her layered images. Not only is López's own voice woven throughout, in two chapters authored by the artist, but her art is also given the space to speak for itself. An eight-page full color spread of twelve of López's pieces gives readers the opportunity to closely examine the works for themselves, guided by the interpretive frameworks provided by the other chapters. Additionally, many black-and-white images of López's work are spread liberally throughout the chapters, each engaging a different set of her visual art. In particular, Luz Calvo ("Art Comes for the Archbishop"), and Clara Román-Odio ("Queering the Sacred") provide astute close readings of López's visual imagery.

Simultaneously, *Our Lady of Controversy* explores the legacy of representations of the revered figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Deena González's "Making Privates Public" provides an insightful reading of religious iconography and the history of la Virgen specifically in the context of Santa Fe and New Mexico, while Catrióna Rueda Esquibel ("Do U Think I'm a Nasty Girl?") reads both "Our Lady" and the controversy through indigenous mythology, untangling the contradictory discourses surrounding Chicana sexuality. Cristina Serna ("It's Not About the Virgins in My Life, it's About the Life in my Virgins") traces the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe as a visual icon comparatively across visual contexts, including other visual artists (Chicana artists Ester Hernandez and Yolanda Lopez as well as Mexican artist Rolando de la Rosa). Together, these chapters help reveal the stakes in representations of the Virgen de Guadalupe in a visual art context and raise significant questions regarding the relationship of spirituality, art practice, and cultural norms.

Lastly, the volume performs an insightful and detailed discursive analysis of the controversy over López's art itself, looking very closely at the local context in which the

controversy unfolded. Kathleen Fitzcallaghan Jones ("The War of the Roses") takes a wide lens, situating the controversy in both local and national politics. Emma Pérez ("The Decolonial Virgin in a Colonial Site") analyzes the plethora of letters López received at the height of the controversy, reading the colonial rhetoric invoked by protestors. Alicia Gaspar de Alba ("Devil in a Rose Bikini") takes up the protests and counter protests launched in and around the *Cyber Arte* exhibition, demonstrating the complexities of discourse and circulation and noting the irony inherent in López's rise to fame through public outcry. It is the attention to detail and context of Santa Fe that makes this set of contributions to the volume particularly strong, providing insight and analysis into a geographical region that is often overlooked in more canonical art history texts.

Without a doubt, *Our Lady of Controversy* is an important volume in Chicana visual cultural studies. But its subject matter is so much more than the very specific situation that sparked the volume. *Our Lady of Controversy* would work quite well in a variety of contexts for undergraduate readers, in particularly Chicana/o studies, art history, women's studies, queer and LGBT studies, and American Studies. Yet its complexities, both thematically and theoretically, make the volume suitable for post-graduate readers. The accompanying DVD, "I Love Lupe" (running time of approximately 45 minutes) showcases López in conversation with two other major Chicana artists, Ester Hernández and Yolanda López, regarding the place of la Virgen in their visual art. The DVD adds yet another interface through which to interact with these important works of art, as well as the artists themselves. *Our Lady of Controversy* is an essential addition to Chicana/o Studies and Visual Art collections.

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