

BOOK REVIEW

Sacred Iconographies in Chicana Cultural Productions

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Sacred Iconographies in Chicana Cultural Productions. By Clara Román-Odio. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Comparative Feminist Studies Series, 2013. Pp. 192. \$95.00 (cloth).

Sacred Iconographies is an interdisciplinary book about Chicana artists' and writers' creation of Guadalupean iconography as a source of resistance, empowerment, and method of healing from injustice. Part of the Comparative Feminist Studies series, it begins with an important declaration: Chicana creative arts and personal narratives contribute to global feminist discourse and action. Clara Román-Odio documents how Chicana artists and writers enact a complex agency that maneuvers multiple identities, bridges across several political and national borders, and decenters hegemonic symbols to craft meaningful lives for women of color. Amplifying the spatial mobility of Chicana cultural production, Román-Odio offers an extremely useful historiography of *nepantla*, tracing the original meaning of the term—an in-between state that is neither colonial nor indigenous knowledge—to the Chicana feminist revision of the process that emphasizes the crossing over from a liminal stage into a hybrid epistemology. In short, the book traces the ways through which subaltern knowledge—produced in visual and creative arts—is able to simultaneously disrupt hegemonic systems of meaning and provide a sense of agency and continuity for indigenous, Mexican, Catholic, Chicana, queer, and Third-World women.

This first book-length exploration of artists and writers who reimagine Guadalupe is written with passion as it begins with an incantation fusing

biblical Mary and Guadalupe. Yet it is also homage to Gloria Anzaldúa, for her concepts, such as borderlands, nepantla, mestiza consciousness, and spiritual mestizaje, are central frameworks for understanding feminist and queer Guadalupan reconstructions. Artists and writers draw on these essential tools to reconfigure an icon widely understood to serve racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism and create an image that empowers Chicanas and mobilizes resistance.

Sacred Iconographies begins with the claim that Ester Hernández's "revolutionary appropriation" of Guadalupe—an aquatint etching from 1975—is the "original event" that transformed the iconography of the Virgin into a Chicana sacred image. Román-Odio correctly observes that Hernández's work "found resonance" among a group of Chicana artists and writers. Scholars document that Patssi Valdez created the first Marian appropriation in 1972 (Mesa-Bains 1999, 37; Romo 2011), but the point remains that a groundswell of creative reformulations of Guadalupe began in the 1970s and have continued into the present. Throughout the book's seven chapters, Román-Odio investigates that groundswell, examining eight artists and eight writers.

"Theory in the flesh" is the springboard for understanding resignifications of female icons, namely Guadalupe but also La Llorona, Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue, and Tonantzin. Clarifying that "theory in the flesh" is not biological determinism, Román-Odio demonstrates how the materiality of the body—its experiences, histories, and relations—generates critical consciousness. For example, the pesticide poisoning that artist Juana Alicia experienced when she worked in the fields informs her mural *Las Lechugueras* (1983) and its documentation of female laborers and the unsafe working conditions they endure as they harvest, wrap, and crate lettuce for market.

The toxins in her body gave her and the child with whom she was pregnant asthma but also solidified her global consciousness. Similarly, artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood visually renders the ways global capital creates massive immigration and destroys the environment. By demystifying globalization and its ability to regenerate the colonial legacy of exploitation, the artist offers insight for surviving the brutalities of globalizing capital as it scars the land and bodies of people of color.

Sacred Iconographies advances Laura Pérez's argument that spirituality is political engagement (2007). Following Ronald Rolihieser, Román-Odio declares that spirituality "is about 'being integrated or falling apart, being within community or being lonely, about being in harmony with Mother Earth or being alienated from her'" (Rolihieser quoted in Román-Odio, 75). As the knowledge system for understanding connectedness, Chicana spirituality enables dissent and liberation, and the anthology *Goddess of the Americas* serves to illustrate the point.

Taking up what some people identify as the most controversial representations of Guadalupe, *Sacred Iconographies* delves into queer appropriations of la Virgen. The author examines two essays by Carla Trujillo and the artwork of Alma López, but Román-Odio does not dwell on the well-known image, *Our Lady* (1999) or its complement, *Our Lady of Controversy* (2003). Instead she selects equally provocative, less well-known images, thereby exposing audiences to López's range and consistency. Román-Odio argues that the altering of the Virgin of Guadalupe's iconography reveals the full complexity of Chicana lesbians—as mothers, daughters, lovers, religious devotees, and members of nations. The implications are significant. When lesbians reformulate Guadalupe, they open liberating space and unconditional love for all women, including heterosexuals who are also denied their own bodies

by heteropatriarchy. Chicana lesbian representations of Guadalupe “hold the greatest potential for social change” (141).

Sacred Iconographies is a concise and theoretically dense book composed in less than 200 pages. Appropriate for advanced undergraduates, graduates, and scholars of art, religion, literature, ethnic and feminist studies, and visual culture, the compelling prose should be assigned reading in these disciplines. I have only one criticism with the press. Unfortunately, the press published *Sacred Iconographies* with very few illustrations; those they did include were postage-stamp size. Nevertheless, *Sacred Iconographies* presents a refreshing challenge to mainstream art criticism, which interprets Chicana art as parochial, and teachers can rest assured that the overwhelming majority of the images are available on the Internet.

References

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