

BOOK REVIEW

La Virgen and the Mexican Catholic Imagination

Pat Zavella

Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen De Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America by María Socorro Castañeda-Liles. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 282. \$29.95 (paper).

In Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen De Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America, María Socorro Castañeda-Liles employs ethnography to argue persuasively that women's devotion is directly linked to the larger Mexican Catholic imagination her subjects learned from their families, yet their views are malleable and shift as the women aged and confronted personal challenges. She uses the analytic of women's "lived religion" in which their religious practice and devotion are contextualized by the larger sociopolitical and historical context, as well as intersectionality, that analyzes how power related to race, class, gender, and sexuality shapes women's daily lives. In this context, women develop a protean devotion to La Virgen in which they may transgress strict notions of being mujeres decentes, while simultaneously retaining the sustenance offered by Catholic theology and practice. These women participate in a "devotional triangle" that links their dedication to the Virgen de Guadalupe with their own mothers' or grandmothers' practice, which heightens its meaning by continually reminding them of key relationships in their past. Through a fluid engagement with La Virgen, these women express their self-awareness in everyday life, as well as their deeply meaningful engagement with organized religion in their own language.

Castañeda-Liles conducted ethnographic research in the United States and in Mexico that included participant observation (visiting the shrine to La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico City), focus groups, and interviews; through such methods, she presents a transnational analysis of three generations of Mexican women's stories of devotion to La Virgen. Her research participants include college-educated young women, somewhat older mothers, and elders (ages 18 to 82) who self-identify as *mujeres*, *madres*, and *las damas*.

The book includes eight chapters that present the significance of Our Lady of Guadalupe in México and the United States, beginning with a discussion of her apparition to an Indigenous man with details new to this reader. Drawing from Chicana feminist thought about La Virgen, she illustrates how various theorists have reinterpreted the conquest, and represent her artistically, to illustrate possible quotidian interventions and to provoke discussion about her meaning. Castañeda-Liles also analyzes the materiality of devotion seen in altars or medals in which women are socialized to revere La Virgen while very young. She innovates the discussions of La Virgen in her conceptualization of religious theater about La Virgen as "living grassroots theology." Castañeda-Liles further draws from Chicana feminist research related to Catholicism's surveillance of young women's dress and comportment, exploring expectations of "proper" gender performance of young Mexican women and the strategies of women growing up in different historical eras who found ways to express their own views, even when living under severe patriarchal restraints.

Perhaps the strongest discussion in this study is the assertion that Mexican women's devotion is fluid and shaped by their everyday lived experience and shifting self-awareness. Castañeda-Liles illustrates how, regardless of generation, Mexican women prefer conversational prayer over traditional

prayers in line with their sense that La Virgen is a presence in their daily lives who understands their struggles (including intimate partner violence) and offers maternal succor. None of the subjects in the study had been socialized to see La Virgen as a role model for submissiveness, passivity, or obedience, which informed their strong critiques and occasional appreciation of Chicana feminist artistic representations of her. Some women even see La Virgen as a feminist even if they do not identify with feminism yet have a strong sense of agency based on their faith—what Castañeda-Liles characterizes as “*fe*-minism.” Importantly, Castañeda-Liles suggests that the Mexican Catholic imagination should inform the broader study of lived religion as well as pastoral work.

One shortcoming is that all of Castañeda-Liles’s respondents are heterosexual. The work would have been more compelling had the author sought out women with diverse gender identities so as to reflect on the ways in which they navigate heteronormativity in relation to La Virgen’s quotidian support. Nonetheless, the book is beautifully written and is graced by a cover photograph of her own mother blessing her granddaughter (Castañeda-Liles’ daughter) in front of a shrine to La Virgen. There are photographs throughout the book—many taken by the author—that illustrate women’s devotional practice. Since there is little scholarship on Mexican women’s reverence for La Virgen that uses an ethnographic approach, Castañeda-Liles makes an original intervention that is critical to Chicana/Latina/o/x studies. Her passion for the material and consummate skills as a self-reflexive ethnographer working with multiple sources of information leads to a nuanced analysis that conveys diverse experiences of lived religion by Mexican women who express a capacious Mexican Catholic imagination.

