

Alicia Gaspar de Alba. *[Un]Framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014. 400 pp. ISBN 978-0-292-75850-6

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In *[Un]Framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause*, Chicana scholar, activist, novelist, and poet Alicia Gaspar de Alba looks back into her prolific career to find the Ariadne thread that ties together a body of works that range from Chicano/a studies, gender studies, and art criticism to historic and "anti-detective" novels. This Ariadne thread is formed by the (mostly) brown female bodies of the unsubmitive women she writes about.

The book is a collection of seven pieces preceded by a revealing Introduction and a powerful Preface. Five pieces are previously published works, now revised, expanded, and updated, and two are previously unpublished. The pieces, sometimes exclusively academic, sometimes with the licenses of creative writing, explore different embodiments of the "Bad Woman". Why do Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, the Juárez "Maqui-locas", and the Chicana artists from Gaspar de Alba's selection are "bad women"? The author ventures a challenging answer: "specific brown female bodies have been framed by racial, social, cultural, sexual, national/regional, historical, and religious discourses of identities" (19). They have been framed, indeed, by the contextual framework of their societies, but even more so, they have been "framed" to "appear like the guilty parties" in a bad deed they did not do (18).

Gaspar de Alba's selection is consistent with her methodology, the activist scholarship of a self-identified "Chicana radical lesbian feminist from the border" (4). The contemporary and historical women (and one mythical female figure) in this book, they all refuse to fulfill the expectations their society and time have for their gender. "Good women", the author claims, follow the patriarchal destiny of heterosexual sex for procreation and social dynamics of submission to men's will. "Bad women" do not. And Gaspar de Alba participates in the rewriting of their stories, "within a revolutionary frame." This frame sometimes uses the mechanisms of fiction, and sometimes academic tools that owe much to American Studies as well as to a vast net of interdisciplinary connections. Gaspar de Alba un-frames and re-frames the female figures in this book,

thus challenging the original context where they were labelled "bad." This context is the patriarchy of the white male but also the (post)colonial patriarchies that inherited the logic of the power from the master i.e. the viceroyalty of New Spain, 20th century Mexican studies, the early years of the Chicano Movement, and the El Paso-Juárez border of the late 20th century.

The well-researched and methodologically solid chapters of *[Un]Framing the "Bad Woman"* are preceded by a moving Preface: a letter to the late Chicano scholar and Gender Studies specialist Gloria Anzaldúa, the other ever present "rebel with a cause" in the book. Her Introduction describes in detail Gaspar de Alba's interest in these "bad women" and the processes through which they can be reinterpreted. Both the letter in the Preface and the Introduction conform an exceptionally detailed testimony of the intertwining of personal life and scholar career, resulting in a powerful reading.

Chapter one is formed by "The politics of locations of la Décima Musa: Prelude to an interview" and "Interview with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." The first part presents an overview of Sor Juana's life, work, and times. It attempts to locate the poet nun from the 17th century New Spain in terms of her exceptionality during the rigorous colonial times as well as to present the major lines of the contemporary mostly-male-oriented reading of her life and work. Finally, Gaspar de Alba presents her re-framing of the "Tenth Muse" by addressing the polemics around the sexuality of the person Gaspar de Alba considers a symbolic "foremother of Chicana feminism" (34). Gaspar de Alba's intention in this "interview" is to explore Sor Juana's identity with a 20th century feminist frame using Sor Juana's own words from letters and poems to answer a series of questions. This creative approach brings to the forefront the dynamics of the act of reading: the questions do not elicit the answers, but it is the reading of Sor Juana's work what has elicited the questions. It is a creative (and to a certain extent, influenced) way to give voice to Sor Juana in a context she was never able to speak.

Chapter two, "Malinche's Revenge", is both an exploration and a debunking of the Chicano mythology around the 16th century indigenous princess sold as a slave Malitzin Tenepal, "Malinche". Her ability as a translator made her concubine of conquistador Hernán Cortés and a key figure in the downfall of the Aztec empire. Gaspar de Alba explores Malinche's reputation as the treacherous woman par excellence in Mexican history and the way Chicano movement appropriated and validated this view. Gaspar de Alba explores the complexities in the caste system and male oriented social discourse inherited in the Chicano communities via their Mexican forefathers via their Spanish conquerors. The contradictions and paradoxes of the Chicano movement intersect with the early conflicts of feminism within the movement as well as with Chicana lesbian feminism. Malinche, in this context, is viewed as the ultimate rebel and a symbol of empowerment, "a mirror of Chicana resistance against female slavery to patriarchy" (78).

Chapter three is entitled "There Is No Place Like Aztlán: Homeland Myths and Embodied Aesthetics", Gaspar de Alba explores Aztlán "as both an aesthetic category

and a cultural myth of origin” (82) for the Chicano community. Aztlán, the mythic place of origin of the Aztec and imaginary stronghold of the Chicano movement of the 1960s and the 1970s was identified with the Southwest of the United States and also with the North of Mexico. In this chapter, Aztlán is analyzed in the historical intersection of two patriarchal/religious ideologies: the Spanish Conquest and the Manifest Destiny. It is also revised beyond those two notions into its 20th and 21st century evolution through the art of four Chicano female artists; the “bad women” who reinterpret the place of origin and the identity of Chicana females.

“Coyolxauhqui and las ‘Maqui-Locas’: Re-Membering the Death Daughters of Juárez” is perhaps the most accomplished example of activist scholarship in the book. The fourth chapter explores in detail the overwhelming amount of femicides that took and continue to take place in Ciudad Juárez. But more importantly, Gaspar de Alba looks into the working conditions for women in the twin plants, the social discourse that blamed the victims, their racial and class profiles; it stresses their anonymity, the social judgement, and the irrelevancy of these women as a crime best to be unsolved. Gaspar de Alba also remembers the media circus around the inefficiency of Mexican authorities to stop and/or solve the crimes and the suspicious amount of sex offenders registered in neighboring border city of El Paso. She connects the dead of these women with Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec warrior goddess killed and dismembered by Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The symbolic power of the myth, for Gaspar de Alba, resides in the punishment of a female figure for opposing the patriarchal order. “It is essential that we should *re-member* the dismembered Coyolxauhquis of Juárez, that we should do something to stop the violence; to end the impunity” (172).

Chapter five, “Mapping the Labyrinth: The Anti-Detective Novel and the Mysterious Missing Brother”, takes on the creative process of *Desert Blood*, Gaspar de Alba’s 2005 novel about the Juárez femicides with an unusual problem for an English writer: it does not have a solution, there is not a guilty part to be found. Instead of producing a convenient wrong-doer, Gaspar de Alba explained why her fiction pointed out real problems as the probable murderers of these women: the economic interests of the twin plants, a conspiracy to keep fertile women away from the United States, and human trafficking for sexual slavery.

Chapter six takes the critic of Chicana art out of the theoretical approach of the construction of identity and brings it to the polemics of the public sphere through the digital collage *Our Lady*, by Chicana artist Alma López. In “Devil in a Rose Bikini: The Inquisition Continues”, Gaspar de Alba focuses on the controversy generated by the exposition of the digitally altered photograph in the Museum of Folk Arts of Santa Fe in New Mexico. A controversy that continued in expositions in California and Ireland. The photography reinterprets the famous iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe using a Mexican looking girl model, theme colors, some of the composition in the religious image and a few well-known motifs. The photograph generated protests in mainly male-led Catholic groups, as well as requests of retiring it from the exhibition and a public

apology from López for her disrespectful and "blasphemous" use of the image. Paradoxically, it also transformed "*Our Lady* into an irreverent apparition to which a multitude of believers and disbelievers flocked in witness" (206). The image could have been a plausible subject for several discussions that are only briefly mentioned, such as its dialogue with the tradition of using the Virgin the Guadalupe for spiritual conquest purposes; the recurrent appropriation of religious iconography by minorities to subvert, reinterpret, and challenge the ideology behind religious imagery, or the discussion of the depiction of the female body. The chapter, however, emphasizes the reasons of white male patriarchal domination behind the religious agitation, a point of view congruent with Gaspar de Alba's explicitly political standpoint.

Finally, the book ends with "The Sor Juana Chronicles". In a similar vein as the chapter "Mapping the Labyrinth", the final piece throws some light on *Sor Juana's Second Dream*, Gaspar de Alba's novel about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Gaspar de Alba's endeavor is to reframe Sor Juana's life from a contemporary Chicana lesbian point of view through fiction. The author reviews various fictional works on Sor Juana in English and also to canonic scholar works on Sor Juana's mainly, *Sor Juana: Or, The Traps of Faith*, by the "venerable patriarch", the "self-ordained high priest of the Mexican psyche" (261) Octavio Paz. From these revisions comes her commitment to oppose to the widely known "version" of a Sor Juana deprived from her body and seen only as an intellectual being; a view, she claims, related to the dangers posed by a Sor Juana whose presumed sexuality challenges the white male patriarchy status quo.

Just as it begins, the book ends with Gloria Anzaldúa. The Epilogue is a poem by Gaspar de Alba remembering the scholar and writer. Gaspar de Alba's trajectory is well represented in the volume. The Chicano/a Studies, as well as Gender Studies, benefit from her radical point of view which invites to a closer reading of the materials presented and analyzed. However, the position taken by her activist scholarship is the reason why some issues presented are not elaborated, but only mentioned, particularly in the aesthetics, art history, and general context of the Chicana art she uses. The book, as reading from the Chicano perspective, must be understood with the differences, cultural heritages, and tension with Mexican studies. Overall, a deep, engaging, and assertive collection of essays by a key figure in her field.