
Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2014)

[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”. Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause

Austin, USA: University of Texas Press, 364 pp.

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This book analyzes histories of women that are all linked to Mexico, the Mexican – U.S.- American border and Chicano/a culture. Alicia Gaspar de Alba argues that these women were deemed ‘bad’ because they refused to comply with hegemonic gender roles. She shows how their practices were evaluated from a hegemonic perspective, from “a frame” (23), which allows others (typically men, but also conservative, mainly heterosexual women) to judge, condemn and even punish them. Gaspar de Alba’s objective is to ‘unframe’ these circumstances by analyzing and uncovering the images created. To do so, she begins with research on the historical context of the women’s lives and she exposes the frame or frames used to condemn them. Then, she applies a new frame, one that accords better with her own identity as a Chicana lesbian professor and activist, and useful to express her political views. Holding a PhD in American Studies, the author’s interests center on Chicano/a Cultural Studies, the U.S. – Mexican border, Chicana lesbian feminisms and literature, sexuality and queer studies, and bilingual creative writing. Historic documents, biographies, diaries, secondary literature,

newspapers, internet web pages, and art pieces are analyzed by her from any of these theoretical perspectives.

The book is organized in seven chapters, preceded by an introduction and concluded by an epilogue. The order follows the sequence which the author has used in previous academic essays. Chapters 1 and 7 discuss Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, her life, lesbianism, and thirst for knowledge. Chapter 2 is a description of la Malinche, her myth and a reinterpretation of her identity. Chapter 3 covers the U.S. – Mexican border, with an emphasis on the myth of Aztlán. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss femicides in Ciudad Juarez and chapter 6 describes the work of a Chicana lesbian artist.

Even if the characters seem very dissimilar, (i.e. some are mythical, some are historical, some are more recent), they share some aspects. They are all brown women, punished because they refused to cooperate with patriarchal dictates of what constitutes a ‘good woman’ and because they questioned the male-centric and heteronormative history, politics, and consciousness of Chicana or Mexican culture.

The underlying frame used to judge them is patriarchy, which “oppress[es] women and at the same time promotes the interests of men” (33). Inside patriarchy, there are also other frames that form part of the construction of male domination and that belong more specifically to the Mexican and Chicano/a culture.

For example, consider the frame of Aztlán. Aztlán recalls the ancestral home of the Aztec people. For Chicano/as it is their place of origin, where the roots of their identity, practices, and beliefs can be found. However, Aztlán is founded upon gender differences: men’s freedom and pride, women’s willing subordination.

The book shows how Mexican and Chicano/a history and myths are a reflection of patriarchy and how two mythical women are punished because they turned against their roots. The first, Malinche, was a slave woman ‘given’ by the native inhabitants of Mexico to the Spaniards during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire. She actively helped her new ‘masters’ in their conquest and consequently is depicted as treacherous and disloyal. The other woman is Coyolxauhqui, the Moon goddess in Aztec mythology. She killed her mother, Coatlicue (the Earth goddess) and opposed her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the god of war and the Aztecs.

More contemporary characters that have received much attention from some audiences are the Maquis Locas. They are the poor, young Mexican women workers killed at the Mexican – U.S. border. Unlike the other characters and in dissonance with the main argument of the book, they

do not represent defiant practices or exhibit resistances that make them ‘bad women’. Instead, the author takes the opportunity to denounce the murders of Ciudad Juarez. For Gaspar de Alba, they have been framed as the killing of women who live a double life, who have lost their morality and therefore their value as a woman. Unfortunately, serious criminological investigations into their deaths have not yet been conducted. However, the author concludes – as do many other people and organizations – that these deaths are femicides.

According to Gaspar de Alba, femicides are often understood as “the killing of females by males because they are females” (132) or “an antifemale terror” (161). However, she shows that there are many other factors than hate for woman that can contribute to the understanding of the killings: (1) Women are killed because they are dark skinned young inditas that can have children with white males. (2) The Mexican government’s incompetence in resolving the cases and the U.S. government’s indifference to resolving them. (3) The free trade agreement between the two border states that transforms Mexican women into cheap and disposable labor for U.S. enterprises. These arguments point to racism, incompetence, and macroeconomic structures as underlying causes.

From a predominantly gender perspective, these crimes can be seen as motivated by misogyny and as femicides. However, even if it is emphasized that these women are vulnerable and underprotected, it is difficult to prove that hatred for women is the main motive behind the murders. Even if the author elaborates an extensive analysis suggesting

there are many different factors contributing to these murders, she concludes the crimes are about hate. But a restricting focus on misogyny is not warranted. These murders should be seen in the broader context of insecurity in Mexico, of which misogyny definitely forms a part. Similarly to these women, many other people's lives are not protected in Mexico. In fact, between 2006 and 2012 26,000 people have gone missing (Amnistía Internacional 2013). This includes not only (maquila) women, but predominantly men and young people, which were not involved in gangs, drug trafficking, or other illegal activities. Many of them were tortured. The recent disappearance of 43 students from the city of Iguala in Michoacán State in September 2014 is exemplary of the extent of the problem and shows the variety of dynamics – like economics, politics or power – behind the killing of innocent people. It also exposes the limited resources, capacity, and commitment of the Mexican government to solve cases and protect its citizens. Murders do not only concern women of the Northern border and they are not only about hate. They are about crime, incompetence, and impunity and concern the whole Mexican population.

'Femicide' as an academic concept deserves a lot more discussion. Using the definition that appears in the book, femicides are difficult to prove. The motivations are usually more complex than just a negative emotion such as hate. In Central America, there is an abuse of the concept because of a tendency to name all deaths of women femicides without any discussion or investigation.

Discussions like the one in the book reveal the need to continue the debate.

The book constitutes a major contribution to research by Chicana feminists. By questioning the image of some particular women, the author mirrors actual debates like the struggles over gender and sexuality within the Chicano/a Movement, in particular women's political participation and male domination over women. It also provides an assortment of insights from studies of Chicano/a culture and history. This is not only helpful to learn about the pre-Columbian period and its myths, the American conquest and Chicano/a culture; It further highlights the value of Chicano/a studies and Chicana feminist studies. The work also joins a body of scholarship within feminist theory pointing towards new forms of racial consciousness, gender awareness, and political identities.

With a convincing methodology and well-presented material, the book undoubtedly is a valuable contribution that increases the visibility of the variety of feminisms beyond the predominance of Western points of view. It is an innovative book and it is definitely recommended to students of Gender Studies and Cultural Studies.