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Crossing the Borders of Tradition: Alma López's *Our Lady* (1999) and *Our Lady of Controversy II* (2008)

ABSTRACT
The focus of my paper is Alma López who draws from indigenous traditions and archetypes in order to rewrite them from a feminist perspective and provide Latinas with alternative paradigms for the construction of the 21st century identities. The main goal of the article is to analyze how López takes advantage of the polyvalence of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as part of traditional Mexican iconography, and reinterprets the traditional archetype from a queer and feminist perspective (Calvo, 2004: 202).
Keywords: the Virgin of Guadalupe; Alma López; Latina identity; Burgin's pre-texts

Alma López is a visual artist who in her works illustrates "emergent new visions and versions of identity and culture" (Ybarra-Frausto, 2003: xvii). Those "newer narratives and constructions of self and community," as Ybara-Frausto observes, "[a]s opposed to traditional stories stressing coherence, totality, and closure, . . . opt for processes of cross-referencing between locations and multiple inflections of identity" (Ybarra-Frausto, 2003: xvii) and thus create an "*alter-Native*

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culture" that reinforces complexity and fluidity of ethnic identities and acknowledges multiple variables that influence the process of their construction (Gaspar de Alba, *Velvet Barrios* 2003: xxi), which "moves identity formation into the realm of indefinite processes unfolding in the bodily 'acts' of the performer, the agency of production, and the spectator" (Arrizón in Gutiérrez, 2003: 67). In her acts of self-discovery and self-definition López draws from indigenous traditions and archetypes in order to rewrite them from a feminist perspective and provide Latinas with alternative paradigms for the construction of the 21st century identities.

The purpose of my article is to analyze how López takes advantage of the polyvalence of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as part of traditional Mexican iconography, and reinterprets the traditional archetype from a queer and feminist perspective (Calvo, 2004: 202). The article examines two reinterpretations of the Virgin, including the famous *Our Lady* (1999) montage and *Our Lady II* (2008) in order to show how the artist challenges stereotypical archetypes, limiting tenets of patriarchy, racism and sexism, by rewriting the long-prevailing myths regarding female role in Latino/a communities and developing new empowering discourses for women to adopt. The article concentrates on the analysis of Lupe's images with a particular focus on the play of Victor Burgin's pre-texts, which he defines as the "other, unchosen elements exist[ing] in the popular preconscious" and how "these elements linger in the field of meaning evoked by López's image" (Calvo, 2004: 216). In addition, my goal is to show how these reinterpretations of traditional myths and archetypes allow for a creation of new personal and collective identities by emancipating the brown female body and doing away with the virgin/whore dichotomy.

Alma López was born in Mexico but raised in Los Angeles where she witnessed the Chicana/o arts renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, including mural art renaissance (Latorre, 2008: 131). She began her artistic career in 1990s and her areas of expertise include painting, photography, and printmaking, though she is mostly recognized by her nickname – "the digital diva" (Latorre, 2008: 132) – that reveals her involvement with computer technologies as the medium of artistic

creation. No matter which technology she deploys in her works, she "places women at the center of discourses on emancipation and decolonization" (Latorre, 131) and her artistic creations expound "what gender scholars would call a Chicana queer aesthetic" (Latorre, 2008: 131). Hence, as Latorre maintains, "López's work centers around a feminist and queer re-thinking of traditional Mexican icons, many of which are imbued with a deeply ingrained patriarchal discourse" (132) and she is best known for her *Lupe and Sirena Series* as well as her digital collage *Our Lady* (1999) and *Our Lady of Controversy II* (2008) that wreaked havoc both in the U.S. and in Europe.

Both *Our Lady* and *Our Lady II* make use of the image of the Virgin Mary, who "holds an unrivalled place in the history of Christianity in Latin America" (Stratten, 2009: 1) and who is one of the most important figures of Mexican and Chicano/a culture. At the same time the story of La Virgen in Latin America (and later on in the U.S.) is to a large extent ambiguous and the ambiguity is reflected by what Deena González describes as "competition that exists between the older Virgin of the Conquest, La Conquistadora, and the younger Virgin of Guadalupe" (in Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 6). La Conquistadora arrived in America under a different name as one of the symbols brought with various Spanish expeditions that were "designed to present and implant a venerable Catholic tradition in regions that were yet to be captured or settled by Spanish speaking Catholics" (González, 2011: 70). As González notes,

> her image was constructed varyingly as Our Lady of the Assumption, Our Lady of the Conception, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of the ransom, and most recently, as Our Lady of Peace, all one and the same Virgin or image wrapped in festive veneration as La Conquistadora [who] had traveled northward with . . . the friars and priests. (González, 2011:71)

Her mexicanization began with the 1531 apparition to Juan Diego and, as Tey Marianna Nunn observes, La Virgen de Guadalupe "was already dramatically changed from the image of the same name in Spain," as she "had indigenous features and elements when she appeared to Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac" (in Gaspar de Alba,

2011: 28). For example, her hands on the *tilma* were longer and repainted/altered to be shorter than those of women in Europe – to look more like the hands of indigenous people. The scope of the paper does not permit to discuss those differences in detail, but such a particular rendering of La Virgen was to win over the conquered people, providing them with a sacred patron, one of their own, that would protect them and at the same time help convert them to Catholicism. Other circumstances of the apparition confirm to a large extent this theory. For example, the place where, according to the story, she met Juan Diego used to be the place of worship of the indigenous goddess Tonantzin. Therefore she had a significant potential to become Tonantzin's natural successor. Jeannette Rodriguez in *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* examines thoroughly the circumstances of the apparition, as well as the records of the story and analyzes the questions that arose around the original image of La Virgen on the *tilma*. Nevertheless, in spite of the controversies, "the mestiza Virgin of Guadalupe" (González, 2011: 73) had gained more and more religious, artistic and political significance over centuries, finally becoming a patron saint of Mexico and then, subsequently, of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American community in the U.S.

Due to the complex history on both sides of the Atlantic, the Virgin can be called a polyvalent figure, as she symbolizes different issues – "she is … a figure who embodies the suffering of Chicano/a and Mexican populations in the context of colonization, racism, and economic disenfranchisement" (Calvo, 2004: 201). At the same time her image is used "to signify resistance to colonization and economic exploitations … as a sign of racial solidarity, for she is imagined to have brown skin, or as a sign of transnational solidarity, for she is the patron saint of Mexico" (Calvo. 2004: 201). The church, on the other hand, deploys her image "in service of its regressive sexual politics" (Calvo, 2004: 201).

The image is used by the artists, but she also appears in different contexts of everyday life, often questionable. As Calvo claims,

> The Virgin of Guadalupe is omnipresent in Chicano/a visual space. She is painted on car windows, tattooed on shoulders or backs, emblazoned on neighborhood walls, and silk-screened on t-shirts sold at local flea markets. Periodically, her presence is manifested in miraculous apparitions: on a tree near Watsonville, California; on a water tank, a car bumper, or a freshly made tortilla. (Calvo, 2011: 201)

Due to that, "the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a sign that is especially available for semiotic re-signification and cultural transformation" (Calvo, 2011: 202). Alma López took advantage of this semiotic opportunity and created "a series of digital images that break open and transfigure previous interpretations and uses of the Virgin" (Calvo, 2011: 202).

The original image is located in the basilica in Mexico City and in the painting the Virgin Mary is portrayed as a humble and pious woman: she is wearing a robe with long sleeves, covering her whole figure. Her head is also covered with a blue mantle with gold stars that flows down, providing another layer over the dress. Her religiousness is emphasized by her hands that are held in prayer. Her modesty and submissiveness are reinforced not only through her clothes but also by her posture – she is portrayed with her head tilted down and her eyes look down as if to avoid a straight gaze towards the spectator/interlocutor. In that sense the original portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe does not differ significantly from other religious representations of the Virgin Mary created in various Christian communities throughout ages. As Stratten observes, her piety and her status – *Immaculata* – are signified by the radiant light emanating from her figure. In this way the image of Mary is different from other renditions, including, for example, The Madonna and Child Jesus or Pieta (Stratten, 2009: 9). She is standing on a dark crescent moon – indicating her exceptional grace, held up by a little angel (Stratten, 2009: 9). As Nicole Stratten concludes, "Each aspect of the figurative composition is symbolic of her humility and obedience: her head is covered, her eyes cast down and her face turned slightly away from the viewer" (Stratten, 2009: 9).

In *Our Lady* (1999) Alma López presents a different version of the Virgin. What strikes the viewer from the first look is a completely different posture and figure of la Virgen, emphasized by the light emanating from behind her back. The model – Raquel Salinas – stands with her head held up defiantly, unlike in the original version. She is also portrayed with her hands on her hips, as if ready to face the interlocutor or even challenge him/her. In addition she is posed with one leg bent, like Michelangelo's *David*, to show movement. Therefore, López's Virgin looks as if she were walking out of the picture, which symbolizes her activity and agency.

What has raised most of the controversies, though, is López's rendering of the Virgin's body. In other words, as Calvo observes, the artist "draws attention to the brown female body by exposing more of it" (Calvo, 2004: 205), since the model "is clothed in roses only, a symbol of the "proof" of her 1531 apparition in Mexico" (Calvo, 2004: 205). The other elements of the outfit that covers the Virgin's body in the original are either relegated to the background, including the gown, or to the bottom of the picture where the "traditional starry blue shawl is now draped and folded at the bottom of the frame" (Calvo, 2004: 205), instead of covering her figure. The color of the gown also differs from the original, as it is in the shades of blue and gray, "with the image of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, the rebellious daughter" (Calvo, 2004: 205), imprinted on it. As Calvo observes, "[t]he angel who holds up [the crescent of] the moon in the traditional image has been replaced by a bare-breasted (and pierced) Latina (Raquel Gutierrez) superimposed over a [viceroy] butterfly" (Calvo, 2004: 205).

In this collage López is definitely drawing from previous artistic renderings of La Virgen, for example, Ester Hernández's *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* (1975) and Yolanda López's *Guadalupe Triptych* (1978) that also refigured the original image of the Virgin – presenting her as a karate fighter, marathon runner or a seamstress and abuelita respectively (Calvo, 2004: 205). These portrayals and subsequent Hernández's *La Ofrenda* (1988) and Yolanda López's *Guadalupe Walking* also raised

controversies in Latino/a communities and the artists received threats for such disrespectful rendering of the Virgin. Therefore, the question arises what makes López's representation of La Virgen particularly controversial. In other words, how does López's *Our Lady* cross the borders of tradition of representations of the Virgin Mary?

First of all, what definitely evoked objections, especially from its most famous critics – archbishop Michael Sheehan and José Villegas described by Alicia Gaspar de Alba in "Devil in a Rose Bikini. The Inquisition Continues" – is the emancipation of the brown female body. As Gaspar de Alba notes, in *Our Lady* López emphasizes physicality and sexuality of La Virgen – in López's portrayal Lupe is a woman "[f]launting her sexuality rather than submitting to the biological imperative of her gender" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 224). She does not look humble or shy. Yet at the same time, she does not look vulgar, either. Her looks resemble the portrayals of indigenous female warriors or goddesses. In this way López refers to the indigenous aspect of La Virgen as well as does away with the virgin/whore dichotomy often applied to define female cultural roles in Latino/a communities therefore, providing Latinas with an alternative cultural sign of the brown female body to identify with.

Moreover, remembering that "meaning is constructed from the manner in which elements are selected and combined" (Calvo, 2004: 215), it is important to recognize the play of Victor Burgin's pre-texts in *Our Lady*. Burgin uses the term "pre-text" on several occasions while analyzing the way the audiences interpret visual arts, including *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* or *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* and he defines pre-texts as elements that exist in popular preconscious which even if they do not get chosen, exist and "can be called to mind by the majority of individuals in a given society at a particular moment in history" (in Calvo, 2004: 216), thus revealing both "manifest and latent contents of the image" (Burgin, 1986: 61). The pre-texts, as Calvo notes, "will yield a different set of images along the paradigmatic chain" (Calvo, 2004: 217) as well as make the interpretation of an image depend on one's cultural location (Calvo, 2004: 217).

In the case of *Our Lady* it is the original portrayal of the Virgin that functions as the pre-text and influences the reading of López's work – the church version of La Virgen, however different, depending on individual's knowledge of her story, i.e. one's cultural location, is evoked in the audiences and informs the audiences' reactions to López's work. Consequently the juxtaposition of a pre-text, a shy, humble, asexual and passive figure, with its complete opposite is particularly striking and it also emphasizes queer aesthetics deployed by López. The pre-texts are combined with what Luz Calvo calls "the play of recognition and misrecognition" (Calvo, 2004: 214) and it is reflected, for example, by the butterfly metaphor (Calvo, 2004: 214). In her collage the artist deploys the viceroy butterfly (*la mariposa*), which reappears in subsequent López's works. The viceroy butterfly "resembles and mimics the better known monarch butterfly … [which] unlike the viceroy, is poisonous to its predators" (Calvo, 2004: 214). The choice is particularly significant for the artist for numerous reasons and López comments on that on several occasions. First of all, she explains that the butterfly metaphor pertains to the question of migration and the interplay between indigenous and immigrant paradigms informing the discourse on Latinos/as in the U.S. Referring to the significance of the butterfly López states:

> The Monarch butterfly is most known for its natural yearly migration from Mexico to the northern U.S. However, the most remarkable aspect of this migration is that on its flight back to Mexico or the northern U.S. it is no longer the original butterfly, but it is the child returning on genetic memory. Like the Monarch butterfly, indigenous people of this continent have migrated between both countries. (in Latorre, 2008: 134)

Moreover, the deployment of the interplay of recognition and misrecognition allows the artist to address queer aesthetics. As she reveals,

> The Viceroy pretends to be something it is not just to be able to exist. For me, the Viceroy mirrors parallel and intersecting histories of being different or "other" even within our own communities. Racist attitudes see us Latinos as criminals and economic burden, and families may see us as perverted or deviant. So from outside and inside our communities, we are perceived as something we are not.

> When in essence we are very vulnerable Viceroy butterflies, just trying to live and survive. (in Calvo, 2004: 214)

López also addresses openly queer sexuality with the fact that Our Lady is upheld by the aforementioned queer Chicana artist (Raquel Gutiérrez) instead of a little angel – which can be interpreted as the artist's statement that her Virgin is indeed the mother of all, also those who have been excluded from participation in traditional religious rituals, even though they have been raised in a culture that sustains the sacredness of La Virgen. Owing to López's representation, queer Latinas can relate again to the Virgin and redefine their relationship with that figure on their own terms. López herself allows for such an interpretation, while addressing the criticism she encountered from some women in her community who fought against the artist's rendering of the Virgin. She admits:

> They had rejected her as a construction of the Catholic church, but that after hearing my interpretation, they may reclaim her as a female indigenous activist symbol. I admit, I was surprised by the violent reaction to "Our Lady" because I was born in Mexico and raised in California with the Virgen as a constant in my home and my community. I know that there is nothing wrong with this image which was inspired by the experiences of many Chicanas and their complex relationship to La Virgen de Guadalupe. I am not the first Chicana to reinterpret the image with a feminist perspective, and I'm positive I won't be the last. (Alma López's website)

Therefore, *Our Lady* is the reflection of Alma López's ambivalent relationship with the Catholic religion in general and la Virgen in particular. As Gaspar de Alba concludes, the collage has been the artist's "exploration of the way her own life fit into the structured meaning of the Virgin of Guadalupe that led her to [using Sandoval's term] "meta-ideologize" the image and create a different sign with an altered meaning that most challenged the powers that claim ownership to the sign" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 209). Gaspar de Alba explains: "Sandoval defines meta-ideologizing as 'the operation appropriating dominant ideological forms, and using them whole in order to transform them'" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 209) and even though López did not use "the exact image of the sign known as the Virgin of

Guadalupe" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 209), she deployed those elements of the sign that allowed the viewer to identify its original version (or a pre-text), as a result of which the artist freed that figure from traditional interpretation and undermined the roles the church assigned to La Virgen.

This measure in turn evokes the question of ownership, or in other words, who is entitled to the Virgin, who does she belong to, or as Hollis Walker asks, "Whose lady is Our Lady?" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 209) and who can portray her? These questions in fact imply a more fundamental issue that appeared during the debate after the collage was created by López, namely "not just who owns the Virgin of Guadalupe, who has the power to dictate what the Mother of God looks like, but more importantly how faith will be exercised, and how women are supposed to behave within the faith" (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 220). And even though López's representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe suggests that as the sign it should be open for reinterpretations and cross the borders of traditional and often limiting renderings of La Virgen in order to reinterpret the long-prevailing archetype, the reactions of different Catholic groups to *Our Lady* (1999) and subsequent protests, campaigns, and lawsuits imply that only traditional renditions are validated as right by the church and commonly accepted.

In reaction to protests against *Our Lady* (1999), Alma López created *Our Lady of Controversy II* (2008), which once again enters into the discussion with the original portrayal of the Virgin, as well as refers to the controversies raised by *Our Lady* (1999). In *Our Lady of Controversy II*, the Virgin's determination is emphasized even more than in the previous collage – she looks defiantly at the audiences, her head is up, her lips are tight, but, first and foremost, her hands on her hips are clad in red boxing gloves that immediately draw the attention of the viewer. She looks like a real warrior right before a fight, ready to face the opponents. As the artist herself admits, in this way "Our Lady … [is] prepared to defend herself" (in Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288) against the previous accusations and potential new challenges.

Her readiness to defend herself is reinforced by a collage of articles and fragments of comics about the controversy of López's previous rendering of La Virgen that the artist placed at the bottom of the paining. Flying from those are multiple viceroy butterflies that come from behind the traditional roses and "the butterfly angel" (Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288) at the feet of La Virgen which "spread the message that our Lady has broken free of the controversy" (Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288). Apart from that both the angel and the butterflies also pertain to the queer aesthetic evoked already in *Our Lady* (1999).

The character of the "warrior incarnation" (Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288) of La Virgen is reinforced by the background colors – pink and orange, which the artist defines as "goddess colors" (in Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288). In addition, the context of her presentation during the exhibition, *Chicana Badgirls: Las Hociconas*, in New Mexico in 2009 implies the subversive role of the Virgin. This portrait of the Virgin was selected for the exhibition because, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba concludes, she is "more *malcriada* than ever" (Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 8). And as Delilah Montoya, who talks about women warriors in her book on women boxers, explains, "A *malcriada* is a woman who will not behave and is determined to do what she wants, regardless of what society rules or even good sense dictates" (in Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 8). Consequently, by such a portrayal López reiterates the message of her previous representations of La Virgen, equipping her with a agency and power. In this way *Our Lady of Controversy II* has become another voice in the discussion commenced by *Our Lady* (1999) on the roles of women who

> subvert and reclaim terms like malcriadas, badgirls, and hociconas (loudmouths) to refer to women who refuse to remain silent, women who express their own realities and who are therefore rebels – women who are not afraid to fight back, using our hands, our minds, and our art. (Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 288)

All in all, with *Our Lady* and *Our Lady of Controversy II* Lopéz subverts commonly accepted rules and paradigms and poses a threat to those long-established archetypes because, as Emma Pérez argues, considering contemporary Chicano/a politics:

> We are threatened once again by a reemergence of uncompromising nationalist movements in which feminisms are dismissed as bourgeois, in which queer voices are scoffed at as a white thing, in which anyone who does not sustain the 'family values' of modernist, patriarchal nationalism is not tolerated and is often silenced. (in Calvo, 2004: 207).

Such discourse determines reductive reading and interpretation of La Virgen that has to be by all means desexualized. López's images in turn allow for a liberating interpretation of La Virgen, where "the Virgin signifies plentitude and omniscience: she is nuestra madre (our mother) who watches over us in the context of racism, sexual violence, economic injustice, and, even, homophobia" (Calvo, 2004: 208). López herself asserts:

> When I see Our Lady as well as the works portraying La Virgen by many Chicana artists, I see an alternative voice expressing the multiplicities of our lived realities. I see myself living a tradition of Chicanas who, because of cultural and gender oppression, have asserted our voice. I see Chicanas creating a deep and meaningful connection to this culturally female image. I see Chicanas who understand faith. (in Gaspar de Alba, 2011: 14)

To conclude, with her re-visioning of La Virgen Alma Lopéz takes her out of "the semiotic structure of the Catholic Church" (Calvo, 2004: 202) and revisits the paradigms that prevent female development, thus encouraging Chicanas to develop paradigms of female behavior based on respect for women, without dependence on male-controlled constructs. She also provides Latinas with a brown female body to identify with. Taking into account the importance of the interdependence between the expression of sexuality and identity formation, such a discourse encourages women to "redefine and reclaim their sexuality while challenging the patriarchal gender order … that relegates women to very few roles (Madonna/whore) that all serve to maintain male privilege and domination" (McFarland, *Chicano Rap*, 2008: 80-81). Moreover, through her portrayal of La Virgen López makes a point about "women interpreting their symbols of veneration for themselves" (González, 89) and in fact "her artwork embraces female empowerment to turn La Virgen's eye back to the viewer, who then must question his or her perspective of the symbol,

its spiritual content, and the religious relic all at once" (González, 91). As Gaspar de Alba concludes, she

> deconstructs and decontextualizes the dominant code and reinterprets the message through an alternative context. For Alma López, that alternative context is the positionality of a Mexican immigrant, Chicana, lesbian, feminist, working-class artist who opposes all of the misogyny of the dominant code and instead sees the beauty of the female form, the nurturing breasts, the fearless stare, and the strength of women's collective survival in patriarchy. (Gaspar de Alba, 2014: 212)

In this way, the artist challenges long-prevailing archetypes and rewrites them from a queer perspective, providing Chicanas with empowering discourse to construct their identities with.

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