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The Bombshell

### Malinche's Revenge and Other Chicana Lesbian Feminisms

Malinche, the Nahuatl slave girl who became mistress of the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés, was also his interpreter, advisor, mother of his children, and a key figure in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. In Mexican popular culture she is perceived as the ultimate traitor, an Eve figure whose evil is located in her sex and sexuality. The Nobel laureate Octavio Paz in his famous essay "Sons of Malinche" depicts her as a treacherous whore who planted the seed of shame in every Mexican and is responsible for Mexico's devastating sense of fatalism and enduring colonization. To be called a "malinchista" is, to this day, a horrendous insult.



In her engaging, challenging, and wonderfully illustrated collection of essays *[Un]framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, activist-scholar, UCLA Professor, novelist, poet, and art critic, rejects the destructive, negating view of iconic Mexican women by the likes of Paz and reimagines women's lives, past and present, "from a radical politics of recognition." A Chicana lesbian writer hailing from the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez border, Gaspar de Alba's sensitivities have been acutely trained to recognize "the racist, the rapist, or the homophobe in the room before that person even approaches"; she has translated this awareness into a scholarly approach "using the frame of Chicana lesbian feminism, which rewrites feminist epistemology by intersecting race, class, gender, ethnicity, language and decolonial theories with the lesbian/queer standpoint." Though that mouthful may seem daunting, her perspective is instead refreshing, revelatory, and crystal clear. Her career-spanning collection -- also including pieces on contemporary Chicana art, the murdered women of Juárez, and the detective novel genre -- examines the "bad woman" stereotype, rigorously and entertainingly exposing it as a patriarchal tool used to oppress women and advance the interests of men. "Bad women" who refuse to conform to patriarchal dictates in order to do as they please are reclaimed and celebrated for their audacity and rebellious spirit.

Two long essays are devoted to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, born out of wedlock in 1648. From

a young age she devoted herself to a life of learning: she was already reading at three; at six she asked her mother to dress her as a boy so she could attend school; at eight, her mother sent her to live with relatives in Mexico City; at sixteen, recognized as a prodigy with an exceptional talent for discourse and writing, she secured a post as lady-in-waiting to the vicereine, La Marquesa de Mancera, a devoted patron of the arts. Highly impressed with her, the viceroy brought forty historians, mathematicians, theologians, philosophers, and poets together to show off Juana's knowledge in a kind of tournament.

Gaspar de Alba, who has devoted much of her career to researching and reflecting upon Sor Juana's life and letters, quotes the viceroy's own account: "In the manner that a royal galleon might fend off the attacks of a few canoes, so did Juana extricate herself from the questions, arguments, and objections these many men, each in his specialty, directed to her." At twenty, Juana became a nun -- her possible motives were to avoid the Inquisition, which strongly disapproved of educated women, and, in Juana's own words, to "escape the fate of marriage." For the following twenty-six years until her death, Juana was prolific, writing poetry, prose, and plays that have been collected into four volumes. She remains the most important cultural symbol of Mexico after the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In both essays, written twenty-two years apart, Gaspar de Alba takes on the great father of Mexican letters, Octavio Paz, author of the "definitive" 658-page biography of Sor Juana, regarded very nearly as a sacred text, in order to reclaim the "foremother of Chicana feminism" from paternal interpretation. Contesting Paz's vehement denial that Sor Juana might have had any lesbian tendency, Gaspar de Alba lets Paz's own paternalistic language undermine his argument: "To think that she felt a clear aversion to men and an equally clear attraction to women is absurd. In the first place, because even if that supposition were true, it is not likely that while she was still so young she knew her true inclinations." The proof, Gaspar de Alba convincingly argues, is in Sor Juana's highly erotic poetry, directed at two women in particular: La Marquesa de Mancera and another vicereine, the Countess of Paredes, who took it upon herself to publish Sor Juana's poetry when she returned to Spain in 1689 with the subtitle "the Tenth Muse of America," the tenth muse being the label Plato had given Sappho.

Sor Juana's 1691 autobiographical essay "*Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*," a passionate defense of a woman's right to learn, "brilliantly rebutted the clergy's mandate to keep women silent and ignorant save for biblical scholarship." It is a philosophical satire on, in her words, "stubborn men who malign/women for no reason/dismissing yourselves as the occasion/for the very wrongs you design, /if with unmitigated passion/you solicit their disdain/why do you incite them to sin/ and then expect them to behave?" Gaspar de Alba sublimely presents us with the first feminist of the Americas.

In a harrowing, horrifying essay, Gaspar de Alba describes the ongoing epidemic of brutal killings of women in Juárez -- "the Juárez femicides." Since 1993, over 800 women and girls aged five to seventy-five have been violently slain along the El Paso–Juárez border; thousands more are missing. She begins the piece with the Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui who learns her mother is pregnant with a son and kills her. The baby boy leaps from the dead mother's womb and chops off his sister's head, then throws her down a mountain causing her to lose all of her

limbs. A cautionary tale to women in patriarchal cultures who challenge male authority, Gaspar de Alba links the myth to the prevailing attitude that the women of Juárez, mostly anonymous, poor, dark skinned, and sexually active, brought their deaths on themselves. She describes the misogynistic Mexican penal codes for rape, shows how the Free Trade Agreement has contributed to the deaths, rails against the Hillary Doctrine for having failed these women, and shows a probable connection between the increasing number of sex crimes in Juárez and the rising number of sex offenders sent by the Texas Parole Board to live in El Paso. In her essay, Gaspar de Alba attempts to "*re-member* the sacrificed daughters of Juárez," emphasizing that the suffering of the women of Juárez is a universal female suffering in which women are punished simply for being women.

In "Malinche's Revenge," Gaspar de Alba traces how Chicana lesbian feminists, through their aesthetic and academic reimaginings, have initiated la Malinche's transformation. In the patriarchal vision she is, in Paz's words, "an inert heap of bones, blood, and dust," whose "taint" resides "in her sex... She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition." In a new paradigm Gaspar de Alba calls "Malinchismo," la Malinche becomes a heroine who resisted her literal enslavement to patriarchy by using her mind, tongue, and body to "cultivate her intellectual skills for her own survival and empowerment." How could she have betrayed the Aztecs, Malinchismo asks, if she was enslaved, an outsider, and only existed for them insofar as she brought down their civilization? Liberating itself from the "self-righteous upper-class, heteronormative Mexicanness," Malinchismo is free to see differently. "Óyeme con los ojos," Sor Juana wrote in a poem. *Hear me with your eyes*. Or, for Gaspar De Alba: "Imagine me, and I exist."

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Another project of reclaiming and remembering women of the Americas who have been grossly ignored and forgotten is the gorgeous and important art book *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*. Published in conjunction with an exhibit co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, the book, indeed a pictorial wonderland, features forty-eight Mexican and US-based artists, including Frida Kahlo, Remedios Varo, Rosa Rolanda, Dorothea Tanning, Leonora Carrington, Lola Alvarez Bravo, Jacqueline Lamba, Janet Sobel, and Lee Miller. Illustrated with more than 200 works of art produced from the 1930s to the 1970s, this book beautifully and powerfully shows that the surrealist movement, traditionally identified with European heterosexual male artists, was a much broader phenomenon, and initiates a radical rethinking of Surrealism to include the significant contributions and influences of women artists living and working in Mexico and the United States.

*Jenny McPhee's books include A Man of No Moon, No Ordinary Matter, The Center of Things, and Girls: Ordinary Girls and their Extraordinary Pursuits. She teaches creative writing at the Central Foundation Boys' School and is a founding board member of the Bronx Academy of Letters. She grew up in New Jersey and lives in London, but mostly she resides at [www.jennymcphree.com](http://www.jennymcphree.com).*