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Review/Reseña

Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba, *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe. Tradition and Transformation*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

Seeking the Universal Dark Feminine

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In “Pure Products go Crazy”, the introduction to *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford uses the example of William Carlos Williams’ 1923 musings about his employee, Elsie, to convince the reader that notions of ethnographic or cultural purity are false. Humans are always becoming and are never fixed in an essential manifestation of an Indian, a woman, an American, and so on. Colonialism poses a particular challenge to those who

seek authenticity, as identities alter, cultures syncretize, and individuals and groups constantly negotiate their circumstances. Representing a culture at any moment is consequently a difficult task, as it requires careful study of the unique situation and of the dynamic and changing histories, as well as critical evaluation of the voices that have shaped the dominant discourse. Well-crafted ethnographies are contingent; they do not assume continuity over time of practice, idea, or purpose.

Similarly, Homi Bhabha reveals in *The Location of Culture* that the significance of culture is immensely complex within postcolonial contexts. “The transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation—makes the process of culture translation a complex form of signification” (172). Easy and uncritical acceptance of terms like culture, people, nation, and tradition fail in these circumstances. Both the model of cultural imposition and the search for the “universalism of human culture” fall short of appreciating lived experiences (12). Instead, postcolonial situations demand examination of the interstices and the messy spaces of flux and exchange.

The purpose of *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe* is to highlight how “popular Catholicism, Amerindian traditions, and African *òrìsà* worship have been woven together through their syncretic contact in the New World” through the comparison of the cult of the Black Madonna (or, more broadly, dark-skinned mother goddesses—blackness is not addressed in the book) from prehistory to the present and what the author calls “an inquiry into contemporary hybrid manifestations of cultural and religious icons in postmodern global space” (1). Through multiple examples, Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba’s book examines the syncretic hybridization goddess images underwent during the introduction of Christianity. More specifically, chapters examine Our Lady of Cz_stochowa from Poland, Our Lady of Guadalupe from the Americas, and a host of Brazilian and Caribbean sacred female characters.

Its approach is anthropological. The author describes her research methodology as largely based on observations and interviews, with some consultation of archival and secondary sources. The author’s approach is also heavily informed by her own biography and she provides an extensive

chronicle of her travels in the book's introduction. Observing ritual practices from Poland to Brazil to the U.S. southwest led her to conclude that "cross-cultural dressing and other hybrid practices, where multilayered identities are negotiated, are idiosyncratic of postcolonial societies, such as those of Latin America and the Caribbean I describe in the following chapters," which she promises to accomplish using contemporary theories of "transculturation and syncretism" (9). The book concludes that from prehistory to the present, "the dark feminine has not disappeared but has both resisted historical, political, economic, and geographical changes through millennia and found ways to transform and adapt to new conditions" (162).

With so many millennia and much of the globe to cover, and such weighty and theoretically complicated issues to tackle, the book is surprisingly slender at 167 pages filled with large illustrations. Its bibliography is equally thin and, with the exception of Nestor García Canclini, lacks major theorists on postcolonialism, culture, and hybridity (Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, James Clifford, Trinh Minh-ha, and Michael Taussig, to name just a few). Instead, the author cites many popular sources, from coffee table books and artists' websites to bible study Internet resources.

The selection of sources and the number of pages dedicated to the discussion help to explain why the text rarely defines, much less critically examines, the terms it uses including blackness, culture, transculturation, syncretism, and hybridity. Nor does the book adequately address the holy images that it takes as its subject. The discussion of the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, is facile and superficial, lacking all of the complexities that the scholarship of David Brading, Stafford Poole, and others has so richly illuminated. In their place are broad, essentializing generalities:

The experiences of invasion, domination, and displacement have left in their wake an overwhelming sense of orphanhood and impotence for such Latin American nations as Mexico, Brazil, Cuba, or Haiti. They have long sought an icon of consolidation and protection. For Mexico, the Latino United States, and large portions of Latin America, this figure came to be the Virgin of Guadalupe, center of the all-pervading cult of Guadalupanism. (79)

The observations of ritual practices appear more sporadically than promised, particularly in the chapters on Mexico and the US Southwest, denying the book a major opportunity to contribute new information. Instead, these chapters summarize and simplify existing scholarship. While the author's introduction promised a critical examination of cultural transformation and hybridity, the method by which she attempts to do this and the assumptions she makes about an intrinsic, global belief system allow her only to skim the surface and to find universalizing explanation for what she calls humanity's collective memory of the Black Madonna.

It is important to note, however, that despite its jargon, the book never claims to be a scholarly study; it synthesizes and personalizes. It will clearly appeal to an audience of readers interested in seeing similarities between worship practices associated with goddesses and female holy figures, with tracing continuities and universalisms from prehistory to the present, and with promoting the idea of a universal, in this case dark, feminine. While followers of Clifford and Bhabha may find little appeal in the text, those who believe in an essential female power in the vein of Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* will find this book to be a great contribution to the field.