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Review / Reseña

Latin American Icons: Fame Across Borders. Dianna C. Niebylski and Patrick O'Connor (Eds.). Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.

A Road Map for Iconology

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Given the historical preference for religious figures as icons—beginning at least with the Greek concept of the *eikon*—Jesus Christ is conspicuously absent from modern-day icon lists in the U.S. Far more popular are sports figures, ethnic heroes, populist politicians, billionaires, musicians, and movie stars.¹ Wikipedia lists Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Rosie the Riveter, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, and others, along with objects, such as the Coca Cola, a football, a baseball,

¹ I derive this anecdotal evidence from my own experience as a teacher in several courses I have taught about Latin American icons at the University of Oregon since the 1990s.

and the Statue of Liberty as icons.² In Latin America, in contrast, the Virgin Mary, especially in the guise of Guadalupe, will likely rise near to the top in any number of icon lists, with her combination of secular and religious iconic dimensions. Does the important presence of saints in the Latin American framework point to a significant cultural difference with the U.S.? As the authors here acknowledge, cultures span national political boundaries, which means that Guadalupe is also venerated here. But different contexts can indeed produce variations in the icons nations tend to favor and how we see them. And, certainly, a large number of Latin American icons are secular, as the volume under review here will attest.



A modern painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe
seen on display in a window in Oaxaca,
Mexico, in November 2013. (Photo by the author.)

So, what do cultures' (or sub-cultures') icons reflect about group values and aspirations? O'Connor and Nieblyski explore the meaning of "icon" in their introduction to this collection of essays about Latin American figures with broad and enduring popularity. They highlight religious, commercial, nationalistic, and sexual-fetishistic dimensions of icons. They also note that icons tend to be essentialized to merely a face or reduced to the simplicity of a logo, all of which are highly visual, and easily recognized, even if the meaning is not always interpreted in the same way by all observers. In fact, as the editors recognize, icons are shaped, perceived, and reconceived for different ends.

² See http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_icon, retrieved 1/31/2015.

Through the editors and the contributors in this collection of essays about Latin American icons we learn much about how these figures are socially and culturally constructed and mediated over time, resulting in dynamic, multiple, and sometimes competing readings. Icons can mirror characteristics we find (or might like to find) in ourselves, or they can represent an “exotic other” (6). They can be larger than life and the objects of near worship and celebrity, or they can have the foibles and contradictions of other humans, subject to parody, caricature, sarcasm, and melodrama. In fact, the editors assert, melodrama and the Latin American icon often go together, not that the essays here claim to distill once and for all some singular iconic essence for the region. The contributors, largely professors in Spanish departments, are more interested in exploring the manifold cultural meanings behind each of the figures they have selected. They additionally provide helpful road signs for future iconological research, which is what this review will aim to highlight.

The editors have sorted the diverse icons under observation into the following groupings:

- “Rebels, Revolutionaries, and Border Bandits,” which encompasses Brian Gollnick’s look at Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa; Beatriz Sarlo’s study of Argentina’s political figure Eva Perón; J. P. Spicer-Escalante’s analysis of the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara; and Robert McKee Irwin’s exploration of the Chilean-Mexican-Californian rebel Joaquín Murrieta and along with the Mexican figure of captivity narratives, Lola Casanova.
- “Golden-Era Icons at Home and in Hollywood” includes Rielle Navitski’s examination of Argentine musician Carlos Gardel; Kristy Rawson’s attention to Mexican actress-dancer Lupe Vélez; Ana M. López’s report on actress Mexican actress Dolores Del Río; David William Foster’s study of Brazilian actress Carmen Miranda; and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Eva Woods-Peiró’s examination of Dominican playboy Porfirio Rubirosa.
- “Contemporary Latin American Icons: National Stars and Global Superstars,” includes Janis Breckenridge and Bécquer Medak-Seguín’s consideration of Argentine actress Norma Aleandro;

Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado's look at Salma Hayek and Gael García Bernal; and Juan Villoro's exploration of Argentine soccer star Diego Armando Maradona.

- "The Afterlife of Fame: Consuming Iconicity," contains an appropriate piece from Margaret Lindauer about Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and the editors' concluding thoughts.

These groupings bring some order to what might otherwise be a random sampling, although with some notable concentration in the area of cinematic performers. Where possible, the following discussion, addressing each chapter individually, will endeavor to extract the methodological or theoretical take-aways for those of us who might carry forward the study of cultural meaning in the making and reshaping of Latin American icons.

Starting us off, in his study of Pancho Villa, Gollnick contributes to our understanding of the challenges of studying icons, noting how Villa is indisputably treated as a classic figure, although "what he stands for has long been contested" (22). As a historical person, Villa defies institutional codification, being both an occasional hero to the working class and a source of discomfort to the rich and powerful. He holds a place in mental images of *mexicanidad* ("Mexicanness") on both sides of the border that he himself crisscrossed, but gringos are not thrilled with his memory. His military actions and his revolutionary leadership, in general, clearly contribute to his enduring mystique and his targeting for literature and films with a focus on epic social upheaval. Villa is interesting, too, as an icon remembered for barbarous acts relayed through anecdotes. As Gollnick sees, some of these anecdotes contradict one another, occasionally resulting in a "meaningless pastiche" (30), "kitsch" (30), and a "comic potential" (31). Cynicism about the derailment of the Mexican Revolution may be feeding such treatments.³

³ Of course, Villa is also a subject very present in biographies and histories of the Mexican Revolution, where he similarly receives mixed reviews.



Kitschy representations of Mexican icons in *nichos*, mass-produced for tourists, as seen in a shop in Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2010. (Photo by the author.)

The “passionate excess” (43) of Eva Perón combined, we might say, with that of her followers and her detractors, has possibly served as a deterrent to the emergence of vapid curios associated with this figure. But this is not to say that she was immune to satire. Widely diverging biographies of Eva Perón have already shown us how she could be loved and idolized on the one hand and detested on the other (as in the “woman with the whip”), but the passion around these competing portrayals collectively underline her unwavering iconic status for twentieth-century and modern day Argentines.⁴ Sarlo’s treatment of Eva Perón includes the author’s own coming-of-age and political-awakening narrative, perhaps as subjective a characterization of the icon as any other. Sarlo grew up in a Peronist family, but she was only 10 in 1952 when Eva Perón died, and so most of Sarlo’s early understanding of Eva is derived from the careful constructions of her memory by Peronists, woven through with myth and legend. But Sarlo does recall for herself the style of the icon and its centrality in how the woman was perceived, as a bridge between the “pathetic” and the “sublime” (41). Eva’s beautifully preserved corpse had a journey of its own, as a *desaparecido* of sorts for eighteen years, keeping alive the questions along with the mystique. Sarlo is adept at perceiving the iconization of Eva Perón in life and in death, especially, when she became saint-like, as portrayed in Jorge Luis Borges’ ironic anti-Peronist story of a

⁴ See, for example, Julie M. Taylor, *Eva Perón: The myths of a woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Mary Main, *Evita: The woman with the whip* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1980); or her own *La razón de mi vida* (Buenos Aires: C.S. Ediciones, [1952] 1996).

blonde-doll-cum-funereal-stand-in and its worship in the provinces by the “gullible” (45).

The iconization of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, another Argentine, also grew to huge proportions after his death in the late 1960s, a figure also loved and loathed alike, but one who has enjoyed enduring “global cachet” (48). While photography gave a major boost to the celebrity of Evita, Spicer-Escalante reminds us how Alberto Korda’s 1960 photograph of Che wearing the beret with the star is “the world’s most iconic photo” (48). Surely it rivals—and probably surpasses—any other single portrait in the way it has been reproduced on millions of posters and t-shirts. The informal canonization of this man, something like that of Evita but more pervasive, has led an art historian to dub him Chesucristo.⁵



Bookstore display in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2009, showing the pervasiveness and intertwining of the symbols of Che Guevara and Frida Kahlo. (Photo by the author.)

Spicer-Escalante, akin to others in this volume, appropriately focuses on the “process of signification” that made Guevara into a persona whose ideological import has receded to the background (48). Foreshadowing a shared situation with regard to Frida Kahlo, this Che has become a branded face, donned by the multitudes around the globe who do not even know who he was, but who long for an association with his image, imbuing it with their own imagined meanings. We find a similar irony in

⁵ See, for example, David Kunzle’s article, “Chesucristo: Fusions, myths, and realities,” *Latin American perspectives* 35:2 (March 2008): 97-115.

the transformation of an anti-establishment, counter-hegemonic symbol into an emblem of the “patently bourgeois and materialistic world of Pop Art” (55). Of course, Che’s visage still adorns banners, shirts, and hats in political marches, such as we have seen in the past few months in Mexico City in response to the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa “43” (disappeared students), while at the same time capitalists have printed Che’s face on bikinis,⁶ and cynics make a parody of the “simulacrum,” such as Homer Simpson with beret and beard and recalling Borges’ blonde-doll Evita stand-in. Spicer-Escalante concludes by warning us of the elasticity of the image, so open to distorting reinterpretation. This is something that will echo throughout the discursive and visual narratives of so many icons.

We see a continuing thread here as we move on to Irwin’s examination of Joaquín Murrieta and Lola Casanova, where he finds a recurring “shapeshifting” in figures in the Borderlands who “resist fixed forms” and take on “palimpsestic qualities” (61). Irwin argues that, while there are competing narratives about Murrieta and Casanova, “no one version of their story trumps others” (62) and they were never incorporated into official histories. Representations of Murrieta, like other icons already reviewed, can range from “superhero” to “fearsome enemy” (64). In this, we may be seeing a pattern whereby icons embody binaries. The image of Murrieta was possibly able to intersect them, being simultaneously a “patriot” and a “bandit” (66-67), according to Irwin.

The flipside of the virtuous female heroine, as in the case of Eva Perón, was the harlot. Casanova more subtly approximates that binary, as either an innocent white girl who married an indigenous man and had children with him, or as “a female animal and nothing more” (67, quoting Hernández), “ashamed,” “pitiful,” and “unfortunate” (68).⁷ Added to the gendering of Casanova, we see the ideology of race in another novel, contrasting her whiteness with the “copper skin,” “naked legs,” muscular chest, and “black hair” (68) of her Seri (read: noble savage) lover-husband.

⁶ See Marc Lacy, “A Revolutionary Icon, and now, a bikini,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/world/americas/09che.html?_r=0, retrieved 1/31/2015.

⁷ Irwin does point to one feminist portrayal of Casanova constructed by Matilde Landeta, referenced in an article by Isabel Arredondo, published in 2002.

While Murrieta and Casanova lived in the nineteenth-century and we therefore lack the photographic portraits of them that have been so influential in the iconization of Evita and Che, the mutability of the personae of the Borderlands figures has nevertheless been significant in the realm of older media forms, such as oral tradition, theater, cinema, ballads, and novels. But the social and geographic marginality of Murrieta and Casanova, argues Irwin, seems to have left a door open to perhaps a greater mutability and fewer efforts to lock them into an established frame for official, nationalistic ends.

The passage of time, perhaps like growing distance from the institutional center, may offer additional opportunities for shape changing. Navitski's study of the tango great, Carlos Gardel, points to the intensification of nostalgia as responsible for the amplification of emotional responses to his music over time. A premature death forever silenced the Argentine musician, whose work built a bridge between the working and middle classes, and yet his followers have seemed to enjoy traveling back in time to re-connect with his oeuvre. Technology has continued to make this time travel possible, and now the expanding frontiers of global communications open Gardel's music to ever widening audiences, not only socially but also geographically.

Navitski does not address it directly, but Gardel's film career seems somewhat less accessible, especially for international audiences today. Limited accessibility is not because we do not have the technology to make those movies more available, but perhaps because that medium is less affective emotionally and thus more prone to culture shock for time travelers. The Mexican star of theater and film Lupe Vélez, active from the late 1920s into the 1940s, suffered from an even greater degree of separation from audiences in the decades to follow. From what Rawson explains, this was partly owing to the xenophobia that increased during that economic crisis of the Depression, plus the demonization of foreigners, and the tainting of her image as one of wild excess or as a comic Latina. But a forthcoming Mexican-U.S. biopic will strive to reinstate Vélez as a celebrity worthy of our respect in moving footage appropriate for more modern tastes.

Witnessing the crossing of gender boundaries and prescribed behavior for women, as for men, tends to bring those structures into sharper focus and allows us to reconsider more judiciously the lives of tainted historical figures. Vélez, like Eva Perón and Frida Kahlo, “contest[ed] national models of femininity and sexuality” (86). Probably in all three cases (but as Rawson only identifies for Vélez), role violations also complicate the place of such women in social movements with agendas and political ideologies that do not necessarily make room for a gender consciousness. These women all seemed to have had a mindful hand in charting their own paths, traversing lines at will, and pushing back against boundaries—to the delight of at least some of their admirers. But, they all met rather sad ends, whether from illness (Kahlo and Perón) or suicide (Vélez).

Like Vélez, Dolores del Río was a star who transcended national boundaries, raising the question, as Ana M. López puts it, of “the relationship between stardom and nationness” (97). López asks us to consider a “continental perspective” that takes in a context with “industrial and ideological linkages” (98) that influenced careers of the likes of Del Río, while also pursuing what we can learn about the construction of national identity. In this period, we see emerging in Hollywood the extraordinarily sensual and exotic Latina performer, whose image, as López demonstrates, was affected by the roles she played and by the growing ethnic stereotyping among filmmakers and audiences. But then Del Río went home to Mexico and made seventeen films between 1943 and 1966, complicating her (now “Mexican”) identity even further. When she returned to Hollywood she was the “strong yet suffering indigenous” woman thereafter (113). Either way, she was an ‘other’ with ethnic, class-based, sexualized and gendered dimensions that were influenced by a transnational, multicultural milieu. In a fascinating move to redeem her and imbue her with a secular sainthood of *mexicanidad*, Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains made her the central (and secular) figure of a series of public “home altars” in the 1980s and ‘90s (97, 114).

If Del Río's Hollywood persona included that of a Brazilian dancer, Carmen Miranda was the quintessential female Brazilian, “flamboyant, hot-

tempered, all-purpose Latin woman” (117), as shaped by the U.S. entertainment industry. Just as fictitious as this construction was, Foster astutely reveals how an actress could be manipulated, resist, succumb, and even consciously contribute to an identity formation that lacked authenticity. Miranda’s make-believe character even came to be seen as a “woman playing a man playing a woman” (121), which Foster skillfully untangles in his exploration of complex feminine and masculine issues behind the role. And the role was racialized. Whereas the parts Del Río played poorly imitated indigenous women, Miranda’s characters had some lampooning version of “Bahía peasant women of African slave descent” (118) as “sexual perverts” (122). Intellectuals in Mexico and Brazil would find the racism repugnant, of course, but the international entertainment consumption machine kept it alive for a time. The broadly “Latin American” clichés personified by Del Río and Miranda would have shocking longevity in the U.S., and yet the actresses would still have some enthusiastic national followers.

In Foster’s assessment of Miranda’s caricature, he shrewdly reminds us that filmmaking “is artifice and not a ‘natural’ and transparent privileged window on reality” (123). In the volume’s next chapter, where Paravisini-Gebert and Woods Peiró dissect the masculine and racial elements in the persona of Porfirio Rubirosa (“Rubi”), we see how other forms of media can also have distorting lenses. Rubi was a glamorous Dominican playboy and legendary Latin lover of “hybrid race” with chiseled features and an “impeccably-tailored elegance” (127) that made him the darling of celebrity media. Those media, such as tabloids and magazines like *People*, tracked his jet-setting and race-car driving. They also went to great lengths to exaggerate Rubi’s legendary physical and performative sexual attributes, which they ascribed to some imagined racial derivation. The result could be threatening to “white male superiority” (129), but national audiences continued to enjoy beholding his memory and the concomitant elevation of the D.R. long after his premature death in 1965. The nostalgia for his presence hits a note that is reminiscent of fans’ time travel to hear Gardel.

Sometimes, it seems, people find gratification in the way their country can bask in the glow of a national star's brilliance, which somehow also refracts onto all its citizens. Norma Aleandro, studied by Breckenridge and Medak-Seguín, is a cinema star that might be credited with helping raise Argentina in the estimation of international audiences. She is a middle-class everywoman who, through the roles she has played—especially in the huge hit, *The Official Story* (1985)—became an example of someone who gradually woke up to, and stood up to, dictatorship and state terror. In her personal transition she symbolically facilitated a shift toward more modern, democratic ways for Argentine society more generally.

Continuing this investigation into contemporary, middle-class, filmic superstars, Ignacio Sánchez Prado tracks the rise of Salma Hayek and Gael García Bernal. They have enjoyed “unprecedented access to global audiences” by way of the more permeable “transnational circuits of cinema” (148) in the neoliberal era. Remembering back to the likes of Dolores del Río or Carmen Miranda, or even the actors on *telenovelas*, we might say these contemporary superstars have come a long way. But while Hayek has been less plagued by exaggerated caricature, Sánchez Prado explains how she does have a shifting ethnicity in her films, and she is marked by a “commodification of difference” (150, 151; citing Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad Valdivia). Her ‘Mexicanness’ derives from what U.S. cinema goes like to think is Mexican and/or Latina; what the author calls a “metacinematic identity” with “empty signifiers” (152). Sánchez Prado finds this to be especially the case with Gael García Bernal, who has found it easier to “shed his Mexican markers” (153), with his light skin, his adaptable masculinity, and his finesse with pan-Hispanic accents.

In *Rudo y cursi* (2008) García Bernal played a youth who rose from the lower ranks as a result of his success in playing soccer. Diego Armando Maradona, known as the god of soccer, is a real-life icon that accomplished just that. His biography embodies the melodrama we hear about in the editors' introduction, the stuff of Italian operatic arias and emotional Argentine tango lyrics, with stunning feats, major eccentricities, tantrums, sentimental tears, confessions, and, in general, a “gargantuan egomania” (160). His greatest successes, in this study by Juan Villoro, were “nurtured

by paranoia and mistrust” (161), leading his fellow players to great triumphs against all odds. These big wins did ensure him lasting fame, but his fortunes had their ups and down after his retirement in 2000. What we are left wondering is whether his tarnished image will become a sad antidote to any nostalgia for his glory days, or whether, because he is still with us (aged 55), he has a chance for another respectable comeback. A third possibility is that his iconicity will prove to be invincible not matter what happens in his remaining years.

Clearly, fortunes can change after the death of an icon. Frida Kahlo holds a prominent place in the concluding part to this volume, “The Afterlife of Fame: Consuming Iconicity.” Like Che Guevara, she is an extremely powerful international icon of remarkable endurance. She has been many things to many people, with banners thrust into her hands that she might not have chosen to carry, but for which her life story might reveal some tell-tale hints—therapeutic inspiration for the alter-abled; a Communist revolutionary; a sexy seductress; a proto-feminist gender bender; a swearing, smoking, cross-dressing lesbian or bisexual; a unique *fashionista*; a Zapotec *indígena* or *mulata* wannabe; a quintessential Mexican interior designer; the overshadowed wife of an artist and yet an artist in her own right; and the list goes on. In her behavior, her letters, and her journal, as in her paintings, she helped shape her own image, which observers have had a field day trying to interpret.

At the time of Margaret A. Lindauer's study of Kahlo, which we find in the excerpt from her 1999 book included in this volume, the author was one of those who were identifying Kahlo as a symbol of feminist resistance. Lindauer finds her work to have disrupted the male gaze, and so many things about her eschewed or made fun of the “patriarchal prescription” (182) that a woman should be a “passive, domestic caretaker” (185). Lindauer also points out how Kahlo fetishized her own persona.

In their Afterword, the editors of the volume recognize the way, in her afterlife, Kahlo has become a fetish figure for various ends, as her meaning is continually revisited and resignified. They note how the genesis of an icon can be very different from its reading in different time periods. They recall how some onlookers will lament the mass reproduction of an

icon's image and its separation from its national or historical context, "decry[ing] a culture of frantic distraction conquering a world of slow thought" (188). The editors recognize that technology can alter the rate and nature of dissemination of the elements that help create, sustain, or refashion an icon. They seem to recognize how new media have the potential to restyle and circulate images with lightning speed, outside the confines of national boundaries, film studios, and elite editors. It is exciting to think how existing icons may be treated in these new arenas, and what kinds of new icons might emerge.

The various chapters in *Latin American Icons: Fame across borders* are consistently well-written studies of fascinating characters. The book is a great read, difficult to put down. The editors have done a commendable job of selecting and framing the contributed pieces. They do not pretend to assemble an exhaustive collection; such would require multiple volumes if it were to be properly thorough. Some readers might long for figures from deeper in history, or from under-represented groups (e.g. Anacaona, Atahualpa, Cuauhtemoc, Malintzin, Ganga Zumba, Toussaint Louverture), or other dreamers from the Independence era (such as Simón Bolívar). But the editors' time frame is twentieth-century, spilling over into the twenty-first. Even when accepting the time frame, some readers might contest the choice of Pancho Villa over Emiliano Zapata. Some might wonder, where Rigoberta Menchú, martyred politicians such as Salvador Allende and Jacobo Arbenz, or other figures with notable ideological import are, or even the dictators many of us might "love to hate." This collection, some might say, is rather long on celebrities.

This raises the theoretical question: how or when does a celebrity become an icon, or is there even a distinction? Merriam-Webster's free online dictionary says that an icon is "a person who is very successful and admired," which is a description that offers plenty of room for celebrities.⁸ The *Free Dictionary*, by Farlex, adds that an icon captures "great attention and devotion; an idol," which continues to accommodate the likes of movie

⁸ See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/icon>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

stars and playboys.⁹ Google's definition of an icon as "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of something," and *Cambridge Dictionary's* addition that this something be "of importance," suggest we should expect a little more weight from our icons than we might from our celebrities.¹⁰

Either way, given the huge popularity of celebrities, it behooves us to ask how and why we are drawn to them. Perhaps celebrities receive greater attention for their appearance (whether sexualized, racialized, fashionable, etc.) and behavior (music, sport, acting, etc.), and icons receive greater attention for their ideas and what their personae come to represent symbolically. Or perhaps these are fields that can be crossed by both. Icon equals image; whether concrete and visual or imaginative and cognitive, and human beings will have multiple facets that can capture our attention and imagination. The qualities one can identify in the embodiment of an iconic or a celebrity personality call for further attention. The authors in this volume find rich fodder for analysis in their illuminating considerations of sexuality, race, class, and nationality. Filmic and literary expressions, or more generally cultural studies, tend to be the objectives of this collection of authors, more than political or social movements or history. But they do also pay attention to the importance of context and timing.

One of the recurring temporal dimensions that come to light in some of these essays is the possibility for time travel on the part of icons' followers. Nostalgia can apparently be a powerful fuel for such trips. To push this inquiry further, one could stray into a psychological probing of nostalgia, for example, and/or see it as a factor in shaping historical memory. How do people want to view the past, attaching significance to their nation's or their culture's roots, and therefore their own heritage? What are the kinds of individuals from history (even as recent as a generation or two back) who provide satisfaction in this way, and how or why? Just as we can PhotoShop out a blemish on a photographic portrait,

⁹ See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/icon>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

¹⁰ See <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/american-english/icon>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

can we reasonably overlook certain traits and exaggerate others, to shape a person into what we wish to see?

Another consideration for the temporal element is the impact of death on the fate of the icon. A premature death has often seemed to boost an icon's worth, drawing upon the observer's sympathies and a longing for the supposed "good old days." Shouts of "*ipresente!*" (present and accounted for) will ring out for martyred populist heroes, such as Eva Perón of Argentina, Augusto César Sandino of Nicaragua, or Farabundo Martí of El Salvador. Argentine President Nestor Kirchner, who fell to an unexpected heart attack in 2010, is said to be "present" and "watching" his widow, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, lead the country in his wake.¹¹ How do iconology and a theology of martyrdom intersect?¹²

The authors and editors of this volume are fully aware of the potential distance between the observers' investment of their dreams and hopes and the icons' own realities and self-perceptions. One who greatly admires any icon cannot help but lament what appear to be self-serving distortions in outlining that person's life or symbol. Apparently common is the phenomenon whereby an icon is a vessel that can be emptied and refilled with a new message. The editors perceptively see no end to this popular practice. If icons are cultural, we must realize that subcultures will assign their own meanings to such figures, and such assignations can evolve over time. Contributing factors might include the way the icon changes his or her comportment (while still alive) or the way the lenses and norms of the subcultures can change, with their evolving tastes and expectations. The appropriation of the vessel and its refilling can be unsettling and a creative impulse for multiple, competing readings, ad infinitum. It may well be that shape shifting has been around ever since the

¹¹ Juan Forero, "In Latin America, dead leaders become icons," *Washington Post*, October 21, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/in-latin-america-dead-leaders-become-icons/2011/10/20/gIQA8w7V3L_story.html, accessed 1/31/2015.

¹² See Martin Maier, SJ, "The theology of martyrdom in Latin America," in *Truth and memory: The Church and human rights in El Salvador and Guatemala*, eds. Michael A. Hayes and David Tombs (Leominster: Gracewing Publishing, 2001), 90.

religious iconic form was repurposed for the secular realm, and even before.¹³

This volume also raises the tantalizing (if sometimes appalling) specter of the development of an icon into a “product” or “commodity.” Commodification offers a fruitful line for further research, for probing its nature and significance. The broader the demographic and geographic reach of an icon, the greater the likelihood that his or her image will be appropriated and mass-produced for economic profit. When an icon’s symbolism strikes a real chord among a broad range of consumer types, it can be for any range of reasons—aesthetic, aspirational, ideological, and so on. The symbolism is often polysemic; it can unknowingly *unite* splinter groups with its “semiotic fluidity” across classes and subcultures, just as it can *fracture* them.¹⁴ But we often find irony in the result. The representation of an icon with symbolic weight being sold as cheap merchandise seems more painful than the selling of a celebrity.

One suspects that Che and Frida, as Communist Party members in their day, would bristle at the commodification of their images if they could observe this. The blogger Daniel Harley finds the trend “deliciously ironic” and “laughable,” but he also calls on his readers to forget the hypocrisy, wear the t-shirts, and keep alive the “pulse of revolutionary desire.”¹⁵ Another writer, less amused, speaks powerfully about how the “international revolutionary [who] fought and died in the cause against capitalism and imperialism has become merchandise in the service of his enemies.”¹⁶

The commercial presence of Frida Kahlo has tarnished her presence among Chicana artists, according to the perceptive curator Marietta

¹³ Even religious icons have experienced ascendancy and decline and their attributes adjusted over time. But the new secular use for an ancient religious form was surely a source of consternation and push back, just as iconographic changes today can offend.

¹⁴ See Matthew Hills, *Fan cultures* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 163 note 21.

¹⁵ “Che the Commodity,” *Thinking blue guitars* blog, 9/17/2009, <https://thinkingblueguitars.wordpress.com/2009/09/17/che-the-commodity/>, retrieved on 1/31/2015.

¹⁶ Carleen D. Sánchez, “The Apotheosis of Frida and Che: Secular Saints and Fetishized Commodities,” *Journal of religion and popular culture* 24:2 (Summer 2012), <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-330005549/the-apotheosis-of-frida-and-che-secular-saints-and>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

Bernstorff. At a boutique show in Los Angeles in the early 1990s, such cheapening of the image was already “gross” and “bizarre, in Bernstorff’s words, putting people off like the tired likeness of the “Santa Fe coyote howling at the moon.” But Frida-inspired objects continue to sell well even now, while, as *L.A. Times* writer Patricia Ward Biederman notes, her followers do not want to see Frida “degenerate into a cultural cliché, mindlessly duplicated without any thought to what she stood for.”¹⁷

Frida’s likeness on a U.S. stamp in the year 2001 suggests that the government had no idea that she had been a member of the Communist Party, something that did in fact cause a stir after the stamp hit post office counters.¹⁸ The stamp’s unveiling by the Postal Service also referred to Kahlo as “Hispanic,” which some of my students at the time took to mean U.S.-Latina. They balked at the idea, proclaiming that she was “Mexican” (speaking of nationality rather than ethnicity). The gesture may have been well meaning, they decried, but why not choose a real U.S. Latina, such as New Mexico-born civil rights activist Dolores Huerta? The choice of Frida failed the legitimacy litmus test for my students, but it reflects more about the institution’s perceived need (and thus its probably hasty decision) to elevate a well-known “Hispanic” and a female figure—based on the abundant kitsch available in this country in that period.

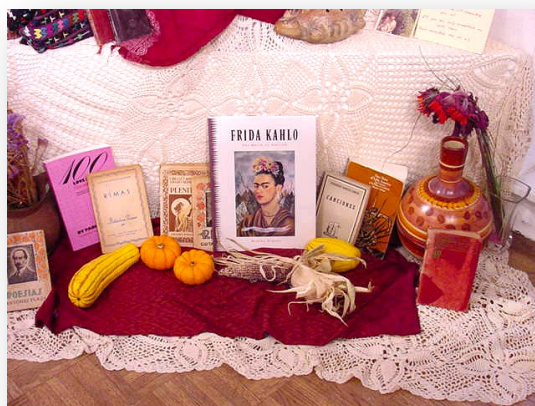
When Communist icons such as Che and Frida take a prominent place on altars, such as during the Day of the Dead festivities, we cannot help but see an irony there too, for the secular icon has come to (re)occupy a semi-religious realm. Carleen D. Sánchez calls such representations of Che and Frida, “secular saints.”¹⁹ Latin Americans with home altars will regularly find room for offerings left to honor indigenous deities, foods for deceased ancestors, and non-religious items of importance to the family. The Day of the Dead (with roots in All Saints and All Souls days) has also broadened from a Catholic holiday to one when people of many religions

¹⁷ “The Face of Frida,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1991.

¹⁸ Peter Laux, “Famous Mexicans on their stamps—Frida Kahlo,” *Mexconnect*, May 5, 2007. See <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/698-famous-mexicans-on-their-stamps-frida-kahlo>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

¹⁹ Sánchez, <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-330005549/the-apotheosis-of-frida-and-che-secular-saints-and>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

take time to remember deceased relatives and friends, improvising on altar adornments. One can also find for sale on line a “Frida Kahlo Secular Saint Candle,” heretically dedicated to “the patron saint of monkeys, thwarted lovers, and unbrows,” to place and burn on such an altar.²⁰



Altar Detail, Maude Kerns Art Center, Eugene, Oregon, 2003.
(Photo by the author.)

When it comes to truly religious icons in twenty-first-century Latin America, the current pope is perceived to be canonizing folks right and left. The nation of Colombia recently got its first saint ever in the shape of a nun who went into the forests to work among indigenous people, and Mexico gained another new saint in the woman who defended an archbishop in the days of religious persecution in the 1920s.²¹

In fact, a new and intriguing candidate for religious and secular iconization may well be “His Holiness” Pope Francis himself, who was *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year in December 2013.²² Of Italian heritage but born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, this first pope of Latin American origins is making lots of waves and capturing attention from people both inside and

²⁰ See the Unemployed Philosophers Guild website, <http://www.philosophersguild.com/Frida-Kahlo-Secular-Saint-Candle.html>, accessed 1/31/2015. Along with Frida, this company sells secular saint candles devoted to the likes of Virginia Woolf, Charles Darwin, Kurt Vonnegut, and Noam Chomsky, “cultural icons you can believe in.”

²¹ “Pope canonizes first saints from Colombia, Mexico,” *CNN*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/12/world/europe/pope-francis-saints/>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

²² See *Time*, December 23, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20131223,00.html>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

well outside the Catholic Church. Here we gain glimpses of the potentially powerful role of social media in spreading his messages and in sharing opinions about them. Pope Francis stated publicly in May, 2014: “The Internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.”²³ At that time, he preferred to limit his role in social networks to Twitter (@Pontifex, with 5.5M followers at this time) until he could find a way for his technicians to protect him from offensive messages on any Facebook (FB) page that he might wish to create.²⁴ To provide a sense of proportion, it is worth noting that pop singer Katy Perry, featured in the Super Bowl half-time show in 2015, has 64M Twitter followers, more than ten times the number watching the pope, which once again underlines the need to cross-examine our fascination with stars.

Returning to Pope Francis, who has yet to make his own FB page, one can count at least four community pages (with millions of “likes”) that bear his name, apparently created by his supporters. Circulated even more widely are sensational FB messages about his meeting with a transgendered person, his support of breastfeeding mothers, his acceptance of both creation and evolution, or a quote about people not needing to believe in God, to name a few examples.²⁵ Before we know it, we may be seeing him on the wildly popular new photograph messaging app, “Snapchat,” or the similarly hot video-clip sharing service, “Vine”—or any number of new applications that are sure to emerge in the next ten minutes. Only time will tell how we will represent (and analyze) the Latin American icons to come

²³ Alessandro Bianchi, “Pope Francis will not join Facebook, sticks with Twitter,” *CBS News*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/pope-francis-will-not-join-facebook-sticks-with-twitter/>, retrieved 1/31/2015.

²⁴ To provide a sense of proportion, however, it is worth noting that pop singer Katy Perry has 64M Twitter followers.

²⁵ Snopes debunked the quote about not believing in God; see <http://www.snopes.com/politics/quotes/popeatheist.asp>, retrieved 1/31/2015. On the meeting with a transgendered man, see <https://www.facebook.com/PopeFranciscus/posts/985534858140545>, retrieved 1/31/2015. On the breastfeeding issue, see for example, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/12/pope-francis-breastfeeding_n_6456314.html, retrieve 1/31/2015. News from the *Huffington post* circulates widely on Facebook, being forwarded liberally. On the evolution issue, see <http://www.livescience.com/48524-catholic-church-big-bang-evolution.html>, retrieved on 1/31/2015, which Snopes.com and the Vatican myth-busted.

in this new millennium. Our road map for iconology will have to take new technologies into account. Meanwhile, read *Latin American Icons: Fame Across Borders*, see some wonderful characters come to life, and enjoy the savvy interpretations.