



Blinded by ‘objectivity’

How news conventions caused journalists to miss the real story in the ‘Our Lady’ controversy in Santa Fe

■ **Kevin Dolan**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

In 2001, a photo montage by Los Angeles artist Alma López called *Our Lady* created a firestorm in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Because of journalistic practices that wait for officials or major players to raise issues before doing stories on them in order to claim ‘objectivity’, newspaper coverage left many underlying issues surrounding the controversy largely unexamined. This predominant trend in coverage privileged the almost exclusively male protesters by constantly replaying their attacks. Also, the way in which the different sides were condensed in ongoing stories forced the artist and her mostly female supporters to play defense without their best defense: the Sandra Cisneros essay that inspired the work and its feminist critique of Chicano culture and its effect on Latinas’ self-image.

KEY WORDS ■ art ■ ethnicity ■ feminism ■ gentrification ■ neutrality ■ news conventions ■ objectivity ■ representation ■ self-image

Introduction

On 25 February 2001, a new exhibit opened at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Called ‘Cyber Arte: Where Technology Meets Tradition’, the exhibit featured the work of four Hispanic¹ women – three from New Mexico and one from Los Angeles. The purpose of the show, the curator wrote in a statement, was ‘to showcase the manner in which [the four artists] translate and recast their deeply rooted cultural beliefs, images and history by utilizing computers to create a new type of visual art’ (Berkovitch, 2001). Among the pieces in the show was a photo montage created on a computer by Los Angeles artist Alma López called *Our Lady*.² It takes off from the traditional

image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a saint highly revered in Mexico and the US Southwest. In the traditional image, the Virgin Mother has her head bowed with clasped hands and is covered with a full-length dress and is enclosed by a full-length robe draped over her head and entire body. It also features a distinctive yellow or golden body halo. She stands on a crescent moon that is held aloft by a boyish cherub. López's *Our Lady* features her friend and fellow Chicana feminist artist Raquel Salinas with her hands on her hips and her head cocked back. López originally photographed Salinas in her underwear and then worked with a computer program to digitally cover the underwear with garlands of roses. Salinas stands on a crescent moon held aloft by a bare-breasted angel portrayed by another friend. Salinas is still wearing a heavy robe as usually worn by Our Lady of Guadalupe, but this one is the cloak of an Aztec warrior goddess draped over her shoulders and is open in front exposing her bare midriff and bare legs. Guadalupe and the angel are surrounded by more roses. In the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, God created a lush rose garden in a barren place as proof that Guadalupe was truly the Virgin Mother. López created this new version of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1999 with money she received from a grant from the city of Los Angeles. It barely caused any controversy when it was shown in Los Angeles (Gurza, 2001), but it created a firestorm in Santa Fe after the image was featured in a museum mailing about the exhibit.

In this essay, I examine the media coverage of this controversy, its shortcomings and limited successes, as well as many of the underlying issues surrounding the controversy that were left largely unexamined by the two major daily newspapers in the area, the 25,000-circulation *Santa Fe New Mexican* and the *Albuquerque Journal*, which sells about 5000 papers a day in the area. For contrast, I also took a look at occasional stories by *The Albuquerque Tribune*, a struggling afternoon paper that is hardly distributed in Northern New Mexico.³ I also plan to explore how journalistic norms and conventions of objectivity strongly influenced coverage of this highly charged cultural controversy, virtually silenced feminist defenses of the image and almost completely ignored the salient issue of attitudes toward and representations of women's bodies, particularly in Hispanic culture.

Note: At the time of this controversy, I was an editor at *The New Mexican* (where I worked for nine years), but I didn't participate in any discussions or decisions about coverage because I had a conflict of interest: one of the other artists in the Cyber Arte exhibit was my next-door neighbor and a good friend. In fact, I made a point not even to read stories about the controversy so as not to be tempted to make suggestions about the coverage. Many of these stories I read for the first time while doing research for this essay.

The controversy

The first protests about *Our Lady* originated from the Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in Santa Fe, led by Deacon Anthony Trujillo and parishioner José L. Villegas Sr, a state archivist who is a well-known community activist in Santa Fe, working as a local police chaplain and on Hispanic education issues. The first story reporting the disapproval of López's image appeared on the front page of the *Albuquerque Journal* on Saturday, 17 March 2001, three weeks after the Cyber Arte exhibit quietly opened. The story, which was accompanied by a photo of López's *Our Lady*, reported that Trujillo and Villegas visited the director of the folk museum and asked her to remove the work. She refused. In the story, Trujillo said he objected to the work being termed a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, adding that 'if that qualifies as devotion, it's very distorted'. Villegas was much more pointed in his criticisms, calling *Our Lady* 'blasphemy' that 'violated the sacred boundaries of our culture'. He said the work was not appropriate for a state-supported museum and that he planned to take his case to the leaders of the Museum of New Mexico, which oversees the folk art museum. 'To see Our Lady displaced with a woman in a bikini and a woman with her bosoms sticking out, that's totally disrespectful', Villegas said (López, 2001a). On the day the first *Journal* story appeared, Villegas sent a 900-word e-mail to López that was even more critical. Many of López's supporters considered it threatening, noting that Villegas wrote that community reaction is very unfavorable to the Cyber Arte exhibit and 'you may find yourself in some serious trouble with our raza in Northern New Mexico'. He also said he and his supporters would find out who López's supporters were and would 'do whatever it takes to admonish them in the public form and hold their actions accountable' (Villegas Sr, 2001). He also contended she had no right to 'mess with a sacred image that does not belong to you' and that 'one thing you don't do in Northern New Mexico is become "playful" over a sacred image that will create irreparable harm to its people and culture' (Villegas Sr, 2001). He added:

When you cross the sacred boundaries of our gente [sic] traditional values of over five hundred years, you cannot impose and/or provoke thought on an issue that will inflame emotions against your own gente. Our Nuestra de Guadalupe does not belong to the new age interpretation of the millennium century and never will . . . A point of clarification, Our Nuestra de Guadalupe picture really constitutes Guadalupe . . . Nothing else counts!

Firmly maintaining that the traditional Our Lady of Guadalupe image is sacred – that it really constitutes Guadalupe herself and occasions devotion wherever it is – Villegas leaves no room for López to interpret the image herself.

In a cordial and respectful 400-word e-mail response to Villegas sent the same day, López said the work was an attempt 'to find personal connections with this image that we grew up with'. She suggested (2001a) that

I portray our lady as a strong Indígena/Chicana/Latina/Mexicana, and not as the young passive [head bowed with clasped hands] image that I grew up seeing in my home and in my community. The reason for this is because all the women I have known in my family and in community are very strong mujeres who struggle to nurture and provide for their families. I wanted to honor and respect their strength. And, I can only imagine that the mother of Jesus would be an incredibly strong mujer to raise and endure the pain of her son's struggles.

As for the nudity in the piece, López said she portrayed the angel carrying her Guadalupe on the crescent moon 'because men and women are beautiful children of our creator. Our bodies are beautiful.' She goes on to say she sees breasts as beautiful and nurturing and not something to be hidden (López, 2001a). The controversy soon erupted into a flurry of protests, town meetings, committee meetings and an eventual decision 'in the spirit of reconciliation' to close the Cyber Arte exhibit four months earlier than planned at the time (Lee, 2001e).

The show, the curator and the artist

It all seemed to start rather innocuously. A preview for the exhibit appeared in *The New Mexican's* arts magazine on 23 February 2001, two days before the exhibit officially opened. The article noted how 'keeping old themes modern characterizes Cyber Arte' and the four artists 'riff off meaning-laden cultural symbols and stories' (Berkovitch, 2001). Three of the artists, including López, use digital media, mainly the computer program Adobe Photoshop, to create their work while the fourth, Marion Martínez, composes devotional objects – including shrines to Our Lady of Guadalupe – from the innards of computers discarded from the nearby Los Alamos National Laboratory, the birthplace of the atomic bomb. As curator of contemporary Hispano/Latino collections at the Museum of International Folk Art and curator of the Cyber Arte exhibit, Tey Marianna Nunn described her job as 'an ongoing exploration of the traditional–contemporary dichotomy'. Nunn said she didn't think the artists' work was disrespectful of tradition, but she did say that of all the artists, López's work was the most likely to be misunderstood (Berkovitch, 2001).

Nunn, a third-generation New Mexican who earned her doctorate from the University of New Mexico, said López's *Our Lady* was included as an important example of the continuous transformation of Our Lady of Guadalupe. 'It comes out of a tradition of Guadalupe always changing with the times', she told the *Journal* (Lee, 2001c). Nunn has studied the evolution of the

Guadalupe's image from saint to a symbol of the Mexican revolution, when she was clothed in red, white and green, and of the labor movement led by César Chávez (Constable, 2001d). One thing Nunn noted was that 'all the artists who have reimaged Guadalupe speak eloquently that they want the Virgin to be strong. They needed to see a reflection of themselves in her' (Constable, 2001d). One of those artists was Alma López.

López is involved in many women of color and queer arts collaboratives in the Los Angeles area (Constable, 2001b). She has said her inspiration for *Our Lady* was a passage from the Sandra Cisneros essay 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess', where Cisneros wonders what Our Lady of Guadalupe looks like under her robes. When doing the original photography for the work, model Raquel Salinas stripped down to her underwear for the shoot and spontaneously tossed out the idea of going all the way. López rejected the idea. 'Raquel, maybe you're ready for that, but I'm not', López said. But she did want a strong woman and focused on the model's inner spirit. 'Give me attitude', López told Salinas (Gurza, 2001). López said the idea for her was to relate to Our Lady of Guadalupe in a way that was empowering (Constable, 2001d):

When I see *Our Lady* as well as the works portraying the 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. (López, 2001b)

Giving voice to gender and cultural oppression is what *Our Lady* and the Cisneros essay that inspired it are really about. Although the idea for *Our Lady* just came from an idea raised in the Cisneros essay, López said many times that the image also speaks to the heart of the essay itself. Throughout the controversy, however, that was almost totally ignored in news stories.

The essay

Much of Cisneros' essay talked about growing up in a culture that in the guise of modesty 'locked me in a double chastity belt of ignorance and *vergüenza*, shame' and how she was 'overwhelmed by the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies' (Cisneros, 1997):

What a culture of denial. Don't get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to. This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, my culture's role model for brown women like me . . . Do boys have to aspire to be Jesus?

As far as Cisneros could see, Guadalupe was 'nothing but a goody two shoes meant to doom me to a life of unhappiness' (Cisneros, 1997) and she became 'obsessed with becoming a woman comfortable in her skin' (Cisneros, 1997):

I also understand that for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me.

Many of the news stories that quoted López about her inspiration for *Our Lady* mention how she wanted to make Our Lady of Guadalupe someone she could relate to but, without elaboration, that comment makes it seem whimsical and self-indulgent rather than a strategic, theoretical attempt to resist what she saw as the negative aspects of such an overpowering cultural image. In *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, Rosemary Betterton talks of the difficulty of women representing themselves in a western culture that has been dominated by male artists representing the female body. Nonetheless, women artists (such as López and Cisneros) have claimed the right to see women's experience differently (Betterton, 1987: 203):

Using a variety of strategies, including celebration through symbol and myth, deconstruction of dominant visual codes, parody and role reversal, feminist artists have literally taken apart traditional ways of viewing the female body and tried to find new images and language with which to explore feminine identities.

For Cisneros and López when they were growing up, there was no visual code more dominant than Our Lady of Guadalupe. López's *Our Lady* was an attempt to explore a new identity and to deal with a culture that left her and other Hispanic girls ignorant and shameful of their bodies and compelled to attain a lofty, unrealistic ideal. However, the news stories that referred to the Cisneros essay failed to report this broad cultural argument, relaying only curiosity about what the saints wore under their robes. This made it seem López was being more voyeuristic than using a work of art as resistance against oppressive cultural and religious traditions. The only time these other aspects of the Cisneros essay were covered in the newspapers was in a Lawrence Spohn column in late April that appeared on Page D1 of *The Albuquerque Tribune* (*The Tribune* also made the entire Cisneros essay available on its website for about a week). The failure to provide readers with the all-important context from this pivotal essay was one of many shortcomings of the newspapers' treatment of the *Our Lady* controversy.

The coverage

The initial stories about the controversy set the tone and trends for later coverage. Unfortunately, most of the coverage in the two major dailies was of a typical point-counterpoint event-centered nature that focused on the primary players in the controversy, official sources and inflammatory rhetoric, particularly from those protesting the image. (It was also referred to as 'he said,

she said' coverage, a description that took on double meaning because the vocal protesters were men and the defenders for the most part were women.) Although some newspaper stories would at times touch on some of the deeper issues, little was done to dig deeper on them or follow up on the ideas, and often it was done by columnists whose columns ran in the back of the papers, not on the front pages.

The first story on the controversy, which appeared on 17 March 2001 on the front page of the *Journal*, was a typical point-counterpoint 700-word story, with quotes from Deacon Trujillo and activist Villegas as well as quotes from Alma López. However, other than a reference to the Sandra Cisneros essay as the inspiration for the image, López isn't heard from until the 11th paragraph, where she says the piece was an expression of admiration for Our Lady of Guadalupe (Lee, 2001a). Also, the mention of the Cisneros essay only notes that she wondered what the Catholic saints wore under their robes. The story never mentioned Cisneros' critique of her culture and its effect on her self-image. A photo of López's *Our Lady* ran with the story, which was the first to describe the image as depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe in a floral bikini. (As a *Journal* columnist would note later, if it was a swimsuit, it was more Land's End than Victoria's Secret, Potts, 2001). Many would later take issue with this description but nonetheless it stuck throughout the controversy. The next day, *The New Mexican* ran a short brief of what appears to be a newswire rewrite of the *Journal* story on page B5, essentially buried in the local section of the Sunday paper.

The *Journal* ran another story on the controversy on Tuesday, 20 March 2001, this time giving the museum's official response that it had no plans to remove López's *Our Lady*. Folk art museum director Joyce Ice said the image fitted into the mission of the museum. 'One of the things that we're interested in is cultural change – the ways in which tradition emerges and the way cultural changes adjust to meet contemporary needs', Ice told the *Journal* (Lee, 2001b). The story again mentions Cisneros' essay as inspiration for the image but doesn't give specifics.

The New Mexican didn't do its own story until Saturday, 24 March 2001, a week after the first *Journal* story appeared. It was a rather long, 1435-word story that ran on the front page with a picture of López's image. The lead talked about different ways in which the Virgin Mary had been depicted. The story also talks about how Deacon Trujillo and activist Villegas met with state officials on Friday while a crowd protested the image outside the building. Although the story quoted a couple of protesters, it was largely weighted down with 'official' establishment sources such as church officials, museum officials, a state legislator, a museum regent and seven paragraphs on Jim Fitzpatrick, a

lawyer who is a part-time Santa Fe resident. He largely gave a First Amendment, free-speech argument in favor of López's image, a defense that would be made many times by various López supporters, particularly in letters to the editor, but not by museum officials.

The *New Mexican* story was accompanied by a much-shorter 400-word sidebar on page A2 that was a very straightforward, matter-of-fact rundown on López and her work. Headlined 'Work not mean to offend, LA artist says', the story offers little or no cultural context and does not mention the Cisneros essay. López's defense in the story seems to come from her website. It contains none of the reasoning behind the work that was found in the first *Journal* story.

A 750-word *Journal* story the same day was largely about the protest and the scheduling of a special museum Board of Regents meeting. While it largely quoted official sources, it also quoted some protesters and some López supporters who showed up at the protest. On Tuesday, 27 March 2001, *The New Mexican* ran a long 925-word story on the front of the local section headlined 'Artist López speaks on Virgin controversy'. The story reported that López planned to attend the scheduled regents' meeting because she wants people 'to better understand where she's coming from' but other than that brief quote in the second paragraph, López doesn't get to speak or defend her work until the ninth paragraph. The beginning of the story is dominated by a looming official figure, Michael Sheehan, the archbishop of Santa Fe, who called the image 'insulting, even sacrilegious, to the many thousands of New Mexicans who have deep religious devotion to Guadalupe' and said he wished 'those who want to paint controversial art would find their own symbols to trash and leave the Catholic ones alone' (Constable, 2001c). Only after a long series of quotes from the archbishop does López get a chance to defend herself. The story is the first time *The New Mexican* mentions the Cisneros essay but again it notes merely that Cisneros wondered what saints wore under the robes, not the larger cultural critique. The *Journal* story that day was dominated by the archbishop's denouncing of the artwork, with the lead stating that Sheehan called it 'yet another trashing of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe' (Lee, 2001c). The story also quoted Frank Ortíz, a regent opposed to the artwork. Although the 950-word story opens with official sources such as Sheehan and Ortíz, it does later offer some broader context, noting that Our Lady of Guadalupe has always had a changing tradition. The story also notes the Cyber Arte exhibit is across the hall from 'Familia y Fe (Family and Faith)', a much larger permanent 12-year-old exhibit of traditional works (Lee, 2001c).

Most of the stories about the controversy, especially the news stories that landed on the front pages of *The New Mexican* and the *Journal*, were stories such as these: point-counterpoint stories filled with the 'usual suspects' such

as Deacon Trujillo, activist Villegas and Archbishop Sheehan on one side and Alma López, Tey Nunn and other museum officials on the other rehashing their same basic arguments. As the controversy wore on, these basic arguments were boiled down to protesters saying *Our Lady* was blasphemy or an outrageous desecration and supporters saying López just wanted to show Our Lady of Guadalupe as a strong, modern woman or someone she could relate to and museum officials proclaiming it's their job to track cultural change.

There were exceptions. Some newspaper stories touched on some of the deeper issues but it was often superficial. Most front-page stories, including those telling us everyone still hadn't changed their mind, rarely invoked deeper issues. The more thoughtful work appeared in columns in the back of the papers. These columnists sometimes raised intriguing issues but they were not incorporated into later stories nor used to expand or explicate basic arguments. Deeper issues ignored are explored in the following sections.

Who controls images of women?

Activist José Villegas was quick to tell Alma López that she had no right to mess with the traditional image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. 'The sacred image was a miracle that was given by God', Villegas said. 'And that image belongs to God. It doesn't belong to her [López] or anyone for interpretation' (Barol, 2001). This rigid claim of ownership perplexed López, who said 'she is everyone's Virgin, not just Mr. Villegas' Virgin' (Constable, 2001d).

Who are these men to tell me how to relate to her? Who are they to demand the censorship of an exhibition of four Latina artists curated by a Latina scholar? Who are they to believe that they hold the only and righteous worldview on this cultural icon? (López, 2001b)

News stories about the controversy often recounted Villegas' claims that López had no right to reinterpret the traditional image but far fewer stories carried any challenges to that claim from López or museum officials or confronted the question of who owns the image.

By no means is Alma López the first artist to play with Our Lady of Guadalupe. One of the most prominent artists who has reworked Guadalupe is Yolanda M. López. Like Cisneros, Yolanda López perceives Guadalupe as 'an instrument of social control and oppression of women and Indians' (Lippard, 1990: 42). She works to deconstruct Guadalupe's idealization in the Mexican community and transform her into a modern indigenous image. 'Why is the Guadalupe always so young, like media heroines? Why doesn't she look like an Indian instead of a Mediterranean, a nice Jewish girl from the sixteenth century?', Yolanda López asks (Lippard, 1990: 42). Two of Yolanda López's

Guadalupes are a distinctive departure from the traditional Guadalupe. In *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, she's a marathon runner who tramples the angel, described by Yolanda López as a middle-aged agent of patriarchy with red, white and blue wings (Gaspar de Alba, 1998: 140–1). Another version has the artist's mother working as a seamstress (Lippard, 1990: unnumbered photo page). Both artists' Guadalupes not only aim to change the way the Virgin looks but to turn her into an active subject. They are an example of what Alicia Gaspar de Alba describes as the feminist work of 'decolonizing the female body by transforming it into an active speaking subject rather than a passive object of display and male gratification' (Gaspar de Alba, 1998: 132).

This feminist sensibility is strikingly absent from almost all of the coverage of the *Our Lady* controversy. One exception was in a Kate Nelson column in *The Albuquerque Tribune*. Nelson talks about how in *Our Lady*, the body becomes a speaking subject through its look. For Nelson, the look in her eyes is 'that same look they train us to adopt as young girls in order to keep ourselves safe. A look that says I'm aware of what's going on around me. That says I'm in charge. That says you can't turn me into your victim.' She says López lifts Guadalupe's downcast eyes 'to deliver a message that you better behave' (Nelson, 2001).

A similar point is made by Alicia Gaspar de Alba in *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition*, where she notes that reinterpretations of Guadalupe aim to 'alter the passive femininity of the traditional image to communicate feminist empowerment through change and physical action' (Gaspar de Alba, 1998: 141). The Lópezes' Guadalupes also represent a more specific feminism, Chicana feminism. With Yolanda López's laboring Virgin and Guadalupe trampling patriarchal Uncle Sam, as well as Alma López's *Our Lady* with its in-your-face defiance of religious propriety, they are examples of Gaspar de Alba's description of Chicana feminism as 'Third World – identified in its concerns over class and color as key nodes of subjectivity and oppression, but it also occurs in the context of entrenched Catholicism, a colonized history, and a First World economy' (Gaspar de Alba, 1998: 123–4). They are boldly laying claim to the right to reinterpret the traditional image as a way to engage with Chicana feminism at these various points.

In several interviews over the course of the controversy, López stressed that the crux of the issue was how people viewed women's bodies and who had the right to represent them as they wished. She was adamant that there was nothing in her image to be ashamed of.

In a way, it was just being a little playful, showing that behind all this is a woman, a strong woman. It's defending my own view in terms of our bodies. I

don't think there's anything inherently wrong that needs to be covered up. A lot of us are breast-fed. I wouldn't think that breasts are all that objectionable unless somebody's looking at them in a sick way, in a perverted or sexualized kind of way (Lee, 2001a).

Or, put another way in a later interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, 'They're just breasts. I have them. Don't rage against the breasts' (Gurza, 2001). In embracing the female body and its nurturing nature, López is engaging in a common practice in feminist art where 'the feminine body has been celebrated . . . through an exploration of bodily processes such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, and in visual metaphors for female sexuality' (Betterton, 1987: 203). But just because López wanted to see the female body as natural and self-affirming doesn't mean that others, particularly male protesters such as José Villegas, would, serving as a proof of Rosemary Betterton's reminder that 'no images can ever entirely escape the circle of voyeurism and exploitation which constitutes male power in representation' (Betterton, 1987: 218). The male protesters simply couldn't, or wouldn't, escape the circle of voyeurism and only saw *Our Lady's* open robe and nudity as sacrilegious. They only wanted to see 'their mother' the way they had always seen her. Male protesters also couldn't escape the very virgin/whore trap López was contesting by trying to offer an alternative vision of a cultural icon (how could someone see the Virgin of Guadalupe as a whore?). In the end, it was a confirmation of Lana Rakow and Kimberlie Kranich's contention that women are denied the position of speaking subjects but rather function as signs (Rakow and Kranich, 1991: 17). In this case, instead of being allowed to speak about and contest representations of women in her culture, López served as a sign of cultural disrespect and transgression, someone who was 'playing around' and picking a fight rather than joining a well-established body of work.

The gender clash also replayed old splits in the Chicano movement where to be a Loyalist, a Chicana could not adopt feminism as a strategy for liberation, where the male leadership of the Movement told early *feministas* they were 'anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-man, and therefore anti-Chicano' (Gaspar de Alba, 1998: 127–8). The male protesters, especially Villegas, portrayed *Our Lady* as an assault on their culture and community. In many ways this reaction confirmed Sandra Cisneros' critique of her culture in 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess' – that Hispanic women were taught to hide their bodies, to live in ignorance and shame. These criticisms also replayed the myth of a monolithic Hispanic culture and community, to the point where most people were afraid to speak out against the protesters for fear of being called traitors or, in the case of Anglos, ⁴ being anti-Hispanic or trying to divide the Hispanic community. Again, these critical points were not covered in news stories about the *Our Lady* controversy. Because of the way the different sides were often

condensed in ongoing stories, with protesters calling it blasphemy and supporters reacting to that charge, López and her supporters were often forced into the position of playing defense without their best defense: the Cisneros essay and its critique of her culture and its effect on their self-image.

So what's it all about?

As the controversy dragged on, supporters came to the conclusion that all the fuss was about much more than López's *Our Lady*, that it was a catalyst for frustrations and concerns about changes in Northern New Mexico and its culture. 'I think what needs to be addressed is the underlying social issues instead of just blaming art', said one Santa Fe artist (Lee, 2001d). Alma López always wondered what all the fuss was about. In April 2001, she wrote, 'This controversy must be about more than a small digital print. Among other issues, perhaps it's about local politics? Gentrification? Lack of opportunities for local artists? Fear of Latina women's liberation? Fear of change?' (López, 2001b).

Paula Gunn Allen has said one of the prime characteristics of the US Southwest is its 'power to ever change and remain essentially the same' (Gunn Allen, 1995: xxii). Although Santa Fe has changed over the years, what was once seemingly slow, inevitable yet acceptable change took on a fevered pitch in the 1980s. Santa Fe became 'hot'. In the late 1970s, newspapers and magazines from across the country started doing travel stories on what a great destination Santa Fe was. Tourists weren't the only people coming to town. Many people – mostly Anglos, some flaunting their wealth – were moving to the City Different for a new life, leaving big cities behind and hoping to be 'saved' by Santa Fe's unique landscapes, cultural mix and lifestyle. Change was quick and dramatic. Housing prices skyrocketed. In 1980, the average home price was \$72,741. By 1990, it had almost doubled to \$144,011, and just two years later it was more than \$200,000 (R. Roybal, 1993). By July 2004, the median home price had hit \$343,000 (Sharpe, 2004). The economic boom that started in the 1980s was creating jobs, but the skyrocketing housing prices also started squeezing out a well-established Hispanic middle class. Thus, many residents were pushed out of the heart of the city. No longer able to afford homes or rents there and unable to hold on to homes that had been passed down for generations (some couldn't even afford just the taxes on their highly valued homes), many were marginalized to trailer parks at the outer edges of the city feeling as if they were 'on the outside looking in' (D. Roybal, 1993). Also, many young Hispanics simply left town, knowing they could never afford the kind of life their parents and ancestors enjoyed in Santa Fe.

The effects of this economic dislocation have spilled over into many other areas. Unable to stop the economic forces that are changing their city, many Hispanics have concentrated on preserving their culture. Like the period of 'social anxiety' studied by Stuart Hall et al. in *Policing the Crisis*, the dislocation brought on by rapid commercialization and significant demographic changes in Santa Fe created a 'predisposition for the use of "scapegoats", into which all the disturbing experiences are condensed and then symbolically rejected or "cast out"' (Hall et al., 1978: 157). As Hall notes, with this genuine sense of cultural dislocation comes a focus not on structural causes (such as capitalism or political structures) but on symbolic expressions such as the perceived slight by López in *Our Lady* (Hall et al., 1978: 159). Like the traditionalist voices reacting to the 'mugging crisis' in Britain, Villegas and other protesters took both the dominant ideology (how women should look and behave) and subordinated anxieties about gentrification and moulded them together in a 'tone of moral indignation and public outrage' (Hall et al., 1978: 162–3).

Some news stories about the controversy mentioned the idea of the image as a catalyst for frustrations over change but never pursued it beyond a few paragraphs. The idea certainly was never incorporated into the boilerplate for ongoing stories. One exception was a *New Mexican* column by Denise Kusel, a former arts editor for the newspaper. Her column, which ran in late April, suggested that *Our Lady* had become an excuse to talk (or not talk) about other things.

We need to ask some hard questions. Are we hiding behind art in the guise of religion in order to voice our dissatisfaction of a far deeper issue? Is art a mere cover-up for the tensions we feel as a community? Is the matter of divisive separation the one that should be addressed here? (Kusel, 2001)

Only a column played in the local section front confronted this issue so directly. Not until the exhibit was about to close in October was it raised again. In a long Sunday page one story about Tey Marianna Nunn, the curator said 'she decided that what she had done was to unknowingly tap into a complex set of feelings that were not at all directly related to the artwork' (Constable, 2001d).

What's a newspaper to do?

As the *Our Lady* controversy was dying down, *The New Mexican* sponsored a roundtable discussion, which I attended, among 25 moderate voices in the community to get their feedback on the newspaper's coverage. They told the newspaper it did 'more to fan the flames of local discontent than it did to shed light on the underlying issues and problems'. The ways the newspaper

did this, they said, was with a preponderance of 'he said, she said' journalism and a focus on the primary players in the controversy and the loud voices on the edges of the debate (Flores, 2001). This is not a new criticism of the press. As Walter Lippman noted more than 80 years ago in *Public Opinion*, to journalists many events or stories don't 'take shape until somebody protests, or somebody investigates, or somebody publicly . . . makes issue of them' (Lippmann, 1999: 7).

Journalists tend to flock to the official, 'louder' voices that are easier to find instead of searching for the silenced, conflicted ones. In this controversy, there were many people, such as those who participated in the roundtable, who were conflicted as they were caught in the cultural crossfire. It was those voices that were lost amid the controversy. Many deeper issues that I mentioned before were only touched on and not explored as fully as they should have been. Several of these could have been dealt with more directly, with stories focused solely on them. We needed stories about such issues as claims of ownership over the image, with parallels drawn to Native American views of property as well as a history of how Guadalupe has been reinterpreted in the past; how the controversy may have been more about anxiety over change and the recent tendency to focus on cultural changes rather than economic forces that are really creating change; how views of the woman's body in Hispanic culture have and continue to affect women's self-image; and how homophobia (López is a lesbian)⁵ may have spurred some of the protests as well as a look at the limits of Santa Fe's often-lauded 'tolerance'⁶ of gays and lesbians. Another possibility would have been to commission Lucy Lippard, an area resident and well-known feminist arts scholar who wrote *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, to write a piece placing *Our Lady* and the controversy in the larger context of feminist and Chicana art.

But no one was talking loudly enough about these issues for the newspapers to take a chance on doing them. To avoid accusations that they are making and not reporting the news, journalists rarely write these kinds of stories on their own, often waiting for an official, a major player or someone else (other than one of their columnists) to bring it out. By focusing their coverage on 'official' pronouncements from both sides, journalists can lay claim to objectivity. This narrow focus is even more prevalent in the reporting of controversial and emotional issues such as the *Our Lady* controversy. As scholars such as Gaye Tuchman and Michael Schudson have argued, news procedures such as these are actually 'strategies through which newsmen [sic] protect themselves from critics and lay professional claim to objectivity' (Tuchman, 1972: 676). In other words, it's an excuse to play it safe.

It also gives journalists a way to claim neutrality. But it isn't really neutral at all. This practice gives official sources and other major players inordinate

influence to set the agenda and it protects the status quo (unspoken homophobia, attitudes that limit women's self-expression) because these stories are left untold. In this case the agenda was almost entirely set by protesters such as activist Villegas and Archbishop Sheehan. Letting these stories with 'news pegs' drive the coverage meant that coverage not only focused on the two opposing sides but also framed the debate in a way that favored protesters by letting them stay on offense (it's blasphemy, a violation) and forcing López's supporters to continually play defense (it's censorship, just trying to portray a strong woman). Worse yet, López's supporters had to play defense without their best defense, the cultural critique and self-empowering aspects of the Sandra Cisneros essay.

Readers had reasons to expect more from *The New Mexican*. For a small daily, it is an unusually ambitious independently owned newspaper. It is known for its project reporting that goes beyond the simple point-counterpoint reporting that is often found among smaller daily newspapers. It has produced several stand-alone special sections on area problems and controversies such as droughts, drunken driving, high school dropouts, nuclear weapon stockpile stewardship and persistent heroin use and overdoses in Northern New Mexico. In 2003, it was a finalist for a national Associated Press Managing Editors public-service award for an investigation of Native American education, and in 1995 and 1996, the American Society of Newspaper Editors/Associated Press Managing Editors Small Newspapers Committee identified *The New Mexican* as one of the best small newspapers in the country.

But in this case the newspapers' safe, 'objective reporting', as Michael Schudson contends, 'reproduced a vision of social reality which refused to examine the basic structures of power and privilege' (Schudson, 1978: 160). It did not expose or question the power men have to control images of women and to attack those who challenge their own representations, as well as the effect those attacks have on those who may dare to do so in the future. The coverage of the *Our Lady* controversy is a great example of how journalism must, as Jane Rhodes argues, move beyond its focus on diversifying its workforce to a thorough examination of 'the intransigent foundations of how news is made' (Rhodes, 2001: 51), including a specific look at how, as Cynthia Carter et al. (1998: 3) contend, gender relations shape journalism's 'forms, practices, institutions and audiences'. In particular, journalists must take a tough, critical look at how journalism's conventions and practices substantially privilege the status quo in its coverage of cultural controversies such as *Our Lady*. In such cases, journalists must take a far more expansive view of how power operates, recognizing that as much or more power lies not in who makes decisions (in this case museum officials or museum regents) but whose language gets circulated most and who gets to set the terms and character of

the debate (in this case the male protesters). Journalists should re-examine their practices regarding 'objectivity' and consider Meenakshi Gigi Durham's call for a 'strong objectivity' that embraces standpoint epistemology by 'beginning all investigations from the perspectives of those outside the privileged community of investigators' (Durham, 1998: 131), especially when it senses voices are being silenced in the midst of volatile cultural conflicts such as the controversy over *Our Lady*.

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Notes

- 1 I use the term 'Hispanic' because it is the mostly widely used term in New Mexico. However, I will, at times, use the terms 'Latina/o' or 'Chicana/o', but only when someone has self-identified or has been described as such.
- 2 Please visit www.almalopez.netORindex.html to view the image and learn more about the controversy.
- 3 For a survey of stories and columns about the controversy at the three papers, I used a LexisNexis search for 'Alma López'. I also was pointed to stories in other publications through mentions on Alma López's website, www.almalopez.net. In all, 73 stories, columns and e-mails were collected for the time period between February and October 2001.
- 4 I use the term 'Anglo' as it is used in New Mexico to denote non-Hispanic whites. I contend the term persists in the unique power dynamics of New Mexico because it also serves as a marker for power and outsidership.
- 5 López's lesbianism was a widely known but little discussed subject in the controversy. However, many of her supporters felt it was an always present but never voiced motivation for many protesters who didn't want to be accused of being homophobic.
- 6 I use 'tolerance' in quotes to denote my problem with the term, which I believe doesn't challenge but simply reinscribes, in this case, heterosexual relations as normal and natural. The reputed 'tolerance' for gays and lesbians in Santa Fe is, I believe, often reserved for those who 'keep it to themselves'.

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Biographical note

Kevin Dolan is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received a B.A. in English literature at Montana State University at Bozeman and an M.A. in American studies from The University of New Mexico. He worked as a reporter and editor at daily newspapers for 16 years, the last nine as a copy editor at *The Santa Fe New Mexican*. His research interests include cultural and critical studies and race and ethnic studies – more specifically the ways the news media protect and bolster the status quo, particularly what he calls the incumbency of whiteness.

Address: 710 S. Anderson St, Urbana, IL 61801, USA. [email: kdolan@uiuc.edu]