

A COUNTRYLESS WOMAN

THE EARLY FEMINISTA

I would have spoken these words as a feminist who "happened" to be a white United States citizen, conscious of my government's proven capacity for violence and arrogance of power, but as self-separated from that government, quoting without second thought Virginia Woolf's statement in The Three Guineas that "as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." This is not what I come [here] to say in 1984. I come here with notes but without absolute conclusions. This is not a sign of loss of faith or hope. These notes are the marks of a struggle to keep moving, a struggle for accountability.

—Adrienne Rich, "Notes toward a Politics of Location,"

Blood, Bread, and Poetry

I CANNOT SAY I AM A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD as Virginia Woolf, speaking as an Anglo woman born to economic means, declared herself; nor can I make the same claim to U.S. citizenship as Adrienne Rich does despite her universal feeling for humanity. As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated at best, as a second class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity. I am commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere I go, including in the United States and in Mexico. This international perception is based on my color and features. I am neither black nor white. I am not light skinned and cannot be mistaken for "white"; because my hair is so straight I cannot be mistaken for "black." And by U.S. standards and according to some North American Native Americans, I cannot make official claims to being india.

Socioeconomic status, genetic makeup and ongoing debates on mestisaje aside, if in search of refuge from the United States I took up residence on any other continent, the core of my being would long for a return to the lands of my ancestors. My ethereal spirit and my collective memory with other indigenas and mestizo/as yearn to *claim* these territories as homeland. In the following pages, I would like to review our socioeconomic status, our early activism and feminismo,

and to begin the overall discussion that moves toward a Xicanista vision.

IN THE 1980S, LEFTISTS AND LIBERALS recognized the atrocities of U.S. intervention in Central America, as similar sympathizers did with Viet Nam in the 1960s. Their sympathy is reminiscent of North American leftists and liberals who in the 1930s struggled against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. In each instance, there is the implication that these liberal individuals are not in any way responsible for the persecution, and that it is all their government's fault. These same humanists have vaguely and apologetically acknowledged the injustice done to the descendants of their country's former slaves and to the Native Americans who have been all but obliterated through genocide and dispossession.

Yet, mestizo/as, those who are Mexican citizens as well as those who are U.S. born, are viewed less sympathetically. We are advised to assimilate into white dominant society or opt for invisibility—an invisibility that we are blamed for because of our own lack of ability to take advantage of the supposedly endless opportunities available through acculturation.

Racism has been generally polarized into a black-white issue. U.S. mestizo/as of Mexican background, therefore, are viewed by many white people, by many African Americans and yes, by some Native Americans as having the potential to "pass" for white, in theory, at will. This general view is based on the assumptions, lack of information and misinformation that accompanies policies, media control, and distorted historical documentation disseminated to the general populace by the white male dominated power system that has traditionally governed this country. The United States cannot deny its early history of importing Africans as slaves, which explains the presence of African Americans throughout the Americas. However, censorship continues regarding the extent of genocide of Native Americans. As for mestizo/as, we were identified as a mongrel race, a mixture of the dispensable Amerindian race and the lowly Spaniard. Little is known by the general public regarding how these attitudes caused ongoing persecution of Mexic Amerindians and mestizo/as in what was once Mexico and later became United States territory. For example, while it is well

known that in the South there were lynchings and hangings of African Americans, it isn't common knowledge that Mexicans were also lynched and hung in Texas and throughout the Southwest.

Most people in the United States have little awareness of this government's ongoing dominant-subordinate relationship with Mexico since, of course, this is not taught in schools as part of United States history. The general public assumes that all Mexicans are immigrants and therefore, *obligated* to assimilate just as European immigrants did and do.

Most members of dominant society have very little understanding of the numerous ways a country, especially one supposedly based on the free enterprise system and democracy, systematically and quite effectively disenfranchises much of its population. While some white members of society have an understanding of this from an economic and historical standpoint, they do not or will not recognize that there are, to this day, economic inequities based on racism. Many more do not understand or refuse to accept that today all women suffer, in one way or another, as a result of the prevalent misogyny legislated and expounded in this society.

For the last twenty years the leaders of the U.S. government have tried to convince its population that the Civil Rights Movement succeeded in creating a true democracy and that increasing poverty and unemployment are primarily a question of world economics. If indications of the growing frustration on the part of women and people of color who cannot overcome job and educational inequities based on race, gender, and limited economic resources were not evident enough to the federal government, the national riots after the Rodney King verdict serve as the final argument.

WHILE I HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH A MEXICAN MAN than with a white woman, I have much more in common with an Algerian woman than I do with a Mexican man. This opinion, I'm sure, chagrins women who sincerely believe our female physiology unequivocally binds all women throughout the world, despite the compounded social prejudices that daily affect us all in different ways. Although women everywhere experience life differently from men everywhere, white women are members of a race that has proclaimed

itself globally superior for hundreds of years. We live in a polarized world of contrived dualisms, dichotomies and paradoxes: light vs. dark and good vs. evil. We as Mexic Amerindians/mestizas are the dark. We are the evil . . . or at least, the questionable.

Ours is a world imbued with nationalism, real for some, yet tenuous as paper for others. A world in which from the day of our births, we are either granted citizenship or relegated to the netherstate of serving as mass production drones. Non-white women—Mexicans/Chicanas, Filipinas, Malaysians, and others—who comprise eighty percent of the global factory work force, are the greatest dispensable resource that multinational interests own. The women are in effect, represented by no country.

Feminists of color in the United States (and around the world) are currently arduously re-examining the very particular ways our non-Western cultures use us and how they view us. We have been considered opinionless and the invariable targets of every kind of abusive manipulation and experimentation. As a mestiza, a resident of a declining world power, a countryless woman, I have the same hope as Rich who, on behalf of her country aims to be accountable, flexible, and learn new ways to gather together earnest peoples of the world without the defenses of nationalism.

I WAS BORN, RAISED, AND SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE in one of the largest cities in the United States. Despite its distance from México, Chicago has a population of approximately a quarter of a million people of Mexican background. It is also the third most frequent U.S. destination of Mexican migrants after El Paso and Los Angeles. The greatest influx of Mexicans occurred during the first half of this century when the city required cheap labor for its factories, slaughterhouses, and steel mill industry.

In an effort to minimize their social and spiritual alienation, the Mexican communities there developed and maintained solid ties to Mexican culture and traditions. This was reinforced by the tough political patronage system in Chicago, which was dependent upon ethnically and racially divisive strategies to maintain its power. Thus I grew up perceiving myself to be Mexican despite the fact that I was born in the United States and did not visit México until the age of ten.

Assimilation into dominant culture, while not impossible, was not encouraged nor desired by most ethnic groups in Chicago—Mexicans were no exception. We ate, slept, talked, and dreamed Mexican. Our parishes were Mexican. Small Mexican-owned businesses flourished. We were able to replicate Mexico to such a degree that the spiritual and psychological needs of a people so despised and undesired by white dominant culture were met in our own large communities.

Those who came up north to escape destitution in México were, in general, dark-skinned mestizos. In the face of severe racism, it's no wonder we maintained such strong bonds to each other. But even those who were not as outwardly identifiably Mexican were usually so inherently Mexican by tradition that they could not fully assimilate. Not a few refused to "settle in" on this side of the border with the pretense that they would eventually return to their home towns in México.

As I was growing up, Mexicans were the second largest minority in Chicago. There was also a fair size Puerto Rican community and a fair amount of Cubans and other Latin Americans. But in those years, before the blatant military disruption of Latin American countries such as Chile and El Salvador, a person with "mestiza" characteristics was considered Mexican. When one had occasion to venture away from her insulated community to say, downtown, impressive and intimidating with its tremendous skyscrapers and evidently successful (white) people bustling about, she felt as if she were leaving her village to go into town on official matters. Once there she went about her business with a certain sense of invisibility, and even hoped for it, feeling so out of place and disoriented in the presence of U.S. Anglo, profit-based interests, which we had nothing to do with except as mass-production workers. On such occasions, if she were to by chance to run across another mestiza (or mestizo), there was a mutual unspoken recognition and, perhaps, a reflexive avoidance of eye contact. An instantaneous mental communication might sound something like this:

I know you. You are Mexican (like me). You are brown-skinned (like me). You are poor (like me). You probably live in the same neighborhood as I do. You don't have anything, own anything. (Neither do I.) You're no one (here). At this moment I don't want to be reminded of this, in the midst of such lux-

ury, such wealth, this disorienting language; it makes me ashamed of the food I eat, the flat I live in, the only clothes I can afford to wear, the alcoholism and defeat I live with. You remind me of all of it.

You remind me that I am not beautiful—because I am short, round bellied and black-eyed. You remind me that I will never ride in that limousine that just passed us because we are going to board the same bus back to the neighborhood where we both live. You remind me of why the foreman doesn't move me out of that tedious job I do day after day, or why I got feverish and too tongue-tied to go to the main office to ask for that Saturday off when my child made her First Holy Communion.

When I see you, I see myself. You are the mirror of this despicable, lowly sub-human that I am in this place far from our homeland which scarcely offered us much more since the vast majority there live in destitution. None of the rich there look like us either. At least here we feed our children; they have shoes. We manage to survive. But don't look at me. Go on your way. Let me go on pretending my invisibility, so that I can observe close up all the possibilities—and dream the gullible dreams of a human being.¹

AT SEVENTEEN, I JOINED THE LATINO/CHICANO MOVEMENT. I went downtown and rallied around City Hall along with hundreds of other youth screaming, “¡Viva La Raza!” and “Chicano Power!” until we were hoarse. Our fears of being recognized as lowly Mexicans were replaced with socioeconomic theories that led to political radicalism. Yet our efforts to bring unity and courage to the majority of our people were short lived; they did not embrace us. Among the factors contributing to this were the ability of some to assimilate more easily on the basis of lighter skin color and the consumer-fever that overrides people's social needs. The temptations of the rewards of assimilation and the internalization of racism by the colonized peoples of the United States was and is devastating. Society has yet to acknowledge the trauma it engenders.

THE HISPANIC POPULATION IN THE U.S., totalled 22,354,509, according to the 1990 U.S. Department of Commerce report. 13,495,938

of that total were of Mexican origin. (We can estimate therefore that when we are discussing the woman of Mexican origin we are referring to a population of about seven million women in the United States.) According to the 1989 report immigration constituted half of the recent Hispanic population growth. I am personally glad to see the U.S. Department of Commerce gives this reason to explain the disproportionate growth of Hispanics as compared to non-Hispanics, as opposed to the 1987 Department of Labor Report, which states that there are so many Hispanics because Hispanic women tend to be more fertile than non-Hispanic women. These figures, of course, do not include the undocumented Latino population. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service estimated 1.2 million apprehensions at the border in 1986.

Hispanic as the ethnic label for all people who reside in the U.S. with some distant connection with the culture brought by the Spaniards during the conquest of the Americas is a gross misnomer. The word promotes an official negation of people called “Hispanic” by inferring that their ethnicity or race is exclusively European rather than partly Native American (as are most Chicano/as), or African American (as are those descendants of the African slave trade along the Caribbean coasts).

The term Hispanic is a misnomer because one-fifth of South America—Brazil—does not speak Spanish. A large population of Guatemala speaks indigenous dialects as a first language and maintains its own indigenous culture. Chicano/as and Puerto Ricans may have little or no fluency in Spanish having been brought up in an English-dominant society, having attended its monolingual schools, and having been discouraged, in general, from pursuing the language of their ancestors. In fact, despite the provisions made by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 to allow Spanish speakers in the Southwest to retain their native tongue, Spanish was prohibited in schools and workplaces. The debate rages on among educators and government alike.

If Hispanic refers to all natives and descendants of Latin America, it is including no less than twenty countries—whose shared patterns of colonization may allow them to be called Pan-American, but whose histories and cultural attitudes are nevertheless diverse in very particular ways.

How can people from the Caribbean states, whose economies depended on slave trade be generically called Hispanic? Is it because they are from states that are presently Spanish speaking or were once colonized by the Spaniards, although they may presently be under another country's dominion? In the Caribbean, Hispanic includes Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans. While Cuba's official language has remained Spanish since Spanish rule, many of its people are of African ancestry. Citizens of the Dominican Republic are considered Hispanic because they speak Spanish, but the residents of the other side of their island, Haiti, speak French (and more commonly, as I understand, patois). Are there enough major racial differences between these two nationalities on the same island to justifiably classify one as Hispanic but not the other? The Philippines were once colonized by Spain and now have English as a dominant language, but they are not classified as Hispanic. They are placed in another catch-all group, Asian.

Hispanic gives us all one ultimate paternal cultural progenitor: Spain. The diverse cultures already on the American shores when the Europeans arrived, as well as those introduced because of the African slave trade, are completely obliterated by the term. Hispanic is nothing more than a concession made by the U.S. legislature when they saw they couldn't get rid of us. If we won't go away, why not at least Europeanize us, make us presentable guests at the dinner table, take away our feathers and rattles and civilize us once and for all.

This erroneous but nationally accepted label invented by a white supremacist bureaucracy essentially is a resignation to allow, after more than two hundred years of denial, some cultural representation of the conquistadors who originally colonized the Southwest. Until now, in other words, only Anglo-Saxons were legitimate informants of American culture.

To further worsen the supposition that we can be Hispanic—simply long forgotten descendants of Europeans just as white people are—is the horrific history of brutal and inhuman subjugation that not only Amerindians experienced under Spanish and other European rules in Mexico and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, but all those of mixed blood. Indeed, shortly after the Conquest of Mexico, Spanish rule set up a complex caste system in which to be of mixed-blood virtually excluded you from full rights as citizens and protection by the law. Jews and Moors in that Catholic society also

experienced racist attitudes.² Just as with today's African-Americans, among mestizo/as and Amerindians, the result of such intense, legislated racism throughout centuries is demoralization. As one historian puts it regarding the Mexic Amerindian people, "Trauma and neuroses linger still, and may not be entirely overcome. For the Spaniards, in Mexico, did not commit genocide; they committed culturicide."³

Among Latino/as in the United States today there is a universe of differences. There is a universe of difference, for example, between the experience of the Cuban man who arrived in the United States as a child with his parents after fleeing Castro's revolution and the Puerto Rican woman who is a third generation single mother on the Lower East Side. There is a universe of difference between the young Mexican American aspiring to be an actor in Hollywood in the nineties and the community organizer working for rent control for the last ten years in San Francisco, although both may be sons of farmworkers. There is a universe of difference between Carolina Herrera, South American fashion designer and socialite, and a Guatemalan refugee who has hardly learned to speak Spanish but must already adapt to English in order to work as a domestic in the United States. Picture her: She is not statuesque or blonde (like Ms. Herrera). She is short, squat, with a moon face, and black, oily hair. She does not use six pieces of silverware at the dinner table, but one, if any, and a tortilla. There is a universe of differences among all of these individuals, yet Anglo society says they all belong to the same ethnic group: Hispanic.

A study by the University of Chicago shows that deep divisions based on race exist between black Hispanics and white Hispanics in the United States. The black/white dichotomy of the United States causes black Hispanics to relate more to African Americans than to non-black Hispanics. It is also revealed that "black Hispanics are far more segregated from U.S. whites than are white Hispanics."⁴ *Color*, rather than saying simply ethnicity, in addition to class and gender, as well as *conscientización*, all determine one's identity and predict one's fate in the United States.

EXCEPT FOR THE HISTORICAL PERIOD CHARACTERIZED BY "MANIFEST DESTINY" fate is not part of United States Anglo Saxon ideology. But the United States does have a fate.

Sir John Glubb in his book *A Short History Of The Arab Peoples* suggests reviewing world history to see how frequently great empires reach and fall from their pinnacle of power, all within two hundred to three hundred years. According to Glubb, for example, the Greek Empire (330 B.C. to about 100 B.C.) lasted two hundred and thirty years; the Spaniards endured for (1556 to 1800) two hundred and forty four years; and the British Empire lasted two hundred and thirty years, (1700 to 1930). It is sobering to note that no great power simply lost its position as number one slipping into second or third place, nor has any former great power ever resumed its original, unchallenged position. They all have ceased to exist as a world power. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Italy has been little more than the home of the Pope for the past fifteen centuries. Moreover, regarding his figures Glubb tells us, "It is not desired to insist on rigid numbers, for many outside factors influence the fates of great nations. Nevertheless, the resemblance between the lives of so many and such varied empires is extremely striking, and is obviously entirely unconnected with the development of those mechanical devices of which we are so proud."⁵ "Mechanical devices" means military might.

Signs of the decline of the United States as the leading world power are most apparent in the phenomenal growth of the public debt in the 1980s: during the Reagan-Bush years, the public debt of the United States went from 907.7 billion dollars in 1980 to over 3 trillion dollars in 1990 (as reported by the United States Department of the Treasury).

The United States, being a relatively young, therefore resilient country, can and eventually will allow for the representation of people of color in the institutions that influence and mandate peoples' lives—government, private industry, and universities, for example. It will gradually relent with its blatant refusal to fulfill its professed democratic ideals and include the descendants of its slave trade, the Native Americans, mestizo/as, and Asians (who also come from a wide variety of countries and social and economic backgrounds and who, due to various political circumstances, are immigrating to the United States at an exorbitant rate). It will do so because the world economy will not permit anything short of it. Nevertheless, most assuredly among those who will get further pushed down as the disparity between the few wealthy and the impoverished grows, will be our gente.

THE LARGEST MOVEMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES ever to force the government to reckon with its native Latino population was the Chicano/Latino Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Because of its force there is today a visible sector of Latinos who are college degreed, who have mortgages on decent houses, and who are articulate in English. (In Spanish, when a person has facility in a language to get by, we say we can "defend" ourselves; we now have a substantial number of Latinos who are defending themselves against Anglophile culture.) The generation that came of age in the 1980s was given the general message that acculturation can be rewarding. Yes, the status quo will always reward those who succumb to it, who serve it, and who do not threaten its well being.

In 1980 when the Republicans and the Reagan administration came to office, their tremendous repression quashed the achievements of the Chicano/Latino Movement, which has been based on collectivism and the retention of our Mexican/Amerindian culture. Community projects and grassroots programs dependent on government funding—rehabilitation and training, child care, early education and alternative schooling, youth counseling, cultural projects that supported the arts and community artists, rehab-housing for low income families, and women's shelters—shut down.

In their place the old "American Dream"—a WASP male philosophy on which this country was founded at the expense of third world labor—was reinstated. As in U.S. society before the Civil Rights Movement, material accumulation equalled self-worth.

The new generation of Chicanos and Latinos who came of age in the 1980s, had a radically different attitude than the collective mentality of the 1970s activists, believing that after two hundred years of racist and ethnic exploitation, the age of the "Hispanic" had finally come. Their abuelos, tíos, parents (some who had been in the Chicano/Latino Movement) had paid the dues for the American Dream. Now they could finally claim their own place in society. They had acculturated.

Encouraged by media hype announcing our arrival in the 1980s as the "Decade of the Hispanic," for the first time in U.S. history, ad campaigns took the Latino/a consumer into consideration. Magazines, billboards and even television commercials (Coors comes to mind) showed young, brown, beautiful Latina models in flashy wear reaping

some of the comforts and pleasures of a democracy based on free enterprise. Also, there was the unprecedented tokenism of Latino/as in visible and high level government posts and private industry that further convinced many among the new generation that each individual indeed had the ability to fulfill his or her own great master plan for material success. The new generation was not alone. The previous generation became more conservative along with immigrating Latinos who also believed in the Republican administration and the trickle down theory of Reaganomics.

It is difficult to generalize why so many Latino/as moved toward conservative, if not overtly right wing, views. Personal disillusionment with leftist ideology may explain in part the change in attitude and goals for some. But for many, I believe it is basically a matter of desiring material acquisitions. It is difficult to maintain a collective ideology in a society where possessions and power-status equal self-worth.

Unfortunately, the continuous drop of the U.S. dollar in the world trade market caused the economy to worsen each year. In the 1980s, jobs were lost, companies closed down and moved out of the country, banks foreclosed on mortgages, and scholarships and grants once available to needy college students in the 1970s were taken away. These were only a few of the losses experienced not only by Latino/as but by much of the population.

Simultaneously, the cost of living went up. The much coveted trendy lifestyle of the white yuppie moved further away from the grasp of young and upwardly mobile Reagan-Bush generation. The nineties ushered a new generation cognizant of the white hegemonic atmosphere entrenched in colleges and universities and with a vigor reminiscent of the student movements of two decades earlier, have begun protests on campuses throughout the country. The acceleration of gang violence in cities, drug wars, cancer on the rise and AIDS continue to be the backdrop, while the new decade's highlights so far for living in these difficult times were the Persian Gulf War *Espectáculo* and the Rodney King riots that resounded throughout the world—sending out a message that this is indeed a troubled country.

EL MOVIMIENTO CHICANO/LATINO saw its rise and fall within a time span of less than two decades on these territories where our

people have resided for thousands of years. El Movimiento (or La Causa) was rooted to a degree in Marxist oriented theory (despite the strong ties activists felt to their Catholic upbringings) because it offered some response to our oppression under capitalism. Socialist and communist theories which were based on late nineteenth century ideas on the imminent mass industrialization of society, did not foresee the high technology world of the late twentieth century—one hundred years later—or fully consider the implications of race, gender, and sexual-preference differences on that world. Wealth accumulation no longer simply stays within the genteel class but our aristocracy now includes athletes, rock stars, and Hollywood celebrities.

THE EARLY FEMINISTA, as the Chicana feminist referred to herself then, had been actively fighting against her socioeconomic subjugation as a Chicana and as a woman since 1968, the same year the Chicano Movement was announced. I am aware that there have been Chicana activists throughout U.S. history, but I am using as a date of departure an era in which women consciously referred to themselves as *feministas*.

An analysis of the social status of la Chicana was already underway by early feministas, who maintained that racism, sexism, and sexist racism were the mechanisms that socially and economically oppressed them. But, for reasons explained here, they were virtually censored. The early history of la feminista was documented in a paper entitled, "La Feminista," by Anna Nieto Gómez and published in *Encuentro Femenil: The First Chicana Feminist Journal*, which may now be considered, both article and journal, archival material.⁶

The early feminista who actively participated in the woman's movement had to educate white feminist groups on their political, cultural, and philosophical differences. Issues that specifically concerned the feminista of that period were directly related to her status as a non-Anglo, culturally different, often Spanish-speaking woman of lower income. Early white feminism compared sexism (as experienced by white middle class women) to the racism that African Americans are subjected to. But African American feminists, such as those of the Rio Combahee Collective,⁷ pointed out that this was not only an inaccurate comparison but revealed an inherent racist attitude on the

part of white feminists who did not understand what it was to be a woman *and* black in America.

By the same token, brown women were forced into a position in which we had to point out similar differences as well as continuously struggle against a prevalent condescension on the part of white middle-class women toward women of color, poor women, and women who's first language is Spanish and whose culture is not mainstream American. *This Bridge Called My Back*, first published in 1981, as well as other texts by feminists of color that followed serve as excellent testimonies regarding these issues and the experiences of feminists of color in the 1970s.

At the same time, according to Nieto Gómez, feministas were labeled as *vendidas* (sell-outs) by activists within *La Causa*. Such criticism came not solely from men but also from women, whom Nieto Gómez calls Loyalists. These Chicanas believed that racism not sexism was the greater battle. Moreover, the Loyalists distrusted any movement led by any sector of white society. The early white women's movement saw its battle based on sex and gender, and did not take into account the race and class differences of women of color. The Loyalists had some reason to feel reluctant and cynical toward an ideology and organizing effort that at best was condescending toward them. Loyalists told the feministas that they should be fighting such hard-hitting community problems as police brutality, Viet Nam, and La Huelga, the United Farm Workers labor strike. But white female intellectuals were largely unaware of these issues. While the Chicana resided in a first world nation, indeed the most powerful nation at that time, she was part of a historically colonized people.

I am referring to the approximate period between 1968 through the 1970s. However, more than twenty years later, the Chicana—that is a brown woman of Mexican descent, residing in the United States with political consciousness—is still participating in the struggle for recognition and respect from white dominant society. Residing throughout her life in a society that systematically intentionally or out of ignorance marginalizes her existence, often stereotypes her when she does “appear,” suddenly represented (for example by mass-media or government sources), and perhaps more importantly, relegates her economic status to among the lowest paid according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Chicana continues to be a countryless woman. She is—

I am, we are—not considered to be, except marginally and stereotypically, United States citizens.

Nevertheless, according to las feministas, feminism was “a very dynamic aspect of the Chicana's heritage and not at all foreign to her nature.”⁸ Contrary to ethnographic data that portrays Chicanas as submissive followers who are solely designated to preserve the culture, the feminista did not see herself or other women of her culture as such. While the feminist dialogue remained among the activists in el Movimiento, one sees in *Encuentro Femenil* that there indeed existed a solid initiative toward Chicana feminist thought, that is, recognition of sexism as a primary issue, as early on as the late 1960s. Clarifying the differences between the needs of the Anglo feminist and the feminista was part of the early feminista's tasks.

And if the focus of the Chicano male-dominated movement with regard to women had to do with family issues, the feminista zeroed in on the very core of what those issues meant. For instance, the feministas believed that women would make use of birth control and abortion clinics if in fact they felt safe going for these services; that is, if they were community controlled. Birth control and abortion are pertinent issues for all women, but they were particularly significant to the Chicana who had always been at the mercy of Anglo controlled institutions and policies.

Non-consenting sterilizations of women—poor white, Spanish speaking, welfare recipients, poor women of color—women in prison among them—during the 1970s were being conducted and sponsored by the U.S. government. One third of the female population of Puerto Rico was sterilized during that period.⁹ The case of ten Chicanas (*Madrigal v. Quilligan*) against the Los Angeles County Hospital who were sterilized without their consent led to activism demanding release of the Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) guidelines for sterilizations. During that period, HEW was financing up to 100,000 sterilizations a year.¹⁰

The feminista also wanted a bicultural and bilingual child care that would validate their children's culture and perhaps ward off an inferiority complex before they had a chance to start public school; traditionally, monolingual and anglocentric schools had alienated children, causing them great psychological damage.¹¹

The early feminista understood the erroneous conceptions of the White Woman's Movement that equated sexism to racism because she was experiencing its compounding effects in her daily life. The feminists were fighting against being a "minority" in the labor market. According to Nieto Gómez, more Anglo women had jobs than did women of color. We must keep in mind that most women of color in this country have always needed employment to maintain even a level of subsistence for their families.

According to the 1991 U.S. Dept. of Commerce Census Bureau Report, income figures for 1989 show that "Hispanic" women are still among the lowest paid workers in the United States, earning less than African American women:

WEEKLY INCOME

Hispanic women	\$269.00
Black women	301.00
White women	334.00
Hispanic men	315.00
Black men	348.00
All Other Women	361.00

The mestiza still ranks in the labor force among the least valued in this country. In Susan Faludi's best-selling *Backlash*, which focuses on the media's backlash against the white feminist movement, the only noteworthy observation of women of color refers to our economic status in the 1980s. Faludi states that overall income did not increase for the African American woman and for the Hispanic woman, it actually got worse.

CLASHING OF CULTURES We need not look very far back or for very long to see that we have been marginalized in every sense of the word by U.S. society. But an understanding of the U.S. economic system and its relationship to Mexico is essential in order that we may understand our inescapable role as a productive/reproductive entity within U.S./Mexican society for the past two hundred years.

The transnational labor force into which most of us are born was created out of Mexico's neocolonialist relationship to the United States.¹² Throughout the history of the United States, Mexicans have served as

a labor reserve controlled by U.S. policy. Mexico encourages the emigration of this labor force to alleviate its own depressed economy, and the United States all too willingly consumes this labor without giving it the benefits enjoyed by U.S. residents.

Contrary to the ideological claim of the United States that insists that all immigrants (which by legislature and action meant European) pay their dues before being able to participate fully in its melting pot economy, the underpaid Mexican worker is crucial to the survival of the profit-based system of the United States. The maquiladoras illustrate this point.¹³

Since the late sixties, U.S. production has undergone a transfer of manufacturing to less industrialized nations, such as México.¹⁴ The U.S.-Mexican border has been an appealing site for such assembly operations. Unskilled women pressed with dire economic necessity serve as a reserve for these industries. A continuing influx of labor from the interior of México provides competition and keeps wages at a base minimum. Daily wage for a maquiladora rose to a mere \$3.50 per day in 1988.¹⁵ An unofficial border source told me that that figure had risen to \$3.75 per day in 1992. The outrageously low wages for working in dangerous and unregulated conditions are among the strongest arguments against the free-trade agreements between United States, Mexico, and Canada.

The cultural and religious beliefs that maintain that most Latinas on either side of the border are (and should be) dependent on their men for economic survival are not only unrealistic, evidence shows they do not reflect reality. On this side of the border, according to the 1987 Department of Labor Report, one million "Hispanic" households were headed by women. Their average income was \$337.00 per week. Fifty-two per cent of these households headed by women survive below poverty level.

Any woman without the major support of the father of her children and who has no other resources, must, in order to survive, commodify her labor. Even most Chicano/Latino men do not earn enough to support their families; their wives must go outside the home to earn an income (or bring it home in the form of piece work). Furthermore, statistics show that many mothers do not live with the father of their children and do not receive any kind of financial assistance from him.

MOST CHICANAS/LATINAS ARE NOT CONSCIENTICIZED. The majority of the populace, on either side of the border, in fact, is not actively devoted to real social change. That sense of inferiority, as when two people were confronted with their *mexicanidad* on the streets of downtown Chicago, permeates most Chicanas' self-perceptions. Lack of conscientización is what makes the maquiladora an ideal worker for the semi-legal, exploitative operations of multinational factory production.

At an early age we learn that our race is undesirable. Because of possible rejection, some of us may go to any length to deny our background. But one cannot cruelly judge such women who have resorted to negation of their own heritage; constant rejection has accosted us since childhood. Certain women indeed had contact early on in their lives with México and acquired enough identification with its diverse culture and traditions to battle against the attempts of white, middle class society to usurp all its citizens into an abstract culture obsessed with material gain.

But many women born in the United States or brought here during childhood have little connection with the country of our ancestors. The umbilical cord was severed before we could develop the intellectual and emotional link to México, to the astonishing accomplishments of its indigenous past, to its own philosophical and spiritual nature so much at odds with that of the WASP. Instead we flounder between invisibility and a tacit hope that we may be accepted here and awarded the benefits of acculturation.

Looking different, that is, not being white nor black but something in between in a society that has historically acknowledged only a black/white racial schism is cause for great anxiety. Our internalized racism causes us to boast of our light coloring, if indeed we have it, or imagine it. We hope for light-skinned children and brag no end of those infants who happen to be born güeros, white looking, we are downright ecstatic if they have light colored eyes and hair. We sometimes tragically reject those children who are dark.

On the subject of color and internal conflicts there are also those who, despite identification with Latino heritage are light-skinned because of their dominating European genes or because one parent is white. For some this may be an added reason for internalizing racism,

particularly when young (since it is difficult to explain the world to yourself when you are growing up). But for others, while their güero coloring may cause them to experience less racial tension in broad society, it may cause tension for a variety of reasons in their home, chosen communities, and when politically active against racism.

Let us consider for a moment a woman who does not necessarily desire marriage or bearing children, and works instead to attain a higher standard of living for herself. She must still interact with and quite often be subordinate to white people, and occasionally African Americans. I do not want to elaborate on the dynamics of her relationships with African Americans since it is understood here that institutionalized racism has not allowed either race to have real domination over the other. My own experience has been one of cultural difference rather than a racial one since there are also "black hispanos." But I will note that she will in all likelihood still feel "foreign" with African Americans who have an acknowledged history in the United States. Because of slavery, white people *know* why African Americans are here. They also *know* why Native Americans are here, yet they *assume* mestizos have all migrated here for economic gain as their own people did.

To compound our anxiety over our foreign-like identity in the United States is the fact that Mexican Americans are also not generally accepted in México. We are derogatorily considered *pochos*, American Mexicans who are either among the traitors or trash of Mexico because we, or previous generations, made the United States home. Unlike the experiences that many African Americans have had in "returning" and being welcomed in Africa,¹⁶ many U.S.-born mestizo/as have found themselves more unwelcomed by mexicanos than white gringos.

Aside from skin color, language can add to the trauma of the Chicana's schizophrenic-like existence. She was educated in English and learned it is the only acceptable language in society, but Spanish was the language of her childhood, family, and community. She may not be able to rid herself of an accent; society has denigrated her first language. By the same token, women may also become anxious and self conscious in later years if they have no or little facility in Spanish. They may feel that they had been forced to forfeit an important part of their personal identity and still never found acceptability by white society.

Race, ethnicity, and language are important factors for women who aspire to a decent standard of living in our anglocentric, xenophobic society. Gender compounds their social dilemma and determines the very nature of their lifestyle regardless of the ability to overcome all other obstacles set against them.

Feminism at its simplest has not ever been solely a political struggle for women's rights, i.e., equal pay for equal work. The early feminist's initial attempts at placing women-related issues at the forefront were once viewed with suspicion by Marxist-oriented activists as The Woman Question was seen to be separate from or less significant than race and class issues by most activists, and along with gay issues, even thought to be an indication of betrayal to La Causa. Along those lines, in the 1990s, while issues of sexuality have come to the forefront, most recently with the national debate of permitting gays in the military, there remains a strong heterosexist bias among Chicano/Hispanic/Latino based organizations and our varying communities.

With the tenacious insistence at integrating a feminist perspective to their political conscientización as Chicanas, feminist activists, and intellectuals are in the process of developing what I call Xicanisma. On a pragmatic level, the basic premise of Xicanisma is to reconsider behavior long seen as inherent in the Mexic Amerindian woman's character, such as, patience, perseverance, industriousness, loyalty to one's clan, and commitment to our children. Contrary to how those incognizant of what feminism is, we do not reject these virtues. We may not always welcome the taxing responsibility that comes with our roles as Chicanas. We've witnessed what strain and limitations they often placed on our mothers and other relatives. But these traits often seen as negative and oppressive to our growth as women, as well as having been translated to being equal to being a drone for white society and its industrial interests, may be considered strengths. Simultaneously, as we redefine (not categorically reject) our roles within our families, communities at large, and white dominant society, our Xicanisma helps us to be self-confident and assertive regarding the pursuing of our needs and desires.

As brown-skinned females, often bilingual but not from a Spanish speaking country (not a Mexican citizen yet generally considered to not really be American), frequently discouraged in numerous ways

from pursuing formal education, usually with limited economic means, therefore made to compete in a racist and sexist lower skilled work force, we continue to be purposely rendered invisible by society except as a stereotype and in other denigrating ways. The U.S. Women's Movement, which in fact began long before the Civil Rights Movement and the ensuing Chicano Movement, is now incorporating a more expansive vision that includes the unique perceptions and experiences of all peoples heretofore excluded from the democratic promise of the United States. Until we are all represented, respected, and protected by society and the laws that govern it, the status of the Chicana will be that of a countryless woman.

**THE WATSONVILLE
WOMEN'S STRIKE, 1986
A CASE OF MEXICANA ACTIVISM**

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I worked for 23 years for this company. I came to the United States in 1962. I was following my father, who had been here for 25 years. I settled in Watsonville. I've been fighting to maintain my family, to give them an education. It is more difficult for a single woman to maintain the family.

—Gloria Betancourt, strike leader

Included in the ongoing analysis among feminists and activists regarding the politics of gender, sexuality, race, and economic inequities has been the theory of socialist feminism, that is, the possibility of merging Marxist ideology with a critique of patriarchy.¹ Obviously, this discourse is essential with regard to working class women of color, but especially those in low-skilled labor.

In 1993, at the time of this writing, this discussion is even more crucial when considering that mejicanas and Chicanas, who are the majority serving in low skilled labor jobs on both sides of the border, will be directly affected by the North American Free Trade Agreement. They are directly affected in that they are among the vast world labor pool that NAFTA supporters rely on for what they refer to as economically efficient production. In other words, for very little pay and with little regard to health and safety conditions and no benefits for maquiladoras and other low skilled workers, multinational investors can produce more by spending less and making bigger profits from world consumers. The workers—in this case, mejicanas/Chicanas—are not the consumers of these products, of course, since they can't afford them, which renders them further inconsequential in terms of economic efficient strategy.

While the present Clinton Administration aggressively attempted to pass the NAFTA agreement,² it was apparently unpopular in Can-

ada, among many people in the United States, and Mexican workers being most exploited can voice little public opinion about such policy decision making. Therefore to refer to it as an agreement of North American peoples appears erroneous. Furthermore, NAFTA was not a proposal for free trade, but a way to enable the transfer of multinational production to where it will be more economically efficient.

The misleading naming of this proposal gives the impression that as a result of it we will be opening the gateway at the Mexican/U.S. border and enjoying a friendly cultural exchange that promises eventual economic benefits to everyone. As the workforce in the United States continues to be put out of work, its hostility toward people of color—in this case, Latino/as (U.S., Mexican, Central American, Caribbean) whom they believe they are losing their jobs to, grows. Moreover, the truth about NAFTA is that it aims to benefit only the very few very wealthy multinational investors while the abominable conditions under which low-skilled laborers are forced to work and the ghastly communities they live in grow more devastating.

Unfortunately, the lives of most women, and specifically women of Mexican heritage, are not affected on a daily basis by intellectual debate. Juliet Minces reminds us:

Let us not forget that in terms of both rights and actual behavior, women's condition in the West is still recent. It is worth recalling that, in France, women only secured the vote in 1945; that equal pay for equal work is still an expectation rather than a fact [certainly, this is the case in the U.S.]; that women participate far less in political and trade union activities than men do, not because they lack rights but because it is not yet *customary* [my italics] for them to be fully integrated.³

This essay provides an illustration of how labor activism among women may catalyze political conscientización by showing how the economic inequities that pervade their working lives are specifically related to race and gender. Understanding our women in the work force is one step toward the illumination of our whole sense of self, but despite Marxist claims, a degree of economic relief has not ended the limits on women's participation in society. This has been proven in the latter half of the twentieth century in various countries throughout the

world, including the United States. To think otherwise in the late 1960s when these discussions began, was a gross underestimation of the phallographic world in which we still live today. To illustrate this I will discuss here a case in point, a successful labor strike led mostly by mexicanas in 1986 in Watsonville, California and an interview I conducted with Chicana/mejicana activists in that same town the following year.

WATSONVILLE, a growing city of approximately 28,000, became the first town north of Fresno, California, with a Latino majority. It is the fertile region of cannery row painted by John Steinbeck in the 1930s. Whereas, years ago, its workers who labored packing fruit and vegetables were of Slavic and Portuguese origins, today most are Mexican.

Driving through Watsonville, it is easy to see that it has become predominantly Mexican—Mexican food stores, brown youth on the streets, Spanish heard everywhere. In 1992 Watsonville received its official sanction as a town of Guadalupanos—a term synonymous to being Mexican—with an apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her image appeared to a fifty-four year old mexicana cannery worker on an old oak tree in the state park. Since then hundreds of peregrinos—I among them—have gone to pay homage to Tonanztlin/Guadalupe at the site.

Along with the glad feeling I have received from familiar cultural associations in Watsonville, there are also the many social problems that accompany poverty and the working class—drugs, gang and domestic violence, and a substandard educational system. Watsonville was hard hit during a major earthquake in 1989 and it has been slow in recovering because of the economic disparity that exists in that area.

My interest in Watsonville was first catalyzed with a visit there in 1987 when I conducted a twelve hour long writing workshop one Saturday with writer Cherríe Moraga. The workshop was sponsored by the local city college and the participants received credit. It was organized by a Chicana who worked at the college and also participated in the workshop.

All the women who attended, about a dozen, many activists, were Chicanas, with the exception of one Native American woman—

married to a Mexican and part of the Chicano community of Watsonville for many years. Their ages ranged from eighteen to sixty. Except for the Native American woman, they were all fluent in both languages, with Spanish often being the first language. Their education ranged from being junior college students to post-graduates. Most were mothers, some breast feeding at the time; others had grown children. In the case of one participant, she attended during the day, then relieved her daughter of her own small children so that the daughter could participate in the evening session. All these women maintained jobs outside the home. All were from the working class or the underclass of the working poor. All had an inherent sense of their cultural difference from that of mainstream society. With the exception of two—the Native American woman and one older Protestant Chicana—all were Catholic. The presence of the Native American was significant in this instance, making the tie of Christian beliefs to Mexican culture markedly apparent as compared to her own orientation with Amerindian philosophy.⁴ Except for one woman, all presented themselves as heterosexual. All, with no exception, desired to express themselves through writing.

It is important at this point, for the non-Chicana reader to keep in mind the sense of familia that exists among women who identify themselves as Chicanas throughout the United States and that crosses the U.S./Mexican border. Therefore, our reputations as Chicana writers preceded us and the invitation to conduct this workshop was based on a sense of belonging to this group bound by Xicanisma. We were both accepted readily by the women and as a result, at the end of the workshop I was able to interview four of the workshop participants for this essay, which was originally published in Spanish in *Esta Puente, Mi Espalda*.

The interview included two women from México and two native to the area. I selected these women because of their unquestionable commitment to Chicana activism and their wide range of commitments. While we conversed quietly in Spanish, the other women listened and made occasional supportive comments so that at no time did I feel that the women who were actively responding were not representative of the group.

At the start of our discussion, it was first established that a woman without conscientización nevertheless perceives certain societal dis-

crimination directed *at her*. With conscientización, she begins a deliberate process of questioning this discrimination, but she may not yet know how to grapple with its effects. With deliberate orientation toward conscientización—which may come by way of higher education, the unusual experience of some social/political catalyst (such as the Watsonville Strike which will be elaborated on in the second half of this essay, or the Chicano Movement of the 1970s), or through a personal deliberate effort to seek help from other women—she may find she has no recourse but to finally take radical action.

The concept of the American Dream—an illusion long fostered by the system to maintain its work force—was an overwhelming factor that played with the hearts and minds of the Watsonville residents, the women in the workshop informed me. People in Watsonville truly believed they could improve their material conditions through hard work. In fact, in comparison to the conditions they lived in México, the material lives of mexicanas *had* improved. Simultaneously, in order to achieve the goals of the American Dream, the Mexican tradition of an extended family, including community, was deemed a hindrance and relinquished within the time span of a single generation. In a nation that strongly motivates people toward competition, individual achievement, and, above all, material acquisitions, collectivity and spiritual aspirations are anachronistic. That is, grandparents and otherwise unemployed relatives outside of the nuclear family would become a burden on the way to material goals.

This dilemma is compounded for women of conscientización who prefer to work for the common good of their ethnic community and to oppose individual profit that often comes in conflict with the personal ambitions of their family of origin, spouses, and their grown children and goes in direct opposition to some Mexican traditions and gringo values:

Shirley: I think that people help each other more in other parts of the world. In this country, you won't get help from your family, for example, if you don't work. You won't get help from your community. One is forced to become part of the working class because if you don't participate, you will die. The other side to this is that the cost of living is so high, not only are you forced to be part of the working class, but the working class is established such that even if

you do go to work every day, you can't exist in the economy due to the fact that inflation, housing, food, transportation, medical expenses are all much more costly than what the majority of the people can afford. Therefore, everyone lives at the substandard level.

Shirley's point is exemplified in the case of Arabian society, steeped in clan-oriented customs, in which one can see parallels between its traditions and those of Mexican culture, and how they have been affected by urbanization. Minces states, "The family group, in the broad sense, is the keystone of society." She continues, "Even when urban conditions have forced the family to become a nuclear unit (father, mother and direct descendants), people still think in terms of the extended family, with all the rights and duties that implies."⁵ However, urbanization as a result of the transformation of the economic base of Arab countries has subsequently affected the ancient tribal tradition of the extended family.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS AN INSTITUTION supported by the Mexican community in the U.S. seems to be a cultural norm rather than a source for real spiritual comfort for these women. The rituals of the church bring a sense of order to women's lives but not much personal tranquility because they do not alleviate her practical concerns. The response of mexicanas to the apparition of the Virgin's image on the oak tree is, to my mind, an indication of a need for spiritual consolation and material relief. Again, it is not so much a manifestation of the church but of the women's culture and ethnic identity. Above all, I see the Guadalupe cult as an unspoken, if not unconscious, devotion to their own version of Goddess.

However, it is the church that represents authority in her life, especially over her sexuality and reproductive ability. The complexities of how society as a whole does not concern itself with the best interest of woman begin to unravel for the activist. The life she has led has been an arduous one, based on hard work, little material compensation, subservience to all (except to other women like herself and their children), and with very little leisure. If she is married, as many women are at a relatively young age, her life may be dictated by her husband's domination. However, when she has some analysis as to the unnatural op-

pressiveness she experiences because of her home life, endorsed by family, community, and church, she may look for a way out. As María states here, speaking hypothetically of such married women:

María: And they [the former Watsonville strikers] begin to question the religious values of . . . "I don't think that God would like me to be in the position that I find myself with this *cabrón*, so I am not going to continue this way . . . !"

The "*cabrón*" to whom María refers to is the hypothetical woman's husband. Culture and religion exalt the value of motherhood, but given her societal status the *mexicana* struggles endlessly to fulfill the practical necessities of raising children. Therefore, she begins to repudiate the church's firm stance against contraception. Contraceptives are more acceptable in the United States, and consequently she is apt to go against this doctrine (usually not without having had children first) and limit her childbearing. It must be added here however, that medical care is to some degree of better quality in the U.S. than what is available to poor women in México:

AC: Is there certain pressure from the man or Mexican culture that says to be a good wife or a good woman you have to have all the children that God sends you?

María: Definitely, of course. My mother, for example tells me: You can be as professional as you want, you can be as perfect as you want, however you want it, BUT if you don't have a child, you will not be complete, you will never fulfill the role that God gave you.

AC: Do you have a child?

María: None. And I won't have any. It's a conviction.

How a conscientized woman concludes that she is going to tear herself away from the fabric of her traditions as mandated by the church is her own process and largely dependent upon the degree of her "political" education.

FORMAL EDUCATION IS ELUSIVE AND LOFTY, difficult to manage, and sometimes unheard of for many women from poor to working class families:

Shirley: In this society you have to have at least four distinct things before you can obtain an education: You have to be oriented within your family that tells you that education is good. Second, you have to have freedom: freedom from child care, other such responsibilities, mobility . . . Another thing you must have are the abilities—your parents must help you through that system. It isn't an easy system to enter [financially]. The other thing that you must be is comfortable in that environment . . .

Moreover, education for the most part and for the large majority of these women has not been seen by the family as a necessity toward the improvement of the family as a whole. This has been unfortunate, since women have traditionally been wage earners perhaps even the principle wage earner of the family when the husband is absent, ill, stricken with alcoholism, or for any number of reasons is not able to contribute sufficiently to the maintenance of the family. Often the woman is expected to be the devoted wife and model mother and bring home a wage. But *how* she manages to provide for the material needs of her family is only a secondary consideration to the expectation that she do so.

If her family and community acknowledged that along with the mandate of motherhood, she quite often is the only one to feed, clothe, house, and maintain all of her children's needs (and sometimes those of her husband's and other relatives as well), then perhaps the pressures for her to be married and to have children might at least be postponed until she can acquire skills to improve her employment opportunities.

But it's not easy for the Mexican woman to go to school. First and foremost she must feel that she is *educatable*—that she can learn, that she may be a valuable contributor to society as a result of educating, in other words, that she is worthy of such a luxury as formal schooling. If the impoverished woman of color does not receive encouragement in this direction from home, but by some stroke of luck is persuaded by an outside influence—a scholarship or a friend within the institution—she must also contend with the other obstacles. If she is already a mother, who will care for her children while she goes to class and when she needs to study? If she must work to support her family, where does she find the time for all the responsibilities?

If she is not a mother by a certain age (I would guess from personal observation, between the ages of 25 and 30), as Maria stated above, all else pales in comparison to the only accomplishment expected from her: motherhood. But few women who do not have children and struggle for an education are ever convinced of the merit of their own achievements:

Shirley: See, what happened was that I began to see the problems in society and I began being an activist. I realized that I could not tackle all areas when I began trying as an activist in the community to do it all—education, voter registration, women's issues, everything. I found that in reality I was burning out. So I made the decision to choose, to choose geographically, with what population, and what problem. So I chose Watsonville. I chose to work with women and in the area of education. Thus, I do what I can within the system to achieve social change.

AC: You're married. Have you received support from home for what you do?

Shirley: I have obtained support after I have demanded it, never before.

THE RUDE AWAKENING FROM THE AMERICAN DREAM jolts Chicana activists toward their displaced Mexican customs. The reason is that assimilation into Anglo society is rarely completely successful. The need to belong to some specific culture brings them full circle to their Mexican heritage, which they once rejected. As Octavio Paz states in his book *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, "[The United States is] a country full of cults and tribal costumes, all intended to satisfy the middle-class North American's desire to share in something more vital and solid than the abstract morality of the 'American Way of Life.'" In attempting to assimilate into the "American Dream" the edges of woman's own personal sense of identity are blurred; she ultimately fits nowhere, is accepted nowhere:

Cruz: Until I was twenty-four years old, I thought I was white, that I was American. I had lost my Mexican values. Just now I am recovering them . . . some, I don't think ever all of them. For me,

there was never the hope of going to college. I was the only one in my family that continued studying and finished college until this next generation now that my daughter is attending. I, with children (I am divorced), decided to educate myself . . . At that time there was economic help and I could do it [she refers here to the seventies when there was funding available to minority students in the way of grants, loans, and scholarships]. And I didn't want to go on to the university—I was afraid—but I went. I achieved it. I came out and I didn't learn a lot, but I achieved it.

The inability of parents, who themselves have little formal education, to instill in their children—especially daughters—the desire for education is an aspect of why many mexicanas and Chicanas may not see themselves as educatable. Another aspect is that early on, in primary school, children begin to experience a sense of disorientation within Anglo culture, language, values, and its system of competition:

Gabriela: It's an underlying discrimination that we can only see when we have certain conscientización, education, but that you don't see when it has been happening to you. I can't exactly explain it because I grew up here and in Mexico. I know, with my students at school, that those who have been with Mexican teachers most of the time, that have been treated well and have been in a well implemented bilingual education program in school, who have the self-esteem for who they are and have their models—those children are going to get very far . . .

For most Watsonville women, the responsibility of just caring for the daily needs of their children makes it difficult for them to even worry about finding quality education and bilingual programs for their children. Yet, the awareness achieved by the organizing success of the strike of 1986—a pragmatic learning process in itself—caused some of these women to understand how all of these issues are interrelated and how they, as mexicanas, are not given consideration by this society.

This particular member of our U.S. society has been raised to believe at best, she must obey the mandates of her culture—not to question the institutions deemed sacred (the church, her parents, her

husband); to bear and care for children; and to maintain the order of her immediate environment as it is dictated to her. It is no wonder that her only personal aspiration may be to acquire commodities, marketed as indispensable necessities, conveniences, or comforts. A person born into very humble economic means learns to yearn for material acquisitions. Products ultimately become the only way to elevate her status within her community, among her family and friends, and within the world at large.

BUT COMMODITIES DO NOT SATISFY THE XICANISTA. She realizes that she is only a worker who is aiding the very system that keeps her from making any real economic progress; that she is a member of a group that because of race has been relegated to the lower social strata in the United States; and that as a woman, she has been subjugated both outside and inside her home. If she decides to act upon her awareness, she finds that for a while she must disassociate from any solid ties to North American *and* Mexican values, which, for her are more similar than they are dissimilar.

The philosophy of the male-dominated Chicano Movement was akin to the theories of Frantz Fanon, who professed that revolutionary struggle for “national independence” would suffice to change people's attitudes toward women's subordinate status. The participation of women in the national struggle would prove their equality to the men and at the same time change women so that they would demand their own “liberation.” However, in the case of the Algerian revolution where the people freed themselves of 130 years of colonization in 1962 this indeed did not happen.⁶ Each struggle for national freedom must be evaluated in its own historical context but national struggles continue to disregard the reality that women ultimately remain subject to male authority. By male I do not restrict myself to actual men but to the system.

In the case of the Chicano Movement in the United States, Chicanos as a whole have been divided into such diverse positions—from complete cooptation by Anglo society to (and this is much less the case) militant separatism. The difficulty of unifying such a movement *within* the United States on the basis of ethnicity is clear: the promise of the unattainable “American Dream” in a country ridden with com-

modity fever focuses the individual on elevating the self not on general improvement of society as a whole. Competition not community is the motivation.⁷

Nevertheless, while most women activists are bound to the community of their ethnic background (with the exception of some lesbian activists who may find a closer kinship to a women's community), women's consciousness today is forcing them toward a unique perspective. While socialism may be their point of departure, women's issues remain the core of their struggle.

The tragedy of mexicanas in the United States lies not in the entrenched notion that woman exists only to propagate the species and to be a man's "mother" throughout his adult life, but that women are conditioned to *desire* this status *despite* the reality of their experiences. Her experience as propagator may give her little personal satisfaction, but she is conditioned to accept it from the day of her birth. At the same time, if she publicly acknowledges the contradictions of her reality she risks adverse reaction from the complex network that represents society:

Cruz: I work organizing in my community, it is my life. I feel a lot of pressure sometimes, because people tell me, well, "You should dress differently, you should do this, or that, buy yourself a car!" But no. I have my path and I am on it. Perhaps in the future I'll change how I'm doing it but right now I feel very clear. But yes, I see that pressure.

AC: You are estranged from your parents, your family?

Cruz: I can't tell them what I do.

AC: You live alone?

Cruz: Yes.

AC: Who is your family?

Cruz: Here, this community.⁸

II

IN THE SUMMER OF 1985, THE WATSONVILLE CANNING AND FROZEN FOOD COMPANY, a major frozen food processor in the U.S., cut the wages of its 1,100 workers by up to 40 percent.

It also demanded serious reductions in health benefits and stopped deducting union dues from the workers' paychecks. The Richard Shaw Company, another local cannery, also demanded similar cutbacks. As a result, over 1,600 workers went on strike in September of that year.

In February 1986 Richard Shaw broke rank with Watsonville Canning and convinced his workers to accept a settlement of better wages, plus a profit-sharing incentive, with restoration of some benefits. Watsonville Canning decided to press for its slashed hourly wages.

Teamsters Local 912, a small and predominantly white union, had organized the freezer plants and canneries during World War II. In 1986 its membership was five thousand; nine out of ten were Latino, and most of them were women. The union was not prepared for the strike. Furthermore, Watsonville Canning hired a law firm known for union busting and the union feared that if it were ousted it would have to fight its way back into every plant in Watsonville. The gap between the leadership and the membership of the union was so great that many of the workers believed that Watsonville Canning had been out to break their union altogether.

The workers formed a strikers' committee to handle the daily conduct of the strike. Court injunctions reached such proportions that strikers who lived near the plants were arrested for simply standing on their front porches. Few had savings and their fifty-five-dollars-a-week strike benefits could hardly feed their families, much less withstand the strike's growing legal expenses. But the word of the strike spread throughout the state during the following eighteen months before it was settled and they received much outside support, "especially from the Chicano Movement" according to the periodical *Forward: Journal of Socialist Thought*.⁹

Not surprisingly, the Watsonville women's strike took on Mexican cultural overtones. The women were fiercely conscious of their race—shocked at and even aggressive toward Mexican scabs whom they perceived as traitors to la raza. "We just couldn't believe it when we saw other mexicanos crossing the picket lines. In México, when they put out those red and black flags [denoting a strike], if you cross the line, you're dead," stated Gloria Betancourt, a strike leader.¹⁰ Although some were handcuffed and arrested, it was only their lack of

financial resources for posting bond that deterred the striker's determined attempts at discouraging scab labor.

When the company offered wage concessions but refused restoration of health benefits, the strike leaders went on a hunger strike. Finally, the strikers secured the publicity they needed by conducting a Catholic pilgrimage on their knees to a local church where they prayed for justice. On March 11, 1987 the strike was over. Their medical coverage was to be restored within three months. As reported by the press, "the strikers now, after 18 months on strike, know that they can take their children to the doctor when necessary."¹¹

As a result of this successful effort, the numbers and organizing power of the Latino population of Watsonville became known to its city officials. However, economic improvement for the Latino population when and if it were to come, would be gradual since government representatives remained nearly exclusively Anglo. Development and the high cost of real estate continued to force Mexican workers to live in sometimes deplorable conditions, as was sharply proven at a county housing hearing when the fire chief at that time told of grossly overcrowded buildings and recounted finding field workers living on the roofs of downtown buildings.¹²

For one and a half years the women strikers were up against what would be presumably insurmountable institutionalized opposition. In addition to the economic disadvantage of being women, some mothers, there were the added disadvantages of language, little formal education and social orientation, and sometimes lack of support from male partners.

The strike spotlighted the obvious reality for them as women: their duty to maintain two jobs at once—with little compensation for either—at work and at home. Women who were married sometimes received little, if any, emotional support from home for their participation in the strike.¹³ They also grew to have some understanding of the legal system and their rights. Moreover, this understanding decreased their fear of laws. As individuals being called upon to speak publicly throughout the state, they had become persons with acknowledged and legitimate opinions and lives.

While they learned the worth of their bargaining power, however, the women's gains from the strike should not be overestimated. The losses a woman activist experiences as a consequence of such rebellion

compared to men's are devastating. If her marriage, for example, breaks up as a result of her husband's intolerance of her insurgent behavior, she loses his income (which is usually higher than her own), as well as the status she receives from society as a married woman. Her status actually drops when she gets divorced or becomes an abandoned woman. She is usually left with their children; she most likely will have to provide for material and emotional care alone.

The principle lessons the Watsonville women strikers learned is that there is no separation between their private and their public worlds, from their wage earning world and their world of kitchens and bedrooms, from their pregnancies and their priests, from the education they never had and from the education their children may be deprived of.

LEFTIST ORGANIZATIONS RALLIED AROUND THE STRIKERS, bringing with them the added stigma of the label *communist*. Already these women were behaving in a way completely uncharacteristic of their tradition. While the strike leaders accepted support from wherever it came, they acknowledged that the socialist ideology that they were exposed to at that time seemed in accord with the strike's goals.¹⁴

Early socialist oriented activists theorized that capitalism would undermine the hierarchy of patriarchy by requiring women to join the labor force and eventually become "independent" of men and become an equal participant in society. We now see that in the long run patriarchy and capitalism actually accommodated each other, in fact undermining any possibility for the woman in the labor force to break from her traditional role as subservient to man's personal needs. Women provide the bulk of domestic services in the home, care for the children, and create a warm, nurturing atmosphere for men, who still see themselves as entitled to refuge and solace because they believe they alone battle in the outside world. Women, of course, battle as wage earners in the outside, while they are the principle caretakers of the home.

In addition, a visible and growing new underclass largely consisting of single mothers has developed during this post-industrial era. The underclass also includes the working poor. When we understand a growing number of families that belong to this underclass are headed

by working mothers, it is not at all surprising that the Watsonville Strike, consisted of and was led mostly by women.¹⁵

However, white supremacist patriarchy (not restricted to the U.S.) recognizes the participation of its non-white, female citizens in the work force and our sizable population, only insofar as it can continue to use their labor while it subverts women's potential to contribute to the transformation of society. This subversion is firmly entwined into each facet of our lives. It is not a struggle against the "bourgeois patrones" alone. It is not a misunderstanding with one's husband when he walks out or becomes abusive because his wife insists on attending a labor or community meeting. It isn't the idiosyncratic nature of one individual who underestimates a woman's intelligence and undermines her work at meetings, nor the behavior of one lecherous individual who becomes sexually aggressive with the same woman because he can only see her gender rather than her whole being.

Like clockwork, these reactions not only go into play at the onset of a woman's activism, they complement each other to the extent that she can justly regard them as a conspiracy. The domineering husband, the sexist activist, and el patrón all conspire against her participation. Moreover, the profit-hungry interests of global corporations depend on the human resources of impoverished populations (predominantly of women) at all costs.

The socialist communism of some male activists within el Movimiento has always been a clear cut case of us vs. them; the enemy is always outside the men themselves. When a woman, who is not supported by any institutions that exist in society, attempts to struggle for better wages, she systematically finds herself confronting more than just the holder of the purse strings. Male activists have had a reputation of being unable to separate their view of woman as worker from their general perception of woman as wife, mother, lover, whore, laundress, cook, dishwasher, mother to men and, generally, his inferior.

If they attempt to split their perception of woman, accepting the ideology of the female as "compañera" within the context of activism and social reform as a worker, the tendency has been to shortchange her when engaging in a personal relationship with her, defeating the whole premise of their socialist ideology. At least, this is to a large extent true within the Chicano/Latino Movement. I do not mean to

imply that no male activist ever contributed to the housework or child care on a regular basis. I do suspect, however, that it did not usually happen without much determination on the part of his female partner for him to think along those lines. This is because patriarchy in Mexican traditions and Catholicism overrides the male activists' identities as "workers," which Marxism so narrowly focuses upon in its economic analysis of society.

GIVEN THE HISTORY OF UNION ORGANIZING IN THE U.S., (despite the monumental achievements of the late Cesar Chavez and the continued efforts of Dolores Huerta and their forebears) the Mexican woman laborer would seem an unlikely candidate to challenge a system that has never recognized her as a force to whom it should be accountable. The concept of the union—historically white and male—did not include providing for the labor force that is non-white, female, and single mothers. Therefore, the women who participated in the Watsonville strike learned how their entire lives are de-personalized for the benefit of mass production.

The Watsonville case may recall the novels of John Steinbeck and his working man's theme of the thirties. However, the Watsonville Strike did not take place a half-century ago when—if white people were living at subsistence level due to the stock market crash—Mexicans were being deported in cattle cars to México so that the U.S. government would not have to contend at all with their no longer needed labor nor with their American born offspring. I must reiterate: unions have traditionally benefited white male workers; while women of color, mestizas, Native Americans, Chinese, Filipinas, Puerto Ricans, and African-Americans have always worked the fields, factories, and kitchens of the United States, alongside their unionless, unrepresented husbands, fathers, and brothers. At the tail-end of the twentieth century, someone is still working in the fields at minimum or below minimum wages, someone is still packing, and that someone is still a Mexican woman—except that *now*, if she has proof of U.S. citizenship, she might be allowed in a union.

Regarding the Simpson-Rodino Immigration Reform and Control Bill that was passed in 1986 and has been touted as an "amnesty" bill, it in fact allows for a "guest worker" plan similar to the Bracero

motherly concerns, it would appear that her children are worth whatever fee is within her means to insure their security and well being. After much controversy over this matter, Ms. Baird withdrew from nomination.

The exploitation of poor working women of color knows no boundaries on either side of the border. From a global perspective, abuse of women of color in the labor market throughout the world, has had no limits. The average wage of workers (mostly women) in Indonesian production plants subcontracted by Nike in 1991 was \$1.30 *per day*. Filipina workers for Mattel, the toy manufacturer, are offered prizes for undergoing sterilization. In addition to slowing down the population growth, corporations, such as Mattel feel that sterilization of women ensures a less demanding labor force in the free trade zone.¹⁷ These inhuman abuses of women will surely continue into the twenty-first century. Only drastic measures taken on their behalf by government policies and corporate interests can protect them.

As Xicanistas who may or may not find ourselves in garment sweatshops in Los Angeles, earning seven cents a garment, or working in indentured servant conditions in the fields with our children for twelve hours a day, or in any number of other heinous labor conditions akin to feudalism that millions of women are forced to endure today, every day in order to feed our children—we must not forget our hermanas who do. We must support them and observe their strikes, even if only by refusing to purchase the products of the company they are fighting against. Just as importantly, we can no longer delude ourselves that while our lives may not be directly and immediately affected by such disregard for humanity as that shown by those who exploit the women who work in low skilled labor, everyone is affected by the kinds of products major industries mass market. We should remember, for example, that the same pesticides that have caused birth defects in the children born to women working in the fields are in the produce at our local supermarkets. The UFW Strike against grapes is not only about pressuring farmers and ranchers who take advantage of their laborers. The grape boycott now—yes, the boycott is still on—is representative of a need for all consumers to be conscious of the poison mass-marketed produce is sprayed with. We must not put it on our tables and serve it to our loved ones. This is almost impossible to avoid

Program implemented in the 1940s. Growers are allowed to hire as many as 350,000 seasonal workers per year who are not granted amnesty. Without staying vigilant to the kinds of legal agreements made between the Mexican and United States governments, often with multinational interests in mind, we cannot understand how, one way or another, we will continue to serve as a source of cheap labor. We must be attentive to these policies not for the sake of a few hundred immigrants coming into the United States in the last few years, or thousands of Mexicans over decades, but for the *millions* of mestizas today who have no choice if they and their families are to survive at all. As maquiladoras they earn about three dollars a day and in Los Angeles garment sweat shops as little as seven cents a garment.

For the undocumented worker her troubles are compounded beyond most of our imaginations. There are horrifying reports from the border of cases of women who never make it across the border when attempting illegal crossing. Rape is often expected by these women, who begin taking birth control to prevent an unwanted pregnancy in anticipation of being raped when trying to cross over. Illegal crossing includes risking no less than their lives by the method that they may be forced to cross. In addition, in recent years some women were murdered for the purpose of having their organs sold by organ brokers.¹⁶ Once on this side of the border, their deplorable experiences may range from below minimum wage earnings to being kept on ranches in indentured servant conditions.

In January 1993 the recently elected Democratic Clinton administration nominated Zoe Baird for the top-ranking government post of Attorney General. However, her nomination was challenged when it was made public that she had hired undocumented workers to care for her children. While she admitted awareness of the illegality of this act, her defense was that she was acting out of concern to provide child care for her children and was motivated as a mother more than anything else. In July 1992 13.2 percent of the labor force was unemployed or underemployed. There was no shortage of legal residents in this country who care for children. However, they would require minimum wages and other legal benefits, such as payment of social security and unemployment taxes. A person of Zoe Baird's professional stature must surely earn sufficient income to pay such a salary. In view of her

in some areas in this country because organic farmers are kept out of the agricultural industry's competition. Moreover, there is little land that has not been contaminated already.

The goal of socialist ideologies was liberation—liberation of the worker. For the feminist socialist, it was liberation of woman within post-industrial society. However, the ultimate liberation is that of enlightenment. Through conscious decisions guided by being informed about the intricate clockwork of industrial destruction of lives and natural resources, each of us is not only being responsible to others, but we are being accountable to ourselves. Most importantly, we are being there for the children who will inherit what we make of this world.

three

THE ANCIENT ROOTS OF MACHISMO

BECAUSE OF THE SEVERE ATTACK ON THE SOPHISTICATED INDIGENOUS CULTURES of México and the annihilation of their beliefs, pre-Conquest history is probably deemed irrelevant to our daily lives by most of us. Save for scholars, most of our people can recite the Apostles' Creed but would be hard pressed to identify the Mexica (Aztec) sun god, Huitzilopochtli, or the earth goddess and mother of Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue.

By the same token, many would also feel quite unconvinced that the Islamic faith of North Africa has any more to do with us than the theology of the Mexica. We may acknowledge a certain degree of obvious Arab influence in Mexican culture. To be sure, traces of Arabic are found in our Spanish language. When we put our hands up in desperate hope, for instance, and utter, *¡Ojala!* we are doing no more than reiterating an Arab expression used in the same context: *Oh, Allah!* But our connection with our ancient cousins is much deeper than many of us in the Americas imagine.

More significantly to us as women, ancient Arab practices are a part of our Spanish Catholic heritage. This is due to our historical ties with Spain. Until shortly before Spain's explorations and exploitation of the Americas Spain had been conquered and ruled by the North African followers of Muhammad for nearly eight hundred years. It is impossible to dismiss the tremendous influence Arabs had on Spanish culture after a period of domination that lasted over three times the duration of the United States's existence as a nation.

Once we recognize this fact of our history, we may more closely examine how this early and adamant culture has contributed to our social relations between the genders and how it has influenced the particular way in which woman has been commodified by Mexican culture. When acknowledging our kinship with the Arab world, we find uncanny similarities in both our peoples' social behavior and attitudes toward women that may be traced back thousands of years to the African continent.