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# Written from the Margins: The Power of Chicana Voices in Defining Their Own Feminism

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***Written from the Margins:***

***The Power of Chicana Voices  
in Defining Their Own Feminism***

Mackenzie Little

Spring 2018

Honors Thesis in History

Skidmore College

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*I would like to dedicate this work to an incredible number of women.*

*My mother, Kate, for constant love and valuing intelligence.*

*My advisor, Kate, for her patience, the language to pursue my questions,  
and occasional thrift shopping.*

*My housemates for everything-  
books, love, food, and being women who believe in other women.*

*My grandmother who was my constant cheerleader  
and taught me about having the strength to right some wrongs.*

*And the women who wrote down their thoughts for others to read,  
who have had the bravery and dedication to voice their opinions  
and stand in opposition,  
who pursue their own justice  
and pave the way for following generations.*

I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of any other part of my identity...Rather, we diminish ourselves by denying to others what we have shed blood to obtain for our children.<sup>1</sup>

—Audre Lorde, *There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions*

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, “There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” *Oppression and Social Justice: Critical Frameworks* ed. J. Andrzejewski, (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1996), 51.

## Introduction

Chicana feminist organizing, beginning in the 1970s and continuing as a movement today, exposes the exclusionary nature of the various currents of White feminism at the time, and the structures of racism and classism faced by Mexican-American women. Why would the cause of feminism, the pursuit of women's equality as seen by White feminists, ignore the intersection of oppressions present in marginalized women's lives? White women's focus on gender identity, setting aside other parts of identity such as race, ethnicity, class, education, religion, or citizenship, causes undue detriment to identity-based empowerment. The rhetoric and understandings of positionality circulating through Chicana living rooms, meetings, and social justice initiatives articulate what Gloria Anzaldúa termed interlocking oppressions, the lived experience of multiple oppressions based on social and economic categories. As White women were focused on pursuing workplace equality and ways out of 1950s housewifery, there were, and continue to be, less publicized, increasingly radical movements among marginalized women. The experiences shared by Chicana women in intellectual, social, and emotional circles during the 1960s and 1970s, gave birth to new lenses, voices, and intricacies in gender theory, revolutionary feminism, and the politics of change.

Through the historic presence of Mexican American women, who self-identify as Chicanas, we see the development of the Chicana feminist movement throughout the struggles it faced in a gender-specific organizing context dominated by White feminism. As students, activists, writers, and feminists, Chicanas radically alter the landscape of their lived experiences—which the surrounding White culture uses as an exterior weapon against them—and make their identity the source of their empowerment. This history, of women, of revolutionary ideas, and of Latin American culture in the United States, has been dismissed and

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shoved under the rug by dominant discourses, leading to a harmfully diminutive perspective of the role of Chicanas in radical feminist history. A silence exists in the historiography; the evidence of a movement of revolutionaries which is a part of U.S. history, a part of feminist history, remains suppressed beneath histories of White, dominant culture. These pathways of women of color feminists are often articulated as developing during the 1980s, yet the contributions of Chicanas and other women of color during the decades of the Sixties and Seventies proves otherwise. The experience of marginalized identities contributes to the understanding of larger movements, yet those who have faced multiple and simultaneously oppressions have been silenced rather than celebrated.

The power of narrative in history plays a vital role in understanding the power of decolonial voices. Chicanos in the early to mid-twentieth century began to create interstitial spaces as scholars and writers.<sup>2</sup> Their work became an essential intervention of oppositional history-telling. The writing and publishing of Mexican American women in the 1970s added their own interventions and command to intellectual spaces. The spaces created by women writers serve to uncover transformations and trace change from an internal and decolonial place, rather than write history as an “us versus them” narrative. Emma Pérez, author of *The Decolonial Imaginary*, works to expose “how historians have participated in a politics of historical writing in which erasure—the erasure of race, gender, sexualities, and especially differences—was not intentional, but rather a symptom of the type of narrative emplotment unconsciously [or consciously persuasive] chosen by historians.”<sup>3</sup> We can acknowledge the historical silencing of women, as men have been legitimized as the record keepers, and the documentation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pérez, 27.

female experiences that have survived are mostly relationally defined by male influencers. However, the legacy of silence must not permeate to the continued writing of history. Pérez says a “middle voice quietly articulates a position that remains unheard unless one excavates deeply.”<sup>4</sup> Burying narratives written from the margins limits the telling of history and leave holes in the historiography. Women’s voices must be privileged and norms of writing history adapted. Pérez continues her critique of historical writing for its dismissal and lack of analytic perspective when seeking answers. She problematizes its structures by saying:

What we know, what we discover as we venture into other worlds, is that we can only repeat the voices previously unheard, rebuffed, or underestimated as we attempt to redeem that which has been disregarded in our history. Voices of women from the past, voices of Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Indias, are utterances which are still minimized, spurned, even scorned.<sup>5</sup>

The mission is then to create histories that keep voices present and draw them from the margins. They are meant to be heard and considered to be of consequence. Chicanas in the 1960s created a vast language network and unified a movement of woman-powered action. Their work has contributed to the voices of feminists today and continued to be a locus of female-centered organizing in dispossessed communities. To locate women at the center of historical analysis is not just to include formerly excluded subjects; it fundamentally alters the way in which history is written, and in turn how it is learned.<sup>6</sup> It is not a matter of whether the history is there, it is that the books exist, but without a bookshelf to hold them. There is no reason for Chicanas to rest at the margins when they have been writing the scripts.

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<sup>4</sup> Pérez, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Pérez, xv.

<sup>6</sup> Yolanda Broyles-González, *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*, Maylei Blackwell, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 27.



## Sources & Methodology

I focus on Chicanas' roles as students, activists, writers, and feminists beginning in the 1960s. Through these avenues of involvement, the development of a Chicana feminist discourse becomes apparent. Language, mobilizing processes, and publications provide evidence of an interconnected generational history that leaves a legacy on feminist thought and action, beginning during the radicalism of the 1960s, rather than as a result of White feminist action. Documenting the path navigated by women of color must include the avenues traveled to "the production of political knowledge and registers of meaning" that influence the construction of theories and insurgent identities.<sup>7</sup> Using the writings of Martha Cotera, a writer and activist of Chicana politics and feminism, and Dr. Maylei Blackwell, a Chicana historian of gender and social justice, as frameworks and evidence of Chicana feminist discourse, I trace the development and contributions of Chicanas to a larger language of feminist activism that has been marginalized and extinguished in historical discussions of feminist action in the United States.

Sonya Rose defines gender history as "based on the fundamental idea that what is means to be a man or a woman has a history."<sup>8</sup> She deems it necessary because "the past is *reconstructed* through historical scholarship," thereby the process of reconstruction and narrative telling is vital to the knowledge that is produced.<sup>9</sup> Women have been neglected as historical subjects because of the viewpoint that history is about "the exercise and transmission of power in the realms of politics and economics," arenas in which the actors have been seen as almost

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<sup>7</sup> Maylei Blackwell, "Spinning the Record," *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Sonya O. Rose, "Why Gender History?" *What is Gender History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Rose, 1.

entirely men.<sup>10</sup> By crafting historical narrative with attention to both men and women, a more complete image of the past can be achieved. However, this approach must go beyond the mere inclusion of women and analyze the impact of their roles as social, political, and economic players. That said, a universalist approach to women's history causes the diminishing and erasure of differences among women and often leads to a production of history that isolates women from the history of men, "reinforcing the marginalization of feminist history."<sup>11</sup>

Blackwell interrogates the silencing of the historicity of women of color feminisms by dominant forms of "historiographic practice," in her book *¡Chicana Power!*; it is a theme that resonates throughout her other writings and oral history projects.<sup>12</sup> It is the distortion of the historical record that marginalizes Chicana feminism during both the Chicano movement and the Women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I examine multiple sites through Blackwell's contributions, as well as an interview she gave for The Women Who Rock Oral History Project out of the University of Washington. Blackwell articulates a need to complicate notions of subjectivities in socio-political movements in order "to see the multiple sites of contestation," and recover histories that have been rendered silent by dominant historical narrative practice.<sup>13</sup>

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Martha Cotera's self-published work, *The Chicana Feminist*, provides an essential framework in studying the development of a Chicana feminist consciousness. Her speech to the Texas Women's Political Caucus in 1972, the transcript titled "Feminism as We See It," directly addresses Chicanas and White women in their combined influence, yet vastly differing approaches, to the pursuit of women's rights. Cotera calls for Chicanas to remain aware of how racism impacts their lives and to remember their heritage, the roots of where they come from,

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<sup>10</sup> Rose, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Blackwell, "Spinning the Record," 14.

<sup>13</sup> Blackwell, "Spinning the Record," 27.

and the lived experiences of their oppression as they pursue their rights as women. In the same moment, she addresses the “Anglo woman’s chauvinistic attitude,” that they will liberate themselves and then help the rest who follow. She calls for Chicanas to recognize the positionality within their communities that allows them to gain intellectual and political independence, but to use the respect of “*una mujer con huevos* (a woman who is strong), a woman who thinks and acts on community issues,” to benefit all women.<sup>14</sup> Cotera’s work speaks to the role of identity in action for Chicanas as they reveal their own feminism.

Virginia Espino, a public historian and scholar of Chicana and Labor Movement Studies, interviewed Chicana activists Gloria Arellanes, Victoria Castro, Grace Montañez Davis, Geraldine Zapata, and Lilia Aceves between 2008 and 2013. Her conversations with these women about their political participation during the 1960s and 1970s adds the dimension of hindsight to accounts of the Chicana movement. My own interview with Virginia Espino highlights the generational influences of the radical Chicanas who opened avenues for future women to record and influence the project of feminist action in educational institutions and through community activism. These interviews, along with written accounts and publications from conferences and meetings from the 1970s and early 1980s, help examine the development of Chicana feminism as it arises in conversation with and in contradiction to White feminism.

It is not my place to tell these histories, but it is also not my place to silence them or draw them from the dust. I have the power and privilege to draw attention to the gaps in this history, but ideally it would not be my voice as a White woman. Linda Martín Alcoff addresses the need for positionality in relation to action and pursuit of social justice in her essay “What Should White People Do?” In order to address racism, White people need to acknowledge the privilege

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Cotera, “Feminism as We See It,” *The Chicana Feminist*, (Austin: Information Systems Development, 1977), 18.

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of their racial identity, and the fact that Whiteness is a racialized category. “In much feminist literature the normative, dominant subject position is described in detail as a white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied male.”<sup>15</sup> However, the position of White feminists both as Whites and as females means they dually participate as tools and beneficiaries of racism.<sup>16</sup> White women must therefore engage with the social positioning that makes them both the oppressor and the oppressed. To follow the development of Chicana feminism in a field dominated by White women necessitates contending with my own privilege and histories. As a middle-class, White female undergraduate student it is necessary to position myself accordingly as I conduct and present research. As I examine the development of diverse feminisms, my contributions are limited by my position—my identity and environment—as a White woman in the United States.<sup>17</sup> I therefor seek sources by and about Latinas and other women of color, who articulate their own involvement, theorizing, and oppression.

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### Background

The rapid westward expansion of the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to White encroachment on Mexican land. By the turn of the century, Mexican Americans experienced severe segregation and discrimination in states such as Texas and California. The Great Depression led to increased racism as White migrant workers competed with Mexicans in the flailing American economy. By the onset of World War II, Mexican American’s were severely marginalized in areas they had lived in for years before White settlement. Mexican American men joined the military, many with the hopes of returning to an improved citizenship after

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<sup>15</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” *Hypatia* 13.3 (Summer 1998), 3.

<sup>16</sup>Alcoff, 4.

<sup>17</sup> It is essential for the knowledge I have of my own feminism, and its part in my identity, to encompass the relevant context of its origins and the multiplicity of identities that have led woman to their current societal position.

servicing their country. However, segregationist politics continued through the 1940s and into the 1960s, even as many Mexican Americans fought for equal political standing.<sup>18</sup> The younger generation saw their parents' attempts at integration as failures, leading youth to engage in radical protests and form nationalist groups like the Brown Berets. They were calling for a reinterpretation of the Latino's place in history. Juan Gonzalez, in his book *Harvest of Empire*, writes that "both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans [insisted they] were descendants of conquered peoples who had been forcibly subjugated when the United States annexed their territories during its expansion."<sup>19</sup> Ethnographer Robert Alvarez documented nearly two hundred years of a migratory circuit between Mexico's Baja California and the U.S. state of California in the old Mexican neighborhood of Lemon Grove in San Diego.<sup>20</sup> On land occupied by their ancestors, nationalist groups organized agendas around distinguishing their heritage rather than assimilating.<sup>21</sup> Students at Texas A&M turned the slang word *chicano*, used among poor people in the Southwest for those born north of the Rio Grande, into a badge of pride. Naming their identity helped young people to connect culturally with Mexico and their heritage.<sup>22</sup> The Chicano student movement, most influential between 1968 and 1971, arose during what Juan Gonzalez terms "The Radical Nationalist Period."<sup>23</sup> The Chicano Movement, or *El movimiento*, "emerged from a multitude of community-based political and civil rights struggles," contending with issues ranging from agricultural and industrial labor to educational access, political

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<sup>18</sup> Juan Gonzalez, "Chapter 5 Mexicans: Pioneers of a Different Type," *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 104.

<sup>19</sup> Gonzalez, "Chapter 10: The Return of Juan Seguin: Latinos and the Remaking of American Politics," 174.

<sup>20</sup> Gonzalez, "Mexicans: Pioneers of a Different Type," 107.

<sup>21</sup> Gonzalez, "The Return of Juan Seguin," 174.

<sup>22</sup> Gonzalez, "Mexicans: Pioneers of a Different Type," 105.

<sup>23</sup> Gonzalez, "The Return of Juan Seguin," 174.

representation, racism, discrimination, resistance to police and state repression, land grant claims, and local control of community institutions.<sup>24</sup>

In order to understand the organizing context of Chicanas and the conflictual nature of feminism within the movement, both the Chicano movement and the White women's liberation movement need to be examined in conjunction and opposition. The Chicano Movement participated in marginalizing women, even as it included them in its meetings and organizing structures. Blackwell outlines three levels of women's marginalization within the movement itself; Mexican-American women were seen as auxiliary members, discouraged from participating in leadership, and were constantly forced to navigate the objectifying sexual politics of the group.<sup>25</sup> By the late 1960s, Chicanas not only had to manage the politics of the Chicano movement, but also those of the Women's movement. Within the Chicano movement, White women working towards "women's liberation" were believed to influence the Chicana to become a more radical, aggressive feminist, threatening unification and undermining collective goals. Contrary to this belief, the dynamic political environment helped Chicana voices create space for agendas engaging with their identity as Mexican Americans and women. Martha Cotera, writing in 1973, contends that "research and detailed analysis of our [Chicano] cultural patterns and tradition of strong women prove that we have a long, beautiful history of Mexican/Chicano feminism which is not Anglo-inspired, imposed, or oriented."<sup>26</sup> It was with a focus on their Chicana identity that new modes of feminist thinking problematized the language of White feminism.

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Commented [ML9]: By who? Explain how this was a misconception

Commented [ML10]: Not an additive to nor without influence from—The White feminist movement of the 60s and 70s did not show interest in representing the needs of Chicanas as women.

<sup>24</sup> Maylei Blackwell, "Contested Histories: *Las Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, Chicana Feminisms, and Print Culture in the Chicano Movement, 1968-1973," in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aida Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Patricia Zavella, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 59-60.

<sup>25</sup> Blackwell, "Chicana Insurgencies," *¡Chicana Power!*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Martha Cotera, "When Women Speak: Our Feminist Legacy," *The Chicana Feminist*, 9.

The White feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s did not show interest in representing the needs of Chicanas as women. Chicanas acted within a political environment hostile to the expression of their needs as they contended with issues racially and sexually. García said: “Chicana feminists had to first define themselves and their agenda before they could even consider participating in the women’s movements and then it would have to be on the basis of white feminists’ respect for Chicanas.”<sup>27</sup> Through their position as working women, students, and active community members, Chicanas articulated a consciousness that went beyond their identity as women and addressed the complexities of the intersecting identities that unified them. Many Chicanas “...believed that some of the goals promoted by the women’s movement, such as access to more upper-middle class and executive positions, did not make sense to Chicanas who represented a predominantly working-class population.”<sup>28</sup> By focusing on issues directly relating to their lived experience, Chicanas starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, contributed seminal discourse to women of color feminist theory and modes of activism.

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### Avenues of Involvement

It began with the Kennedy campaign in the 1960’s, continued with social and economic issues in the mid-sixties, and then on to reform in the educational system in the late sixties. Further on, we moved into political participation in 1970 and to the founding of the Raza Unida Party. As is the nature of the Chicanas involved with this conference [Texas Women’s Political caucus, 1972], you have a group of polished, battle-scarred veterans of a social movement.<sup>29</sup> (Martha Cotera)

Through various avenues, Chicanas found ways to mobilize around their experiences of simultaneous racism and sexism in educational institutions, the work place, and social programs.

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Decades of hard work and confrontation with power structures dominated by majorities gave the

<sup>27</sup> Alma M. García, ed., *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 192.

<sup>28</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Martha Cotera, “Feminism as We See It,” *The Chicana Feminist*, 17.

Chicana movement a foundation of experience to articulate the needs of marginalized groups on women's issues inside of their communities and in society at large. The survival strategies developed through their experiences of oppression translated into avenues of activism. In an interview for the Women Who Rock Oral History project out of the University of Washington, Dr. Maylei Blackwell discusses the work of women of color and how it has impacted social movement politics in the field of academia. To understand the feminism of women of color as emerging only in response to the racism of White feminism recenters hegemonic feminism instead of "providing an understanding of the diverse historical impulses that gave rise to women of color feminisms."<sup>30</sup> Blackwell says that today is about a blend of citing those who have gone before, but also continuing to put in the work. Women like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, or Audre Lord did not just write; "they made home out of their exclusion."<sup>31</sup> Dissatisfied with hegemonic silencing of women, people of color, and especially women of color, their voices speak out to address the experience of the dispossessed as lesbian women of color who know what it is to be marginalized by society.

By studying the margins, the signs become apparent of where society has frayed. They are signifiers of larger issues, of the edges that have been ignored yet are integral to the whole, and the voices of those at the margins are not privileged enough to just be able to write. Alongside other women of color, they craft what the Combahee River Collective, a Black lesbian feminist organization, described as the necessary combination of theory and praxis that arises from a feminism rooted in experience.<sup>32</sup> They must do the work to make the words be heard.

Commented [ML14]: Combahee River Collective  
"the necessary combination of theory and praxis that arises  
from a feminism rooted in experience."

<sup>30</sup> Blackwell, "Spinning the Record," 18.

<sup>31</sup> Maylei Blackwell, interviewed by Michelle Habell-Pallan, transcript by Shanoa Pinkham, Women Who Rock Oral History Project, *University of Washington*, February 19, 2011, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement [1978]," *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural*, ed. Maggie Humm, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1992), 134.



Pathways, cleared by mothers for their daughters, can be found throughout Mexican-American heritage. These pathways led the way to political mobilization during the 1960s that changed the nature of Mexican-American women's involvement in community activism and their resistance to the hegemonic power of White America.

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### Chicanas as Students

Universities and colleges were at the foreground of the emerging Chicana identity during the 1960s and early 1970s. Attending college meant many women stepped outside of their family homes and into unfamiliar environments for the first time.<sup>33</sup> Young women were pressing into the field of education and pursuing degrees as a first generation of women in higher education. For some students, they were the first members of their family to attend college. Although educational opportunities existed, they were limited in their availability and many women did not find systems of support on campuses throughout California. Through their involvement with organizations on campus (student groups, women's advocacy, etc.) Chicana students became more aware of the discrepancies and biases in their education. Demand for Chicano Studies grew, as students called for syllabi to reflect their own histories. In a piece published in the Spring 1974 *Civil Rights Digest*, Consuelo Nieto, a professor at California State University, wrote: "Women's studies courses should not exclude the unique history of minority women from the curriculum."<sup>34</sup> She highlights the significance of different groups and the need to recognize distinctions rather than risk reductiveness. Curricular radicalism remains a contested space complicated by identity based processes and regional histories. The Chicano movement worked

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<sup>33</sup> Sonia A. López, "The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement," from *Essays on La Mujer* (Los Angeles: UCLA, Chicano Studies Center, 1977, 16-29), *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Consuelo Nieto, "The Chicana and the Women's Rights Movement", in "Section 4: Chicana Feminists and White Feminists: Unresolved Conflicts," *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 210.

to include Mexican-American narrative in curriculums, yet Chicanas were left to pursue the inclusion of women and their own stories in their studies.

Mexican-American women dealt with a specific sort of exceptionalism in the university environment. At a time when many schools were just beginning to become co-educational women of color faced incredibly marginalizing educational futures.<sup>35</sup> The intricacies of opportunity to attend school in the first place collided with the collegiate environment once female students were admitted. They faced economic and racial discrimination from professors, roommates, and peers, all while experiencing an intense cultural isolation on campuses dominated by the White majority. *El movimiento* provided a cultural home for first-generation students who felt increasingly isolated by the newness of college; it was a space of inclusion in campus environments dominated by White students. However, participation in the movement could be incredibly taxing for students contending with multiple social demands. Between providing economically for their families, academic commitments, and participating in activism many found themselves contending with new understandings of their identity in a variety of contexts.

Victoria Castro reflected on her collegiate environment decades later, still highly cognizant of the role her ethnicity played in her campus experience. Starting school in 1963 at California State University, she recalls her first day on campus and being struck by how White it all was.

“Where did the Mexicans go?”...Remember, my elementary, my junior high, and my high school, I’m the majority ethnically, and when I go to Cal State, I now get what it means to be a minority and go to a math class and not only are you one of the limited females in the class, you are probably the only Latina in the class, or there’s maybe one other Latino in the class. It was a white school. So, it was a

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<sup>35</sup> Ivy League schools did not begin to admit women until 1977, Columbia not until 1983. Candace Dempsey, “When did each of the Ivy League colleges start admitting women?” Quora, October 9, 2017, <https://www.quora.com/When-did-each-of-the-Ivy-League-colleges-start-admitting-women>.

shocker. That was, “Okay, now I get what a minority is.” So that was also, “This is not right.”<sup>36</sup>

Castro experienced severe sexism from professors in her math classes, but continued with her studies, eventually entering a career in teaching. She speaks to Chicano Studies as finding a haven to learn more about herself, one that would also influence her future in education.<sup>37</sup> Antonia Hernández is another example of a Chicana woman who achieved higher educational status than many of her peers. After graduating from UCLA with a law degree, she went on to serve as the civil rights attorney for the case of *Madrigal v. Quilligan* in 1978, crafting a civil suit against LA County hospital, where Chicana and Black women were forcibly sterilized, among many other cases.<sup>38</sup> After helping produce the documentary *No Más Bebés*, a film documenting the experiences of the women in *Madrigal v. Quilligan*, Virginia Espino says of Antonia and other legal professionals involved in the case: “Well they were the first of their generation to go to college, to graduate. I mean they probably had incredible, incredible egos.”<sup>39</sup> Being a student was an intensely isolating yet empowering experience for many Chicanas. Through their experiences within Chicano student groups, women came together and forged their own organizations, privileging their issues while still maintaining a connection to cultural loyalties.

In *¡Chicana Power!*, Maylei Blackwell examines the ways in which Anna NietoGomez and the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc “forged an autonomous space for women’s political participation,”<sup>40</sup> within the gendered confines of Chicano cultural nationalism on campuses and

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<sup>36</sup> Victoria Castro. Interview by Virginia Espino. “La Batalla Está Aquí”: The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles. Transcript. Alhambra, California. Sessions 3 and 6, March 3, 2013, 0:54:26.

<sup>37</sup> Victoria Castro, 01:27:00.

<sup>38</sup> *No Más Bebés*, digital film, directed by Renee Tajima-Peña (2015; Los Angeles).

<sup>39</sup> Virginia Espino. Interviewed by Mackenzie Little. Skidmore College. December 7, 2017. 0:41:09.

<sup>40</sup> Blackwell, “Introduction,” *¡Chicana Power!*, 1.

within community politics. The Hijas de Cuauhtémoc challenged norms by mobilizing Chicanas “around the gendered and sexual experience of racial and economic marginalization.”<sup>41</sup> Within Chicano groups on campus, women contended with isolation by their male peers. Anna Nieto Gomez describes her understanding of masculinity as it was constructed through movement discourses. Masculinity on campus was about trying out idealized male roles.<sup>42</sup> Chicano students had to contend with being “Anglo” if they did not perform “the exaggerated stereotypical macho,” yet they faced a double-edged sword. Maylei Blackwell helps problematize the performance of *machismo* by examining it from the view of hegemonic white culture.

Historically racist stereotypes in the dominant culture conflate the word *machismo* (originally a form of male conduct and responsibility under patriarchy) with all forms of misogyny that defines sexism as a Latino, working class problem and makes invisible the hegemonic project of everyday male supremacy in the dominant culture.

Within Chicano groups, female students were often relegated to traditional gender roles, supporting male leadership through logistical work and romantic relationships.<sup>43</sup>

Chicanos ostracized their female compatriots because of their performance of the masculine behavior expected of them by White society. “Much of the work of organizing Chicano resistance was dependent on women’s labor while simultaneously making it invisible.”<sup>44</sup> In 1969, Anna Nieto Gomez was democratically elected to serve as president of MEChA, but she faced disruption to her role from the “old-guard male leadership” who attempted to hold control of the organization from the perimeter by holding meetings behind her

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<sup>41</sup> Blackwell, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>42</sup> Blackwell, “Retrofitted Memory,” *¡Chicana Power!*, 99.

<sup>43</sup> Sonia A. López, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Blackwell, “Chicana Insurgencies,” *¡Chicana Power!*, 68.

back.<sup>45</sup> Through her role as president, Nieto Gomez faced the sexism of her peers, but it was her role as a counselor to new college students where she came to political consciousness of Chicana oppression. Many women did not have access to birth control and some students who faced unwanted pregnancies attempted self-abortions to save their educational futures and because they felt they would be disgraced by returning home pregnant.<sup>46</sup> Nieto Gomez realized the horrific consequences of a dearth of resources and reproductive rights for Mexican-American women. She helped found the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc to help bring resources to the attention of young women and contend with issues based on being both Chicanas and women.

The Hijas de Cuauhtémoc played a consequential role in the propagation of feminist dialogue between Chicanas. Established in 1971 as “an organizational mechanism for women’s political education,” they bonded the ties of Chicanas within *El movimiento* with their needs as women.<sup>47</sup> The Hijas were dedicated to providing a ground for Chicanas to share their experiences and a space to be insurgent, find allies, and generate resistance. “The Hijas de Cuauhtémoc felt they had rekindled the fires and could now pass on the message of the importance of women’s education. It authorized them to organize around the immediate survival of Chicanas on campus to work on a feminist political project.”<sup>48</sup> Through their publication, Hijas de Cuauhtémoc reworked political and symbolic understandings of what it meant to be Chicano, rendering notions of “tradition, culture, and history that circumscribed racial, sexual, and gendered expectations of women.” Off-campus Chicano organizations were more settled in their role as Chicano and supported the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc in their efforts to publish material

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<sup>45</sup> Blackwell, “Contested Histories,” *Chicana Feminisms*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Blackwell, “Chicana Insurgencies,” *¡Chicana Power!*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Blackwell, “Contested Histories,” *Chicana Feminisms*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> Blackwell, “Retrofitted Memory,” *¡Chicana Power!*, 104.

for women. Their work served to create dialogues among Chicanas and members of the Chicano movement, as well as craft a linguistic basis for the terms of Chicana feminism.<sup>49</sup> Chicanas adopted different strategies to be heard and to achieve their agendas.

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Geraldine Zapata had a different association with activism in an educational environment, since her experience was not in a college environment, but focused on local public schools. In reflection, Zapata says she wishes she had gotten her degree.<sup>50</sup> However she also states, “that academic education changes you, and in some ways the change is not conducive to being an activist, to challenging the institutions.” Zapata speaks to a large core of Chicana activists who based their organizing work in their communities. Her experiences centered around improving educational quality and access for Mexican-American youth. “Sometimes under certain conditions I might say like I have a Ph.D. in community involvement or something... I think sometimes people don’t acknowledge the worth of anything that I might have done because I don’t have a degree...”<sup>51</sup> However concrete her accomplishments, she still articulates a desire to have a degree that legitimates her commitment. Zapata sits astride the border between activism occurring in educational institutions and a large portion of Chicana activism happening within communities, addressing multiple women’s issues through the cultural lens of the Chicana experience.

### **Chicanas as Activists**

Difficulties arose for Chicanas who saw their participation in the Chicano Movement minimalized or dismissed as soon as they began to center women’s issues. Consuelo Nieto calls for Chicanas to participate in the mainstream feminist movement to keep the Chicana perspective

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<sup>49</sup> Blackwell, “Contested Histories,” *Chicana Feminisms*, 67.

<sup>50</sup> Geraldine Zapata. Interview by Virginia Espino. *Mexican American Civil Rights Pioneers: Historical Roots of an Activist Generation*. Transcript. Monterey Park, California. Session 7, June 24, 2011, 0:20:38.

<sup>51</sup> Geraldine Zapata, 0:24:49.2

present and avoid polarizing their Chicana identity from the shared identity of woman.

Navigating lines of cultural loyalty while critiquing structures of sexism that have permeated relationships between men and women required a dual-activism. “The Chicana must tell her brother, ‘I am not here to emasculate you; I am here to fight with you shoulder to shoulder as an equal. If you can only be free when I take second place to you, then you are not truly free—and I want freedom for you as well as for me.’”<sup>52</sup> Nieto says Chicanas “must demand that dignity and respect within the women’s rights movement that allows her to practice feminism within the context of her own culture.”<sup>53</sup> She speaks directly to the ebb and flow of influence coming from outside influences as well as internal knowledge. Gloria Arellanes remembers her experiences of denying her involvement with women’s liberation because she saw her feminism to be culturally situated. “To me, women’s libbers were the white women who were burning their bras at that time, and we weren’t doing that. We were walking with our men, not behind. It took me a very long time to even understand that, and so now I understand it and I realize how important it was.”<sup>54</sup> For women of color to see each other sharing feminisms and celebrating unity and difference created spaces for the development of a distinct consciousness that did not need, not ask for, the go-ahead from White feminism. For Victoria Castro, her early experience as a community activist gave her a defense to stand behind in the light of criticism for feminist mobilizing. “I think I could always stand in my own integrity in the sense of, like I said, I came from being a community activist to a college activist, and so I could wear that badge, sort of, and defend myself.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Consuelo Nieto, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 210.

<sup>53</sup> Consuelo Nieto, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 211.

<sup>54</sup> Gloria Arellanes. Interview by Virginia Espino. “La Batalla Está Aquí”: The Chicana/o Movement in Los Angeles. Transcript. El Monte, California. Session 3, October 11, 2011, 0:46:24.2

<sup>55</sup> Victoria Castro, March 3, 2013 Session 3, 00:24:49.

Women were marching, rallying, and protesting.<sup>56</sup> They were also active in creating publications for distribution, writing for newspapers and establishing community assistance centers.

More than using memory to add women to existing movement narratives (i.e. Aztec Princesses or revolutionary sweethearts), the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc shifted the historical terrain of struggle by retrofitting new narratives that engendered the project of liberation.<sup>57</sup>

Inspired by the Hijas de Cuauhtémoc, Comisión Femenil was founded in 1971 and led to the creation of the Chicana Service Action Center in Boyle Heights in 1972.<sup>58</sup> The Center's main objective was to provide counseling services to grassroots Spanish-speaking women who were looking for employment and education opportunities.<sup>59</sup> Alicia Sandoval says the Center focused on using “rap sessions, consciousness-raising techniques, workshops, and conferences in an overall humanistic effort to liberate the Mexican-American woman from sexism as well as racism—a two-front battle.”<sup>60</sup> It was with distinct acknowledgement that women engaged with *double militancia*, or dual activism.<sup>61</sup>

Joan Scott poignantly articulates the power of vocabulary and the need to address the essence of words for their power and limitations when she says: “Those who would codify the meanings of words fight a losing battle, for words, like the ideas and things they are meant to signify, have a history.”<sup>62</sup> In the Chicana movement, words indeed carried power. The Chicano Movement's focus on *hermandad*, brotherhood, excluded the women who identified with their

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<sup>56</sup> Gloria Arellanes, 1:25:25.

<sup>57</sup> Blackwell, “Retrofitted Memory,” ; *Chicana Power!*, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Alicia Sandoval, “Chicana Liberation,” *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 204.

<sup>59</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 204.

<sup>60</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 205.

<sup>61</sup> Blackwell, “Introduction,” ; *Chicana Power!*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No 5. December, 1986. (American Historical Association), 1053.



Mexican-American compatriots because of the gendered nature of the language. To amend their exclusion, Chicanas consciously crafted an *hermanidad*, the sisterhood of Chicanas, making a language of their own and terms of unity.

Founded to continue the mission of *hermanidad*, sisterhood, Comisión Femenil transitioned from their 1960s activisms into tangible community programming in the 1970s and 80s. Lilia Aceves was a founding member of Comisión Femenil. In an interview with Virginia Espino, she talks about the objective of creating a sisterhood among Mexican women. The concept of *hermanidad* would equal the companionship and unity of brotherhood within the Chicano Movement, but with a unique and focused attention on the gendered aspects of Chicana women's experiences with racial and economic oppressions.

Well, right now that you bring it up, there was already an *hermanidad*. I mean, you were in the same struggles together, so you weren't necessarily in competition as it's gotten now. I mean, I think that some of the younger women and some of the women that were going to college, they were in a more competitive style than in the beginnings that we were. We might have gotten competitive going up the ladder, but as we started as an organization we were very supportive of each other.<sup>63</sup>

Grace Montañez Davis, a contemporary of Comisión Femenil speaks to what characterized the organization and the issues they were most focused on pursuing.

I know that they were mainly professional women. They were going into different fields, and they were lending support to each other. Their meetings usually addressed some skill that they needed to cultivate and so on. I'm trying to think if they were concerned with abortion, with women's rights to make decisions about their own body. No, it's something I remember; they became very active in this. The county hospital was sterilizing women, the poor women who were on relief and so on, and I remember they became very active in that field. They had women who were studying to be lawyers or had become lawyers, and they helped a lot. I think they actually sued the county hospital to put a stop to that.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Lilia Aceves. Interview by Virginia Espino. Mexican American Civil Rights Pioneers: Historical Roots of an Activist Generation. Transcript. Alhambra, California. Session 5, January 30, 2009, 01:02:01.

<sup>64</sup> Grace Montañez Davis, 00:15:04.

Davis refers to Comisión's involvement in the Madrigal v. Quilligan case. The suit brought together several Chicana organizations, many with differing motivations and *modi operandi*, yet unified in the pursuit of justice for women who experienced bodily violation at the hand of the oppressor and were wronged by the system.

Activists from the 1960s and 1970s remained active as community members and leaders, participating in various forms of government positions to try and improve resources and social circumstances. They applied their experiences in radical student movements to feminist theorizing in academia and to Chicano-centric organizations.<sup>65</sup> New language emerged in these spaces, as women began speaking and writing with words that articulated their positionality and struggles, sharing their experiences and mobilizing each other.

### **Chicanas as Writers**

*"Silence is starvation."*<sup>66</sup>

My dear *hermanas*, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose—we never had any privileges. I wanted to call the dangers "obstacles" but that would be a kind of lying. We can't *transcend* the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance.<sup>67</sup>

Writer Gloria Anzaldúa penned this commentary in "Speaking in Tongues," a chapter of her book *Borderlands* (1987), which revolutionized publications in the literary world for women of color writers, and has become a seminal text in studying intersectional feminisms. Anzaldúa also co-authored *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) with Cherríe Moraga, an anthology of essays on the experiences of women of color. Moraga says that "within the context of the late 1970s utterly

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<sup>65</sup> Victoria Castro, 00:37:18.

<sup>65</sup> Gloria Arellanes, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Cherríe Moraga, "La Güera", *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues", *This Bridge Called My Back*, 163.

white-middleclass-dominated genre of feminist writings (mediated by white instructors), *Bridge* was the logical and necessary critical outcome to my feminist studies.”<sup>68</sup> For women of color writers, the development of communities through shared work and publication was a legitimizing factor in the pursuit of their own voice. By building coalitions, writers were able to express the differences in experience for women of color based on their racial, sexual, and economic circumstances. Moraga’s essay “La Güera” addressed the need for authorship as a processing tool to understanding her own self and the relational narratives she shares with others. As the daughter of an immigrant who achieved a level of education higher than any other woman in her family, she says: “...the joys of looking like a white girls ain’t so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister’s being beaten because she’s Black, it’s pretty much the same principle. We’re both being beaten any way you look at it.”<sup>69</sup> For Moraga, it is through her writing that she is able to contend with the sources of her oppression, naming the enemy within and outside of the self, and make authentic, non-hierarchical connections between oppressed peoples.<sup>70</sup>

Commented [ML22]: collabs with Black feminists

The language of these women is insurgent. They radically redefine genre and memory through their narrative voices. Moraga identifies the need for transformation when she says: “We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women’s fear of, and resistance to, one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.”<sup>71</sup> A discourse develops through correspondence, shared publication, and a literary take on redefining the who, what, and how of the historical record. However, it is not without consequence. The act of writing reveals deeply personal navigations through lived experience, often in language and

Commented [ML23]: quote to make this “come alive”

<sup>68</sup> Cherríe Moraga, “Appendix”, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 250.

<sup>69</sup> Cherríe Moraga, “La Güera,” *This Bridge Called My Back*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Moraga, “La Güera”, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Moraga, “La Güera”, 25.

modes of communication foreign to culturally inherited story telling. It is an amalgamation of languages, taking from the past and the present to enlist a dialect for the future. Moraga writes: “In my development as a poet, I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my brown mother, the brown in me.”<sup>72</sup> Aurora Levins Morales seconds Moraga, writing “If we’re the ones who can imagine it, if we’re the ones who dream about it, if we’re the ones who need it more, then no one else can do it. We’re the ones.”<sup>73</sup> They write of survivors, the need to insist on a future, one that emerges from those who have survived and are re-enlivened.<sup>74</sup>

The necessity for expression stems from the place of the subaltern. In a speech made in 1976 Martha Cotera said: “Within our society there are hierarchies of need because there have been hierarchies of oppression.”<sup>75</sup> She called for a coalition building among women, a way to address power differentials and create space for those voices the most in need of being heard. Judit Moschkovich proposed a tangible way for White women to learn the nuances of these spaces and open themselves to the experiences of minority-group women and women of color.

I don’t usually hear ‘Hey what do you think of the work of such and such Latin American feminist author,’ but rather, ‘Teach me everything you know.’...A great deal of information about Latin America is readily available in most libraries and bookstores. I say: read and listen.<sup>76</sup>

Women who have access to White feminism also have the ability to access voices of Chicana women, other Latina women, Black women, working-class, immigrant, lesbian, and trans-women through their writing. The published, and unpublished, works of women of color contribute to the field of feminism by expanding sources of knowledge and adding dialogue to the discourse, for those who will listen. However, as Moschkovich goes on, “when Anglo-

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<sup>72</sup> Moraga, “La Güera”, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Aurora Levins Morales, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 52.

<sup>74</sup> Moraga, “La Güera”, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Cotera, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 214.

<sup>76</sup> Judit Moschkovich, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 73

American women speak of developing a new feminist or women's culture, they are still working and thinking within an Anglo-American cultural framework."<sup>77</sup> The material is already there, it doesn't need to be new, it needs to be recognized, read, absorbed and brought to the forefront instead of being white-washed and made palatable for larger audience consumption. Yet when I recently visited the Harvard Bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, their Latin American history section included a book on Cuba, an art history anthology, and a biography of Simon Bolivar. Where are the books written by women? About women? About experiences outside of colonization and U.S. economic negotiations? Read the way these women write, because I will not even begin to try and match the eloquence with which they speak. By amplifying the language of Chicana women in the greater discourse of feminism, more voices are privileged in the dialogue of action against oppression. In turn, epistemologies of feminism are able to flourish.

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Audre Lorde, a Black writer-poet, feminist, lesbian, womanist, mother, and civil rights activist, in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," draws attention to the need for not only acknowledging difference, but empowering it and seeing it as vital.

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.<sup>78</sup>

Difference must not merely be a tolerated component of feminist cooperation, but seen as a wealth of polarity from which to draw from in the pursuit of a dialectic language.<sup>79</sup> Women must still "stretch across the gap of male ignorance" to educate men, but they are also there to educate each other, not necessarily through "This is my experience, can't you see my struggles?" but

Commented [ML25]: Wtf does this mean

<sup>77</sup> Judit Moschkovich, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 77.

<sup>78</sup> Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *This Bridge Called My Back*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," 95.

through the language of what is shared between women in the face of multiple oppressions.<sup>80</sup> Through sharing the process of writing and its trials and tribulations, Chicana women formed connections and contended with languages of power, giving form to feelings and feelings meaning.<sup>81</sup>

Anzaldúa says “A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.”<sup>82</sup> Through their work in academic institutions, publications, caucuses, speeches and personal communications, Chicanas and other women of color developed a mode of transmitting power to each other. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa proclaims: “In our common struggle and in our writing we reclaim our tongues.”<sup>83</sup> Writing served as an avenue of power through the articulation of shared experiences. It was a process dedicated to crafting individual voices who added to the collective. Women drafted a language with which to face their oppressions while also recognizing how those oppressions were internalized. Moraga and Anzaldúa say to other women of color: “We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race, and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves—even in our most private unspoken moments.”<sup>84</sup> By calling into account their shared experiences of the hegemonic power structures of sex, class, race, and sexuality they generate subversive dialogues and craft statements of power and unity. In her essay “Brownness” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Andrea Canaan writes:

I hold arm raised, fist clenched to the white superior culture. I embrace the brown community with respect and deep loving, but with firm insistence that being myself, being different—even radically different from my mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers—is my right, my duty my way of living a whole and sane existence,

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<sup>80</sup> Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” 96.

<sup>81</sup> Mirtha Quintanales, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 148.

<sup>82</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 162.

<sup>83</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 161.

<sup>84</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 196

accepting the responsibility and consequences of being true to myself in order to be true to my humanness in order to be true to my community.<sup>85</sup>

The words of women of color writers speak to their experiences and histories in ways that “White superior culture” and most authors of history cannot.

However, participating in certain avenues can also continue to marginalize the voices of women of color writers. Anzaldúa expresses concern about limited accessibility to resources when she says: “...I realize that many of us women of color who have strung degrees, credentials, and published books around our necks like pearls that we hang on to for dear life are in danger of contributing to the invisibility of our sister writers.”<sup>86</sup> Women who set a foundation for generations to come were also practicing self-awareness of what their accomplishments meant in a broader cultural context. The publication of progressive women writers like Anzaldúa and Moraga were still only a selection from within Chicana political thought. Yet, they set a precedent for the development of language and pursuit of dialogue for future generations. The works produced in the 1960s and early 1970s served as fuel for Mexican American women who were just coming to identify as Chicana. Virginia Espino speaks of her own experience:

So, it was really, like a tipping point, because people were challenging racism all across the United States. And gender exploitation, um, class exploitation, it was a time to really rebel. So, I benefitted from that, only after the fact, by professors who had lived it and experienced it themselves.<sup>87</sup>

By having material accessible to them, younger generations of Chicanas pushed further and explored the dynamics of womanhood and activism through personal experience with an analytic lens informed by the voices of women of color writers who were made accessible through publication and curricular development. Seeking their own engagement with the women’s issues

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<sup>85</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 236.

<sup>86</sup> Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 165.

<sup>87</sup> Virginia Espino, December 7, 2017, 0:16:18.

identified by White feminists in the 1960s and 70s, Chicanas continued to write, study, and participate in political movements, using the language of *hermandad* to speak to the specificities of their own feminisms. Their feminism emerges in conversation with White feminism and feminisms of color, but from circumstance and language distinctly their own.

### Chicanas as Feminists

Like you, we cannot separate our race and sex identity. Neither can we prioritize our need to survive with both intact. We must continue to face both issues together, as long as most white men and women refuse to face up to their racism.<sup>88</sup>

Chicanas developed courses of action and civic participation influenced by the Chicano Movement and in parallel to the White Women's Liberation Movement. Alma García points out that "Chicana feminists not only had to contend with the politics of the Chicano movement, but also with the politics of the women's movement."<sup>89</sup> The word feminism, its meaning in a social context and its power as an identity, was, and is, complicated by the intersecting identities of many Chicanas within these contexts. As a label, the term feminism holds political weight in identifying the ideological priorities of the individual within a larger organizing context. The Chicano Movement prioritized the unified national identity of Mexican Americans in the face of dominate White culture. Chicanas faced marginalization on this front as their identities and issues as women were placed on the back burner. In the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, they were subjected to racialized grouping and discrimination as White women failed to address racism and class differences in the pursuit of addressing women's issues.

Martha Cotera cautions against the additive nature of women in histories, and the "Us too!" assertions of Chicanas as the Anglo Women's liberation movement addresses this neglect.

<sup>88</sup> Martha Cotera, "Among the Feminists: Racist Classist Issues—1976 speech", *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 220.

<sup>89</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 192.

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If the historical narrative neglects the presence of Chicana women, if the “herstories” of the Women’s lib movement do not include them, Cotera says the cultural knowledge of Chicana history must take its place in informing the past, present, and future of the movement through retrofitting memory and historical narrative.<sup>90</sup> Major Chicana feminist activities in the 1960s and 70s are omitted from the telling of the feminist movement in the United States. Beverly Hawkins asks, if this is because of the restrictions of white feminism to the cause of Chicana women, how then is it racially perpetuating silences?<sup>91</sup> It signifies the continued marginalization of the voices of women of color who speak not only to their identity as women, but their racial and class identities that form overlapping oppressions that necessitate a more complex address to issues. If the historical narrative neglects the presence of Chicana women, if the herstories of the Women’s lib movement do not include them, Cotera says the cultural knowledge of Chicana history must take its place in informing the past, present, and future of the movement.<sup>92</sup> By privileging the voices of women of color writers, historical narrative becomes richer through evidential first-person accounts, while also incorporating narratives of power dynamics that may otherwise go unarticulated by dominate sources.

In an interview with Virginia Espino, Victoria Castro, a teacher, community activist, and former board member for Los Angeles public schools, reflects on White feminism’s role in her life.

ESPINO:

So, if you would describe the agenda of the Feminist Movement, primarily the white feminist movement, at that time looking back, what would you say their big issues were?

CASTRO:

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<sup>90</sup> Cotera, *The Chicana Feminist*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 216.

<sup>92</sup> Cotera, *The Chicana Feminist*, 27.

Commented [ML28]: How?

Commented [ML29]: What does this mean?

One would be—let me reflect on that, because I’m feeling right now it was not a part of me, so it’s something that I’m watching. I think the most I might have ever participated in is I think I tried to go braless. [laughter] I remember the test. You were supposed to get a pencil and put it under your boob, and if your boob held the pencil, then you shouldn’t go braless. There was some rule. So, I think I couldn’t go braless because I might have been too big or something. [laughter] So it was like I feel like I’m watching a movie and then I’m trying to participate, but I obviously then took access to the Pill and things like that, so I grew into liberation.<sup>93</sup>

Virginia herself spoke to the label of feminism as a part of a Chicana identity developing over time.

So, you also have feminism, Chicana feminism, kind of changing the narrative as well by forcing departments to acknowledge Chicana and Chicano within their titles. But that’s very new, that only started in the 90s. So that’s when you can kind of see more Chicanas embracing this feminist ideal. So, if you look at the early literature, you’ll only see a handful of people writing about Chicana feminism in the 70s, but as you move into the 90s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so many people include that in their studies about the Mexican American community.<sup>94</sup>

Facing these environments led to a distinctive understanding and necessary definition of feminism for Chicanas. Barbara Smith provides one definition. “Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminist, but merely female self-aggrandizement.”<sup>95</sup> In order to address their needs as both Mexican American and as women, the Chicana “has continually had to justify, clarify and educate people in the political and philosophical issues of the Chicana woman.”<sup>96</sup>

In an early 1974 edition of *Encuentro Femenil*, a magazine published by Comisión Femenil, Anna Nieto Gomez writes: “From 1968-1971 feminism was rejected by the Chicano

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<sup>93</sup> Victoria Castro, March 3, 2013, Session 3, 0:40:00.

<sup>94</sup> Virginia Espino, December 7, 2017, 0:17:00.

<sup>95</sup> Barbara Smith, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 57.

<sup>96</sup> Anna NietoGomez, “La Femenista,” *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 87.

movement as irrelevant and Anglo-inspired.”<sup>97</sup> Feminism led to philosophical conflict as debate sparked within the movement on the divisiveness of sexism when all were fighting against racism. Chicana *feministas* were left to push back against the racism of the women’s movement with little to no support from their Chicano peers. Chicanas took on a new language to contend with the needs specific to their experiences as women and as Chicana, navigating women’s issues within their own cultural heritage and lived experiences.<sup>98</sup> Yet within the movement, women still identified heavily with their Chicana community and pointed to racism as the most poignant factor in their oppression. In her essay “¡Soy Chicana Primero!,” Enriqueta Longeaux Vasquez writes: “Our men are not the power structure that oppresses us as a whole. We know who stole our lands: we know who discriminates against us...we know where we hurt and why.”<sup>99</sup> Still others called for women to prioritize their Chicana identity, fearing that to spread out and address multiple facets of identity would weaken the Chicano movement’s unity and undermine its goals. “The Chicana must not choose white women’s liberation... To be a Chicana PRIMERO (first), to stand by her people, will make her stronger for the struggle and endurance of her people.”<sup>100</sup> This attitude proved problematic as Chicanas developed a feminist consciousness as women who faced distinctly racialized and gendered expectations in their roles as students, activists, and writers. Many Chicanas also felt the divisive force of feminism, the root of the issue being that they felt their experiences with racism were stronger than sexism. The systematic oppression and the colonization of Mexican Americans was the most prevalent issue, demanding direct confrontation, while working in unity with their Chicano brothers. For many Chicanas, there was “a sense that their true identity was with the Chicano movement or ‘la

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<sup>97</sup> Nieto Gomez, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 87.

<sup>98</sup> Nieto Gomez, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 87.

<sup>99</sup> Enriqueta Longeaux Vasquez, “¡Soy Chicana Primero!” *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 198.

<sup>100</sup> Vasquez, “¡Soy Chicana Primero!” 199.

*familia.* They believed that white feminists focused too narrowly on men as the enemy.”<sup>101</sup> They addressed issues specifically, as they related to their needs as *both* Chicana and as women.

Within the Chicano movement, Chicanas felt a sense of purpose, but also struggled with the gendered barriers on their participation. In the *Chicano Studies Newsletter* of 1977, Velia Garcia wrote: “many Chicanas feel a deep sense of frustration over the fact that so many Chicanos perceive us in roles limited more by romantic conceptions of the past and of our grandmothers before us than by historical reality.”<sup>102</sup> Distinctly gendered expectations of women within the Chicano movement limited their mobility and served a distinct development of a feminist consciousness for many of the women involved. The social context of the sexual revolution meant many Chicanas faced contradictions “between new freedoms and expectations and continued gender inequality and the sexual double standard.”<sup>103</sup> One Chicana said that “initiation into the movement included attempts by the men to ‘revolutionize’ their pants off.”<sup>104</sup>

Where the power differential lies on an issue is important because it implicates what the movement focuses on changing and who is a vital, centralized participant. Education acts as an example of a concern that distinguishes the aims of Chicana feminists from White feminists. Chicanas stressed education reform as a cultural concern, believing a Chicana-centered curriculum had transformative potential for communities. They spoke from their experiences in segregated schools and higher education. While education was also important to White feminism, they were limited by their experiences, asking for changes that did not extend to the racism experienced by Mexican-American and Black students. These differing approaches revealed stark distinctions in the directions of the two movements. The differences between

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<sup>101</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 192.

<sup>102</sup> Velia Garcia, “La Chicana, Chicano Movement and Women’s Liberation,” *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 200.

<sup>103</sup> Blackwell, “Chicana Insurgencies,” 62.

<sup>104</sup> Blackwell, “Contested Histories,” 63.

White feminists and Chicana activists become apparent through their varying approaches to the same issues.

Through their involvement in the Chicano movement, many Chicanas learned the practice of activism and found the language to address issues they saw pertaining to their experiences as Chicana and as women. “Chicana feminists had to first define themselves and their agenda before they could even consider participating in the women’s movements [of the early 1970s] and then it would have to be on the basis of white feminists’ respect for Chicanas.”<sup>105</sup> For Chicana’s to identify as feminist, it would be on their own terms. Espino expounds on the progress of Chicanas feminist identity.

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They were very outspoken about their feminism but it took a while, it took generations, for mainstream and [the] majority of Chicanas to actually embrace that term feminism, because they saw it as more of a white woman’s issue and experience. So, when people started to embrace it, they started to look at it as multiple identities and multiple feminisms, instead of one kind of feminism.<sup>106</sup>

It was not as a result of White women’s battle for liberation that they began to speak of women’s rights. Addressing issues as women had always been a part of the Chicana. It was the conjunction of their increased political involvement through the Chicano movement and the socio-political environment of the period that drew out the articulation of a feminist identity.

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In her speech to the Texas Women’s Political Caucus in March of 1972, Martha Cotera cautioned against devoting oneself too much to the cause of feminism as a White women’s movement. She said: “Don’t become accessory to it [racism] in your fight against sexism.”<sup>107</sup> It was necessary for Chicanas to devise feminism as their own, a correspondence between women and their identities that allowed them to contest the structures of oppression that continued to

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<sup>105</sup> García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 192.

<sup>106</sup> Virginia Espino, December 7, 2017, 0:06:43.

<sup>107</sup> Cotera, “Feminism as We See It,” *The Chicana Feminist*, 19.

force them to the margins. Consuelo Nieto (1974) spoke to the distinctions made by Chicanas as they developed the language of their own feminism.

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The Chicana shares with all women the universal victimhood of sexism. Yet the Chicana's struggle for personhood must be analyzed with great care and sensitivity. Hers is a struggle against sexism within the context of a racist society. Ignore this factor and it is impossible to understand the Chicana's struggle.<sup>108</sup>

The nature of the Chicana existence necessitates a multi-faceted approach to feminism.

Aida Hurtado examines the intricacies of Mexican-American womanhood and their implications in feminist theorizing.

The exclusion from scholarly attention of the lives of women of Color, as well as the exclusion of the analysis of many scholars of Color has resulted in the paradoxical dilemma identified by Behar, in which mostly white academics have put forth many definitions of feminism but have failed to substantively capture the experience of poor women of color.<sup>109</sup>

Interviews testify to the strong currents of womanhood throughout Mexican-American heritage and the influence of history on the experiences of Chicanas in the culture of the United States. Daughters speak to the strength and independence of their mothers and aunts throughout different environments. Women with entrepreneurial independence see themselves and each other as hard-working and not limited by their relationships to men. Mothers who continued to pursue higher education and degrees in law and medicine are seen as role-models. For some women, the word feminist describes their experience of being taught to be "really happy to be a woman and not think of it as a negative thing."<sup>110</sup> For others, who generationally disagree with the use of the word, they "talk about issues not in terms of feminism but [by] talking about what real women experience."<sup>111</sup> The agency expressed by Chicanas who identify with feminism

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<sup>108</sup> Nieto, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 206.

<sup>109</sup> Aida Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 198.

<sup>110</sup> Hurtado, 200.

<sup>111</sup> Hurtado, 201.

comes from the historical work of Chicanas before them who have carved pathways of agentic womanhood.

### **Conclusion**

The historical narrative crafted by Chicanas as students, activists, writers, and feminists comes from a demand for empowerment. During the late 1960s and continuing into the following decades, Chicana feminism became a resource for women to identify with other women and create change within their communities. Enmeshed within the Civil Rights movement, the White women's liberation movement, and *El movimiento*, the voices and key players of the Chicana feminist movement enacted change during decades where they received little to no recognition. Racism and sexism remain problematic in modes of telling history, but by privileging the voices of Chicanas and other women of color the holes can be filled in the historiographical record. At the Texas Women's Political Caucus of 1972, Martha Coteria summarized, "We are Chicanas and we are women. We have nothing now because of these two factors. And we can 'go for broke.'"<sup>112</sup> After evaluating their positionality, Chicana activists and feminists had the language to dismantle the sources of their oppression and act against them.

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Oral history projects like those undertaken by Maylei Blackwell and Virginia Espino help track the record of Chicana histories through storytelling capable of capturing the intricate nature of women's experiences with interlocking, overlapping, and multi-faced oppressions. A legacy of resilient activism and dedication to radical movements characterizes Chicana feminism's contributions to women's rights and the continued pursuit of women's equality. The identity of Chicanas formulates through multiple sites of action and different avenues of involvement in the cause for freedom from oppression as Mexican-American and as women. As students, Chicanas encountered racism and sexism in elite institutions and forged communities based on shared

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<sup>112</sup> Coteria, "Feminism as We See It", *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 18.

Mexican-American heritage in radical nationalist groups. Campus based organizing expanded to community and gender based activism as Chicanas learned and shared their language of insurgency, addressing issues based on their needs as Chicana women. Through writing and publishing, Chicanas formed ties with other women of color feminisms, building coalitions through the dialects of oppression that added to the dialogue of feminism rampant during the 1970s. The bases of education, activism, and language served as avenues towards the empowerment of Chicana feminism.

History is an act of telling and retelling to gain greater access to the knowledge of our pasts and how they implicate our futures. Sources, whether the direct product of their time and environment or the secondary stage of narration through an analytical approach to evidence, serve as storytellers. Accounts of Chicana feminism span generations of women and occupy space in the history of Chicano radical nationalism and the feminist movement. Neither movement has come to a distinct conclusion, and as the narrative continues to develop so too can the avenues of analysis taken by historians. Holes remain in the historiography, but by prioritizing narrative voices and complicating existing narratives there remains radical space to reinterpret and re-remember. To break down the power of the colonial legacy will take multiple approaches to hegemonic narrative and new modes of storytelling. The radical legacy of the Chicanas of the 1970s still influences women today as they learn the language to express their own lived experiences and become educators, activists, writers and feminists with their own language.



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