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In Pursuit of Latina Liberation

Elizabeth Martínez

Who and what is a Latina? Ignorance, confusion, and often impassioned controversy make it necessary to begin this commentary with such basic questions. Latinas, like Latinos, are in general a mestizo or mixed people. They combine, in varying degrees, indigenous (from pre-Columbian times), European (from Spain’s invasion of the Americas), and African roots (from the millions of slaves brought to the Americas, including at least two hundred thousand to Mexico alone). Today in the United States, Latinas include women whose background links them to some twenty countries and going back one, two, or ten generations.

The term “Latina,” used here, is problematic but preferable to the totally Eurocentric label “Hispanic” with its obliteration of our indigenous heritage. “Hispanic” also carries the disadvantage of being a term that did not emerge from the community itself but has been imposed by the dominant society, in particular by its census bureau and other bureaucracies, during the 1970s. (People from Brazil, of course, reject the term “Hispanic” because it replaces Portugal with Spain in their history; this is just one example of the many existing complexities and problems related to terminology. Such distinctions concern not only scholars but also organizers and activists like myself.)

To many of us in the United States, La Raza or simply Raza, meaning the People, is a better name than either Hispanic or Latina/o; it dates back many years in the community. In the end, the least controversial and most common form of identification is by specific nationality: Mexican, Guatemalan, Colombian, and so forth. “Chicana/o,” a term for Mexican Americans, became popular during the 1960s and 1970s movement years for its strong message of pride in one’s peoplehood. In essence a political term of affirmation, it continues to be widely used, especially among youth.

Whatever the terminology, Latino peoples in this country have in their historical background a deep experience with colonization, direct or

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indirect, and mainly by two countries: first, Spain (or Portugal), and later the United States. Among Latina/os, it is Mexicans in what we now call the Southwest who have experienced U.S. colonialism the longest and most directly, with Puerto Ricans not far behind. Almost one-third of today’s United States was the home of Mexicans as far back as the 1500s, until Anglos seized it by war in 1848 and treated its population as conquered subjects. (The Mexicans, of course, themselves occupied lands that had been seized by Spain from Native Americans.) This treatment occurred despite the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the 1846–48 war and promised respect for the civil and property rights of Mexicans remaining in the Southwest.

The imposition of U.S. rule included taking over millions of acres of Mexican-held land by trickery and violence. Colonization also brought the imposition of Anglo values and institutions at the expense of Mexican culture, including use of the Spanish language. Anglos lynched many Mexicans in ways similar to the lynching of Southern blacks.

In the early 1900s, even as the process of colonization continued, the original Mexican population of the Southwest was greatly increased by an immigration that continues today. This combination of centuries-old roots with relatively recent ones gives the Mexican American people a rich and varied cultural heritage. At the same time, the institutionalized racism imposed by U.S. colonization confronts the entire population to one degree or another, regardless of when any sector arrived.

But we cannot understand all that history simply in terms of victimization: popular resistance is its other face. Resistance, which took the form of organized armed struggle in the Southwest during the last century, continues today in many ways. These include resistance to what we can call the colonized mentality: that process of internalizing belief in the master’s superiority and our inferiority. (As a resident of California and a Chicana, I am drawing primarily on the experience of Mexican/Chicana and Central American women, who predominate among Latinas here.)

**Advances by women**

Without attempting to review the history of Latina feminist struggle in these few pages, it should be noted that such a tradition does exist despite the stereotype of the passive Latin woman. The historical landmarks in Mexico are numerous, from the seventeenth-century feminist thinker Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, a nun, to the first feminist congress of 1911 and the suffrage movement of the 1930s. Cultural mainstays like the powerful pre-Columbian queens and goddesses who ruled alongside male deities and the timeless curandera or healer demonstrate the power of women’s historical presence. The many women who participated in the
Mexican war of independence from Spain (1810–21) and the Mexican Revolution may or may not have been consciously feminist, yet their collective image resonates with strength and courage.

We also note a growing feminism and advances over sexism by Mexican and Chicana women in recent years. During the Chicano liberation movement of 1965–75, open challenges to male supremacy began to be heard from Chicana participants. As sociologist Alma García tells us in “The Development of Chicana Feminist Discourse, 1970–1980” (1990) and as confirmed by my personal experience, the contradiction of encountering male supremacist practices within a movement supposedly fighting for social justice spurred many Chicanas to new consciousness. In the process they made minimal feminist demands. (Women in the African American and Asian American movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were similarly encouraged in a feminist direction by experiencing sexism inside their movements.)

In response, male supremacy hurled two weapons at such Chicanas. The first was the accusation that “you’re acting like a white woman” [agringada]. In other words, you’re a traitor to your people, your culture. This could be devastating to Chicana activists, given that a central goal of the movimienoto was liberation for brown people from Anglo-imposed domination and its values. In effect, the charge accused women of undermining ethnicity as a unifying force.

The second counterinsurgent weapon was the accusation, “You’re being divisive.” It could be equally devastating, because unity and the sense of Raza as family were so important to the movement. What could be worse, in a hostile society, than to be divisive among your own people? That charge also resonated with certain realities about the women’s liberation movement as Chicanas saw it then, including many strong activists. As a participant in New York Radical Women in 1968 (the only Latina member, I believe), I shared the powerful sense of feminist discovery that illuminated those years yet also came to understand why so many Chicanas in the Southwest saw the women’s movement then as irrelevant because it was overwhelmingly Anglo and middle-class. Again, like many African American and Native American women, Chicana activists believed that the women’s movement saw men as the enemy, a view they could not accept because Raza were fighting racism and oppression as a people; men suffered from those same forces. To focus on women’s oppression alone and to discount racial and class oppression, as the national women’s movement often did, contradicted our perception. This sense of clashing worldviews, which resulted from having such different historical experiences, became a major reason why only a few Chicanas looked for lessons that could be learned or alliances that could be forged with Euramerican feminists.
In the next twenty years a self-defined Chicana feminism flowered, mainly in academia and most visibly among young faculty and graduate students. Under pressure, the National Association for Chicano Studies (NACS) established a women’s caucus at its 1985 meeting in Sacramento, California. A lesbian caucus was formalized at its 1992 meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which established an active rejection of homophobia in NACS toward lesbians. Another organization, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS), emerged in the 1980s as the locus of Latina feminist academics’ work for social change that prioritizes mentoring young Chicanas in their scholarly development. Its initial leadership came from Adaljiza Sosa Riddell at the University of California, Davis, and the University of California, Berkeley’s Mujeres en Marcha, a graduate student women’s group.

At the undergraduate level, signs of growing feminism exist alongside visible hesitation about being labeled “feminist.” As elsewhere, symbols and terminology often define the debate; changing the name “Chicano Studies” to “Chicano and Chicana Studies” (or some similarly inclusive phrase, necessitated by a gendered language) has become common on California campuses. At the same time, when I speak about feminism as such to Latina and Latino undergraduate students, I frequently encounter a telling combination of reactions from mixed audiences. Few Chicanas in the audience support my ideas publicly or declare themselves feminist; few if any men are sympathetic, and many air sexist attitudes or make such statements as, “I believe in equal rights for women but not in feminism”; and several Chicanas express agreement after the event, in private. As might be expected, feminist expression intensifies in any all-women’s gathering, where Chicana students analyze and grapple with issues of patriarchy and sexist practice.

These developments suggest two realities. First, the women’s movement of the 1960s has had positive effects, despite its racial and class biases. The idea of separate women’s organizing, once anathema to Raza activists and energetically opposed by the men, has become widely accepted. Latina lesbians would have stayed in the closet longer without the national women’s movement to encourage them out, I believe. The articulation of concerns common to almost all women, such as health, child care, and reproductive rights, is much more frequent than it was two decades ago.

Our second reality is that Latina feminism, like other forms of feminism, has been sabotaged by backlash forces that rage everywhere. We can thank those forces for making the term “feminist” so unpopular, for making so many Chicanas and Chicanos buy today’s bra-burning, man-hating images. In the case of Chicanas, another political trend sometimes strengthens the general assault on feminism: a nationalism that has in-
tensified in direct relation to the racist backlash of the last twenty years and especially since President Reagan’s election in 1980. That nationalism, for all its other positive effects, is often accompanied by sexist forms of pride in one’s peoplehood that leave women in stereotyped and inferior places. (Much more research and analysis needs to be done on the relationship between nationalism and sexism.)

The present picture, then, can seem almost surreal in its contradictions. One can observe young Chicanas who will unequivocally distance themselves from the word “feminist” but who act in ways that objectively are so very feminist.

**Who says teenagers aren’t feminist?**

Portents of change can often be found. For example, the California division of the Chicano student organization Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) declined a few years ago to establish a Chicana caucus, despite urging from a women’s workshop I attended. It now has such a caucus. More than a few MEChA chapters in California are formally headed by women, which rarely happened ten or fifteen years ago (although women may well have been the real leaders in practice).

In the 1993 hunger strike to win departmental status for Chicana/o studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, half of the strikers were women students. In 1994 women also formed a major part of the hunger strikes for similar causes at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the University of Colorado in Boulder. In the May 1994 Stanford University hunger strike for Chicana/o studies classes and other demands, the fasters were four Chicanas. Through such experiences, women have often developed new attitudes toward themselves—perhaps the most subversive change of all. This has taken concrete form in networking; the fasters and supporters from Boulder, for example, came to Santa Barbara to express their solidarity with the fasters there.

As for the reactions of Latino men on California campuses, contradiction is often written across their faces. The same Chicano student who articulates extremely backward ideas about women may also recognize that change is blowing in the wind and that he cannot oppose it in obvious ways. A day or week devoted to “La Chicana” or Latinas in general is institutionalized on many campuses. Unfortunately, this is less true with respect to gays and lesbians; among Latino college students, homophobia still runs more freely than sexism toward women.

At the level of secondary school in California, one can find an even stronger current of self-conscious feminism (without the word being used) than at the college level. Last year I spoke before six hundred Latina/o high school seniors who had come for “Raza Day” at the University
of California, Berkeley, when students visit Cal as a college they might want to attend. My talk was about Latina women's history. I began by describing how, at marches and other demonstrations, you could hear cheers for this man or that—"Viva Zapata! Viva César Chávez!"—by name. "And then," I said, "we hear 'Viva la mujer'—Long live women!" I was going to make the point that it is rare to hear a woman's actual name cheered and to ask why women, unlike men, were celebrated anonymously. But this audience upstaged me with thunderous applause and cheers shaking the auditorium: "Viva la mujer!" Dozens of young women were jumping in their seats.

More examples have accumulated since then, during various encounters with junior high and high school girls. In an era when we are told that feminism does not appeal to young women, the opposite seems true, at least for working-class or lower-middle-class Chicanas in the San Francisco Bay Area, and at least if the "F word" is not used. Last April 22, Latina/o and other students from thirty-eight schools in eleven Bay Area towns held walkouts—called blowouts—or similar protests. They demanded educational reforms: more bilingual counselors, more retention programs, no more cutbacks, a relevant multicultural curriculum. At the staging-area rally, during the march downtown, and at the main rally facing City Hall, a good half of the speakers were female. That would have been unthinkable during the 1960s movement years.

During the San Francisco walkouts, it was the women who called loudest and most clearly for unity and peace among their peers rather than gang warfare over "colors." One moment that vividly demonstrated this concern came when the marching crowd was shouting a chant against Governor Pete Wilson's educational cutbacks: "Wilson, Wilson, a la chingada! Viva, viva Che Guevara!" I overheard one young woman say to another, "We have to change that chant—the kids from Wilson High will think it's about them." So they started shouting, "Pete Wilson, a la chingada . . ." to make sure listeners knew they were trashing the governor and not their peers.

The April 22 blowouts, which formed the third wave of such actions in less than a year, involved five to six hundred high school students in San Francisco and environs plus another thousand in nearby Hayward (just to mention two areas). They had been organized by different groups. Several have a fifty-fifty rule on male-female participation in leadership, handling the press, and so forth. During the summer of 1994 I saw key organizers meet weekly to develop a structure, program, and outreach for ongoing work in 1994–95; they took the fifty-fifty rule seriously.

All this anecdotal evidence leaves many questions, such as how deep the teenage women's feminism runs—that is, does it operate at home when mother tells daughter, "Make your brother's bed"? Perhaps, perhaps not. Two Latinas aged thirteen and fourteen who had participated
in the blowouts told me that "in this protest we do not feel put down"; "boys have not put down girls for being leaders." On the personal relations level, however, "We get called 'ho' if we have sex but for a boy, it makes him a man." Despite these and other contradictions, the evidence of a Latina feminist consciousness evolving among young women has been too constant, too strong, for me to doubt its existence.

In the provocation and shaping of that consciousness, Chicana artists and writers have had great influence. We would not be as far along as we are today without the beautifully bold writing of lesbian authors Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and others or the performance art of lesbian comedians like Marga Gómez and Monica Palacios. We would not be as far along as we are today without the heretical work of painters Yolanda López and Ester Hernández, whose feminist transformations of the Virgin of Guadalupe offer a liberation never before available. We would not be this far along without some biting poems from Sandra Cisneros, the multifaceted work of feminist writer Ana Castillo, and painter Juana Alicia's images of Latina women as strong survivors all. So many more names could be set down; all have nurtured the feminist impulse of young Chicanas, especially those in their upper teens and/or college students.

Working women speak feminist tongues

Chicana workers and other community women who do not define themselves as feminists but lead objectively feminist lives have been among us since the United States took half of Mexico by war in 1848. Often this feminist practice resulted from their becoming involved in labor organizing and other forms of collective struggle. They have provided the backbone of male-dominated groups but also formed all-women's groups. Today various Latina labor organizations offer shining examples of such activism.

Look at Fuerza Unida (United Force, or Strength), formed in San Antonio, Texas, when Levi Straus laid off eleven hundred garment workers there in 1990 and moved the plant to Costa Rica for cheaper labor. Angered by their experience of lies, broken promises, inadequate compensation, pathetic retraining, and no special aid to workers crippled with carpal tunnel syndrome, the former Chicana and Mexican employees have still not given up five years later. From often being shy or nervous because of their lack of formal, higher education, Fuerza Unida women have become administrators and amateur labor lawyers, steadily developing as leaders. In 1994 they opened an office in San Francisco, home to Levi's international headquarters, and held a three-week "fast for justice" in Levi's face. Fuerza Unida has become an inspiration for women workers everywhere. So has Mujer Obrera (Working Woman), founded in El Paso by garment workers who demanded thousands of
dollars in back pay and won some of it with such bold tactics as chaining themselves to their sewing machines.

The garment industry is one arena in which Latinas are superexploited; another is the maquiladoras, plants in the U.S.-Mexico border zone where workers assemble everything from bikinis to transistors. Thousands of maquila women have been organizing steadily for a decade. The plants’ deliberate employment of very young, preferably teenage, Latinas reeks of cynical exploitation. The corporate goal: hire them young, suck out the best of their energy, exploit their inexperience as workers and their fear of angering the boss—then toss them aside like so many rag dolls when they become pregnant, injured, or “troublemakers.” But these women are fighting back, often with a clear sense of being a class unto themselves as maquila women.

Then look at the first statewide gathering of Latina farmworkers in August 1993 at Fresno, California, where a hundred women came together from all over the state as part of the new Farmworker Women’s Leadership Development Project. They discussed not only labor issues like wages, pesticide poisoning, and contracts but also sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sexual discrimination. In those workshops you could sense the women’s desire to talk, to tell their stories, along with their feelings of awkwardness and perhaps fear.

At the beginning I was concerned that only the workshop facilitators and other prepared participants would feel able to talk. Wrong: as one spoke, another gathered strength to open up on painful subjects, and then another. Very few outsiders like myself had been allowed in the room, and we were wisely assigned to sit on the outer edges. Millie Treviño is director of the project and a former farmworker herself; a second statewide conference took place in 1994 at Irvine, California, with ongoing discussion of those thorny topics.

Indeed, across this state our moon is rising!

Back to the word “feminism”

Like other women of color, most Latinas have rejected any feminism shaped by an exclusively white middle-class perspective that denies the racist, classist oppression of Latino men alongside the women. Such a feminism does not understand how, for a colonized racial/ethnic people, cultural integrity is profoundly interwoven with survival. Or how the family can be seen primarily as a key weapon of self-defense in a hostile world rather than as an oppressive institution. Thus we had to define our own Chicana feminism in the 1970s.

The problem continues today. We still find some Anglo leaders of the pro-choice movement, for example, who defensively refuse to yield control of the agenda or to prioritize the women-of-color perspective that
demands reproductive choice in every sense of the term, including adequate prenatal care and freedom from forced sterilization. In a white supremacist world where so many women are of color and poor, it should be obvious that any true feminist must be constantly and passionately antiracist and anticlassist. The times cry out for work by Anglo women that combines resistance to oppression based on race and class as well as on gender.

Today the need to build bridges among all women could not be greater. Xenophobic immigrant bashing reaches new and frightening heights as the corporate elite scapegoats working-class people of color—primarily Latina/os and Asians—for the ongoing economic crisis. We would all do well to remember: there is no more exploited, vulnerable person in the United States today than the undocumented woman worker of color. Her lack of papers means she can almost never fight back, no matter how vilely she has been abused.

Evidence of that exploitation and abuse has come to public attention sharply in recent years. In March 1993, Latinas presented a full day of testimony in San Francisco about how they had been recruited from their home countries to serve as housekeepers or in similar positions for professional families in the Bay Area. They gave chilling, detailed accounts of being raped on their first day at work; of being kept on duty around the clock as housekeeper, nurserymaid, cook, laundress, cleaning woman, baby-sitter, and personal maid; of not being paid for months at a time; of being locked up in their employers’ homes; and of being kept ignorant about how to seek help in a strange land, or being too terrorized to try. Their treatment in the United States of the late twentieth century is simply barbarous.

Yet even these Latinas are no longer silent, no longer invisible. The moon is rising even as the sky fills with new storm clouds. Time for sharp eyes, open minds, and the tenacity that has stamped our historic Latina heritage.

San Francisco, California

Afterword about sources

This article draws on interviews, personal experience as an activist, lecturing, and reading over many years. Without pretending to offer a full list, here are some titles or authors relevant to the article.

Two useful readings about early Chicana feminism:


A few general titles and authors important to my own development:


A few titles that could introduce readers to Chicana writing referred to in this article (all of these authors have published other important work):


I have found many works by the following scholars useful and interesting: Maxine Baca Zinn, who writes extensively on Chicana sociological issues; Julia Curry, on Mexican immigrant women; María Lugones, on racism/ethnocentrism; Ana Nieto Gomez, one of the earliest Chicana feminists; Mary Pardo, on contemporary Chicana activism. Marta López Garza and Gloria Romero are Chicana scholars trained in sociology and psychology, respectively, whose work often offers a valuable and progressive feminist perspective.

Original research on the California student walkouts has been published in “Be Down with the Brown,” by Elizabeth Martínez (Z [November 1994]).