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CHICANA FEMINISM

In the tracks of "the" native woman¹

AS SPAIN PREPARES TO CELEBRATE the quincentenary of "the discovery" in 1992 contemporary Chicanas have been deliberating on the force of significations of that event. It took almost 400 years for the territory that today we call Mexico to acquire a cohesive national identity and sovereignty. Centuries passed before the majority of the inhabitants were able to call themselves Mexican citizens. As a result, on the Mexican side of the hyphen in the designation Mexican-American, Chicanas rethink their involvement in Mexico's turbulent colonial and postcolonial history, while also reconsidering, on the American side, their involvement in the capitalist neocolonization of the population of Mexican descent in the United States (Barrera *et al.*, 1972).

In the 1960s, armed with a post-Mexican-American critical consciousness, some people of Mexican descent in the United States recuperated, appropriated, and recodified the term Chicano to form a new political class (Acuña, 1972; Muñoz, 1989). Initially, the new appellation left the entrenched (middle-class) intellectuals mute because it emerged from the oral usage in working-class communities. In effect, the new name measured the distance between the excluded and the few who had found a place for themselves in Anglo-America. The new Chicano political class began to work on the hyphen eager to redefine the economic, racial, cultural, and political position of the people. The appropriation and recodification of the term Chicano from oral culture was a stroke of insight precisely because it unsettled all of the identities conferred by previous historical accounts. The apparently well-documented terrains of the dyad Mexico/United States were repositioned and reconfigured through the inclusion of the excluded in the very interiority of culture, knowledge, and the political economy. Thus, the demand for a Chicano/a history became a call for the recovery and rearticulation of the record to include the stories of race/class relations of the silenced against whom the very notions of being Mexican or not-Mexican, being American or not-American, and being a citizen or not a citizen had been constructed. In brief, the call for the story of Chicanas/os has not turned out to be a "definitive" culture as some dreamed. Rather

the term itself, in body and mind, has become a critical site of political, ideological, and discursive struggle through which the notion of "definitiveness" and hegemonic tendencies are placed in question.

Though the formation of the new political Chicano class was dominated by men, Chicana feminists have intervened from the beginning. The early Chicana intervention is available in the serials and journals that mushroomed in tandem with the alternative press in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately much of that early work by Chicanas often goes unrecognized, which is indicative of the process of erasure and exclusion of raced ethnic women within a patriarchal cultural and political economy. In the 1980s, however, there has been a re-emergence of Chicana writers and scholars who have not only repositioned the Chicano political class through a feminist register but who have also joined forces with an emergent women-of-color political class that has national and international implications (McLaughlin, 1990).

In the United States the 1980s were, according to the Ronald Reagan administration, the decade of the Hispanic—a neoconservative move assisted by the US Census Bureau (Giménez, 1989) and the mass media, to homogenize all people of Latin American descent and occlude their heterogeneous histories of resistance to domination, in other words, the counter-histories to invasions and conquests. At the same time, in the 1980s, a more visible Chicana feminist intervention has given new life to a stalled Chicano movement (Rojas, 1989). In fact, in the United States, this appears to be the case among most raced ethnic minorities. By including feminist and gender analysis into the emergent political class, Chicanas are reconfiguring the meaning of cultural and political resistance and redefining the hyphen in the name Mexican-American (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1983; Alarcón, 1989, 1990).

To date most writers and scholars of Mexican descent refuse to give up the term Chicana. Despite the social reaccommodation of many as Hispanics or Mexican-Americans, it is the consideration of the excluded evoked by the name Chicana that provides the position for multiple cultural critiques between and within, inside and outside, centers and margins. Working-class and peasant women, perhaps the "last colony", as a recent book announces (Mies *et al.*, 1989), are most keenly aware of this. As a result when many a writer of such racialized cultural history explores her identity, a reflectory and refractory position is depicted. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 43):

She has this fear
that she has no names
that she has many names
that she doesn't know her names
She has this fear
that she's an image
that comes and goes
clearing and darkening
the fear that she's the dreamwork inside someone else's skull . . .
She has this fear that if she digs into herself
she won't find anyone
that when she gets "there"
she won't find her notches on the trees . . .
She has this fear that she won't find the way back.

The quest for a true self and identity that was the initial desire of many writers involved in the Chicano movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s has given way to the realization that there is no fixed identity. "I", or "She" as observed by Anzaldúa, is composed of multiple layers without necessarily yielding an uncontested "origin." In the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989: 94):

Things may be said to be what they are, not exclusively in relation to what was and what will be (they should not solely be seen as clusters chained together by the temporal sequence of cause and effect), but also in relation to each other's immediate presences and to themselves as non/presences.

Thus, the name Chicana, in the present, is the name of resistance that enables cultural and political points of departure and thinking through the multiple migrations and dislocations of women of "Mexican" descent. The name Chicana is not a name that women (or men) are born to or with, as is often the case with "Mexican," but rather it is consciously and critically assumed and serves as point of redeparture for dismantling historical conjunctures of crisis, confusion, political, and ideological conflict and contradictions of the simultaneous effects of having "no names," having "many names," not "know[ing] her names," and being someone else's "dreamwork." However, digging into the historically despised dark (*prieto*) body in strictly psychological terms, may get her to the bare bones and marrow, but she may not "find the way back," to writing her embodied histories. The idea of plural historicized bodies is proposed with respect to the multiple racial constructions of the body since "the discovery." To name a few: indigenous (evoking the extant as well as extinct tribes), criolla, morisca, loba, cambuja, barcina, coyota, samba, mulatta, china, chola. The contemporary assumption of *mestizaje* (hybridism) in the Mexican nation-making process was intended to racially colligate a heterogeneous population that was not European. On the American side of the hyphen, *mestizas* are non-white, thus further reducing the cultural and historical experience of Chicanas. However, the *mestiza* concept is always already bursting its boundaries. While some have "forgotten" the *mestiza* genealogy, others claim an indigenous, black or Asian one as well. In short, the body, certainly for the past 500 years in the Americas, has been always already racialized. As tribal "ethnicities" are broken down by conquest and colonizations, bodies are often multiply racialized and dislocated as if they had no other contents. The effort to recontextualize the processes recovers, speaks for, or gives voice to, women on the bottom of a historically hierarchical economic and political structure (Spivak, 1988).

It is not coincidental that as Chicana writers reconstruct the multiple names of the *mestiza* and Indian, social scientists and historians find them in the segmented labor force or in the grip of armed struggles. In fact most of these women have been (and continue to be) the surplus sources of cheap labor in the field, the canneries, the maquiladora border industries, and domestic service. The effort to pluralize the racialized body by redefining part of their experience through the reappropriation of "the" native woman on Chicana feminist terms, marked one of the first assaults on male-centered cultural nationalism on the one hand (Alarcón, 1989), and patriarchal political economy on the other (Melville, 1980; Mora and del Castillo, 1980; Córdova *et al.*, 1986; Ruiz and Tiano, 1987; Zavella, 1987).

The native woman has many names also—Coatlicue, Cihuacoátl, Ixtacihuátl, etc. In fact, one has only to consult the dictionary of *Mitología Nahuatl*, for example, to

discover many more that have not been invoked. For many writers the point is not so much to recover a lost "utopia" nor the "true" essence of our being, although, of course, there are those who long for the "lost origins," as well as those who feel a profound spiritual kinship with the "lost"—a spirituality whose resistant political implications must not be underestimated, but refocused for feminist change (Allen, 1988). The most relevant point in the present is to understand how a pivotal indigenous portion of the *mestiza* past may represent a collective female experience as well as "the mark of the Beast" within us—the maligned and abused indigenous woman (Anzaldúa, 1987: 43). By invoking the "dark Beast" within and without, which many have forced us to deny, the cultural and psychic dismemberment that is linked to imperialist racist and sexist practices are brought into focus. These practices are not a thing of the past either. One has only to recall the contemporary massacres of the Indian population in Guatemala, for example, or the continuous "democratic" interventionist tactics in Central and South America, which often result in the violent repression of the population.

It is not surprising, then, that many Chicana writers explore their racial and sexual experience in poetry, narrative, essay, testimony, and autobiography through the evocation of indigenous figures. This is a strategy that Gloria Anzaldúa, uses and calls "La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue state." The "state" is, paradoxically, an ongoing process, a continuous effort of consciousness to make "sense" of it all. Every step is a "*travesía*, a crossing" because "[e]very time she makes 'sense' of something, she has to 'cross over,' kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 48, 49). The contemporary subject-in-process is not just what Hegel would have us call the *Aufhebung*—that is, the effort to unify consciousness "is provided by the simultaneous negation and retention of past forms of consciousness within a radical recomprehension of the totality" (Warren, 1984: 37)—as Anzaldúa's passage also suggests. The complex effort to unify, however tenuously, Chicanas' consciousness that is too readily viewed as representing "postmodern fragmented identities" entails not only Hegel's *Aufhebung* with respect to Chicanas' immediate personal subjectivity as raced and sexed bodies, but also an understanding of all past negations as communitarian subjects in a doubled relation to cultural recollection, and remembrance, and to our contemporary presence and (non)presence in the sociopolitical and cultural milieu. All of which together enables both individual and group identity as oppressed racialized women. In order to achieve unification, the Chicana position previously "empty" of meanings emerges as one who has to "make sense" of it all from the bottom through the recodification of the native woman. As such the so-called postmodern decentered subject, a decentralization that implies diverse, multiply constructed subjects and historical conjunctures, in so far as she desires liberation, must move toward provisional solidarities especially through social movements. In this fashion one may recognize the endless production of differences to destabilize group or collective identities on the one hand, and the need for group solidarities to overcome oppressions through an understanding of the mechanisms at work, on the other (McLaughlin, 1990; Kauffman, 1990).

The strategic invocation and recodification of "the" native woman in the present has the effect of conjoining the historical repression of the "non-civilized" dark woman—which continues to operate through "regulative psychobiographies" of good and evil women such as that of Guadalupe, Malinche, Llorona and many others—with the present moment of speech that counters such repressions (Spivak, 1989: 227). It is worthwhile

to remember that the historical founding moment of the construction of *mestiza(o)* subjectivity entails the rejection and denial of the dark Indian Mother as Indian which have compelled women to often collude in silence against themselves, and to actually deny the Indian position even as that position is visually stylized and represented in the making of the fatherland. Within these blatant contradictions the overvaluation of Europeaness is constantly at work. Thus, Mexico constructs its own ideological version of the notorious Anglo-American "melting pot," under the sign of *mestizo(a)*. The unmasking, however, becomes possible for Chicanas as they are put through the crisis of the Anglo-American experience where ("melting pot") whiteness not *mestizaje* has been constructed as the Absolute Idea of Goodness and Value. In the Americas, then, the native woman as ultimate sign of the potential reproduction of *barbarie* (savagery) has served as the sign of consensus for most others, men and women. Women, under penalty of the double bind charge of "betrayal" of the fatherland (in the future tense) and the mother tongues (in the past tense), are often compelled to acquiesce with the "civilizing" new order in male terms. Thus, for example, the "rights" of women in Nicaragua disappear *vis-à-vis* the "democratizing" forces of the US, the Church's "civilizing-of-women" project, and traditional sexism notwithstanding Sandinista intentions (Molyneux, 1985). In this scenario, to speak at all, then, "the" native woman has to legitimize her position by becoming a "mother" in hegemonic patriarchal terms, which is near to impossible to do unless she is "married" or racially "related" to the right men (Hurtado, 1989). As a result the contemporary challenge to the multiple negations and rejections of the native racialized woman in the Americas is like few others.

For Chicanas the consideration of the ideological constructions of the "non-civilized" dark woman brings into view a most sobering reference point: the overwhelming majority of the workers in maquiladoras, for example, are *mestizas* who have been forcefully subjected not only to the described processes but to many others that await disentanglement. Many of those workers are "single," unprotected within a cultural order that has required the masculine protection of women to ensure their "decency," indeed to ensure that they are "civilized" in sexual and racial terms. In fact as Spivak and others have suggested "the new army of 'permanent casual' labor working below the minimum wage—[are] these women [who today] represent the international neo-colonial subject paradigmatically" (Spivak, 1989: 223). These women (and some men) who were subjected to the Hispanic New World "feudal mode of power," which in Mexico gave way to the construction of *mestizo* nationalism; and who were subjected to an Anglo-American "feudal mode of power" in the isolation of migrant worker camps and exchange labor, which in the US gave rise to Chicano cultural nationalism of the 1960s, in the 1990s find themselves in effect separated in many instances from men who heretofore had joined forces in resistance. Though work in the fields continues to be done with kinship groupings, the "communal mode of power" under the sign of the cultural nationalist family may be bankrupt, especially for female wage-workers. Although, of course, the attempt to bring men and women together under conservative notions of the "family" continues as well. In this instance "family" may be a misnaming in lieu of a search for a more apt name for communitarian solidarity.

Whether it be as domestic servants, canners, or in the service industry in the United States, or as electronic assemblers along the US/Mexican border, these "new" women-subjects find themselves bombarded and subjected to multiple cross-cultural and contradictory ideologies. A maze of discourses through which the "I" as a racial and

gendered self is hard put to emerge and runs the risk of being thought of as "irrational" or "deluded," in their attempt to articulate their oppression and exploitation. In the face of Anglo-European literacy and capitalist industrialization that interpellates them as individuals, for example, and the "communal mode of power" (as mode of de-feudalization) (Spivak, 1989: 224), which interpellates them as "Mothers" (the bedrock of the "ideal family" at the center of the nation-making process, despite discontinuous modes of its construction), the figure and referent of Chicanas today is positioned as conflictively as Lyotard's "differend." She is the descendant of native women who are continuously transformed into *mestizas*, Mexicans, emigres to Anglo-America, "Chicanas," Latinas, Hispanics—there are as many names as there are namers.

Lyotard defines a differend as "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy" (Lyotard, 1988: xi). In appropriating the concept as a metonym for both the figure and referent of the Chicana, for example, it is important to note that though it enables us to locate and articulate sites of ideological and discursive conflict, it cannot inform the actual Chicana differend engaged in a living struggle as to how she can seize her "I" or even her feminist "We" to change her circumstances without bringing into play the axes in which she finds herself in the present—culturally, politically, and economically.

The call for elaborated theories based on the "flesh and blood" experiences of women of color in *This Bridge Called My Back* (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1983) may mean that the Chicana feminist project must interweave the following critiques and critical operations: (1) multiple cross-cultural analyses of the ideological constructions of raced "Chicana" subjects in relation to the differently positioned cultural constructions of all men and some Anglo-European women; (2) negotiate strategic political transitions from cultural constructions and contestations to "social science" studies and referentially grounded "Chicanas" in the political economy who live out their experiences in heterogeneous social and geographic positions. Though not all women of Mexican/Hispanic descent would call themselves Chicanas, I would argue that it is an important point of departure for critiques and critical operations (on the hyphen/bridge) that keep the excluded within any theory making project. That is, in the Mexican-descent continuum of meanings, Chicana is still the name that brings into focus the interrelatedness of class/race/gender into play and forges the link to actual subaltern native women in the US/Mexico dyad; (3) in negotiating points (1) and (2), how can we work with literary, testimonial, and pertinent ethnographic materials to enable "Chicanas" to grasp their "I" and "We" in order to make effective political interventions. This implies that we must select, in dialogue with women, from the range of cultural productions, those materials that actually enable the emergence of I/We subjectivities (Castellano, 1990).

Given the extensive ideological sedimentation of the (Silent) Good Woman and the (Speech-producing) Bad Woman that enabled the formations of the cultural nationalist "communal modes of power," Chicana feminists have an enormous mandate to make "sense" of it all as Anzaldúa desires. It requires no less than the deconstruction of paternalistic "communal modes of power," which is politically perilous since often it appears to be the "only" model of empowerment that the oppressed have, although it has ceased to function for many women as development and post-industrial social research indicates. Also, it requires the thematization and construction of new models of political agency for women of color who are always already positioned cross-culturally and within

contradictory discourses. As we consider the diffusion of mass media archetypes and stereotypes of all women, which continuously interpellates them into the patriarchal order according to their class, race (ethnicity), and gender, the "mandate" is (cross-culturally) daunting. Yet, "agent provocateurs" know that mass media and popular cultural production are always open to contestations and recodifications, which can become sites of resistance (Castellano, 1990).

Thus, the feminist Chicana, activist, writer, scholar, and intellectual has to on the one hand locate the point of theoretical and political consensus with other feminists (and "feminist" men), and on the other continue with projects that position her in paradoxical binds. For example, breaking out of ideological boundaries that subject her in culturally specific ways, and not crossing over to cultural and political areas that subject her as "Individual/ autonomous/neutralized" laborer. Moreover, to reconstruct differently the raced and gendered "I's" and "We's" also calls for a rearticulation of the "You's" and "They's." Traversing the processes may well enable us to locate points of differences and identities in the present to forge the needed solidarities against repression and oppression. Or, as Lorde and Spivak would have it, locate the "identity-in-difference" of cultural and political struggle (1984; 1988).

Note

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