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Latinas in Crisis: A Struggle for Rights in the Face of Oppression

A Conference Held at
Hastings College of the Law
San Francisco, California

Sponsored by
Hastings La Raza Law Students' Association
Thursday, March 28, 1991

A Brief Note on the Birth of *Latinas*

by *Rocio de Lourdes Cordoba**

The dialogue sparked by *Latinas in Crisis* was unprecedented for a Hastings audience. While most of us were aware of the complexities surrounding reproductive choice in a traditionally religious culture; knew someone who had been physically or sexually violated in her own home; and, living in San Francisco, were daily witnesses to the many obstacles faced by poor immigrant women, we had failed to place ourselves in an open forum to candidly discuss how these issues affect Latinas.

The realization of this program, therefore, forged a new level of understanding about Latin American women's struggle for rights in the

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I would like to extend many thanks to La Raza members Michael Nuñez and Karen Carrera for their tremendous energy in shaping and implementing the many facets of *Latinas* — particularly through their close work with our guest speakers. Ruben De La Torre's artistic talents, Alan Torres' adept video editing skills, and Thelma Garza's words of wisdom also are greatly appreciated. Connie Magaña, as usual, came through in La Raza's hour of need, and for this she deserves a perpetual hand. A note of special appreciation also goes to La Raza chair Patricia Barrera for her encouragement in adding a feminist dimension to La Raza.

face of oppression.

Increased informal dialogues among progressive women's circles about reconciling feminism with racism, classism, and the stark realities of immigrant women contributed to the timing of *Latinas*. A rising tide of presentations, rallies, and "teach-ins" at Hastings — on subjects ranging from federal funding of explicit art to the environmental effects of an amphibious war — only ripened its conception. Sparked primarily by vigorous reactions to the United States involvement in the Persian Gulf, as well as the rising tide of conservatism in the courts and public policy arenas, Hastings students engaged in a spectrum of highly charged discussions during the few months preceding *Latinas*. The volume of free speech on campus grew so high that we came to witness an incessant wave of panel discussions during the Spring of 1991. As the announcement flyers (on recyclable white paper, of course) grew thicker upon our bulletin boards, however, these well-intended forums became larger and more distant. A world view and broad appeal — while valid attributes — slowly began to replace, rather than complement, the significance of individuals' concerns. Particularly when these individuals were women. And especially when these concerns involved persons with little political clout, such as women of color.

The need to vocalize an untold story by and about women of color, therefore, fueled our nascent spark. *Latinas in Crisis* ignited that dialogue.

The poignant words delivered by Sandra Henriquez Cacavas and Luz Alvarez Martinez that afternoon sent a powerful message to those who both attended the forum and helped to fuel its discussion. But even more significant than the energy that permeated an otherwise formal reception was the optimism created in having raised a new sense of awareness — not only about Latinas, but also about issues surrounding traditionally underrepresented women, particularly women of color.

We hope this sort of dialogue continues, not just among progressive law students but beyond our halls of learning and into our courts of justice, our legislative arenas, and the currently unpenetrable political process. Our goal is that, as a result of this awareness, enough persons who are truly concerned about our *hermanas'* rights will coalesce to incite change both within and beyond the system we face in this country, our respective states, and daily throughout our cities, towns, and barrios.

This Article consists of introductory words that I presented as we began the forum, followed by the messages delivered by Sandra Henriquez Cacavas and Luz Alvarez Martinez. Both of these women are Latinas, and each focuses on an important perspective of the crisis situations currently faced by Latinas. Their messages are not meant to shock or to depress readers, but rather to educate and instigate sensitivity and

change. We at La Raza are forever indebted to the participants for helping us focus on that which we know but often prefer to internalize or displace until it happens to one of our own.

INTRODUCTION

As the title, *Latinas in Crisis*, suggests, we are discussing issues facing women. More specifically, those of Latinas and Chicanas, or women of Latin-American descent, who live in the United States.

I'd like to share with you, briefly, some of our reasons behind bringing this discussion to Hastings. As you will see, it can be characterized in several ways.

First, this program may be described as a feminist discussion with a "women of color" or "Third World" women's perspective. This terminology, however, has engendered its own critics. Early in the 1980s, for example, when the National Third World Women's Alliance held its first conference on racism within the feminist movement, women of color objected to the oppressive connotations inherent in these labels. As Chela Sandoval, secretary to the Alliance, later commented:

In examining the [registration] lists registrants discovered one single title designated "women of color," while "white" women were offered a series of lists signifying their diversity and emphasizing their choices: "white/immigrant," "white/upper-class," "white/working-class," "middle-class," "educated," "Jewish," "experienced in CR groups," and so on

While many "white" women were unhappy with being separated from women "of color," many of the women of color felt immediately suspicious of a conference structure which would place them under one, seemingly homogenous category. However unintentional, this segregation reflected the way in which women of color are positioned in the dominant culture and within the women's movement itself

Other women called for the title "Third World," arguing in its favor on the grounds that we had originally been constituted as a group by the dominant powers, which needed us defined in particular ways in order to define themselves in another. For these women, then, to be "Third World" meant three things: first, to have been de-centered from any point of power in order to be used as the negative pole against which the dominant powers can then define themselves; second, to be working politically to challenge the systems that keep power moving in its current patterns, thus shifting in onto new terrains; and third, such a name would work to underline the similarity between our oppression in the U.S. and that of our international sisters in Third World countries.

Other voices opposed these positions with the fear that the title "Third World" would diffuse the name of our *particular* oppressions as Americans too much, while arguing that the title was one more appropriate to International Third World women.¹

Despite the terminology controversy — which continues to this day² — one of the underlying goals behind this forum was an attempt to discover where the concerns of women of color fit within gender-based discourse. We further refined these questions by focusing on Latinas, so as to assess where, in the spectrum of priorities among feminists, issues facing Latinas lie. Do they even count?

The answers to these questions, at the moment, are few and far between. As Chicana theory continues to evolve, for example, a number of respected critics — particularly those who focus on literature — teach us that the process currently is riddled with obstacles. Writer and editor Tey Diana Rebolledo analyzed some of these hurdles in her essay, *The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, A Critic, Doing in this Text Anyhow?*³ She notes that Chicana writers' lack of access to publications ultimately results in rendering their works "virtually unavailable to a larger audience," thus making the "role of the Chicana critic . . . one of facilitator" as well as theorist.⁴ Rebolledo, therefore, views the process of placing Chicana theory within the larger context of feminist discourse as complex. She further notes:

Chicana literary discourse, like most feminist discourse, is a troubled one. It is always searching, questioning and fraught with tensions and contradictions, just as the creative writing arising from the same creative context. A truly Chicana literary theory would result from the attempt to resolve these things, to mend the rift between doers and thinkers. I think we would all agree that Chicana criticism and theory are still in a state of flux looking for a theoretical, critical framework that is our own, whatever the perspective. I personally find it difficult to have theory (male-oriented, French feminist, post-structural or whatever is the cur-

1. Chela Sandoval, secretary to the National Third World Women's Alliance, *Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference* in MAKING FACE/MAKING SOUL: HACIENDO CARAS, CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES BY WOMEN OF COLOR 55, 60, 62 (Gloria Anzaldúa ed., 1990) [hereinafter MAKING FACE].

2. For example, I recently witnessed a similar — though increasingly positive — discussion about the symbolism of labels with a group of political women of color in Chicago.

3. Tey Diana Rebolledo, *The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, A Critic, Doing in this Text Anyhow?* in MAKING FACE 346, 346.

4. *Id.* at 349.

rent fad) be what dictates what we find in our literature. I prefer to have literature speak for itself and as a critic try to organize and understand it. Perhaps from a more open perspective our own theoretical critical analysis will arise, rather than finding the theory first and imposing it upon the literature.⁵

Norma Alcarón, Chicano/Ethnic Studies professor, editor, and publisher, undertakes a different perspective that imbues her discussion of feminist theory with the complexity of reconciling gender with culture, class, and race. As Alcarón states:

From the standpoint of epistemologists, the desire to construct a feminist theory based solely on gender, on the one hand, and the knowledge or implicit recognition that such an account might distort the representation of many women and/or correspond to that of some men, on the other, gives rise to anxiety and ambivalence with respect to the future of that feminism, especially in Anglo-America. At the core of that attitude is the often unstated recognition that if the pervasiveness of women's oppression is virtually "universal" on some level, it is also highly diverse from group to group and that women themselves may become complicitous with that oppression The inclusion of other analytical categories such as race and class becomes impossible for a subject whose consciousness refuses to acknowledge that "one becomes a woman" in ways that are much more complex than in simple opposition to men. In cultures in which "asymmetric race and class relations are a central organizing principle of society," one may also "become a woman" in opposition to other women. In other words, the whole category of women may also need to be problematized In any case, one should not step into that category nor that of man that easily or simply.⁶

Beyond a search for theory, however, our discussion is also one of ethnicity and how our collective cultures manifest themselves among Latinas and Chicanas living in the United States. What are the societal forces that drive us to seek new paths — or to remain where our mothers were — as we strive to live in an alien land?

Collectively, our people have faced centuries of oppression by imperi-

5. *Id.* at 350.

6. Norma Alcarón, *The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism* in *MAKING FACE* 360, 360. The introductory note to Alcarón's essay explains: "*This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Chicana writers Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa [note omitted], was intended as a collection of essays, poems, tales and testimonials that would give voice to the contradictory experiences of 'women of color'." *Id.* at 356.

alistic powers that continue to dominate the political and economic well-being of Latin American nations. The onerous journey and eventual ostracism of undocumented immigrants within this country is just one of our daily examples. As muralist, activist, and community leader Judy Baca describes:

The people coming over the border from Mexico are the most difficult to organize. Even though they are the most exploited in the Los Angeles sweatshops, even though they are providing a very low-cost labor force, supporting the economy in a very substantial way and using very few social services — they are the people who are being shot at the border, raped at the border, beaten at the border, followed by helicopters with infrared, etc. They don't want to hassle anything; it's too dangerous. They will not resist because they want to have this little bit of money and work. They just want to blend in and be Americans. My point simply is: if you deny the presence of another people and their culture and you deny them their traditions, you are basically committing cultural genocide.⁷

More immediately, however, those of us who comprise the first generation born in the United States have created a new culture that strives to retain our beloved Latin American heritage while attempting to survive in an Anglo-dominated world. The clash of these dichotomized identities, however, can often be quite volatile — particularly for women. Chicana feminist Canela Jaramillo, for example, gives us one view of the pressures of living within Chicano culture, particularly when you don't look the part. In her personal essay, *Postscript*, she writes:

I have one friend who still insists on forewarning her guests, "she looks Anglo, but she's Chicana." Secret password

Not long ago, I dreamed that I moved back to the barrio. As I was unpacking, the wheels of my car were stripped clean. I ran outside, angry and hurt, thinking, "They wouldn't have done this if they'd known I'm Chicana." Safety. Acceptance. Yet it's less a question of my ethnicity, I think, than of sharing a common background — of lower-class children struggling against or out of the ugliness of inferiority and discrimination; of mostly uneducated, largely illiterate parents; of the terror and abuse within many of our homes, outside from territorial gangs from other barrios, and from a police force and legal system which despised us. And the women — my god. We were nothing unless we could stay off drugs and alcohol or away from pregnancy long enough

7. Judy Baca, *Our People Are the Internal Exiles* in MAKING FACE 256, 256.

to keep our only desirability: "beauty."⁸

Furthermore, this current pressure has transcended its external manifestations and has begun to internalize the relations among our sisters of color. Gloria Anzaldúa, editor of *Making Face, Making Soul*⁹ and co-editor of the revolutionary anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*,¹⁰ places the blame for this almost violent rift among women of color on our "external oppression" by the white power structure. She writes:

One of the reasons for this forced hostility among us is the forced cultural penetration, the rape of the colored by the white, with the colonizers depositing their perspective, their language, their values in our bodies. External oppression is paralleled with our internalization of that oppression. And our acting out from that oppression. They have us doing to those within our own ranks what they have done and continue to do to us — *Othering* people. That is, isolating them, pushing them out of the herd, ostracizing them. The internalization of negative images of ourselves, our self-hatred, poor self-esteem, makes our own people the *Other*. We shun the white-looking Indian, the "high yellow" Black woman, the Asian with the white lover, the Native woman who brings her white girl friend to the Pow Wow, the Chicana who doesn't speak Spanish, the academic, the uneducated. Her difference makes her a person we can't trust. *Para que sea "legal,"* she must pass the ethnic legitimacy test we have devised. And it is exactly our internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines (this part of me is Mexican, this Indian) marked out and woe to any sister or any part of us that steps out of our assigned places, woe to anyone who doesn't measure up to our standards of ethnicity. *Si no cualifica,* if she fails to pass the test, *le aventamos mierda en la cara, le aventamos piedras, la aventamos.* We throw shit in her face, we throw rocks, we kick her out. *Como gallos de pelea nos atacamos unas a las otras — mexicanas de nacimiento contra the born-again mexicanas.* Like fighting cocks, razor blades strapped to our fingers, we slash out at each other. We have turned our anger against ourselves. And our anger is immense. *Es un acido que corroe.*¹¹

8. Canela Jaramillo, *Postscript* in MAKING FACE 77, 77-78.

9. See *supra* note 1.

10. THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK: WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR (Cherrie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa eds., 1976).

11. Gloria Anzaldúa, *En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las nuestras* in MAKING FACE 142, 143.

Ceremonial dancer Aleticia Tijerina, however, blames our own self-hatred, stating:

"Because I am Brown, I am oppressed." When I speak this, I know it is not enough. The knowledge of racism is not enough. Because if I am still bound by my own self-hatred, I am the oppressor onto myself.

I ask myself, "How does a Brown sister, a Black sister, free herself?"

Knowing I am oppressed, I must also know that I participate in the oppression. I must realize that I and all my darker sisters take the instruments of oppression and use them on ourselves. Our tools come in many forms.

We take from the oppressor the instrument of hatred and sharpen it on our bodies and souls. The internalization of "spic" and "nigger" begins at birth. Only consciousness must follow — or death.¹²

Given the internal pressures we may place upon ourselves as women of color, we further contemplate how Latinas fare in the external struggle against racism in this country. Are we discriminated against as a class first and as women second? Or do these effects happen simultaneously? The frustration inherent in this sort of hypothesizing reverts to our attempt to define ourselves when this identity is comprised of many sometimes-competing and sometimes-complimentary facets. As Gloria Alcarón further notes:

The need to assign multiple registers of existence is an effect of the belief that knowledge of one's subjectivity cannot be arrived at through a single discursive "theme." Indeed, the multiple-voiced subjectivity is lived in resistance to competing notions for one's allegiance or self-identification

Thus, current political practices in the United States make it almost impossible to go beyond an oppositional theory of the subject, which is the prevailing feminist strategy and that of others; however, it is not the theory that will help us grasp the subjectivity of women of color Socially and historically, women of color have been now central, now outside antagonistic relations between races, classes and gender(s); this struggle of multiple antagonisms, almost always in relation to culturally different groups and not just genders, gives configuration to the theoretical subject of [*This Bridge Called My Back*]. It must be

12. Aleticia Tijerina, *Notes on Oppression and Violence* in MAKING FACE 170, 170.

noted, however, that each woman of color . . . even in her positioning of a "plurality of self," is already privileged enough to reach the moment of cognition of a situation for herself. This should suggest that to privilege the subject, even if multiple-voiced, is not enough.¹³

Apart from seeking to discover our place within feminism and among women of color, our final perspective in structuring *Latinas* was to question where, as women — *mujeres* — we fit within our *own* culture, among our *own* people. Is the stereotype of "machismo" a myth or a reality among our brothers? If it is alive, what compels this attitude? Are the men of our generation — our peers — any different from our fathers? Do the privileged few, the educated — like the ones here today — think differently of their own sisters than they do of white women? Can they?

Poet Bernice Zamora, for example, apparently thinks they cannot. In *Notes from a Chicana Coed*, a Chicana college student describes the irony of her *compañero's* compelling need to rebuke the white oppressor while continuing to receive the many benefits that she has been denied as a woman. Not only does he accuse her of threatening to shatter the Chicano *movimiento*, this particular brother has the nerve to further patronize this Chicana coed by seeking to capitalize upon her intellect at his convenience. In her poem, Zamora writes:

To cry that the *gabacho*
is our oppressor is to shout
in abstraction, *carnal*.
He no more oppresses us
than you do now as you tell me
"It's the gringo who oppresses you, Babe."
You cry, "The gringo is our oppressor!"
to the tune of \$20,000 to \$30,000
a year, brother, and I wake up
alone each morning and ask,
"Can I feed my children today?"

.....
And when I mention
your G.I. Bill, your
Ford Fellowship, your
working wife, your
three *gabacha guisas*
when you ask me to
write your thesis,

13. Alcarón, *supra* note 6, at 365-66.

you're quick to shout,
"Don't give me that
Women's Lib trip, *mujer*,
that only divides us,
and we have to work
together for the *movimiento*;
the *gabacho* is oppressing us!"

Oye carnal, you may as well
tell me that moon water
cures constipation, that
penguin soup prevents *crudas*,
or that the Arctic Ocean is *menudo*,
because we both learned in the barrios,
man that pigeon shit slides easier.

Still, because of the *gabacho*,
I must write poems about
pajaros, *mariposas*, and the fragrance
of oppressing perfume I smell somewhere.¹⁴

The multitude of questions we have raised, therefore, serves to demonstrate the futility of attempting to reach any coherent or immediate answers. The truth is — issues facing Latinas encompass all of the above. We cannot be feminists without also being women of color — Latinas — while simultaneously being daughter, lover, sister to men raised in a culture very different from the Anglo world in which we live. Some issues in our lives as Latinas, therefore, transcend gender and highlight our struggles as a people. But even within these matters — such as the plight of undocumented immigrant workers, our linguistic barrier, and even the pressure we place upon our less political brothers and sisters — women ultimately carry the heavier burden. For we are the ones to whom our brothers look for solace when their masculinity is threatened. For it is our throats that are on the line when we complain to strangers about being knocked around. For it is our bodies that are taken into custody by external forces far more powerful than our own reproductive will.

For all these reasons, we are excited and proud to spark a dialogue about some of the issues that we, as Latinas, face and come to terms with in a daily struggle for rights. The right to reproductive choice in a traditional and patriarchal culture. The right to be free from physical and sexual abuse — both from strangers and within our own homes. While

14. Bernice Zamora, *Notes from a Chicana "Coed"* in MAKING FACE 131, 131-32.

we realize that we can only attempt to touch upon these and some of the broader underlying questions, our goal is to raise the awareness of at least a handful of issues affecting marginalized women both within and beyond the feminist movement. African-American, Asian-American, Native-American, lesbians, disabled, and poor women. Women who have been denied a voice. As women of color, we need not merely join the discourse in search of our rights; we can create it. We need to demonstrate that to our way of thinking and living being a woman goes beyond discussing relations between the sexes or within our sex. It encompasses relations among various cultures, classes, and races and how these manifest themselves in our integrated identities. Only through our collective strength can we bond isolated fragments into a movement that celebrates not only what we share, but more significantly, the ways in which we differ.

