Mexicanas and Chicanas

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Elena Poniatowska, Mexico's leading woman writer and journalist, gave the following lecture at Hampshire College in the fall of 1991, when she was writer-in-residence at the Five Colleges in Western Massachusetts. Her admiration for Chicana writers has not lessened in the intervening five years, and, as usual, she has put her money where her mouth is by translating Sandra Cisneros's now-canonical early novel, The House on Mango Street (1989), into Spanish (New York: Vintage, 1994; Mexico City: Alfaguara Literaturas, 1995 [with Juan Antonio Ascencio]. The novel was previously translated and published in Spain in 1992.). I met Sandra Cisneros in 1991 as well, when she gave a memorable reading of Woman Hollering Creek at Mount Holyoke College. Both women have immense charm and humor, and I had the good fortune to coincide with both of them in Mexico City in January of 1994, just when Elena was finishing her translation of The House on Mango Street. We spent two and a half hours in the lobby of Sandra's hotel, laughing until our sides ached. It was a rare privilege.

Elena Poniatowska gave MELUS permission to publish this lecture. It is good to see that some of her remarks then are now out of date, especially when she referred to the fact that no Chicana writer had ever been published in Mexico. She herself has seen to that.

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Chicanos and Chicanas have always been in New Mexico, Texas, California, Colorado, Illinois and other North American states. The González'es, the Dominguez'es, the García's, the Fernández'es have lived in these states ever since they can remember. Their great, great grandmother had a house in San Antonio, or in San Diego, or in Sante Fe, long before 1836 and 1848 when these territories became American. Land usually characterizes people and gives them their major traits. Argentinians feed themselves on meat like we Mexicans eat.
beans and corn; corn tortillas are our daily bread. Western culture can be called the culture of wheat, while Spanish-speaking America is the culture of corn.

The story of the border between the United States and Mexico has been a long and painful one. Even when Santa Ana sold half of our country, territories were already in the hands of many North American pioneers who worked the land. When a land is depopulated, or unpopulated, it is the country that settles it that becomes the owner. Texas was never integrated into Mexico. Tijuana only integrated itself during the time of ex-President Echeverría, twenty-four years ago, when his government finished the road that crossed the whole peninsula of Baja California. If one country does not populate a region, and another one does, the one who loses it is the one who has no settlements. Now the limits between our two countries are recognized internationally. Two small islands off the coast of San Diego will never be given back to Mexico, especially because on one of these islands there are military installations. In the nineteenth century, Mexicans living in the northern territories complained that, when the American government took over the land, they felt abandoned by Mexico. Mexico had never done anything for them, and, in the years in which the United States appropriated these lands, Mexico was a country that had been defeated by America. How could Mexico help or protect anyone if it could not even control the rest of the Mexican Republic which was torn apart? Texans of Latin origin, or Hispanics as they are called now, had no time to become Mexicans, and Juan Rulfo used to say that the territories that were lost were the ones that had no bishops. Catholicism as an institution was very strong at keeping a people together. As there were no bishops and no practice of this faith in these lands, adventurers like Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone were the lawmakers.

To say that Mexico abandoned its people would not be false, because Mexico abandons all poor Mexicans. The poor choose the American dream and the American way of life on the other side of the border, because they don’t see a future for themselves in their own country. The word Chicano, although its origin is not exactly known, probably comes from Mexica, and Mexicans from Mexico City, from Monterrey, Puebla, Guadalajara, and other big cities, consider Chicanos either to be undocumented workers and manual laborers or Mexicans who only care to imitate the Americans. “You are a traitor, you are not Mexican, you chose the United States.” “Pocho, pocha, go back to your own country, you can’t even speak Spanish well.” If Mexicans want to be really aggressive, they become racists: “Chicanos are dark and short; they are pickers.” “All that Chicanos
want is to marry a blond.” Or they say in Spanish: “Te crees la muy, muy” (“You think you’re so special”), because they mingle with Americans. So Chicanos are caught between two worlds that reject them: Mexicans who consider them traitors, and Americans who want them only as cheap labor. No one ever seems to remember that they belonged to Texas, New Mexico and California. In a Mexican university, a Chicano student was once advised not to say that she was one, because she would not be accepted.

Another aspect of this rejection of Chicanos could be envy; Mexicans yearn for the American way of life, most of all American clothes and fashions. T-shirts are diamonds. Oh, to have ten dollars in order to buy a T-shirt! Mexico is a racist country; we are racists against ourselves; out of thirty-two states, only one, Oaxaca, has an Indian governor: Heladio Ramírez. As for our skin color, we usually say that we are “café con leche,” coffee with milk, or “apiñonadito,” which is the color of a pine nut. The amount of coffee and milk is the degree of segregation. Milk with only a little coffee is best for the Chicano’s health. Half and half is “moreno,” which is brown, and more coffee than milk is “prieto.” Strong, strong black coffee in a steaming cup is a disaster and we comment: “color de piano,” (black as a piano), or “Ese negro tan feo,” (that ugly black). We still have no use for decaffeinated coffee, but we certainly haven’t yet qualified as a delicious, richer and smoother blend for a taster’s choice. So you Chicanos and Chicanas have a lot to do with the way you like your 100% freeze-dried coffee.

Fifteen years ago, with Luis Valdez’s movie “Zoot Suit,” Mexicans discovered the extraordinary strength, the overwhelming freshness, and the real meaning of the word “Chicano.” Chicano not only designated people of Mexican ancestry living in the United States, but also the social and racial discrimination, the economic exploitation of a migrant working class which crossed the Rio Grande looking for a better life. With “Zoot Suit,” Mexicans also became aware of the contribution that the Chicano theater movement had made to the Chicano’s search for identity, as the “Campesino Theater” was not only the starting point for Valdés’s movie, but also for the Chicano’s assertiveness, the Chicano’s fight for recognition, the Chicano’s human and political struggle towards liberation. As for the movie, “Zoot Suit,” it gave a vision of Chicanos that Mexicans did not even suspect, for Chicanos were, and still are, not considered part of our culture.

Even now, very few Mexican writers care for Chicano writers and poets, and even fewer women writers take Chicana writers into ac-
count. Carlos Monsiváis, José Emilio Pacheco, José Agustín and Gustavo Sáinz—who has been in contact with Chicanos while working in Albuquerque—are the only ones who have promoted Chicano literature. (José Agustín prides himself of the fact that his novel *Ciudades Desiertas* [Deserted Cities] is considered a Chicano novel.) In 1987, the Colegio de la Frontera Norte and the Colegio de México founded the Chicano-Mexican Writers Congress that was also held in Tijuana in May 1989. Just last year, 1990, a Chicano movie festival took place in Mexico City.

These last two years there has also been a campaign to welcome “Paisanos” in Mexico, and the airport was filled with posters of the Mexican idea of a Chicano: a migrant worker with a happy smile and a straw hat. “Give your hand to a Chicano.” But Chicanos with American passports are still considered aliens, and women especially are seen as continuing the tradition of la Malinche, the ultimate traitor, although Cortés is not the Conqueror anymore. Americans are now the Conquerors.

That is why, to many of us, the movie “Zoot Suit” was so important. For more than ten years it filled the emptiness. Not only did it show us what it meant to be Chicano, but it proved that Chicanos had mastered the Anglos’ filmmaking craftsmanship and technique, and that they had not lost time: they had something to say and they knew how to say it. “Zoot Suit” was sociologically valuable, a better and more expressive film than what Mexican cinema itself had achieved in our country in the last thirty years, after Gabriel Figueroa and Emilio “El Indio” Fernández concluded the Golden Era of great Mexican movie making. We have not been able to see ourselves with the same sharpness as the Chicanos, and we are learning only now to be critical of ourselves.

Why did “Zoot Suit” have such an impact on us? Because it summarized all that Chicanos had gone through in the borderlands: their fight for the land and for an identity everyone was ready to deny them. The images gave us not only the generation gap between the traditional parents (who continued living in the United States as they would have lived in their provincial and cautious Guanajuato) and their children (who spoke English and dreamt the American Dream), but the social, economic and political gap between them and the United States. “Zoot Suit” managed to portray the intimate feelings of Mexicans who had been discriminated against for years, and who continue being segregated today. Why were they discriminated against? Because they were poor. Poverty is always an offense. Because they were Indians, mestizos, not white like the Anglos, and, even if they were, they were not Anglos, for they did not know that
life could be conceived of as one great big business. Suddenly they discovered that time is money—a philosophical contribution that Americans have made to the world—that technology was as sacred as any religion, and that their Catholic religion did not have the same importance in the States as it had in Mexico. In other words, they had lost their sense of belonging.

Germán Valdés popularized “Tin Tan” in Mexico, a character who could very well be considered the first living image of the Chicano struggle, the “Pachuco.” The Pachuco’s aspiration was to look exactly like Clark Gable in the movie “Gone With the Wind.” With his baggy pants tightly tied to his skinny waist, laughing at himself, Tin Tan almost disappeared under his super, extra-large coat with very large shoulder pads, a southern smile, a gold chain so long that it dallanged to his knees, a wide hat with a huge feather, shoes too big for him, a mustache (Mexicans have always been crazy about mustaches), and a white shirt. Of course Clark Cable looked gorgeous, but the same could hardly be said of the Pachuco, whose exaggerated pants, hat, chain and jacket floated in the chilly winds of our dusty border towns. Pachucos moved in a no man’s land: they were second-hand Mexicans and fifth-class Americans. Neither Tin Tan nor the Pachucos achieved social recognition. On the contrary. In Mexico, Tin Tan was criticized for popularizing a song in vaudeville night clubs and theaters that said “Este es el Pachuco, un sujeto singular” [This is the Pachuco, an outstanding fellow]. The same went for movies like “Frontera Norte” [The North Frontier] and “El Hijo Desobediente” [The Disobedient Son]. There was a press campaign saying Tin Tan offended the language; consequently he was stripped of his clothes and speech and destroyed by another comedian, Cantinflas.

Nevertheless, the Pachucos remain in our minds not as grotesque figures, but as very daring and lonely ones; they were in search of an identity that both countries denied them; they were very bold in a society that rejected them; and they wanted to live among Americans who denied them political participation and human rights. Mexico, their country of origin, had not been capable of feeding them, much less giving them an identity. The United States cast them aside and blamed them for all their social ills: robberies, rapes, vandalism. They had to be the responsible ones, because they were poor, and the Pachucos lived in junk yards among abandoned cars and used refrigerators, creating their own subculture with their own Spanglish, their own music, and their own way of life.

The Pachucos’ challenge to society is still a valid one, even if at the time it had little to do with Reies López Tijerina or César Chávez’s fight for the land. It is only fair to emphasize that the majority of the
workers immersed in the struggle for the land are women, for they are the ones who pick the lemons, the tomatoes, the grapes, and other fruits that need delicate hands. Curiously, the old saying remains true: man plants, woman harvests.

In César Chávez’s childhood there were signs saying “No dogs and Mexicans allowed.” There was also an assistant sheriff who said, and it was published in the Department of Labor Bulletin no. 836 (1945): “We protect our farmers here in Kern County. They are our best people. They are always with us. They keep the country going. They put us in here and they can put us out again, so we serve them. But the Mexicans are trash. They have no standards of living. We herd them like pigs.” Chávez’s fight with his National Farm Workers Association still continues, ever since his first strike in 1965. The Union’s newspaper is called “El Malcriado,” the one who doesn’t behave and is rude.

Filipinos were brought to the United States to work before Mexicans and they were also spoken of as “the most worthless, unscrupulous, shiftless, diseased, semi-barbarian that has ever come to our shores.” After the Philippine independence act of 1934, further importation of Filipinos came to an end, but Mexican braceros and day laborers were brought into California and the Southwest at harvest time and trucked out again when the harvest was over. The bracero program was a very popular one: they harvested cotton, sugar beets, oranges, lemons, and other crops. Americans would not do the hard, stooping labor strawberries required. The Mexicans’ poverty was desperate. In 1959 they worked hard for sixty cents an hour. But Mexicans like to work on the earth. In the cities, even the most miserable shack has its flower pot, its “geranios,” its herbs for teas. It would be impossible to separate the word Chicano from the word earth. Chicanos are linked to the earth. Migrant workers who come to the valleys of California love lemon and orange trees. They call them “los arbolitos,” worry about them, think about them, and when there is a frost, “una helada,” and they freeze, they pity and mourn them: “Se quemaron los arbolitos, tan bonitos que venían. Ya se murieron los pobrecitos” [Our poor little trees were killed by the frost and they were growing so beautifully].

Gaspar Rivera, who lives in the Mexican peasant town in Watsonville, California, is now one of the best students at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is getting his Master’s degree in Latin American Studies. He lived in Ciudad Nezalhualcoyotl, home to five million Mexicans. Born in Oaxaca, he is mixteco. The Mixteca is a mountain range in Mexico where it hardly rains; it used to, but the climate has changed, and now the earth only gives stones. The wind
sweeps the good earth away. He came as a field worker to the Valley of Santa Cruz, to the Valley of San Joaquin and says the earth in these lands is wonderful because there is water. He admires what Americans have done, turning a desert into a cultivated field by bringing water from lakes, from the north.

These lands are little jewels. No lands like these exist in Mexico, where we are always waiting for rain. The only state that gets all the attention and the money from the Mexican Government is Sinaloa, where there are enormous dams, and the Valley of San Quintin in Baja California. All those very fertile valleys produce the tomatoes that we sell to the United States in December. We Mexicans, who are producers of corn, import corn from the United States, and the corn we buy is not the one used for human consumption but for fattening pigs. Tortillas made with this corn are yellow.2

In order to avoid dying of hunger, many workers come to the States, even if they have to work like slaves. Gaspar Rivera says,

After being a cook, dishwasher, picker in the fields (broccoli, strawberries, artichokes), garbage man, the best-paid job I had was picking mushrooms, $7.30 an hour. I could never dream of earning anything like that in Mexico. The other one was in a factory started by the hippies for natural chocolate with no artificial ingredients. After three years I became a gardener at the University of California at Santa Cruz. That is how I entered the University. Chicanos, as you can see, have been peasants. Most of the Chicanos who now attend school and get a higher education and go to the University are sons and daughters of men and women who never had the opportunity for a university career.

For many years, the Chicanos were to Mexicans a forgotten people in a no-man’s land, in ghost towns, in cities that we in Mexico called, “ciudades de paso,” or “walk-through cities,” cities where no one settles, bad cities for bad people, just as Cuernavaca is called “a sunny place for shady people.”3

Tijuana in 1926 had nothing but slums. The Casino “Agua Caliente” (owned by an American company) started by giving work to the poorest Mexicans who became waiters, janitors, errand or bell boys, dishwashers, bed-makers in whore houses, cheap singers and guitar players. Because of Prohibition, stars like Douglas Fairbanks and Clark Gable came from Hollywood, and it was in “Agua Caliente,” Tijuana (today a public school), that Rita Hayworth began her singing career under her real name: Lola Cansino.
Even if “Agua Caliente” was considered a first class Casino and frequently compared to Monte Carlo, it was run and visited by low class Americans. The designation first class, second class, and fifth class has always been characteristic of the border language. Eulalio González, “Piporro,” epitomized the new inhabitant of the North, a real macho dressed as a cowboy; he called himself a second class Mexican who was lucky enough to get a first class girl, first class because she was a gringa. Chicanos tried to grasp their roots, roots that floated in the air and drifted around in the barren winds and were taken by the waters of the Río Bravo and the Río Grande. They did not speak English, and their Spanish became weaker day by day. English words were mexicanized: truck became troca, yard became yarda, from Tijuana we in Mexico, D.F. inherited words like “sí, man” instead of sí, yes, “migra,” “pasó,” “parquear,” “friquearse,” “alivianado,” “buena vibra” [good vibes], and others, that belong to jail language. The Chicanos created a new language. There are many examples given by the poet Alurista, as, for instance:

El sarape de mi personalidad  
comes in fantastic colors

or Tino Villanueva:

Tú como te llamas, mexicano, latino, Meskin, skin, Mex-guy, Mex-Am, 
Latin-American, Chicano.

or

Once upon a time a little mariposita was flying in the jardín, when de repente she fell cayó and then she dijo: “Ay, what brute am I, I forgot to open my alitas.”

It was not only the language. Chicanos were living “on standby,” always in “transit,” always in a “meantime land,” like “maripositas” waiting to settle down, fluttering their “alitas” before getting their green card, before becoming residents. Rejected by both Mexicans and Americans, they had no one to turn to except themselves, their backs always wet (that is why Gloria Anzaldúa’s book’s title, This Bridge Called My Back, is so good), their back or neck always hurt, and their ribs, over which the bridge can be built, is also a passage across the border. These Mexicans finally reached a new shore, the shore of their awareness, their active participation, their fight for their land, the same land that the same Gloria Anzaldúa describes in these words:
Yes, the Chicano and the Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land. Again I see the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Papi and Mami, all six of us bending to the ground. Below our feet, under the earth lie the watermelon seeds. We cover them with paper plates, putting “terremotes” on top of the plates to keep them from being blown away by the wind. The paper plates keep the frost away. Next day or the day after, we remove the plates, bare the tiny green shoots to the elements. They survive and grow, give fruits hundreds of times the size of the seed. We water them and hoe them, we harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are ploughed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, renacimiento de la tierra madre.

If the whole Mexican family, even the children, worked heavily in the picking of fruit, of cotton, of beans (that is why they are called beaners), women worked even harder, because long after the others had finished, they had to cook and feed their family, put their Aztec sweethearts to bed and clean up. As they were peasant women, they did not fear hard work. In Mexico they had done the same, but for less. Still, their journey was the longest of them all, and, as women, they were subject to sex, race, and class discrimination, to the ill treatment of machos because they are female, to the inferiority complex that accompanies every woman in a patriarchal society, and in which the sex roles are established since birth: machito, little man, mujercita, little doll. Man’s potential is enormous, woman’s potential doesn’t exist. Even without knowing it, they nurtured in their daughters a feeling of worthlessness, of self-hatred for what it means to be a woman and a Chicana.

A field where women work is lovely just to look at, because women wear colored scarves on their heads or blouses or aprons. Now women have chosen to work in the “maquiladoras” [assembly lines] that started in 1965 on our side of the border. They are in demand because they are cheaper and more docile. Most of them are young, single mothers. More and more they become responsible for themselves, and by becoming economically independent in a country like Mexico, where women only know restrictions, they also become the owners of their lives and bodies.

To be a Chicano is not easy, but to be a Chicana is even harder. To be a writer in Mexico is not easy, but to be a woman writer sometimes makes no sense at all. A Chicana writer in the United States gets the worst of both conditions: being a woman and a Chicana aspiring to become a writer. Just one glance at the names of the publishers of Chicana women writers gives us an idea of their marginality: “Spin-
ster/Aunt Lute," "Bilingual Press," "Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press," "The Feminist Press," "Shameless Hussie Press," "Third Woman Press," "El Fuego de Aztlán Press." In Mexico, the work of Chicano writers like Tomás Rivera, Tino Villanueva, Rudolfo Anaya, Miguel Méndez has been published, but no Chicana can make the same claim. Just as in the fields, her working day has been twice as hard.

When man or woman reaches the bottom of the pit, his and her efforts in coming out are priceless. This is what has happened to Chicanas. For many years they lived at the bottom of their pits, not only the extreme border but on the borders of their own landscape, the limits of their own bodies, the length of their hair and their ideas, and they decided for themselves what women can do and must do; they abolished once and for all the unwritten Mexican law inscribed at birth on all our foreheads: "Not you, you are a woman." They discovered their sexuality, accepted it, they pushed aside their mothers who had slowed down the pace, and they achieved what Rosario Castellanos asked for in one of her most beautiful poems: a new way of being human and free. They knew they had to accept and love themselves for others to love them, to love themselves out of negation. Without having decided it beforehand, but in a very explicit manner, they won over class and racial prejudices, social and economic segregation and even won over their own poor feelings of self-esteem. From this devastating battle they came out stronger, and have lived in twenty years what has taken Mexican women a hundred years. They are way ahead of us. They have asserted themselves, and through brutal discrimination they have opened a path to and for themselves. Brutal has also been their journey. Their literature has a lot in common with Frida Kahlo's painting, the portrait of the Indian nana [nanny] who gives her breast covered with tiny white milk brooks to the child-woman who clings to her great obscure nipple. Mexicans and Chicanas drank Indian milk and now they drink low fat 1% milk or skim milk. They still consider themselves daughters of rape. As Lucha Corpi puts it in her "Marina poems":

Tu no la querías y él la negaba
y aquel que cuando niño ¡mamá! le gritaba
cuando creció le puso por nombre "la chingada."
And Sylvia González is specific:

   I am Chicana
   Waiting for the return
   of la Malinche,
   to negate her guilt,
   and cleanse her flesh
   of a confused Mexican wrath
   which seeks reason
   to the displaced power of Indian deities.
   I am Chicana
   Waiting for the coming of a Malinche
   to sacrifice herself
   on an Aztec altar
   and Catholic cross
   in redemption of all her forsaken daughters.

No Mexican woman writer has ever seemed to care about her Chicana counterpart. Why? The reason is mere ignorance and an official dismissal of a culture split in two: the Chicana and the Mexican. This whole feeling of superiority will quickly change into an inferiority complex when Mexican women writers find out who Gloria Anzaldúa or Cherrie Moraga are, or Ana Castillo in her wonderful The Mixquiahuala Letters, Sandra Cisneros in The House on Mango Street or My Wicked, Wicked Ways, with that provocative picture of hers, throwing at our faces like a slap her red mouth and her lotus position, and now Woman Hollering Creek, that has been well received and has had a review in the New York Times Book Review, or Helena Maria Viramontes, consumed and refreshing author of The Moths, and the wonderful stories about the ones who work during various months of the year over the border, or “You cramp my style, baby,” a poem by Lorna Dee Cervantes that addresses the Chicano male movement which perpetuates the Chicana’s role as servant and sex object, slaves of their lord and master. Lorna Dee Cervantes expresses the need to dominate the written word in order to destroy stereotypes about Mexicans and rewrite history from the perspective of the oppressed. As Juan Bruce-Novoa says it, Sheila Ortiz Taylor is the best Chicana novelist and in Mexico she hasn’t been translated. In her play Amor y Libertad [Love and Freedom], Rosa Carrillo writes a dialogue between father and daughter in which traditional family values clash with the Chicana changing self-image and desire for independence. She wants to be free, but her father has never been free, so he cannot understand. Reading Chicana literature, I cannot help but think
about this marvelous Puerto Rican writer, author of "Pollito Chicken," one of the most creative writers, the happiest in her skin, the freest of all writers, Ana Lydia Vega. How can I judge the grade of freedom of a writer? By the happiness it communicates, because he or she knows how to make others laugh, because he or she has a sense of humor, because he or she makes fun of him or herself, because, like Groucho Marx, he or she can declare: "Outside of a dog, books are man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

Chicanas rub their liberty in our faces; provocative, their thighs stand in the air; shameless, their body-battles take us by assault, and take heaven by assault the way Marx (not Groucho) would have wanted. A Chicana in T-shirt and mini-skirt challenges the world. This openness, this absolute will of self-assertion: the Chicana obtains it from her environment. Chicanas who imitate American, white, Anglo-Saxon girls do it with great innocence, and sometimes a lack of self-criticism is a form of liberation. (Read Mary Helen Ponce and her "Color Red.") To put shoes on the Virgin of Guadalupe and throw her into the streets in her high heels, in a short skirt, is a lesson for us who do not let loose the reins.

There are a few reasons for this. Our religiousness has nothing in common with that of the United States. Over there, Catholics are a minority; here the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who go to Tepeyac to pay tribute to their little Virgin exercise an influence so powerful over Mexicans that, like it or not, it has to be considered both politically and socially.

In Mexico, every day I look more like my mother, as Rosario Castellanos looked like hers, Angeles Mastretta like hers, Beatriz Espéjolike hers, Barbara Jacobs like hers. In the United States, the difference between parents and children is enormous. In the case of Chicanos, parents do not agree with what children do. Meekly they continue living in the United States as they would in Mexico, letting everyone step on their feet, while Chicano children desire to find a place among the Anglos.

Freshness, spontaneity, sense of humor, freedom, are on the side of the Chicanas; on our side (except for the case of Angeles Mastretta in her novel Mexican Tango, Kyra Galván and Silvia Tomasa Rivera in their poetry) is nostalgia, traditions, laments and lack of self-love, as in Rosario Castellanos. Our ignorance of Chicano women writers is particularly unfair when we Mexican women writers always complain that no one takes us seriously. What is done to us, we do.

With Chicanos, the problem is also a class problem. Mexican women writers do not come from the working classes and do not have an immediate relationship with the fields and factories the way
Chicanas do. Even though Nellie Campobello was born in the country and can well be considered the only woman writer of the Revolution, she belongs to the bourgeoisie. For the Mexican woman writer, writing is an under product of her social situation. For the Chicanas, writing is a means to overcome their social situation. It is the confrontation of two classes. We come from the Mexican middle class that can travel and settle in the United States under optimum conditions. Money, let us remember it, has no fatherland. Money has no fatherland, but the way of spending it does. There is a culture of waste that is the result of excessive riches.

The knowledge of Chicano literature could enrich us in more ways than one, and teach us what it means to fight for freedom, break down stereotypes, demystify, to know God in a land of indios, to rescue the Virgin of Guadalupe in the land of gringos.

The liberty with which Chicanas write is an example to Mexican women writers. Chicana intellect and will power have benefited from the American Way of Life and Mexican Tradition. They are richer than we are. We are still bent over under the weight of religion, of social status, of tradition. It is still a prowess in Mexico to be a writer. Not even Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz can be considered really subversive, and if she was, three hundred years ago, she was only subversive in her writing, because out of her own disposition she was a courtesan. And Sor Juana went to the very limit of what she could do. Society was hostile to her and it is still hostile to women. How hostile the magazine Plural was to Castellanos, who, according to the Editorial Board, had badly translated St. John Perse, Claudel and Emily Dickinson. In a literature like ours, which had no Emily Dickinson, no Marianne Moore, no Edna St. Vincent Millay, writing and publishing is a subversive action. The publication of Nellie Campobello’s Cartuchos [Cartridges] and My Mother’s Hands [Las manos de Mamá] was in its way a battle siege. A story like Elena Garro’s “La Culpa es de los Tlaxcaltecas” [The Tlaxcaltecas’ Guilt] is profoundly subversive, as is “The Monologues of the Spinster” in poetry by Rosario Castellanos. Of Mexican women writers who do not belong to the petite bourgeoisie, only two could be called proletarian: Benita Galeana, who is not a professional writer, and Sylvia Tomasa Rivera, who accompanies the reading of her poems with beer bottles, bangs on the table and shouts that she is a peasant. She is not anymore. The writer who will shatter our nostalgia to pieces and pulverize our customs is still to be born.

Women fought the Revolution in a subsidiary way. They were the basis of the daily life of the revolutionary army. This women’s movement has not been taken into account, even though there has been a
slow recognition, as in the case of Carmen Serdán, Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, Juana Gutiérrez de Mendoza, and others who took their gun and defended their country. As yet, Mexican literature still lacks great feminine figures; they do not exist or simply they are not allowed to become figures.

We live in a patriarchal society in which women are the servants of the lord, the abnegadas cabecitas blancas [devoted little white heads]. Mother’s Day is incredible in Mexico City: stores earn more money than in the Christmas season. The worst son, the worst daughter, gets his or her mother a blender, a microwave, a salad mixer. The Chicanas are still bent over under the weight of their mother’s misfortune, or the memory of their mother’s misfortune, their Mamacita who is also the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Malinche who gave herself to Cortés, the Llorona who weeps for her dead children, the Chingada, the legendary violated mother, who has given birth to the whole of “La Raza.” The Chicanas love and rebel against their devoted mother who fears her husband and accepts his beatings. Never in any literature have there been so many references to the Malinche. In Rosario Castellanos and Elena Garro’s novels, in the stories of Inés Arredondo and María Luisa Puga, the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Malinche are hardly mentioned. For Chicanas, the Virgin of Guadalupe is an obsession, and no one knows it better than the painter Esther Fernández, who tattoos the Virgin on backs and stomachs. In the United States it would not have been a scandal to put the face of Marilyn Monroe instead of the face of the Virgin of Guadalupe, as it wasn’t a scandal to put Mao Tse Tung’s face instead of the Mona Lisa’s, but when a Mexican painter did it in Mexico everyone was outraged. In the United States, Catholicism is not the main religion. Every year Sandra Cisneros comes to Mexico on December 12 in order to walk on her knees with hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to honor the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is a strong social and political force. We would never think of a Mexican nun becoming anything but the superior of the Convent in church hierarchy, but in the United States there is a Protestant woman who has become a bishop. The picture on the feminist magazine Fem. of the Virgin of Guadalupe walking into the streets with high heels surprised us, but there were no further consequences, because the painter was a Chicana and Fem. magazine does not have a big circulation. No Mexican painter would have done it. Mexicans usually say that before anything else they are “guadalupanos,” sons of the Virgin. Breaking religious canons in Mexico is breaking cultural canons. And political ones.
Mexican women are so profoundly marked by religion, the weight of religion is so paralyzing, that the Chicana’s absolute will for self-respect and self-assertiveness would be hard for us to accept: “¡Mira, qué bárbaras, mira qué locas, cómo se atreven, son unas sinvergüenzas!” [“Look how uncouth, look how crazy, how dare they, they’re shameless!”].

In the Chicanas’ literature, it is their Mexican past that rules. “Abuelita, make me a tea.” And the curandera grandmother takes her yerbabuena [mint] “and fixes a hot drink” because she knows the secrets of medical plants. Many Chicano and Chicana writers go back to their childhood memories, and there stands their grandmother, to whom they speak in Spanish because she never learned English, and wants them to remember Mexican palabras, Mexican prayers, Mexican cooking, chile and tostadas, and customs like the Día de los Muertos. If her children tell her: “Now, abuelita, we kids are Americans,” Grandmother will remind them: “No niños, no, don’t forget su abuelita es mexicana.” The generation gap between fathers and mothers and sons and daughters is wider than the generation gap between parents and children in Mexico. Mexican parents in the United States continue thinking the same way they would in Mexico, and their patterns of conduct have not changed, while their children want to be considered Anglos.

In her book Loving in the War Years, Cherré Moraga writes in her autobiographical essay “La Güera”:

I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother, I had no choice. I took her life into my heart but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual. When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn’t until I had acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother’s oppression—due to being poor, uneducated and Chicana—was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.

What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain’t so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke.

Nevertheless, after reading their work, Chicana women writers seem freer human beings than Mexican women writers in both their work and their life. The freedom of expression in the United States
started years ago, and the process of assimilating women in any movement was natural. That is why a sort of feminine Henry Miller could spring out: Erica Jong in her *Fear of Flying*. Mexican women found out about American women’s emancipation as late as 1988. With the exception of Rosa María Roffiel, no woman writer on this side of the Bravo River has talked about her vagina. Our language is still the language of the nineteenth century. María Luisa Erreguerena, the one with the best sense of humor (let us remember her delightful “The day that God got into my bed”), does not write any more because she practices medicine full time.

It is not that I believe that only the description of the sexual act is liberating, and that sexuality is a synonym of literary achievement, but I believe that choosing one’s own sexual option freely is a first step of men and women towards freedom.

Alexandra Kolontai, the Russian revolutionary and Lenin’s friend, wrote in 1911 about women and moral sexuality and said that a woman is worthwhile when she values her individuality and defends her right to be what she is. She wrote: “I am myself, and everything I am, I owe to my effort.” For Alexandra Kolontai, a modern woman was self-disciplined and presented herself not just as the shadow of man but as an individual woman.

Today we should add: “and not as the shadow of another woman.” Or “and not as the shadow of a patriarchal culture.” Or also, “Not as the shadow of oneself but as an individual shaped through the years by various decisions.”

Mexican women writers have a lot to learn from the freshness and aggressiveness in Chicana writings. Their imagination and their sensuality go much farther than ours. They neither forgive nor feel guilty. Despite, or because of, the Virgin of Guadalupe they are sacrilegious and blasphemous. Good! More than we, they identify themselves with La Chingada. We are also Chingadas, but prefer not to recognize it.

The borderland is spreading quickly, and with it all the agitation, problems and political weaknesses of a poor society of men, women, and children brought together by necessity in the most conflicting fringe between our two countries. The land is fertile and creative, and Cherríe Moraga is right when she says: “There resides in her, as in me, a woman far greater than our bodies can inhabit.”

To know that we can be greater than our bodies, that we can go farther than our limits, that we can overflow ourselves, are lessons that
Chicanas have taught us with their life and literature, and we have not yet known how to thank them.

Notes

1. Malinche was the Aztec noblewoman who was given to Cortes early in his campaign to conquer the Aztec empire. She was both his interpreter and his mistress, and in Mexico, largely due to Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), she is considered by many a traitor to her people. She is often referred to as “La Chingada,” the raped one.

2. White corn is preferred in Mexico for making tortillas.

3. Cuernavaca has been a favorite vacation spot for the wealthy of Mexico City since the days of Cortés. The city is about one hour’s drive south of the capital.