
In Between La Malinche and Gloria Anzaldúa:
Feminism of Mexican and Mexican American Women in the United States, 1910-1950

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In 1976, Martha P. Cotera published what has been identified as the first attempt to construct a complete history of Chicanas entitled *Diosa y hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the U.S.* Cotera chronologically traces Chicana history by beginning with key female figures in Mexican pre-Columbian history and ends by discussing Chicanas' work within the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Of the different historical periods highlighted by Cotera, the inclusion of Mexican women in Mexico and in the United States from the beginning of the twentieth century will be the focus of this paper. This inclusion is of interest because the history of Mexican feminist discourse whether situated in Mexico itself or expressed from within the United States between 1910-1950 is not often placed in conversation with Chicana or U.S. feminism nor is it considered as a part of either field's history.

Most anthologies about the history of feminism in the United States completely ignore Mexican and Mexican American women's experience during 1910-1950. Traditionally, these anthologies do not mention Mexican American women until their sections on the Civil Rights movement era. Some anthologies have begun to highlight some of the labor rights activists of the beginning of the twentieth century with minimum mention. Yet it is easy to highlight these particular women because they share a common link with other Anglo women in the U.S. doing the same type of work at the time. One would then assume that this absence is not present for Chicana scholars but unfortunately, to some extent it is. It is also true that Chicana historians do include some Mexican women as part of Chicana feminist history. The fact that Chicanas do include particular Mexican women into their historical account is reflective of an overall *selectiveness* of Chicano/a cultural production when referencing Mexican culture and history. Bruce-Novoa highlights this selectiveness: "Here, however, my concern is to see how, in the search for origins, Chicano literature has represented, interpreted and recreated the image of Mexico. Our response to the Anglo American tradition surrounding us is clear: Mexican tradition, offering a multiplicity of faces, which Chicano literature, in turn, selectively reflects" (52-53). In the case of Chicanas, they turn to Mexico when referencing indigenous female figures – La Malinche – and when referencing colonial figures such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The most prevalent figures when it comes to the beginning of the twentieth century are women associated with the Mexican Revolution, more specifically icons like the Adelitas, who fall in line with the Chicano Movement's use of figures like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Additionally, Mexican folklore is appropriated for Chicana feminist discourse through characters like La Llorona while Mexican Catholicism is also significant via Chicanas' appropriation of and relationship to La Virgen de Guadalupe. The influence and use of Mexican female figures and imagery is clear; yet, why does Chicana history incorporate Mexican figures like the ones previously mentioned while simultaneously excluding others? The following comments are limited to only making the case for the inclusion of these Mexican women into the study of Chicana history which ultimately is part of U.S history.

This text proposes that there are two important obstacles to discuss when making the case for the importance of Mexican feminists in the U.S. pre-1960 to Chicana feminist history. The first obstacle centers on the traditional definition of history and the need to cross temporal and geopolitical boundaries in order to study Chicana feminism alongside Mexican feminists in the United States pre-1960. The construction and definition of the term Chicana is the second obstacle since it is precisely the limitations created by the term Chicana that delegate what becomes relevant to the study of Chicana feminism. These limitations have excluded certain Mexican and Mexican American feminists in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century.

Traditional constructions of history are founded on a chronological linearity that establishes clear order and unquestionable origins. This mode of creating history becomes problematic when historians uncover events, figures or stories that contradict established historical facts or disrupt the historical order. New approaches to history provide the space to include often marginalized groups and insert them into a larger context. By using Michel Foucault and Emma Pérez' contributions about history, I hope to make room for Mexican women from 1910 to 1950 in the larger literary and historical context of Chicana studies and history.

Mexican women living either in Mexico or the United States during the first half of the twentieth century are a part of a *genealogy* of Mexican and Chicana feminism in the *foucaultian* sense of the term. Foucault critiques the tradition of seeking origins and in Chicana studies, the only historical females that were of use in the field's historical construction, were those who allowed Chicana scholars to establish foremothers and who reiterated traditional Chicana feminist discourse, as previously mentioned. If we dismiss the need to find Chicana origins, we can then recover the voices of these Mexican women and discover the manner in which they can enrich Chicana studies. Additionally, Foucault's idea that conventional history called for the negation of anything *different* explains the exclusion of certain women from the Chicana imaginary if they did not meet the criteria needed for their historical agenda. History is constructed on unifying the identical and not incorporating the different.

Emma Pérez not only questions the modes of historical creation but also applies this theory into her study of Mexican women of the Yucatan. The first useful piece from Pérez' text is her redefinition of history which rejects the notion of historical linearity, therefore forgoing the concept that in studying Mexican feminists of the first half of the twentieth century in United States I am proposing they are somehow a part of an "origin" narrative for Chicana feminism. Like Pérez, I do not invest in finding an "origin" but am interested in making productive theoretical connections:

I found myself returning to my original questions regarding the formation of Chicana nationalist identities beyond the geographic and political border of the United States. Chronologies and origins, however, no longer concerned me as much as enunciative moment. Foucault's premise that "discourse must be treated as it occurs, and not in the distant presence of the origin" allowed me to think again about seeking origins that serve only to impose false continuities. I found it necessary to traverse centuries and borders to unravel contemporary Chicana feminisms rooted in a past which may be understood as an enunciation in the present. Deconstructing systems of thought that frame Chicana history is my task.

In other words, I experimented with a consciousness of Chicana knowledge. (Pérez XVIII)

In this sense, my work seeks to rearticulate the way in which the history of Chicana feminism has been constructed by rejecting traditional modes of history that bind us temporally and geographically. The most vital tool for studying these feminisms is linking the different utterances, discourses and/or ideologies that share common morals, strategies, negotiations, social contexts, and foundations throughout time and space:

As the decolonial imaginary disrupts the Chicano/a historical imagination, a new consciousness is born in which “Chicano/a” identity is forced beyond its own borders by new cultural critiques; in which the Mexican immigrant experience can parallel transnational, third world diasporas; in which social history derives its appeal from its multicultural imperative. (Pérez, 14)

Therefore the initial theoretical obstacle of conventional modes of history is dismantled through the *decolonial imaginary* proposed by Emma Pérez, this imaginary calls for the widening of and sophistication of the way history is perceived and constructed. In doing this, the contributions of Mexican women in the United States pre-1960 provide the catalyst for a new approach to Chicana studies. It is not the premise of this work that Mexican women prior to the Chicano movement should be labeled Chicanas, as that identity marker and political label has and is still being deconstructed and re-evaluated; the intention is to expand the way Chicana and U.S. feminist history are studied so that the experiences of Mexican women in the United States and in Mexico between 1910-1930 can be appreciated as important tools to better understanding U.S. feminist/Chicana history and vice versa.

This innovative approach can result in a more inclusive and theoretically refined method of understanding both Chicana and Mexican feminism in the United States:

For many historians, Chicano/a history materialized only after 1848, and any probing back into Mexico is illegitimate, or should I say “illegal”? Chicana/o history from Mexico that tries to cross the U.S. border is detained there as only Mexican in origin. Our “undocumented” history is barred by a political border, as if that imagined boundary can erase centuries of Spanish-Mexican domain. The [Mexican] revolution occurred after Euroamerican conquest in 1848. It should qualify as Chicana/o history; however, many historians narrowly dictate Chicana/o history within the United States perimeters and argue that a study of the Mexican Revolution must remain within those perimeters to be considered Chicana history. We run the risk of contributing to colonialist historiography when we narrow and bind Chicana/o history to the post 1848 continental United States.” (Pérez 146)

Pérez highlights that by forcing Chicano/a studies into traditional ways of construction history, these fields of study are essentially being colonized again. In my work, I accept that what is pertinent to Chicana historical studies is not only post-1848 U.S. history when the identity Mexican-American is initially noted nor is it only post-1960 history and the birth of the politically conscious label Chicano/a.

The second obstacle in Chicana feminist studies relates to the term *Chicana* itself and what constitutes a Chicana feminist. Many Mexican and Mexican-American women during the

beginning of the twentieth century did not use the terms Chicana nor feminist to define themselves, yet were aware of the issues surrounding gender and race, issues that eventually became the centerpieces of what is known as contemporary Chicana feminist thought. In order to confront this semantic quandary I will question what it means to be Chicana and/or feminist in order to open the lens with which the Chicana feminist discourse has defined, interpreted and categorized its constituents.

First, Chicana as a term borne out of and defined by the social movements of the 1960s has a working-class tendency. The Chicano civil rights movement was initiated by and propelled by the working class: Luis Valdez's *Teatro Campesino*, the United Farmworkers Union, César Chávez and others. These working-class roots imply that the works produced by women/men of an elite class are often not within the discursive reach of Chicano/a discourse nor are their texts found to be significant to its field. Repeating this sentiment is Chela Sandoval: "As immigrants became laborers, 'work' became the privileged site for scholars who wrote 'labor history'. Mexicans and Chicanos/as became laborers, with little mention of their lives beyond the fields or factories" (18). This working class affinity is also noted in anthologies on Chicana feminism; one of the few texts that depicts feminist work by Mexican and Mexican American women between 1910-1930, only references women whose work was solely concerned with working-class issues and this can be seen in other collections.

This supposed antithetical relationship with the elite and intellectuals has not allowed the history of Chicana feminism to be completely open. Traditionally, writers belonging to the elite-class have been depicted as disconnected from working-class issues and/or eager to assimilate. "Middle-class leaders, however, lost their influence with the Chicano movement because they clung to integrationist politics and accommodation to the Anglo establishment as a way to achieve equality" (Acosta & Winegarten 15). The relationship between the working class and middle or elite classes cannot be overly simplified since many figures in both sectors found their relationships to their race, gender and class to be complex and multi-faceted. A step toward reconciling this barrier entails placing both discourses in dialogue and exploring how each have contributed to the history and current status of Chicana feminism instead of continuing to personify this relationship as irreconcilable.

Chicano/a studies began in the fields with the United Farm Works and student walk-outs with a focus on working class issues and at the same time, intellectuals brought all of these grass-roots movements into the academic world. At this very basic level, there is a connection between the working class and intellectuals and this connection needs to be continued in Chicana feminist history. Chicanos and Chicanas are not only farm workers or immigrants; they are intellectuals, millionaires, politicians and hold an array of positions at different social levels. With the inception of Chicana feminist studies, the limitations and usefulness of the term feminist has been a topic of interest. Responding to a mostly Anglo-American and upper-class feminist movement in the United States, Chicanas took on the task of redefining what feminism meant to them since they were unsatisfied with the U.S. feminist movement's discussion of the intersection of race and gender.

Chicana historians have looked toward figures that were visible, accessible and whose discourse was and is easily identifiable as *feminist*. For Chicana discourse, well known and theoretically accepted feminists are deliberately and overtly feminist, posing yet another obstacle

for the way Chicana feminism has conventionally been articulated. That is to say, the rhetoric of women like Sor Juana, Jovita Idar or more recently Gloria Anzaldúa or Cherie Moraga is straightforward and direct with regards to notions of women's rights, labor rights, sexual freedom, reproductive rights, and anti-*machismo*. In *The Chicana Feminist* Martha Cotera contributes to this construction of Chicana feminists, "The Chicano community has traditionally encouraged the participation of aggressive women..." (11). This aggressiveness is then translated into pieces that speak loud and clear about the author's stance on feminist issues.

This particular feminist discourse is in no way filtered nor negotiated and this becomes problematic when considering that many Mexican and Mexican-American women writing before the 1960 movements did not have the literary liberty or clout to fully express any feminist inclinations. Additionally, their response to issues of sexuality, marriage, child-rearing and morality was not always clear cut and direct since they were working from within and sometimes against Mexican and North American cultures. More nuanced readings of texts by women of Mexican descent pre-1960 will allow me to identify works who subtly and strategically advocate for women while balancing the reality that they had to work within patriarchal societies and literary scenes. Echoing this sentiment Hannam proposes: "Feminist ideas, in theory and in practice, were complex. It is important, therefore, not to be too quick to label individuals as feminist or non-feminist on the basis of an ideal model of what a feminist should look like."

The antifeminist movement felt in the mainstream United States culture called women back to their femininity and this deterred many women from using this term. This division between feminism and femininity was also felt for the Mexican women confronted with these issues. Intellectuals, activists, philanthropists, educators and the other well-educated women who had the funds, education, time and access to be involved with the inception of a feminist movement in Mexico were making choices about the terminology that could best describe their efforts. Not only did being labeled a feminist entail losing one's femininity but it also implied a certain level of Americanization and a potential loss of Mexican culture for women of Mexican descent. Yet, can it be argued that those that did not use the term feminist were not as concerned with issues surrounding women, equality and progress? If the marker for identifying that which is relevant to feminist history is the use of the term *feminist*, then a whole body of work that could be beneficial to the study of feminism is being excluded. Because the relationship to the term feminism was not stable, women who did not use this label cannot be excluded; after all, some were equally as concerned with issues linked to women's status in society as their cohorts comfortable with using the term.

The conflict surrounding feminism and femininity was bound to cultural ideology in México that sought national unity through cultural autonomy. Nationalist ideologies could not be reconciled with gender issues. Additionally, the Mexican woman distinguished herself from her European and Anglo-American counterpart because of her particular Mexican femininity which was a stark contrast to the modern *flappers*. Because of the tumultuous relationship with the term feminist, Mexican and Mexican-American women who do not use the term cannot be automatically excluded. With or without the term, many women were actively discussing and articulating their views on gender relations.

Reading the margins and between the lines of these texts becomes the essential tool for this specific historical recuperation. What is useful for the study of Chicana feminism cannot be

reduced to texts whose feminist inclinations are apparent and whose discourse is transparent since many women's experiences at the beginning of the twentieth century and before were not well-defined in relation to feminism. The way these women negotiated with the tools and discursive spaces made available to them must be researched and taken into consideration. It then becomes necessary to revisit, expand, redefine and question terms such as *Chicana* and *feminist* so that these archives can be used towards a better understanding of feminism in the United States, Chicana feminism and Mexican feminism on both sides of the border.

Embracing the complex relationship that many Mexican women and Chicanas had and have with feminism, class, race and other important matters creates a more innovative method for studying and understanding Chicana feminist history by presenting *strategic possibilities*. As explained above this is accomplished by first deconstructing traditional modes of history, redefining the terms *Chicana* and *feminism*, placing into dialogue working class and elite discourses, and lastly embracing *strategic possibilities*.

Some of these forerunners include Jovita González, María Amparo Ruíz de Burton, Jovita Idar, Leonor Villegas de Magnón, Andrea and Teresa Villarreal and many other women whose archives are yet to be studied. Why are these literary figures not studied in relation to Chicana history? Andrea and Teresa Villarreal, Soledad Peña, Jovita Idar, and Luisa Moreno.

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