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Chicana Studies: Is there a Future for Us in Women Studies

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WATERS,
PLUNGING LEAGUES WHEN I CLOSE MY
LIDS,
BACK AT DAWN WITH ACCOUNTS OF
WRECKS,
WITH FINS, COINS, REMAINS OF MEN.

THOSE WHO LEARN TO SEE IN THE DARK
NEVER GO BLIND.
IT IS A GOOD YEAR TO BE WOMAN
AND WHALE AT THE SAME TIME.¹

The topic of this essay is the connection and interrelationship between Chicana Studies and Women's Studies. It has been an extremely difficult paper to write because over the more than ten years I have been involved with Women Studies on a national level, I have increasingly, instead of decreasingly, found it difficult to work with Anglo women involved in Women Studies. Therefore I fear that what I have to say is fairly pessimistic vis a vis Women's Studies. I also hope that once the tensions, problems and difficulties between the two areas are delineated, we may be able to transcend them and arrive at a new understanding.

In 1984 I was hired at the University of New Mexico as Director of the Women Studies Program there, the first minority woman to be the Director of the Program and at the time, I believe, I was the only Chicana to be the Director of such a Program in the United States. It may be that I am still the only Chicana to be a Director. In any event the number of us must be very, very small. The Program in New Mexico is one of the oldest women studies programs in the United States, having been started in 1970 by a group of graduate students and women professors. Because New Mexico is such an intercultural crossroads, from the beginning the program had participation from minority women, particularly Chicanas, who taught the first courses on Chicana relations, history and literature and began courses on race, class, sexual preference and gender issues. Their voices were loud and clear and insistent. Through the years there were often conflicts between the minority women and the liberal Anglo feminists who ran the program: sometimes on the basis of course

CHICANA STUDIES: IS THERE A FUTURE FOR US IN WOMEN STUDIES?

by Tey Diana Rebolledo
University of New Mexico

DISCOURSE ON METHOD
Demetria Martínez

JULY 10TH, MY MONTH'S BLOOD IS
BRIGHT
CANDLE AT THE TUB, KNEES AND BREASTS
IN A BUBBLE REEF, READING BLAKE
BY THREADBARE LIGHT.
A CHILD I DREAMED I WAS A KILLER
WHALE,
BLACK CRESCENT BELLING THROUGH
SEAS,
EATING SHARK, BEARING YOUNG, FAR
FROM THESE ALTITUDES, THESE
NEON YEARS ONE MUST BEAR
UNTIL THE WORK IS DONE.

NIGHTLY MY EYES RETURN TO THEIR

offerings, sometimes of race issues, sometimes (and most often) on hiring issues.

The year before I was hired tensions were high, the program was in disarray and the minority women coalesced in force. With their support (and their pressure) I was hired as the director. I can tell you that when I arrived on campus expectations of me were high. I was to represent minority women, especially Chicanas. I was to be a visible presence for the university on minority issues as well as women's issues. I was to stabilize the program. I was to focus on minority hiring within the program. I was to be diplomatic and normalize relations between program participants.

Because I am a Chicana some faculty members felt I would focus exclusively on Chicanas (I tried to do as much of that as I could). I was expected to generate grant proposals and to work with SIROW (the Southwest Institute for Research on Women) to bring research to UNM. In addition to this I was half-time in my Department (Modern and Classical Languages) where I was expected to gain tenure in one year and teach graduate students (I also taught in the Women Studies Program). Since I am trained as a Latin Americanist and as a Chicana scholar there were pulls on my time and my interests from the Latin American Institute and the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute. I believe that, to begin with, many of us who are selected to administer such programs are pulled in a great many different directions which at times even conflict with each other.

I do not mean this discussion to be one of my travails, because the years I spent working on the Women Studies Program were happy ones for me, years in which I learned a great deal and had many enriching experiences. Nevertheless in the last years I began to have grave doubts about what I was accomplishing, trying to combine my interests in Chicana literature and scholarship, and working with the Women Studies Program. More and more I found myself being pushed in directions away from

my own interests in minority women, more and more I was dealing with mainstream activities and administrative activities having little or nothing to do with Chicana Studies.

After four years I decided that I would have more impact on Chicana Studies if I were to go back full time into my department, focus on our Chicana/o students, integrating women's and Chicana literature into the modern and classical language curriculum, and finish my books. In fact, I am often more effective as a critic on the outside than I was as a participant on the inside. I am sure that the high visibility I had as Director of the Women Studies program insures some of this effectiveness. I am sure that some of the tactics I learned as an administrator also helps, but, for the most part, I have come to feel that we are most effective working full time on our own agendas, rather than trying to work our agendas into mainstream agendas. I would like to outline for you here some of the problems I see in the interface between Chicana Studies and Women Studies, and hope that in workshops and discussion we may begin to find a solution.

Most Women Studies Programs are directed and led by White Anglo Feminists who range in perspectives from traditional to liberal to radical. At times they remember that they need to include minority women in their courses and on their faculties. Certainly in recent years, with curriculum integration projects and with loud voices and commentary from minority women, many programs have made significant inroads in inclusion. Many have not, and I truly believe even in women who regard themselves as "liberals" there is still insensitivity, tokenism, and the necessity for us to constantly be educating. This attitude reminds me of a poem written in the early seventies by Marcela Aguilar called "No More Cookies, Please" where she explains that she is tired of attending coffees with white liberal feminists, constantly having to be nice and to explain herself, educating them. In the intervening years it often seems to me as if not

much has changed.

If any group of minority women have been able to cross boundaries, I believe it is Black women. More often than not they are included in curriculum, their works are read. The curriculum integration and clearing house project run by at Memphis State is doing very well. Chicanas are not half so well represented. Asian-American and Native American women are still almost invisible. We are still having trouble breaking into the mainstream, although some of you/us are doing quite well. We continue to be asked the question, is the work any good? are the writers any good? are you any good? or are you good enough? (And since we ourselves ask these questions of ourselves often enough, it doesn't take much to discourage us.)

I want to outline several areas which for me continue to be problematic.

1) Integrating our research into mainstream books, journals, etc. For a long time I have firmly believed in working on projects that would integrate our work into the larger canon. To this end I have published chapters in such works as The Desert is No Lady, Yale University Press and For Alma Mater, University of Illinois Press. And I have continued to publish extensively in Chicana/Chicano publications. Several years ago I received a letter, however, which has made me question the value of such integration. I would like to read you excerpt from it which will aptly illustrate what I am talking about...it may strike a familiar cord in some of you.

"Dear Professor Rebolledo;

My co-editor and I have just signed an advance contract with a University Press for a collection of essays on the fiction and/or autobiographies of twentieth-century British and American women writers. For some time now we have been searching for someone to write an essay on mothering on the fiction of a Chicana or Latina Woman writer."

(At this point and throughout I am going to be a Chicana

deconstructionist analysis of this letter. To begin, I must mention that I did not know these women at all. I read that the volume is already put together since they have an advance contract. The editor of the press told them that they needed to find a Chicana or Latina, it doesn't matter which, so that their volume will not appear to be racist. They have already pre-selected the topic, mothering, but they don't know any Chicana or Latina critics, or really anyone who knows any, since they have been searching for some time. In addition they don't know any universities where such knowledge might be found.)

"Your name was given to me by the Women's Studies Director at the University of...She also suggested a possible novel -- The Ultraviolet Sky (Bilingual Press, Tempe, AZ) but we are certainly open to suggestion about this."

(Here they have chosen the novel for me, but if I complain loud enough they would be willing to change. After all, they have read the novel so it doesn't make much difference.)

"We are limiting each essay to 8250 words (23 pages, excluding bibliography), and our deadline is October 15, 1989. In fact it would be preferable if we could have an initial draft in September so that we can make editorial comments. Given the short notice, we do realize that this may be difficult to achieve."*

(Ah yes, deadlines. The letter to me was dated July 14, with the 14th crossed out and 18th written in. I received it on July 28th. This gave me exactly a month and a half to write a paper on a subject chosen for me. Because what I write might not be any good, they ask for it a little early so they can edit it, it might be really radical...or, the more likely possibility is that it will be badly written in English, so changes will have to be made. It also assumes that I have nothing to do, but to write this paper. I was only involved in trying to finish 2 books, write this paper for MALCS, finish a promised chapter for a book on Chicano colonial literature, get my

classes organized and coordinate the National Associate for Chicano Studies Conference for 1990.)

The final paragraph. "Please let me know as soon as possible. You may phone me at home or at State University. But I am rarely in my office during the summer. You may, of course, also write to me at the above address. I do hope to hear that you will contribute an essay to this book."

(Deconstruction: Even though I have nothing to do with this project, she not only patronizes me but she places the burden of responsibility on me. I may phone her and moreover, I should track her down. Baring not finding her, I can write to her, soon, immediately with my excitement about having been invited to participate in this project.)

Now perhaps some of you will think I am overreacting to this letter. When you have received enough of them you will see how serious this is. Question: what to do? I took the easy way out, I didn't answer. Advice from colleagues ranged from writing them an angry letter telling them "que se chinguen", to a letter educating them by refusing to participate but explaining why I am offended, to doing a Chicana deconstruction of it. This letter is serious because the project has never been from the start an integrated project with input from minority writers about how best to combine these various papers and perspectives, it is tokenism at its worst because it is so genuinely insensitive and it makes so many assumptions about our work.

2) It is very important to generate public programs, workshops, etc. on issues that minority women feel strongly about. But minority women have to be at the center of the planning for such programs. When they are, you can have great results. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and I planned a program on Redesigning the Traditional Literary Canon, invited female and male speakers, collaborated between Departments and it was a great success. But they have been other programs where this precisely has not been the case, and

they have resulted in memorable disasters.

One case in point is the Dark Madonna Conference held at UCLA several years ago and sponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and co-sponsored by many minority groups such as the African Studies Center, Chicano Studies, Hispanic Women's Council, etc. It seems like a well planned conference. On the night of the opening plenary session with over 500 women in the audience it quickly became apparent that all was not well. Of six speakers on the podium there were no minority women. (We had all been relegated to sessions the next day.) The evening dragged endlessly on with discussions about women and uses of convention, and garden clubs etc.

When time was allowed for questions, a woman stood up and I recognized her, Roberta Fernández. She said, and I paraphrase: "As you look at the audience you can see that we are of all races, the program was advertised as the Dark Madonna with an obviously Black virgin and child on its cover, why are there no minority women on the plenary session?"

As you can imagine, this left the persons on the stage in total confusion with all sorts of embarrassing statements to be said, such as well, there are minority women on the program tomorrow, we tried to include minority women (and they had invited quite a few of us), we didn't think, and, it's not my fault I am not the organizer.

My point is that this happens again and again. When there are no minority women on the planning committees, they forget about us.

As another example, last year I was invited to participate in a New Mexico Humanities Grant on women's rituals for a program sponsored by a Women Studies Program which was to be held in New Mexico. The program director used my part of the program as an example of cultural integration for the program. After the grant request went in, I didn't hear from the program sponsors again except for a short note in January saying that

they had received the grant and that they would be in touch. Several months later I had a call from the secretary of the department asking me if I had made my hotel reservations yet. For when, asked I? For tomorrow night, said she, adding that my presentation was scheduled for 4 p.m. the following afternoon.

When I explained that I had not been notified even when the program was to take place, much less at which hotel I was to make my reservation, she was surprised, though not more so than I. Of course, feeling obligated, I called the program director to ask what happened, and the answer was, oh, they must have forgotten to notify me about it. Strange to say that they would have forgotten to tell the cultural diversity person about the program. Of course I was unable to go on one day's notice.

3) I think that perhaps the greatest impact that we have been able to make vis a vis Women Studies has been in curriculum integration. At least at the University of New Mexico all the Women Studies courses taught have to have a strong racial and ethnic component in them. Truly integrating Chicanas on projects, however, has been a different story, even on the project of curriculum integration. I have often worked with SIROW on different projects, inviting minority women to participate in small numbers. Several years ago they received a grant from the Ford Foundation to participate in a curriculum integration project of a different sort. To integrate the work of minority women into the Women Studies Curriculum. I was asked if our program wanted to participate. I asked what minority women were on the planning committee: well, none. I asked who the project director was: well, a gringa. I asked who the coordinators were: well, a gringa and a Chicano. I said no, no thank you, that we didn't want to participate because we had no input. In their January 1989 newsletter I read that on 13 campus coordinators for the project only one was a Chicana, although Gary Keller and Estevan Flores were also included. Now, if you think Chicanas have no input into the matter...Later I heard that it

was being circulated that I was a difficult person to work with.

When one takes into consideration how these different projects are being put together and presented, it becomes clear that we Chicanas are not only not represented, but that others are speaking for us...others who may be sympathetic, but who cannot presume to speak for us, not from our perspective. Once again others are shaping our world view and presenting it as ours. Is this better than not being represented at all? I will leave this for you to cogitate.

What can Chicanas do about this besides complain and whine? For one thing we need to concentrate on our own research, our own classes, our own agendas. We need to finish our dissertations, our articles, our books. We need to be clear on our perspective and to look to other Chicanas as a source of support. When we are invited to be speakers, present papers, collaborate on books, we must ask who the organizers are, who the planners are. Have they had input from minority women, are they asking for ours? Are we invited at the beginning of the project so that we may take a role in shaping it? If the answers to our questions are not satisfactory, we might perhaps refuse to participate, particularly if we are being used as tokens and are matronized. If we are feeling generous we might explain why we are refusing. We must express our concerns. If they hear this enough from enough of us, perhaps the message will sink in, and I won't be the only one who is difficult to work with.

4) In hiring program participants (faculty, secretaries, students) etc. in Women Studies Program it is very important that there be more than a few token minority women. The more minority women we had in the office and in the halls at UNM in whatever capacity, more minority students were also there. In the years since I left, there has been a noticeable drop in minority students and faculty and student who have been physically present in the program. We need to keep the pressure on Women Studies Programs.

There might be some home of connections between Chicana Studies Programs and Women Studies Programs. My feeling is that they need us more than we need them. Our work is breaking new grounds, is vital and exciting. In reality they know this. It takes time, but the time is now.

I would like to end this discussion, which is just a beginning, with a poem by a Nuevo Mexicana writer, Gloria Gonzales:

THERE IS NOTHING
SO LONESOME
OR SAD
THAT
PAPAS FRITAS
WON'T CURE.²

¹ In Las Mujeres Hablan: An Anthology of Nuevo Mexicana Writers. Eds: Tey Diana Rebolledo, Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, Teresa Márquez. Albuquerque : El Norte Publications, 1988. 194

² Las Mujeres Hablan, 184