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Women, Then and Now: An Analysis of the Adelita Image versus the Chicana as Political Writer and Philosopher

Norma CANTÚ

When I began preparing for this talk I listed various questions that remain unanswered in my mind and that I believe merit scrutiny at a session such as this one. Since my main area of study is literature, questions regarding gender and inequality in higher education and society in regard to literature outnumbered all others. The list included questions such as why, although we have so many Chicanas writing, so few are publishing consistently. Why do we have so many “one-book” writers, as Tillie Olson calls them? Why is it so difficult to find good serious criticism of women’s works? Are Chicana writers oppressed in one more way as writers? Are we, in fact, experiencing a “dark age” of Chicano/a literature—one that is producing nothing new and relying on old, trite formulas? Why aren’t there Chicana literature classes in Chicano studies programs? You can see where the list was going. Some of the questions, it can be argued, are irrelevant. More Chicanas are publishing than ever before, and there *are* Chicana literature courses offered in *some* Chicano studies departments—or more probably, Chicanas are included in Hispanic women’s literature courses.

But the list also included other questions not directly related to literature. Why are there so few, if any, services available for reentry Chicana students? Why isn’t child care the rule not the exception at centers of higher education? How can administrators and faculty support Chicana students in a system that inherently prohibits such bonds? I soon realized that the questions on my list were indeed related, if somewhat tenuously at times, because they led directly or indirectly to literature and to Chicano studies in the broadest sense of both terms.

I have chosen to speak about only two major questions, which might explain, not necessarily resolve, some of my more specific and personal concerns. *Primeramente*, how can Chicana studies survive, in places where no such animal exists, officially or unofficially? As an aside, I suggest that all of us might soon be asking this question about Chicano studies in general unless we take some action, but that is for another session, not this one. The second question is: why are Chicana studies relegated to substatus, a subtopic of Chicano studies, and why do we tolerate this situation?

My comments treat both questions together for I believe that they are ultimately one question. I have been grappling with what I call the "Adelita complex," which might account for Chicanas' exclusion from, or secondary status in, Chicano studies. The explanation I offer comes from literature, from history, and from the various personal experiences of Chicanas.

The images of Adelitas and *soldaderas*—from the Mexican Revolution—are, to a degree, false. Unfortunately, the images still live and give life to attitudes about self and others. They are false in that they often connote a follower—a woman following a man, a soldier, as in the case of the Adelita as a provider, nurturer, healer. The *soldadera*, on the other hand, follows but is more actively involved in the man's activities. Not content with merely keeping the soldiers alive, she is herself a soldier, sometimes donning man's attire and fighting along with the men. But the Adelitas and *soldaderas* were not merely followers—they were often military strategists, political thinkers who gave the Mexican Revolution more than tortillas and beans. A revolution may depend on the feeding of its troops but it must have ideas and ideals even to begin. Leona Vicario, Doña Josefa Oríz de Domínguez, and numerous others were instrumental in developing the ideas that fed not the stomachs but the generating forces of the Revolution.

In Mexican films of the Revolution, one image invariably appears. Always—whether as Adelitas or *soldaderas*—the women follow the men. And as Pedro Armendariz rides into the next battle, Dolores del Rio follows—on foot. The image has not been limited to literature and films, but as self-fulfilling prophecy, has made itself a reality in the minds of contemporary Chicanos and Chicanas who feel that women must follow. Women are perceived as followers, not leaders, or thinkers, when in fact women are active in the role which our foremothers also played, that of political and social

thinkers, of leaders in various areas throughout our communities. But denying our existence in this arena—by excluding Chicana writers from courses in Chicano literature, for example, we perpetuate the stereotypes, and this exclusion thereby invalidates our work.

The implication of this is that women are not taken seriously because they are not serious. By not reading Chicana literature, by not supporting our work in any academic or professional area, our organization—by not taking women seriously—follows the pattern of other professional organizations that by exclusion invalidate the work of certain groups. Chicano studies cannot exist without acknowledgement of Chicanas and our work; to do otherwise would betray the spirit of our organization. One cannot claim to be in Chicano studies and continue to ignore Chicanas. As leaders, thinkers and above all partners, whether in academia or in the larger community.

The pejorative image of Chicanas as Malinches or Adelitas must be replaced by one not assigned to us by patriarchally defined categories. Their “new image” is not new in our history, nor in our literature. Chicanas must be seen as positive forces—leaders, workers—for change with all the positive characteristics that women at all levels of our struggle have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate.