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Gloria A. Ramirez

Esperanza Peace and Justice Center

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Mujeres as carriers of cultura, an activista remembers

Gloria A. Ramirez, editor of *La Voz de Esperanza* published by the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas
NACCS talk 3.10

The conquest of land and the exploitation of resources have always wreaked havoc upon gente, —destroying homes, language, culture and creating alienation within families and communities, effectively undermining and debilitating social structures that for the “conquered” become stored in myth, story or genetic memory, if not completely erased. So it was 500 years ago and it is no different today. Mujeres who are the carriers of culture and transmitters of language bear the brunt of environmental plunder and exploitation. Our bodies become battlefields and subject to conquest in the form of rape, torture and death, then as now.

As Marisol Cortez pointed out at this year’s 20th International Women’s Day March & Rally in San Antonio & in the article, ***Our First Environment: Women’s Bodies***, April 2010:

“It’s no coincidence that so many grassroots struggles for environmental justice, here in San Antonio and in the United States but also around the globe are fought and led by women—ordinary women who fight for clean air and water and healthy food because they’re the ones who carry water home for drinking or washing, or who cook the food, or who out of love or necessity take care of others.”

In 1986, a group of mujeres in San Antonio, Tejas tired of having to decide how to divide their attention among issues of social and environmental justice decided to find a site where groups could meet, share a space and work creatively as activistas on a variety of issues related to social change on the local and global arena. In January of 1987, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center opened its doors hosting offices or meeting space for a small group of organizations that included groups as diverse as The Greens, The Democratic Socialists of America, UTSA MEChA, Voice for Animals, Refugee Aide Project, The Vegetarian Society, Central America Information Center, The Middle East Forum, ELLAS [a statewide Latina Lesbian organization], The South Africa Peace Tour and others. Through the late 80s, the 90s and finally a decade into the 21st century, 23 years later, the Esperanza Center continues to connect issues of justice facing our communities today.

We believe that we cannot work on single issues within separate communities but must act creatively to show that all issues are connected and that all oppressions arise from the same root. The Esperanza is still led by women of color (mostly Chicanas and queers with barrio and working class backgrounds) and we continue to enjoy the involvement of allies that understand their role at the Esperanza is one of Buena Gente serving our community with actos de Corazon that create or add to positive social change.

Much the work of the Esperanza is well documented in the pages of *La Voz de Esperanza*, our monthly newsjournal in existence since November of 1988. Many of the articles in *La Voz* are written by mujeres and focus on the work we have done as activistas and cultural workers.

It would be easy to talk about the water issue calling for Agua Pura, Vida Digna defending our aquifer, the energy issue working for green energy and against nuclear, the defense of and fight for the preservation of public spaces or the struggle for barrio conservation and historic restoration but those are obviously “environmental” issues. We do all of that and more.

Remember that the guiding principle of Esperanza is that all issues of justice are interconnected and come from the same root of oppression. We cannot achieve environmental justice without social justice. With this in mind one of the issues that we have continued to focus on is the femicides of the women of Juárez. In 2002, Yolanda Chávez Leyva wrote the article “Another Kind of Terrorism: Hundreds of Women Murdered in Juárez” in *La Voz*. This began a series of events focused on the Juárez femicides.

In October of 2003, our clay cooperativa Mujerartes, serving mujeres from El Westside, traveled in caravan to Los Angeles for the conference, *The Maquiladora Murders/ Who is Killing the Women of Juárez?* at UCLA stopping to meet with some of the victims’ mothers in Juárez and groups working on behalf of las madres. Dr. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, the conference organizer had worked closely with the women of mujerartes who sculpted clay pieces depicting the femicides including an arbol de muerte by their maestra, Verónica Castillo of Izucar de Matamoros, Puebla in Mexico. The clay artwork was assembled into an exhibit titled, *Lamento por Las Mujeres de Juárez/Elegy for the Women of Juárez* that was exhibited that summer at the Esperanza with an accompanying plática. The clay artwork also traveled to the UCLA Fowler Museum to be exhibited as part of the conference.

A special issue of *La Voz* in July/August of 2003 paid tribute to the mujeres de Juárez with articles, poems and a corrido. In the years that followed, demonstrations at the Mexican consulate, V-Day participation at the El Paso/Juárez border, an outdoor installation of pink crosses at the Esperanza Casa de Cuentos on the Westside, Dia de los muertos ofrendas and written Calaveras, plus annual tributes at the International Women’s Day March and Rally kept the Juárez femicides in the public eye. In the last few years, the femicides have been a topic of *pláticas* and a subject of plays, art exhibits, literary works and film screenings throughout San Antonio in college campuses and cultural arts venues.

In March of this year, Elvia R. Arriola, professor of Law at Northern Illinois University, visiting professor at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, shared an excerpt in *La Voz* titled, “Justice Interrupted: The Ciudad Juárez Femicides & Global Social Responsibility” from a longer piece published in 2007 by the *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*. Here, she makes the connection of the Juárez femicides to the issue of environmental justice. Dr. Arriola cites the December 2009 landmark ruling of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights that condemned the Mexican government for its systematic failure to address in an appropriate and responsive manner the abductions and killing of girls and women in Juárez since the mid-90s [continuing at the rate of 30 femicides per year]. The ruling requires Mexico to take measures to bring about justice to the families that made the human rights complaints and that it must attempt to curb future acts of violence against women. The remedies are extensive “But,” Elvia asserts, “what is missing is the larger context of the environmental instability that is the norm of industrialization whether under NAFTA or CAFTA or anywhere that the leaders of global finance target as important to the global economy.”

Dr. Arriola uses the case of Claudia Yvette González to illustrate the lack of corporate responsibility. Claudia was killed after she was declared late to work by 2 minutes. She was dismissed despite the fact that her work record was perfect and she was scheduled to receive a bonus check for her record of service. Adding to the irony of this case, the company she worked for had a website proudly touting its treatment of workers claiming that they were a socially responsible workplace who valued their workers.

Elvia concludes saying, “Put them all together, gender abuse and violence, corporate power, government acquiescence and you have a recipe for an environment clearly hostile and dangerous to women.” The women killed in the Juárez femicides have become martyrs for justice who are victims of environmental injustice caused by corporate greed and gluttony. Something not exclusive to the Americas. Elvia wants to find a legal way to make corporations and factories ethically and morally responsible for the hostile environments they create in order to maximize profits while completely dehumanizing workers.

The climate for corporate responsibility, however, does not look good. If the recent Supreme Court ruling in January of 2010 holds, corporations will continue to influence elections in this country, gaining more and more power, perhaps even running for office. As Amy Kastely points out in the article, “The Alarming Fiction of Corporate Personhood, Citizens United v. The Federal Election Commission” [*La Voz*, March, 2010] —corporate plundering and excess have already caused so many environmental catastrophes, the extinction of plant and animal species, and the deaths of children dying each hour from lack of food and clean water that the time for legislating corporate responsibility is drawing near. Ya veremos.

The impact that corporations have had in our lives becomes evident if you simply review your childhood. Those of you born in the 50s, especially. When I was a child growing up in the 50s, I had no inkling that corporate monsters existed. I grew up in Austin, Texas on the eastside in a barrio. Tienditas surrounded my abuelas’ homes on East 3rd and my home on Castro St. We could buy items on credit when needed and the owners knew we’d settle our accounts on pay day. No credit or debit cards, only tiendita and Buena gente ethics.

Milk was delivered in glass bottles to our porch and we awoke to the smell of bread baking a block away at Mrs. Baird’s bakery (where ALLGO is now located on Tillery St.). The breakfasts my mom made for us included: pan tostado con mantequilla y Rex jelly, pancakes, papas con huevo y chorizo, nopalitos, atole, chocolate, okra con huevo, frijolititos con huevo, tamales, apple butter and peanut butter sandwiches, fried weenies or fried bologna and eggs y mucho mas. No MacDonald’s. I still insist on a good breakfast every morning.

An *arroyo* ran behind our house. We spent a lot of time there catching crayfish, porchas, tadpoles, frogs and turtles. Sometimes, it would flood in the springtime and we’d end up in the street swimming in the water with my mother, now 84 years old. We had 15 fruit trees, mostly peach in our yard and my father, now 85, would graft branches from one tree to another creating new fruits. With the peach and plum trees he created something like pluots, with the plum and pear trees he’d create a crunchy plum. We had a variety of peaches with white, orange or yellow flesh some big, some small, plus we had moras, blackberries and raspberries, that we would pick and eat —ending up with purple teeth and stained clothes. I don’t know how my mom did it, but using her tallador and her wring washer she kept us in crisp clean clothes drying them outdoors in the sun.

I enjoyed hiding under cascading bushes creating my own little house or climbing trees thinking myself master of the world. Or, I would lay under the tomatito plants and eat the ripe cherry tomatoes before my mom could harvest them. In the summer canvas covered trucks with the canvas rolled down would drive into the neighborhood and take the boys to pick watermelons. I really wanted to go, but girls were not allowed! My father loved watermelons and taught us how to thump them and calaralas by cutting a triangle into the melon and pulling it out with a pocket knife to check the ripeness. And, he taught us how to slice lengthwise pulling long slices off with a tap until the heart of the watermelon, the sweetest part, was exposed. We would each get a round piece of the heart (there were 5 of us children at that time). Then the seed wars would

begin! We would place the seeds between thumb and forefinger, aim and press hard landing the black slimy seeds on someone's cheek, leg or arm. Or, we would use our tongues to send the seeds whoosing out towards our targets.

In the humid summers, mosquitos would abound and fumigating trucks would pass down Castro street blowing out billowing smoke. Excited, we would run behind the trucks hiding and running through the clouds of fumes unaware of their toxicity. Sometimes, trucks would come by to tar the gravel in the streets with chapapote blowing black soot into the air.

Often, we would gather soda bottles to sell for a nickel at the tienditas: Upper 10 was my favorite. The rag man would come by to pick up rags and the panaderos would walk by yelling, Paaaan! Paaaah-n! The Avon lady, the Watkins man, bible salesmen and other assorted salespeople would stop by. Person to person communication, can you imagine that?

We seemed not to lack for play digging holes or drawing lines and circles in the dirt so we could shoot our marbles. We had washers to toss into the holes and tops to spin in the circles as we tried to crack our opponent's trompos. We also did tricks with yoyos. We would roll tires and get inside them or jump up and down on them as they lay flat on the ground, balancing ourselves by holding hands with a partner. We would go out to the empty lots and cut the tops of weeds that had sheaths of spears that we'd wet with our tongues launching them at each other, returning home with our clothes full of flechitas dangling. Or, we'd pick clumps of berries from the china berry tree and have china berry wars. Sometimes, it really hurt when we got hit!

At Easter time, mom would take pieces of tissue and bright candy wrappers y los picaba. She would cut them in the palm of her hand until they turned into tiny confetti. Then she would cut out perfectly round tapitas for the cascarones. We would dye the shells, color them and fill them with confetti tamping down the tapitas with homemade pegadura made with flour and water. Or, we would make kites with my father using sticks, string and newspaper and fly them out behind the house by the arroyo making sure la huila wouldn't get eaten by a tree.

Most days, one would find us outdoors with all sorts of interesting creatures. Cochinillas that we'd roll into little balls. My little sister liked to eat them. Horned toads that we'd catch turning them over to touch their soft underbellies or putting cigarettes into their mouths to watch them smoke. Whip tail lizards that we'd try to catch but end up throwing a rock that would sometimes hit a tail that snap off and wriggle away. That was gross, fascinating and fun! Tambien, tumbabanos panales, we'd throw dirt clods taking down the many yellow jacket nests clustered around the open garage my Dad had built. When the wasps chased after us we would run screaming. My brother would grab a board and swing at them batting them away. But inevitably we would get stung sometimes and we'd apply cold, wet mud to the bite, taking out the stinger.

In the fine dirt we would look for toritos. I now know they were ant lions. Finding funnels in the dirt we'd put our forefinger in the inverted spirals saying, torito, torito something, something, something until the ant lion appeared moving backward into the palm of our hands as it's antennae horns waved in sync. Grasshoppers, chicharas, lightening bugs, hormigas....chickens. *Habia mucho mas que ser y ver afuera.* Not so much these days.

A game I remember that I must mention was played with pocket knives. We would flip *el filero* into the dirt from different parts of our body and if the knife stuck in the dirt we'd move up from knee, to hip, to shoulder, to chin, to nose, and finally to the forehead. The winner would be the first one to get to the top flipping their knife into the soil. Years later, I researched this game and

found out it was of British origin and was called, mumblety peg. How that got into a Chicano barrio in East Austin beats me. But it might be a worthy research topic.

All these childhood *recuerdos* are from the perspective of a Chicanita who did not play with dolls, no me *interesaban*. *Yo era muy machetona*. I really just wanted to be a shoe shine boy or throw the newspaper like my brother. They seemed to have all the fun. Still, I helped with a few chores cleaning the beans by pulling fistfuls of them onto a table and checking for *piedritas* and finally setting aside the pile of beans on the table picked clean of tiny pebbles or dirt clods.

In those days there didn't seem to be a lack for anything. If we ran out of sugar, eggs, papas, frijoles or whatever, mom would send one of us to borrow from a neighbor who would send a bowl with what we needed. We'd always return the bowl filled with something; peaches, *tomatitos*, nopales, or *panecitos*. Or, mom would send a plant or flowers as she was always comparing *las rosas y matitas* with *las comadres*.

Hot, tired and thirsty, we were always ready to play with water spraying it up in the air from the manguera calling out, "*Esta lloviendo, esta lloviendo.*" Or, we'd fill *las tinas* with water and sit in them. Who doesn't have a picture of themselves naked in a *tina* as a 50s baby? Or, we'd jump rope with the water or twirl it into the air so that it would land in a curvaceous thud. If our father got home early from work he would always take a drink from the manguera and feel refreshed. Don't you drink from a manguera?

I don't remember too much about elementary school except that I always was having to compete with the very few *gringuitos* in my classes and would rarely win school competitions in spite of being pretty good at my schoolwork. What I do remember were the civil defense drills and the sirens that would set off the drills. We would have to duck under our desks in anticipation of a nuclear bomb. It was scary. I can still hear those sirens. Perhaps those sirens were a warning of what was to come in my life because we moved as I ended elementary school. We were a family with 5 children in a two bedroom house and my parents felt it necessary to buy a new home. Moving to the south side of Austin put into sharp focus for me issues of racism, civil rights and discrimination. Times changed and violence entered the picture as we watched assassinations, riots and wars becoming the norm. I became *conciente*.

We still own our first house at 3100 Castro Street. *Pero, ahora, que?* The streets are paved but so is the *arroyo*, paved over with cement. No *porchas*, no turtles, no crayfish, no frogs. The neighborhood has few of the *vecinos* we grew up with but no peach trees. No horned frogs, no *luciernagas*, no whiptail lizards. There are, however, a few new green homes in the area and investments abound. I live in San Antonio.

I think about the young mujeres murdered in Juárez and around the world. Having met a few of their mothers and seen many of their pictures, I know many of them were much loved in their families and had childhoods similar to mine. In Mexico, there still are neighborhoods such as the one described from my childhood and children often have relationships with nature. But childhood as I knew it is disappearing as we become seduced by consumerism.

In closing, I would like to talk briefly about our most recent lawsuit against the city. We have already won one lawsuit against the City of San Antonio when despite going through an arts funding process with high marks, the City Council buckled under pressure from gay conservative males and the Christian Right and withdrew the recommendation by peers to be funded. We won the case on appeal with the judge stating that we could not be discriminated against in a public process based on viewpoint discrimination. The City masked its homophobia

claiming that the content of our programming was “too political.” Actually, it was the queer programming that did us in. But we won organizing around two basic ideas: *Arte es Vida and Respeto es Básico*.

This time we are challenging the city on its march ordinance that allows the city to favor some Marches through sponsorships and charges others (political ones) exorbitant rates for our right to assemble and exercise our free speech. Challenging this ordinance are the International Woman’s Day March Committee and the Free Speech Coalition that represents different groups in the city concerned about the ordinance. Again, while we have a lot of men supporting us, the mujeres of the IWD committee are moving forward with this suit. To prepare we are having a mock trial and pláticas with our community. At the end of this month we’ll be presenting oral arguments at the district court level in New Orleans. We have a caravan of *buena gente* going with us and a coalition of groups in New Orleans that will be meeting with us for support. Our basic organizing slogan has been: *Las Calles No Se Callan*.

Whether it is the earth’s atmosphere or airwaves, the seas, *las riquezas de la tierra*, the sentient beings of this earth or the riches of the universe that are exploited, it is we, *mujeres*, that must get involved to make real change. *La mujer* like *la madre tierra* must resist the insistent quest for dominance and profit. *Tenemos que ser concientes con todo los que hacemos*.