

PLÁTICA I:

El Cuerpo y El Baile

THE BODY AS SITE OF KNOWLEDGE

with Drs. Antonia Castañeda and Luz María Gordillo

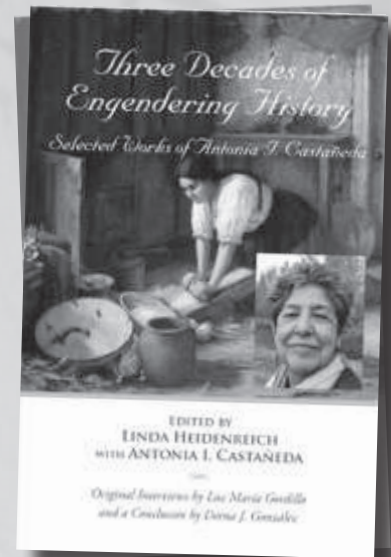
When the hop harvest was over, we'd lived seven months there, the boys had gotten sick, I'd gotten pneumonia and had to go to the doctor. Well—with the fright we'd had on the road, we didn't feel like returning [to Texas] and we decided to stay in Washington. The work ended in Brownstown and we came to Toppenish. Then we went to live at the Golding hop farm—this was made up of rows of shacks—without doors and all falling apart—there was only a wall between the next unit where another person lived. The houses weren't insulated—they didn't have floors, and we worked in the hop. They paid us women \$.75 per hour and \$.85 for the men.¹

Irene Castañeda, “Personal Chronicle of Crystal City.”²

Out in the empty fields near Crystal City and in front of recording devices, Castañeda recreated movements that as a young woman she repeatedly performed while picking potatoes. Dr. Castañeda's anachronistic “danza del jale,” her rhythmically graceful though punishing movements, represented a sense of dignity and accomplishment of the body as well as a sense of sensuality and sexuality—the miracle of a gendered social, cultural and political resistance.

When I conducted the interview “El Cuerpo y El Baile,” Dr. Castañeda and I had already engaged in discussions about the body and its movement while working in the fields and living at the camps. Neither one of us knew exactly how the conversation and interview would develop, but we knew it was important. Castañeda had been working with different concepts regarding the body and knowledge for some time while I was working with transnational sexualities that included experiences of working class Mexicanas in the United States.

Both of us felt it was important that we did not exoticize the fields and diminish or minimize the intensity and exploitative impacts of the labor; but on the other hand we needed to recognize the influence that field labor camp life had on the body itself and on the experience of growing up. Castañeda was able to articulate and theorize experiences of the body and labor; throughout the interview we were able to break this down and analyze it together. Such crossroads—of body, theory and knowledge—make historians of color hesitate as they negotiate with archival work, memories,



Editor's Note: Three Decades of Engendering History, Selected Works of Antonia I. Castañeda*, edited by Linda Heidenreich with Dr. Castañeda and published by University of North Texas Press (2014) **debuts at Esperanza on March 28 at 7pm with a celebration of Antonia's life and work.**

The book contains well-noted historical articles as well as recent writings by Antonia. It also includes 3 pláticas with her conducted by Dr. Luz María Gordillo. Plática I is reprinted here with permission from the publisher. A conclusion by Dr. Deena González summarizes the importance of this “path breaking” book.

The event will include invited guests sharing stories about Antonia. Excerpts of Antonia: A Chicana Story, a documentary co-produced by Drs. Luz María Gordillo and Javier Pescador will also be screened.

Antonia's influence as a historian, activist, arts advocate and an engaged member of multiple communities has had great impact. Her work validates the lives of gente de labor, women, children, elders and indigenous people as an integral part of American history. As Linda Heidenreich states (p.3), Antonia's work —has shaped and influenced two generations of Chicana/o historians and will undoubtedly shape many more to come...

*Note: Archival images appearing in this reprint are not in the book.

facts and experiential images in order to write history that is fair to the subjects of that history but also theoretically clear for those who have been biased, and rendered Chicanas/os' experiences invisible in U.S. mainstream narratives. This is an interview at those crossroads.

Abject living conditions, unfair wage practices, gender and racial discrimination, health problems and no health care, lack of access to formal education, and constant physically punishing work however, were everyday components of a larger context of Tejanas/os lives. These threatening terrains and spaces also represented home and family, community and history. Resistance and personal struggles recreated tales of strength, community formation, and love; resistance and personal struggles also brought respect and love for the land where all of these bodies converged to work and to share in the construction of migrant worker communities.

Luz María Gordillo: Let's talk about how, on the one hand, working in the fields was terribly punishing. And on the other, you experienced a sense of fluidness in the body—a sense of freedom, a sense of touching the earth with your hands, a sense of connection.

Antonia Castañeda: The fields... I was going to say particularly the row crops, but actually all of the crops, whether they were row crops; hops, which are on vines; or orchards, although we didn't work a lot on orchards, in the early years. Farm labor is very hard punishing work, like all things in this society, it is also hierarchical with respect to Mexicans and

Anglos. So when we got to Eastern Washington, the orchard [workers] were, at that point, principally Anglos—Euro-Americans, at least where we were. In other parts of Washington, like the Okanogan, Native Americans were the earliest orchard workers. The issue is that orchard work does not require one to stoop; it is not stoop labor.

When I think about the fields, I think about, on the one hand, very hard work, punishing work, if you will. But the fields were also an incredible universe: a universe of learning, a universe of understanding, a universe of exploration and imagination. Those contradictory realities were ever-present for us. Sometimes we were able to think about it and to focus on it, and sometimes we just lived it. It took me a while to understand, but eventually I did and came to appreciate my body and what it did, how it functioned, how it moved, and how it worked.

The fields and that punishing hard work also made us very conscious and very aware of our bodies, of our physical beings because that was what we used, that was our tool—that was our instrument: our legs and our hands and our knees, our spine, our neck, our head. So it was a whole universe, not only of learning, but a universe of being. So yes, the fields were a physically taxing space. We came out of those fields dragging, sometimes crawling, and sometimes the work involved literally crawling—or if not crawling on your hands and knees then moving on your knees, kind of walking on your knees and moving from plant to plant, depending on what crop you're working.

As a woman, as a young woman, as a teenager, I realized—I don't know as I was really thinking about it per se, but I came to a realization that working in the fields, or what I did in that physical labor, also became the basis for appreciating my body and its ability to work very hard. That hard work also taught me how to push my body; we learned how far it would go and its strength and its endurance and its power. That knowledge, or understanding, became the basis for moving through space—for moving through space in the fields, in the camp where we lived, but also on the dance floor.

And so, we danced with a kind of freedom of movement and ease, we were at ease with our bodies and later, as I thought about it, that was not only a basis for an appreciation of your physical being, but also of your sexual being.

I think of that movement, and although I didn't think about it at the time, there was a freedom with one's body that was not acceptable and was not accepted by Euro-American society.... I'm working on an essay about the body in that regard. Not just as a body that labors, but as a body—your laboring body—as a basis of learning about your body and learning about movement and moving through space—it's an energy. Not just a field of energy, but it becomes energy itself.

I comment that there are elements of sensuality and sexuality in labor—at least there were for me. It was in the fields that I first became aware of my sexual self. A confession that I've certainly never made publicly or ever told anybody: I was just





At the same time, [farm labor] was punishing work and it was exploitative work in many respects... it was complex. I don't romanticize it. There was nothing romantic about it. But it was certainly a place of learning, a universe, a university, if you will, that provided what I've come to understand is a world of depth.

working, in the hops, and from one moment to the next, there was an orgasm, and I didn't know what was happening. I must have been thirteen. It was a particular movement of legs and hips, maybe dragging myself along to the next plant. Though I did not know what it was, I somehow understood I was not to talk about it.

So one learns, it's a universe of learning—and how could we not learn? We experienced and daily saw life and death in the fields. It wasn't just life and death of the plants, the crops we were working—certainly it was that because there is a seasonal cycle; you plant the crop, whatever it is, whether tomatoes, potatoes, hops, or anything else. They grow, ripen, and die as you perform the work cycle of planting, irrigating, weeding, pruning, and harvesting. We not only saw the plants, we also saw animals: birds, rodents, spiders, bugs, insects, bees and so we were aware of all kinds of life in the fields—not just our lives, and the lives of plants, but we also saw the lives of other entities that were present. That universe was very important to my formation and to who I am; I believe it was important to the formation of all of us who worked in the fields, who did farm labor.

At the same time, it was punishing work and it was exploitative work in many respects. And Mexican workers, field workers, were needed but not wanted. I've written about how, when we came in flatbed trucks from the camps into town to buy groceries or to go to the park, Euro-Americans in town looked

at us with fearful eyes, sometimes with disdain—actually a lot with disdain. So it was complex. I don't romanticize it. There was nothing romantic about it. But it was certainly a place of learning, a universe, a university, if you will, that provided what I've come to understand is a world of depth. I am only now having the time to go back and examine and explore that. But I'm particularly interested in how work also became the basis for our understanding, or at least the basis for our moving through space and occupying space. And I didn't know it at the time, but that—not so much understanding—that being, just that sense of being and that sense of movement and that sense of freedom of movement [was part of the understanding].

Working in the fields, as I've said, gave me, at least, and the women in the community that raised me, a flexibility and a freedom of movement, and an ease. I was at ease with my body. I liked my body. I still do. Those are all elements that I'm now beginning to not only think about but to talk about and to begin to write about. There is much there and I'm very grateful for that experience. I can now appreciate it. At the same time, it was punishing work and we were very aware that we worked the land, and that the land was not ours. And I was also equally aware that the owners needed our labor but did not want our presence in their world; one could not help but be aware, and it also became the basis, for what I subsequently studied and wrote.

LMG: You said that when you danced, you danced with freedom. Take me back to you getting ready for one of these dances. I want to hear the conversation again.

AC: So we're out in the fields and it's late afternoon and we're sweating like crazy. We're dripping. We covered our head with a bandana, and a hat on top to protect the face and head from the sun because we didn't want to get sunstroke. So we're dripping wet, if it's the middle of June, as it can get very very warm—up to 110 degrees in the middle of overgrown fields. And so we're hurrying like crazy and probably cutting the plants as well as weeds, if we're weeding, in order to get to the dance because we all want to go to the dance.

We're living in the camp and there are communal showers just like there are outdoor toilets. There is a communal water faucet that's a bit of a distance from the particular cabin, or long house, that we live in. So everybody—the women in particular (the men, I'm sure are having their own conversations) but our conversations as teenagers, was about who we were going to dance with con aquel o “no voy a bailar con él porque andaba con ella,” y “que te vas a poner.” “y no tienes hair spray.” So these were the conversations as we were getting ready to go and then we would tease each other about being in such a hurry that we didn't even want to take the time to shower. We were just going to put “Tabu” on ourselves and go. Tabu was this very stinky kind of perfume, real cheap in a blue bottle, I think in a heart-shaped bottle. We were just very happy to have a dance to go to.

We are getting ready and going to the shower ... and the communal shower is also the communal lavandería (laundry room) because, in addition to the shower, there are sinks. The sinks are ridged in the front, where you bend into the sink, so that you can scrub clothes—and big faucets. And then we go and presumably by the time we've showered we have ironed our dresses and all of those crinolines that are starched beyond belief and they pouf-out the skirt. And we go to the dance. I'm allowed mainly to go to wedding dances. It is rare that my parents, specifically my father, allow me to go to the other dances, which are the dances where people pay to get in, like a cover charge.

This is the 50s, so ... la música ... more than the boleros, it is usually the polkas, the polquitas that we dance. Dancing, obviously is another kind of movement. The unspoken protocol of the arena is that everybody dances in the same direction. But sometimes, if you get a little charge with music, sometimes going the opposite direction you bump into people. So the dances are a joy and a release, where we are able to move in ways different from how we move in the field. They are related but also different movements. And so it's all my friends and their mothers and sometimes their fathers, but the girls usually go with their mothers. And there's lots of talking and lots of looking at the dancing partners. And sometimes, if there are no male partners, and even if there are, we dance with each other. The point is to dance. The point is to move. The point is to be in sync and on rhythm with the music that is being played. And the source of that music is Tejas, and Tejas is home. So the dance is about our movements. It's about enjoyment. It's about geography. It's about flirting. It's about engaging with other people—with other girls and their mothers, in particular. It's about learning to be sociable. Portarse bien o mal—in a family in a communal setting.

But it is also about moving out of spaces of oppression and exploitation and difficulties. So the dances create those spaces for us. Or we create those spaces for ourselves in the dancing. So, for me, the memories of that period and of dancing are very, very important precisely because it was a realm in which we could be who we were and move in the way that pleased us and that mattered to us. And it is interesting to think about it now because actually the reality is that the dances were usually held at the roller rink that was no longer in use so the cement was all cracked and the walls were—re-thinking it, it was probably a shabby place or would have been considered a shabby place. But for us it was as elegant as any elegant ballroom. It could be because it was ours and because we were dancing. So it's a whole other universe. And it's a rhythm. Some of the rhythms were transported from where we were working—from our work, but we also developed other movements of body. ➔

Note: *Plática I, El Cuerpo y El Baile* is reprinted with permission of University of North Texas Press. Notes at the end of *Plática I* can be requested from: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org. See the back page for more on the event celebrating Antonia's life and work.



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Antonia arrested at the demolition of Univision in 2013.



At the 2010 International Women's Day March