

## Grassroots Mobilization by Chicanas in the Environmental and Economic Justice Movement

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The history of Chicanas is replete with instances of community and work-based activism. Chicana Studies are documenting historical and contemporary accounts of Chicana grassroots mobilizations. Their research dispels myths of Chicanas as passive, demonstrates the mobilization by Chicanas is rarely based solely on gender, describes the interconnectedness of family and workplace, and illustrates the transformation of traditional characteristics into political assets. Despite the importance of this topic, very little written research exists. Yet grassroots mobilizations are themselves increasing, suggesting the need for more studies. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on grassroots mobilizations by Chicanas. In light of global restructuring, do we find an emergence of new forms of Chicana activism? If so, what are the characteristics of this activism? I intend to pursue these questions through examination of Chicana activists in the Environmental and Economic Justice Movement.

The Environmental and Economic Justice Movement exists in direct response to the toxic poisoning that people of color face in their workplace and in their communities. This Movement by people of color challenges environmental racism—the systematic targeting of their labor for particularly hazardous occupations and of their communities for the location of hazardous materials.<sup>1</sup> Women of color are especially affected through occupational and industrial segmentation exemplified by their prevalence in low wage employment in high tech industries. In their families and communities, women are surrounded by illness, birth defects, and premature death. The experiences of women of color are integral to the Environmental and Economic Justice Movement. In fact, Chicana, Latina, Indigenous, African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander women are active in the fight against environmental racism and are key members and leaders of environmental and economic justice organizations.

An examination of grassroots Chicanas within the Environmental Justice Movement illuminates community responses to the inequality being produced by restructuring of the world economy. The purpose of this paper is to observe and characterize examples of women's activities in the Environmental and Economic Justice Movement, specifically Chicanas involved in an Albuquerque based state-wide organization called the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP). Chicanas spearhead this organization and are currently the director, the president of the board, the responsables of organizing campaigns, and active members. Many of the women have long histories of community activism originating in the Chicano movement while others developed their political experience more recently. Most become involved because of issue directly facing themselves and their communities. By observing Chicanas in SWOP, we can learn about the emergence of grassroots mobilizations by Chicanas as part of a larger social movement that is tackling the negative impacts of global restructuring.

### Research on Chicana Activism

Chicana Studies scholars are documenting historical and contemporary accounts of community and work-based activism by Chicanas. Chicana writings have presented Mexican women in their fights for the Mexican Revolution, for unionization, in the Chicano Student Movement, and in their communities. Research by Chicana scholars makes at least four points: Chicanas are not passive but instead have a long history of action for social justice; mobilizations by Chicanas reflect an identity tied to class, race, and gender; consciousness and mobilizations by Chicanas are reflective of ties among family, household, and workplace; Chicanas' organizing skills and strategies stem from their experiences and conditions.

The majority of these studies have taken the form of documentation. As labor activists, for example, Chicanas have a history of involvement in the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA); International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU); the United Farmworkers (UFW); and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers

of America. Chicana writers have depicted the efforts for unionization in the California food processing industry between 1930-1950, the strike against Farah Manufacturing Company in El Paso, the Toltec Food Strike in Richmond, California, the Watsonville Strike of 1986 and others.<sup>2</sup> Chicanos and other non-Chicanas have also contribute to this documentation.<sup>3</sup> Still, the examples of unrecorded labor activism are countless, leaving room in the Chicana Studies literature for more accounts of historical and contemporary efforts. There are, however, numerous accounts of survival and strength by Chicanas under difficult circumstance. These include studies of cannery, domestic, and *maquila* workers and undocumented female labor.<sup>4</sup>

Chicanas have also written about involvement of Chicanas/Mexicanas in social movements including the fights for Mexican Independence and in the Chicano Student Movement of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In each of these movements, Chicanas\Mexicanas have been critical actors in these fights for social justice, but have also had to fight within their organizations over issues of treatment of women. Nonetheless, numerous examples exist of women's activism occurring in efforts alongside men. While very few written accounts exist of other forms of Chicana activism, it is the case that Chicanas have mobilized around issues of welfare rights, childcare, community health, sterilization, birth control, legal rights, and prison reform.<sup>6</sup>

There is even less written documentation of Chicana activism that is community or neighborhood based. While we know this activism exists, Mary Pardo, has provided one of the few written accounts that has made its way into Chicana Studies.<sup>7</sup> Pardo begins by pointing out that much of the political science literature conceptualizes political action in terms of the electoral arena and that most feminist research describes efforts that are primarily gender-based.<sup>8</sup> Her own research describes the efforts of the Mothers of East L.A. in their fight against an incinerator and a prison in their neighborhood. Pardo points out that in their organizing, the Mexicanas transformed "traditional" networks

and resources based on family and culture into political assets to defend the quality of urban life."<sup>9</sup>

The Mothers of East L.A. accomplished this by turning their preexisting gender based networks, e.g. those related to church and school, into political benefits, bringing forward previously "invisible" women into leadership positions, transforming the identity of "mother" into a force for political opposition, developing their own cultural and political identities, and developing a sense of entitlement on behalf of their communities. Pardo states that when the women themselves explain their activism, "they link family and community as one entity" and "they seldom opt to separate themselves from men and their families."<sup>10</sup> The work by Pardo provides an analysis of grassroots efforts that challenges static views of democracy and social change. Instead, we meet women who

...have defied stereotypes of apathy and used ethnic, gender, and class identity as an impetus, a strength, a vehicle for political activism. They have expanded their - and our - understanding of the complexities of a political system, and they have reaffirmed the possibility of 'doing something'.<sup>11</sup>

The Mothers of East L.A. are connected to the Environmental and Economic Justice Movement through their affiliation with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice. This network has seventy-two organizations that are confronting issues of environmental racism in their communities. The SouthWest Organizing Project is another of these organizations.

### **The South West Organizing Project**

The SouthWest Organizing Project is a social justice organization fighting for environmental and economic justice in communities of color. As Jeanne Gauna, director of SWOP, said in her keynote at the 1994 retreat, SWOP is a "poor people's organization" whose purpose is to fight for "the ability to determine our own future."<sup>12</sup> This fight is being waged in the face of years of colonization and exploitation facing communities of

color in New Mexico. SWOP is asking for clean air, water, food, and safe jobs. They call upon government and industry that comes into their communities to be accountable. "We have seen waves of people come in to our state who take more than they give...We are asking for our future."

In its 1994 brochure, the SouthWest Organizing Project declares the following:

Adequate food, housing, employment opportunities, a decent education, and a safe environment are fundamental human rights. In the United States today, these rights are the privilege of some communities while people in our communities suffer. Meanwhile, our much needed tax dollars are being used to sustain a foreign policy which oppresses communities and working people in other countries.

At the SouthWest Organizing Project, we are working for the self-determination of all peoples. Self-determination is when we take direct responsibility in running our communities. We work for social, environmental and economic justice at home and abroad, and live by the principle that as community and working people, we have the right to control our own lives and resources.

In its fifteen year fight for the future, the SouthWest Organizing Project has actively registered people to vote, has educated the community on economic and environmental issues through public forums, demonstrations, publications, and press conferences. They have been instrumental in establishing the SouthWest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice and the National People of Color Summit. Their national influence includes leadership in pressuring mainstream environmental organizations to be accountable to communities of color and the Environmental Protection Agency to do its job. In addition to EPA, they have taken on the Department of Energy and Defense (Kirtland Airforce Base), major transnational corporations (Intel), developers, and federal, state and local governments.

Their many victories include working with the

Advisory Council to secure an agreement with Kirtland Air Force Base to allow community residents access to the process of conducting and overseeing contamination studies. Mountainview, a small community south of Albuquerque, suffers from severe groundwater contamination, first discovered in 1961. This precedent setting agreement was significant in opening up community involvement and accountability of the Air Force Base, EPA, state environmental enforcement agencies, and elected officials.

Local issues are not SWOP's only concerns. They work closely with other organizations and communities to support their struggles for social and economic justice. They support indigenous struggles on native lands, strikers from the Levi Strauss Plant in Austin, Texas (formed as Fuerza Unida), farmworker struggles against pesticide use, African American residents in Texarcana, Texas, freedom fighters in Chiapas, and Native American activists against uranium tailings. Indeed, the SouthWest Organizing Project understands its work in global terms and local significance. The organization itself operates democratically, is highly conscious of its responsibility to youth, seeks non-sexist modes of operating, and sees itself as family.

At its 1993 retreat, the SouthWest Organizing Project devised the organizing theme "Take Back New Mexico!" or "*Reclame Nuevo Mexico!*" signaling the group's intent to reassert the native and indigenous claim to New Mexico. Its agenda for the 90's calls for tackling state economic development strategies that encourage external investment in exchange for tax abatement and infrastructure subsidies, toxic worksites, the gentrification of neighborhoods and communities, and crises among the youth. These issues are some of the reasons that SWOP is so seriously concerning itself with the future of New Mexico.

The issues that comprise the "Take Back New Mexico" campaign reflect major development issues in the State of New Mexico including the recruitment of multinational corporations as an economic development strategy, high tech industries as a favored source for job generation, border development arising

from free trade zones and the speculation over NAFTA's impact, the speculation through large development projects in traditional neighborhoods, and the policing and incarceration of youth. In this paper, I will briefly describe the articulation of issues and the strategies of Chicana organizers to demonstrate their resistance to environmental and economic injustice in New Mexico. In particular, I will discuss SWOP campaigns regarding the expansion of Intel Corporation, the poisoning in high tech employment, anti-NAFTA position, inadequate infrastructure, and the placement of a courthouse in a long standing community.

### Intel

Jean Gauna describes the expansion of Intel Corporation as "nothing more than a multi-million dollar hustle of New Mexico, our communities, our people."<sup>13</sup> Many elected officials and developers claim that Intel is good for New Mexico and that the \$2 billion industrial revenue bonds arranged by state and Sandoval county officials are justified by the jobs that will be created by the manufacturing of the Intel Pentium chip. SWOP describes the expansion as economic extortion and questions the environmental consequences, the security and safety of the jobs, the ultimate cost of those jobs, and the demands on the infrastructure such as sewage, water.<sup>14</sup>

In a "Community Update" SWOP questioned the soundness of the state economic development strategy suggesting that state officials, such as the governor through his sale of land near Intel, have personally profited from the campaign to encourage Intel to expand its New Mexico facility. SWOP also suggests that changes in New Mexico's tax structure were made to benefit large companies like Intel to "lure them" to New Mexico. "For example, Intel's use of New Mexico Investment Tax Credit allows them to keep their employees' income tax withholdings, rather than send them on to the state."<sup>15</sup>

SWOP points out that Intel is "committed to profits," not to New Mexico and that the Sandoval County facility is Intel's largest manufacturing operation. It produces 50% of the corporation's revenue and 70% of its profits" (SWOP 1993).

And the security of Intel as the top chip manufacturer could easily change resulting in the laying off of several thousand workers. SWOP challenges, therefore, the wisdom in placing so much faith in Intel as an economic solution to New Mexico's employment problems. SWOP also points out that the Industrial Revenue Bonds used in the Intel deal will pose a financial liability for taxpayers and that Intel's presence will place major strains on local infrastructure. According to SWOP's research, 32 00 cubic feet of bulk gases, 22 cubic feet of hazardous gases, 2,275 gallons of deionized water, 20lbs. of chemicals and 285 kilowatt hours of electrical power are necessary to process one six inch silicon wafer. The output from this production includes 25 pounds of sodium hydroxide, 2, 849 gallons of waste water, 7 pounds of hazardous waste, including photoresist, pump oil, solvents, contaminated rags, etc. When the Rio Rancho expansion is complete, Intel wants to process 5,000 8-inch wafers per week.<sup>16</sup> These figures show that the amount of resources and infrastructure that are necessary for the Intel plant may be more than what the surrounding communities feel are worth the insecure, and not necessarily safe, jobs that would be generated. The SouthWest Organizing Project has succeeded in raising the consciousness of area residents and in suggesting that Intel may not be good for New Mexico.

The fundamental organizing issue, according to Gauna, is how can a local organization take on a major multinational power like Intel? SWOP has held public hearings, produced publications and materials with facts on Intel and questions about the expansion; they have organized demonstrations, printed satirical dollar bills, initiated post card and door to door campaigns, and issued a 50 page report on the expansion. SWOP has also authored a book on the Intel expansion which they call, Intel Inside. They have received press coverage and have succeeded in influencing many people to question the wisdom of Intel's presence in New Mexico.

It did not take long for Intel to react to SWOP's activities. In a meeting with its work force and its management, Intel reportedly warned them that SWOP was engaging in union

activities and that SWOP activity was endangering their jobs and might possibly be involved in industrial espionage. The security in an already highly secretive industry was intensified. Yet the pressure from SWOP eventually led to a series of meetings by SWOP with Intel officials. Intel also responded with a highly visible public relations campaign. They placed two-page inserts in the local paper, officials appearances on Sunday morning local television talk shows; the corporation contributed money to local activities, sponsored local events, and is now promising to finance a high school.

The expansion proceeded, despite SWOP's opposition. They did, however, raise awareness within the community as to who has legitimate access to land, water and other resources and just how far a community should go to make itself vulnerable to economic extortion. The eight million dollars in industrial revenue bonds (IRB's) that Intel is now requesting will not come as easily, and because of SWOP, this transnational corporation is having to consider its accountability to any community where it locates. This issues continues.

### Workers in the High-Tech Industry

In SWOP's High Tech campaign, awareness has been raised regarding the impact on workers in the microelectronics industry. Specifically, SWOP has organized several public hearings where women who worked in the Sandia, Motorola, Honeywell and GTE-Lenkert plants have presented their stories.

Despite the clean image of high tech industry, few people hear of what some have described as the 'silent holocaust' which is taking place in Albuquerque: the hundreds, if not thousands of women of color poisoned in the electronics industries.<sup>17</sup>

On April 3, 1993, the SouthWest Organizing Project held "Interfaith Hearings on Toxic Poisoning in Communities of Color." This was a follow-up to hearings held in September 1989. A group of religious leaders served as the panel receiving testimonies from numerous members of communities of color

speaking of the toxic poisoning to them and their communities. The hearings demonstrate the effective working relationship with grassroots organizations and churches concerned with issues of justice.

During these hearings, several spoke about the impact of working in high tech manufacturing. They spoke of

carpal tunnel syndrome, nerve problems, reflex sympathetic dystrophy, headaches, fatigue, memory loss, attention switching or poor attention spans, slowed reflexes, encephalopathy (degenerative brain disease), positive MRI's (actual deadspots on the brain), hypothyroidism, adrenal gland failure, colon pulps, lupus, cancer, menstrual problems, cervical precancerous tissue, reactive airway disease, multiple chemical sensitivities, high liver readings, sinus surgeries, irritability, depression, anxiety, higher rates of infection. These are by no means the only health effects which individuals will have. Solvents attack each individual at points that are genetically weakest. Photoresists are known to cause birth defects in the unborn fetus. Solvents affect the immune system and weaken an individual's system to fight disease and infection.<sup>18</sup>

Other problems identified by these primarily women of color, include high blood pressure, eye problems, miscarriages, bells palsy, reproductive system disorders, heart attacks, digestive illnesses, severe dermatitis, seizures, tumors, muscle and joint illnesses, and respiratory illnesses.

In New Mexico, as elsewhere, women and children are bearing the burden of increased environmental hazards and unsafe working conditions...Unfortunately for many women who are no longer with us and many more who are very sick, these captains of industry have not told us that compared to other industries, electronics manufacturing has an exceptionally high rate of illness among its workforce and is responsible for disastrous cases of

environmental pollution. They also did not tell us that electronics is itself a sort of chemical industry because of the thousands of different chemicals used for production...What does this mean to our communities?

It means that our greatest resource, our children, are in jeopardy. Women, who are the majority of the industry's production workers, are exposed to certain chemicals, experience problems with pregnancy such as miscarriages and still our premature birth. Children may be born with low birth weights and/or children have behavioral or learning problems such as mental retardation. This is not a price we are willing to pay.<sup>19</sup>

The SouthWest Organizing Project has worked to dispel the myth that high tech industry is a clean industry. The SWOP organizers have worked closely with the women impacted to tell their story and to organize the Toxic Victims Assistance Corporation. This group is seeking legislation to protect high tech workers, fund medical clinics, and inform potential workers. Several of these women have now become members of the SouthWest Organizing Project.

### NAFTA

The SouthWest Organizing Project took an anti-NAFTA stance arguing that NAFTA, and the renegotiation of GATT "are strategies by the corporate elite to confront the crisis in capitalism and increase their profits" and that NAFTA "will mean a renewed assault on worker and community rights."<sup>20</sup> The SWOP campaign against NAFTA was a statewide effort and called for the renegotiation of NAFTA. In its effort to oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement, the SouthWest Organizing Project formed a broad based coalition of labor, community, religious and environmental groups across the state.

An important actor in the SWOP campaign was a representative from labor and a member of the SWOP board. Eleanor Chavez, through her labor organizing work and support of the SWOP campaign, demonstrates Chicana involvement in international worker issues. Her involvement also demonstrates the connectedness of Chicana/Mexicana relations since she was

instrumental in hosting Liliana Flores of the Democratic Revolutionary Party of Mexico who spoke to a full house at a local union on the negative impacts of NAFTA. Indeed, the work of SWOP on the anti-NAFTA campaign reasserts the notion that Chicana and Chicano activists tie their own struggles to those of Mexicanas and Mexicanos in Mexico. SWOP members connected the potential impact of NAFTA on the U.S. workers and the people of Mexico that drove their anti-NAFTA position.

A major component of the SWOP campaign against NAFTA was to flood the offices of elected officials with postcards and letters opposing NAFTA. A letter to President Bill Clinton, Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici, and Representative Steve Schiff, Bill Richardson and Joe Skeen contained the following arguments in opposition to a trade agreement that SWOP believes "will only deepen the inequities which currently exist in New Mexico and the border region:

**\*New Mexico is anticipating increased development of U.S. based and other foreign companies (maquiladoras) along the border.** New port of entry recently opened between Juarez, Mexico and Santa Teresa. This bridge will increase trafficking of toxics which will affect communities on both sides of the border. In Sunland Park, New Mexico, which borders Santa Teresa, Nu-Mex Company has built a 384 acre dump. Residents have stated that maquila industries have already started dumping in this primarily Mexicano/Chicano community.

**\*Economic extortion is being practiced against New Mexico communities.** In Las Vegas, NM, the fiber board plant Medite fired 52 Chicano workers who went on strike for fair pay and a safe working environment. The company threatened to move the plant rather than address the concerns of the strikers. GE Lenkurt in Albuquerque exposed hundreds of women workers to dangerous chemicals causing cancers, brain damage, and birth defects. When over 100 workers filed suit against the company the plant fled to Juarez, Mexico, exposing other workers to the same dangerous working conditions.

**\*10,000 to 20,000 people live in southern New Mexico colonias located in Doña Ana and Luna counties.** Farmworker families providing food for our communities are forced to live in these areas which lack basic services such as water and sewer, and medical facilities. Each summer cholera appears in the colonias on both sides of the border, because of these unsanitary conditions.

**\*Maquiladoras are poisoning the water and air on both side of the U.S./Mexican border.** Wastewater from *maquila* facilities have revealed levels of contamination as high as 215,000 times levels declared safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Children have been born without brains, in Brownsville, Texas, Matamoros, Mexico and Juarez, Mexico. Toxic dumping by *maquiladoras* is a prime suspect in the cause of these illnesses.

**\*Meanwhile U.S. industries, with the help of our tax dollars, are moving to low-wage countries.** Working families in this country are in poverty while working for minimum wages. 7.5% of these people of the United States are unemployed (17 million nationally and 112,500 in New Mexico).<sup>21</sup>

The letter goes on to urge the re-negotiation of NAFTA suggesting that NAFTA exacerbates the flight of industries leaving the U.S. for low wage countries. "The U.S. government subsidized flight of companies and jobs from this country and the criminal exploitation of workers abroad must stop!" The letter also expresses doubts over the side agreements which will allegedly remedy the economic and environmental consequences of NAFTA.

Additional laws seeking to safeguard U.S. working living and environmental conditions will be totally ineffective. While NAFTA will be in effect and operating, these laws will slowly wind their way through Congress, until they are finally passed in a much diluted form. It is only fair that if the amending laws to NAFTA concerning working, living and environmental conditions, CAN BE DEBATED, AMENDED AND CHANGED, THAT NAFTA ITSELF SHOULD UNDERGO THE SAME PROTECTION.

In addition to the post card and letter campaign, SWOP, in coalition with other groups, sponsored information forums, one of which was convened by Congressman Steve Schiff, sponsored press conferences, and held demonstrations. In October, prior to the passing of the agreement, the SouthWest Organizing Project participated in a demonstration of 400 people in El Paso, Texas, then crossed the border to Ciudad Juarez and joined with Mexican organizations. There, they protested the Mexican government handling of a GM facility which had contaminated a local community and its workers with an array of chemicals including cyanide.

SWOP, an affiliate member of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, has actively participated in the Network's Border Justice Campaign. A major element of this effort was the publication and circulation of a fifteen page report outlining the reasons for its objection to NAFTA and the trends in world trade policies. It states, for example,

The Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice sees the NAFTA as part of a global trend by transnational corporations to exercise greater and greater control over working people and their communities, destroying their movements for self-determination and social justice, trampling on their rights, their health, their sovereignty, while poisoning Mother Earth in the process. We oppose this free trade agreement because it is an integral part of these negative world trends and will further this destruction and exploitation.<sup>22</sup>

As part of their campaign to call attention to the opposition to NAFTA, SNEEJ also organized an "Encuentro Sin Fronteras" held in July 1993 in Tucson, Arizona. The gathering was attended by seventy-seven representatives of U.S. and Mexico organizations. The primary purpose of the Encuentro was to take the first step in organizing a network of border organizations from both Mexico and the U.S. The SNEEJ border campaign also coordinated a series of demonstrations held on the border on October 23, 1993. Though the demonstrations and efforts of the Border Justice Campaign of SNEEJ and the efforts of SWOP did

not result in the failure of NAFTA to pass, it did result in heightened consciousness and the formation of an enduring effort to call for environmental and economic justice along the border.

### **South Valley and Community Infrastructure**

Pajarito, an elementary school in the predominantly Chicano population in unincorporated Albuquerque, closed its doors several times during the 1992-93 school year due to backups of its septic tank. The result was the spillage of raw sewage into the school's drinking well and its playground. In July of 1992, SWOP sponsored a community meeting for residents to express their concern over the poor infrastructure in their community. As Vivian Padilla, a resident, said, "My mother (who lives in the Pajarito neighborhood) can't even drink her water or do her laundry because the water is so bad."<sup>23</sup> At the same meeting, residents spoke of the frustration in not being able to get city and county officials to budge on the issue of water and sewage treatment in the South Valley. In fact, a survey conducted by SWOP of South Valley residents, showed that 94% of those surveyed considered water contamination as a problem. Residents were not only aware of the political and bureaucratic run around but were also aware of the discrepancy between their own conditions and the predominantly white Northeast Heights. South Valley residents wanted hook up to city water. They also wanted the water problems solved at the Pajarito elementary school.

Local parents mobilized for a special election to consider a bond issue for building a new Pajarito school. In January 1993, SWOP organized a community Educational Forum that was co-sponsored with the Pajarito Elementary School Parent Teacher Association. The meeting was set up for residents to ask questions of Albuquerque Public School officials and administrators. During this meeting residents expressed their concern for the health and facilities concerns that they had for their neighborhood schools. SWOP organizers hit the streets and registered 300 voters and contributed to increased voter participation and the successful passing of the bond. The new Pajarito school opened in the Fall of 1993. Students are building a groundwater

simulation tank which will be used for educational purposes.

The efforts to build a new Pajarito school also demonstrate once again, the ability of SWOP to work in coalition with other groups, including locally organized neighborhood associations. The Pajarito example illustrates the discrepancy between infrastructure issues in the South Valley in comparison to the subsidized access to infrastructure that is being provided to the Intel Corporation. The involvement of SWOP in the infrastructure issues of the South Valley demonstrates the range of issues included in the struggle for environmental and economic justice.

### **Martineztown and Gentrification**

The struggle in Martineztown illustrates the conflicts that can emerge over what is considered appropriate development for "an urban village" adjacent to downtown Albuquerque. The U.S. General Services Administration proposed a Federal Court Complex for a large plot of vacant land in Martineztown. While certain developers stood to benefit from the complex, some residents also felt that the project would serve to solve the economic and social problems of the neighborhood. Other residents felt equally strong that the large project would destroy the character of the neighborhood and would result in increased traffic, noise and air pollution, and problems in affordability. Most vocal and brave among these residents was Loretta Naranjo who reached out to the SouthWest Organizing Project to solicit their help in organizing against the courthouse. Naranjo also expressed the concern that the project would lead to gentrification and would make the neighborhood inaccessible for the elderly and unaffordable for the youth.

With the help of SWOP, Loretta Naranjo organized members of her community to attend house and public meetings and to obtain a petition with 350 signatures against the courthouse. Most notably, the organizers also managed to recruit numerous people to attend City Council and Environmental Planning Commission Meetings (EPC) to express opposition to the proposal. The Natural Resources Defense Council provided council to SWOP and the community. Students from the UNM Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and community

residents worked in coalition with SWOP to gather information, to educate residents, and do the necessary permits pending more analysis. Eventually, the organizing efforts resulted in the granting of a building permit for the site but not for a courthouse.

The courthouse fight in Martineztown is only one example of the kind of struggle indigenous communities in New Mexico are carrying out in order to defend their cultures and social well-being. It has attracted attention both in Albuquerque and in communities like Santa Fe, where Chicano residents are fighting a virtual life and death struggle with developers and "new age" colonizers.<sup>29</sup>

The outcome of this conflict over the future of Martineztown demonstrates the ability of organizing to make a difference and the role that one Chicana, committed to her community, can make in providing the momentum and leadership to take an interest and to take action.

### **Characteristics of Grassroots Chicana Activism**

Activities of the SouthWest Organizing Project exemplify grassroots responses to the inequality being produced by restructuring of the world economy. Issues of economic development, international trade, toxic sites, occupational hazards, and neighborhood development are issues confronted by this environmental and economic justice organization. Targeted opposition includes all levels of governments, U.S. military agencies, transnational corporations, and local neighborhood patrons. The SouthWest Organizing Project is affiliated with a large Economic and Environmental Justice Movement, which in turn, collaborates with other national and international networks comprised of Chicanos, Latinos, Indigenous, African American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Under the banner, "We Speak for Ourselves," The Movement articulated a set of principles at the People of Color Summit held in Washington D.C. in 1991.<sup>25</sup> Activists are creating models for democratic process and bottom-up decision-making and demanding that governmental and corporations do the same. They array of mobilization strategies utilized by organizations within the Movement are exemplified

by the activities of SWOP.<sup>26</sup>

Given the active involvement of Chicanas within the SouthWest Organizing Project, we can make the following points about Chicana grassroots participation within a local organization that is tied regionally, nationally, and internationally to a social movement.

One, Chicanas within this organization display a sophisticated knowledge base. Organizing efforts reflect an understanding of socio-economic conditions and the explanations for these conditions. They are aware of trends in the world economy and the impacts of those trends on their region. This is particularly evident in their perspective on NAFTA and Intel. This level of knowledge is matched by their understanding of government processes, from policy making to enforcement. In addition, the various issues they confront require enhancing their knowledge of numerous issues including water management, tax structures, etc. We observe, therefore, a data gathering process where rigor and accuracy are valued, but in this case, becomes the basis for developing mobilization strategies.

Two, Chicanas in SWOP display a high level of oppositional consciousness, a sense of the "collective good," and a separation from authorities of domination.<sup>27</sup> Scholars who are closely following the restructuring process are also interested in the potential role of social movements in challenging the global domination by corporations.<sup>29</sup> The activities of SWOP, and the Environmental Justice Movement in general, suggest a potential powerful force as agents of urban change.

Three, Chicanas engage in principled strategies designed to directly confront the logic of their opposition. Their strategic intervention in the process of urban development poses the possibility of alternative values, decisionmaking processes, and formations of urban space. The issues of bottom-up decision making is a call for impacted communities to be at the table when policies are being shaped thus challenging backroom decisionmaking and processes of collusion between governments and corporations. Participation in urban change comes through involvement in a protracted process of conflict.<sup>30</sup> The

success of the Movement and of the activities of Chicanas within SWOP, should not be measured by whether the logic of opposition is radically transformed with one swoop, but by whether strategies are fundamentally and effectively impacting the structurally interactive process of conflict that shapes the outcome.<sup>31</sup>

Four, the Chicanas work in coalition with other groups, but still maintain a specific cultural and regional identity. As Chicanas and New Mexicans, Chicanas within the SWOP work in alliance with African American, Indigeneous, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and other Latinos. The organization also has a number of allies who are European American. The regional networks with which SWOP is affiliated base their strength on strong local organizations. The coalition is only as strong as each of the organizations, or groups. This suggests that coalitions work when they are based on localized identities; the stronger these identities, the stronger is the basis for the coalition.

Five, gender conscious Chicanas utilize organizations that are not gender based to impact issues facing their communities. These organizations become vehicles to address the negative impacts on women of occupational and land use policies. Many environmental justice organizations are comprised of only women, suggesting the inseparability of gender from issues of family and community. The principles of the Movement include addressing issues affecting women and provide an arena where feminist issues can be raised, eg. process, leadership development, and child and youth development.

The activities of Chicanas within the SouthWest Organizing Project illustrate grassroots mobilizations that are emerging in the face of economic restructuring. Aligning with other people of color and their own men, Chicanas are joining a national and international movement for environmental and economic justice. Armed with knowledge, oppositional consciousness, and principled strategies, grassroots activists are inserting themselves into questions of international economic integration, local economic development, neighborhood change including issues of gentrification, infrastructure, tax abatements, natural resource management, zoning, and an array of other development issues.

The potential of these activities and this social movement are enormous, as grassroots organizations define questions of social change as their realm in their struggle for environmental and economic justice.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Bryan, Bunyan and Paul Mohai. Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards. Boulder, CO: Westview Press: 1992; Bullard, Robert. Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990; Bullard, Robert, ed. Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots. Boston: South End Press, 1993; Bullard, Robert, ed. Unequal Protection. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. Toxic Waste and Race in the United States, a National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites. New York: United Church of Christ, 1987; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit: Proceedings. New York: United Church of Christ, 1992.

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## "Otra Vez"

Lynda Jasso-Thomas

A-G-N

"A thousand times and after school," Mrs. Waterman stated.

A-G-I-N

A thousand times, I heard that sound,  
the bumping, banging of her head as it  
hit the ground,

her beautiful black hair cascading  
down upon the ground

"Si," the lady blurted out loud, "her husband  
dra-aggd

her round upon the ground,  
her beautiful black hair cascading  
down upon the ground."

A G-A-I-N

A thousand times, how could she stand  
the bumping, banging of her head as it  
hit the ground,

her beautiful black hair cascading  
down upon the ground.

A thousand times I heard that sound  
and after school

the bumping, banging of her head as it  
hit the ground,

her beautiful black hair cascading  
down upon the ground.

A G A I-N