

THE FUTURE PERFECT: Chicana Feminist Critical Analysis in the Twenty-first Century

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This essay reviews Chicana feminist criticism at the millennial turn. Using an interdisciplinary and cultural studies analysis, the essay addresses changes in the historical, material, and social development of knowledge production by Chicanas over the last few decades leading up to the new century. Set within the grammatical of a "future perfect," the essay also takes aim at the antiessentialist and antiutopian academy as it moves into a global and transnational frame. Chicanas have situated their analysis in cultural studies because of its interdisciplinary framing and intersectional concerns with feminist studies. Chicanas have developed a prodigious feminist approach that incorporates many unique elements that resist both the nationalist and foundationalist claims made by Chicanos and American feminists during the 1960s and 1970s. This essay also utilizes a polemical style that is provocative and features some insights into the location of Chicana feminist critical analysis. [Key words: Chicana/o studies, feminist theory, feminist criticism, cultural studies, feminist critical analysis]

Chicana feminism derives its interdisciplinary framing of critical analysis from activist, academic, and sociopolitical practices. Among the myriad of dispositions is a general response to systemic exclusion, silence, and divisive institutional politics (Alarcón 1989a/b; González 1997; Pérez 1999; Segura 1993, 1994). And while the last forty years have seen the elaboration of the field of feminist studies with a list of major publications and changes in pedagogical practices, Chicana feminist critical analysis has been widely recognized in other venues, such as contemporary leftist theory, cultural studies, sexuality studies, and queer studies. Only in recent years has Chicana feminist analysis found a new direction that advances a set of political goals.

Among the main priorities at this millennial turn is a reorientation of identity frameworks (Pérez 1999; Sandoval 2000; Torres 2003). However daunting the task might seem to report the status of critical analysis by Chicanas, this is nevertheless an appropriate time to reexamine the influential decades. In this essay, I define Chicana feminist critical analysis as the knowledge production by women of Mexican American descent whose work has altered the structural and particular oppressive conditions determined by the colonial history of Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. Chicana feminist critical analysis, in its current trajectory, incorporates both theoretical and social-political practices, as well as a race and gender analysis, as its main concerns. The goal of such critical analysis in feminism has been to interpret and dismantle historical and structural conditions that oppress women, to demystify the truisms within culture that hold Chicanas to a subordinate role in society, and finally, to recast dimensions of power in all facets of life.

Chicana feminist critical analysis thus assumes many forms, such as creative projects, field and academic work, testimony, law, history, personal and professional expression, collective organization, and activism. Among the new strategies envisioned in Chicana feminist critical analysis is the intellectual framing of methods and practices that self-consciously depart from both cultural nationalism and the foundationalist logic of Anglo American feminism (Wiegman 2004). Numerous approaches (Castillo 1994; Córdova 1999; Hurtado 2003; Saldívar-Hull 2000; Segura 1993) have since been developed, and over the course of the last few decades, many new areas, including social justice models; transnational, postnational, and global studies; and gender-queer theories and methodologies have emerged. In the first part of the essay, I summarize feminism within the Chicana movement and draw out the reasoning for the skepticism in the idealizations of culture. The second part of the essay focuses on thematic or themes that consider queer, global,

transnational, and postnational concerns. In the final portion of the essay, I offer a closer reading of three books that offer new epistemologies for a Chicana feminist critical analysis.

While Chicana feminist critical analysis challenges the notion of cultural idealization by promoting a nuanced critique of dominant culture, the language play on the “future perfect,” or conditional voice, alludes to the tendency in Marxist-based ideology and social movements to overly romanticize and idealize a community, culture, and nation. The nostalgia for a time before colonization, to paraphrase Lisa Lowe, illustrates the colonized woman’s desire for a memory prior to the ruptures incurred by colonial violence, a nostalgia for wholeness that returns to the feminist of color as an epistemology wrought with complications and critical detours (cf. Aldama and Quiñonez 2002).

Calling on Chicana feminism as a rejoinder to the slippery essentialist binds and limiting identity frameworks that so defined the last few decades, I look to Chicana feminist critical analysis as a counter to the ideality of culture and nation by citing its future perfect grammars, possessing little or no investment in the idealizations of either Chicano nationalism or Anglo American feminism but rather routed in yet another direction because of the failures of these movements. The idealism that does inform Chicana feminism occurs because the practice of political difference incites new ways of building paradigms to replace those that are not suitable or do not seem adequate. However, in this age of suspicion regarding the essentialist and universalist campaigns in the academy, one of the impulses that ought to be resisted is the summary rejection of any type of idealism as a community and social practice. Rather, we should not conflate the essentialism and universality of institutions and nation-states and the abuses of male-dominated epistemologies with the insurrection of ideas and self-determinations of minority women. But if we are to fear

positive ideas about ourselves to appease the theoretical ordination of academic knowledge, which can be faulty and after all is intended to be a critique of dominant male culture, we have truly missed a very valuable point about progressive movements and the transformation of knowledge and history. The anti-intellectual claims of such theorizing too easily conclude that any form of idealization of culture closes off or reduces thoughtful action to rote, mindless adoration of a people or their creed, irrespective of the vagaries they might impose. If anything, antiessentialism and anti-intellectualism have thwarted efforts to promote some types of affirmative actions by reducing women of color to an oversimplified identitarian body count.

Additionally, Chicana feminism claims of exclusion from Chicana/o nationalism as well as from Anglo American feminist movements necessitate a different historical understanding of Chicana as subject/agent in the academy. This claim or stance against idealized feminist future-building lacks the cultural facets of utopianism that so defined nationalist representation in the revolutionary moment of the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, Chicana feminism's advent within critical analysis serves as a primary critique of hegemony and of cultural determinism; the institutional dynamics possess their own set of silences and exclusionary methods that continue to marginalize Chicanas under a new set of terms—new world ordering or post-9/11 paranoia. Finally, I argue against all attempts to universalize La Chicana, either as an emblem of coloniality, liberal salvation, or moniker of labor (always the maid), and at the same time, I highlight intellectual and activist models that have contributed to Chicana feminist critical agencies in emancipatory and liberating terms. Above all else, I urge a reexamination of liberatory strategies that materially and theoretically ameliorate the conditions within feminist practices in general, but especially for Chicanas in the academy. The feminist trajectory has certainly fueled the critical vanguard that I speak of here.

The language play of the “future perfect,” or conditional voice, captures Chicana feminism’s theoretical place at this millennial turn. This essay provides a point of departure for the political drive to offer idealizations of the future without the delirious discontent that idealized future-making projects falsely promise their own. Derivative of this term—“the future perfect”—Tomás Rivera’s story “Cuando lleguemos/When we arrive” in *Y no se lo trago la tierra* characterizes this very important moment of expectation. In the story, Rivera describes a truckload of migrant workers on the late-night leg of a trip northward to harvest the crops. It is a quiet scene, and most of the workers are half-asleep or peering into the dark distance. We are transported into the thoughts of the migrant worker, and it is in the space of the imaginary that the reader glances at their hopes and dreams; each worker details her/his longing with the phrase, “when we arrive.” The refrain “when we arrive,” when repeated throughout the vignette, shapes the chorus of a people in search of their lost nation, and thus this steady but haunting refrain establishes the cadence of loss, return, and arrival. And like the migrant workers on Rivera’s truck desiring the end of their long journey across Anglo America, the story corresponds to the arduous traveling of those longing to arrive at their destiny/homeland.

Because it is a sad tale, this story lacks the idealism that one might associate with a figurative dream of triumph or that one might readily recognize instead in something like an autobiography, a testimony, or a social movement; as such, “arrival” stands out among the imagined community of workers, and their tale is not unlike the migratory story of Chicanas who have traversed the landscape of different knowledge paradigms and continental divides to organize within the academy and in social activists groups, and transport themselves from predominantly working-class settings into middle-class “respectability,” to be “found” or located in the professorate.

This refrain, “when we arrive,” personifies Chicana feminism’s orientation toward the political as a future perfect construction, motivated by hope and situated within the realism of present-day politics. Like the migrant workers on Rivera’s truck longing for the end of their trip, the metaphor moves the narrative of the community forward into the uncertain future. The “future perfect,” while sounding unbearably utopian, in reality signals a progressive move forward in time and gestures development, suggesting that something better awaits the organization or the field of Chicana studies. I have taken this line to emphasize what Chela Sandoval has called the “grammar of supremacy” when she refers to the power of language over women of color in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000). But as I have already noted, the Chicana feminist critical analysis that has informed our work, whether grassroots, political, or academic, has been anything but utopian. In the search for authority and in the vision of what was necessary for economic, political, or academic survival, those ideals have made Chicana feminism a critically engaging area of study that continues with a different set of challenges.

A summary review of Chicana feminist critical analysis will serve to reconvene the area where the movement has fulfilled some of its promises. Chicana feminism’s internal dialogues shaped critical discourses by responding to current issues such as: How has affirmative action helped or hindered the movement of Chicana/os into academe? Where do Chicana academics belong in the global discourse? What is the nature of Chicana feminist critical inquiry? These questions were not necessarily planned or thought out in a quest for data or for publishing position statements and policy papers (there is no funding, in any case, for such work). Rather, the renderings of its own history, as a field or area of study, make the outcomes of Chicana criticism, of Chicana feminist studies, less predictable than one might anticipate for other groups. Yet embedded in the critical strategy of the future perfect, because of its impossible recourse

to exceptionality that is most often subsumed under utopian positioning, nevertheless necessary for structural change, is the strategy of criticism, which, we see, like that of resistance, simply cannot exist alone.

For one, we lack the symbolic academic currency (institutional presence) to foster true leadership at other levels, which in turn might transform that critique into action or results. In those few instances in which leadership might have been registered, it was often viewed with nostalgia and not always as a transformative and powerful strategy. Certainly, leadership within Chicana feminist circles, whether in society or in academe, is not individually rewarding; the reward comes collectively and usually without merit promotions or compensation of the type given to leaders of other collective movements that privilege men—unions, political action committees, educational initiatives, and so on. The glance toward the future at which we might “arrive” is necessary when exploring Chicana feminism as a method of inquiry that is self-fashioned from the internal contradictions of history. The suggestion of utopianism for Chicanas who did not benefit from the cultural nationalist movement served the development of a feminist critical analysis. Drawing from book publications and arguments representing the last few years, we see now that Chicana feminism locates itself within conventional academic domains while at the same time traversing the boundaries among competing disciplines and interdisciplinary studies.

In its present form, Chicana feminism has achieved or exceeded many of its own ideals. For example, the ideal of collectively organizing and promoting a critical vanguard has been a major driving force in the academy. In literary production alone, Chicana feminist writers have dominated knowledge production within Chicana/o art discourse and literary representation (Alarcón 1989a/b; Anzaldúa 1987, 1990; Castillo 1994); yet the recognition of that fact

is not accepted outside the closed quarters of small conferences and classrooms, where such gains profit little else than mere mention or exploitive recognition.

Given this brief overview of what is meant by Chicana critical analysis, it is important to note that there is no one singular field of inquiry that addresses the intersectional concerns and interests of any area known as critical studies. That Chicana studies is also participating in the creation of a loosely organized method or strategic practice under the umbrella term “critical studies” is clear. Most critical schools of thought, such as the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School, and the U.S. civil rights and feminist movements, developed in a post–World War II culture. The emblem of race and ethnicity gave primacy to the differences as determined by the masculine biologics. However, U.S. civil rights movements, feminism, and queer liberation movements offer social and cultural critiques that challenge dominant ideologies and examine the roles of women. This facet of American formation of race and ethnic difference often determined the lineage of the culture by way of masculinity. Even within current Chicana/o cultural studies, the most immediately relevant critical studies to Chicana feminist thought have been Marxist critiques of class and gender. First, the position of Mexican women or Chicanas in U.S. culture, in the nation’s economies and in popular culture, including forms of public sexuality (J Lo), have brought into the discussion issues of class.¹ Although Marxist criticism has been used to discuss marginalization (e.g., Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981), oppression in the Marxist sense exists outside of the physical body or the kind of female subjectivity visited upon such figures as J Lo. Thus, the struggle against the manufactured images is simultaneously conceived of as a class-driven resistance to an external authoritative power as much as it is a question of agency. In the 1980s, Chicanas’ criticism created its own dynamic style of feminism with a foundation in research organizations.

Central to this process of producing an idealized feminist movement alongside the co-opted commodity experience of female *latinidad* is to have such a Chicana feminist critical model acknowledged and applied. This has not occurred, however; rather, the production of knowledge by Chicanas over the years has advanced to the point that different patterns and contradictory views of feminist practice can now be named and applauded. An example would be in the work of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies' (NACCS's) Lesbian Caucus, which has been engaged for several years in a discussion about whether to change its name to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersexual (LGBTQI) Caucus. Yet the male equivalent, the Joto Caucus, continues to exist as a space for gay male attendees of the annual conference. For now, the change seems apparent and the name will continue to transform as the needs for queer identities settle into their own paradigms and historical foundation.

Similar changes have registered in research, subject matter, the focus of analysis, and the concepts of gender and sexuality in a direction that is consistent with current feminist critical thought. The organization of Chicana feminism did not begin with a single issue of liberation, although the effects of colonization could hardly define a cogent and direct path for sufficient narrative reflection to determine a logical historical sequence in undoing coloniality. Despite the major historical turns that have shaped the outer layers of Chicana feminism, at this juncture the millennium signals a time for an overarching reassessment of it. This first portion of the essay outlines some of the prevalent themes that constitute Chicana feminist critical analysis.

Social Justice

The visionary ideals of social justice in its many forms have advanced the concerns of Chicanas beyond the local or community interests.² By

cultivating a response to trends that directly affect Chicanas in their respective communities, Chicana feminist critical analysis first emerged from grassroots and activist organization across the United States (Blackwell 2003; Cotera 1976; Espinoza 2001; García 1997). Initially, feminist writings by Chicanas made claims of injustice in predominantly grassroots feminist publications. Since many of these publications date back to the early twentieth century in some regions of the borderlands, Chicana feminist collectives of the later periods regard the tendency to silence and exclude Chicanas from participation in the Chicano and U.S. feminist movements to be contradictory to the goal of liberation.

As Dionne Espinoza and Maylei Blackwell have documented in recent studies of the origins of Chicana feminist movements, such as *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, Ana Nieto Gómez calls for a critical view of sexism, citing its existence in Chicano families, in communities, and within the male-dominated Chicano movement (quoted in García 1997). The internal politics in the Chicana/o movement itself pitted Chicanas against other emerging groups. In this excerpt from her well-known essay, Gómez elucidates the need to create a Chicana feminism that resists silencing strategies. It suggests to us now that the struggle to find a Chicana feminist voice was also a struggle to define oneself outside the male Chicano patriarchy and the Anglo feminist movements:

Being compared with Anglo women has been the greatest injustice and the strongest device used to keep Chicanas quiet. Nobody liked to be called a traitor in a cause she feels she would die for. And no Chicana who has worked in the movement deserves to be compared to any Anglo woman or with gay liberation. These comparisons are divisive and threatening to the strength of the movement. (90)

Gómez notes how distortions in Chicana feminism created havoc in the struggle to define a place in the different movements and were often met with criticisms. Not unlike the *traidora*, or “the traitor,” that Norma Alarcón writes about in “Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” an essay detailing Alarcón’s description of la Chicana as intellectual, Chicana feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were also caught in a historical bind of the translator/traitor (Alarcón 1989b). The traitor/translator quagmire refers back to the figure of *La Malinche*, who served as translator for the Aztecs and the Spanish conquerors. Her intellectual skills in diplomacy and translation set her up as the betrayer of culture during the conquest of the Aztec empire by the Spanish. Even in twentieth-century Anglo American liberal culture, the sedimentation of this betrayer motif subtly cautions the Chicana in intellectual realms as well as in U.S. letters (all the way from a branding of sorts, like the scarlet letter but in this instance, with an “M” for traitor, to her modern-day state of abjection).

Other Chicana feminist predecessors wove similar threads in provocative and philosophical pieces that were read primarily by other movement activists. Like other feminist works of this time frame, Bernice Rincón’s *Regeneración* details that Chicanas, as women, could no longer be relegated to marginal status within the home and culture, since the domestic space was arresting and thus constructed to deny Chicanas a place in the Chicana/o movement. This sentiment expresses a concern that the revolution for social change did not make its way into the private space of the home. Other Chicana feminists echoed Rincón’s sentiments. Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez, founder of the publication *El Grito*, wrote numerous articles on the status of Chicanas and directly takes aim at sexism within Chicano communities, while noting that these communities were also dominated by a pervasive system of racism in American society. These feminists encountered the issues that were directly shaped by the

liberal nation-state and that continued well into the next few decades with little change (see Baca Zinn 1996; Blea 1992; Galindo and Gonzalez 1999).

The most vivid example of the transformation of grassroots feminism and university research came in the formation of publication arms or houses, notably, Third Woman Press. According to founder Norma Alarcón, the idea for the founding of a press developed from a conversation among Chicanas and Latinas living in the Midwest. They aspired to form a journal that dedicated its publications to writings by women of color living on the margins of society. It took several years and some university support to actually build Third Woman Press. In the first ten years of its publication, *Third Woman* existed primarily as a journal, officially founded in 1979 by Alarcón, who, along with Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros, organized the first editions. By the mid-1980s, the journal transformed itself into Third Woman Press, a publishing house producing critical anthologies by women of color. Today, the press is in the process of changing itself again into a nonprofit cultural arts organization. For more than twenty years, it has provided a forum for the written and visual expressions of women of color and has supported intellectual activism by publishing the works of feminist writers.

A correlation thus exists between the activist grassroots publications in Chicana feminist thought and the rise of Chicana studies as an academic field of inquiry. In the scholarship itself, the interconnectedness of race, class, gender assumptions, and, later, sexuality, broadened ethnic studies and women's studies with a cross-disciplinary approach, linking class to gender and racial inequity. As a model of study, the scholarship by Chicanas still becomes most apparent in feminist studies. Recent trends in U.S. feminist critical studies suggest such a shift in subject matter—from a strictly U.S.-based race, class, gender divide to a more complex set of

renderings—which occurred partly because of the advancement of global and transnational capitalism. The transformative aspects of global capital defined the living conditions for many Third World women around the globe. In university curricula, Chicanas and Latinas within academic settings responded accordingly by attending to topics investigating the reorganization of the working-class, labor sector.

While it has yet to be seen how the transformation from a U.S. cultural national movement to a global and transnational frame will affect the field of inquiry known as Chicana studies, it is clear that the scholarship has already witnessed major changes. Border studies, critical race theories, and transnational and global studies, as well as gender, sexuality, transgender, and queer studies, have emerged in recent years as responses to the need to expand the terminology of an identity and methodology—Chicana studies—that became prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the commitment to social change and to questions of justice have remained a consistent part of Chicana feminist practice, whether in the university or beyond it. As Chicana feminism gains visibility throughout academia, the nature of analysis across various domains and influence in contemporary leftist theory have also changed.

MALCS: Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social

The founding of MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social) was critical to the formation of Chicana feminist critical analysis in the 1980s and 1990s. As an organization that flourished because it offered controversial and at times dramatic presentations at the different venues of its summer institute/conference, the organization is the first of its kind to link Chicanas and feminists in the academy. The first time I attended the MALCS Summer Institute in Los Angeles (1990) was especially memorable, because it brought to the forefront lesbian representation in a way that I thought remarkable

for its time. I draw from my first experience attending this conference to illustrate its influence on students as well as on research. MALCS Los Angeles deliberated two major concerns. Specifically, the lack of inclusion of lesbians as presenters and lesbian subject matter dominated the conference. A separate challenge existed regarding the inclusion of Anglo women as presenters. Both concerns brought about intense debate that invariably led to major changes in what I am calling a cultural logic of Chicana feminist identity and its politics, embodied in the phrase “identity as politics.”

I will not detail the complexity of the deliberations at the conference, but I mention them to underscore the earlier point about Chicana feminist cultural analysis: conference sites shape and refine the feminist intellectual process. They are singularly important for that reason alone, irrespective of their outcome. That gender eclipses racism was rarely raised as a view; that would come in the 1990s. Still, racism and class bias were considered the major issues among Chicanas in academic published works before 1980. Among those publications are those that suggest that the broader conceptual tie between gender and sexuality within the Chicano movement needed further examination. In other, nonacademic works, such as newspapers and newsletters, Chicana writers articulated a basis for the development of a Chicana feminist analysis. Across the many publications, these writers were able to raise consciousness by creating a public voice and breaking out of the more private, space-bound home and domestic concerns that permeated 1960s and 1970s feminism. *Encuentro Femenil*, *La Comadre*, and *Hembra* were central to the formation of Chicana feminist criticism because they detailed Chicana interests and political viewpoints toward discrimination and racism, as well as a Chicana-driven approach to questions of labor practices (boycotts, strikes, and unionizing activity).

But the formation of Chicana feminism continued ever forward with its development as an academic discourse and practice. The two were not mutually exclusive, the political organizing *out there* and the academic writing about that organizing. In the 1970s, small groups of Chicanas entered universities and colleges for the first time, breaking away from the mythology of subservience that had fossilized into if not true cultural practice (the organizers defied the practice, for example), then minimally into an etched historical memory that maintained that Mexican-origin women and *mantilla*-clad, Catholic-worshipping figures were tradition-bound; others who did not fit the mold or image were not. The imaginary proved critical to the first writings Chicanas produced, such as the works of Marta Cotera and Adelaida Del Castillo, to name just two. But among the most pressing concerns of a generation of the emergent academic class was the need to express issues that were particular to Chicanas as women of color (beginning with Third World liberation struggles). The drive to turn grassroots movements to a research analysis supported by funding inside the agency that produced knowledge—the conceptual reframing of Chicana feminism—grew and magnified. Most of this research developed out of discussions at myriad feminist conferences or meetings; the majority took place at colleges and universities as well as in community centers in efforts to bridge both.

While many concur that the most important aspect of Chicana feminist critical analysis is the ever-present need for social change, the birth of MALCS has made it possible to organize critical perspectives. The institutionalization of MALCS stands as an example of the critical nexus between a commitment to social change and academic interests. Through Chicana critical text attempts to “bridge,” “cross borders,” or engage the intellectual vanguard by alluding to some existing need to alter the course of study, a MALCS goal is met: to voice, publish, and add to the knowledge

about Chicanas everywhere (Alarcón et al. 1993). The organization's critical texts, published intermittently until recently, when the funding for the journal in which this article is published was secured, cross decades of annual meetings and workshops.

Published material focuses on the internal contradictions within Chicana studies, whether viewed by its practitioners as group identity, as a culture, or as carrying academic integrity. These self-reflective modes of analysis include queer studies, gender, and sexuality within the broader field of Chicana/o studies, and the intersectional concerns of psychology, spirituality, transnationalism, and border studies. Some presenters premiere their work at MALCS and then refine it at larger gatherings; others present only certain work at MALCS, for insider feedback. The intense struggle within the organization around sexuality and gender, in particular, engaged a relatively young academic community (that is, Chicana/o studies was itself a beginning discipline in the 1980s) by foregrounding in its publications and at annual gatherings some of the most important political theories and practices, such as lesbian feminism, radical lesbian separatism, and gender identity. One result, then, was that this interesting arrangement of critical inquiry oriented the stereotypically Chicano nationalist position of identity formation from without to a critical Chicana analysis from within the knowledge production of Chicana/o studies. At its most basic level, the Chicana position presupposes interesting facets of community building, but it also translates the goal from a setting out there toward a setting within the confines of the university where the annual meetings of MALCS take place—at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Conference sites, their institutional tensions, and the production of knowledge, all symbolized or embodied and emboldened by MALCS, allow a politics

of the self to be created outside of traditional forms of scholarship. With a framework that cultivates new ideas and creative projects, Chicana cultural and academic production applies to history, social values, aesthetics, politics, and economics, along with all other organized structures that determine the political subject's cultural views.

To account for a radical transformation (be it language, cultural, social, or semiotic structure), the actual moment of political resistance must also be recognized in the dynamic processes of the conference/summer institute. The growth of MALCS, particularly its discussions about leadership and identity practice, has created a space in which social criticism, self-reflection, and spiritual renewal can all coexist. The coexistence was or has not been smooth in the matter of lesbian practice and its politics, but Chicana lesbians have led MALCS into the future by serving as coordinators, chairs, and program committee organizers, and with that growth a steady progression into the future has culminated in a social justice model that centralizes knowledge production and institutional presence. Although accepted as a marginal field that wittingly traverses the boundaries of sexuality and culture, today's Chicana feminism offers a critique of nation, family, and community, but also of ideology, hegemony, and postcolonial and transnational studies in ways that resist the academic pull to accept knowledge as neocolonial discourses.

Identity as Politics

At some point, it became fashionable to reject identity formation as a source of knowledge production. Chicana feminism's multifaceted and distinct political diversity offers a critical style that provides important ideas for the new millennium and a recasting of identity continues. Over the last decade, social activism, cultural studies, lesbian queer studies, colonial *mestizaje* studies, and transnational studies have illuminated Chicana feminist projects

in ways that could not have been imagined in the 1980s. All have taken shape from within these varied and multiple languages and discourses. The phrase “like migrants among the stately disciplines” characterizes the new academic projects that seek to push Chicana criticism on to another level and that elicit identity frameworks of Chicana or Chicano as far more than a period relic, or a political persuasion of the 1980s U.S. multicultural education. Rather, the distinctive tone, symbols, and tools used to fashion a Chicana praxis and analysis work to illuminate the interconnections between knowledge production and diverse experiences that promote growth in the academy.

It is by this measure, the appeal and celebration of diversity in all facets of life, that Chicana critical analysis promotes identity as a politics but also as resistance to the clever political ideology of the conservative agenda. In other words, no one position of race, class, or sexuality predominates over another, and the varied ethnic and racial mixing of feminist critiques has developed in tandem with the growth of Chicana feminism’s diverse epistemologies. Clearly, my main concern is not to define what constitutes Chicana feminism; rather, I seek to argue that the critique from within accounts for its own transformations. This essay does not explain “who,” but “what” and “how” as the thematic and critical analysis being fashioned by Chicana feminist analysis. The future of Chicana feminist critical analysis appears to hinge on the development of multiple emerging discourses, many of which have been responsive to the social changes of a global culture and the redefinition of national identity. Given the structural poverty that serves as Chicana feminism’s home, we might all well wonder how it is possible that such an analysis can lead the way or even contribute to other types of analytical movements that are viewed through the lens of so-called proper credentialing—for example, Third World women of color from the upper classes.

While the development of critical ideas represents some interesting hopes and visions for the future, some would argue that Chicana feminism promotes an identity politics because of the way the focus on “Chicana” promotes an inaccessible view of Chicana-, Latina-, and women-of-color-only participation. I would rephrase that to mean that Chicana feminism actually promotes identity as its critical process, determining the boundaries of the knowledge and condition that would benefit Chicanas for the long term. Ironic as it may seem, this measure to secure parity in the public expression of ideas has been seen as limiting access or excluding the participation of those interested in the study of Chicanas. Working on pure academic merit, those interested in such an exchange may not have any personal investments in the lived experience of Chicanas, so this need to be present by those insisting that Chicana feminism is exclusionary (toward them) subordinates the place of Chicanas. Under the ruse, Chicanas become merely a study group, formed by but not subverting of the process of creating a knowledge base on Chicanas.

The conclusion therefore is that Chicanas become the object property of academic knowledge, and the presenters, students, and professors become maids of methodology, serving the repressed hierarchies of the global machine. The example is not a fiction, as it has occurred at several critical junctures in the academy and extends beyond, to the awarding of fellowships and grants to non-Chicanas no matter how well intentioned, who are seeking to reap the rewards of filling gaps. In the absence of a critical mass of any type, Chicana feminist or non-, the awarders of these fellowships (sometimes Chicano/as themselves!) would do well to ask what the source of the perception of exclusion really addresses. This polemical question considers identity frameworks to be especially concerned with sexuality.

Identity Frameworks

Turning next to what might be inscribed as Chicana feminist—and especially Chicana lesbian feminist—logic, Chicanas' own working through the ideas in workshops and academic projects is intended to develop intellectual exchange within a space free from the power struggle that exists in American group dynamics wherein speaking is considered a constitutional right, or, even more, a cultural exercise of that constitutional right to power. In actuality, MALCS workshop formats do not set the terms for identity-based thinking but rather encourage actions by individuals who seriously wish to promote the exchange and development of new ideas. Plenary and roundtable dialogues also help develop workshops and conferences on Chicana feminisms rather than disrupt a competitive pattern that so dominates national academic organizations such as the Modern Language Association and even the American Studies Association, whose interests lie in outsourcing knowledge.

Instead of adding to the hierarchies of power that so often pervade academic discourse, the logics of identity formation within Chicana organizations have distinctive features, and I suggest here that Chicana critical analysis is expressive of a flexible identity process and might well always be present in Chicana/o discourse. No matter how strongly, loudly, persistently, and dogmatically the presentation of the nationalist or revolutionary rhetoric may have been expressed in the earlier organizational period, whether at MALCS or at NACCS, the instability of language and the mobility of culture preclude the flourishing of any identity-based formations. MALCS can be seen as a precursor, in a sense, to NACCS's trials or turmoil around the same types of issues; from about 1990 forward, NACCS has had to deal with a combined Chicana lesbian feminist voice, organized as a lesbian caucus, and before that, in the 1980s, as a Chicana caucus. Both caucuses exist today and advance cultural critique within the national organization from different histories and perspectives.

Identity formations should be understood as a temporal facet of nationalism or group enterprise that seeks to mobilize action as it resists the alienating effects of organized capitalism and its conditioning for ethnic female representation. The identity politics that I address in this segment draws from the historical context in which “identity as politics” emerged as a framework. Identity politics arose in the 1980s with what was then perceived as the organization of culturally ethnic, feminist, and queer oppositional groups. The political context for identity politics was embedded deeply in the Reagan and Bush administrations’ cultural approach to changing the course of social dynamics and its intended goal of destabilizing liberal social politics and economics that had been constructed during the 1960s and 1970s; whether the dramas emanating from the NEA debacles of the 1980s to Lynne Cheney’s conservative, micromanaging leadership on educational standardization, the period induced a Chicana critique that sought to revamp the traditional, mainstream perspective on education—“tenured radicals” was a common phrase cast first toward 1960s and 1970s Euro-American faculty who stayed on the left, but it also came to apply to those few faculty of color who were pioneers in the academy. Chicana academic feminists took their place in the lineup and received few rewards for their organizing and theorizing.

The study of identity politics—a term applied to these seeming hordes of scholars of color who were really just cultural critics and had mastered fields of study—has reached a level of organization in the lexicon of critical analysis. Its meaning should be carefully examined. While there are many different definitions of identity politics, Stanford’s *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* stands out for its characterization of the social group’s self-determination.

The laden phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of

injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around ideology or party affiliation, identity politics typically concerns the liberation of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination. (10)

Deena González also notes in her essay “Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory” that conference settings such as MALCS and NACCS staged sexual identity politics from within these institutional organizations and have necessitated a further inquiry in the gender and sexuality debates that permeated 1980s and 1990s cultural criticisms. As a historian, Chicana feminist critic González observes: “The 1980s and 1990s suggest an interesting development in the bumpy demarcations that map Chicana feminism as it appears on the conference scene over the last few decades; multiple issues have been raised and discussed at each juncture. No group or set of groups emerges feeling elated or at ease. Dis-ease is in fact rampant” (53). This pervasive sense of “dis-ease” is one of the reasons new approaches, textual practices, and thematic subject matter took on greater meaning over the last few years, for in looking at the ways we are discomforted by one another’s presence (or, at least as a textual problem), we become better able to bridge the social and methodological issues that identity politics brings forth. Since the late 1990s, the concerns with identity politics have been the source of the new knowledge paradigm in Chicana feminist critical studies, and several major books on the subject address the problem.

Chicana Cultural Studies: A Feminist Mestizaje

Urging on a dynamics that considers all of the mentioned issues, an emerging critical vanguard in Chicana feminist critical studies represents a knowledge plan that interrogates oppressive power and the erasure of the Chicanas across

different feminist studies. Emma Pérez's *Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Theories of Representation and Difference) (1999) challenges the linearity of colonial historiography in her study of women. Pérez, a historian by training, takes apart the mythology of history, particularly its dispensation of narrative devices that exclude colonized women from the making of their own historiography. To overcome the problems with such colonizing strategies, according to Pérez, new ways of writing stories must replace the dominant discourse. Pérez arrives at a "decolonial imaginary" to create a new cultural logic for the colonized. She divides "the decolonial imaginary" into three segments. In part 1, a remapping of Chicano/a history sets the foundation for the study. In part 2, Pérez uses New Historicist methodologies to analyze the genealogies of twentieth-century Chicana social practices. In the last segment, part 3, Pérez incorporates Freudian theory and Michel Foucault's method of genealogy to focus on a description of the "colonial imaginary" in the framing of patriarchal Chicano nationalism.

It is significant to consider such theoretical methods, as Pérez critiques both the Chicano studies cannon and gender analysis in history. In the orientation of the book, Pérez clearly places herself in the next wave, situated as part of a generation of scholars who will lead the way to postcolonial histories, Chicana/o histories, by creating knowledge paradigms that require revision. Most interesting of all is Pérez's "Oedipal Conquest Complex," in which her argument for new ways of writing, teaching, and knowing outside of the colonial imaginary renders a massive turning over of master narratives. The decolonial imaginary will require scholars to reconsider the very process of writing history. And yet another generation of historians comes of age.

Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) structured a new approach to feminist thought by centralizing women of color in the

postmodern era. In a work with far-reaching implications, Sandoval does no less than revise the genealogy of theory over the past thirty years, inserting what she terms “U.S. Third World feminism” into the liberal narrative of liberation and revolution. What Sandoval has identified is a language, a rhetoric of resistance to postmodern cultural conditions. U.S. liberation movements of the post–World War II era generated specific modes of oppositional consciousness. Out of these emerged a new activity of consciousness and language Sandoval calls the “methodology of the oppressed.” This methodology—born out of the strains of postmodern cultural identity struggles that currently mark global exchange—holds out the possibility of a new historical moment, a new citizen-subject, and a new form of alliance consciousness and politics. Utilizing semiotics and U.S. Third World feminist criticism, Sandoval demonstrates in this women-of-color methodology a tactic of mobilizing love as a category of critical analysis. Rendering this approach in all its specifics to postmodern feminist studies, *Methodology of the Oppressed* gives rise to an alternative mode of criticism, opening new perspectives on a theoretical, literary, aesthetic, social movement, or psychic expression.

And finally, Edén E. Torres’s *Chicana Without Apology/Chicana sin vergüenza: The New Chicana Cultural Studies* (2003) adds to the list of emerging critical studies. Among the Chicana feminist works that introduced a Chicana cultural analysis, this stands out as an example of Chicana feminist knowledge production departing entirely from the standard of a set discipline. Torres’s cutting-edge cultural (critical) studies approach blends the intersectional concerns of race and gender with a strident feminist social critique that has been virtually flattened or recolonized by horizontal Foucauldian logic in the academy. *Apology* is an epistle of intellectual mestizaje brought to life within First World modernity, even postmodernity; that is, it is part feminist missive, part healing practice, and part existential philosophy, and is guided by a

healthy dose of Latin American socialism. In the first chapter, “Anguished Past/Troubled Present: The Savagery and Promise of Traumatic Memory,” Torres opens with a pointed and impressionable retelling of her own father’s internalized colonization: “For most of my childhood, my father was a ghost. I loved and feared him for many reasons, and never knew when he would appear or disappear. Nor could I predict whether his brief presence would be kind or cruel. I have come to believe that he has always hated the Mexican in him” (11). The point that Torres makes, without stating the obvious, is that objectivity, the scientific search for evidence and claims for truth, the sociological cause and effect, cannot begin to measure entrenched aspects of racialized, gendered, or economic trauma that pervade American society.

In its conclusion, the book makes the point that education may be liberating for some, but the fact remains that Chicanas, along with many women of color, serve the role of objects of study and not as subjects of their own analysis. Without a middle-class base or a viable class critique, translating the promise of success into visible social change will continue to be difficult. Without it, as Torres, and Pérez before her, have argued, our future remains wrought with psychic pain. Torres concludes the book with a reminder of what that social change means: “The ability to make connections is often difficult, but we must behave as if we know it is absolutely possible and necessary. We have to do it despite the hardship and real dangers involved. Such a commitment increases our capacity to perpetually incorporate new voices, to critically think about and acknowledge questions as they arise, and to refocus on a larger vision” (186). Through its methodology, the book offers a discursive practice that is true to its orientation in standpoint feminism and a Paul Gilroy type of cultural studies with its insistence on a global framework. Within Chicana feminism, the interdisciplinary format spans the literary, including its social politics, the poetics of identity. These perspectives, methods, standpoints,

epistemologies, or logics orient us to that familiar place we call home—or better yet, to that which is nestled deep within the contours of the scariest place of all, the political unconscious. The unconscious landscape is the narrative of conquest and colonialism and, for Chicanas, of ongoing, steady colonization, superimposed by urban alienation and internalized racial and gender disharmony. Together, these composed millennial paradoxes, while they challenge academics, feminists, and women of color everywhere, have elicited the beginning of a foundation for a powerful discourse on La Chicana.

Conclusion

This essay has described issues that undermine contemporary challenges as Chicanas view them. Thinking historically, I had wanted to “undo the braid” of traditionalism, to step outside of a cultural production that I found restrictive and circumscribed as simply or only feminist and lesbian of color. The braid is a curious trope that possesses multiple meanings for many Mexican women. Some prefer to read the braid much like the veil, foot binding, or the burka, with its own national and traditional coding that marks women in opposition to U.S. imperialism under an orthodox but seemingly emancipatory nationalism. The danger has been realized vividly in other parts of the globe as a regressive religious fundamentalism, whose organic claim to nationalism has taken on an unusual political significance. Globally, at least, a perverted form of nationalism under the rubric of anti-American imperialist postures reserves severe consequences for women and queers in such politically conflicted regions as Afghanistan, Iran, Brazil, and Mexico. I look at the braid ironically, not for a lack of willingness to read its double meaning and its oppositional possibilities but because in the most literal sense of the word, the significance of traditional coding for Third World women and queers signals the emergence of hard-core patrimony inscribed in nationalism as an authoritative and repressive cultural regime. This revolutionary nationalism will ultimately

oppress the most oppressed and confound any attempt to circumvent discussions of capitalism in productive ways that would be beneficial to people of color. And yet the braid also ties Chicana feminists to Mexican feminists, women of color to one another, and encourages all those who push against the state or national apparatus to engage and practice feminist critique. In just one organization, MALCS, Chicanas have displayed a willingness to unbraid one another, with positive and problematic effect. If it can be accomplished, however, at that level (the organization survives and continues to provide the mentoring space it originally envisioned), the transnational conversations will probably also mirror similar consequences for the feminist communities of the world. Equally, the debate is not a substitute for the required actions needed to feed, clothe, and educate the most impoverished humans on the planet.

Rey Chow captures the spirit of my lament when she questions the role of the “native” construction within an American (Marxist) context. She explains, “In the politics of identifying the ‘authentic’ natives, several strands of the word ‘identification’ are at stake: How do we identify the native? How do we identify with her? How do we construct the native’s identity? What processes of native identification are involved?” (1993, 28-29). Chow’s observations come at a time when native constructions create certain signifying claims by First World interlocutors. What do we stand to gain from some of these not-so-ironic appropriations of native imagery? One of my fears, of course, has to do with the commodification of an authentic native construction for Latinas and Chicanas that may actually affirm and entrench our location in the traditional sex/gender binary.

Without a progressive political irony, how are we to resist constructing the native woman as the object of First World humanistic interventions? “The braid,” while a stylish exploration of female and feminist nationalist and

oppositional discourses, assumes the position that braided women should form criticisms based on their own location as female agents. Native women's roles in this drama, however, seem to affirm rather than problematize cultural and gender differences in modern global terms.³ That should also not be the case or the outcome of a Chicana feminist cultural analysis.

The cultural body of the twenty-first-century Chicana and Latina has intensified our intellectual interest in sexuality and gender while the constituencies of a flexible identity are difficult to evaluate and predict. With this shift in the collective cogency of a cultural body (the transgendered or intersexual being, for example, who may or may not achieve popular notoriety but exists primarily always in danger), that body defies conventional logic. It is far easier to have the tradition-bound, familistic Chicana or Mexicana on hand for its popularity on television or as the subject of the movies (Salma Hayek, J Lo, to name two). Originally, I had hoped to explain away a crisis-ridden identity politics and emphasize instead a performance-oriented style of politics that makes visible the concerns of gays and lesbians and of radical feminists within Chicana feminist analysis. The material dilemma, however, of this two-sided theoretical issue may give the impression that racial and ethnic oppressions are contained in realist discourse of the sexual body. The inclusion of Chicana lesbians led directly to the reassessment of the race, class, gender, and sexuality model. This can be seen in the different approaches being taught in cultural, literary, and visual studies, as well as in historical approaches as evidenced by the critical feminists.⁴

While this critical engagement has repeated itself across the different organizations in the United States—for example, in the National Women's Studies Association, MLA, or ASA—numerous other organizations on a much grander global scale have similarly undertaken the role of the problematized

lesbian as a unique identity with an articulating political presence. Some will offer the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (Trujillo 1992) as forging a major critical identity for Chicana and Chicano presence, but I say with some measure of qualified judgment that *Bridge* and *Chicana Lesbians* simply did not go far enough in the academy to afford us the luxury of critical presence, of arrival. Still, let us not be so quick to dismiss the power of imaginary visions, for without a prospectus for the future, we have no true sense of continuity for our goals. Without the tenet that the future holds a better way of life, better social equity, and less racism, homophobia, and sexism, we are left without hope, without prospect. Instead, the visionary moment is a dynamic way of enlisting the place of power in our lives: even in the dark, a truckload of workers can dare to think. Even in the migrant fields and labor camps, women who today are professors and artists contemplated a different future, and arrived. To act as visionaries is more than wish fulfillment, more than a decree about the subjunctive. It is also a way of honoring the imagination and our political imaginings as women.

This essay has offered a glimpse, a vision of what Chicana feminist studies can accomplish and has accomplished in this early part of the twenty-first century. While I suggest that we have certainly arrived at a major turn, it is by no means the end. Rather, the essay suggests that the future is a place in which the social imaginary meets up with hard facts, the unconscious as yet unimagined resides, feminism and higher education as well as social practices will be reviewed, and the more perfect future seems worthy of contemplation. It is also the way of activism, whether in the streets or in the institutions of society. I enjoin Chicana readers to enact power as visionaries for the creation of a more perfect future. To desist from the politics of our own creative lives, we self-selectively withdraw from promises, for promises can be realized not only “when we

arrive,” as Rivera might say, but also in the methodologies and practices used to imagine a perfect future.

Notes

¹ Jennifer Lopez personifies the commodification of sexual identity for Latina subjectivity. While J Lo’s unique style as a hip-hop artist captures feminine qualities, her public image also produces standards of beauty and political resistance. Lopez’s performance of the everyday Latina includes her haunting portrayal of Chicana tejano music legend Selena. Unlike other Latina pop icons, Jennifer Lopez represents advanced capitalism as well as a pan-Latina identity to personify many variations of Latina identity.

² Martha Coteras’s “La Chicana” defined the work that Chicana feminists had undertaken. Alma M. García’s book *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* defines some of the preliminary foundational work by Chicanas. Dionne Espinoza’s dissertation (2001) organized one of the first revisions of Chicana feminist practice. Her study “Pedagogies of Nationalism and Gender: Cultural Resistance in Selected Representational Practices of Chicana/o Movement Activists, 1967–1972” details the strategies of resistances by early Chicana feminists. Maylei Blackwell’s work with feminist organizations takes it to the next level when she expands on the analysis to include early Chicana feminist organizers. Aside from many of the essays in the edited collection by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), I draw particular attention to an essay by Nayereh Tohidi, “Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism,” which documents the ubiquity of fundamentalism in its attempt to counter American imperialism. It is an excellent example of the ways revolutionary projects take on reactionary overtones (351–67).

³ See also Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall, “Bitches in Solitude: Identity Politics and the Lesbian Community,” in *Sisters, Sexperts, and Queers*, edited by Arlene Stein (New York: Plume, 1993).

⁴ Deena González has been at the forefront of issues that directly affect gays and lesbians in the academy. See González 1997.

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