

## **Chicana Feminism: Self-Actualization Through Border Conscience**

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### **Abstract**

With the emergence of “marginal discourses” meant to challenge and destabilize the dominant discourse as representative of human reality, marginalized voices from within these ostracized communities have begun to express their own theoretical frameworks and present an alternative premise for the speculation of otherness. Chicana feminism is one of these theoretical movements that are expressed from within and without sanctioned alternative discourses. The qualification of feminism according to cultural, socioeconomic and racial characteristics that shape the Chicana woman associates the Chicana with a male-centered social movement and theoretical discourse that seeks to subordinate her based on gender. The Chicana is mindful of the imposed oppression determined by her cultural allegiance, not only from the Anglo-dominated society in which she struggles to survive, but also that oppression inflicted upon her from within her culture of origin. The Chicana feminist’s identity is multiple. A heightened awareness of the various contributing factors that determine the Chicana’s marginalized status gives rise to a theory-based *border* conscience that constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs identity as a means of self-actualization.

“I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently.”—Cherríe Moraga, “La Guera” (1981)

With the emergence of “marginal discourses” meant to challenge and destabilize the dominant discourse as representative of human reality, marginalized voices from within these ostracized communities have begun to express their own theoretical frameworks and present an alternative premise for the speculation of otherness. Chicana Feminism is one of these theoretical movements that are expressed from within and without sanctioned alternative discourses. The qualification of Feminism according to cultural, socio-economic and racial characteristics that shape the Chicana woman associates the Chicana with a male-centered social movement and theoretical discourse that seeks to subordinate her based upon her gender. The Chicana is mindful of the imposed oppression determined by her cultural allegiance, not only from the Anglo-dominant society in which she struggles to survive but also that oppression inflicted upon her from within her culture of origin. The Chicana feminist’s identity is multiple. Therefore, theory must reconcile this multiplicity with a theoretical position conventionalized by the dominant discourse that insists that the *self* is an

expression of a unified and definable distinctiveness. The subsequent label serves to deny the *self* an individual and self-possessed identity thus placing an act of self-actualization back into a subordinate position. A heightened awareness of the various contributing factors that determine the Chicana's marginalized status gives rise to a theory based *border* conscience that constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs identity as a means of self-actualization.

In "Chicana Feminism and Postmodernist Theory", Paula M. L. Moya argues that current pragmatist theories do not prove to be sufficient for a liberatory feminism (Moya, 2001). Her article documents the trends of Chicana theorists to employ postmodernist theory in a manner that denies a coherent autonomous Chicana discourse. The Chicana feminist, because she is shaped by multiple subjectivities is incapable of obtaining or reclaiming an identity. Such theoretical claims and conclusions about the Chicana feminine subject, who is perpetually marked by her subordinate position and oppression, condemn the Chicana feminist to be an unidentifiable subject by the essence of her reality. For, if she were to step out of the subordinate and oppressed position, then she would either cease to be feminist or Chicana. Moya (2001) argues that these theories of "multiple subjectivities" as being particular to Women of Color fail to recognize how "all people are 'subjects-in-process' and that, *to the extent that* they are constituted by discourses, they are multiple and (to some degree) incoherent"(p. 455).

By removing the stigma that women of color are eternally *subjects-in-process* and demonstrating that being created by multiple discourses is a human phenomenon rather than one unique to women of color, Moya is able to encourage a dialogue in which Chicana feminism can be a *movimiento* toward a *subjected* self whose *agency* serves as a liberating force. Moya (2001) explains, "[f]rom a realist perspective, I suggest that while Chicana and other women-of-color feminists acknowledge the conflicts they experience, they attempt to work through them to create a qualitatively new and better social order" (p. 459). The manner in which these feminists work through the conflicts of their experience leads them to stake *political positions*. Thus, they become activists engaged in " 'politics of transfiguration'—a transformative exercise by which historically oppressed people engage in imagining 'the emergence of qualitative new desires, social relations, and modes of association,' both among themselves and between themselves and their oppressors"(Moya, 2001 p. 459). Moya proposes an imagining of a *self* as a means to *agency*, where the agent is bent on change and specifically with the goal of *changing the world*. For Moya, the Chicana feminist is an *agent* of change, a vehicle operated on imaginings. While she criticizes Norma Alarcón for her dependence on discursive subjectivities, her theory intends to "reinvigorate theoretical discussions among Chicana and other feminists about the relationship between theory and practice, between intellectual inquiry and our ongoing attempts to transform ourselves and our world" (Moya, 2001 p. 445). Thus, her broader project is to augment the discursive production that would theorize and pragmatize the multi-voiced dialogue that shapes *identity*.

According to Moya's (2001) *postpositivist realist perspective*, a search for truth is equated with an intention to build a "better society than the one we currently live in"(p. 480). Moya contends, and thus, lends her voice to that of Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa and other prominent Chicana and women-of-color feminists, that women of color promise to play an important role in society. Because they have lived and experienced multiple subjectivities and have had to adapt their behavior and personality according to the various contexts in which they operate, they not only serve as excellent interpreters, but also as instructors for the

greater society where *difference* and *otherness* are complicated by the close proximity in which *differed* peoples are operating.

That which Anzaldúa terms *la facultad*, Moya recognizes as an *experience* that strengthens the Chicana feminist as a theorist and agent for change. Moya (2001) writes, "Certainly, one of the major victories to date of women-of-color feminism is the ability some women of color have to conceptualize themselves as nonfragmented beings constituted neither by lack nor by excess"(p. 476). While *la facultad* cannot be determined as a defining trait that all *Chicanas* share, it serves to give a skill and a more sensitive concept of identity to the woman-of-color feminist. She, therefore, seeks truth with a skeptical and flexible outlook. This perspective does not favor an internal concept of reality and identity over that of a dominant discourse. It is willing to recognize the biases within as well as without that of the Chicana's personal experience. By recognizing these biases that mold her perception of reality, she is flexible enough to adjust and admit where concepts of reality are wrong or require revision. Yet, skepticism does not imply fatalism. Truth exists and is therefore sought. Moya describes the process by which women-of-color feminists are able to contribute to theory through their heightened awareness of *la facultad*, "The radical and realist questioning of themselves and the world around them is what I see women of color doing and what I see as women-of-color's genuine contribution to the project of progressive social change"(p. 478).

Implicit in Moya's work is the severing of ties between the women-of-color feminists and the *white feminists*. According to her *postpositivist realist perspective*, the agent for social change is the flexible woman-of-color feminist, who recognizes that postmodern and pragmatist theories are inadequate for the greater liberating project of feminist theory and feminism. She is among the "people who are frequently situated on the wrong side of dichotomous constructions of truth and beauty, such women have developed a deep suspicion toward hegemonic constructions of the same. However, I have not seen that they therefore have dismissed the concepts as in themselves hegemonic"(Moya, 2001 p. 478). Having experienced the negative, darkened and othered side of truth, the woman-of-color feminist has a heightened awareness of the dangers placed by "subjectivity" when it is asserted and acquired at the expense of a "non-subjected" other. For her, it is imperative to avoid 'hegemonic' labels of truth. Moya proclaims that: "Indeed, women of color's commitment to a truth (however difficult to access) that transcends particular cultural constructions underlies their success in forming coalitions across difference"(p. 479). These coalitions all stem from a "drive for truth."

As Moya's project calls women-of-color feminists to join in her theoretical framework which intends to find a truth and recognizes that a truth exists to be found, it also provides a good example of how a heightened awareness of the various contributing factors that determine the Chicana's marginalized status gives rise to a theory based *border* conscience. Moya is in an argument with theoretical approaches to defining and analyzing Chicana feminism and agency. Her theory is as complex as the identities possessed by those about whom she is theorizing. She repeatedly refers to her theoretical framework as a *postpositivist realist perspective*. This term fixes the theory within a time constraint, following a prior *positivist* period. It also places a judgment on those outside of its approach, being *realist*, whereas other theories must therefore be *non-realists*. Finally, the certainty conveyed by the first two terms is brought into question when the more modern realistic search for a *transcendent truth* is qualified as a mere *perspective*. The eloquent and determined criticism of postmodern and pragmatist feminist theory falls subject to refuse "to

make an objective metaphysical claim--even limited ones--about the nature either of the world or of human beings" (Moya, 2001 p. 442). Moya's theory, while positive and inspiring, does not avoid the trap into which she claims postmodern theory inevitably leads. Her struggle is with the stabilization of an identity in *flux*. The multiplicity of experience is determined by place of identity construction, according to Moya. While these influences exist in the formation of identity, they do not dictate the final outcome.

Moya's work crosses the borders of theoretical *perspectives* initiating and continuing a dialogue among theorists, all seeking to express and theorize *agency* for the Chicana feminist. She employs *la facultad* in a manner that *both* embraces and rejects coalitions among not only women-of-color feminists, but also between women-of-color and *white feminists*. By praising the *multiplicity* of *perspective* possessed by women-of-color, Moya finds the difficulty proposed by finding *truth* when *flexibility* requires constant re-visioning of identity.

Because claiming herself a feminist and therefore a member of the women's movement cannot itself serve in giving the Chicana the theoretical tools necessary for determining her own agency, she must continually confront the conflicts that arise between the multiple factors that contribute to her identity. Her presence is not rooted in one place, and location becomes the metaphoric locus of her theoretical craft. The multiplied sense of homeland contributes to the formation of an identity in flux. The reenacting of the initial border crossing becomes an important metaphor in Chicana Feminism. Efforts to convey agency are identifiable bridging acts reflecting the internal conflict for the Chicana who cannot easily adopt one *label* over another. The Chicana Feminist eludes definition and thereby establishes a theoretical framework that challenges the dominant discourse and the structures for inequality that it creates based on race, class, gender and sexuality. Chicana feminism is the constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing of the *border conscience* as a means of self-actualization.

In feminist theory, the realization of self-expression has been contemplated with a skeptical, if not pessimistic outlook. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) examines the problem that the marginalized *self* must confront. By attempting to express herself through the codified language and discourse established by the dominant group, the *other* cannot escape failure. Spivak proposes that even when a woman determines her agency through *sati*, a traditional widow suicide at the death of her husband, she cannot avoid being appropriated by the dominant system. Spivak (1988) concludes that "(t)he task of recovering a (sexually) subaltern subject is lost in an institutional textuality at the archaic origin" (p. 303). While Spivak's conclusion is that the subaltern cannot speak, she does not intend to discourage feminist theory or agency, but rather caution that the mere determination of another discourse outside of the dominant realm does not itself serve to create a *spoken* or *heard* doctrine. The *subaltern* must be aware of the battle in which her intellectual endeavors have entered.

Where Spivak finds danger in the use of language to speak as well as language usage as a means of countering and controlling unspoken acts of self-determination, there emerges a hopeful discursive tendency for the Chicana Feminist. Because the Chicana Feminist straddles multiple realms and cannot express her reality through one language, one cultural viewpoint or one gendered stance, her language becomes complex and more difficult to deconstruct. Also, the Chicana Feminist is an activist and her expression of agency, as well as her theorizing of the self, is therefore an act of exploration that cannot be resolved. Chicana Feminism is an ongoing process of definition and redefinition. It is an eternal dialogue

bridging and destabilizing the links between the variables that create the Chicana reality. A web-published poem demonstrates the *border* conscience espoused and promoted by Moya's *postpositivist realist perspective*. The following is the text of the poem in its entirety:

Our Proud Nopalization Encounter

You might shut the door on our nose but our color stands out

By Lisabeth Espinosa & Carmela Vasquez Web Published 12.5.2003

“Do we really fit in?”

WE ARE HERE!!!!

Don't make it easier on us,  
by showering your pity.  
We want to learn all the  
knowledge this institution has to offer.

But we won't give up our  
native language  
let it be  
Spanish, Calo, Spanglish, Nahuatl.  
We are not embarrassed  
of the culture that our color represents.  
We won't assimilate.  
We are educated.

But  
we are not going to give up  
la musica ranchera,  
dancing to salsa music,  
eating frijoles de la olla con jalapeños curtidos.

WE ARE HERE!!!!

It's hard when you  
give more than 100% in academia  
and you're still not perceived  
as the person that received  
a quality high school education.  
We work harder  
because  
we have to constantly prove  
that  
as people of color we can graduate from the  
University of California system.  
We don't want to be another failing statistic.

WE ARE HERE!!!!

You might shut the door on our nose

but our color stands out.  
 We can't hide from you.  
 We are not going to give up.  
 You will always see us here in college.  
 Listening to mariachi music,  
 Drinking café con canela,  
 Eating our tacos de carne asada.  
 WE ARE HERE!!!  
 This is our dream  
 our parent's desire  
 our grandparent's fantasy.  
 Make room for us' cause  
 we always bring our family.  
 We're like a turtle carrying  
 it's home on it's back.  
 We might go through  
 hell  
 while trying to understand  
 Plato and Socrates  
 all these "so-called knowledgeable theorists"  
 that don't tell you how real society functions.  
 WE ARE HERE!!!  
 Our advantage in life  
 is  
 that  
 we know  
 how to survive in society  
 we don't need theorists  
 to tell us  
 the truth  
 about  
 our day to day life  
 while  
 constantly striving to be  
 who we are!!!  
 WE ARE HERE!!! (Espinosa and Vasquez, 2003).

What I find in this poem is an anticipation of the denial of agency as warned by Spivak. But these young Third Wave Chicana Feminists do not accept or fear such denials of agency. They write, "You might shut the door on our nose but our color stands out." If they are heard, then they will be seen. The poem repeats emphatically, "We are here!" This complicated self will not be rejected or denied. In order to express the complexity of Chicana Feminism, as well as avoid hegemonic labeling, the poets express the enigmatic language in which Chicana Feminists operate, "Spanish, Calo, Spanglish, Nahuatl." The multiple codification creates a theoretical standpoint that invites the Chicana Feminist attached to any of her multiple cultures of origin as well as any of her symbolic linguistic systems in which

she feels most comfortable to operate. Despite her educated status, she does not recognize the educating patriarchal system as the shaper of her identity. She refuses to be theorized or assimilated. The poem expresses Chicana Feminism as a theoretical framework that eludes definition and thereby establishes a theory driven structure that challenges the dominant discourse and the structures for inequality that it creates based on race, class, gender and sexuality. These young Chicana feminists are constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the border conscience as a means of self-actualization. They are *here* and their multiplicity as well as self-awareness presents a dialogue that is eternal, meaning the Chicana Feminist does not anticipate a finale to her endeavors. This eternal dialogue threatens to maintain an activist presence among the theorizing intellectuals that are determined to label the Chicana Feminist with a controlling hegemonic marker.

Expressing the woman-of-color's ability and willingness to consider her *identity* and her *misconception* of truth, these Chicanas go beyond declaring their liberty and self-determination. The poets ask in the opening line "Do we fit in?" as if requesting membership while at the same time demarcating the lines of difference. In *The Bridge Poem*, a more famous poem published in the anthology This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, the poet Donna Kate Rushin expresses her (the Chicana's) wariness at the "radical and realist questioning of themselves and the world." Difference obligates the poet to explain "my mother to my father/my father to my little sister/my little sister to my brother/my brother to the white feminists/the white feminists to the Black church folks/ the Black church folks to the ex-hippies/the ex-hippies to the Black separatists/and the Black separatists to the artists/the artists to my friends' parents..../Then/I've got to explain myself/To everybody"(Rushin, 1981, xxi). Engaging in re-visioning truth and forming coalitions is a heavy burden for the Chicana. Perhaps, this constant need to explain herself to "everybody" best expresses the Chicana theoretical effort. Being Chicana is being a bridge to "your womanhood/Your manhood/Your humanness" (Rushin, 1981, xxii). The poet does not celebrate the mediating self who forms coalitions. For her, it is more urgent to translate her "own fears", to "mediate/My own weaknesses" (Rushin, 1981, xxii). She is not apologizing for enigmatically inviting and banishing coalitions between herself and her Chicano brothers, her Chicano fathers, her Chicana sisters, her sisters-of color, her brothers-of color and her feminist sisters. Race, class, gender and culture all serve to create her *identity*, which makes her *useful* in connecting the "rest of the world." Ironically, the task of connecting her with herself is a task left unaccomplished. The poet is disengaging herself from Moya's project of seeking a *truth* that will serve *liberatory feminism* intent to create a "better society than the one we currently live in." Her poem proposes a project of self-examination as a means of self-determination.

For Teresa Córdova (1998), the project proposed by Rushin's poem is the Chicana feminist's quest for liberation. In "Anti-Colonial Chicana Feminism," her Chicana objective echoes Moya's concern for a liberatory feminism for which her "postpositivist realist perspective" is proposed as a more appropriate theory over postmodernist pragmatist theory. But for Córdova, the liberation is an anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial challenge. The Chicana must challenge 'internalized colonialism' in order to find her "voice to express her pain and her experiences, to rename herself in her own image, to recover mythic and historical female symbols that reconnect her to her past, and to celebrate and learn to love herself" (Córdova, 1998, p. 379). Córdova's (1998) theory proposes that the Chicana feminist writer

“reconstructs her self to liberate it from the oppression of the colonialist construct whose only purpose is to debase her in order to control her”(p. 379).

An anti-patriarchal/anti-colonial stance, according to Córdova's theory is based on renaming the Chicana self by reclaiming historical female symbols. This is done through “telling our stories and we are recording our triumphs and, by virtue of our presence, we are challenging our surroundings”(Córdova, 1998, p. 381). In *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo (1994), the story of a household of women reconstructs a historical stereotype of the Chicana experience. The matriarch Sofia carries the name of the wisdom saint and her life is told through a quixotic narrative. Sofia is preceded in death by all of her daughters: Esperanza, Fe, Caridad and Loca. In fact at the close of the novel, she has absorbed the eclectic personalities of her daughters—such as leftist activist, spiritual leader, workaholic and eccentric—in the reconstruction of her Chicana self. Castillo employs now stereotypical symbols to *reconstruct* an identity that challenges identities constructed by a colonial order of power. As the daughter's faith, charity, hope and insanity all fall into a realm of uncertainty, the very concepts for which they are named are brought into question. It is *insanity* that in the end is *sainted*, only after a lifetime of magical realist experiences, such as returning from death and a long friendship with *La Llorona*, playing along the *acequia*. Her *second* death is marked by realization of a life of self-determination, rejecting all requirements of *normalcy*. Her death is described in this manner, “Loca went to sleep in the Lady's arm, thinking that for a person who had lived her whole life within a mile radius of her home and had only traveled as far as Albuquerque twice, she certainly knew quite a bit about this world, not to mention beyond, too, and that made her smile as she closed her eyes”(Castillo, 1994, p. 245). Castillo's *reconstruction* is simple. A woman who rejects the codified identity for normal is not insane, not *loca*, but rather an activist, “La Loca Santa.” What Castillo's novel manages to do is to take a family of women and ascribe defining names to them that cannot account for the complexity of their identity or *multiple subjectivities*. Their *border* conscience, a heightened awareness of the many factors that contribute to their *identity* and experience of *reality* leads them to reconstruct their self as a means of liberatory feminism.

If one considers Spivak's subaltern theory as one that challenges the possibility for identity *construction* by the marginalized *other* when operating within a hierarchically constructed society, then the young Third Wave Feminist poets challenge this obstacle by *constructing* their own branch of Chicanoism as well as feminism. Likewise Moya's employment of Anzaldúa's *la facultad* as a marker for transcendence, proposes a Chicana feminism based on an incessant deconstructing of her identity and the experiences that contribute to its formation. In Rushin's *The Bridge Poem*, the tiresome effort that the quest for truth requires leads the Chicana feminist to despair as to whether she has a *self* that can be identified from her labors. The reconstructing act that follows Spivak's constructing project and Moya's deconstructing project is recognized as an oppositional challenge to colonialism according to Córdova's theory. This reconstruction of historical female symbols shapes Ana Castillo's plot in *So Far From God*. What these constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions offer is a feminism—a Chicana feminism—that is characterized by a heightened awareness of the various contributing factors that determine her marginalized status, giving rise to a theory based *border* conscience as a means of self-actualization. The border conscience provides an *othered* and *subalterned* voice that is here, there and in-between. This awareness of the self and the not-self within multiple realms of same and different provides a



framework that shapes not only Chicana feminist theory, but also, the Chicana's self-expression.

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