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# From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the United States

Vicki L. Ruiz

Beginning with the Coronado expedition of 1540, Spanish-speaking women migrated north decades, even centuries, before their European American counterparts ventured west. The Spanish colonial government, in efforts to secure its territorial claims, offered a number of inducements to those willing to undertake such an arduous journey. Subsidies given to a band of settlers headed for Texas included not only food and livestock, but also petticoats and stockings. Although some settlers would claim "Spanish" blood, the majority of people were *mestizo* (Spanish/Indian), and many colonists were of African descent.

Few women ventured to the Mexican North as widows or orphans; most arrived as the wives or daughters of soldiers, farmers, and artisans. Over the course of three centuries, they raised families on the frontier and worked alongside their fathers or husbands, herding cattle and tending crops. Furthermore, the Franciscans did not act alone in the acculturation and decimation of indigenous peoples, but recruited women into their service as teachers, midwives, doctors, cooks, seamstresses, and supply managers.

Women's networks based on ties of blood and fictive kinship proved central to the settlement of the Spanish/Mexican frontier. At times women settlers acted as midwives to mission Indians, and they baptized sickly or still-born babies. As godmothers for these infants, they established the bonds of *compadrazgo* between

Native American and Spanish/Mexican women. However, exploitation took place *among* women. For those in domestic service, racial and class hierarchies undermined any pretense of sisterhood. In San Antonio in 1735, Antonía Lusgardia Ernandes, a mulatta, sued her former employer for custody of their son. Admitting

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paternity, the man claimed that his former servant had relinquished the child to his wife since his wife had baptized the child. The court, however, granted Ernandes custody. While the godparent relationship could foster ties between colonists and Native Americans, elites used baptism as a venue of social control. Indentured servitude was prevalent on the

colonial frontier persisting well into the nineteenth century.

The history of Spanish/Mexican settlement has been shrouded by myth. Walt Disney's *Zorro*, for example, epitomized the notion of romantic California controlled by fun-loving, swashbuckling rancheros. As only three percent of California's Spanish/Mexican population could be considered rancheros in 1850, most women did not preside over large estates, but helped manage small family farms. In addition to traditional tasks, Mexican women were accomplished *vaqueras* or cowgirls. Spanish-speaking women, like their European American counterparts, encountered a duality in frontier expectations. While placed on a pedestal as delicate "ladies," women were responsible for a variety of strenuous chores.

Married women on the Spanish/Mexican frontier had certain legal advantages not afforded their European American peers. Under English common law, women, when they married, became *feme covert* (or dead in the eyes of the legal system) and thus, they could not own property separate from their husbands. Conversely, Spanish/Mexican women retained control of their land after marriage and held one-half interest in the community property they shared with their spouses. Interestingly, Rancho Rodeo de las Aguas, which María Rita Valdez operated until the 1880s, is now better known as Beverly Hills.

Life for Mexican settlers changed dramatically in 1848 with the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War, the discovery of gold in California, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexicans on the U.S. side of the border became second-class citizens, divested of their property and political power. Their world turned upside down. Segregated from the European American population, Mexican Americans in the barrios of the Southwest sustained their sense of identity and cherished their traditions. With little opportunity for advancement, Mexicans were concentrated in lower echelon industrial, service, and agricultural jobs. This period of conquest and marginalization, both physical and ideological, did not occur in a dispassionate environment. Stereotypes affected rich and poor alike with Mexicans commonly described as lazy, sneaky, and greasy. In European American journals, novels, and travelogues, Spanish-speaking women were frequently depicted as flashy, morally deficient sirens.

At times these images had tragic results. On 5 July 1851, a Mexican woman swung from the gallows, the only woman lynched during the California Gold Rush. Josefa Segovia (also known as Juanita of Downieville) was tried, convicted, and hanged the same day she had killed

an Anglo miner and popular prize fighter, a man who had assaulted her the day before. Remembering his Texas youth, Gilbert Onderdonk recounted that in proposing to his sweetheart he listed the qualities he felt set him apart from other suitors.

"I told her. . . I did not use profane language, never drank whisky, never gambled, and never killed Mexicans."

Some historians have asserted that elite families believed they had a greater chance of retaining their land if they acquired an Anglo son-in-law. Intermarriage, however, was no insurance policy. In 1849, María Amparo Ruiz married Lieu-

litigation, the court awarded his widow only 8,926 acres. Even this amount was challenged by squatters, and she would continue to lose acreage in the years ahead. Chronicling her experiences, Ruiz de Burton wrote *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), a fictionalized account of the decline of the ranching class.

Providing insight into community life, nineteenth-century Spanish language newspapers reveal ample information on social mores. Newspaper editors upheld the double standard. Women were to be cloistered and protected to the extent that some residents of New Mexico protested the establishment of co-educational public schools. In 1877 Father Gasparri of *La revista católica* editorialized that women's suffrage would destroy the family. Despite prevailing conventions, Mexican women, due to economic circumstances wrought by political and social disenfranchisement, sought employment for wages. Whether in cities or on farms, family members pooled their earnings to put food on the table. Women worked at home taking in laundry, boarders, and sewing while others worked in the fields, in restaurants and hotels, and in canneries and laundries.

In 1900, over 375,000 to 500,000 Mexicans lived in the Southwest. By 1930 this figure increased ten-fold as over one million Mexicans—pushed out by revolution and lured in by prospective jobs—came to the United States. They settled into existing barrios and forged new communities both in the Southwest

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"Comadres," Teresa Grijalva de Orosco and Francisca Ocampo Quesada, 1912.

tenant Colonel Henry S. Burton and five years later the couple purchased Rancho Jamul, a sprawling property of over 500,000 acres. When Henry Burton died in 1869, the ownership of Rancho Jamul came into question. After seven years of

and the Midwest. Like their foremothers, women usually journeyed north as wives and daughters. Some, however, crossed the border alone and as single mothers. As in the past, women's wage earnings proved essential to family survival. Urban daughters (less frequently mothers) worked in canneries and garment plants as well as in the service sector. Entire families labored in the fields and received their wages in a single check made out to the head of household. Grace Luna related how women would scale ladders with one hundred pounds of cotton on their backs and some had to "carry their kids on top of their picking sacks!"

Exploitation in pay and conditions prompted attempts at unionization. Through Mexican mutual aid societies and progressive trade unions, Mexican women proved tenacious activists. In 1933 alone thirty-seven major agricultural strikes occurred in California. The Los Angeles Dressmakers' Strike (1933), the San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike (1938), and the California Sanitary Canning Company Strike (1939) provide examples of urban activism.

Like the daughters of European immigrants, young Mexican women experienced the lure of consumer culture. Considerable intergenerational conflict emerged as adolescents wanted to dress and perhaps behave like their European American peers at work or like the heroines they encountered in movies and magazines. Evading traditional chaperonage became a major preoccupation for youth. However, they and their kin faced the specter of deportation. From 1931 to 1934, over one-third of the Mexican population in the United States (over 500,000 people) were deported or repatriated. Discrimination and segregation in housing, employment, schools, and public recreation further served to remind youth of their second-class citizenship. In María Arredondo's words, "I remember. . . signs all over that read 'no Mexicans allowed.'"

Operating small barrio businesses, the Mexican middle-class at times allied themselves with their working-class customers and at times strived for social distance.

The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) represented a group that did both simultaneously. An important civil rights organization, with women's active participation, LULAC confronted segregation through the courts; however, only U.S. citizens could join. Conversely, El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Española (Spanish-speaking People's Congress) stressed immigrant rights. Indeed, this 1939 civil rights convention drafted a comprehensive platform which called for an end to segregation in public facilities, housing, education, and employment.

After World War II, Mexican women were involved in a gamut of political organizations from the American G.I. Forum to the Community Service Organization (CSO). An Alinsky-style group, CSO stressed local issues and voter registration. Two CSO leaders, Cesar Chávez and Dolores Huerta, forged the United Farm Workers (UFW) during the early 1960s, he as president, she as vice president. A principal negotiator, lobbyist, and strategist, Huerta relied on extended kin and women friends in the union to care for her eleven children during her absences. Although criticized for putting the union first, Dolores Huerta has had few regrets. As she told historian Margaret Rose,

"But now that I've seen how good [my children] turned out, I don't feel so guilty." Family activism has characterized UFW organizing.

As part of global student movements of the late 1960s, Mexican American youth joined together to address continuing problems of discrimination, particularly in education and political representation. Embracing the mantle of cultural nationalism, they transformed a pejorative barrio term "Chicano" into a symbol of pride. "Chicano/a" implies a commitment to social justice and to social change. A graduate student in history at UCLA, Magdalena Mora, not only wrote about trade union struggles but participated in them as well. She organized cannery workers in Richmond, California and participated in CASA, a national immigrant rights group. An activist since high school, she died in 1981 of a brain tumor at the age of twenty-nine. The informal credo of the Chicano student movement: to return to your community after your college education to help your people. Magdalena Mora never left.

A layering of generations exist among Mexicans in the United States from seventh-generation New Mexicans to recent immigrants. This layering provides a vibrant

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Las vaqueras, circa early 1900s.



Las solas: Mexican women arriving in El Paso, 1911.

cultural dynamic. Artists Amlia Mesa Bains, Judy Baca, and Yolanda López and writers Sandra Cisneros, Pat Mora, and Cherrie Moraga (to name a few) articulate the multiple identities inhabiting the borderlands of Chicano culture. Across generations, women have come together for collective action. Communities Organized for Public Service (San Antonio) and Mothers of East L.A. exemplify how parish networks become channels for social change. Former student activists María Varela and María Elena Durazo remain committed to issues of economic justice, Varela through a New Mexico rural coop-

erative and Durazo as a union president in Los Angeles. Whether they live in Chicago or El Paso, Mexican women share legacies of resistance. As Varela related, "I learned . . . that it is not enough to pray over an injustice or protest it or research it to death, but that you have to take concrete action to solve it." □

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