CHICANA FEMINISMS

There are many definitions of feminism, and many scholars now assert that the word should be used in its plural form to encompass women’s various social locations. As such, Chicana feminisms address the specific historical, economic, and social experiences of women of Mexican descent in the United States. The field of Chicana feminisms developed within the context of feminist movements in the United States, including the feminist writings of African-American, Asian-American, Native American, and white scholars. Although Chicana feminist analyses focus specifically on the condition of Chicanas, writers claim allegiance to U.S.-based as well as internationally based politically progressive movements (Saldívar-Hull).

There are four distinctive features that distinguish Chicana feminisms from other forms of feminism: history, culture, intersectionality, and political coalitions.

The Importance of History

The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 codified in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the colonized status of Mexico’s former citizens in what became part of the U.S. southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Mexicans residing in this region lost their citizen rights and saw their language and culture displaced overnight. It was this act of colonization that Chicanos in general and Chicana feminists in particular use as central in claiming a particular social and economic position in the United States that makes them different from other immigrant groups. The initial act of colonization influences even recent Mexican immigrants as they join Chicano communities in the United States that are treated differently from mainstream white communities.

During the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s, many Chicano writers sought to expose the suppressed history of Mexicans in the United States. Chicana feminist writers focused on highlighting the political resistance and “underground” feminisms of many important women leaders since 1848. Women of Mexican descent in the United States have a long history of resistance and political mobilization, as demonstrated by strong women leaders such as Emma Tenayuca, who was a labor leader in Texas, and las soldaderas (women soldiers) who fought in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Dolores Huerta (b. 1930) followed this tradition of political leadership as she fought side-by-side with César Chávez (1927–1993) to unionize California farmworkers and continued into the twenty-first century carrying out Chávez’s important political work after his untimely death in 1993.

The Importance of Culture

Chicana feminist writers agree with other feminists that patriarchy exists in most societies. However, patriarchy is manifested in culturally specific ways, and as such, Chicanas’ culture and history are central to their analysis of gender in their communities. Chicana feminists have identified several cultural elements that are central in defining Chicana definitions of proper womanhood. One is the veneration of La Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe, the national saint of Mexico); another is the figure of La Malinche, an indigenous woman who facilitated the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) by serving as translator and go-between in the negotiations that ultimately defeated the Aztec leader Montezuma in 1519. Both women are iconic figures of what is desirable and undesirable for Mexican women in Mexico as well as Chicanas in the United States.

The desirable aspects of Mexicana/Chicana womanhood based on La Virgen de Guadalupe are piety, dedication, humbleness, selflessness, dedication to family, and virginity. The undesirable traits, as embodied in La Malinche, are treachery, lying, deceitfulness, and sexual promiscuity. Although other cultures usually describe this distinction between women as a “virgin-whore” dichotomy, in Mexican or Chicano culture the dichotomy is tied specifically to these two figures rather than a general distinction with no cultural or historical referent. These culturally appropriate and inappropriate ways of expressing Chicana womanhood do not apply to non-Chicana...
women and therefore merit a different feminist analysis from those developed by other cultural groups.

The Importance of Intersectionality

Many writers of Chicana feminisms had been active participants in the 1960s Chicano civil rights movement and in the white feminist movement. Their experience in multiple political struggles alerted them to the exclusion of gender and sexuality in ethnic mobilizations and the exclusion of social class, race, and ethnicity in feminist mobilizations. From the experience of always feeling only partially understood, Chicana feminists developed, in conjunction with other feminists of color, the concept of intersectionality. Chicana feminisms ascribe to the notion that women belong to more than one oppressed group and that through understanding the intersection of how these different social categories—sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, gender—intersect in contextually specific situations, Chicanas’ multiple oppressions can be understood. For example, a poor, lesbian, immigrant, Mexican farmworker will experience patriarchy and gender subordination differently from a middle-class, heterosexual, third-generation U.S.-Chicana professor. Intersectionality immediately recognizes that not all women are the same and that social locations identified through group memberships can elucidate women’s multiple sources of oppression.

Dolores C. Huerta, cofounder and first vice-president emeritus of the United Farm Workers of America—AFL-CIO (UFW)—played a major role in the American civil rights movement.

Dolores Huerta was born on April 10, 1930, in a small town in northern New Mexico. Her father, Juan Fernandez, was a miner, fieldworker, union activist, and state assemblyman. Dolores was raised by her mother, Alicia Chávez, after her parents divorced when she was three years old. Dolores along with her two brothers and two sisters grew up in the San Joaquin Valley in the farmworkers community of Stockton, California. Her mother was a businesswoman who owned a restaurant and a seventy-room hotel that often put up farmworkers and their families for free.

Dolores Huerta attributes her accomplishments and lifelong activism to her mother’s influence and caring. Dolores was one of the first Chicanas to graduate from her high school and one of the first to receive a teaching degree from the University of the Pacific’s Delta Community College. As a teacher, however, she soon realized that she could make more of a difference in her students’ lives if she helped improve the lives of farmworkers—so their children did not have to attend school hungry.

Dolores began community organizing in 1955 as a founding member of the Stockton chapter of the Community Service Organization (a grassroots organization fighting social injustice). While working for the CSO, she helped create the Agricultural Workers Association (in 1960), and as a lobbyist in Sacramento in the early 1960s she was instrumental in the passage of legislation allowing voters the right to vote in Spanish and allowing individuals to take the driver’s license examination in their native language. She later lobbied in Washington, D.C., for an end to the so-called bracero program that encouraged the use of “captive labor” from Mexico. In 1962 she joined Cesar Chávez in Delano, California, and they created the National Farm Workers Association, precursor to the United Farm Workers union.

In 1966 Huerta negotiated a farmworkers’ contract with the Schenley Wine Company, marking the first time in the history of the United States that agricultural workers negotiated a labor contract with a major corporation. Her struggles on behalf of farmworkers continued into the next decades. In her seventies, she was still fighting to preserve and extend the rights of agricultural workers in the United States, working long hours and traveling to cities across North America promoting La Causa—the farmworkers’ cause—and women’s rights.

Huerta received a number of honorary doctorate degrees, was a board member for the Fund for the Feminist Majority (advocating for the political and equal rights for women), and president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, with the mission of establishing Communities of Conscience focusing on community organizing and leadership training in low-income, underrepresented communities.
A corollary to intersectionality is that the experience of multiple sources of oppression facilitates Chicanas’ experiencing social reality as multilayered. That is, knowledge of more than one language and one culture allows the potential for realizing the arbitrary nature of social categories. Chicana feminist writers have identified the ability to perceive and translate different social realities as mestiza consciousness (Moraga and Anzaldúa), concientización (Castillo), and shifting consciousness (Sandoval), and have capitalized on this intellectual dexterity to capture fully the internal diversity of Chicanas in the United States and to avoid essentializing the “Chicana experience.” Furthermore, the ability to communicate multiple realities has also facilitated Chicana feminist writers speaking to different constituencies through their intellectual production and addressing different sources of oppression depending on whom they are addressing (Arredondo et al.).

The Importance of Political Coalitions
Chicana feminisms do not situate the sources of women’s oppression only in gender or exclusively in class, race, ethnicity, or sexuality. Their commitment to examine women’s disadvantages through the lens of intersectionality allows them actively to seek political coalitions with other oppressed groups, including men of color. Chicana feminisms refuse to “rank the oppressions” (Moraga and Anzaldúa) and are committed to being self-reflexive about how everybody, regardless of their apparent powerlessness, can contribute to oppression within restricted contexts (Pérez). At the same time, Chicana feminisms see class struggles as fundamental to worldwide liberation (Saldívar-Hull).

The Future of Chicana Feminisms
Chicana feminisms are a vibrant field of study in several disciplines: American studies, anthropology, art, ethnic studies, film studies, literature, psychology, sociology, and women’s studies. At the start of the twenty-first century, with Chicana feminisms as a field almost three decades old, a third generation of writers were expanding and elaborating the basic features of Chicana feminisms. Furthermore, young, educated Chicanas were embracing the political goals set out by the first generation of Chicana feminist writers and using their various professions to implement many of the ideas written about almost thirty years earlier. All of these developments, coupled with the flexibility and self-reflexivity inherent in the paradigms proposed by Chicana feminisms, make it a promising and expanding field of study as well as a potential framework for political action.

See also Chicano Movement; Feminism: Third World U.S. Movement; Women’s History.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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ISLAMIC FEMINISM

The term Islamic feminism was first used in the 1990s. It is not certain who coined the term. Nor is it evident that those who first used it were aware of the explosive impact that the juxtaposition of these two words was to have. Rather than imagining and promoting a revolution in the heart of Islam, these women in Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and some Asian Muslim communities were merely describing what they and others like them were doing. They were challenging the misogyny that they saw to be essential to the projection of a newly politicized Islam.

Defining “Islamic Feminism”

To understand Islamic feminism, both words have to be examined separately and then together. The epithet “Islamic” situates a person somewhere on the continuum between a cultural identity that is Muslim and coexists easily with secularism and occasional expressions of religious observance on the one hand, and Islamist, which describes a way of life committed to fighting for the establishment of an Islamic state. “Feminist” refers to a consciousness that women are unjustly treated simply because they are women. This consciousness may, but need not, be galvanized into action to do something to change this unjust system (see introduction in Badran and Cooke).

“Islamic feminist” describes the speech, action, writing, or a way of life committed to gender justice and also an engagement with Islamic epistemology as an expansion of a faith position rather than a rejection of it. At the same time that they address themselves to this discourse and derive from it