

# Women on the Margins (Borders): Passage to Center through Education

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## Introduction

*Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men. As for her, she does not consider herself responsible for it; it is understood that she is inferior and dependent; she has not learned the lessons of violence, she has never stood forth as a subject . . .*

— Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir's words and views regarding woman as the *second sex* within man's world are no more glaringly powerful than when placed in the context of Spanish-speaking women entering the United States . What hope do they have in realistically and viably changing a life path that keeps them trapped within a cycle of poverty, subjugated to those privileged by nationality, race/color, gender, class and holding power over their lives? Whether through illegal or legal immigration these women soon realize that they may aspire and even attempt to resist oppressive frameworks, but they are met with the realization that they do not have the communicative competency, cultural capital, and social power to successfully do battle with the Goliath of oppressive structures, institutionalized inequities in government and education, and constructed realities that view them as less than, or other. Notably, women born, or who gained entry through legal immigration into the United States have historically encountered the gendered politics that keep them from engaging their highest human potential; and fullest participation within society and politics. If this be the case, then the scenario for immigrating, Spanish-speaking women is all the more dire.

*To date, the US has yet to give reaffirmation of the United Nations Platform of Action on Women's Rights an effort that grew out of the World Conference on Women in Beijing that occurred in September of 1995.*

The Americanization of Spanish-speaking women has had a direct corollary impact on the US economy for their ability to contribute to labor-force demands. In McLaren's (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) thinking, "difference is intimately related to capitalistic exploitation." Beyond their Anglo and African-American peers, Mexican women greatly outnumber others as blue-collar workers (Ruiz, 1998). These women have a long history of laboring for transnational organizations at inhumanely low wages in the fields or as domesticated servants, seamstresses, laundresses, and overall service workers, which make them the new underclass within American society. Minimal attention has been given to the plight of these women due to the politics of color. They are "subject to the 'racial discounting' routinely experienced by . . . Mexicans in the United States . . ." (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002, p. 3). There is a silencing, which Spivak writes of, drawing from Gramsci's theorizing. The subaltern are without privilege. Those confounded by this condition "cannot speak" because they "cannot be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third worlds (p. 5).

*Throughout her work Spivak has been concerned with addressing questions of the international division of labor (of the super-exploitation of Third World female labor in particular) and she is well-known for her formulations on the subaltern, that constituency which remains most excluded from the circuits and possible benefits of socialized capital . . . she claims that the subaltern 'cannot speak,' . . .*

*they cannot be heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds* —Landry & MacLean 1996

In this work I address some of the legitimated institutionalized inequities that fetter these women to living lives as second-class citizens within both public and private spheres. Finally examined is how these women can begin to transcend or even transform their lives through the empowerment of education as well as communicative competency and social literacy.

*Questions of gender and race take on a new significance at the turn of the century, when, as a consequence of the massive incorporations of Third World women into a multinational labor force and into domestic service, feminist theorists have had to rethink such fundamental concepts as the public/private distinction in explanations of women's oppression*—Chandra Talpade Mohanty

## **Legitimated Institutionalized Inequities**

### **Government**

Grand narratives, and dominant ideologies evocative of Colonialism, the Western frontier mentality, and the vow of Manifest Destiny have accustomed Americans to the belief that they hold the right to rule others and territories through force by self-granting assumptive privilege. Spanish-speaking women entering the United States are met with the challenge to submit or resist being pushed to the margins or borders of society, without serious attention being given to their opportunity to experience what is patently termed as the *good life* in America. They are caught in a maelstrom of hegemonic practice and socio-political dominance that they in no way could fully anticipate, or prepare a defense for prior to arriving in this country. Initially, these women often feel alienation of home, community, and importantly cultural identity. Most, if not all, are immediately met with either implicit or explicit manifestations of nationalism that make them acutely aware that they must negotiate within a society that is less than welcoming of their cultural diversity and presumed invasion of hallowed US borders. These individuals enter the United States into what is often erroneously glorified as cultural homogeneity.

*Democracy has failed because so many people fear it. They believe that wealth and happiness are so limited that a world full of intelligent, healthy and free people is impossible, if not undesirable . . . such a world, with all its contradictions can be saved, can yet be born again; but not out of capital, interest, property and gold*—Noam Chomsky

### **Whose Freedom and Democracy?**

Notions of nationalism and patriotism cloud American consciousness from deciphering that its tactics for curbing immigration may be harsh and unjust. In place of genuine democratic practice is what I term a: *Veiled Discourse of Democracy (VDD)*, which is defined as a shadowed rhetorical device which functions to appear to be one of freedom and democracy for all, when in fact the veil is lifted and more critically examined by progressive, transgressive, liberatory minded educators, citizens and activists, there is the recognition that the veil hides a shadowed rhetorical device, a deeper deadly consciousness emerges, which reveals that freedom and democracy are conditional by virtue of obedience to authority or risk punitive consequences involving corporeal, legal, and governmental action—all under the auspicious of protecting citizen rights, nationalism, and patriotic sentiment. Saliently stated, what exists is a socially constructed hegemonic dominant-ruled conceptualization and operationalization of democracy and freedom that serves to powerfully influence and significantly impact existing educational systems that buttress the status quo resulting in loss of citizen rights; as well as academic freedoms. The politics of color and the legitimated institutional and governmental inequities cannot be denied nor justified. Gotanda (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) offers a critique of the notion of color-blindness as it relates to the U. S. Constitution

but just how adequate is color-blind constitutionalism as a technique for combating racial

subordination? . . . nonrecognition has three elements. First, there must be something which is cognizable as a racial characteristic or classification. Second, the characteristic must be recognized. Third, the characteristic must not be considered in a decision. For nonrecognition to make sense, it must be possible to recognize something while not *including it in making a decision* . . . *nonrecognition as a technique, not a principle of traditional substantive common law or constitutional interpretation. It addresses the question of race, not by examining the social realities or legal categories of race, but by setting forth an analytical methodology. This technical approach permits a court to describe, to accommodate, and then to ignore issues of subordination.*” *Color-blindness is not neutral and objective* . . .” (p. 35).

## Overview of Immigration Laws

Provided below is not a detailed chronology, but rather an overview of key immigration laws and acts that put into motion severe challenges for immigrants.

- 1790 residency laws put into practice.
- *In the late 1800s the Chinese population was excluded from formally immigrating to this country due to their ethnic and cultural identity. Japanese, hopeful of immigration, were met with similar sanctions in 1907.*
- *After the US war with Mexico in 1846, Mexicans underwent the process of Americanization that would ensure that they be identified as second-class citizens. In attempting to travel and enter the US these women underwent the assaults and indignities of war. For most, the Catholic church became complicit with the Americanization process, which attempted to erase cultural and national foundations, image and heritage (Blea, 1992).*
- *1917 revisions were made to the law prohibiting, among others, “illiterates” entry into the US .*
- *By 1924 a return to a sense of urgency to protect and maintain American cultures, values and beliefs was fortified by the Johnson-Reed Act, which enacted a quota system limiting immigration. The Border Patrol was also put into effect.*
- *During the 1950s profiling was put into action to target potential immigrant dissidents, who were perceived to be engaging in actions deemed subversive to America and its citizens. In particular, a program was put into place titled “Operation Wetback,” which was intended to target and deport Mexicans living along the U. S. border.*
- *Well over a decade later in 1965, the Immigration Reform Act was put into motion allowing immigration from other countries no matter one’s race, ethnic or cultural identity.*
- *The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was established to target employers who knowingly employed undocumented workers (primarily Mexicans).*
- *As of 1996 one of the most stringent and rigorous acts was formed, the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act intended to curb illegal immigration, specifically at*

*U. S. border sites. The anti-immigration sentiment begun in early U. S. history continues with a vengeance today .*

- *More recently, the USA Patriot Act, also known as Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism was swiftly put into affect by the existing administration after the tragedies of September 11, 2001. I would argue that the outgrowth of such legislative action has functioned well to legitimate identity profiling based upon race and ethnic heritage, and serves powerfully to justify stronger controls and tactics along the U S Mexican border.*

We need only look to our own history for evidence of dissonance in the concept of democracy. For the creation of American crafted instruments of rights were conceived within the cultural womb of slavery.

Then, as now, democracy has not been allowed to mature and be tested to its fullest bounds among immigrants entering our society. Even greater discrepancies arise when attempting to decipher those proposed inalienable rights of freedom and democracy, yet, institutionally legitimates marginalization of those who fall along the periphery. Research in critical race theory as well as the recognition of male, white privilege give testimony to such binary structures.

## Education

With the need to survive and to meet basic daily needs, the value of, and effort toward gaining an education appears among these individuals as unnecessary, or perhaps simply a luxury known only to the wealthy. American education, at its inception was never intended to address issues of diversity or gender. Adopted from European models of education, conceived by white males, and translated through Puritan ethics—the mission of American education was to sustain the dominant society including public/private spheres of activity for women and men. We know well, that enslaved Blacks had no rights to an education, let alone citizenship. Women for over the first century and a half in American history, were denied access to formalized education (Woody, 1974; 1966). Such a system works in tandem with governmental policies to nurture and sustain the status quo. In particular, a hidden curriculum can be found within education, as Giroux (1998) makes clear,

*the hidden curriculum refers to those unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of a given class. An extensive amount of research suggests that what students learn in school is shaped more by the hidden curriculum, the underlying pattern of social relationships in both the classroom and the larger school, than by the formal curriculum. In addition, the hidden curriculum often acts at cross-purposes with the stated goals of the formal curriculum, and rather than promote effective learning, it vitiates such learning. Under such conditions, subordination, conformity, and discipline replace the development of critical thinking and productive social relationships as the primary characteristics of the schooling experience. While the hidden curriculum cannot be entirely eliminated, its structural properties can be identified and modified to create conditions that facilitate developing pedagogical methods and content that help to make students active subjects in the classroom rather than simply recipient objects” (p. 51).*

Recognizing the desire to preserve nationalism vis-à-vis governmental regulations and policies, as well as through the use of the hidden curriculum, the image is galvanized of how immigrants, in this case la mujer Mexicana—upsets both national and educational initiatives. Currently, several issues need urgent attention. For example, those who immigrate, illegally, can complete a high school education but they are banned from obtaining a higher education. Another concern is the issue of *ESL* or students for whom English is a second language has erupted within the American school system, nationally, as a catalyst for racism and hatred toward difference. Further, Preservice educator programs, in the main, do not develop skills and strengthen knowledge that are vital to their ability to encourage *ESL* student success within the American school system and society.

Such oversights prove grievous not only to students, but for many educators who argue that the imposition of the added tasks and special attention required by these students, places heavy demands on their already strenuous workload; and the burden of state mandates to teach to the test to increase national scores. Still yet, Spanish-speaking women without the facility or command of the English language, or whose articulation is strongly enunciated by a cultural accent are often deemed, on the basis of bias or conjecture to be anti-intellectual, less than academically qualified and unworthy to enter the sacred grove of education. These myths as well as others have become legitimated institutionalized inequities. Contrastively, those born and socialized into American culture learn early several critical elements 1) that a social hierarchy exists wherein some are privileged due to race/color, class, and gender, while others must struggle to gain access to similar goods, services, and opportunities granted to some by virtue of social capital; and 2) that education instantiates the positions of those in locations

of power as well as those who remain disempowered; 3) that, individuals who fall along the margins and borders of society, could possibly change, or at least improve their socioeconomic predisposition through advanced education.

### **Higher Education—Not Exempt**

Higher education is not exempt from its own practices of inequity. Specifically, Women's Studies programs have been criticized for their focus on mainstream feminism, while oppressive conditions that Spanish-speaking women find themselves in are not adequately addressed. Issues evoked do not speak to the lived realities of these women. Chicanas and other women of color allege that their experiences and works still remain excluded from the larger context of feminist discourse and critique (De La Torre & Pesquera, 1993). When they have been studied—stereotypes and distortions abound. According to Angie Dernerseian (De La Torre & Pesquera, 1993), Chicanas are not simply raising questions they are attempting to restructure and introduce themes unaddressed involving potential new forms of national identity. Though these academic programs are broadening and including the works of Brown scholars, Norma Alarcon (De La Torre & Pesquera, 1993) feels that many programs remain unwilling to expand and revise their theoretical perspectives to more accurately align their teaching with the works of these Spanish-speaking scholars. Noteworthy is that Chicana activism can be traced to the early immigration of Mexicans to the United States. Offshoots of this activism can be found in La Raza Unida Party, the United Farm Workers, the Crusade for Justice, and student movement groups. El Movimiento began in the 1960s, and by the early 1970s Chicana feminism was on the rise. Anna Nieto-Gomez began to more aggressively reframe the purpose and mission of the feminist Chicanas. In particular, she spoke against the male domination within the Chicano Movement

*[Chicanas] can no longer remain in a subservient role or as auxiliary forces to the [Chicano] movement. They must be included in the front line of communication, leadership and organizational responsibility . . . the issue of equality, freedom and self-determination of the Chicana—like the right of self-determination of, equality and liberation of the Mexican [Chicano] community—is not negotiable. Anyone opposing the right of women to organize into their own form of organization has no place in the leadership of the movement (p. 5).*

Finally, Chicana feminism differs from other forms of mainstream feminisms, for it seeks to maintain ethnic and cultural heritage as well as national pride while resisting oppression. Therefore, feminisms must be enlarged to address this cultural need. In order to preserve this credo, the organization has had to find its own space within the larger women's movement, feminisms and women's studies. Instrumental in raising Chicana feminist conscientiousness was the creation of Chicana-based feminist publications. The writings further attempted to recover a historical record of feminist discourse that had been made invisible or erased.

### **Dividedness of Self in Public/Private Spheres**

When speaking of public/private spheres, in this instance, I mean the split that occurs for many immigrating Mexican women who find themselves within a double and even triple bind regarding their selfhood, identity and agency. First, there is insurmountable pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture to gain access to means of livelihood, healthcare, education and community. It is recognized that immigrants find already established communities, which they might join. However, assimilation into those cultural communities take time and acceptance. In the main, these women must work to overcome their status of being outsiders within a larger social hierarchy that stereotypes them into roles of exoticism or domestication. Daily they fight the triple oppression of race/color; class and gender within the hegemonic society that they must quickly learn to navigate unknown social roles, and communicative practices for their survival, and that of their family, and extended families in many cases.

Second, these women can easily fall into a dichotomized psyche as they struggle to hold on to their cultural and ethnic heritage as well as language, while attempting to embrace the newer identity of Americanism. Family and church are integral to the identity of many Spanish-speaking women. Traditionally, within Spanish-speaking cultures women are acculturated to believe their role to be that of wife, mother, and caretaker of the family, while also ensuring that the husband is respected. She is to honor her family and the church by adhering to instilled codifications of morality that do not necessarily extend to the husband.

Many males within these communities greatly value their sense of masculinity and maintain narrowly concrete views regarding gender-specific roles for males and females. Dominance, misappropriated as true manhood can take the form of machismo, which is akin to patriarchal rule and dominance. Oftentimes women who resist the established family structure are viewed as subversive. Alacron, Castillo & Moraga (1993) disclose that acts of abuse and even sexual violence remain hidden within the interior of the family domain. Traditional values of home and family are instantiated even regarding sexuality, and the role of the church. Enriqueta Longeaux Y Vasquez (Garcia, 1997) believes that Brown women not only suffer oppressions known to Anglo women, but they “also suffer the oppression of being a minority person with a different set of values” (p. 31).

Anzaluda (1999) was among many who attempted to “confront the tradition of male dominance within her community” (p. 3). These women have long abided by a “familial Oligarchy,” which has greatly limited their social roles and expectations. In their activist work and writing, Moraga & Anzaldua (2002) sought to reject rigid sex-role boundaries. Social activist Bernice Rincon supported Nieto-Gomez’s position by calling for an eradication of “internal oppression” that existed even within the Chicano movement. Marta Coreta, Enriqueta Longeaux Vasquez, Francisca Flores, Cherrie Moraga, Mitra Vidal, Gloria Anzaldua, Chela Sandoval as well as others were among those who joined their voices to resist gender inequality, sexism, and male dominance within the movement. Further, activists sought to challenge the notions of the idyllic Chicana/Mexican women created by cultural nationalists. They sought to demystify the socially constructed fantasy, which used the Virgin Mary as their female archetype, followed by wife and motherhood.

### **Sociorhetorical Resentment**

Race cannot be essentialized to a singular category of ethnicity and cultural disposition.

Exacerbating these women’s struggle to assimilate are the projected stereotyping of ethnic, racial and sexist labels that have been utilized historically, as dangerously powerful rhetorical devices to target the insiders from the outsiders functioning to demarcate lines of identification (Burke 1969b; 1969a). Enemies can then be made of those who *invade* US borders, schools and communities. There is a linguistic politicizing of cultural identity for those that fall outside of the mainstream of American society due to their social circumstance. The chief offensive rhetorical strategy is the reduction of all Brown people to one distilled category of nonwhiteness. For example, Chicanas/Mexicanas should not be reduced to being “nonwhite women” in the view of Ofelia Schutte (Garcia & DeGrieff, 2000). As Ruiz’s (1992) historical research chronicles Brown women have been confronted by beauty myths tethered to notions of color by media and advertising. Throughout this paper I have conjoined the terms race/color for these women must also resist the disenfranchising of their physical identities related to color (Ruiz & DuBois, 1994). Dehumanization occurs when their view of selfhood collides with American standards or perceptions of intellect, beauty, and value. The archetype of whiteness in America has seared an indelible image in the communities of nonwhiteness.

*. . . thinking through unacknowledged male privilege, as a phenomenon, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected . . . describing while privilege makes one newly accountable*

—Peggy McIntosh

### **Their All the Same—Right?**

Those of Spanish-speaking heritage are routinely subjected to deterministic perceptions of selfhood, identity, and lived experience. The US Census Bureau and other agencies buttress such action by using the term Hispanic as coding of collective identity by which all Spanish-speaking peoples are categorized. As Suzanne Obler (Garcia & DeGrieff, 2000) argues, the term Hispanic does not link to any factual historical, territorial or cultural identity, yet it is implemented as if that were the case. Such reductionism further crystallizes the standpoint that these individuals do not merit greater recognition and understanding of their unique identity within the larger Spanish-speaking population. Some would argue, their all the same—right? How unknowing and unthinking. This is but a sampling of the cultural identity that is embraced among Spanish-speaking people: Spanish, Spanish-Mexican, Moorish, Mexican-Indian-Mestizo, Chicana, Latina, Hispano. Finally, some view themselves as Mexican-Americans, while others prefer to think of themselves as Mexicans, temporarily in America. Elements that bind these women of diverse origin are: the Spanish language, their history of hardship within the Colonial experience, and racial and gender discrimination (Rochin & Valdes, 2000).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In sum, I have addressed how legitimated institutionalized inequities continue to confront women immigrating to the United States, particularly the great numbers arriving from Spanish-speaking countries, specifically Mexico. Women of all ages enter the US to fill positions that rank among the least desirable. They are greeted by those privileged holding social capital that function to dominate and oppress the marginalized. The neglect of these women's education is conducive to obedience to authority, which begins a cycle of paid servitude and loss of human agency. Astounding numbers of non-literate and non-English speaking women are buried within the darkened caves of transnational corporations thus making the light of education seem virtually impossible. Without literacy and accessible language, a subaltern existence emerges blotting out the possibility for critical hope. Women's globalization of a community of resistance ruptures and decenters such scenarios. Colonial rule is enacted in the gendered power relations and political terrain of not only transnational corporations, but also mainstream educational systems that continue to oppress women of color—pushing them to the margins of a viciously competitive capitalistic society that they battle to survive. Adding to this condition is a growing socio-rhetorical resentment toward these women, and Brown people in general, who must struggle against the triple oppression of race, class and gender. This triad is further complicated by the influence of patriarchal, socio-historical antecedents that often dictate women's roles within public/private spheres. Education offers powerful oppositional mobility to counter hegemonic dominance. Specifically anti-oppressive liberatory pedagogy and praxis.

*It is imperative that more women acquire the skills required in the public sphere. Formal education provides women with the specific skills and expertise; informal education can instill the motivation to move beyond the private sphere—Bonnie Smith*

### **Composing Lives of their Own**

Significantly, the educational system has been given the authority to act as the most powerful socializing agency in America. The omission of this indoctrinating socialization and acculturation further distances immigrant women from experiencing empowering and successful lives. Most often without formalized education their futures are solidified with an existence along the borders and margins of society. Mainstream education is preferred to no education at all. However, I advocate and teach through progressive, anti-oppressive education. With such an approach these women stand a fighting chance to succeed against oppressive frameworks. Poignantly, the model of progressivism inspired through democratization by Dewey (1969; 1939) and extended by Freire (2001) as anti-

oppressive, liberatory pedagogy—would go far in strengthening these women’s resolve to regain their agency in both public and private spheres; and to begin composing lives of their own. From a poststructuralist perspective social space can then be widened for creating new possibilities for living and being.

Beyond the progressive model advocated, communication competency and skills in social interaction/literacy are vital to realizing successful lived experiences for all women, but specifically for those stuck on the borders. Such abilities give them the cultural capital to resist exclusion from public discourse and encourages reclamation of their own theories and social aesthetics. Through education women can then form an engaged community of learners and activists structuring an alternate framework of equity, democracy and justice. Chela Sandoval’s *oppositional consciousness* can be realized. Anzaldua *uprising* can ignite change. Such is the foundation for la mujer Mexicana to begin building her own *frontera*, while recapturing their indispensable historical heritage—so they are no longer strangers in a new land.

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