EDITORS' COMMENTARY: Translating the Backslash

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The Editors trace some of the meanings of the backslash between "Chicana" and "Latina" and the journal's subtitle and history.

In 1993, Chicana feminist Angie Chabram Dernersesian brought the backslash or virgule to public attention in her analysis of the symbol between "a" and "o" in the words "Chicana/o" and "Chicano/a." Examining cultural productions of the 1970s, she argued that it "split" the Mexican American singular subject into a "plurality of competing identities" and proclaimed the "end of the nongendered Mexican American subject of cultural and political identity" (39). The grammatical premise of the backslash may confuse the uninitiated. In Spanish the word "Chicanos" refers to a group of males and females or a group of males, but feminists and heritage speakers in the United States are more sensitive to the authority of patriarchy which imagines a group of men or boys. In addition, Spanish and English code-switching—that is the linguistic and political moments in which "Chicano" became a word in English—allowed "Chicano" to silence women when employed as an adjective, as in the phrase "the Chicano Movement." The diagonal line and its feminine and masculine endings, as Chabram Dernersesian points out, affirmed women's presence and created a sign that "could better accommodate multiple subjects" (42) as well as "combat exclusion" (40).

Reading the Diagonal

The Editors employ the backslash between "Chicana" and "Latina" in a similar way. We value its ability to challenge exclusion and encompass multiple identities. It serves to open our subjectivity and community, and it

allows for our differences. But the diagonal symbol also engages new questions and functions, all of which set the tone and vision for our editorship. This commentary lays out that vision and explores some of the tensions and ambiguities encompassed within the virgule. Following our feminist lesbian philosopher and activist, Gloria Anzaldúa, we embrace contradiction and ambiguity as sites of possibilities and creativity: our writing and editorship does not fear disagreements or solutions. While our commentary does not pretend to discuss all of the meanings presented or imagined by the backslash, we trust that our experiential knowledge will continue to serve as a guide for traversing the space between "Latina" and "Chicana." The following are some readings of the diagonal:

1) Chicana Studies is the place from which and for which Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) emerged. This history is acknowledged and reclaimed in the co-joined phrase "Chicana/Latina". The left of the backslash invites readers to remember that Chicana Studies is part of a social movement, a liberatory action. It is rooted in the "radical social politics" (Sandoval 2000, 150) that emerged and flourished in the late 1960s, became a national movement by the early 1970s, and continued to transform everyday life in the 1980s. On a national level the Chicana/o Movement may have stalled out in the 1990s, but people are still fighting for decent education, housing, health care, language-rights, political representation, and human dignity. When we reach the close of the twenty-first century, social analysts will tell us how we have witnessed national activism against sweatshop labor, anti-immigrant legislation and legislators, English-only mandates, imperialism, and criminalization of youth and organizing for health care, education, housing, unions, and affirmative action. The use of the term "Chicana" invites us to recall and to join in the struggle.

The first part of the co-joined phrase also recognizes the unique historical relationship that Chicanas have to the United States: we are indigenous *and* immigrant. The familiar phrase "we didn't cross the border, it crossed us" empowers Mexicans and their generations of ancestors that resided in what is now known as the American Southwest. This geographic heritage is a second connection Chicanas have with Native Americans, the first being our own autochthonous status and intermarriage. Territorial memory transforms even those who migrated from Mexico after 1848. Continued displacement and oppression, however, makes us experience both the absence and presence of a homeland. The pages of *Chicana/Latina Studies* are devoted to exploring the complexity of being of this place and not. In addition, the Journal examines the relationship between Chicanas and Native American/Indigenous women of the Americas.

2) While the virgule is a documentation of the past, it is also a record of current and future demography. Social analysts predict that Mexicans will comprise approximately 60 million people by 2050, about one-third of the U.S. population (Vélez-Ibañez 2004). They already hold the distinction of "majority" in many border towns and cities in the American Southwest. For our historians, such as Deena J. González and Antonia I. Castañeda, demographic trends are cyclical. In New Mexico, Mexican women were the majority population in the nineteenth-century (González 1999). To the right of the backslash, "Latina" signifies the diaspora of Latin Americans in the U.S. and a growing camaraderie among *mujeres* as we join in solidarity across national boundaries and regions.

3) Each part of the pair—"Chicana and Latina"—is a foothold of a bridge, an intellectual and creative grip that joins parallel and complementary histories, bibliographies, methods, and experiences. Reading left to right, Latina Studies is not seen as the evolutionary development of Chicana Studies. These fields

are distinct and yet intertwined. Historian Emma Pérez (1999) documents the shaping of Chicana consciousness by the Yucatán's socialist revolution, particularly the feminist congresses of 1916 and el Partido Liberal Mexicano, whose leaders were refugees in the United States. She illuminates both the transnational discourse of Chicana Studies and its parallel developments in Mexico.

In short, the backslash has two functions: to signify solidarity *and* distinction. This will not be our first apparent contradiction, and the Editors encourage authors to explore incongruities from a vantage point outside western thought that has trained us to see polarities. We support explorations of continuity and disjunction between Chicanas and Latinas, and thus the diagonal signifies possibilities of coalition and tension, resolution and ambiguity. Through our editorship, we hope "to accomplish social justice by building successful coalitions" (Hurtado 21). Our agenda is a theoretical, political, and creative one.

When I [Davalos] initiated the re-inauguration of the MALCS journal and began to draft the feminist editorial policy, I naively insisted that we employ the phrase "Chicanas and other Latinas" because it is grammatically correct. Linguistically, the former is a subgroup of the latter. Members of the National Advisory Board, including Adaljiza Sosa-Riddell, Antonia I. Castañeda, Norma Alarcón, and Deena J. González, immediately argued against the "othering" of Latinas. Their insights remind us that language has the potential to confirm and grant inequality, exclusion, and distance. The diagonal symbol serves to structure our equality and unity. It expresses a transnational and transcultural site that has the potential to form solidarity with women from and living in Latin America and the Caribbean (Saldívar-Hull 2000). The backslash is a breathing space, one that we hope is explored in these pages.

Alternative Meanings

Because postmodern graphic arts have made the backslash ubiquitous, we offer a few words about other meanings implied in the symbol but not employed in the case of the Journal's title. For example, in English usage, it can separate alternatives, such as "either/or." In this case, the backslash allows for two possibilities, typically polar opposites, but joined by the diagonal symbol they are fused as if indistinguishable. This is somewhat distinct from the diagonal in "Chicana/o." Chicana feminists do not envision Chicana as the *alternative* to Chicano, but an equal presence and experience that should not be lost to patriarchal discourse. "Chicana/Latina" is a similar inscription. The subject of "Chicana" is not an alternative to "Latina" or vice versa. It is a site that acknowledges the experiences, memories, and histories of each without displacing one for the other.

Moreover, while a backslash can be read as a substitution, the Editors prefer clarity and specificity within the pages of the Journal. In this case, we are thinking of social analysis (and not about self-determination) in which scholars unthinkingly refer to a population as "Latina" when in fact the group is specifically Chicana, Salvadorian, or Dominican—to name a few. Just as Jennifer López is not Selena, and Salma Hayek is not Frida Kahlo, except in film, we aim for socially or empirically grounded identifiers to describe groups. The Editors wish to avoid the general term "Latina" when a specific marker is more appropriate. Interchanging "Latina" and "Chicana" is not ruled out but it requires explanation.

This guideline to avoid interchanging the terms is rooted in methodological, epistemological, political, and spiritual positions. We [the Editors] support any combination of these strategies that bring us to clarity. We also acknowledge that in a journal that celebrates, creates, analyzes, and promotes

experientially derived knowledge, the guideline is recalibrated by and for our artists and authors who use the personal voice. Western notions of authenticity do not guide our editorial pen when authors self-identify, name themselves. Identification and disidentification have guided MALCS and its publications since the beginning.

The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social

Almost twenty years ago, in 1985, Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social published its first journal, *Trabajos Monográficos: Studies in Chicana/Latina Research*. In its "Forward," editors Antonia I. Castañeda, Alma García, Clara Lomas, Adaljiza Sosa-Riddell, and Leonora Timm stated the publication's goal as to "furnish an outlet for the work in progress by women whose research will contribute to the documentation, analysis, and interpretation of the Chicana/Latina experience" (iii). *Chicana/Latina Studies* is still faithful to that spirit. The works we publish in this re-inaugural issue are no longer in progress. They are, however, the fruit of a feminist publishing practice that has its roots in the many years of MALCS meetings, e-mail discussions, and sharing of our experiences as Chicanas and Latinas in academia. A force of more than fifty mujeres strongly positioned en el mundo de las Letras and with a clear agenda por el cambio social is behind our Journal today. Its seventeen brilliant contributors, the eleven members of the MALCS National Advisory Board, our twenty Associate Editors, and the ten members of the Loyola Marymount University (LMU) colectiva have formally joined us, las editoras, in the process of generating funds, extraordinary work, energy, wisdom, and goodwill to further our goals for the next five years.

MALCS's first journal *Trabajos Monográficos* included writings by Elisa Linda Facio, Mary Helen Ponce, and Angelina F. Veyna. A copy of the slim beige publication mysteriously resurfaced from the library of a dear LMU

colectiva member when time to write this preface came. It was inspiring to reread the initial composition of MALCS's membership. It was invigorating to be reminded of the clarity of purpose that we want to preserve in *Chicana/Latina Studies*. In the first page of the preface, the editors quoted from MALCS's declaration,

> We are the daughters of Chicano working class families involved in higher education. We were raised in labor camp(u)s and urban barrios where sharing our resources was the basis for survival....Our history is the story of working people—their struggles, commitments, strengths, and the problems they faced....Our purpose is to fight the race, class and gender oppression we have experienced in the universities. Further we reject the separation of academic scholarship and community involvement.

The historic document is proudly displayed in my office, while, I [Partnoy] take over with tremendous emotion my job as coeditor, a responsibility that demands that I listen to the voices that have spoken before mine. *Voces*, the second scholarly review produced by our organization, billed itself as "*A Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies.*" At the threshold of a new century, to be "a" journal highlighted the expansion of the field, and the existence and need for multiple academic publications. In 1993, the editorial board of MALCS had published the ground-breaking anthology *Chicana Critical Issues*, and in the same year Adela de la Torre and Beatriz M. Pesquera had issued *Building with Our Hands: New Directions in Chicana Studies*, now a classic in the field, dedicated to "las compañeras de MALCS."

Voces, now called *Chicana/Latina Studies*, defines itself as a peer-reviewed journal. The peers we refer to are Chicanas and Latinas with proven expertise in the authors' respective fields. We foster mentorship and non-hierarchical editor/

author relationships in our Journal, qualities that are often absent from the peer review processes of most academic publications. We seek to transform the nature of the peer review in academia, to erase the elitist practices that exclude from publication the products of our ground-breaking approaches to knowledge and scholarship. We are aware that even when our Journal is housed in a university, and its editorial process is as rigorous as that of other academic publications, it runs the risk of being labeled as a nonreputable place to publish because it is produced by Chicana/Latina feminist scholars and cultural workers.

Our sister organizations, such as Feministas Unidas and the Asociación Internacional de Literatura Femenina Hispánica, also struggle against that type of discrimination. In fall 2001, former Feministas Unidas President Elizabeth Horan wrote in their newsletter, "We seemingly censor ourselves in the name of some greater good. We censor ourselves at considerable cost: lacking a common identification, we have no unifying principle. If we are not feministas, we're not unidas. Besides, if we can't call ourselves feministas, what else can't we call ourselves?" (4). In spring 2001, with equal courage and vision, the last issue of *Voces: A Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*, proclaims that MALCS is "a feminist Chicana/Latina academic organization dedicated to building bridges between community settings and academia" (iii).

We continue that work under a new name. *Chicana/Latina Studies: the Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* highlights our lasting commitment—twenty years after its first publication, by spelling out our will to both *transform higher education* and *provide space for those historically marginalized.*

The choice of the feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez as the unifying theme for this re-inaugural issue is consistent with our goals and identity as members of MALCS. Although we expect to produce only occasional issues around a central theme,

the Editors and other members of the Journal's editorial board felt the urge to concentrate efforts to stop the killings of our hermanas. We then gathered the voices of Evangelina Arce, madre de Silvia, desaparecida en Ciudad Juárez, Arminé Arjona (activista y poeta juarense), Elena Poniatowska, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Claudia Rodríguez, Juana Suárez y Alicia Schmidt Camacho, cuyas perspectivas creativas y esclarecedoras serán preciadas herramientas en los salones de clase y en nuestro intercambio académico. Nina Maria Lozano-Reich recogió para nosotras obras que ilustran claramente la acción de las artistas visuales contra el feminicidio. Un artículo de Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz sobre la brutalidad policial contra las mujeres mejicanas indocumentadas, enfoca desde otro ángulo el tema de la impunidad.

La lectura se complementa con los poemas de Luzma Umpierre sobre nuestras experiencias como Latinas en los Estados Unidos. Tanto esos versos como el comentario profundo de Antonia I. Castañeda sobre "las nuevas garras del imperialismo" y el dolido pero afectuoso llamado de atención a la compañera Sandra Cisneros en el poema de Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, son muestras claras de la voluntad crítica y autocrítica que nos guía.

Casi al finalizar la compilación de estos trabajos, un golpe amargo nos paralizó: la compañera Gloria E. Anzaldúa, visionaria y sabia, fuente imprescindible de fuerza intelectual y emocional para todas nosotras, cruzó la frontera que nos separa de la muerte. Le dedicamos esta publicación e incluímos en ella el tributo de Maylei Blackwell, quien comparte algunas páginas de su Cuaderno Militante.

Recuerdo la solidaridad de Gloria cuando, a mediados de los años ochenta, acarreaba con cajas de mi libro sobre mi experiencia como desaparecida en un campo de concentración en Argentina, para venderlo junto con *Esta puente, mi espalda* en una conferencia en Nueva York. Volví a verla hace un par de años.

Quedé deslumbrada por la claridad de su pensamiento y la calidez que emitían sus manos cuando dibujaba en los libros que le llevábamos para que dedicara a nuestros niños. Nora Erro-Peralta, la *prietita* uruguaya y ex presidenta de la Asociación Internacional de Literatura Femenina Hispánica, la había invitado como profesora residente un semestre a su universidad en Florida.

Like Nora Erro-Peralta, Deena J. González had given the tremendous gift of Anzaldúa's presence to her own students. In a moving tribute to Gloria, Deena remembers her friend's visit to the Claremont campus back in 1989, as the first Chicano/a Studies Visiting Artist-in-Residence. "She spoke twice on campus to jam-packed audiences. Students loved hearing about how, tongue in cheek, she learned in Vermont that homophobia meant a fear of leaving or going home," writes González in *La Voz*, the newsletter of the Esperanza, Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio (July 2004). She adds, "Over the years, I reminded Gloria how it might be true that Chicano Studies often did not support her, but…Chicana academics most certainly did; we ordered her book, we taught it, and we helped create a discourse community among ourselves in ways that were enormously satisfying and that went beyond what most white allies could envision" (21).

Unfortunately, many of our white allies found out about Anzaldúa's passing into spirit weeks, or even months after the bitter event. We heard about it through the grapevines. When our dear compa Norma Cantú's message arrived, and I told my daughter and my friends, their sense of disbelief was dismaying. That feeling stayed with us for a couple of days. Hadn't we learned from Gloria that it was only logical that the newspapers and the mainstream media ignored our loss? We soon realized that if they were not reporting it, then it had to be true. We treasured the words of Denise Chávez and Sandra Cisneros, on an occasional radio program (Latino USA); we eagerly listened

to KPFK, and it delivered; we gathered around altars, and internet sites; we rejoiced once more in her wisdom, "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (Anzaldúa 1987, 54).

Our Journal is a gathering of wild tongues, it is a space to build coalitions and to reflect, share, and cherish our differences. Our mandate—following Anzaldúa's advice, is to "shock [ourselves] into new ways of perceiving the world, shock [our] readers into the same" (2003, 88). Es por eso que en nuestra publicación abrazamos las diferencias, que la cesura en Chicana/Latina es tensión y fuente de energía. Si compartimos historias personales no lo hacemos con el arrepentimiento de la confesión sino con la entrega de la confidencia que fortalece el compañerismo y rompe con las jerarquías. Evitamos así que nuestros cerebros y sus productos se exhiban, como en gancheras de académicas carnicerías, colgados lejos de nuestros cuerpos y de nuestras acciones. Estamos alertas ante el riesgo de apropiarnos de la voz del otro: no somos la subalterna ni hablamos por ella, hablamos, si es posible, con ella.

La rica textura de nuestra revista nos recuerda la complejidad de nuestro encuentro. Sabemos que nos tenemos que tratar con cuidado, con careful care, respetando nuestras energías porque somos preciosas. Somos pocas y tenemos mucho camino que abrir todavía, mucha maleza que cortar para que nuestras compañeras jóvenes y nuestras hijas puedan construir sobre el terreno limpio de tanto estorbo reaccionario, de tanto yuyo usurpador de nutrientes, de tanto quite de solidaridad.

Sol/i/dar/i/dad is, according to poet Cecilia Vicuña, a "palabrarma," a word-weapon that means to give and give sun (Lippard 18). We wish to give some warmth to the women who fight against impunity in Ciudad Juárez, to let them know that their voices will be heard. We want them to know that, with

Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled" (89). With our backs to the wind, because we are "spit[ting] into the eye of the world," (88) we now ask Gloria to join us in blessing this journal that we have woven with love and patience, so it gives beauty and keeps us warm and never afraid of going home.

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