

# DEPANTLA

*Essays from the Land*

*in the Middle*

For Jorge,  
my dear and trusted  
friend.



¡Abrazos!

Pat Mora  
2014  
El Paso!

PAT MORA

*University of New Mexico Press*

*Albuquerque*

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First paperbound printing, 2008

Paperbound ISBN: 978-0-8263-4527-1

Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 1 2 3 4 5 6

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Mora, Pat.

Nepantla: essays from the land in the middle / Pat Mora.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8263-1454-6

1. Mora, Pat—Biography. 2. Poets, American—20th century—

Biography. 3. Mexican Americans—Civilization. I. Title.

PS3563.073Z472 1993

811.54—dc20

[B] 92-39874

CIP

The author thanks Arte Público Press for permission to quote from her following poems:

“Foreign Spooks,” “Petals,” “Desert Women,” “Bailando,” “Fences,” “Don Jaime,”

“Abuelita Magic,” “Diagnosis,” “Immigrants,” “Elena,” “My Word-house,”

“*Mañanitas*: Birthday Song,” “Too Many Eyes,” “Dominican Gold,”

“Bribe,” “*Bruja*: Witch,” “Curandera,” “1910,” and “Tree-wisdom.”

She also wishes to acknowledge the publication of previous versions of the following essays: “Living on the Border,” *The Christian Science Monitor*; “To Gabriela, a Young Writer,” *English Journal* and *The Horn Book Magazine*; “Endangered Species,” *Vista* and *Impresión*; “Island Images,” *Focus*; “Unseen Teachers,” *CALYX*; and “Snapshots,” “Lobo,” and “Desert Women,” *Impresión*.

The Introduction contains poetry passages from *Adobe Odes* by Pat Mora.

Book design by Kristina E. Kachele

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## DESERT WOMEN

The desert.

How normal the starkness is when we live in it and know no other landscape. Geographical terrains are seldom awesome to their inhabitants. Many Mexican American women from the Southwest are desert women. We “know about survival / . . . Like cactus / we’ve learned to hoard.”<sup>1</sup> We hoard what our mothers, our *tías*, our *abuelitas* hoarded: our values, our culture. Much as I want us, my daughters, my niece, Chicanas of all ages, to carry the positive aspects of our culture with them for sustenance, I also want us to question and ponder what values and customs we wish to incorporate into our lives, to continue our individual and our collective evolution. Such emergence, the wriggling from our past selves and experience as both women and women of Color, brings with it mixed blessings. We can learn from the desert, from the butterflies and snakes around us, how vulnerable a creature is in transition. We can offer one another strength and solace, protection from harsh elements, from the painful cold of sexism, racism, ageism, elitism; faith, the space for exploration.

Our cities are changing, though far too gradually. We have lived to see bicultural and bilingual librarians, principals, super-

intendents. We have lived to see Latinas as alderwomen, lawyers, doctors, judges, directors. Much as we want young people to view this as appropriate and normal, we want them to be keenly aware that Mexicans were part of this open, uncluttered Southwest landscape long before the arrival of Anglos. But women and men of Mexican descent have, like American Indians, been both excluded from shaping many aspects of their societies and unrecognized for the contributions they did make. Late in the last century, Anglos became the dominant culture. English, which had been foreign to our region, the language of the second colonizer, became the correct and valued language. Work viewed as menial too often became the province of the dark-skinned, of Mexicans. Ours.

Mexican women contributed to the intellectual history of this land of promise, the West, before the region was part of the United States. Thanks to the work of Chicana and Chicano literary historians such as Tey Diana Rebolledo, Rosaura Sánchez, and Clara Lomas, we are beginning to learn the names of some of the early women writers. How much all of us will profit from this research and from endeavors such as the ten-year Arte Público Press project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, titled "Restoring the Hispanic Literary Heritage of the United States," which will publish work written from the colonial period to 1960.

"The struggles, lives and dreams of Hispanic women in the West from 1580 to 1940 is just beginning to be pieced together," Rebolledo tells us.<sup>2</sup> Women such as Nina Otero Warren, Cleofas Jaramillo, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, Jovita González, and Josephina Niggli are finally receiving a degree of attention—women who sat in their long dresses, hearing the mix of indigenous languages, Spanish, and English that is part of our heritage, looking out at our mountains and moon, writing diaries, drama, fiction, poetry. For most of us, those women remain in

the shadows. I think of them, pen poised above a sheet of blank paper, frowning, struggling as I do to find the right words.

But they were the exception. Most of our foremothers lived unsung lives, seldom if ever realizing their intellectual potential, renouncing personal ambition to give steadily and unstintingly to their families, to their children, to us. How they have worked—in their own homes and in the homes of others, in department stores, in churches, in fields, in canneries, in factories, in restaurants, in hospitals. Some supported their families financially, endured and endure; some supported husbands, endured and endure. We have drawn strength since we were in grade school from the pride of our female relatives. We were encouraged by the nods of approval from *Abuelita* when we recited the Pledge of Allegiance, even when she didn't understand a word we said, and perhaps even stubbornly refused to learn English, carving linguistic space for herself, denying those foreign sounds a place inside of her.

The prices have been high, then, for succeeding generations of Latinas to complete college and university educations. Often, "We are the first / of our people to walk this path."<sup>3</sup> The climate in our schools remains cold. Studies continue to reveal that educational institutions are not appropriately encouraging women of all ages and colors to explore their potential. Do we create a supportive climate for ourselves and for others? We know our students, female and male, need to study the history and literature of women. In a particular way, women of Color deserve role models to give them faith that they too can advance and contribute to society. As the educator James Banks reminds us, simply observing, for example, Hispanic Heritage Month and the quincentenary will not suffice. The educational system must be transformed. Our students should study Latina contributions, perspectives, and values as an integral part of

their curriculum, a curriculum in which they see themselves. Textbooks that don't include diverse perspectives should be rejected by responsible educational institutions—for their bias *mis*-educates.

We, and all women, need and deserve our past. We can value the resourcefulness of our mothers and the homes they created, the space they shaped for us. There is much to be learned from the strengths of *tías* and *abuelitas*, and from our experiences in cooking, gardening, mothering. The seventeenth-century Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz quipped, “*Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho mas hubiera escrito.*” “Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written more.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, Sor Juana lived a privileged life and knew that housework can be true drudgery when a woman has no options. But rather than focusing on the drudgery of work, her words present such work as a source of creativity.

Our womanness, heritage, culture, language all deserve preservation. To transform our traditions wisely, we need to know them, learn from them, be inspired and saddened by them, choose for ourselves what to retain. But we can prize the past together, valuing the positive female and Mexican traditions. We can prize elements of the past as we persist in demanding, and creating, change. I remember looking up at a huge abandoned church outside of Ciudad Oaxaca and seeing a cactus somehow thriving and growing high up near the bell tower. I pointed to it in delight, and the Mexican with me said, “*Aun en los lugares mas dificiles el nopal da frutas.*” “Even in inhospitable places, cactus bears fruit.”

Latinas are labeled a *double minority*. The words are depressing. They don't quite sound like “twice-blessed.” Little wonder that most Latinas, whether in the Southwest or elsewhere in this country, don't dwell on this uncomfortable term. Anyway,

who has time? We often are too busy playing the game of Great Expectations.

Most humans play some form of this game; most of us strive to fulfill the dreams that our society, our family, and our self have for us. Latinas, though, confront some unique challenges, and we often receive little support in fulfilling our potential.

In the eighties this country began to hear a Latin beat. Generations of determined women and men had questioned discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, immigration laws, inadequate health-care systems, biased arts council panels, and had endured meeting after meeting requesting and ultimately demanding equal opportunities for our people. Singers, writers, and artists had worked to capture the vigor of *lo mejicano*. Their works are more and more visible. And demographics conspire with us. These population shifts, combined with historic equity struggles, mean we live in a society that finds it grudgingly necessary to notice our community. We can't ignore even this lukewarm willingness to respond to the needs of Latinos, whether by politicians, corporations, or federal or state agencies, because we know the grim statistics on wages and education for U.S. Latinos.

Ah, but our millions have billions to spend. Hundreds of millions are targeted by advertisers, who now like us and suddenly care deeply about our needs. Unlike those enmeshed in the political machinations of English Only, advertisers are happy to be bilingual. Well, their messages are. They speak to us *en español*. "Ven es la hora de Miller"; Coors tells us, "Celebre! Cinco de mayo"; Canadian Club says, "¡Qué pareja! Canadian Club y tu!" Xerox tells us that its Hispana employees are "especial."

Advertisers track our values and thus our buying habits. Their analyses confirm the conclusions of psychologists and sociologists: we are loyal: to our families, the Spanish language, this country. Advertisers like loyalty, which they hope translates



to brand-name loyalty. For those to whom English is a new language, brand names probably do bring a sense of security and predictability in the cacophony of strange noises. I remember that when my grandmother, who never spoke or wanted to speak English though all three of her children were born here, had a headache, only Bayer would do. She trusted the symbol on that small, pain-easing white circle.

Politicians, of course, are busy courting our loyalty too, because we are a young segment of an aging population. No more will candidates bite into a *tamal* with corn husk in place. Media visibility, the occasional Latina actor, the occasional Latino family in a commercial, can in an odd way foster a sense of group identity, even though cultural symbols are usually being appropriated, used. Our growing population makes it less threatening to delve into our cultural past, for what we discover suddenly interests people—perhaps because it is trendy, but the information nourishes us.

Such targeted marketing doesn't change the reality that this country often views us as either fiery, and thus less than rational, less than intellectual; or as docile, and thus less than effective, less than assertive. A woman named María might be considered as a candidate for a position as a domestic worker or secretary, but it is unlikely that she will seriously be considered as a candidate for senator. Yet. How easy is it, then, for a Latina to deal with a society that finds her dark eyes and hair attractive, but that is a bit surprised to see her aggressively pursuing a goal, striving to become an architect or veterinarian or literary critic? T'ain't easy.

And then there are our families. Intense emotional ties. Our parents, siblings, and relatives are a source of indescribable strength. Perhaps because marriage traditionally has been so important in our culture, men and our families often equate an attractive physical appearance with true womanhood. Many

a *tía* or *abuelita* at home wants her niece to pursue a career, preferably in teaching or nursing, but *Tía* is secretly hoping—and probably praying—that we'll receive both a degree and a marriage proposal. She loves us and longs for some fine, respectful, hard-working man who will protect this vulnerable single woman from financial worries and the world's indifference.

Our parents also may do some frowning. How happy will they be at the news that we're considering joining the space program or applying for graduate school in another state? Frowns may really multiply once we're married with a family and announce that we need to begin traveling. Their frowns will say, "Neglect your children and husband? What kind of a woman are you?" Often their concern is genuine, and it is not easy to help them see that their desire to protect can be an unacknowledged desire to control.

Hard choices. We know women are socialized to please. How does a bright, talented Latina weather her family's displeasure when she works long hours rather than visiting regularly with sisters and cousins? *Tía's* frowns have a way of giving us tired blood.

And what about the woman who gazes back in the mirror? What Great Expectations does she have for us? Chances are she wants us to look energetic, to excel in our chosen work, to struggle against injustice, to be a loving and respectful daughter, niece. Chances are she will never be quite satisfied with our efforts. She will be pressuring us, often relentlessly, to try harder, to produce better work. She can be our harshest critic. Convincing her to wink back at us occasionally may be a lifelong challenge.

The Latina who completes her college education—a small percentage of us—may indeed now have more opportunities, whether for employment or for service on panels, committees, and boards, which is appropriate. As double minorities com-

mitted to societal change, though, we find ourselves working doubly hard, struggling to prove to others that women like us are not a risk. We often feel tired, alone.

Alone, yet enmeshed in family responsibilities, concerned about our parents and siblings, about our children. And we worry about our national family or community as we hear the statistics about our growing Latina population. If Latinas have families—and fewer of us are marrying—they tend to be larger than the average, and more and more we head these families alone, often in poverty. Although we have high participation in the work force, we tend to be clerical or service workers. Our median income remains below that of Anglos. How well prepared are we for these challenges? How are we assisting other women to plan for the future, to have realistic expectations? Too many of us don't finish high school, too many of us who complete community college programs don't transfer to four-year institutions, too many of us are denied the opportunity to attend colleges away from home, too many of us are not encouraged fully to develop our talents.

As we mother, teach, write, mentor the next generation of women, we need to examine the lives of women in this country, our lives, not as we might want them to be, but as they are. It's difficult to change what we don't understand. What do we know about ourselves and about the women who will appear in our offices and classrooms? What do we know about our inside lives, the inside lives of the female middle class? Most women in the United States are not reading professional journals in their apartments or houses today. We ingest pollutants—toxic ideas and attitudes—while we watch movies and television or read steamy novels or relax with women's magazines. Women in this country continue to devour novels about women who find comfort in the image of being swept off tiny feet by determined, hard-muscled men.

We turn slick, musk-scented magazine pages that promise The Secrets of Skin Polish, 9 Ways to Prevent Wrinkles, Beauty from Head to Toe. For the price of the magazine, we are lured to believe that we can transform our flabby egos and disappointing bodies into the confident creatures who gaze boldly, sirens who beckon us to become perfect, smiling decorations. Listen to the bait. We are promised that we can be glamorous, attractive, radiant, exhilarating, classic, breathtaking, dazzling, legendary, mysterious. Similar magazines from Mexico promise that we can be *sensual, increíble, sexy, elegante, bella, enigmática*. We're taught the world over that it's our job to be pretty. Too often do we brood when we're five or eighty-five about our exteriors, peer in annoyance at our hips (too wide), noses (too long), lips (too thin). Some of us stop eating or eat until we're sick. We bare our unsatisfactory bodies so they can be reshaped, be made more lovable by surgeons who can mold us into beauty and happiness. How much time we spend looking the part, a part we didn't write.

In her documentary "A Famine Within," Katherine Gilday skillfully reveals our obsession with The Body, the difficulty we have accepting and loving ourselves, our imperfect selves. She shows how we are bombarded with images of women who seldom look like the women in our lives or in our mirror. Our shapes and the shapes of our mothers are steadily described as inferior, proof of our lack of self-control. We define others by their contours, equate thinness with morality. The young women Gilday interviews visibly struggle for words ugly enough to describe their reaction to being overweight. To be fat is to be "grotesque." Fashion models are often role models, says Gilday. Decorative, silent women.

Driving down the freeway, we see, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby." Baby? The woman smiling at us casually holding a cigarette is young, sleek, glamorous. Success is being defined for

us as eternal youth, a carefree life, trendy clothes, and getting to do what men do—in this case, savor a health hazard. We want to define ourselves in broader and richer terms than that, but how do we help young women, all young women, to perceive such manipulation and to wrench their lives free from images that bind?

A *Time* cover story titled “Fighting the Backlash Against Feminism” (which should have been titled “Fighting the Backlash Against White Feminism”), includes a *Time*/CNN poll indicating that although the majority of respondents believe an active women’s movement is still needed, the majority do not consider themselves feminists.<sup>5</sup> Our labels continue to separate us. And often the discussions are couched in militaristic terms: fighting, calls to arms, secret weapons, shock troops, guerrilla warfare, battle scarred. We need metaphors that inspire us to solve problems as communities, not armies. We need *una comunidad de conciencia*, “a community of conscience.” We must liberate ourselves, but destruction and annihilation of those we oppose need not be the goal. Far harder, of course, to reach out our hands, our open, trusting hands, to others struggling to live their commitment to justice. Complex historical patterns of sexism, racism, ageism require our inventiveness and humanity even more than our anger, which in no way implies that just anger is invalid or inappropriate. But we must be determined to move through anger to creativity and power. Social psychologist Aída Hurtado and her colleagues who study issues of identity propose the term *social engagement* for a participatory process in which individuals “choose their own paths for themselves and their communities while still feeling a sense of contribution to a larger multicultural society.”<sup>6</sup> We have a long way to go before we have educational institutions and a resulting society that nurture civic participation. At a deep level I wonder if the

United States really wants a nation of thinking citizens. Our support of education suggests not.

I took my children to see the remake of *Father of the Bride*, the only movie one Christmas that spared us bodies blown to blood before our eyes. I walked out annoyed at the end, surrounded by a satisfied, grinning crowd. It's a comforting, happy movie—if you're wealthy, white, or wanna-be. Oh, there is a Mexican in the film. The woman who smiles as she cleans the mansion. How many of us will sit in a dark theater munching popcorn, looking *up* at those beautiful homes with staircases to the sky, those laughing people in color-coordinated clothes, and be led, ever so gently to conclude that fathers who love their daughters write big checks? How many a young woman will return to her small home or apartment wishing, maybe even ashamed to be wishing, for such a cute life, a dad who plays basketball with her the night before she floats down the aisle in a dress light as clouds? How many of those wistful young women will be Native Americans, Asians, African Americans, Latinas?

We can appeal to young women's minds with our facts and statistics, but who is daily tugging at their hearts, at our hearts? Who keeps teaching heterosexual women to hum, "Some day my prince will come"? Most novels, magazines, movies, the "soaps" or *novelas*, the talk shows focus women's attention on the primacy of a snugly relationship with a man. Deep in their most private selves, do young women wait for their male solution, ashamed to admit this aloud, sparing themselves our cold frowns, the frowns of mothers, aunts, professors? They know what we want to hear, know all the right phrases and reasons—self-determination, self-interest, self-direction—but is their unspeakable truth that without *the* man at their side they just don't like themselves? We hand them Julia Álvarez's poem "Against

Cinderella.” They read, “I can’t believe it. / Whoever made it up is pulling my foot / so it’ll fit that shoe.” We say, Go on. They read the last words: “Some of us have learned to go barefoot / knowing the mate to one foot is the other.”<sup>7</sup> Do they hear?

Even when they recognize the truth, can they make it part of themselves? We do not plan and prepare to be self-sustaining and autonomous; women are often underprepared to cope with daily stress by a society that steadily demands youth and beauty. If we want to communicate with women of all shapes and varieties, how do we create spaces not only for our private selves but also for our collective selves? Spaces where we can together admit our dreams and fears, using our emotions as resources for discovery?

The truth is that womanhood is defined for us so effectively by advertisers that we’re being naïve if we think we can escape. How do those of us who care about women—about our daughters, nieces, students, friends—assist them more accurately to assess the realities they will confront? More than half of the women in this country work outside the home. More than half of those women are single, widowed, separated, or divorced. Dollar per dollar, we still earn less than men. Most of the child-rearing responsibilities remain ours. We can tell young women to plan, prepare, preserve, persist; but I doubt that they hear us, because in their minds they are walking into the sun, into a boy’s (or man’s) smile. Even naming ourselves is difficult. Feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun reminds us that “women have long been nameless. They have not been persons. Handed by a father to another man, the husband, they have been objects of circulation, exchanging one name for another.”<sup>8</sup>

Some men are attempting to ease the pressures felt by their working mothers, sisters, wives. The change is slow and difficult. Our children see our exhaustion. We have two-career

families but not enough two-parent families even in two-parent homes. My daughters may have even a more difficult time than I did because their expectations of what they can and should achieve both personally and professionally are higher.

I think of them, both so bright and full of life, studying hard to complete their university educations, and I worry. Given the constant bombardment by the media, the images of slender female bodies, tight clothes, alluring makeup, men's muscular bodies, soft romance, hard sex; the layering of images, smiling women with men, lonely women without, children, happy children with their mothers, at home, the houses, cars, never new enough. How do I prepare them for life's deceptions and inequities, for this society's patterns of shaping gender to guarantee consumption? How can my small voice be heard above the throbbing din? How do I nudge them to dream, as does the protagonist in Sandra Cisneros's short story "Bien Pretty," of "real women. The ones I've known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines . . . Passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce."<sup>9</sup>

We can encourage women not to be deceived by the glamour-girl illusion, remind them to consider not what they'll wear when they drive off into the sunset but how they'll develop the internal strength needed to nurture their talents. We can consciously and conscientiously indicate to women of all ages, whether in our classes or in our conversations, that we are interested in their search for self-worth. We can struggle to resist basing our expectations of women, including ourselves, on ethnicity, age, class, sexual preference, physical disabilities. We can resist demeaning women's traditional work and women who choose traditional roles. *Siendo muy mujer*, being a real woman in the traditional sense, need no longer mean only fingers adept at cooking and crocheting. It can mean contributing to society



in a unique way. Such redefinition and freedom requires internal and external struggle, but being stifled, repressing one's voice and talents is unhealthy, and ultimately more painful.

Persistence is essential. I often joke that if my résumé listed my rejections instead of my publications, it would be much, much longer. I read a wonderful poem and essay by Donald Hall the other day. It ended by saying that the poem took two or three years to write and more than a hundred drafts. Students usually consider one draft sufficient.

Latinas face significant challenges, given the stereotypes embedded in the national psyche and the sexism of our culture, a culture that often rewards us for being pretty, long-suffering, and selfless. We need to listen to one another and to draw strength from one another. I remember hearing professor Margarita Melville talk to a group of university students, watching her teach them about the importance of group identity for self-assurance, of seeking mentors, of cultivating a sense of belonging. That last bit of wisdom, of saying to myself, "I have the right to be here," has helped me innumerable times.

Many of us have endured personal stings, the pain of being the lone voice, the token, the thorn in the side of our offices and institutions, seeking justice for our culture in these United States. Often we receive "bitter frowns / in committees and board rooms / push and pound, push and pound / "Why am I the only Mexican American here?"<sup>10</sup> At times we grow angry at a city, a state, a country that we love but that often ignores us. On difficult days we are "Legal Aliens" in our own land,

viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,  
perhaps inferior, definitely different,  
viewed by Mexicans as alien  
(their eyes say, "You may speak  
Spanish but you're not like me").<sup>11</sup>

Just as each of us is the product of two very different parents, those of us who are Mexican Americans are the products of two very different cultures. Mexico is the warmer parent, but we live, and many of us were born, in the United States and rightfully should be heard. We love this cold house. It is home. But we were taught to value people, the importance of the heart.

Writers such as Margarita Cota-Cárdenas urge us to look for our true names inside of ourselves: "*Busca tu nombre / dentro de ti misma.*"<sup>12</sup> Even extricating ourselves long enough from the mesh of family and work to be able to examine the pressures of being a Mexican American woman requires significant effort and determination.

How do we create space for ourselves to be ourselves, our multiple Latina, Hispana, Mexicana, Chicana selves? Space in ourselves to hear ourselves, space free of the pollution of bigotry and bias, space free of contemporary colonizers. Space for play and dance. Some day I want to write about preserving the imp in ourselves, the light side, like the little girl I saw one night at an ice-cream shop who was dancing by herself, only vaguely aware that a group was watching her, dancing for herself. The desert teaches us the value of space. Like the wind, our spirits will play if set free in a broad expanse. The inventiveness and creativity that shrivel in the tiny box labeled Only a Chicana burst like the fireworks that signal independence in July.

### *Desert Women*

Desert women know  
about survival.  
Fierce heat and cold  
have burned and thickened  
our skin. Like cactus  
we've learned to hoard,

to sprout deep roots,  
to seem asleep, yet wake  
at the scent of softness  
in the air, to hide  
pain and loss by silence,  
no branches wail  
or whisper our sad songs  
safe behind our thorns.

Don't be deceived.  
When we bloom, we stun.<sup>13</sup>

Each generation seeks to evolve. In new circumstances Latinas and other women today are wrestling with the old human riddle, How do I live in the present to change the future? With sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, we know that "subordinate groups have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to rearticulate them through our own specialists."<sup>14</sup> We want to change because we know that our schools don't appropriately include the legacies of past generations of women. We are aware that women's voices, and certainly Latina voices, are not being sufficiently heard in the arts, sciences, education, health, social services, and government; that poverty is more and more a women's issue; that we want fairer options for our daughters.

It is leaders, Latinas willing to take risks, to speak out, to band together, who will also be an unstoppable force; insisting on equity for ourselves and our daughters, remembering that we are the lucky ones who have received the gift of an education. *Se hace camino al andar.* (In walking, we make a road.) We will be making many roads at times, physically alone but strengthened by the knowledge that we are together, refusing to subject one another, in Anzaldúa's words, to "ethnic legitimacy tests."<sup>15</sup>

We must remember women struggling for literacy, safe homes, adequate health care, accessible services, a fair wage, diplomas and degrees, personal choice. They are with us, preventing us from becoming too comfortable in our protected offices and lives. What literary critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull writes about the title story from Sandra Cisneros's widely acclaimed collection *Woman of Hollering Creek* is the hope of Chicana writers: "Cisneros shows how feminist solidarity, the *feminismo popular* that many Chicanas and *mexicanas* in Greater Mexico engage, puts theory into practice and begins to cross the border geopolitically and across class lines."<sup>16</sup>

And there is happiness in this struggle, happiness that counters the wounds. Together we become less timid, more confident that we are not subversives or disloyal when we seek justice. There is an appropriateness to our insistence on equity from our stubborn cities, states, country.

Women working to produce necessary change and thus leading fragmented lives see ourselves discussed and analyzed. Pop psychologists offer us Oil of Olé for our psyches, quick cures for what some term our persistent insecurity. I choose not to reduce our motivations entirely to a drive to prove our personal worth. Many women, though tired, rushed, guilty, underpaid, and undervalued, are trying to create space for the next generation of women. When we're thinking clearly, we are transforming our homes and workplaces, rather than, as traditionally done, transforming ourselves to suit our circumstances.

As we prize the past together, valuing the positive traditions, we can also participate together in changing the present, in creating new traditions. Much as I want a community or communities of women working together, I want individual women to allow for private time, to be fully present in the present, to preserve our ability to care, to support one another, to take risks, to be candid yet sensitive with one another. She who laughs,

lasts. We need time for renewal, lest work lull us into drones. Let's nudge one another to nurture our best selves by allowing space for play in our lives, be that time to read, think, dream, hike, garden, travel, dance, to be creative with our selves.

Women. We gather—in our homes, neighborhoods, committees, conferences, communities. More and more we gather internationally at conferences such as “New Visions of Leadership: 1992 Global Forum of Women,” held in Dublin in 1992. We gather to explore our shared values: concern for the young and for the environment, for justice, which precedes peace. Let's accept the power of being the majority in this world; let's create an international community of women of conscience, multilingual, multivocal, multicolored, united by beliefs such as that expressed in the Balinese prayer, “May all that breathes be well.” Truly, well. And until that day, we are united by our *inquietudes*, our unrest at injustice, our determination to have every creature safe and valued. Rather than defining power as domination or control, we can define womanpower—*el poder de la mujer*—as energy, as collaboration. Ours can be an alternative vision. The perspective that values not dominance but respect for all life, the well-being of individuals of all colors, sizes, and ages, that can love and lead, has critical lessons for this world.

Those of us who went to school in this country year after year memorized words written by Emma Lazarus, although as a child I never heard the name of the woman who wrote the words on the Statue of Liberty, nor do I remember ever hearing the beginning of her sonnet:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame

Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles.

Perhaps our most significant challenge is how we Latinas resist contemporary colonization. Indeed, we can resist believing the demeaning myths about us both as women and Mexicans. Theorist Chela Sandoval writes about the skill we daily use to resist patterns or traditions that limit us, a skill she describes as a "differential mode of oppositional consciousness."<sup>17</sup> We know how to alter our language or style, how to position ourselves, to oppose those around us, whether our mothers, colleagues, employers or institutions, when their behavior or comments demean us or our community. Knowing how to determine the most effective form of resistance, says Sandoval, requires "grace, flexibility, and strength."<sup>18</sup> Through history, experience, and necessity, we know how best to push against those persons or ideas that will smother us. United, we free ourselves of having to invest all of our individual strength in resistance. United, we can invite ourselves to create. United we withstand the steady disappointments and rejection, and we individually and collectively raise our voices, more and more tell and write and sing and paint our own stories, create our own grand buildings, bridges, theories and myths, refusing to be limited by the expectations of others. By incorporating the strength and stubbornness of *nuestras antepasadas*, "our foremothers," we create and claim *our* space, the space to be our surprising selves.

### Notes

1. Pat Mora, "Desert Women," in *Borders* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986), p. 80.

2. Tey Diana Rebolledo, "Introduction," in *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicano Literature*, edited by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana Rivero (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, forthcoming, 1993).

3. Pat Mora, "University Avenue," in *Borders*, p. 19.
4. Margaret Sayers Peden, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Salisbury, Conn.: Lime Rock Press, 1987), p. 62.
5. Nancy Gibbs, "The War Against Feminism," *Time*, 9 March 1992, p. 54.
6. Aída Hurtado, "Latinos and Anglos in the United States: Interdependent Collective Representations" (Paper presented at the Conference on Social Structure, Culture, and Cognition, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, June 1991), p. 10.
7. Julia Álvarez, "Against Cinderella," in *Florilegia* (Corvallis, Oreg.: Calyx Books, 1987), p. 174.
8. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), p. 121.
9. Sandra Cisneros, "Bien Pretty," in *Woman of Hollering Creek* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 161.
10. Pat Mora, "Withdrawal Symptoms," in *Borders*, p. 26.
11. Pat Mora, "Legal Alien," in *Chants* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984), p. 52.
12. Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, "Justo Será," in *Noches despertando en consciencias* (Tucson, Ariz.: Scorpion Press, 1975), n.p.
13. Mora, "Desert Women," in *Borders*, p. 80.
14. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 202.
15. Gloria Anzaldúa, "En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las nuestras," in *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990), p. 143.
16. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, "'Ya Soy Mujer': Crossing the Border/Changing the Subject in Chicana/Mexicana Discourse," in *Rearticulations: The Practice of Chicano Cultural Studies*, ed. Mario García (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).
17. Chela Sandoval, *U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World*, *Genders*, no. 10, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), p. 15.
18. Sandoval, *U.S. Third World Feminism*, p. 15.