

# I

## Reading Tejana, Reading Chicana

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*We are what we do, especially what we do to change what we are:  
our identity resides in action and in struggle.*

Eduardo Galeano, "In Defense of the Word"

*It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are  
constituted through experience.*

Joan W. Scott, "Experience"

In this book I articulate my multiple locations as a Tejana, as a cultural worker who labors "outside in the teaching machine," to use a phrase by Gayatri Spivak, who is an advocate of subaltern women. My readings of early Chicana poetry and contemporary Chicana narratives are informed by my travels from a Brown-town in South Texas to the corridors of academia. My path hews close to the migration pattern established by my paternal aunt and uncles who left el valle de Tejas for economic reasons and settled in California Greater Mexico. Although the goal of my journey, my work as teacher, literary critic, and feminist theorist, is radically different from that of my gente of the previous generation, the need to leave el valle for los trabajos remains the same.<sup>1</sup>

## Transfrontera Memorias

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In the Río Grande Valley of South Texas of the 1950s and 1960s, I was not a Chicana. I am the eldest daughter of working-class parents and the granddaughter, on my mother's side, of migrant workers who returned from their trips "up north" with little cash and many stories about Traverse City, Michigan, and their experiences picking cherries. Early on, my parents exhibited the ambivalence that in my memory still characterizes my life on the border. Traditional ethnic Catholics, yet eager to become fully modernized Americans, they sacrificed to send my older brother and me to a Catholic school, at least until we were properly catechized and made our First Holy Communion. Only then was it safe to send us to regular public school. All seven Saldívar siblings experienced variations of our parents' beliefs about the bridging of a Catholic and a secular education. They agreed in principle with the extended family's rules about a good Catholic education but believed themselves modern enough or, more saliently, *American* enough to come up with a new solution for their children's education. Our father's countless hours working at the shrimp plant and traveling along the coast of Mexico and Central America for the company ensured that my younger brothers and sister, José David, Héctor Antonio, Anna María, and Arnaldo René, could spend more years at Our Lady of Guadalupe School than Ramón had spent at Saint Joseph's Academy or I had spent at la Inmaculada, the Immaculate Conception school.

Intent on realizing their American dream, which our parents believed would materialize with Father's World War II Navy service, if not by birthright as native Tejanos, the Saldívar clan of my youth was in the process of becoming more American than Mexican. The pláticas of Tío Frank, Aunt Armandina, and my parents abound with bitter stories of how they were bombarded with propaganda from what I now understand were the hearings held by Joseph McCarthy as chairman of the Senate's permanent subcommittee on investigations in his relentless search for Communists. In the Rio Grande Valley, it was historically dangerous not to be American. Our Saldívar and García elders had lived the history of Texas Ranger terrorism against Mexicans. Apá Treviño's disgust with "la pola," the notorious poll tax that kept poor Mexicans from voting, only later made sense to me.

Early on, our parents taught us to consider the border city of Matamoros as a foreign land. While we understood and were fluent in Spanish, we spoke only English at home. Father knew his people had always lived on this side of the Rio Grande; he had no relatives “over there.” When his sister-in-law produced the Saldívar genealogy she had long researched, it traced the family to 1811 in the Goliad area of Texas. Our father delighted in this document—indisputable history—as he mercilessly goaded Mother about the unspoken origins of her beloved father, Eleuterio, and her Tía Cándida. My normally obstreperous mother advocated silence only on issues that she believed she could not change. The topic of her paternal Treviño roots in the Tamaulipas ranchitos was the one instance of an uncharacteristic refusal to engage in one of her marathon defenses of her position. Her reticence conveniently erased a past from which neither she nor her hijos could personally profit. Like the teachers I would soon meet in the public elementary school, Mother believed that we could change our identities as easily as the teacher would change our names—expunging the Mexican paternity would ensure her and her children’s future as Americans. Nothing would be lost.

My brothers and I speculated that our beloved but clearly unhappy Apá Eleuterio was in hiding because of some covert activities in Mexico. The way he hid the newspapers he acquired in Matamoros led me to assume that he had been involved in the kind of política that my parents avoided. Mother discouraged our curiosity with her anger and would acknowledge only her maternal García Tejano ancestors, whose ranchito in San Pedro made them landowners in her mind. We knew no kin from el otro lado; we were Americans. Nonetheless, in conversations among themselves, the familia, and their compadres, my parents never failed to distinguish themselves from the Anglos whom they unswervingly called los Americanos (always said only in Spanish).

I learned from my parents that Matamoros, and by extension the rest of Mexico, was not “home”; yet as a child I crossed over almost every weekend with my Treviño grandparents, Apá Eleuterio and Amá Alvina, and Tía Lydia, who was more like an older sister than an aunt. We shopped at the parian, sometimes went to the hairdressers, and, as mujeres, always waited at the plaza while Apá visited his barber and argued la política with the other men. Mom and Dad may have insisted on their Americanness, but with my grandparents I constantly crossed back and forth to el otro lado to retrieve the basic necessities of our lives, our cultural molcajetes and jarros de barro para los frijoles, as it

were. Where else could we get just the right piñata for my little sister's party? We needed the delicate papier mâché sitting hen to celebrate Anita's birthday properly. With Ramón Jr. and José David manipulating the piñata rope, Hector Anthony and Arnold René required just the right kind of Mexican candy to motivate them to join Anna's little friends in the frenzied quest to demolish the gallinita and liberate the dulces. Even the multicolored ones with the aniseed in the center were prized by the children. The baby, Alfredo Luis, as usual in my arms, would scream with glee. My job was to keep him from getting hit by the broomstick camouflaged with ribbons that the children used to pulverize the piñata.

There was only one salón de novias where we could find just the right arras or lasso or cojines for our Catholic wedding rituals. The First Holy Communion candles, prayer book, and rosary could be found only in Matamoros. And when Tía Lydia was called once again to serve as madrina for a quinceañera, where else could we go but to el otro lado to get the proper dye so her shoes and gloves would match the lavender or perico-green dress that all fourteen damas would wear? I couldn't wait to be asked to a quinceañera or a prom so I too could visit Doña Licha's Casa de Belleza and have my hair shellacked into those lovely gajito curls that would last at least a week if you slept on your stomach, your chin on your hands.

I remember the solemn pilgrimages to Doña Panchita, the holy woman/espíritista who read las cartas, the Tarot, and prayed directly to her god without the need for intermediaries. On those occasions, my normally too American and too unsuperstitious mother would join us. She eased her Catholic guilt by insisting that the gods and goddesses Doña Panchita invoked in her trances were really all the virgins and apostles and saints. If we did not recognize the names, perhaps it was only because she was chanting, as the priests did, in a language we did not know. "Son lenguas antiguas," Amá Alvina would cryptically explain. My admiration for my grandmother only increased when I guessed that she and Doña Panchita communicated in this secret language. These were the special times when Mother made the crossing—how else was she to verify or disregard what the camaroneras were telling her about her husband's long days at the shrimp-processing plant?

But on the numerous occasions when Mother did not cross with us in her late-model Ford, Apá would borrow Tío Juan's shiny 1959 beige

Impala with the fins out to there, a low rider before low riders were fashionable even with the local pachucos. Those earliest memories include feeling a curious mixture of dread and embarrassment as we approached the bridge from Matamoros to Brownsville. We always took “el puente viejo” because my grandparents believed that the Border Patrol agents stationed there were also the viejos who understood that as borderers, they had no need to ask these obviously American Mexicans for proof of citizenship. Yet every time an unfamiliar gringo approached the car, my grandmother would tighten her grip on my hand and anxiously answer her rehearsed “Yes” at the inevitable question, “Ya’ll American citizens?” For the following week the outing’s success would be remembered and discussed at Amá Alvina’s kitchen table in terms of the experience at the puente. If the questions led to a search of the car, Apá would spend the rest of my visit scowling and rattling his Mexican newspapers, invoking the only saint he ever mentioned, San Avabitché, San Avabitché, as he perched on a lawn chair on the front porch, which became off limits to the usually quiet granddaughter playing solitaire jacks with a golf ball on the cool, maroon cement. I attributed his rage to the rinche officer at the bridge. Living on the border, we have our reasons for never differentiating between Texas Rangers and Border Patrol agents.

The crossings over to Matamoros began when I was old enough to declare my citizenship in unaccented English for the border guards; a more formative crossing came at grade 3. Our working-class neighborhood (we said “barrio” only when we were speaking Spanish) was in the border zone between the middle- and upper-class Anglo elementary school, Ebony Heights, and the working-class Mexican American school, Resaca. Would we attend Ebony Heights, where “Ebony” referred to a native tree and certainly not to the hue of the preferred student body, or to Resaca Elementary, named after the stagnant bodies of water peculiar to our southernmost U.S. town? Our parents celebrated when they discovered a quirk in the city school zoning that would allow their children to attain the heights of a privileged public education, and finally assert their claim to the American part of their dual identity.

Much later I learned that only three streets in our neighborhood—Blanche, Velma, and Mildred—were rezoned because this was the Mullen subdivision and the Mullen grandchildren lived on Blanche. Most significant for us, the school bus driver’s grandchildren lived on Mil-

dred, and he had been the family retainer of a powerful school board member. Ours was the street in between, Velma. That was one propitious border zone we inhabited.

At Ebony Heights the sections of the third grade were A, B, C, and F. The F section would eventually be termed "Special Education." On registration day, the woman in charge declined to look at my Immaculate Conception School report cards; by virtue of my last name, I belonged in C section at best. My older brother, Ramón, renamed Ray by the Anglo teachers, had crossed over Boca Chica Boulevard to the Anglo part of town two years before. The family accepted that he had actually made my better-than-F-section placement possible with his perfect report cards. To this day he enjoys reminding us that he began his public school education in the F section.

Lining up at the front of the third-grade class with the handful of children my teacher delicately labeled "Spanish," I worked daily on "diction." The fact that we all came from similar backgrounds, with working-class parents, many of whom were fifth-generation borderers and were therefore fluent in English, was ignored by this educator, who felt she was helping us by eradicating all traces of a Spanish accent. By the time the school year ended, the tall, kindly Anglo teacher's Mexican students would proudly pronounce "ship" and not "chip," "Miss" and not "Meese," "chair" and not "share," "shop" and not "chop," "shoe" and not "chew," and so on. I worked my way up the ladder of this educational system until by fifth grade I was in the A section with my Anglo schoolmates. None of them lived in my neighborhood. None of them could come to visit after school. Too far from their neighborhoods, too close to the government projects up the block from our house on Velma Street. I failed to understand why they could never get permission to come, but I was secretly glad because my life at home did not allow playtime for girls. The two granddaughters of the original neighborhood developer were my classmates and we played together during recess, but it never occurred to us to interact back home. We never did. Passing their house on my daily trek to the ten-dajito, I never saw them outdoors. So that was how they stayed so pale.

While I was proudly fluent in Spanish because of my close ties to my non-English-speaking grandparents, by the end of my elementary school career I affected a British accent, mainly because of my Beatlemania rather than from any ideological leanings. Or so I thought. While I was never physically assaulted for speaking Spanish in the

schoolyard, I intuitively assumed the “don’t ask, don’t tell” version of early-1960s xenophobia in South Texas. If no one challenged my unaccented English, I did not have to acknowledge my fluency in that other language.

Things began to change for me the summer after the Beatles first appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. I was finally asked to be a dama for a quinceañera. As the youngest of the group, I was assigned a chamberlain from el otro lado who was a family friend of the birthday girl. With my tía and amá’s help, my mother began a campaign to ensure that I would not disgrace the family by running off with him. His citizenship canceled out the fact that he came from a relatively wealthy Matamoros family. Ironically, as a not-quite-twelve-year-old, I was more offended by the fact that they could assume my disloyalty to my favorite Beatle and even consider looking at this other boy than outraged that they had such little faith in my integrity. The bitterness came later, when I realized that for these women in my family, there was no liminal stage of innocent girlhood.

One night, after a late rehearsal for the customary quinceañera procession and first dance, the young man offered to drive me home. I reacted with extreme suspicion, imagining abduction into slavery or worse in Mexico. The mujeres in my family had succeeded. My unreasonable fear of this perfectly well-mannered and actually quite bored young man managed to make the baile an unpleasant duty. To justify her victory, Mother reminded me that quinceañeras were not celebrated by my Ebony Heights friends. With her proclamation, she simultaneously rendered them old-fashioned and un-American. Needless to say, when I turned fifteen and the family could not possibly afford such a lavish celebration, I feigned disinterest in that antiquated custom.

Boca Chica, the boulevard that we had negotiated in our commutes to the other side of town, became for me a rarely traveled route that merely shared the name of the beach that we frequented. Boca Chica was our beach, the one our family chose to haunt rather than the more popular Padre Island. The causeway toll of a dollar a carload was obviously a factor to my parents and extended family, but as children, we were less concerned about such issues than about the fact that la Boca Chica had better sand dunes. There we began the beach season with an Easter-egg hunt that no one else in my circle could duplicate. The rest of the spring and onto the summer, we could count on Aunt Armandina and Tío Frank to stop by and load some of us seven sib-

lings in their Auto Glass Shop pickup along with their own four children while the rest of us and Tía Lydia piled into family cars to head out to the playa. We would return well after dark, sunburned and jellyfish wounded, but with fantastic stories of near drowning and heroic rescues. John Lennon's "Twist and Shout" still evokes the smell of the beach, the taste of sand-dusted hot dogs, pollo asado, and, when Tío Frank was lucky, taquitos del catch of the day—usually trucha (trout).

As summer ended, I journeyed to the junior high school to which my neighborhood belonged and found most of the students Mexican American. In the few years since we had moved from the notorious southmost barrio to what some called la Villa Verde (Mom insisted it was the McDavid neighborhood), new families had followed. Their children were not part of the Ebony Heights migrants. To me it seemed as if this barrio de las tarántulas had changed overnight. Suddenly I had friends in the neighborhood with whom I could walk to school. We spoke Spanish as easily as English. The new girlfriends were amused by my Ebony Heights pretensions, but as proper borderers, they understood the unspoken rules, and I needed no excuses or defenses for my crossing to that other school.

Mr. Manzano, the principal of Cummings Junior High, was Mexican American, as was our drama and speech coach, Miss Parra, whom I credit for encouraging my participation in poetry readings at the Valley-wide Interscholastic League competitions. Not even my mother dared confront her about pressing household duties once Miss Parra decided I was on her team. There I was more than a Mexican, more than an "American," certainly more than eldest daughter, dishwasher extraordinaire, and surrogate mother. Surrounded by teachers like Miss Parra, I could finally indulge in my forbidden passion of reading. Back home, Mother never tired of reciting the story of her comadre who had suffered a nervous breakdown after reading the Bible in its entirety. As a woman of her own time, a product of unresolved conflicts and ambivalence about her preordained role as a mother and as a woman, she tried to prohibit me to read because to her the physical inactivity of reading signified laziness in a girl. Being a full-fledged American and leaving antiquated Mexican traditions behind did not extend to her daughter. For me, school became a safe haven from her anger, from her own disappointments in life. Cummings became a place where I could indulge my passion for Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, and the Brontës under the guidance of marvelous teachers. This unique school



offered a new breed of teachers, Mexican, like Mr. Esparza, and Anglo, like Miss Pugenat, who taught those of us raised on nopales and mesquites how to write and how to appreciate daffodils even if we might never see real ones. The formidable librarian always saved the new books for me to check out first. By the end of seventh grade she had introduced me to Thomas Hardy as well as Margaret Mitchell. Only in hindsight do I wonder exactly why she thought I should read about Tess and Scarlett over the long Christmas vacation. To be fair, she chose other books that offered much more than cautionary tales for this American Mexicana whose Beatlemania now translated into a definite interest in attentive brown-skinned boys. By the time I completed junior high I had read the Austen canon as well as the Brontë sisters' novels. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and even Faulkner were the more challenging new discoveries that Ramón shared from his high school English classes. School, with its usually abandoned library, was the sanctuary for a girl who loved to read but had more pressing duties at home.

As the Ebony Heights traumas stemming from my outsider status began to fade, negotiating another barrier proved more daunting. At this junior high school, even Mexican girls could be smart, could be the top students and favorites of the legendary librarian. For my mother, however, becoming a full-fledged American never altered her biases against her daughter's attempt to escape traditional gender constraints. The boys in the family could aspire to everything the school system provided, but Mother could not accept a daughter's learning to ride a bike or even to roller-skate. There were vicious arguments in which she proclaimed her fear that I would damage my "female organs." My sputtering response that she was being unfair suffered from the absence of a more forceful language with which to articulate the misogyny of her rules. The brothers could play, read, and study as much as they wanted—indeed, the status of the family somehow hinged on their success—but as a *mujercita*, I was needed to perform crucial household and child-care tasks. My attempts to read and study were signs of laziness and nothing more. My longing to ride a bike or play baseball with the boys could signify only dangerous propensities to wander, improper desires for a girl. At that time, Mother could not conceive of a different possibility for a daughter.

Contradictions abounded. I was allowed to go to school dances, but only if my older brother agreed to stay by my side. As a result, Ramón and I forged a deep friendship over books and dancing. As best friends

we conspired against her rules. If I taught him the latest dances—the jerk, the watusi, the broken hip, even the bolero for the slow dances—we could part at the door of the school gym or the civic center for the big shindigs featuring Kiko and the Dukes, Sonny and the Sunliners, or Little Joe and the Family, and meet up at the end of the dance. We still reminisce about dance lessons to the Beatles’ “And I Love Her,” as well as that first reading of *Catcher in the Rye*. Unfortunately, not even her eldest son’s influence swayed my mother’s conviction that I must turn down the editorship of the school newspaper, citing too many demands on my time, since I was also in the band. Since I joined the band for its social benefits, I was possibly the worst clarinetist in Cameron County. She did allow me, however, to contribute to the paper as gossip columnist. I never fully explained that one to my English teacher. Since he was Mexican American as well, I suppose he understood. Unlike Miss Parra, though, he did not challenge the limiting roles my parents had ordained for me.

Growing up on the frontera in Brownsville, Texas, in the 1950s and 1960s taught me to long for something more; yet it also prepared me to accept the limits placed on us. Allowed to excel in junior high, in the town’s only public high school I was reunited with my former Anglo and middle-class American Mexican classmates. But this time I noticed that they were all tracked to the college prep classes, regardless of their intellectual capacities. I found it strange that the untouchable “brains” of Ebony Heights were my peers at Brownsville High. In our senior English honors class, they all wrote papers on *The Catcher in the Rye* (the book I had already digested with Ramón when I was in eighth grade) and earned A’s, whereas what I now recognize as a proto-feminist paper on “My Last Duchess” enticed the popular Hemingwayesque teacher to lament that while I couldn’t write as well as my older brother, at least I had something he did not—shapely legs. It speaks volumes about the late 1960s, a time before the Women’s Movement reached our South Texas enclave, that at the end of the school year this master teacher actually wrote with impunity such a blatantly sexist sentiment in my yearbook.

While the White classmates all planned their futures at the University of Texas or other schools as far from the Valley as possible, my girlfriends and I were advised by the senior counselor not to apply to a college. In my case, my indifferent math scores on the entrance exams were more significant than my high scores in English and history. The local junior college, which we disparagingly called Tamale Tech, was

all I could aspire to. I had heard of a women's college and attempted to apply to it, but my parents knew nothing of Denton or Texas Women's University and reminded me that the application process was entirely my problem. My boyfriend, who was at the small agricultural college two hours away, warned me that if I went, our relationship was over.

Tamale Tech it would be. I knew that after the tech, I would be married and my life would be complete, anyway. I could not imagine any other way for myself—I knew no other Mexicana from Brown-town who had done it differently. There were no other possibilities for young working-class *fronteristas*, what I now call us *frontera* dwellers with feminist leanings. All my girlfriends were also being married, and getting good jobs at the phone company or as tellers at the bank. Their employment solution was progress, a step up from our parents' manual labor jobs. As *mujeres*, we were all considered successful if we graduated from high school and did not end up pregnant and a dishonor to the familia. The fact that we were all smart, a few of us members of the National Honor Society and a handful of us in the top 5 percent of our graduating class of over nine hundred students, did not translate into scholarships to the university.

Little did we know that the world was changing outside the Valley. My older brother, who in spite of his grades could escape no farther than a college in the central Valley, brought back new ideas as well as the long hair and Zapata mustache that Dad hated. His rebellion included leaving behind a full scholarship at that college and our father's rage to venture into the unknown territory of the university at Austin, where we had no family or family history. Judging from my parents' laments at his departure for Austin, *sin permiso*, it was as if Central Texas were the end of the earth and he would certainly fall into the abyss if he left *el valle*.

By my first year at the local college, Brown power and women's liberation were beckoning. Too many young Mexican American men who had been my high school classmates or with me in the band returned from Viet Nam "with full military honors." Staying in college to avoid the draft became essential for many of my male friends, in spite of active discouragement by the school counselors. Largely as a result of these first college students, an entire generation identifying as Chicanos soon would produce a body of writing that would speak to our lives on the border, where we existed between Mexican and American, between rich and poor, between the United States and Mexico.

Thinking back on those years when “la frontera” literally signified “the frontier,” words such as *marginality*, *alterity*, *misogyny*, and *difference* were not concepts available with which we could theorize our subject positions in this land of our ancestors—both the Spanish settlers of Nuevo Santander and the Karankowa or Comanches indigenous to this area. I remember how the significance of my hometown centered on its specific spot on the map. Living in Brownsville, Texas, meant living at the southernmost tip of the United States. When I was a child, the knowledge that we were at the bottom of the U.S. map made sense to me. When we traveled in Mexico, we were called *norteños*, *pochos*. Our preference for flour tortillas signified our working-class position; our *pochismos* also marked us as working class and not real Mexicanos. My grandparents had always been aware of those neighborhoods and certain *tiendas* in Mexico where we were not welcome. The class bias that we experienced in Matamoros and the rest of Mexico was as powerful as the racism endured in Brownsville. I knew then that I was not Mexican. Armed with these lessons that shaped my subjectivity, if not my political consciousness, I left the Valley.

In my present role as a Chicana cultural worker, I trace the coming to consciousness of my identity to the cultural artifacts, the first Chicana/o poetry I read in the mid-1970s. The act of reading these texts legitimized my experiences as a working-class *mujer*. The act of reading poetry written by a Chicana complicated and enriched my burgeoning self-consciousness as a feminist Chicana. The feminism on the border I elaborate throughout my study of contemporary writers springs from these preliminary articulations of early Chicano nationalism and the dissatisfaction that so many activist *mujeres* began to feel in the face of the masculinist notions of that political movement.

I acknowledge the anxiety I share with the cultural critics who warn against conflating the personal lived experience with detached studies of history or with clinical analyses of the class war.<sup>2</sup> As Chicanas, however, our specific experiences as working-class-origin, ethnic women under the law of the fathers undergird our theories. As a female subject of transfrontera culture in the Río Grande Valley of South Texas, I attended college and eventually graduate school only after performing all the requisite roles of a young *mujer* of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Free love and the rejection of materialism did not apply to most of us isolated in the

Valley, under the protection of our fathers and tradiciones. Never imagining that I could do anything other than bask in the reflected glory of a man, I married one year out of high school and dedicated my considerable energies to realizing my husband's career goals. After my second year at college, he began his medical school training. Immediately I left school and went to work, as I had been programmed to do. I knew no other way. No woman in my sphere had ever lived differently. The idea of moving to Houston, where he would study, was ambitious enough for me.

With Ramón completing his graduate degree at Yale and José an undergraduate there as well, I noted no injustice when the extended family gathered at holidays and the talk eventually centered on the men's exciting intellectual work. I welcomed these family reunions as reprieves from my drudgery as an unskilled laborer at a huge Houston hospital. After my husband told his anecdotes about surviving at medical school and mimicked the famous heart surgeon's Louisiana drawl as he expressed his utter contempt for lowly medical students, I attentively listened to my brothers' literary conversations. They knew I was interested, and after an attempt to introduce me to the mysteries of phenomenology and this new critical tool they called deconstruction, the discussion eventually turned to the lack of publications by Chicano writers. I noted that the writers they named were all male (Tomás Rivera, José Montoya, Rolando Hinojosa), and asked if there were any women writing. Included on their impromptu list were Angela de Hoyos, Carmen Tafolla, Inés Hernández, and the young Lorna Dee Cervantes. The brothers promised to send me copies of these women's poems.

We returned to our lives, the brothers to academia, I to my role as supportive wife. My husband and I promised ourselves that we would change the world of *el valle* when we returned to South Texas armed with his medical degree. His career became *our* causa. We engaged in Chicano political activism in Houston, but only in its emanations in the medical arena. When on a whim I applied for a premed summer program and earned admission, I joined my husband and his family's laughter at how I had fooled the admissions committee into thinking I could participate in such an important field. In a few days I was no longer amused but I nonetheless declined the admission.

The longer I worked at the hospital, the more I found I could accomplish. I soon went from blood collector to medical technician, learned to perform urinalysis, and eventually found myself surrounded

by test tubes and beakers and computers in the biochemistry wing of the laboratory, even training first-year medical technology students in the practical aspects of testing blood. My lack of formal training justified low wages, but it was not until the hospital janitors went on strike that I realized that I could not stay at this job. My political sympathies were with the Latino and African American workers, but my college-educated lab colleagues refused to support the strike for fear their "professional status" would suffer if they aligned themselves with "unskilled workers." Illegitimate, skilled, but unschooled, I knew I could no longer work there.

Even in these roles as undereducated, underpaid, almost-white-collar worker and wife of a medical student, I considered myself liberated. I imagined that I too labored for a causa. My early (mis)understanding of "women's liberation" allowed me to contemptuously dismiss my mother as a mere breeder. I congratulated myself on my personal liberation from the familia in the Valley, from the exceptionally strict and profoundly dissatisfied mother skeptical that her daughter could escape her own niche in the working class as mother of seven children. I took pride in my pioneer spirit as I forged what I imagined was a new way.

The medical school welcomed us, the new generation of working-class White women and women of color, with a doctors' wives club that would teach us to appreciate opera, ballet, and the spirit of volunteerism. Ironically, most of us worked to support our husbands and to send money to our parents and younger siblings. That first year I dutifully attended the meetings when my husband insisted that his career would suffer if I dismissed the Ladies of the Distaff. Throughout the medical school years my hospital co-workers warned that med students' wives were commonly dismissed by the young doctors when the M.D. became reality. Even my mother joined in and whispered the fears of the working wives. Her caveat was particularly irritating as she expressed it in the language she had taught me had little value: "Cuidate, te va dejar cuando se reciba." Indeed, many of the wives were handed divorce decrees as the men received their medical diplomas.

In spite of my sense of isolation and insecurity, further fed by night-shift labor at the hospital, my fears dissolved as I devoured the literature that my brothers began to send. José supplied me with the chapbooks the Chicano students at Yale were compiling, as well as copies of Lorna Dee Cervantes's "Mango"; Ramón sent the mimeographed poems by a fellow Tejana, the mestiza Angela de Hoyos. The first poems I read clarified the label *Chicano* for me. I would return to their

powerful pages throughout my tenure as a medical student's wife, and soon after, as an obstetrical resident's wife. For now, that was my identity of choice. But something else was happening. I had begun to read and reread the Movimiento poetry my brothers supplied. A new way of thinking began to open up for me.

## Tracking History and Subjectivity

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By 1975, de Hoyos self-published some of those poems in the collection *Chicano: Poems from the Barrio*. She was an activist during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, and her involvement with the Texas Farmworkers Union informed the social vision of her poetry. As Mexicans in South Texas, we identified with the laborers in the fields. If we were not out there ourselves, we had familia who worked the labores. This was the magic valley whose chamber of commerce erased the history of exploitation of the farmworkers by Anglo farm owners. This representation of a "magic" valley whose fields of melons, grapefruit orchards, and cotton fields employed happy peasant workers spurred writers such as Angela de Hoyos to unleash angry voices resonating with poetic and political intensity. Her early poems illustrate the oppositional nature of Chicana cultural production of the late 1960s and 1970s, wherein a quest for a cultural identity set forth a preliminary quest for history. Reading this poetry forced me to think about the intellectual implications of being Chicana alongside my emergent feminist politics.

De Hoyos's poetry provides historical documentation of the Chicano Movement as it exposes the internal contradictions of the Movimiento. On one level, the poetry of the period reflects the awakening of political consciousness among Americans of color. Tejanos knew only too well the fury of armed Texas Rangers when we dared organize protests or strikes. The literature offered different strategies as we articulated rage against Anglo-American domination in forms other than the corrido. In the poetry of women like de Hoyos, we see how an emergent group expanded its struggle from the melon and onion fields to the discursive arena, in this case to the lyric form. These early records, however, remain in obscurity, in out-of-print chapbooks held mainly in personal libraries. Necessity demands that I present the poems in their entirety here.

*Hermano*

*"Remember the Alamo"  
 . . . and my Spanish ancestors  
 who had the sense to build it.*

I was born too late  
 in a land  
 that no longer belongs to me  
 (so it says, right here in this Texas History).

Ay mi San Antonio de Bexar  
 ciudad-reina de la frontera,  
 the long hand of greed  
 was destined to seize you!  
 . . . Qué nadie te oyó cuando caíste,  
 cuando esos hombres rudos te hurtaron? . . .  
 Blind-folded they led you  
 to a marriage of means  
 while your Spanish blood  
 smoldered within you!

Tu cielo  
 ya no me pertenece.  
 Ni el Alamo, ni la Villita,  
 ni el río que a capricho  
 por tu mero centro corre.  
 Ni las misiones  
 —joyas de tu pasado—  
     San Juan de Capistrano  
     Concepción  
     San José  
     La Espada  
 : They belong to a pilgrim  
 who arrived here only yesterday  
 whose racist tongue says to me: I hate  
 Meskins. You're a Meskin. Why don't you  
 go back to where you came from?  
 Yes, amigo . . . ! Why don't I? Why don't I  
 resurrect the Pinta, the Niña and the Santa María  
 —and you can scare up your little 'Flor de Mayo'—  
 so we all sail back  
 to where we came from: the motherland womb.

I was born too late  
 or perhaps I was born too soon:  
 It is not yet my time;  
 this is not yet my home.