Excerpt from the play Real Women Have Curves, by Josefina López

Ana (age 22):

I always took for granted their work to be simple and unimportant. I was not proud to be working there at the beginning. I was only glad to know that because I was educated, I wasn't going to end up like them. I was going to be better than them. And I wanted to show them how much smarter and liberated I was. I was going to teach them about the women's liberation movement, about sexual liberation and all the things a so-called educated American woman knows. But in their subtle ways they taught me about resistance. About the battle no one was fighting for them except themselves. About the loneliness of being women in a country that looks down on us. With their work that seems simple and unimportant, they are fighting... Perhaps the greatest thing I learned from them is that women are powerful, especially when working together...
Mestizaje as Method: Feminists-of-Color Challenge the Canon

Chéla Sandoval

For the Chicana feminist it is through our affiliation with the struggles of other Third World people that we find our theories and our methods.

—Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1991)

The Chicana feminisms that spanned the late twentieth century were deployed in five different modes. Sociologists Denise Segura and Beatriz Pesquera typify three of these as "Chicana liberalism," "Chicana insurgency," and "Cultural nationalism." These Chicana deployments of feminism, however, have been appropriated by Gloria�nism, many argue, calls up a syncretic form of consciousness made up of transversions and crossings; its recognition makes lands!La possible another kind of critical apparatus and political operation in which ing chiasmus (a mobile crossing) between cultures, languages, and nations. Thus conceived, of consciousness that insists upon polymodal forms of poetics, ethics, identities, and politics not only for Chicanas/os but for any constituency resisting the old and new hierarchies of the coming millennium. Much has already been written about this borderlands consciousness, investigated as it is across disciplines and seemingly from within every academic and theoretical location. Whether citing the pivotal contributions of scholars from the domain of Chicano/a Studies, particularly those of R. Saldívar, Alarcón, Rechy, Castañeda, J. Saldívar, Anzaldúa, Saldívar-Hull, or Paredes, or whether citing such writers as Giroux, Butler, Deleuze, Barthes, Harding, Hayles, Lorde, or Gibson, borderlands theorizing is the contemporary imaginary that is reforming disciplinary canons. This essay makes obvious the links that tie the mestiza form of Chicana feminism to what is named "U.S. third world feminism" in an effort to demonstrate how both have inspired and engendered an emerging cross-disciplinary and transnational politics of resistance that is increasingly theorized as "border," "diasporic," "hybrid," or "mestiza" in nature. Both U.S. third world feminism and Chicana mestizaje have developed similarly a specific methodology, one for which scholars across disciplines are seeking in the attempt to identify techniques capable of advancing cross-disciplinary study.

Scholars are trained to look to the OED, the Oxford English Dictionary, in order to find some originary point for meanings that reverberate outward from our words. When I was asked by the editors of The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States to devise the historical and conceptual definition for a social, literary, intellectual, and methodological movement that had never before been similarly canonized, I felt bear down the weight of history and meaning. Yet to write this definition one need only recapitulate the long (if unrecognized) trajectory of struggle by Chicanas and other feminists of color to write into history this very movement. I agreed to the project on the condition that I could take up this trajectory, to make explicit that which seems to have slipped through and escaped contemporary academic canonization and official histories: "U.S. third world feminism" understood as critical apparatus, theory, and method.

Reasons for this academic disappearance (even truancy) have to do with the 1970s form of social movement called U.S. third world feminism itself: It was polymodal, composed of differing and mobile structures of consciousness difficult to express in traditional linear narrative. Moreover, this particular social movement was generated out of the juxtaposition of anticolonial and antisexist U.S. histories that are often under-
estimated or misunderstood. Further, to understand a form of criticism as "U.S. third world feminist" without also naming and describing the practices that comprise its methodology tends to confuse and conflate its specificity with other forms of feminism devised by U.S. women of color since the 1950s. The definition devised to describe the methodological, theoretical, historical, and social practice of "U.S. third world feminism" would need to account for these problematics.10 During the course of my investigation, I became increasingly intrigued and moved as I traced the so-called third world liberation exchanged within the boundaries of the United States during the late twentieth century as it became extended, translated, and transformed into U.S. third world feminism, mestiza feminism, and now "borderlands" theory and "diaspora" studies by the century's end. In what follows the Oxford encyclopedic entry that defines "U.S. third world feminist criticism" is restated in order to emphasize the similarities of its apparatus with varying theoretical, methodological, and historical apparatuses that are being worked out across disciplines, though under the auspices of differing terminologies, rubrics, and rhetorics.11 The Oxford definition of U.S. third world feminist criticism insists upon a singular site, however, and from this location rises a critical apparatus for the analysis of language, politics, and historical narrative that was devised, enacted, and developed by U.S. women of color during the post-World War II period. The mystery is the disappearing act: how this theoretical and methodological formulation, including the more technical aspects of what we now call mestiza feminism, mestizaje as critical apparatus, womanism, diaspora, and/or border studies, continues to slip away from disciplinary understanding and recognition.

Mapping the Site

This mystery is at least partially explained when examining the name for this late 1960s social movement, which links two apparently contradictory geographies in the phrase "U.S. third world feminism," as if the "U.S." and the "third world" could together represent a single political locality. In this sense, sim-
nevertheless by virtue of their similar sociohistorical, racial, and colonial relationships to dominant powers. This fresh sense of alliance influenced the transforming identities of U.S. peoples of color, especially those participants of the great social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Activists of color involved in the civil rights, antiwar, Black, Chicano, Asian, Native American, student, women’s, and gay liberation movements saw themselves as bonded, despite distinct and sometimes contrary aims and goals, in a coalescent form of consciousness opposed to dominating powers and oppressive racial and social hierarchies. To be a citizen/subject of the United States who was also a “third world liberationist” during this period, then, did not mean being committed solely to racial, decolonial, and class liberation. For U.S. peoples of color the term increasingly meant to ally with what semiologists now identify as the “third” and repressed force that nevertheless constantly rises up through dominant meaning systems, breaking apart two-term or binary divisions of human thought.

By 1971, grassroots organizations of “U.S. third world feminists” began to form across the United States, bringing together women of color who, in spite of severe differences in historical relations to power, color, culture, language, gender, and sexual orientation, were surprised to recognize in one another profound similarities. A great number of their newsletters, pamphlets, and books were produced by underground publishers from 1971 to 1974, including separate works by Janice Mirikitani (1973) and Francis Beale (1971), both entitled Third World Women, which were meant to affirm and develop the revolutionary kind of shared sisterhood/citizenship insistently emerging in the corridors and backrooms where U.S. feminists of color congregated. The burgeoning women’s liberation movement, however, was not yet able to imagine, recognize, or contain this other kind of female alliance. As early as 1970, for example, Black feminist Francis Beale had already published an essay in the groundbreaking collection The Black Woman: An Anthology (reprinted one year later in the famous Sisterhood Is Powerful), which prophesied that U.S. women’s liberation would fast become a “white women’s movement” if it insisted on organizing along the gender demarcation male/female alone, when, as Sojourner Truth had so eloquently elaborated in 1851, U.S. peoples of color are denied easy or comfortable access to either of these socially constructed categories. Again, in 1970, Chicana feminist Velia Hancock wrote in the Chicano Studies Newsletter that “white women focus on the maleness of our present social system” as if “a female dominated white America” will take a more reasonable course for U.S. peoples of color of either gender. In Sula (1973) Toni Morrison suggested that women of color must understand they are “neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them,” so “they had to set about creating something else to be.” That “something else to be” was explored throughout the seventies by a growing number of U.S. third world feminist artists, writers, critics, theorists, and activists, including Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko, Antonia Castañeda, Bea Medicine, Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, Rosaura Sánchez, Maxine Hong Kingston, Andre Lorde, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Judy Baca, Teresa Hak Kyung Cha, Azizah Al-Hibri, and Margaret Walker. As Barbara Noda (Bridge, 1981) put it, U.S. feminists of color were “lowriding through the women’s movement”; that is, they were developing the imagery, methods and theories necessary for cruising through any dominant meaning system on behalf of this “something else”–this other “third” force that would become distinctive of U.S. third world feminist critical theory.

By the 1980s, U.S. third world feminism became an influential intellectual presence. In 1981 the National Women’s Studies Association held the first U.S. conference on the troubled relations between white women and women of color entitled “Women Respond to Racism.” Three hundred women of color attended to establish the first official “National Alliance of U.S. Third World Feminists.” Their statement of purpose argued that U.S. third world feminism is organized according to a “fundamentally different structure” from that of other feminisms, as well as from other U.S. social movements for racial justice. That same month, This Bridge Called My Back, A Collection of Writings by Radical Women of Color (1981), edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, was released. Here, as Toni Cade Bambara (1981) put it, a growing number of U.S. third world feminists are “putting in telecalls to each other. And we’re all on the line.” Bridge was quickly followed by the
founding of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the journal Third Woman, and the publication of a plethora of writings by U.S. feminists of color. These writings included Bernice Reagon’s “Coalition Politics, Turning the Century” (1983), an explication of hegemonic white consciousness trapped in a prison-house of identity that makes alliance across difference impossible; and Audre Lorde’s 1982 Zami, in which women of color realize “that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.” This U.S. third world feminism, understood as a “third” space, a bridging “house of difference” engaged the imaginations and commitments of diverse artists throughout the 1980s, including Angela Davis, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, bell hooks, Maxine Baca Zinn, Aida Hurtado, Kitty Tsui, Gayatri Spivak, Beth Brant, Janice Gould, June Jordan, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Christian, whose works reflect only the surface of a sea of contributions produced by U.S. feminist/womanist activists of color during the 1980s.

**A Sleight-of-Consciousness: La Conciencia de la Mestiza as Differential Consciousness**

East Indian feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty has written that “simply being a woman, or being poor or Black or Latino,” is not “sufficient ground to assume a politicized oppositional identity” (1991). **What is required,** as Fredric Jameson points out, **is a specific methodology that can be used as compass for self-consciously organizing resistance, identity, praxis, and coalition under contemporary first world, late-capitalist cultural conditions.** Examination of U.S. third world feminist works developed between 1965 and 1991 reveals their combined insistence upon a structured theory and method of consciousness-in-opposition to U.S. social hierarchy that is capable, when all actors agree to its methods, of aligning a variety of oppositional social movements with one another across differing gender, sex, race, culture, class, or national commitments. This theoretical and methodological compass was represented, developed, and utilized by U.S. feminists of color during 1968-1988 because, as Native American theorist Paula Gunn Allen put it in 1981, so much has been taken away that “the place we live now is an idea”—and in this place new forms of identity, theory, practice, and community have become imaginable. In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa redefined and specified that the practice of U.S. third world feminism required “la conciencia de la mestiza,” the consciousness of the “mixed blood.” **La conciencia de la mestiza** is born of life lived in the “cross-roads” between races, nations, languages, genders, sexualities, and cultures: It is a developed subjectivity capable of transformation and relocation, movement guided by the learned capacity to read, renovate, and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed in a skill that Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” (1987). So too does the philosopher Maria Lugones claim that the theory and method of U.S. third world feminism requires of its practitioners nomadic and determined “travel” across “worlds of meaning.” Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins describes the skills developed by U.S. women of color who, through exclusion from male-controlled race liberation movements and from white-controlled female liberation movements, were forced to internalize an “outsider/within” identity that guides movement-of-being according to an ethical commitment to equalize power between social constituencies. And Gayatri Spivak suggests “shuttling” between meaning systems in order to enact the “strategic essentialism” necessary for intervening in power on behalf of the marginalized—this, in order to practice the political method Alice Walker names “Womanism”: the political hermeneutic for constructing “love” in the postmodern world. These examples direct our attention not only to the features of a specific “U.S. third world feminist” critical paradigm. This paradigm is the compass sought by Jameson that can enable “cognitive mapping” under first world, postmodern cultural conditions. Indeed this paradigm can be recognized as a theory and method for mobilizing oppositional forms of consciousness in the postmodern first world.

This theory and method understands oppositional forms of consciousness, aesthetics, and politics as organized around the following five points of resistance to U.S. social hierarchy: (1) the “assimilationist” (or “liberal”) mode; (2) the “revolutionary” (or “insurgent”) mode; (3) the “supremacist” (or “cul-
tural-nationalist") mode; (4) the "separatist" mode; and (5) the "differential" "mestiza" (or "womanist," "Sister Outsider," "third force" it has generated many names) mode of "U.S. third world feminist praxis." It was this last, differential mode that enabled U.S. feminists-of-color to understand and utilize the previous four, not as overriding strategies, but as tactics for intervening in and transforming social relations.17 Viewed under the auspices of U.S. third world feminism understood as the differential practice of mestizaje, the first four modes are performed, however seriously, only as forms of "tactical essentialism." The differential oppositional praxis wields and deploys each mode of resistant ideology as a potential technology of power. The cruising mobilities required in this effort demand of the differential practitioner commitment to the process of metamorphosis itself: This is the activity of the trickster who practices subjectivity-as-masquerade, the oppositional agent who accesses differing identity, ideological, aesthetic, and political positions.18 Such nomadic "morphing" is not performed only for survival's sake, as in earlier, modernist times. It is a set of principled conversions, informed by the skill of "la facultad," that requires differential movement through, over, and within any dominant system of resistance, identity, race, gender, sex, class, or national meanings: The differential strategy is directed, but it is also a "diasporic/immigration" in consciousness and politics enacted to ensure that ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations enter into the everyday, political sphere of culture. Indeed, it is important to understand that it is this ethical principle that guides the deployment of all the technologies of power utilized by the differential practitioner of this theory and method of oppositional consciousness. The differential theory and method of oppositional consciousness has been developed in many forms across disciplines, but this ethical principle most clearly drives the critical apparatus of Chicana feminist mestizaje and its conciencia de la mestiza.

The field here defined as "U.S. third world feminist criticism" is not an easy terrain. Debates continue among U.S. women of color over which forms of resistance comprise the most effective U.S. third world feminist practices and how such resistances should be valued, distinguished, translated, or named. Today, alternative contending names range from "transnational" or "transcultural" feminisms, where issues of race and ethnicity become sublimated, to more technical terminologies—such as "the differential," "la conciencia de la mestiza" (which specifies the techniques of la facultad, Coaltique, and nepantla forms of consciousness), "womanism," or "third space feminism—which together signify the activities of the "U.S. third world feminism" identified here,19 to "U.S. women-of-color feminism," which emphasizes the exclusion of its population from legitimate state powers by virtue of color and/or physiognomy. U.S. women-of-color feminism tends to commit to one or more of the five technologies of power outlined earlier as a means of increasing and reinforcing racial and tribal loyalties and self-determination. This focus is more specific than that of third space, or U.S. "third world feminism" however, which when understood as a technical and critical term is focused, above all else, on the differential, mestiza, and poetic deployment of each technology of power. As such, U.S. third world feminism is not inexorably gender, nation, race, sex, or class linked. It is, rather, a theory and method of oppositional consciousness that rose out of a specific deployment, that is, out of a particular tactical expression of U.S. third world feminist politics that more and more became its overriding strategy. The tactic that became this overriding, differential strategy is guided, above all else, by the imperatives of social justice that can engage a hermeneutics of love in the postmodern world.

The differential strategy both generates and depends upon la conciencia de la mestiza in order to function. This conciencia recognizes and identifies all technologies of power as consensual illusions. When resistance is organized as either assimilationist, integrationist, revolutionary, supremacist, or separatist in function, the differential U.S. third world feminist criticism reads and interprets these technologies of power as transformable social narratives designed to intervene in reality for the sake of social justice. The differential maneuvering required here is a sleight-of-consciousness which activates a new space: a cyberspace where the transcultural, transgendered, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective strata-
gems of oppositional praxis can begin, a process Judith Butler theorizes as “the performatve.” Aesthetic works, identified, read, and interpreted with the analytic tools of differential criticism, are marked with both disruption and continuity; as well as by migrations, diasporas, border crossings, and by politics, poetics, and procedures. Also, they are marked by tactics, strategies, movement, position and styles of travel. These are all produced, however, with the aim of equalizing power on behalf of the colonized, the nation-, class-, race-, gender-, and sexually subordinated, as stated by U.S. third world feminist Merle Woo in *Bridge* (1981).

The so-called “flexibility of identity” once required for survival under conquest, colonialism, and domination is being required today of every first world citizen living under transforming postmodern global economies. This mobility of identity is only one requirement of the neocolonial forces that marshal postmodernity in the first world. Yet this same challenge to subjectivity, singularity, and traditional citizenship also clears the way towards a utopian and coalitional postcolonial future. What are the ways towards a utopian and coalitional postcolonial future?

Aesthetic *mestizaje* occurs when the unexplored *affinities inside of difference* attract, combine, and relate new constituencies into a coalition of resistance. Any such generalized and politicized coalitional consciousness, however, can only occur on the site of a social movement that was once overlooked because it was perceived as limited, restricted by gender, sex, or race identity: U.S. third world feminism; a feminism developed by U.S. women of color and by Chicana feminists under the sign of “la conciencia de la mestiza.” That is, coalition can only take place through the recognition and practice of a “U.S. third world feminist” form of resistance that is capable of re-negotiating technologies of power through an ethically guided, skilled, and differential deployment—a methodology of the oppressed that is only made possible through *la conciencia de la mestiza*. The remaining questions are these: If subjectivity is “masquerade,” as Anzaldúa argues in *Haciendo Caras,* can men and women of any race, nation, class, sex, or gender identification inhabit the subject positions required by U.S. third world feminist criticism, Chicana *mestizaje* as critical apparatus, and differential social movement? In what ways would doing so slide the rule of canon?


9. The mystery of the academic erasure of U.S. third world feminism is a disappearing trick. Its exemption from the academic canon short-circuits knowledge but secures the acquittal of a “third,” feminist “force” about which Derrida said, “it should not be named.” Not named, he hoped, in order that what is performative and mobile never be set into any place: freedom resides, thus, everywhere. It is out of this terrain that U.S. third world feminism calls up new kinds of people, those with skills to rise out of citizenship to agency: countrypeople of a new territory. For these countrypeople, who are no longer “U.S. third world feminists,” the game is beginning again: new names, new players.


11. Forms of this methodological apparatus are being developed in academic terrains as diverse as sociology and physics, from new historicism to cultural studies, from semiotics to “situated knowledges,” and even within immigration and diaspora studies.

12. See the 1981 report on the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, which details how U.S. feminists of color decided to name their alliance “U.S. Third World Feminism” in order to emphasize their affinities with women of color living outside the boundaries of the U.S. This emphasis has since shifted, and the preferred name for this U.S. alliance had become “feminist” or “womanist” women of color. See Chela Sandoval, “The Struggle Within: A Report on the 1981 N.W.S.A. Conference” (Oakland,


15. See Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), especially the sections on cognitive mapping.


18. Judith Butler has recently theorized the method of U.S. third world feminist practice as “the performative,” aligning this most interesting contribution from the domain of “queer theory” with what
is theorized here as the “methodology of the oppressed.” See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990).


General References on U.S. Third World Feminism


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As Spain prepared to celebrate the quincentenary of "the discovery," in 1992, contemporary Chicanas had been deliberating on the force of significations of that event. It took almost 400 years for the territory that today we call Mexico to acquire a cohesive national identity and sovereignty. Centuries passed before the majority of the inhabitants were able to call themselves Mexican citizens. As a result, on the Mexican side of the hyphen in the designation Mexican-American, Chicanas rethink their involvement in Mexico's turbulent colonial and postcolonial history, while also reconsidering, on the American side, their involvement in the capitalist neocolonization of the population of Mexican descent in the United States (Barrera et al. 1972).

In the 1960s, armed with a post-Mexican-American critical consciousness, some people of Mexican descent in the United States recuperated, appropriated, and recodified the term Chicano to form a new political class (Acuña 1972; Muñoz 1989). Initially, the new appellation left the entrenched (middle-class) intellectuals mute, because it emerged from the oral usage in working-class communities. In effect, the new name measured the distance between the excluded and the few who had found a place for themselves in Anglo-America. The new Chicano political class began to work on the hyphen, eager to redefine the economic, racial, cultural, and political position of the people. The appropriation and recodification of the term Chicano from oral culture was a stroke of insight precisely because it unsettled all of the identities conferred by previous historical accounts. The apparently well-documented terrains of the dyad Mexico/United States were repositioned and reconfigured through the inclusion of the