

# off our backs

a women's newsjournal

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chicanas speak: about feminism & the women's liberation movement

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# chicanas speak:

As a feminist, I was originally interested in finding ways to facilitate Third World women's participation in the Women's Liberation Movement because this seemed the right thing to do politically. I felt guilty about the existence of racism, especially within the Women's Liberation Movement, and about accusations that the Women's Liberation Movement is "a white middle class women's trip." So I tried to learn about Black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women's cultures and to find ways for the Women's Liberation Movement to speak more to these women's needs, but I did so sporadically and half-heartedly since I was acting out of guilt and in response to my or someone else's accusations.

Within the past year my attitudes about Third World women and about their relationship to the Women's Liberation Movement have changed. Because I feel less defensive about the extent to which the Women's Liberation Movement is white and middle class, and because I have learned more about Black women's and Chicana's history and literature and have been excited by this knowledge and angry that it has been kept from me. I now find myself wanting to work with Third World women largely for my own benefit. I feel isolated from Black, Latina, Asian and Native American women, and I want to learn about how women different from myself experience the world. This new attitude of self-interest has changed my feelings about my feminist work--because I am acting out of my own desires rather than out of guilt and reaction, I find that I feel more continuously motivated to learn about Third World women's experiences and to use this knowledge to expand the scope of my feminist activism. And, rather than feeling guilty about my and the Women's Liberation Movement's racism, I want to acknowledge, learn about, and change this racism so that I can do the work that I enjoy and am excited about.

It is important to me to find out how Chicanas themselves feel about some of the topics I am most interested in: their experiences with and feelings and thoughts about El Movimiento, feminism, and the Women's Liberation Movement. I tried to achieve this goal by conducting personal interviews with two Chicanas and by seeking out material written by Chicanas on these topics.

White, and often male, social scientists are notorious for their exploitation of Third World and female respondents. I want to avoid such a situation in which I obtain information from my respondents without giving them anything in return, or in which I use the information my respondents give me in a way ultimately harmful to them. With these concerns in mind, I told each of my respondents that I wanted our interview to be a two-way process--that in addition to giving her the results of the interview (this paper), I would be glad to share my opinions and experiences with her throughout the interview if she wanted me to and I hope she would tell me about anything she wanted to get from our discussion. I also told my respondents about my purpose in doing the interviews--that I wanted the information not only in order to help me, as an Anglo feminist, understand how I could best work with and in the interests of Chicanas.

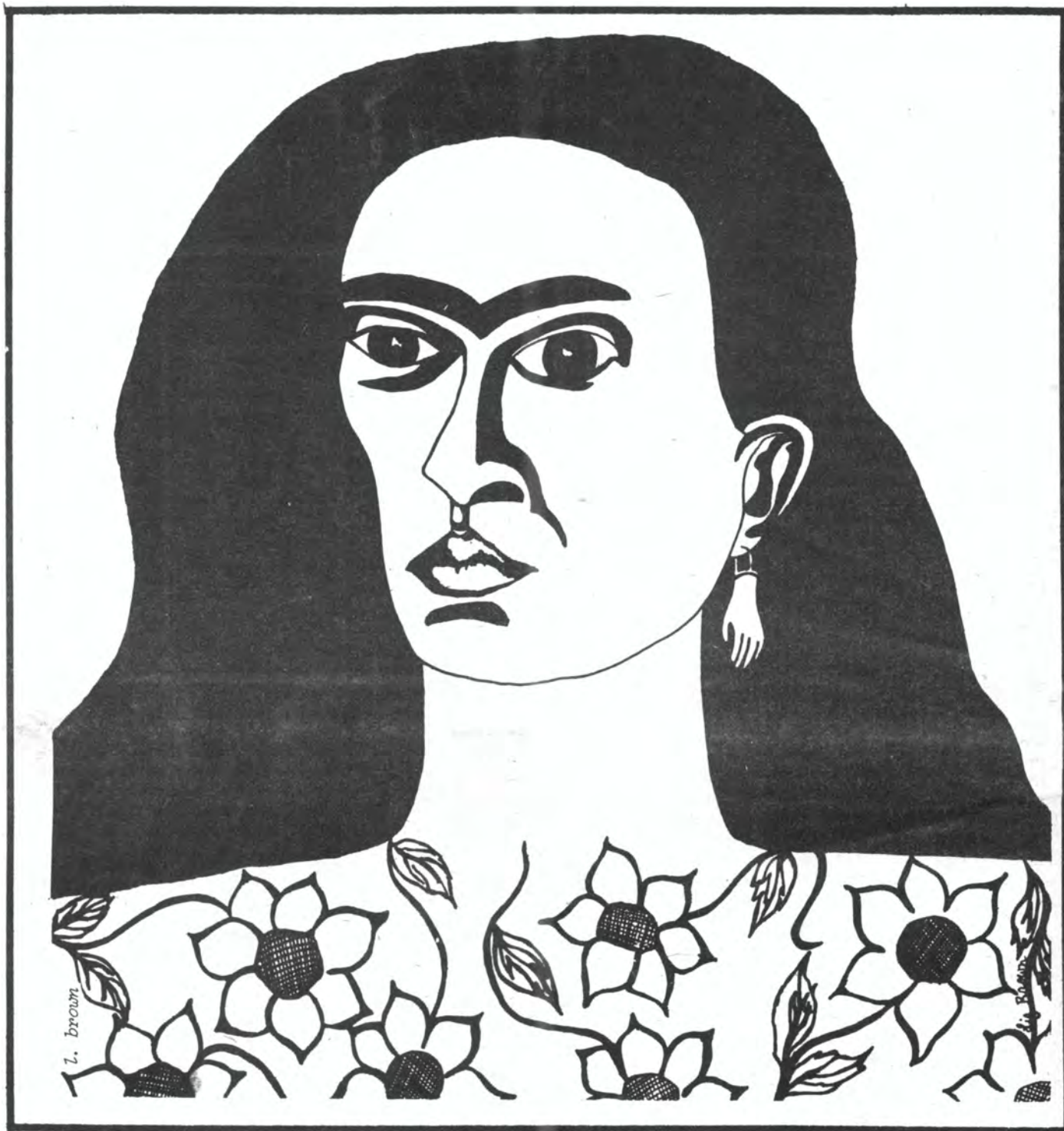
It is also important to me not to distort my respondents' answers or to waste their time by asking them basic questions I could find the answers to elsewhere. For these reasons, as well as in order to make the interviews as useful as possible to me, I prepared for them by reading material by Chicanas (and a few articles by Chicanos) on Chicanas, the Chicano Movement, and Chicana perspective on feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the development of El Movimiento and the Women's Liberation Movement contributed to Chicanas' growing awareness of themselves as a distinct group that faces particular problems of racial, sexual, and often class oppression. Involvement in or knowledge about both these movements, and particularly the Chicano Movement, in which Chicanas have participated extensively, brought many Chicanas to define their political priorities and allegiances. At first, most Chicanas in El Movimiento identified mainly as Chicanas/os, and saw their struggle as being the same as Chicanos'. However, their experiences with sexism within the

Chicano Movement eventually led many Chicanas to feel that "fight(ing) for the fulfillment of the Chicano while denying equality to women should not be the direction of the movement."<sup>1</sup> Fewer Chicanas participated in the Women's Liberation Movement, and those who did often found white feminists to be, at best, unreceptive to issues important to Chicanas, and at worst, racist and classist.<sup>2</sup>

and leftist political groups, the other of whom had been active in primarily white feminist organizations. I found and contacted both of these women through mutual friends. In order to understand the perspectives of the women I interviewed, it is important to know about their respective backgrounds.

Estella is twenty-six years old, the



The contradictions between El Movimiento's demands for equality and freedom, and many Chicanos' sexism, as well as the contradictions between the Women's Liberation Movement's similar demands and many of its members' racism, created a situation in which politically active Chicanas have had to struggle to be heard, while everyone but Chicanas has told them what their experiences are and how they should be working to make changes. This situation, in which not only white social scientists but also Chicano and feminist activists have continued to "speak for" Chicanas, is exacerbated by the lack of written material by Chicanas about Chicanas.

When I was able to explore, in person and on paper, what Chicanas themselves have to say, I was excited to discover distinctly Chicana perspectives that are not based only in the Chicano or feminist movements, or in a combination of the two, but rather are a reflection of Chicanas' unique experiences. This, then, has been the clearest message of my research for me: that Chicanas are not "brown-skinned Anglo women" or "female Chicanos," but a distinct, though varied, group of people, and that their experiences and opinions must be understood in this light.

I interviewed two politically active Chicanas, one of whom had worked in Chicano

third in a family of nine children. Her grandparents on both sides of the family emigrated from Mexico to the United States, and she grew up in Los Angeles. Her mother "has been a housewife all her life," and her stepfather, with whom Estella lived since the age of three, owned his own furniture business. Her father and stepfather are both high school graduates; her mother attended school through the ninth grade.

Estella attended public schools in Los Angeles, then went to community college and after that to UC Berkeley, where she is currently majoring in Chicano Studies. She has worked at paid jobs since she was a sophomore in high school, contributing to her family's as well as her own support.

Estella first developed her political consciousness through her awareness of the school walk outs in East Los Angeles. Since that time she has been active in a number of different political groups, many of which have focused on educational issues. She has also worked with the United Farm Workers, from whom she "derived a lot of my collective thoughts, and my perspective in terms of working-class struggle." Recently she has been involved in the student progressive party at UC Berkeley, and at the time I interviewed her she was running for the position of Academic Affairs Vice-President.

## about feminism & the women's liberation movement

Estella's parents were not politically involved when she lived with them; her stepfather, she says, is "a real capitalist." Her mother used to worry about Estella's political activism, and was afraid that Estella would become "a commie." However, in the past five years, Estella's mother and father have both altered their attitudes and become more politically active, a change which Estella attributes partially to her influence on them.

Anna is twenty-two years old, the youngest of three children. Her mother is Mexican and completed the seventh or eighth grade in Mexico, where she met Anna's father, who is an Anglo college graduate from the United States. Anna's family lived in Europe from the time she was three until she was sixteen. Her mother supports the family through such jobs as waitressing and janitorial work, and has recently graduated from high school. Anna's father does not work.

Anna's family is poor, and she feels she was affected both by this economic situation and by the somewhat contradictory middle-class values her father brought to their family. As a child, she was exposed to a lot of political people, ranging from those who, like her father, were "interested in creating alternative lifestyles," to those, including socialists, who were more "politically realistic."

Anna is a high school graduate and has been aware of and interested in feminism since she was about thirteen, when she had to take a cooking class, even though she hated to cook. While the boys took industrial arts. At that time, she says, she "knew right away that feminism was speaking to me, although I had no concept of how far-reaching it was." By the time she was out of high school "I thought of myself as a feminist." Anna's political involvement has been with three primarily white feminist organizations: a women's newspaper, a feminist school, and a rape crisis center.

Estella and Anna, as well as Chicana authors whose articles I have read, discuss their experiences with sexism within the Chicano Movement and community. Many of the writings have included criticisms of machismo, the "notion that a Chicano is ... the breadwinner, the sole determiner of familial policy, the main communicator with the external community, the father protector, and dispenser of justice within the family... that males must exude toughness, virility, and 'false' courage."<sup>3</sup> Some Chicanas feel that machismo is a thoroughly negative value and has kept Chicanas from being equal members of the community and movement.<sup>4</sup> Others make a distinction between "traditional" and Anglo-imposed machismo. For example, Velia Hancock writes that Chicanas "enjoy relating to our men as women in all of the traditional ways. The problem arises when the perverted, stereotyped notions of machismo, used by Anglo society to ridicule the Chicano people, infect our minds and threaten the working relationships we are trying to develop with one another."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, many Chicanas see sexism not as an intrinsic part of Chicana/o tradition, but as a value imposed on Chicanos/as by whites, and often, in particular, by white upper-class capitalists.<sup>6</sup> This belief differs from that of many Anglo feminists, who see sexism, and indeed male supremacy, as basic components of all known societies.

Estella made a distinction similar to Hancock's, saying that sociologists have portrayed Chicanos as macho, and Chicanos have accepted and tried to live up to this image of themselves; this has often meant "telling their women not to participate in the Women's Movement." However, Estella also made comments implying that, while many of the sexist elements of machismo may originally have been imposed on Chicanos by white social scientists, she finds today's Chicana/o culture to be possibly more sexist than Anglo culture. She commented that "in the past year, many of my political dealings have been with white men rather than with Chicanos, and I've found their level of consciousness about women and sexism to be higher than Chicanos'." She also told me

that "Chicanas are a bit more caught up in the dumb sexy role than the average woman."

From a practical point of view, it may seem unimportant to question whether and to what extent sexism was originally an Anglo or a Chicana/o value--if it exists today, why not simply fight it, both among Anglos and among Chicanos/as? However, a look at the context within which the Chicano Movement arose clarifies the significance of this issue. Since the United States first colonized Mexican land and people in 1845, Anglos have attacked Chicanas/os and their culture, saying at first that Chicanos/as were a genetically inferior race, and later that their oppression was a result of their own cultural "backwardness." Today, white social scientists who claim to favor equality between women and men, and some white feminists, continue this practice in a new guise, saying that Chicana/o culture is inferior to Anglo culture in that it is more sexist and patriarchal than Anglo culture, and thus Chicanos/as who want to fight sexism within their own culture should do so by adopting the more "liberated" and egalitarian Anglo sex role patterns.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this ideology is in opposition to El Movimiento's (and, in fact, the Women's Liberation Movement's) ideology of self-determination.

Given their history as a colonized people, it is clear why it is so important to Chicanas not to participate in the denigration of their culture which has gone on for years. Chicanas' desire to affirm their culture, while at the same time trying to change it, puts them in a difficult position, especially when they are attacked by Chicanos for criticizing sexism within the Chicano Movement and the community. Under-standing the dilemma faced by

Chicanas who want to be self-determining both as Chicanos/as and as women has helped me to understand why so few Chicanas participate in or even seem to feel supported by the Women's Liberation Movement.

Those Chicanas who choose to work in or with the Women's Liberation Movement are often angered by white feminists' and sometimes Black, Asian, and Native American feminists', racism. Anna and Estella both talked to me about their perceptions of this problem. Anna feels that many of the white feminists she has worked with have stereotyped expectations that Chicanas will be dumb, uncultured, and passive." She feels that she is sometimes seen as "not a 'real' Chicana" because she does not fit this image, and also that she has, in the past, fallen into what seemed to be expected of her and thus acted more passive than she wanted to when working with white feminists.

Anna also feels critical of Anglo women who claim they want to work with Third World women, but seem to sabotage their own efforts because of the white women's unacknowledged ambivalence. Some Anglo feminists, Anna told me, think that Third World women are "less efficient" than white women and also are not "true" feminists since they are usually committed to their race communities as well as to women. Thus, these Anglo women feel that it would be disruptive to work more closely with Third World women.

And, indeed, Anna acknowledges that white feminists will have to change some of our priorities and organizational methods if we want to involve more Third World women in the Women's Liberation Movement. She can understand why Anglo feminists are frightened of examining our own racism and changing some of the ways in which we work; what really angers her, she says, is that white feminists often try to work with Third World women in order to be "politically correct," and then end up hurting themselves and the Third World women they work with because the white women have not looked honestly at their own feelings. Anna feels that "white women themselves must want not to be isolated-- I can guilt trip them into working with me, but if I do that, eventually they'll just kick me out --I can't force them to be ready."

Some of Estella's feelings about the Women's Liberation Movement and white feminists are similar to Anna's. Estella has found in working with white feminists that "their number one bias is that Third World women don't give a shit about feminism--that we are passive, just into being wives and mothers--they (white women) don't understand our culture, so we're never given a chance."

Although Anna identifies herself as a feminist, while Estella does not use this label, both women emphasize their desire to define their feminist beliefs and actions on their own terms. And, as long as Anglo feminists feel we must educate and recruit Chicanas and other Third World women to "our" movement, Third World women, not surprisingly, will feel angry and turned-off to the Women's Liberation Movement -- and white feminists will conclude that we were right all along--Third World women do not really care about feminism. However, when we (white feminists) feel secure in our feminist beliefs we will no longer fear that they will be disproved or weakened by contributions from Third World women's experiences and thoughts because we want to know these things, rather than because we "should," we will be able to create a more broadly-based, cross cultural Women's Liberation Movement, and will also be able to make alliances with the many Third World women who will want to continue to develop and practice their feminism within their own race communities.

by bridget wynne

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## RACE AND SUFFRAGE *continued from page 7*

against Wilson and the Democratic Party to show them that women did have power and wouldn't stand for this nonsense. The CU brought women voters together and in 1917 created the National Woman's Party, with headquarters in Washington, DC. That same year they became involved in a desperate struggle with the United States Government that lasted until the suffrage amendment was passed by the Congress in 1919. In those three years, over 1000 women picketed the White House: over 500 were arrested and 166 went to jail and prison--some of them repeatedly.

The escalation of violence against the NWP developed as a clear and direct result of the country's involvement in World War I, as the government set about a national program of war mobilization and oppression of dissent, reaching its zenith in the Palmer Raids. Violence against Blacks escalated as thousands more moved north to work in war industries. Assaults against them followed, with no intervention from governmental power. Increased violence against the NWP strengthened their commitment and militancy as they grew in tactical skill and in support from women around the country and from Leftist groups.

The 19th Amendment for Woman Suffrage finally passed the Congress in 1919 and was ratified by the states in 1920. However, politicians in the deep south were quick to announce that they were not going to permit Black women to vote. The south had remained almost solid in its opposition to the Amendment all along. The governor of Georgia declared, "I shall urge the enfranchisement of all white women and the disfranchisement of all Black women on the same plan that Negro men are now disfranchised."<sup>9</sup>

One critic estimated that after the 19th Amendment passed, 3 million women south of the Mason and Dixon line were still disfranchised.<sup>10</sup>

How did the suffrage movement respond to this situation? The NAWSA converted to become the League of Women Voters to educate the new woman voter. The NWP declared that they would remain organized as an autonomous Woman's Party. Some of the women felt strongly that the very future of the Party depended on pursuing the vote for Black women in the south:

*...Never before has there been a trained organization of the leading women of the nation associated together for seven years for the sole purpose of carrying through a Federal amendment. The Woman's Party, if it is to have a future existence, will stand or fall in accordance with the path it chooses in this matter.*<sup>11</sup>

In December, 1920, the NWP urged the introduction into the Congress of an Enforcement Law providing penalties for election officials who disregarded the 19th Amendment. Florence Kelley, of NWP's Advisory Council, wrote to Mary White Ovington of the NAACP,

*She (Alice Paul) considers this by far the most important item of their immediate program, in fact the only one on which all their efforts should be centered until the task is accomplished.*<sup>12</sup>

But as the NWP prepared for a convention to determine the future direction of the Party, it became clear that proBlack sentiments were merely window dressing. The NAACP's request that Mary Talbert of the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs speak at the convention was rejected on the grounds that Talbert's support of an anti-lynching law would inflame the southern members of the NWP!

The issue did not die there, but erupted at the convention in Feb., 1921. A delegation of 60 women from Black organizations in 14 states arrived in Washington several days before the convention. They had difficulty in even getting to see Alice Paul. When they did, they presented her with a memorial that honored the role of the NWP in winning the 19th Amendment and paid tribute to the early pioneers in the women's movement who had also been committed to the struggle against slavery.

Mary Church Terrell led the Black women in asking Paul to use her influence to ask Congress for an investigation of the violations of the new suffrage Amendment. When that request was put before the convention, it was defeated. The major sentiments of the women there were to work for "legal equality."

Sue White, one of the NWP leaders, explained the defeat of the proBlack resolution this way:

*...The whole point was that the Woman's Party, as an organization, is concerned only with discriminations on account of sex, and they (the Black women) were understood as asking us to protect them against discriminations on account of race.*<sup>13</sup>

After the convention the issue was not heard of again. At a meeting of the Executive Committee on May 16, 1921, when the Enforcement Bill came up for discussion, the five women present decided not to take any action for its support.

It was clear that the white women's movement was not really ready yet for sisterhood. If universal suffrage had been a grand principle that had fired the courage of those fighting spirits, the reality was that their racism became operative. The NWP's turn against Black women was the first of a series of decisions that isolated them from the mass base out of which they had drawn their strength.

In 1923 the NWP introduced the Equal Rights Amendment, ERA, a radical feminist proposal that challenged patriarchal values at their root. It was so radical at that time that it drove away most of labor's support (because of its probable threat to protective labor laws for women only).

Just as the women's push for suffrage in 1869 had finally destroyed the common ground between feminists and abolitionists, so the push for the ERA destroyed the coalition which had crossed class and race lines within the suffrage movement. In both instances, supporters of an ostensibly radical position blindly chose a narrow, racist and elitist path.

On the other side, in the 1910s, radical feminism had aligned itself with labor and Blacks to take a progressive position. However, this coalition was not represented within the organizational structure of the NWP, and so in 1920, it had no power for subsequent decision making by the Party.

I have no quarrel with the ERA today. It has become a great symbol for our movement, much as suffrage was in the 1910s. Although introduced in 1923, the ERA finally got through Congress only after it had begun to gather support from labor and Third World people, as well as white middle class women. The maintenance of this coalition is vital to its final success. Radical feminism does not have to choose the narrow way. If the ERA is to be of value to women, it must be of value to Third World women.

In 1920, the NWP represented one of the greatest fighting forces in our history. Yet their decision at the first flush of victory set the organization on a path that isolated it and reinforced racism and class privilege.

The NWP still maintains headquarters in Washington, DC on Capitol Hill. I lived there for a year in 1970, working for the ERA with Alice Paul (then 85) and a handful of other women. The building had become a museum, a shrine filled with memorabilia of its feminist past: posters, feminist periodicals, suffrage

## IGNORANCE *continued from page 8*

will end, when each of us is prepared to put ourselves upon the line to end it, within ourselves, and within our communities. That is real love, that is real power.

We stand as the last bulwark of humanity in an increasingly depersonalized and anti-human world. A search for acceptance within that world must never blind us to the need for genuine and far-reaching change. We must always ask ourselves, what kind of world do we really want to become a part of?

As lesbians and gay men, we have been the most despised, the most oppressed and the most spat upon people within our communities. AND we have survived. That survival is a testament to our strength. We have survived, and we have come together now to use that strength to implement a future; hopefully, a future that shall be free from the mistakes of our oppressors, as well as from our own. What we are doing here this weekend can help shape our tomorrows and a world.

We are going to turn that beat totally around. by Audre Lorde

banners, books, art, statuary. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, the women there were almost totally unable to relate to the new women's movement that was spilling into the streets all around us. Most of the new feminists who came by there did not feel welcome, or could not stand the values that it represented. I believe it is important to understand that what we saw in 1970 was the end product of that series of decisions in 1920.

After 1920, the Black movement turned to nationalism, under Marcus Garvey's leadership. In the south, Black men and women continued to be deprived of their voting rights until a new militant movement erupted in the 50s. It was in that struggle that many women learned the political skills that made our contemporary women's movement strong. Civil rights legislation certainly gave the ERA a boost. Once again, the two movements emerged together. Now, its future is in our hands.

by Marjory Nelson

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## CHICANA *continued from page 11*

### Footnotes

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- 4Enriqueta Longuey y Vasquez, "The Woman of La Raza," *Chicana Status and Concerns* (Los Angeles: Chicana Service Action Center, n.d.).
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- 6"Chicana Regional Conference," *Hi jas de Cuatemoc*, May, 1971.
- 7Maxine Baca Zinn, "Political Familism: Toward Sex Role Equality in Chicano Families," no journal title or date available.