Paloma Martinez-Cruz

# Women and Knowledge in Mesoamerica

## From East L.A. to Anahuac

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PALOMA MARTINEZ-CRUZ



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# *About the Author*

Paloma Martinez-Cruz, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Spanish and teaches language, literature, and Latino Studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. She received her BA in Latin American Literature and Chicano Studies from the University of California at Berkeley, and her PhD in Latin American Literature from Columbia University in the City of New York. She published her translation of Conçeicão Evaristo's Brazilian novel *Ponciá Vicencio* with Host Publications in the spring of 2007. With coauthor Liza Ann Acosta, Martinez-Cruz's article "El Macho: A Performance Perspective Which Tells How the Women of Teatro Luna Became Men" will appear in *Performing the U.S. Latino Borderlands,* to be released by Indiana University Press in 2011. Her creative and scholarly writings have been featured in *PALABRA, Nerter* (Canary Islands), *Voces,* and *Ariel Journal*. A Chicago-based writer from North East Los Angeles, she is a resident of the Pilsen community.

# Women and Knowledge in Mesoamerica

Dedicated to my mother,
Rosa Maria Martinez,
Warrior Woman

# *Acknowledgments*

ALTHOUGH MY DEBT OF GRATITUDE to family, friends, and colleagues can never be repaid, a few names must figure here, the entry lions that create and defend a space for me to think and feel. The work that ensues is the sound of their inexhaustible roar: Rosa Ando Martinez, Richard V. Cruz, Camilo Cruz, Emiliano Vargas, Jaime Vargas, Daniel Gallegos, Dominica Rice, Shanna Lorenz, Amado Carrasco, Agustina Martinez, Ana Montalvo, Patricia Osuna, Carlos Cruz, Sophie Hand, Aaron Michael Morales, Carlos Murillo, Paul Martinez Pompa, Corry Banton, Derek Bell, Brant Veilleux, Patricia Carlos, Leonard Dominguez, Irasema Gonzalez, Silvia Rivera, Janet Garcia, Nuco Villanueva, Roxanna Sooudi, Matt Statler, Matt Krystal, Norval Bard, Stephen Macek, Susan Martin Goodrich, beloved *mociuaquetzque,* and Kenneth Cruz, beloved *huitzilli*. Additionally, the generous time and expertise provided by Bruno Bosteels, Diana Taylor, and Jean Franco were crucial to the development of the present work.

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# *From East L.A.*

I am the one who speaks with God and with Benito Juárez.
I am wise even from within the womb of my mother.
I am the woman of the winds, of the water, of the paths,
because I am known in heaven,
because I am doctor woman.
—*María Sabina*

## A "Xicanita" Approach

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the intellectual traditions of Mesoamerican women. When I first wrote this heading, I mistakenly typed "A Xicanita" instead of "A Xicanista Approach," referring to what Ana Castillo calls a "Xicanista," or decolonial mestiza, way of interpreting society and culture to identify and transcend the consequences of colonization in our lives.[1] I smiled to see the diminutive looking back at me from the screen: Xicanita. Of course, my "Xicanita" was a mistake, a false start. This was not the beginning with which I had intended to launch my study of radical feminist epistemology. If anything, academic inquiry, known for its anti-aesthetic language encasing an "objective" approach, has trained us to locate our studies within the anaerobic environment of a criminal trial, and to distance ourselves from any warmth we may have for the subject of our research. As I have received this sort of training, my first impulse was to simply erase the unintended diminutive, but that's when I discovered that it was too dear, and too unruly, to simply excise. In much less time than it took to wonder whether or not an "ita" belonged there, it had attached itself to the page as an emblem of the way truth claims are

socially situated. The granting of epistemic authority consolidates power, and a Western education teaches us that power does not look like me, read like me, or refer to itself the way I refer to people like me, with notes of affection, familiarity, and playfulness.[2] The "ita" both challenged and inspired me to wonder at how I have so thoroughly internalized the idea that a serious discussion of epistemic authority is no place for a Chicanita, and it made me ask the following questions: If a Chicanita can't be a thinker in this book, then where?[3] If a Chicanita can't be a thinker, then who?

This book examines the Chicana, Native American, mestiza, and *indígena* consolidation of intellectual authority. If not us, then who is in charge of knowledge? Theories of knowledge are not impartial. In the social context in which I write, as a college professor and cultural critic, the centripetal flow characterizes officially sanctioned epistemic projects. I am calling "centripetal" truth claims those that make the self larger, aggrandize the name, individuate the thinking being. The other kind, the "centrifugal" transmissions of knowledge, privilege performances and practices rather than the person generating a discourse, ceding egocentric recognition in favor of the empowerment of the community. Many have developed reasonable descriptions of what I am calling here centripetal and centrifugal flows of intellectual work, and often the binary oppositions of public and private, masculine and feminine, and archive and repertoire are perfectly adequate. However, I view Mesoamerican women thinkers as people who empower their community members through the performance of healing, which is not necessarily private, employing techniques that are not always gender-specific, and frequently these are not ritualized or repeated to the degree that I would risk discussing theirs as a repertoire of performances. Also, for what I am considering to be a centrifugal flow, there need not be hara-kiri feats of self-effacement. Simply put, it is difficult to find ways to describe intellectual authority in Western terms that do not associate knowledge with political hierarchies. A Chicanita approach? Well, why not? Why can't my framework come from a clowning place, a diminutive place, a mistake-making place?

What we have come to know as "legitimate" epistemic authority in the West is an environment of public, dueling discourses. The feminist philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff observes that an iconic image of

Decartes appears to be amused by the idea that his readers will attempt an interpretation of his work:

> Everyone knows the familiar portrait of Descartes which appears in almost all editions. According to Alain, the philosopher is looking humorously at anyone who is about to give an interpretation of his work and saying: "Another one who is going to get it wrong!" This anecdote contains the whole melancholic odyssey of the history of philosophy as an academic tradition: Descartes is looking at his commentator, not the other way around, and, if the commentator is clear-sighted, he or she will bow and say, "I am not worthy to have a conversation with you, sir" (it is I who am continuing Alain's tale here).[4]

Le Dœuff's imagery dismay with the "melancholic odyssey" of philosophical work was something I had already internalized: that "legitimate" philosophical competency is a frenzied fight club, a shaken fist, a swollen *au contraire, mon frére*. (And heaven help you if you are a *soeur*). As a Chicana in the university system, in order to perceive a feminine locus of theoretical work, I had to contend with the sedimentation of "I am not worthy to have a conversation with you, sir."

The problem of locating Mesoamerican women thinkers has long been at the forefront of my field of inquiry. As the idea that women of native cultures were devoid of any original and lasting contribution beyond our culinary talents—and tortilla-as-magnum-opus sung to the tune of "Allá en el rancho grande" was not going to cut it—I was a heavily burdened Chicanita. I was born and raised in East Los Angeles, completing high school in a pregentrified Eagle Rock and moving around Highland Park and Lincoln Heights throughout my childhood, depending on where our divorced mother and father resided. Narrow, tar-veined roads with hairpin bends, chicken coops and citrus trees, Spanish bungalows and the wide, concrete channel of the L.A. River formed the backdrop of my childhood.

My father, Richard V. Cruz (1943–93), had majored in philosophy at California State University of Los Angeles before going on to study law and practice that profession, becoming a Chicano rights attorney of some renown. Mario García has published an edited volume of my father's papers, entitled *Chicano Liberation Theology: Writings and*

*Documents of Richard Cruz and Católicos por la Raza* (2009), which details some of his early Chicano movement activities, such as his role in inciting the Saint Basil's riot that interrupted a televised Christmas Eve mass. My brother Camilo and I never knew when we might be hit with a volley of our father's unsettling questions: Do you believe in time? What is reality? How do you know you're real? He was an atheist in a Catholic, Chicano culture, and although at that time I had been content to defer to the impassioned doctrine delivered by his Catholic mother, he insisted that we engage in debates on the nature of things. Also, his answers to my own questions often proved to be as provocative as the questions he posed. I once asked him if he had a hero, and he answered without hesitation, "Mao Zedong." When I asked him who if not God, then, created the universe, his rapid-fire response was, "Chicanos."

When Dad managed to wrangle a moderately stimulating conversation out of one of my friends (by tenth grade I was usually in the company of Anglo guys who attended community college and read Rimbaud in French, preached about B. F. Skinner, and skipped class to visit museums), he gleefully pronounced him a philosopher. (And I do mean *him*—it was always a male person who won this exalted appellation). From those Northeast L.A. kegger-and-garage-band days, I knew I just had to figure out how to be one of those myself: someone who read lots of important books, had deep thoughts, and seemed to always know when to bust out the most important theories to demolish their opponent in an argument. To round out my education in self-hatred, I was an urban, eastside child during the 1980s, a decade in which Latinos were far from fashionable, and the Valley Girl who frequented the Sherman Oaks Galleria, dressed like a *Breakfast Club* era Molly Ringwald and spoke like Moon Unit Zappa was the reigning queen of youthful Angelino womanhood.

Although I had no access to what I would then have described as Mesoamerican philosophers, our Chicano movement parents provided us with a stream of information about alternative ways to imagine epistemic authority. I was a child when I first came into contact with the concept of the shaman's journey. My mother had long been a participant and occasional staff person in the psychotherapy sessions of Salvador Roquet. Dr. Salvador Roquet coauthored with Dr. Pierre Favreau *Los alucinogenos: De la concepción indígena a una*

*nueva psicoterapia,* in which he described the collaborative investigation of the clinical potential of *psilocibina* (hallucinogenic mushrooms). I was about eight years old when our mother returned from a trip she had taken with Roquet to Huautla de Jiménez in Mexico. She wore a white cotton T-shirt on which was embroidered a cluster of little mushrooms—a free-thinking Puerto Rican mom during the height of Nancy Reagan's War on Drugs campaign. Once ingested, the mushrooms took their host beyond ordinary perception, and Mom claimed that the experience was worth years upon years of conventional therapy (to which she was no stranger). Her journey to Huautla de Jiménez and her work with Roquet had changed her life.

In 1965, Roquet was the head of the mental health department of the Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores and was frustrated that all known methods in psychotherapy met with the same obstacles. With each technique, patients would become blocked by mental and spiritual levels of resistance in their progress. The Argentine Tallaferro School and the psychedelic movement of the United States provided him with a Western theoretical framework that he synthesized with Mesoamerican pharmacology that had been a part of care delivery in the region for thousands of years. He and his staff made their way to Huautla in 1967, where a Mazatec shaman by the name of María Sabina conducted their first mushroom ceremony and became the individual that most informed and inspired Roquet's ensuing research and practice.

When I was just sixteen I participated in a workshop called a *convivencia* (convivial). Roquet had designed a series of exercises that would simulate the effects of the mushroom ceremony. Without the benefit of hallucinogens, he provided participants with an approximation of the stages of the shaman's ecstatic journey, combining indigenous concepts with Western clinical methodology. I recall undergoing strenuous physical activities that at the time seemed completely arbitrary. In a group of about thirteen men and women from Mexico and the United States, we were paired to face each other while kneeling upright on our knees. We were required to whack the ground in front of us repeatedly with a sopping wet towel. I tired very quickly from the exertion of this activity, and staff people took turns visiting me to insist that I try harder to remain upright and to continue whacking. Another group member was overwhelmed with fury and was soon

screaming at the top of his lungs as he vented his pain on the towel and the unyielding cement beneath it. Long after everyone else had made peace with their towel, he raged with his entire body and voice until there was nothing left to expel. He lay on the cement sobbing, and staff members helped him up to take him for a personal interview with Roquet. The participant came back to the group later in the day to resume the chores we had to complete: acting out dramatic scenes from our past, wrestling with each other in groups of two, painting our animal nature on long lengths of butcher paper—we never knew what we would be asked to do next. Roquet was an affectionate yet stern presence who appeared and disappeared without warning as we performed our tasks. When he looked at me I felt excited and afraid; eager to do my best yet anxious that under his knowing gaze, my mental health would earn me a poor grade.

At one point, on the second and last night of the weekend-long convivial, we were awakened by the relentless sounds of stereo chaos. Punk rock and speed metal blended unceremoniously with television commercials, militant Nazi marches, symphonies, African drumming—a raging cacophony accompanied us as the staffers led us blindfolded into another room, positioning us in groups of two, propping us against each other back to front on the carpeted floor. We were instructed to inhale and exhale deeply and rhythmically while our partner massaged our sternum with what I considered to be an uncomfortable amount of pressure. I let out a scream that came from the helplessness caused by the weight on my sternum and by being forced to assimilate an invisible stranger's pace of breath. The complete loss of control, the chaos, and the physical imposition of another person controlling the rhythm of my breath worked to break down all my tolerance and led me into despair. I was raw and emotional as the stereo chaos gave way to the softer, more benign sounds of gentle music and the breaking dawn.

Once our blindfolds were removed, we joined Roquet, who was seated on a low sofa at the edge of a blanket. We gathered around the blanket's perimeter after we had finished our drawing and writing assignments. We used crayon on paper to draw pictures of subjects as abstract as "My God," "My Faith," "My Work," and as concrete as "My Mother" or "My Children." I remember feeling an overachiever's sense of pride at having made recognizable likenesses of family members

and other images. They did not tend to be as "neurotic" as those of some of my peers, which I managed by shrewdly avoiding the black and red crayons and the use of a palmar grip. But when it was my turn in the hot seat (we took turns in groups of two sitting in the middle with our drawings and family photos spread out around us), Roquet pointed out that I was merely hiding. I was covering up the truth. I was unwilling to look underneath the tip of the iceberg and subject to scrutiny my true emotional world. He did not allow me to leave the hot seat until a new and more precise, yet less perfect, portrait had emerged.

In the native tradition, Roquet held that mental, physical, and emotional healing could never be separate from spiritual healing. He and his colleagues founded a clinic based on indigenous pharmacology and spirituality called the Pyschosynthesis Institute. In *Los alucinógenos,* Dr. Roquet describes the phases of the ecstatic journey upon which the convivial is based. "Chaos," in the sessions in which psychoactive substances are used, is an early stage. In the convivial version—the only one that would be legally permitted within the United States—the chaos state is one of the final phases of the work, and each of the physical and emotional tasks that participants undergo over the course of the weekend is used to break down repressive impulses of the individual's personality in order to be vulnerable to the chaos moment. The exalted state of sensitivity and emotion produced by the different exercises leads to the culmination of the work, a state in which participants experience love as an essential condition of life. For Roquet, "God," "energy," and "love" were equivalent concepts. Healing occurred when participants recognized their ability to invent their lives and become vehicles of transformation.

After Roquet's passing, I volunteered with his daughter Ivon Roquet as a Spanish and English translator and staff person when she visited the United States to hold weekend or day-long workshops. It felt right to be doing what I could to help the Psychosynthesis Institute's representatives that developed mental health programs for incarcerated and migrant farm labor populations as well as attending to the needs of their traditional clients. The sessions were always bilingual, and while the exercises were based on Mesoamerican cosmogony, never was there a politics of trying to exclude or reverse the imprint of Western culture.