

ONE NATION

VIVA LA RAZA: A HISTORY OF CHICANO IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

BY YOLANDA ALANIZ AND MEGAN CORNISH
Red Letter Press, 2008

IN THE SPRING OF 2006, LATINA/O STUDENTS walked out of their classrooms to protest federal legislation that would make living and working in the US without following proper immigration procedure a felony. Their organization and passionate resolve might have been surprising to someone not versed in the history of Latina/o student activism. But vocal resistance and organized demonstration is a hard-earned legacy of young Latina/os, Chicana/os, and Mexican-Americans. Many of the students who spoke out during that spring were born in the US or living here with proper documentation, and were not subject to the legislation themselves.

The term “Chicana/o” refers to a US citizen - either by birth or long-term residence and naturalization - of Mexican descent. Chicanos are distinct from Mexican nationals who live in the US, recent immigrants, and people with Central-or South American roots.

When the authors of *Viva la Raza* describe the Chicana/ o student activists of the 1960s and 1970s - who demanded the right to speak Spanish on campus, and see an end to the Vietnam War - their words could be easily transposed to the scene in 2006:

“Their protests and demands received wide support from the largely working class Chicana/o community, in contrast to white middle-class students activists who were generally isolated from their conservative and disapproving families. In addition, Chicana/o youth drew no firm dividing line between campus-, labor-, and community struggles. They felt a special connection to *la comunidad* (the community) and to their families who had made great sacrifices to enable them to get a higher education.”

Authors Alaniz and Cornish tell the story of Chicana/ o activism in bruising detail and with thorough

theoretical context. The writing of Stalin, Marx, and Lenin make up the theoretical basis for the work. Alaniz and Cornish collaborated on a comprehensive survey of Chicana/o resistance history, but with four sharply critical eyes. This isn’t the inspiring story of the great Chicana/o resistance leaders, although they are honored in its pages. Alaniz and Cornish are activists to the bone, and they want to show us how racism, sexism, and misguided nationalism have held the Raza movement back.

Alaniz was one of the early Chicana student activists at University of Washington, an experience she describes in an appendix that is one of the only documents of its kind. She was deeply involved in *La Raza*, the Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women. Cornish, a well-known socialist thinker, was involved in other resistance groups and worked in coalition with *La Raza*. Both women wanted to explore the detailed history and theoretical undercarriage of the movement. They also wanted to address internal struggles in *el movimiento*: the separatist rhetoric, sexism, and homophobia that threaten the objectives of *La Raza*.

Stand alongside

The energy on high school and college campuses in 2006 was the latest in a resistance movement that has been going strong since 1848, when the current southern border was established by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Under article IX of the treaty, those living in the annexed area were granted US citizenship, and all the rights that come along with it. Ever since, “racist terror against Chicanas/os has effectively denied them the most basic rights of citizenship.” Chicana/ os have continually faced segregation, forced assimilation, and violence at the hands of authorities and civilians without justice. They have also continually organized resistance movements, dissolved, and reunited for the fair treatment and freedom promised in the treaty.

Chicana/os are primarily fighting white supremacy and racial discrimination in the US. This is the foremost issue, and it comes before concerns of class discrimination and Chicana/o rights as organized workers. The authors point out “Chicanas/os are the biggest

Latina/o grouping in the US, which makes them a connecting link between all Latina/ o ethnicities in the country.” When another Latino group is facing discrimination based on their nationality, and not just the color of their skin, the Chicana/os that stand alongside them are fighting racism and xenophobia directed at people who look like them.

According to Alaniz and Cornish, the movement for the Nation of Aztlán has distracted Chicana/os from fighting racism within the context of the United States working class. According to their stated characteristics of nationhood” - common language, culture, territory and economic life” - Chicanos do not qualify, owing largely to the lack of consolidated territory and distinct economy. The authors debunk the notion of a separate Chicano state, and warn against nationalist rhetoric as a saboteur of effective resistance against economic oppression in the US. Creating “‘ethnic purity’ through exclusive public institutions, such as schools, labor unions, and churches,” will not redress

the situation of any oppressed group. The mission of Chicana/o resistance is - and has traditionally been - to be equal, not separate. Nationalist ideas run counter to socialist principles, which “advocate the unforced, natural combination of cultures that evolves when people live together democratically.”

Curiously, *Monthly Review* Press had planned to publish *Viva la Raza* in 2006. A letter from Red Letter Press, which published the work two years later, says, “After initially approving the manuscript, the editors [at Monthly Review Press] decided it was too brazen in its opinions...” It’s not hard to imagine that most people who come across *Viva La Raza* will take issue with some of Alaniz and Cornish’s ideas. Nonetheless, their theoretical frame of classical socialist theory, and the facts of history - stated simply and in chronological, geographical order - are anchored by touchstone events in popular memory, and are convincing enough to infuriate, but too sane to dismiss.

—Ann Raber

Dear *Left Turn* Editors,

Thank you for publishing Ann Raber’s thoughtful review of Red Letter Press’s new book, *Viva la Raza: A History of Chicano Identity and Resistance*, by Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish. I’m sure it will encourage readers to examine this important work on the nature of the Chicano struggle and the thrilling history of La Raza.

Authors Alaniz and Cornish would like me to clarify that their book’s theoretical roots include not only Marx and Lenin, but also Leon Trotsky, especially in his analysis of divisions within the working class and the treachery of Stalinism. They support only one product of Stalin — his analysis of the National Question, which they believe owes much to the close political oversight of Lenin.

Another clarification is needed on Ms. Raber’s statement that the authors believe that, for Chicanos, “race discrimination...is the foremost issue, and it comes before concerns of class discrimination and Chicana/o rights as organized workers.” As a matter of fact, a key point raised by the authors is that such cultural nationalism is a destructive force because it promotes race solidarity over lines of class and they give numerous examples where this has played out in the movement. They identify class as the essential unifying factor between workers of different races, nations, sexual identities and genders. Workers who suffer double and triple layers of oppression provide invaluable leadership to the working class as a whole because those on the bottom have few illusions about the nature of the system. This is one of the main reasons that it is in labor’s strongest interests to confront all forms of bigotry and divisiveness within its ranks...

Again, many thanks to Ann Raber and *Left Turn* for their serious treatment of this major contribution to Marxist writings on race and nation.

Sincerely,

Helen Gilbert, Red Letter Press, Managing Editor

Reprinted by **Red Letter Press**
4710 University Way NE #100, Seattle, WA 98105 • (206)985-4621
RedLetterPress@juno.com • www.RedLetterPress.org