

Elizabeth Martinez and Enriqueta Longeaux y Vasquez, "Viva La Raza, Raza, Raza ..."

People once said that the Mexican-American was one of the United States' best-kept secrets. We, the second largest minority group in this country, were almost unknown people outside our own communities and we were hardly to be seen in the history books. No one even knew how many of us lived here. But today we are becoming aware as a people, we are finding ourselves as a people, we are uncovering our history. And as we do so, we are arising to be heard. We want to be heard by all but we especially want our own people to hear-and to rise in united pride, united action.

Across the country we see the stirring of our people everywhere. From Denver to Delano, from the fields of Texas to the big city barrios of Los Angeles, from Oregon to Florida and in the middle states of Wisconsin, Indiana, Kansas, everywhere the Raza lives and works, there is movement. With the rousing Chicano handclap and cheers of "Raza, Raza, Raza, Raza," and the stamping of feet, we can feel that a new era has begun for the Chicano. We feel it in the air, it is written in the wind, it is on people's faces everywhere. Like a volcano we stir, and in the rumble we hear "Chicano Power," "Brown Is Beautiful," "*Somas Hijos del Sol*," (We are Children of the Sun), "*Viva La Raza*," "*Viva Zapata*," and the rumble and the echoes grow louder with more harmony and unison each day.

Our people are on the march in all levels of life, awakening and demanding justice in the schools, in employment, civil rights, housing, the welfare program, the churches, on the land, in the military, and even behind prison walls. After decades of being lynched and displaced; after decades of being herded into migrant camps for mere survival; after decades of being pushed off our land and being forced into the cities where we end up on welfare; after decades of being punished and shamed for speaking our own language and living our own culture; after decades of giving our bodies for dying in wars that are not ours, our people are saying *BASTA YA! ENOUGH!*

We want to determine our own destiny. We do demand justice and equality within this country, but we want to decide that equality on our own terms. In all the stirring and movement that can be seen today, there is something more than a drive for "first-class citizenship." There is a deep probing-a deep search for self. We move to be ourselves: to be brown, to assert our Mexican roots. We say that we have millions of brothers and sisters to the south of us and our strength lies in the fact that we are a *majority* and not a *minority* in America-the continent. We seek to be something other than white, Anglo, gringo, something other than what the majority of this country imposes upon us and would like us to be. To the Chicano of today, equality does not mean becoming a carbon copy of white middle-class America. It means "to be" in the deepest sense.

As archaeologists dig up the cities of old Mexico and of the southwestern United States, we are bringing up our true past from its long burial and listening to old voices. We marvel as the hidden treasures of our farsighted forefathers come to light again. We learn more and more that our cultural roots have long been here, and that the border between

Mexico and the United States is but an imaginary line—a line which does not break up culture and kinship ties. We are rediscovering our Indian roots and heritage that date back twenty-five thousand years. We see the common elements that unite us and refuse to be divided any longer as the white man has tried to keep us divided for centuries. With these discoveries, we know that we do not need to try to be something we are not. We do not need to live in conflict with ourselves.

We call ourselves by various names today but most of them suggest the new affirmation of who and what we are. "La Raza" means in Spanish "the race" and stands for the blending of predominantly Indian and Spanish peoples who were our ancestors—the blend that we are today. The essence of La Raza is that we are a mestizo people, a mixed people, a blend of races and culture.

Today among many young men and women, the most popular name is Chicano (or Chicana). We are not sure about the origin of this word. Some say Chicano is derived from a word used by the Aztecs which they pronounced "Meshicano." Since the Spaniards had no "sh" sound in their language, they tended to write the word as Mexicano. However, the last part of the word as pronounced by the Aztecs survived—"shicano" or Chicano.

It isn't clear, in this theory, whether "Meshicano" referred to the Aztecs themselves—our indigenous ancestors—or to the children of mixed Indian and Spanish parentage, which is what we are. But there does seem to be good reason to think the word is old. Then, some thirty years ago, "Chicano" became common again in the slang of the streets—especially in California. Because of that "lower-class" association, many conservative Raza have not liked the term. The young people like it and have adopted it, "because it is something that I choose to be called, not something Mexico chose to call me or, even more important, not something the gringo has named me."

There are Raza who call themselves "Mexican-Americans." This is a term most often used by the white society, along with "Spanish-surnamed" or "Spanish-speaking Americans." The problem with Mexican-American is that it suggests Mexicans are something different from Americans, when in fact we were "Americans" long before the pilgrims or anybody else from Europe landed. Of course, "America" is a European term itself. But if we use the word, and we don't have much choice, then we should remember that America is a continent—not a country. We must realize that the United States has assumed the name of the whole continent for itself, much to the disgust of many Latin Americans. The "America Love It or Leave It" slogan is laughed at by Chicanos and Indians, who say: "I buy that. When are they going to leave?"

And there are still more terms used by our people to describe themselves: Indo-Hispanos, Latinos, Hispanos. It depends on what village, town, city, or state, what age group, what social class, the person belongs to. In many mountain villages, where families date back for several hundred years, some of our people call themselves "Hispanos" or even "Spanish." The term Spanish-American is preferred by many middle-class Raza who have "made it" and wish to relive the gentlemanly *patron* of the era of Spanish

colonization. Among our people the most widely used word is probably Mexicano-not the English "Mexican" but our Spanish word, *Mexicano*, which has a brotherly feeling of warmth and acceptance.

This discussion of names is not just a matter of arguing over words. It reflects our whole struggle for what some people call "identity" -the affirmation of who and what we really are; and learning to be proud of it instead of ashamed. This new pride has come to us from the feeling we today call Chicanismo. It is often a difficult thing for the Anglo to understand. The concept and understanding that if you do not know your roots, your past culture, you are nothing.

White America might understand our demands for civil rights or decent pay, because that is demanding what is ours under *their* rules. But it cannot comprehend the idea that we may not want to be part of the so-called "mainstream of society." It does not occur to them that we may frown upon the non-culture imposed on us. That we may not totally believe that life consists of working for money to buy things. That we may not want to sell ourselves to "get ahead in the world," because in the United States that means forgetting other human beings for the sake of a new color TV. That we have joy in being what we are, in discovering ourselves. That we are a very strong people.

We have found sanity in being Chicano, for it is in our Chicanismo that we have come to see all of the cancer in the dominant white society and we know that we don't want to be that sick. We want a society that will function for human beings, we have solutions and we refuse to become robots that walk in death.

One of the best ways to judge the values of a society is by looking at how it defines *freedom*. The Anglo society, like other Western societies, thinks mostly in terms of freedom *from* something. The heritage of La Raza talks in terms of freedom *to be* something-to be productive, to be loving and participate in care for others, to be alive as a fun human being. It is like the difference between being free from responsibilities, and being free to have responsibilities. We thrive on human involvement and devoting time to others, be they our family or close friends. The majority society may think that when they put their old people in "rest homes," they are freed from a burden. For us, caring and learning from our elders is a part of living. After all, if one does not love and care for one's family and others, what else is there worth doing?

These are but a few of the beliefs and reasons for our new pride in being Raza. Our new sense of identity is not just a matter of taking pride in talking our own language or eating our own food and loving our own music. Chicanismo is *carnalismo*-blood brotherhood and sisterhood, a feeling of unity among our people. And this goes beyond, to a feeling for all people. "*Mi casa es tu casa*" or "*Esta es tu casa*"—my house is your house, this is your house—the phrase expresses a basic openness toward people as fellow creatures on this planet.

Today we often hear the Mexicano or the Indian described as "passive," "humble," or "meek" when in fact the person is simply open and honest and not playing the role game

of the Western world. Many times words such as these show us the conflict between cultures. In English, "humble" means low in station, unimportant, like a servant. In Spanish, *humilde* describes a person with a deep feeling for others, a respect and a kind of human concern. It is a good thing to be called. It helps explain the endurance of La Raza and the Indians—an endurance far beyond anything the white society understands or is capable of feeling.

An these values we assert as we cease to be the nation's "best-kept secret." And as we stand up to speak, to be heard, the world has begun to listen. For although we may be looked upon as a minority here, we are a minority with an ancient geography and history on our side. A minority with a history of our own, that was here long before the "majority." A minority that, like the Indians, has specific legal treaties with the United States to protect our rights as a people.

We are, above all, a "minority" with indestructible deep roots in the land. The relationship of Raza to the land is one of the most important facts of history. Raza relates strongly to the land, not only in terms of written treaties and in terms of ownership but also in terms of the land being an ever-existing power; a spiritual link; a source of life and a hope that never ceases.

La Raza has drawn a deep strength from many of these basic feelings and we find them contained in the concept of Aztlan—the name of the Chicano nation the homeland which many of us are committed to rebuilding. The homeland of Aztlan lies not only in the countryside but also in the cities, everywhere that Raza may be. Rebuilding it means not only claiming our rights, but restoring our unity as a people, affirming our historic values, our culture, our spirit—the source of our enduring strength.

As La Raza becomes more alive, more awake, more intense, the dominant society with all its power looks on in puzzlement, wonder and fear. Sometimes it tries to crush us with brute force, and sometimes it tries to buy us off. And all the time, it is making more and more "studies" of us, more evaluations more investigations. Today we are being studied, surveyed, observed, and studied again. Colleges have made studies agencies have made studies, everybody is studying us. And what is our answer to all this studying and surveying? All around, La Raza is saying *BASTA YA!*

We are learning more and more that the ones who need to be studied are the majority society and its freak mentality that guides this country. We have learned that it is not we who are the problem, but the gringo mind. We have understood his system and his misguided attitudes, we know well how he operates and thinks. We have learned what he stands for. We are tired of listening to him talk about us. We are going to be the ones to talk about us. We are going to make our own studies, tell our own stories, write our own books. We are going to speak for ourselves—and in a language that La Raza understands, with concepts and ideas that existed long before English was used in the Southwest.

As we affirm our worth as a people, as we become more and more conscious that we have a noble past, a rich culture, and beautiful human values, we begin to wonder why

they built a bad image of us, why they tried to destroy something that is ours-something that is beautiful. And as we find some answers, we question even more and more and more. WHY? WHY? WHY? The more we look, the more answers we find.

It becomes clear that in the search for the truth about ourselves, we must recognize and throw off the BIG LIES of the Anglo society and its institutions. We must question the actions and teachings of every branch of that society. By institutions we mean the political, educational, spiritual, judicial, all of them, large and small. We must tear away the shroud of distortion, hypocrisy, and just plain falsity that has been wrapped around us-and all other oppressed peoples—for centuries.

The biggest lie, the root of all the other lies, is that the Anglo belongs here and we are the immigrants—that this country with all its wealth should be the property of the gringo, and we are foreigners in his land. The gringo has called Mexicans "wetbacks" because there is a river that draws a so-called border between Mexico and the U.S.A., and people have often crossed it by swimming or just walking. The gringo forgets about his own great swim across the Atlantic Ocean, when our ancestors had already been here for centuries. Among Raza, we know who the real "wetback" is.

From the first lie comes still another: that only the Anglo society's values-competition, "getting ahead," consuming-are good values, and that this is a way of life that everybody should accept. White makes right, so get with it, they say. But what about our ancestors and their way of life? Is it possible that these so-called savages could teach the white man some basic lessons? Is it possible that they have much to tell Raza today, as we struggle to create a new society?

A vital part of the present Raza movement is uprooting those lies and putting the truth back into history. The real history of our Raza is one of the most important issues of the day for us. All other issues, all the oppression we face, arise from the past. We cannot draw sharp lines between past, present, and future, as many Western cultures do. We have a different sense of time. We see that the occurrences of today are the result of past history, and we need to reveal all that history in order to build for the future. Because our roots and part of our ancestry lie in America, we have a strong base on which to build our own destiny.

To us, history is not just an abstract study of facts, but a study of human beings-their societies and their ideas. Our history must be treated as a history of peoples, cultures, and a land. This means looking at history without the borderline between the United States and Mexico, it means recognizing that the Southwest was once the northern part of Mexico, it means seeing that there are links between us and Mexico that have not, and cannot, be destroyed. So when we speak of Mexico, we are speaking of a land before there were borders, before there were the concepts of property and land ownership as the Europeans know them. We cannot think of our history merely in terms of the United States. Our history is largely a history of the natives of this continent, a history of the very roots of civilization in America.

This brings us to another of the big lies: that American history began with the arrival of the white man on this continent, and nothing really important or worthwhile existed before that. Columbus "discovered" America, Cortes "discovered" Peru-all the history books talk that way, as if the Indians who lived here never existed or never had any kind of civilization. They were labeled superstitious "savages" by ignorant Europeans, who say that the Indians' life style and values have no use or meaning in today's modern world. This is, of course, the way white society looks at all of us-brown, black, red, yellow. The only history worth talking about began with the white man, according to him.

Let us take a look at life in America before Columbus, for it is through this that we will learn who the "savage" really is, and we will take pride in realizing that we come from a very "civilized" people. Let us not look just at the monuments people built or the wars they fought, but also at the kind of human beings they were-how they related to the universe, the land, and to each other; how they thought of life and death, how the young and old related. Let us begin by learning and writing *our* kind of history.