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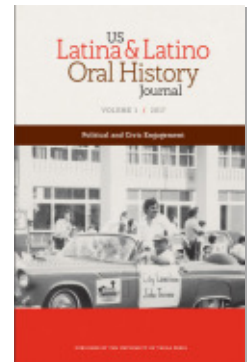
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Historical Interpretation

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# Raza Unida Party Women in Texas: Oral History, Pedagogy, and Historical Interpretation

EMILIO ZAMORA

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This article emerged out of an effort to provide graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin opportunities to understand the theory and practice of oral history in a classroom setting. The students were also expected to collectively plan and carry out a project that focused on the experiences and retrospective assessments of nine former female members of the Raza Unida Party, a third party that fielded candidates in the 1972, 1974, and 1978 Texas statewide elections. The hands-on approach involving the exercise of recovering Mexican American and women's history through oral narratives and *testimonios* optimized the students' learning experience in oral history and generated new knowledge and preliminary analysis on the importance of women in Mexican American history. The classroom experience had special importance for the all-female and ethnically mixed group of students who were able to share and valorize their feminist values and views in preparation for their encounter with the Raza Unida Party women. Martha Cotera, one of the narrators, provided a valuable conceptual tool for analyzing the views of her fellow Raza Unida Party members on inequality, power, and agency. Women, according to Cotera, were the "backbone" of the party.

**T**HIS ARTICLE OFFERS AN INTERPRETATIVE ACCOUNT OF AN ORAL HISTORY project that provided graduate students hands-on experiences in generating oral narratives and testimonial records on Mexican American and women's history. Conducting interviews, creating oral history, and organizing public *testimonios* as part of a classroom project generated important benefits, including enriched relations among interviewers and narrators, group learning, cross-fertilization of ideas on the method and theory of oral history, and valuable contributions to the production of knowledge on Mexican American and women's history. If our statement on this classroom project encourages more colleagues in Mexican American studies

KEYWORDS  
Mexican American women, Raza Unida Party, pedagogy, essentialism, *testimonio*

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to use oral history as a pedagogical and research tool and to publish their accounts, this article will have made yet another contribution.<sup>1</sup>

Our primary concern in the seminar course *Memory, History, and Oral Narratives: Mexican American Politics in Texas History* was to provide students a full learning experience, including a self-conscious and reflective learning process of discovering, recovering, and creating knowledge with the use of oral narratives. I also sought to improve the students' knowledge of Mexican American history, especially the important themes of gender relations and a feminist critique of patriarchy in the Mexican American social movement of Texas during the 1970s. My third purpose was to direct students' collective effort toward an analytic understanding of key findings in the research project. The strategy of essentialism as a component of the feminist critique and the Mexican American women's call to action emerged as a salient finding that became a central point of interpretation for the class.

The subject of the seminar was the political activism by Mexican American women in the Raza Unida Party (RUP) of Texas, the state political party that led a third-party challenge against the Democratic and Republicans parties in 1972, 1974, and 1978.<sup>2</sup> Participants also sought to underscore the importance of oral narratives as a means of recovering lost or misconstrued pasts in Mexican American and women's history. Revising the current knowledge about Mexican women by relying on the activists' reflections and voices added to the social value of the project. Aside from creating a singular set of oral narratives and collecting documentary materials, the course offered the students the opportunity to participate in a collective effort to plan and author a research project, as Michael Frisch reminds us, in sharing interpretations with our narrators.<sup>3</sup>

The major challenge in the course was to manage a large number of tasks by the nine graduate students in a one-semester seminar. Their duties included preparing for multiple interviews, conducting and transcribing the interviews, preparing preliminary analysis, and participating in an ongoing process of collective learning with class discussions, student-narrator conversations, and student presentations. Extensive planning measures, however, alleviated their responsibilities and ensured optimal learning opportunities. Selecting a history topic that I knew firsthand eased the students' work. Extensive preparation for the course—including the selection of the subjects, securing the necessary funding, preparing preliminary biographical information on the narrators, and making logistical arrangements—also helped. Last, Martha Cotera, one of the interview subjects who lives in Austin, helped with the planning activities, including visiting my class on two occasions to participate in discussions on assigned readings on the history of the RUP and *Mujeres por La Raza Unida Party (Mujeres)*, the party's feminist caucus. She also took part in two one-hour interviews that three students planned and conducted in the classroom. The designated students also led a class discussion on planning, executing, and interpreting an oral history project.<sup>4</sup>

## The Raza Unida Party

The idea of a third party emerged in 1969 when members of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) met in San Antonio and decided to challenge both the exclusionary practices of the major parties and the pro-Democratic Party politics of an older generation of leaders associated with the League of United Latin American Citizens and the American GI Forum. José Ángel Gutiérrez, a founder of MAYO, and Luz Bazán, an early member of the student movement and MAYO, made use of the organization's reach into South Texas to call for a community-grounded plan to challenge racial thinking, discrimination against Mexican Americans, and Anglo-controlled politics in various South Texas towns, including Crystal City, Carrizo Springs, Cotulla, and Robstown.<sup>5</sup>

Gutiérrez and Bazán established their organizing agenda for local community control at Crystal City, where they joined local activists connected with Ciudadanos Unidos, the group that would become the RUP's local organizational base. By January 1970, three hundred Mexican Americans had joined the organization, and its leadership had filed for party status in Zavala, La Salle, and Dimmitt counties. After winning two city council majorities, two school board majorities, and two mayoralties in three South Texas towns, RUP members attending their 1971 state convention in San Antonio decided to pursue a statewide progressive platform that included opposition to the Vietnam War, support for workers' and women's rights, and calls for Mexican American community control and bilingual, bicultural education. In the process, Mexican American communities energized their opposition against racial thinking, discrimination, and inequality. Despite a broad progressive appeal, the RUP continued focusing on Mexican Americans and alienated potential allies in urban areas outside the predominantly Mexican American region of South Texas. A predisposition by Texas voters to think racially no doubt also contributed to self-serving perceptions by white progressives that the RUP offered a limited agenda for change.

After a spirited door-to-door statewide campaign to gather the necessary voters' signatures to place the party on the 1972 ballot, the RUP offered a slate of candidates that included Ramiro "Ramsey" Muñoz, an attorney from Waco, and Alma Canales, a student from Edinburg, for the positions of governor and lieutenant governor, respectively. RUP candidates also ran for state treasurer and a seat on the railroad commission and the state board of education. Still concerned with conditions in the predominantly Mexican region of South Texas, RUP candidates rounded off the effort by running for posts in at least five counties. Muñoz, the top vote getter on the RUP ticket, garnered 6 percent of total votes cast for governor, most of his support coming from Mexican American voters in South Texas, along with some African Americans from urban areas like Houston.

Although the RUP's statewide showing was not as impressive as expected, especially in the elections of 1974 and 1978, the party recorded some notable local victories

in the 1972 election and subsequent ones over the following two years. Moreover, its leadership energized the cause for equal rights with a self-righteous voice for marginalized Mexican American communities in approximately forty counties in Texas and in other parts of the country. That the third-party cause did not go unheeded became evident as the leadership of the Democratic Party of Texas—also under pressure from the urban-based coalition of labor, minorities, and progressives to set itself apart from the Republican Party—began to pay more attention to Mexican Americans. A more liberal Democratic Party eventually contributed to the greater participation of Mexican Americans in Democratic Party politics, a conservative (mostly white) flight into the Republican Party, and the demise of one-party rule in Texas. This important turning point also led to the emergence of the Republican Party in the 1980s as a formidable player and new one-party rule by Republicans. The growing ideological consistency and clarity for progressive change in the Democratic Party provided a more rational and democratic process for incorporating Mexican Americans into the body politic beginning in the 1980s. Moreover, the increased presence and influence of Mexican Americans in Democratic Party politics concurred with the advancement of the idea that the social inequities often assume broader ideological forms such as patriarchy and white supremacy.<sup>6</sup>

Women played prominent roles in the RUP as candidates for office, officers of the organization, leaders in the party's statewide organizing and electoral campaigns, and members of *Mujeres*. As noted earlier, Canales, a student leader from the University of Houston, and Martha Cotera, a librarian in Crystal City, a candidate for membership in the Texas State Board of Education, and a faculty member with the Jacinto Treviño College in Mercedes, led as candidates for statewide positions in 1972. Other party stalwarts included Evey Chapa, an RUP and *Mujeres* officer; Virginia Múzquiz, a 1964 candidate for the Texas Legislature and RUP national chair from 1972 to 1974; and María Elena Martínez, the Texas party chair from 1976 to 1978.

Not unlike the better-known members, María Hernández, Ines Hernández-Avila, Juanita Bustamante, Rosie Castro, and Irma Mireles also contributed to the party with prior associations that gave the RUP its broad appeal and organizational experience. María Hernández, a community activist since the 1930s, offered a long view to the idea of a Mexican American social movement against discrimination and inequality and a woman's claim for equality. Hernández-Avila, a creative writer and cultural activist, used her Nez Percé and Mexican identity and connections with indigenous groups in the United States and Mexico to introduce a pan-indigenous worldview that underscored ancestral claims in the call for equal rights. Juanita Bustamante, a community activist from Laredo, brought her organizing skills to expand the work of the RUP in another way. She was instrumental in forming a party-affiliated social service center in the border town of Laredo. Castro and Mireles, former Democratic Party activists from San Antonio, in contrast, shared organizing experiences in state

electoral politics as Mexican Americans to help manage the party machinery and abide by pertinent election rules.

The general lament among the RUP women was that they faced the same form of patriarchy within the organization as they did in the larger society. They also claimed that they shared in the community experience of racialized discrimination and inequality, and that they had become more identifiable and targetable as they embraced a feminist outlook as Mexican American women. They tried to devise a public campaign against patriarchy that did not appear divisive but enhanced the centrality of *la familia*, the cultural symbol of unity and cooperation in the RUP, by extending the concepts of equality and justice to the women within the real and figurative families that constituted the Mexican community. The solution became evident as a multipart struggle that challenged patriarchy within the party, including the obvious attempts by men to guard and advance their privileges and the equally apparent efforts by other women who accepted patriarchy under the guise of cultural solidarity in the fight against white supremacy. Differences among the women on the issue of patriarchy were especially important because they came to define a more critical and predominant camp of feminists against a smaller group of accommodationists who typically sided with the men on a more restricted form of behavior for the women. The feminists were the women leaders of the RUP and the intrepid activists who established ties with like-minded women outside the party.

According to conversations with Martha Cotera and Inés Hernández-Avila, the *Mujeres* also entered the public arenas alongside other feminists in support of issues such of the reproductive rights of women, equal rights policies, and their underrepresentation in the body politic.<sup>7</sup> They directed one of their most significant public campaigns against the coerced sterilization of minority women. The RUP women also sought out their natural ideological allies in the Texas Women's Political Caucus (TWPC) and the National Women's Political Caucus with the idea of bridging a divide between the party and progressives in the predominantly white women's movement and bringing additional white votes for party candidates. They were not only instrumentalist in their aims. Although *Mujeres* brought their activist members from places like Mercedes, Edinburg, Laredo, Crystal City, El Paso, San Antonio, Austin, Temple, Dallas, and Houston into the TWPC, the white feminist organization did not reciprocate sufficiently. They did not work on behalf of Canales and failed to express any support for progressive RUP candidates even after Sissy Farenthold lost the primary election. They either felt beholden to Dolph Briscoe or to the Democratic Party candidate in 1972, or they were too ambivalent about remaining true to their progressive values. As a result, the *Mujeres* broke with the white feminists in 1973, but not before enduring harsh criticism mostly from their male counterparts who accused them of breaking ranks for the sake of an alliance with progressives who were too invested white supremacy and could not be trusted.

Patriarchy and white supremacy obliged the self-aware RUP women to pursue a politics of solidarity as Mexicans and women within Mexican communities and the larger society. The intersectionality of these axes of differential power and an ethical standard of egalitarian values that guided the RUP women explain the problems that they faced with their fellow Mexican male and female members and white feminists. The most unfortunate challenge that they faced involved opposition within the party and indifference among TWPC adherents to a strategic move that the Mujeres were organically disposed to take in favor of a mutually beneficial alliance. The initiative, in other words, was logically necessary to realize the potential of such an alliance and to test the limits of public pronouncements of ethnic and feminist solidarity against the legacy of racial and gender discrimination in Texas.

Although gender politics within the RUP created difficulties for the women, the moral base of the party's call to action against discrimination, inequality, and white supremacy encouraged and justified the very feminism that challenged patriarchy and sought a natural organizing course beyond the party's fold. Again, according to Cotera and Hernández-Avila, self-consciousness as Mexican women with a singular claim on equality and justice energized the RUP women and gave them a special sense of political purpose. Their troubles in the party, in other words, also represented the opportunity to forge a political identity as feminists and to claim their right to lead. The Mexican feminist foray into the world of white feminists may have approximated a sacrifice of time and effort to the promise of collaboration, but the Mujeres also demonstrated a confident and bold leadership at a time when the RUP was facing difficulties in obtaining support from white progressives in the state.

## **The Oral History Project**

The Raza Unida Party oral history project stands out in at least three ways. The project involved nine student interviewers and nine narrators, all of whom were women. I was the sole male participant as well as the instructor of record and project director. Participants were acutely aware that the project drew special historical significance as an important recovery exercise. Moreover, I had been a supporter of feminists in the RUP and maintained personal and political relations with many of them since the 1970s. Thus, an individual assessment of collective relations informed the work. The friendship and trust that resulted naturally from the narrators' long-lasting associations were especially important in the success of the project, mostly because the RUP women welcomed the opportunity to tell their story in a collective fashion and in a welcoming environment that included young and supportive women researchers.

The project's significance lies in its collective approach to the study of Mexican women and in its interpretations of the fight against patriarchy and white privilege in a political setting that placed Mexican women between organizations and ideologies

representing the Mexican and women's movements of the 1970s. The participation of mostly Mexican graduate students in the seminar that generated the project also gave the effort special meaning. On several occasions, the narrators described the interviews and testimonials as a practice in intergenerational transmittal of information and opinion on Mexican American history and women, and the students often expressed a deep sense of responsibility in the production and use of historically significant knowledge for the Mexican community. This imbued the project participants with a special sense of responsibility that underscored the importance of knowledge production in Mexican American and women's history, as well a close adherence to professional standards in interviewing, transcribing, and interpreting oral interviews.

The interviews and testimonials provided ample evidence to support the claim by some of the RUP women that they served as a historical bridge between the RUP and the TWPC. The dual membership that RUP women maintained between two social movements, in other words, provided the opportunity to examine the politicized experiences of women as Mexicans and women, as well as in the negotiating terrain that they inhabited as they sought to build effective unity across racial and gender divides. This complex political setting gave the project its unique interpretative opportunities.

My interest in Mexican American history and involvement in the social movement of the 1960s and 1970s, including RUP and feminist politics, facilitated the planning of the research project and guided my decision to give the course its singular research focus.<sup>8</sup> My familiarity with the work of the women in the party also influenced the research direction of the seminar. I consulted with the narrators before the beginning of the seminar, especially with Martha Cotera and María Elena Martínez in selecting the other seven narrators in the project: Luz Bazán (Yakima, Washington), Elvia Ríos (McAllen), Evey Chapa (Corpus Christi), María Jimenez (Houston), Alma Canales (Waco), Linda del Toro (Austin), and Angelita Mendoza-Waterhouse (Austin).<sup>9</sup>

The selection criteria for the nine narrators emphasized active involvement in a range of RUP activities from among twenty-two women who continued to be active in their communities after their initial involvement in the party.<sup>10</sup> Their availability and the accessibility of travel and per diem funding were determining factors in their selection. They also had to have directly witnessed or participated in important activities in the history of the party. These included the 1972 petition drive, party conventions, establishing community centers, organizing work at Crystal City, campaign work, and meetings and workshops sponsored by Mujeres.<sup>11</sup>

Nine graduate students from the School of Information, the College of Education, and the Department of Anthropology enrolled in the seminar. The students were at different stages in their graduate programs of study and approached the course with the idea of developing methodological and analytical skills, mostly in preparation for the writing of theses and dissertations on Mexican American history and culture. The students were especially interested in advancing their knowledge of interviewing



as well as in improving their understanding of oral narratives as valid and reliable sources of historical information and memory.<sup>12</sup> All the students were women, and four of them identified themselves as Mexican-origin persons. During an initial class discussion dedicated to introductions and brief autobiographical statements, the students defined their subject position in the project and research as feminists interested in joining the long-standing recovery enterprise in Mexican American and women's history and in revising the historical record from the vantage point of the RUP women. This involved an open-dialogue approach that encouraged the students to speak frankly and reflexively about their academic and political interest in women's history, feminist thought, and ethical standards in the study of the past.

Once the semester started, the students began an intense reading schedule on Mexican American history, oral history, and oral narratives. The readings continued as the students began to finalize plans for the visits, the interviews, the *testimonios*, and the recording and transcription work. At this point, the students assumed greater responsibility for the project and made decisions collectively to ensure a student-centered learning process. We arranged for the narrators to visit the campus in groups of three to accommodate their different schedules and the students' availability. Pairs of students hosted each of three narrators and conducted semistructured, videotaped interviews with each of them, following a previously prepared interview schedule with general, open-ended questions. The interviews included questions on their personal biographies, participation in RUP, salient memories on women and gender relations, feminist ideas, and retrospective assessments of the significance and efficacy of the RUP in light of the larger political landscape in Texas since the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

The students were also responsible for transcribing assigned interviews and for assisting in organizing three public *testimonio* fora during which groups of three RUP women each spoke openly and casually about their lives and political work. The students organized the *testimonio* forums, and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the university provided financial support and publicity. Students without direct interviewing responsibilities assumed recording and logistical tasks; that is, they assisted other students with equipment, scheduling, and transcribing responsibilities. Each forum offered reunion-like settings for the RUP women to provide testimonials on their experiences as RUP members and women to audiences totaling approximately thirty mostly Mexican American undergraduate and graduate students, and faculty. The unprecedented experience provided the narrators with the opportunity to share their individual and collective historical memories and their analysis of their role as RUP feminists. Recalling and analyzing the past, in other words, became a mutually reinforcing experience for the participants, especially since they also took part in the planning and implementation of the seminar.

Planning and administering the oral history project in a cooperative fashion benefited the students in two general ways. The technical-logistical experience helped

them develop methodological and social skills as well as a fuller appreciation for systematically planning and implementing a research project with a focused point of inquiry. As an oral history project, the experience, as well as the pertinent readings, also had the advantage of placing the students at the point of the creation of the record, thus affording them a greater awareness of the delicate and contingent nature of evidence, including the subjective process of remembering.

The students and the narrators built familiar and trusting relationships, as well as frank and informative conversations that added depth and breadth to the narratives. During class discussions based on readings on interpreting oral narratives, the students embraced the importance of empathy and understanding as an explicit expression of respect for the narrators and as a research imperative for appreciating the subjective position and experience of the RUP women as individuals and as a historically significant group of women. This enabling disposition also encouraged the RUP women to speak openly, and to offer frank and critical assessments of their lives, as well as their political work and that of others. The RUP women, in other words, added to the success of the research project with their open appreciation for the interest and professional standards of the students and with their expressed agreement to share authority in the process. The seminar's call for open and frank dialogue constituted yet another element that contributed to the success of the project.

The project also faced challenges that limited the learning and research possibilities. First, despite my planning work, the semester was simply too short for students to prepare themselves adequately for the interviews and to interpret them fully. It was especially difficult for some of the students to complete the working biographies of the RUP women because materials were not readily available in our libraries and most narrators had difficulties finding and sending useful materials, such as newspaper articles, letters, and personal statements. The different levels of student preparation, including uneven knowledge of the Spanish language and Mexican American and RUP history, also affected the quality of the narratives, primarily when interviewers lacked important information to ask effective probing questions. Fewer interviews or a two-part course could have allowed us to better plan and conduct the interviews, and improve the learning experience.

Interpersonal tensions posed another set of problems. At least three of the RUP women, for instance, confided that they preferred that the interviewers had been Mexican American women. Two of the three Anglo students in the class sensed the cultural distance and expressed their own concern about the apparent bias of the RUP women. In retrospect, however, ethnic or gender issues did not represent a serious obstacle. I was able to convince everyone involved that biases are a natural consequence of cultural distance, but that we had to make every effort to develop understanding and empathy in our relations for the sake of the research project. Our well-intentioned purpose of empowering the RUP women and valorizing their word may not have met

everyone's expectations, but we did make a serious attempt to adhere to our feminist approach and professional standards in oral history. The instructor also took time to lead a discussion with the students on the unexpected results in research projects, including the disruptive effects of bias and cultural distance in their learning experience, as well as the counterbalancing effect of shared values in the project.

We understood, at least by the time that the students began to communicate regularly with the RUP women, that we would take a feminist stance; that is, the project would seek to recover and valorize their voices as women against patriarchy. Our focus on women as central figures in Mexican American and RUP history, but especially our numerous attempts to make the narrators equal partners in the project, underscored our desire to create a historical record that genuinely reflected their views, values, and opinions. As much as we may try to make oral history reflect our sense of fairness and equality, however, the research process obviously remains an unequal enterprise, and this became evident in our project. Assigned readings on coauthorship and hands-on experiences made it clear to the students that diligent and responsible researchers can appropriate the research process by independently selecting, framing, and analyzing the evidence. The narrators, as Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai note, begin to both share and lose their partnership at that point.<sup>14</sup>

The interviewing process, and especially the *testimonios*, allowed the women to speak freely. Moreover, the research process empowered the RUP women at the same time that the students improved their research and social skills and developed a greater appreciation for the unobstructed voice of women, the nature of evidence, and sound methodological principles. At least two of the student researchers added that the *testimonio* statements were especially instructive because they transported the audience back to the 1970s and gave them a sense of the public speaking that some of the RUP women had used effectively on the stump or during rallies and meetings. The idea of incorporating oral history and *testimonios* into the classroom, in other words, has great pedagogical as well as scholarly merit. This can be demonstrated addressing Cotera's "backbone" observation, a *testimonio* statement that was both personal opinion and a fair summation of similarly expressed views by the other women.

### **The "Backbone" Hypothesis**

Cotera declared that women formed the "backbone" in RUP. Cotera's claim may have offered the most explicit and bold observation that placed women in the center of a historical social movement for equal rights. Although Cotera had expressed her provocative view on previous public occasions, her statement at one of the forums captured the general sentiments of the other RUP women who agreed that their contributions were significant. She also struck an obvious chord with the audience who responded with some of the loudest approving applause and shouts.

Cotera's characterization of Mexican women as the backbone in history frames at least four general observations that the narrators made during the interviews and the *testimonio* events. One of the recurring comments was that women performed an inordinate amount of the mundane tasks such as cooking, secretarial work, caring for children, and planning events for the party. Cotera and Martínez acknowledged that these were necessary activities and that women should be credited with "doing what had to be done" for the sake of the movement and the RUP.<sup>15</sup> The women, in other words, were more responsible and mature, even as some acquiesced to the discrimination and demeaning ideas that undergirded the practice. At the same time, most of the narrators rejected the observed competitiveness that RUP men claimed as their prerogative and posited as a central driving force in the party. Chapa expressed a general observation among the narrators when she noted during her *testimonio* that women were more disposed to be egalitarian and less hierarchical than the men in the RUP and, consequently, more inclined to focus on building coalitions and less concerned with personal or political gain. In other words, the women forged a gendered response within the party embracing a form of strategic essentialism that highlighted women's singular qualities that explained their history.

Bazán reminded us that the women in the RUP also challenged the discrimination with refusals to cooperate and even used it to elaborate critiques that called for the application of democratic principles everywhere, lest the party appear vacuous and hypocritical. During her *testimonio*, Bazán recounted an event at Crystal City to underscore the pervasive nature of gender discrimination and the willingness of the women to challenge the view of women as participants of lesser importance. The men, including Gutiérrez, Bazán's husband, arranged for a visit by Professor Ralph Guzmán from California, and they assumed, as they were accustomed to do under these circumstances, that the women would make the necessary food preparations.

According to Cotera and Chapa, expectations on the part of men that women offer gendered labor practices occurred in a variety of settings, including the work of Ciudadanos Unidos, the community organization that gave rise to the RUP at Crystal City and that hosted the visit by Guzmán. The women had other thoughts on that day. When the professor arrived and the organization convened at a local hall to hear him speak, some of the men noticed that all the women were present, an obvious sign that the food would not be ready. The women announced that the food had not been prepared because they had decided that the event was so important that everyone had to attend. They also took the opportunity to point out that the women had equal rights and that the men had to start acknowledging that basic fact. The good professor agreed with them. Bazán did not explain whether the incident made an appreciable difference in gender relations, and no one in the audience appeared to have asked her. She was obviously more interested in saying that women had resisted—rather than possibly admitting that patriarchy and gender inequality remained

relatively undisturbed in the RUP. This reflects the nuanced nature of contestation in intergroup politics that, according to all the narrators, occurred at numerous sites, including party conventions, Mujeres-sponsored workshops and statewide conferences, informal conversations among RUP members, and electoral campaign meetings.

Cotera also posited that women demonstrated a special backbone by supporting the party and its candidates continuously and enthusiastically, despite the obstacles that they faced, which suggests yet another central role in the RUP. Cotera, as well as Chapa, Jiménez, Canales, and Martínez were unambiguous on this as they pointed to event after event that illustrated their contention. They often pointed to Canales's campaign for attorney general to underscore their point. Canales, without the necessary funds, with great sacrifice and often in the face of danger to her life, waged an almost solitary campaign that became a symbol of commitment and determination in the party. Martínez, however, built a reputation as a thoroughly committed and hardworking state chair between 1974 and 1978. Jiménez gave the audience a taste of the sharp wit and intellectual prowess associated with her campaign during her *testimonio*. She explained that while her authoritarian father had taught her to speak boldly for social justice, her mother had shown her how to speak to power, a skill that she now uses when advocating for immigrant rights.

Cotera and Chapa, the principal leaders of Mujeres, were especially adamant in arguing a third point—that women demonstrated a special commitment to the RUP when they negotiated a strategic link of cooperation with the TWPC.<sup>16</sup> The Mujeres members, according to Cotera and Chapa, used their association with the major women's political group in Texas to advance the cause of the RUP, all along contending that white feminist politics promoted racial supremacy by failing to deliver strong and consistent support for the RUP. It took a great deal of time and effort to bore into the TWPC and to promote a socialized feminist project that included Mexican women and their communities. The men in the RUP never fully understood or appreciated the expanded view, the opportunity for principled alliances, or the difficult work, and they even opposed them as Mexican feminists, according to all except one of the women. They nevertheless remained solidly behind the party, and introduced new women into the RUP with their feminist appeal, and their trying and ennobling battles with the TWPC.

The fourth major backbone observation also concerned ideological matters. Cotera and Chapa claimed that Mujeres por la Raza advanced the cause by elaborating nationalist and feminist ideas as intermediaries between the RUP and organized Anglo feminists. In their view, they received little credit in either camp for broadening their appeal and constructing a useful working relationship between the groups. Mexican women, according to Cotera and Chapa, actively worked to link separate and critical discourses that offered Mexican nationalists and Anglo feminists a way to evolve ideologically and organizationally. Although they created temporary openings for

themselves in both organizations, they used their special intermediary status to exercise political capital in the internal workings of the RUP and the TWPC.

The interviews and testimonials demonstrate that the nine narrators did not always agree in their accounts of women's status and influence in the RUP. This speaks to complex politics of community organizations. Ríos and Mendoza-Waterhouse, for instance, at times disagreed with the rest of the women on the degree of discrimination that Mexican American women faced and the influence of women in the RUP. Some of them, especially Jiménez and Martínez, also preferred to describe their participation in RUP history with little reference to gender or feminist ideas, whereas others, namely Coterá and Chapa, emphasized the woman's experience and often spoke from an explicitly feminist perspective. Disagreements and differences in emphasis remind us that the nine narrators had different social backgrounds, participated in various capacities in the RUP, and followed different social pathways and political trajectories since 1978.

The narrators shared a working-class origin; at least two were born and raised in Mexico, others came from rural communities in Texas, and still others originated in towns and cities from throughout the state. Most claimed that they experienced discrimination and were students when they joined the RUP, however, they served the party in different capacities and thus spoke from different vantage points. Three served in elective positions, and two headed electoral campaigns. The rest of them mostly belonged to the rank and file. In other words, the different backgrounds, experiences, and past and current views of the narrators all underscore the importance of the sense of unity that they expressed in general outlook and purpose as Mexican women activists.

Since the demise of the RUP, the narrators have pursued varying political interests. Jiménez, for instance, is a national spokesperson for the rights of immigrants and professes a decidedly progressive stance on the working class in the Americas. Ríos became a staunch Democrat, and Martínez prefers to define herself as a naturalist and *curandera*, or faith healer, with a feminist predisposition. Chapa found her niche in the middle school classroom, still advocating social justice and women's rights, while Mendoza-Waterhouse served as a family court judge for years in Travis County. Del Toro and Canales are staunch supporters of the Democratic Party of Texas.

## Conclusion

The RUP may have elected candidates to public office only in its rural strongholds of South Texas—Crystal City, Cotulla, and Robstown. However, the mostly young adherents contributed significantly to the history of third-party challenges, the advent of a functioning two-party system in Texas, and ultimately the development of an electoral strategy in the Mexican American social movement that achieved prominence beginning in the early 1970s.

Important differences notwithstanding, the RUP women involved in the classroom project demonstrated an amazing degree of unanimity on a number of issues. They agreed that women had been important in the history of the RUP, and most of them embraced the idea that the woman's experience of discrimination and political involvement is critical for understanding the RUP and recent Mexican American history. The RUP women also concurred that men exploited women's work, reproduced patriarchy in the party, resisted change in gender relations, and failed to embrace their fight against white supremacy and attempts to forge alliances with an otherwise progressive TWPC. Moreover, when they described their political work, they often spoke about women as the central, unifying element in the Mexican American family and the Mexican American social movement. They did this to both generate and solidify a commitment to an ongoing woman's cause and to communicate a feminist critique. In the process, they also claimed special ownership over the history of the RUP and Mexican Americans.

Women were certainly active and prominent in the RUP in Texas and in other states. Cotera, however, sought to do more than just simply recall an impressive record of achievement to affirm and recover a neglected part of Mexican American and women's history. She granted special attributes to women as feminists with authorial voices that figured prominently in the history of the RUP and *Mujeres*. Equally important, Cotera also used history to reenact a semantic and temporal moment of backbone, much like the group of Mexican women that Elizabeth Martínez's observed during the 1998 RUP reunion meeting "to talk about past activism, which often turned out to be present activism as well."<sup>17</sup>

The word "backbone" conveyed the concentrated richness of a metonymic image that, according to the anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin, narrators use in place of long and sustained narratives to comment on the past. Cotera's more focused intent, elaborated in her public testimonial, and in a subsequent interview, was to offer what feminist scholars have called a countermemory, or a representation of the past that revises conventional depictions of women and larger histories. Cotera, in other words, invoked a memory that inscribed the collective past with the claim that women made singular and even determining contributions to the Mexican American social movement.<sup>18</sup>

The RUP women were clearly seeking to provide us with verifiable accounts of past events, of inscribing and reinscribing women into political history. The idea that they were creating records to correct past erasures and misrepresentations also motivated them. Given their challenging and often frustrating experiences in the RUP and the TWPC, they were naturally inclined to set the record straight and to defy the very practices marginalizing them. This does not mean that they were not also reconstructing memory with hindsight, interpreting the past on the basis of ongoing political projects and current feelings and ideas. Nor does it mean that our own subjectivities as researchers did not also shape the content and direction of the

narratives. These and many more methodological and theoretical issues raised by our research project must await a more detailed analysis of our findings and the memories that recalled and interpreted them. For now, it is enough to say that the project was a valuable experience that recognized the important role that Mexican American women played in the RUP and feminist politics and the generative significance of memory in advancing political causes.

Their notions of self may have originated in the RUP and served to legitimate their position as critical members of the party, but they also used their reconstituted identities to present themselves as more than feminists in the TWPC. They were also members of a marginalized community and a feminist bloc within the RUP, an advanced guard that had earned the right to lead the way in building effective unity in the progressive fold of Texas. Mexican feminists offered to broaden the white feminist and the Mexican nationalist agenda from narrow arenas of political identity and action into opportunities for cooperation and alliances. Patriarchy and white supremacy, however, were too entrenched for this significant current of the moment to translate into little more beyond these meaningful forays into politically and culturally distant worlds. The task of fostering understanding and appreciation across the wide divide would be an ongoing one. Perhaps this explains why our Mexican feminist narrators continue to present themselves as essentialist in their intentional challenge against the patriarchy and white supremacy of our times.

The students emphasized one learning outcome, the significance of the use of an essentialist identity among the RUP women to underscore their importance in recent Mexican American history. They also posited that the retrospective assessment was itself an artifact of the past. In other words, the narrators on numerous occasions noted that their feminist critique included essentialist arguments, a clear strategic move to draw attention and gain authority within the RUP. The students also understood the special value of oral history and oral narratives in moving beyond the informative and discovering nuance and particularities gleaned from the undulating voice, the emotive power of the spoken word, the point of the gesture, and other performative aspects. Oral interviews and *testimonios*, in other words, provided us with firsthand views on how essentialist notions constituted important emotive elements in the performance of feminist critiques of inequality, power, and agency that archival and documentary sources would not have been able to provide.<sup>19</sup>

The students also acknowledged the collective value in learning. The seminar gave them an opportunity to transfer individual acts of discovery to a richer level of group learning. Connecting learned experiences in classroom discussions, for instance, confirmed the special importance of some findings over others and facilitated the development of consensus thinking on historical trends or focused patterns of behavior in the history of Mexican Americans, the RUP, and RUP women. The collective “reading” of the reactions by audience members during the *testimonios*,



that is, their relations with the narrators, also helped the students understand the importance of vantage point and perspective in understanding the narrators' oral narratives. The students noted other learning experiences such as assigned readings, ethical considerations when conducting oral interviews, the challenges in interpreting oral narratives, and planning research projects. They were more intrigued, however, by the notion of strategic essentialism in history and the importance of oral history to understand its significance in history and possibly in their own lives.

## Notes

1. Scholars have published numerous accounts on their classroom work, including Vicki Ruiz, who wrote one of the earliest statements on the teaching of Mexican American history, and Daniel G. Solorzano, who reported on his use of Paulo Freire's early method of critical race theory to explain social change in the classroom. Scholars like María E. Fránquiz and María del Carmen Salazar have demonstrated that teacher-training programs are especially important in addressing pedagogy and theory in their classrooms. Other authors have used oral history and oral narratives, as well as *testimonio* records, to teach research methods and report on their findings. They include the following: Vicki Ruiz, "Teaching Chicano/American History: Goals and Methods," *History Teacher* 20, no. 2 (February 1987): 167-177; Daniel Solorzano, "Teaching and Social Change: Reflections on a Freirean Approach in a College Classroom," *Teaching Sociology* 17, no. 2 (April 1989): 218-225; María E. Fránquiz and María del Carmen Salazar, "The Transformative Potential of Humanizing Pedagogy: Addressing the Diverse Needs of Chicano/Mexicano Students," *High School Journal* 87, no. 4 (April-May 2004): 36-53; Irma M. Olmedo, "Voices of Our Past: Using Oral History to Explore Funds of Knowledge within a Puerto Rican Family," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1997): 550-573; Dolores Delgado Bernal, "Grassroots Leadership Reconceptualized: Chicana Oral Histories and the 1968 East Los Angeles School Blowouts," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19, no. 2 (1998): 113-142; Cinthya M. Saavedra, "Language and Literacy in the Borderlands: Acting upon the World through 'Testimonios,'" *Language Arts* 88, no. 4 (March 2011): 261-269.

2. The author has consulted the following works on Texas, Mexican American, and Raza Unida Party history: Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 16, "Modern Texas: 1971-2001," 438-467; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987); Douglas E. Foley, Clarice Mota, Donald E. Post, and Ignacio Lozano, *From Peones to Políticos: Class and Ethnicity in a South Texas Town, 1900-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, Center for Mexican American Studies, 1977); Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality & Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990); Douglas E. Foley, "The Legacy of the 'Partido Raza Unida' in South Texas: A Class Analysis," *Ethnic Affairs* 2 (Spring 1988): 47-73; Ignacio M. García, *The Rise and Fall of La Raza Unida Party* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Armando Navarro, *The Cristal Experiment: A Chicano Struggle for Community Control* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Armando Navarro, *La Raza Unida Party: A Chicano Challenge to a Two-Party Dictatorship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); and Benjamin Márquez and Rodolfo Espino, "Mexican American Support for Third Parties: The Case of La Raza Unida," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (2010): 290-312; Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Raza Unida Party," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/war01>; and Cynthia Orozco, "Mujeres por la Raza," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/vimgh>.

3. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990). For additional readings on the challenges and opportunities involved in the shared and contentious process of history making, especially in its broad form of historical production, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

4. In hindsight, I would have incorporated new media sources to ensure the more effective management of my graduate course and the oral history project, as Rina Benmayor so ably suggests. I did use some of the best

practices noted in this paragraph and suggested in the previously noted publications on oral history in high school and university classrooms. The students' positive comments on their experience during the end-of-course classroom discussion and the university's electronic course evaluation suggested that the seminar was successful in providing them with a sound learning environment. Rina Benmayor, "Cyber-Teaching in the Oral History Classroom," *Oral History* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 83–91. One of Cotera's numerous accomplishments included the first published history of Mexican American women: *Diosa y hembra: The History and Heritage of Chicanas in the U.S.* (Austin, TX: Information Systems Development, 1976).

5. For studies on Mexican American women's issues, their feminist critique, and electoral politics in Texas, see José Ángel Gutiérrez, *The Making of a Chicano Militant: Lessons from Cristal* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); José Ángel Gutiérrez, Michelle Meléndez, and Sonia Adriana Noyola, *Chicanas in Charge* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007); and Gerald Torres and Katie Pace, "Understanding Patriarchy as an Expression of Whiteness: Insights from the Chicana Movement," *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy* 129 (2005): 129–172.

6. On the last contribution credited to the RUP in the body of the paper, C. Wright Mills long ago underscored the strategic imperative of translating personal challenges into social ills if we are to truly effectuate change in society, a lesson US feminists popularized in the 1970s with the statement "the personal is political." Some RUP activists called the process *concientización*, or the building of social consciousness. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

7. My conversations with Cotera and Hernández-Avila, as well as with other RUP feminists, have occurred over the years. Although I have interviewed Cotera and Hernández on several occasions, the more recent interviews confirmed the views that I attribute to them in this article: interview with Martha Cotera by Emilio Zamora, November 2, 2016, Austin, TX, notes in author's possession; and interview with Inés Hernández by Emilio Zamora, October 5, 2016, Austin, TX, notes in author's possession.

8. I had originally planned to organize the course around the historical experiences of state representatives serving in the Texas legislature, believing, as I still do, that they are ideal for informing political relations between local Mexican settings and the larger world of Mexicans in state and national politics. A conversation with Cotera, however, directed me to RUP women in Texas as the focus of our course. Cotera and I had talked on numerous occasions about the need to write a history of Mexican women in the RUP and possibly in the larger history of Texas. Regarding my involvement in the RUP, I participated in numerous organizing activities in the Kingsville and Austin areas between 1972 and 1978. I was also a RUP candidate for state legislator in 1977 and served as the Travis County chair for the party in 1977–1978.

9. I participated in the 1972 petition campaign, worked on the three gubernatorial campaigns and one state representative campaign, served as Travis County chair in 1976, and contributed to local party decisions in Kleberg County (1972) and Travis County (1972–1977). Throughout this period, I often took part in activities sponsored by Mujeres. These initiatives included their educational and strategy meetings, and the campaign that elected me Travis County chair.

10. Although it is not necessary to offer an exhaustive political biography of our nine narrators, some commentary is in order. Luz Bazán, along with her former husband, José Ángel Gutiérrez, helped initiate the movement in Crystal City that resulted in the formation of the RUP in 1970. Bazán continued to be a key organizer and spokesperson for the party after its official designation as an official political party in 1972. Ríos did not have an official leadership position in the party or Mujeres, although she was a highly visible and active worker throughout the state, particularly in Houston and Austin. Chapa and Cotera were cofounders and principal spokespersons for Mujeres. Jiménez and Canales were RUP candidates for statewide office, and Martínez served as RUP state chair between 1974 and 1978. Mendoza-Waterhouse served as RUP chair in Travis County in 1978. Cynthia E. Orozco, "Mujeres por La Raza," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/vimgh>.

11. Other preparations included securing funding from the Center for Mexican American Studies and the Public Policy Institute at the University of Texas at Austin and formal agreements of cooperation from the narrators. I also made travel and hotel arrangements, secured equipment and site reservations, developed a tentative questionnaire and interviewing agreement, and prepared brief biographical statements on each of

the narrators. Last, I scheduled classroom visits by Cotera and Martínez to help introduce the students to the history of the RUP and their experiences in the party.

12. The students included Amelia Abreau, Rachel Carreon, Betty Harrison, Linda Ho, Hortensia Palomares, Sara Schueneman-Ayala, Brenda Sendejo, Rebecca Snow, and Teresa Taylor. My teaching assistant was Cassandra Treviño.

13. The schedule of the testimonial events were as follows: On April 7, 2004 (10:30–11:45, Texas Union 4.110, African American Culture Room): Evey Chapa, member of Raza Unida Executive Committee, 1974–1977 and cofounder of *Mujeres por la Raza*, 1973; María Elena Martínez, state chair, Raza Unida Party, 1976–1978; Luz Bazán Gutiérrez, first Raza Unida chair of Zavala County, 1970. On April 14 (11:30–12:45, Texas Union 4.110, African American Culture Room): María Jiménez, Raza Unida candidate for attorney general, 1972; Linda Del Toro, member of MAYO and Raza Unida Party, 1972–78; Alma Canales, Raza Unida Candidate for lieutenant governor, 1972. On April 21 (11:30–12:45, Texas Union 4.110, African American Culture Room): Martha Cotera, cofounder, *Mujeres por la Raza*, 1973; Angelita Mendoza-Waterhouse, state chair, *Mujeres por La Raza*, 1977–78; Elvia Ríos, member of *Mujeres por La Raza*, 1976–77.

14. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991), 2–3.

15. Although Martínez stated this observation during her interview and *testimonio*, all the RUP women concurred in one way or another.

16. Debbie Mauldin Cottrell, "Texas Women's Political Caucus," *Handbook of Texas Online* (published by the Texas State Historical Association), <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wet01>.

17. Elizabeth Martínez, *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998), 178. Martínez made this observation while observing a group of "mostly women" discuss activism during the 20th Anniversary Chicano Activists Reunion held in San Antonio, Texas, on December 27–30, 1989.

18. Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126–127. For an examination of feminist perspectives on memory, see Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction," *Signs* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 1–19.

19. See Torres and Pace, "Understanding Patriarchy as an Expression of Whiteness," for a note on how their use of archival materials limited their ability to view and understand the complex power relations in play, particularly the performative aspect of the feminist critique that the *Mujeres* exercised in the RUP.