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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Las Mujeres: Conversations from a Hispanic Community, by Nan Elsasser, Kyle MacKenzie & Yvonne Tixier y Vigil, The Feminist Press, New York, 1980, pp. 163.**

**Reviewed by Lea Ybarra\***

In *Las Mujeres*, the authors tried to present a mosaic of the life experiences of Chicanas/Mexicanas, through the words of New Mexico women. It is a rich source of information for anyone wanting to understand how some Chicanas view their own life experiences and the factors that have shaped their lives.

The book is divided into four sections, representative of the changing lifestyle of "Las Mujeres"—(1) the oldest generation, who were often rural women isolated from mainstream society and whose primary workplace was the home and the care of their families; (2) women, more urban than the previous generation, who began to work at paid employment; (3) the first generation of *mujeres* to complete high school and attend college in substantial numbers and who are combining families and careers; and (4) young women concerned with creating social change and improving the lives of Chicanos. While some of the oral histories are merely nice anecdotes and are not very in-depth, others offer rich insights. For example, the thoughts of one of the interviewees, Jennie Montoya, a mother, wife, graduate student and aspiring writer, offers us a view of the complex life of the contemporary Chicana.

Seriously, I can't separate my work from my life. If my mother needs me, I have to put the pen down. I've got to go see what my mother wants. My God! I can't say, "Mother, I'm sorry. I'm working on my novel." Or if my uncle says, "We're working here in the yard and we need your truck," okay, and here I go with the truck. My people are the priority. Our work is an

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integral part of us. I can't see saying, "I'm going to become a poet and write beautiful things," because that's not the reality. The reality is my people, the reality is what I am. I am a Chicana, with all the social, political, and economic implications that come with it.

Thus, comments such as these, in the words of the women themselves, are the strengths of this book. However, as in most written works, weaknesses are also apparent.

While the sections in which the book is divided represent a logical way of organizing the material for the reader, they nevertheless suffer from very short, somewhat shallow introductions. The material is left to stand on its own and while this often works, in this case, it leaves the reader desiring a level of analysis which is necessary to more fully integrate the materials. This flaw is even more evident in the conclusion of the book. There are absolutely no concluding remarks to provide a much needed analysis of the material presented. The book simply ends abruptly after the last life history. Despite this serious shortcoming, it nevertheless represents an important step in beginning to document Chicano history, through the eyes of Chicanas, a history which has been ignored by traditional history books and too often lost to posterity. However, besides the historical significance of documenting these stories for researchers, you just basically feel "good" after reading these stories, good that these women survived well despite poverty and prejudice and that, as Chicanas, they represent such an important source of strength within the Chicano community.

Perhaps the usefulness of this book is best expressed by the authors themselves:

. . . This book cannot make a definite statement about the culture of all Southwestern mujeres. Culture changes with each generation, and its impact upon individual women also varies. What these voices tell us is that the experience of these women—women who have often been stereotyped—is, in fact, richly diverse. The voices speaking here record only a part of the experience of New Mexican Hispanas, but by speaking, they have transformed their experience into history.

Through similar documentation of Chicana experiences throughout the Southwest, a basis will be laid for an integrative and substantial history of Chicanas.