

Photographing Mexican Women

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For me, photography is an integral part of what I do as an anthropologist. I am often disconcerted by the casual way in which anthropologists take pictures and use pictures in their accounts of other cultures. While questions of textual and social representation are profoundly theorized, questions of visual representation are almost never raised. Anthropologists include pictures in their textual representations of how other people live and think, but they rarely comment on them, rarely seem to have anything to say about them.

Pictures are never self-explanatory, especially not those pictures taken in the neo-colonial landscapes in which many anthropologists locate their "fieldwork." Yet they have usually functioned as silent subtexts in ethnographies. They have served as "evidence," insidious visual proof of primitivity and sublimated Western desire, as in those pictures, collected in countless colonial outposts, of barebreasted exotic women. They have served romantic exemplary purposes, showing us people not deracinated like ourselves, cooperating in ritual and economic activities. They have served, on that most basic level which naively treats the photographic image as transparent, neutral, and natural, to show us "what the people are like." Yet, what has this meant? In my own case (as I do not claim immunity to the tendencies I am describing), I know that in my book about Spanish peasants I consciously chose to include those pictures that showed the older generation of peasants at work, at home, posing as peasants for my camera. I included few pictures of these peasants' children, most of whom left

for the cities twenty years ago, and could only pose for me next to their cars, on an urban street, in the bars or factories where they work, or in their highly decorated, kitschy apartments. I was not interested in photographing modernities in some ways similar to mine, in some ways "distastefully" unlike mine, and I took their pictures reluctantly, and certainly did not include them in my book.

What one does as an anthropologist is thus intimately related to what one does as a photographer, to turn my first sentence around. The issues become even more complex when one is a woman from the West photographing women from the Third World. Recent critiques by women of color and by women from the Third World that highlight the unexamined colonial features of Western feminist discourse give me pause as a wielder of images in my double role as anthropologist and photographer. These critiques make painfully obvious how Western feminists have unself-consciously created a cultural other in their (textual) images of Third World women or women of color in their own society, upon whose backs they have built analyses that establish their authority and right to speak about what is a meaningful female life. Let us remember that one of the first and most important critiques by radical women of color was called, precisely, *This Bridge Called My Back*.¹ Non-Western women, as "other," carry the weight of everything that Western women are not: ignorant, poor, domestic, uneducated, traditional, superstitious; they are distanced spatially, and even temporally, viewed as mired in the past or struggling to become modern, by Western feminists who have already arrived at the farther shores of postmodernism.²

A similar critique needs to be made of photographic images of women of color and Third World women, which, in a world where looking is given primacy, circulate more widely than the textual images. The violent acts of reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization involved in representing other subjects are magnified in photographs.³ All photographs are about objectification; they are "a micro-version of death," as Roland Barthes puts it: "They turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions."⁴ The ways in which Western feminists objectify the photographed Third World woman is brilliantly shown in Jo Carillo's poem,

"And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You," with its powerful lines:

Our white sisters
radical friends
love to own pictures of us
sitting at a factory machine
wielding a machete
in our bright bandanas.
holding brown yellow black red children
reading books from literacy campaigns
smiling
Our white sisters radical friends
should think again
No one smiles
at the beginning of a day spent
digging for souvenir chunks of uranium
or cleaning up after
our white sisters
radical friends
And when our white sisters
radical friends see us
in the flesh
not as a picture they own,
they are not quite as sure
if
they like us as much
We're not as happy as we look
on
their
wall⁵

Carillo's assertion that Western feminists are more comfortable with the pictures of Third World women than the real women behind them again points to the kind of safe distance that Western women place between themselves and their subjects. The poet tells her "white sisters radical friends" to take their pictures with them when they leave because their pictures are of no use to her or to other women of color. Those pictures of Third World women smiling as they work at the hard physical labor spared their well-meaning "radical friends," bring up children, and struggle to change their society while cleaning up after (and for) their "white sisters," are impersonations of who they are, representations of

themselves to satisfy the self-representations of Western women. They are pictures that become "other" to their subjects as soon as the photographer triggers the lens; they are to be taken away, for use elsewhere, to be placed on a wall, in a book, or in an essay such as this one.

* * *

I can rarely bring myself to take a picture without asking for permission first, especially in my capacity as an anthropologist, and especially so as an anthropologist in Mexico. It is emblematic of the relationship between Mexico and the United States that one cannot take up residence in a Mexican town without being suspected of being a C.I.A. agent. To go around snapping quick, secret, unmediated pictures is hardly a way to maintain trust in a neo-colonial situation in which your presence and motivations are highly questionable.

I also believe, as a matter of aesthetic integrity, that the photographer has to give her subjects time to pose, time to transform themselves into the images that they would like my camera to engrave on celluloid. I take photographs slowly. I wait. I look up. I look down. I look up again. I see if my subject is ready, composed. For some of my subjects, who have rarely been photographed, I know that the picture I take is their death-picture, in the sense that they want me to photograph them so their families will have an image to remember them by. I try to take a picture that will honor, not shame, their memory. I know that the picture is important *to them*, and that they will want a copy of it. They will not let me take my pictures with me when I go until they have seen them; and if they don't get to see them because I cannot print them in time or because I have forgotten to bring them back, they will ask me about them often enough to make me conscious of the fact that I am not to become the owner of the images they have only lent to me. So I don't get off the hook easily.

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All the photographs included in this essay were taken between 1984 and 1988 in the town of Mexquitic in the arid highlands just west of the city of San Luis Potosí. Mexquitic is not by any means an isolated rural town, yet

it is off the tourist route, and of scholarly interest only to a few local historians (which include some of its inhabitants) and my husband and myself. It is de-Indianized rather than mestizo, and not exotic in any of the stereotypical ways that we associate with colorful Mexico. It is a microcosm of many Mexicos. There are poor people who still work the century plant for its honeywater which is brewed into *pulque* and sold on Sundays and in the markets in San Luis. There are modest farmers who grow the subsistence crops of corn and beans; there are better-off farmers who grow such cash crops as cauliflower, tomatoes, zucchini, and garlic. There are people who have little or no land and work for wages in the city; the men typically work at construction jobs, the women in domestic service or peddling food and produce on the streets and from house to house. There are primary and secondary schoolteachers, many of them women who battled for their education.

And there are many who take their labor across the border as undocumented workers in the United States, asserting their right to be here because we, economically, politically, historically, have been, continue to be, there. Many of the men, before they make the dangerous crossing that could cost them their lives, joke about going north as "tourists" (*me voy de turista*, they say); theirs is the tourism of the poor, the selling cheap of their labor in exchange for being elsewhere. Yet when they are here, as one man recently returned from the States in 1984 told me, bringing his hand down toward his knees to indicate small stature, *nos ven así, muy bajos, nos ven muy chiquitos* ("they see us like this, very low, they see us as very small"). Aware of the infantilization and emasculation that they will have to undergo in the States, those men who have wives make sure that their contraceptive devices are removed prior to departure, so that their wives, at least, will remain theirs, and have something to show for it if they don't. To this setting, in which women and men are working hard to make an honest living and to maintain their dignity under the shadow of the raised boot to the north, I come with my camera, looking for Mexican light.

NOTES

1 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1981)

2 These points are culled from Chandra Mohanty, "Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses," *Boundary 2* 12(3)/(13(1), 1982:352; Marnia Lazreg, Feminism and difference: the perils of writing as a woman on women in Algeria, *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988):97; Aihwa Ong, Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist re-presentations of women in non-western societies," *Inscriptions*, special issue on "Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse," 3/4 (1988):87

3 On the violence of representation, see Edward Said, in the shadow of the West, *Wedge*, special issue, "The Imperialism of Representation, The Representation of Imperialism," no 7/8 (winter/spring):4

4 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p 14

5 In Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, pp 63-64

Antonia
(1984)

When I took this picture, Antonia was recently widowed and in fair health. She took care of herself and lived alone, though her daughter from a nearby village visited very week. Aware that she would soon not be in total control of her life, she gave me an image of Mary from her altar as a gift. In recent years she has, indeed, grown weaker and sicker, and her daughter has taken her in. We used to visit her frequently when she was alone, and she told us stories about witchcraft, showing us the withered skin on her arms and telling us that the witches were eating away at her body. "We see faces but we don't see hearts," she would say. On one of our visits, she took us out to the land behind her house, pointing out the dramatic century plants, the *magueyes*, that she herself had lugged home from the woods and grafted to the soil. She paused before a *maguey*, its arms hugging her, and I asked if I might photograph her there.



Comadre Pancha

(1985)

Pancha had just moved out to a small clearing in the brushlands near the secondary school and had invited us for breakfast. She and her husband and five children had left their old house in town because several of their neighbors had complained about their goats. Pancha hoped for a better, more peaceful life in the new setting. In this small clearing, in a cardboard shack that Pancha herself built, the whole family slept for several months, while her husband, Lucas, gradually built an adobe room for them, in between construction work and bouts of depressive drinking. Camping out on the land, Pancha made use of everything in her environment, hanging her spoons, pots, and tortilla basket neatly on a maguey, domesticating the desert. Her resourcefulness and sense of beauty and order were striking to me. Standing close to her to take the picture, I felt her bodily strength and exertion in her deeply bent knees, and I felt the heat and the smoke hitting her face as it hit mine. I was grateful for the tortillas that Pancha made for us that day as her compadres, co-godparents. We have a spiritual bond in her youngest daughter, Verónica, who is six and just beginning school. Lately, I worry about Pancha. When I saw her again in 1988, Lucas had grown violent, he was no longer working, and threatening to leave. He had twisted her arm badly and we took her to a healer to have it cured. Verónica was suffering from a bad case of fright (*susto*) and Pancha had become convinced that she herself and her household had come under an evil spell. She has worked so hard; life ought to be better for her.



Bartola
(1984)

It was May, the cornstalks had shot up after some good rains, when I photographed Bartola in her field. She stood in the midst of her cornstalks, straight and tall like the stalks themselves, her *rebozo* tightly framing her firm jaw, and looked straight at me, as she always does when I photograph her. Bartola, a widow of many years, is the head of a large household that includes three daughters, their children, and grandchildren; only one of her daughters and children share a house with her, but the entire family views her as a kind of matriarch. One evening as we sat around the first in the courtyard chatting, Bartola remarked that they don't have to worry about whether the food is done at a certain time, or whether, on a certain day, they cannot prepare the finely ground good corn tortillas milled from one's own corn. *Al cabo, no hay hombres* ("In the end, there are no men here"); no one to tell them how and when to do things. I understand why Bartola is respected by her family: she is sharp, direct, well-spoken. She has asked me many incisive questions about my work, and about life in the United States. Once she asked me, *en el otro lado*, "the other side," as the United States is commonly referred to in rural Mexico, "do people eat all their food out of cans?" This is what several people who had crossed over to the other side had told her. Surprised by the question, I answered it rather literally, saying that people cook fresh foods here, as well. Later, I thought about the metaphorical ramifications of the question. Was she, implicitly, making a point about the commodification of human relations in the United States? The extravagance and frivolity of eating food out of cans -- and those cans are so rampant in American supermarkets -- is a telling image of the American proclivity towards speed, efficiency, control, sterile hygiene, and wastefulness. That people don't have to go to the trouble to plant, harvest, and cook: a symbol of the alluring yet dehumanizing power that at once attracts and repels the Mexicans who cross over to this side.



Lola
(1985)

Lola is Bartola's daughter. She posed for me with her youngest daughter, Mago, by her first husband's grave. It was the Cross of May, a Catholic holiday six months equidistant from the Day of the Dead, centering on the veneration of the cross, when people go to the cemetery and decorate the crosses and graves of their dead with flowers. Lola, as Bartola has often told me, ran off with her first husband to Nuevo Laredo "eight days before her twelfth birthday." After several years, they returned, had four children, and lived in peace until her husband died suddenly from a bad anger (*coraje*) that was not swept out of him quickly enough. Later, she met her second husband, Savino, a farmer and nightwatchman in San Luis, and after a few years had a church wedding. They have six children and live now in a cinder-block house that Savino and his sons built on the outskirts of town, near the highway. Lola has her mother's strength of will and intensity, and an understanding of the sublime as well. Once, on a visit to a newly-founded Marian shrine, she told me that at the site where the original apparition took place she looked long and hard and finally saw, from the corner of her eye, a bright blue fold in the corner of the Virgin's cape.



Comadre Cristina

(1985)

Cristina is Lola's daughter. I took this picture of her, pregnant, accompanied by her older son Arturo, her daughter Lourdes, and her baby Jose, in the fading twilight on the road leading to Lola's house. I have been Cristina's *comadre* virtually since we arrived in Mexquitic at the end of 1982. She was my first *comadre*, coming one night with her brother and sister-in-law asking if we might accept her daughter, Lourdes, as our godchild. Lourdes was a tiny baby, and she was born with a harelip. Lola said that the reason Lourdes had been born with a harelip was that when Cristina was pregnant she had failed to listen to her when she told her to wear a safety pin during a lunar eclipse, to break the spell of the moon. Her lip was operated on shortly after her birth, though a scar was left from the free operation that was performed at the general hospital. I worried about Lourdes as a baby and small child, because Cristina became pregnant again a few months after Lourdes was born and took her off breastmilk. I used to watch as her half-brother, Arturo, Cristina's eldest boy by her failed marriage, mixed small spoonfuls of powdered milk with large amounts of water for his hungry little sister while Cristina was away in San Luis selling *gorditas* (filled tortillas) to support the family. In this photograph of Lourdes at a year-and-a-half, she is just as I remember her clinging to a roll of bread and her younger brother's blanket. Now, almost seven, she is a sprightly girl, confident, talkative, observant. Cristina had two other children after Lourdes by different men, she had to raise and support her children alone, because the fathers had wives to support, and both Lola and Bartola were too upset with her to even offer sympathy. She gave birth to her youngest son, also our godchild, in the tiny room she rented for a time in Mexquitic, without any assistance. In 1987 she took up with a new man, a contractor, who seemed committed to her and her family. He took the family to San Luis and told Cristina to stop selling and stay home. When I returned in 1988, I was told by Lola that they had left several months before and no one knew where they were. While we were there, her mate came for a one-day visit and announced to the family that they were now living on the border, in Matamoros. And Cristina was pregnant. He told us that little Lourdes was very excited to be living so close to where we live. She points towards the border and says, "Over there, that's where my *madrina* [godmother] lives."



Sisters
(1984)

These girls are great-grand-daughters of Bartola through her eldest daughter, Juana. Dressed in their best, the older girl wearing the gown from her kindergarten graduation, posed by their mother, they look at me harshly: what is this picture for?



Comadre Benigna (1988)

Benigna is a *marchanta*; she sells fruits and vegetables door to door in the city of San Luis. She has worked as an independent peddler and farmer for the last twenty-five years, raising her two sons from her marriage and her two daughters and son from a subsequent relationship on her own, while living in her mother's house. I did not get to know her on my early visits to Mexquitic, partly because I saw her rarely, partly because when I did see here she intimidated me. Rumor has it that she is a harsh, combative woman who threw her son out of the house and bewitched her ex-husband after he left her for another woman, making him go totally blind. I became her *comadre* after she asked us to purchase the cake for her younger daughter's coming-of-age party (*quinceanera*), a relationship that she reinforced by later asking us to serve as godparents to her infant Jesus dolls, which are "put top bed" and "woken up" with great festivity during the home Christmas rituals. After becoming *comadres*, she told me her life story in great detail. I also learned of her involvement in a spiritist cult in which the medium, in trance, speaks through the voice of Pancho Villa, a contradictory hero and anti-hero in Mexican historical consciousness who symbolizes manly banditry and chaotic power. Benigna makes offerings of brandy to Pancho Villa, whose picture hangs on the wall of her home altar, and she invokes his aid, she tells me, to give her courage and valor to meet the challenges of life. For Benigna, whose suffering at the hands of her ex-husband turned her into a woman warrior, not the abnegated mother of conventional gender representations of Mexican women, it is Pancho Villa, not the Virgin Mary, that she turns to for fighting valor. His is a harsh, violent, unsanctioned power, for the Church certainly does not recognize Villa as a figure worthy of veneration. Benigna agreed to let me photograph her outside her house next to the image of Pancho Villa from her altar; but the breeze kept blowing and we couldn't get the picture to hold still for very long. "Maybe he's not happy about this," she said, laughing. As soon as I snapped the photograph some people came to the door and Benigna quickly hid the picture.



Maestra Estela
(1988)

Estela is a schoolteacher who is married to a house-builder. They have five children. She comes from a poor family and it was with some hardship that she attained the education she fervently desired while raising her children. I had long admired Estela's teaching diploma in the front room of her house. I finally thought to ask her if I might photograph her holding it. She agreed immediately. I waited for her to pose. She carefully took down her degree with its youthful picture of her, and brought it close to her body, so close that in the photograph she and the diploma form a seamless figure, that of a mermaid.

