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CHSTU 255 A

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12 December 2020

Final Essay

Feminist, leader, and activist are all words used to describe the achievements of Elena Arizmendi and Lorena Borjas, two women who faced racism and sexism in the patriarchal systems they intended to deconstruct. Elena put her hands on the bone and blood of revolutionaries and Lorena outstretched her hands to the transgender women in her community, both while being inhibited by the surrounding circumstances and biases of their time. They parallel each other even within the distance of their different time periods, fighting for justice and their own rights along with the rights of others. The open wounds of the world pleaded with Arizmendi and Borjas, which they both stepped forward to answer. The two women displayed qualities of fearlessness that challenged institutions and suggested a strong level of expertise and innovation. The underlying threat for Mexican women to don the identity of the selfless mother was pushed onto both of them, and Lorena Borjas was able to delightfully subvert the stereotype, claiming her role as a caretaker, but in a way that exerted power and self-determination. However, because of Arizmendi's inability to become a mother, she was swallowed by the gained title of Vasconcelos' lover. She evolved into a literary sexual symbol because she did not fit into the self-abnegating stereotype and her innovations were dishonored.

In his book *Se llamaba Elena Arizmendi*, Gabriel Cano mentions that while the Arizmendi family belonged to the elite social class during the time of Porfirio Díaz, their daughter drove herself with self-confidence and personal conviction that did not correspond with

the stereotypical submission attributed to women (Cano 18). She was pressured into an abusive marriage at a young age that she was able to obtain a divorce for, after which she went to Texas and took the route for her career that would result in the most agency. The nursing profession helped women emerge from the private domain, and as Cano explains, “el ángel de hogar pasó a ser el ángel de la batalla” (the angel of the home came to be the angel of battle). This became a way for Arizmendi to exert her imaginings and hopes, emerging into the public space and finding opportunities there. After receiving training in nursing, she forged ahead and formed her own humanitarian group, *La cruz blanca neutral* that provided care to the revolutionaries abandoned by the Mexican Red Cross--work that was discarded in *La tormenta* by Vasconcelos, where her role in creating the organization was only portrayed as circumstantial. This representation of her was extremely harmful, because she became a literary character fused with reality--a sculpted image that was already imprinted under the eyelids of the nation. In the book *Troubled Memories: Iconic Mexican Women and the Traps of Representation*, it is mentioned that the only reason Arizmendi begins to be unearthed is because of Gabriel Cano's work on her story. Now individuals are able to “see her in a new light”, the truth of “the courageous nurse who challenged male doctors and soldiers with a firm attitude that” challenged “imposed ideas of feminine sacrifice, maternity and submission” (Estrada 169). It was easier to broadcast that Arizmendi stumbled through her life rather than intentionally paved her way with feminist intentions and intelligence because of the already present bias. This narrative was even more detrimental to her image because of Vasconcelo's power and influence at the time, and the expectation that women remained silent in the political sphere. Her true story was erased from history on account of the systems of thought at the time. However, she still approached each problem with an entrepreneurial vigor that started with her creation of the Neutral White Cross

and culminated with the elegant feminism present in *Vida incompleta; ligeros apuntes sobre mujeres en la vida real* and *Feminismo internacional*.

Lorena Borjas faced similar societal objections and circumstances, especially considering she was a member of the LGBTQ community, coming to the United States in 1981 the year the AIDS epidemic was cresting the horizon, and where transphobia and homophobia abounded. NBC posted an article in honor of LGBTQ history month that cited the “1983 appearance [of] activist and Gay Mens Health Crisis co-founder Larry Kramer”, who asked host Jane Pauley to “imagine what it must [have been] like” to lose “20 of your friends in the last 18 months”, a powerful statement that reflects the severe loss and suffering during that time of a group that was ignored and condemned by society (Fitzsimons). The ‘plague’ of AIDS was regarded by some in the country as an act of God, and because of this the problem was shoved aside. Lorena Borjas arrived just as AIDS did, and was there to witness the horrifying sickness of her friends. It was a graphic scene, and community members had to grow used to wearing black at funerals and watching those they loved grow weaker. Worse, the knowledge loomed that the government and wider society rejected them. Lorena spent her first years in the United States wondering if she or her friends would occupy the receiving end of that death sentence. While she dealt with her own exploitation, a determination and indignance for the suffering of her sisters pushed her to help those around her survive. Institutions were not there to object if Lorena Borjas was taken advantage of, evident in the fact that she was convicted of human trafficking when in fact she was a victim herself. The legal system’s faults are a reflection of the severe attitudes that Lorena had to contend with. However, despite the constant fear and threat of racism and transphobia, she threw open the doors of the house where she lived with 20 other sex workers and marched along the street, starting to hand out condoms and educate people on the deadly epidemic. She could

have been arrested for this, as having more than three condoms was considering evidence of prostitution. The Human Rights watch mentions that “for many sex workers, particularly transgender women, arrest means facing degrading treatment and abuse at the hands of the police [and] for immigrants, arrest for prostitution offenses can mean detention and removal from the United States”, which illustrates Borjas’ risk in her activism (“Sex Workers at Risk”). However, she continued to protect the people who found themselves in the same situation, moving on to facilitate syringe programs for women wanting hormone treatments and provided resources for immigrants. She did not allow her Latina sisters to drown either--she made sure the forgotten group of transgender immigrant sex workers had the resources they needed that she herself had been deprived of. She famously carried around a list of contacts, one of which was ACLU transgender activist and lawyer Chase Strangio who said that “Lorena saved more people than almost anyone [he had] ever known” (Sanders). People like Chase Strangio would be dispatched by Lorena to navigate the racist and biased institutions her sisters faced.

Both women faced substantial obstacles--one of which was the societal expectations for Mexican women to be selfless mothers--yet neither of them allowed themselves to be sacrificed as martyrs. This specific social barrier manifested differently in the lives of the two women. Borjas voluntarily filled a nurturing role in interest of reclaiming power while Arizmendi suffered for its absence--being remembered for her role as a femme fatale of Vasconcelos and not for her own accomplishments. The role of motherhood in Mexican culture caused Arizmendi to be viewed by Vasconcelos as a novel new plaything, a reduction which contributed to his portrayal of her in *La tormenta* as a serpentine temptress. As Susie Porter mentions in her analysis of Cano’s *Se llamaba Elena Arizmendi*, the “piedra angular” (cornerstone) of the relationship between Arizmendi and Vasconcelos was sexual and intellectual, not formed on the

basis of wanting children (Porter 767). The tradition of the martyr wife was the foundation of relationships at that time, so Arizmendi's infertility became an opportunity. Vasconcelos desired her for their "pasiones compartidas, tanto culturales como carnales" (shared passions, as much cultural as carnal), in part due to the fact that he was disillusioned with his own marriage to Serafina Miranda and the dynamic that it created (Porter 767). He looked at the relationship like something he could control, and like something that would benefit him, a new experiment with a 'free' woman, almost like she was a puppet that he could pick up at his convenience. Because of Arizmendi's supposed freedom from motherhood, Vasconcelos pursued the 'experiment' that he viewed was their relationship, and played out his own selfish desires. When it broke off between them, he did not fault himself or the circumstances because he already viewed her as an object. The difference in how each person illustrated the end of the relationship reflects the implicit barriers women faced. Vasconcelos thought the relationship ended because of Arizmendi's personal faults, due to "la ligereza", or her own improvidence (Porter 768). This is consistent with the tendency of men at the time to assume that women were full of too many emotions, and that they were irrational beings, a sentiment that allowed them to demean women's accomplishments and status. Vasconcelos goal here was to transform Arizmendi into something brittle--an intention more realized due to the fact that their relationship was based on sexuality alone and did not produce children. She did not have his offspring as a base to assert her role or gain the appropriate amount of respect, and so she fell to the fate of the cucarachas in the Mexican Revolution, erased and remembered for their looseness and status as public women. In the eyes of history, it was more important for her to be recognized as Vasconcelos's item, a blip recorded in the pages of his life, than to be her own person who was a writer, feminist and healer.

Because she could not be a mother, society (and Vasconcelos) labeled her as they understood, categorizing her into a sexual symbol and erasing her professional life.

While Lorena Borjas faced this same situation, she had the agency to embrace the role of mother without bearing biological children, instead naming her friends and community members her ‘daughters’ and helping them regain their power. “She was someone whose efforts as an ally and advocate were greatly admired and [she] was often viewed” as the “the mother of the trans-Latinx community” (Seucan). Here Lorena exists as the mother of those she helped by healing a group that is severely marginalized and discriminated against. Arizmendi’s lack of motherhood transformed her into a sexual object for Vasconcelos, while Borjas’ renewal of the term transformed her into a community leader.

To understand Lorena Borja’s relationship with the Mexican ‘esposa martír’, it is important to consider the distinction between a genetic motherhood and a proved motherhood. Even if Lorena Borjas was an elected and demonstrated, not biologically produced, maternal figure, she could still fulfill the role of the self-abnegating woman. On the surface, Borjas has some of the same characteristics. Sharing the same blood with children demands a certain sense of duty and obligation, which Lorena lacked towards her self appointed daughters. Therefore, it could be considered self-abnegating for Lorena to do what she did for those vulnerable communities--she was not required nor bound to anyone, she freely gave. However, her life was determined by her own choice for it to be a selfless one and not manufactured by society. The labeling of Lorena as a “as a sacred guardian angel” is ironic because it is used to describe a woman that fought so hard to negate the effects of society’s blind devotion to religious standards of womanhood (Seucan). Lorena strolled with spirit down the streets of Jackson Heights, her suitcase jostling as it hit cracks in the sidewalk, resources and condoms somersaulting against the

sides. She faced the problems of transgender women with an alacrity that was not weak in the slightest, eyebrows beautiful sculpted and arching ever upwards. She was not silent and subservient, yet she was a mother. In this way, she reorganized the meaning of the word, equated to a sacred object for her courage and not for her submission. While both Elena Arizmendi and Lorena Borjas were required to live in the shadow of the “esposa mártir” (martyr wife), neither of them allowed themselves to be defined by it. Each woman made her own advances outside of that realm, even shattering it. Arizmendi became a writer and a feminist with claims to the progress of the suffrage movement and Borjas declared motherhood as a way to break free of oppression, flaunting her role as a mother, rejecting the desire to sideline women and maintain the meek roles of females in the Mexican family after the revolution.

Both women combated racism and its prevalence in the United States, where each woman eventually resided. Arizmendi found herself among the influential suffragette movement leading up to the 1920's, where she “señaló públicamente la parcialidad racista de Carrie Chapman Catt” (she publicly exposed the racist partiality of Carrie Chapman Catt) (Cano 24). This interview appeared in *Feminismo Internacional*, a magazine that she helped edit, which Cano notes as a brave and daring gesture. She spoke out against powerful and influential white women to advance the status of Latinas and other women of color looking for the right to vote, alluding to the alacrity and strength of will that she possessed. She challenged institutions and brought issues to the table that were otherwise sidelined by white women and men who controlled the narrative.

Lorena Borjas had her own vital role in fighting racism through community work. Cecilia Gentili had the privilege of knowing Lorena as a friend and ally. In her op-ed about the emotional impact and significance of the woman's accomplishments, Gentili highlights the

institutional racism transgender women of color fight, explaining that “so often, society paints those of us who need a hand as victims of our own poor choices”, and that they are even “considered a danger” to the communities around them. This arrogant assumption is peeling away because of the way Lorena leveraged her knowledge. The resulting confidence she inspired transformed into power as her sisters gained footholds in the legal and healthcare systems, deftly navigating their immigrant status in a way that ensured a more fair treatment. Gentili elaborates that Lorena “pushed [them] to shine authentically, to become an unstoppable insubordination, a scream of subversion that says, ‘I am here, and I deserve happiness, too’”, a sentiment which blossomed into a community support network that reassured transgender immigrant women that they were not as alone as they thought. When everyone else had shut their eyes on transgender immigrants and women of color--silencing their struggles by condemning them to deteriorate at the hands of the institutions engineered against them--Lorena shouted against the ignorant silence to make sure each human being was being treated justly.

The pens of historiographers hopped gleefully as they recorded scenes of masculine triumphs, then became lethargic as they conceded only to record miniscule truths about women. This tendency contributed to the erasure of female accomplishments. Society has acted as if women carried out their lives behind the closed door of the home, when in fact they were becoming unfettered from it in the most brilliant way possible. Both Mexican women are not widely known despite their pivotal roles, ones that came at a steep price and after much hardship. Elena Arizmendi was incredibly spirited and forged on despite the biases of those around her and the obstacles she faced early on in her life, shaping each one of her goals to best develop feminism and freedom within Mexico (and later the United States). Borjas mirrored the nurse’s enthusiasm in feminism and in fighting for the forgotten. The well established roles for women

encroached and tried to steer the two women towards a path of unflinching martyrdom, an attempt that failed on both Borjas and Arizmendi. While this stereotype manifested differently in their two lives, both managed to create rich professional careers in the public domain. They created new avenues for women to search for equality, one meant for nurses supporting revolutionaries and one meant for transgender immigrant women struggling to navigate their new lives. They brought to life the words of Victor Hugo, that “adversity makes men” and “prosperity makes monsters”, underscoring in their lives that challenge indeed afforded strength. Because of their intersectional identities, they were poised to make an important impact that was not justly recorded, but nevertheless resounds in the advances women have made throughout history and leading up to today.

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Mexican American Women Past and Present
12/9/20

Comandanta Ramona and Leona Vicario: Worlds Apart but Close in Spirit

Throughout my tenure in this class, I came to know about many remarkable women throughout Mexican history, and the sad thing was, I had never heard of them, aside from the notable few we discussed early on. I have often heard people debate about the similarities and differences were between historical figures, yet they are always talking about Anglo men, never anyone else. I had never noticed this until I began to learn about the rich contributions of and interesting lives led by the plethora of women who had shaped Mexican history.

Perhaps no two women perfectly embodied the spirit of rebellion quite like Leona Vicario and Comandanta Ramona. Both of these women emerged to prominence during a dire moment in the history of Mexico, battling against two distinct governments they deemed unfit to lead the country, in the case of Leona Vicario, or unfit to lead her community and her people, in the case of Comandanta Ramona. As we shall soon see by learning about these incredible women, their origins are difficult to compare, as the criolla Leona Vicario's early life is well known, while the indigenous Comandanta Ramona's life is entirely unknown. There is much to compare and contrast between these two women, and, being Mexican women, they were both impacted and shaped by the political, religious, social, and cultural institutions of their time in many ways.

About the Women

Leona Vicario (1789-1842) was a figure heavily involved in the War of Mexican Independence from the Spanish Empire fought betwixt 1810 to 1821. A generous and politically minded philanthropist hailing from a wealthy and privileged Criolla (A person of purely Spanish

descent born in Mexico) she was a benefactor of the revolutionary cause and aided it in a multitude of ways, including supplying to the rebellion armaments, raw materials, pamphlets conveying revolutionary ideals, and medicine. She also helped to shelter fugitive rebels, acted as a courier herself, swayed Spanish allied skilled laborers to the cause of independence, and spied for the independence movement.

Throughout the course of the war, her life was upended dramatically, beginning with her being forced to flee her home in Mexico City after she came into conflict with the Spanish authorities there. From there, she spent the rest of the duration of the war living in the Mexican countryside, along with her husband and compatriot, Andrés Quintana Roo, with whom she would go on to have a child while still living in the countryside during the war. She would eventually be captured and tortured by the Spanish, without giving them any information before being rescued by fellow rebels. (Adams) (Fernández and Tamaro)

Comandanta Ramona (1959-2006) was a Tzotzil Mayan woman who was one of the best-known faces of the Zapatista movement, known formally as the EZLN. In tradition with the lives of many guerilla fighters and revolutionaries, “her real name and details of her pre-revolutionary life were never revealed” according to her obituary in *The Independent*. She first entered the public spotlight in January 1994, following the beginning of the EZLN’s insurgency against the Mexican Government in the Mexican state of Chiapas.

It was Comandante Ramona who commanded the EZLN during their takeover of the town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, (her hometown) advocating for indigenous rights and against Mexico’s participation in NAFTA. (*The Independent*) (Cardenas et al.) Following the beginning of the 1994 Chiapas uprising, during the first 12 days of which took place active resistance,

Comandanta Ramona and the rest of the EZLN cloistered themselves in the Lacandon Jungle, evolving from an active combatant group to a political one. (*The Independent*) (Cardenas et al)

Contrasting Leona Vicario and Comandanta Ramona

When you begin to compare these two inspirational women hailing from different racial and class backgrounds, differences abound due to the heavily stratified sociopolitical structures of Mexican society. Leona Vicario was a criolla born into immense wealth. Comandanta Ramona was an indigenous Tzotzil Maya woman born into extreme poverty. Vicario, stemming from her premium education afforded to her by her wealthy background, was an avid reader and lover of the arts and literature. (Fernández and Tamaro) Conversely, Comandanta Ramona was a monolingual Tzotzil speaker who was still struggling to learn Spanish circa 1994, necessitating the presence of a Spanish-Tzotzil translator for interviews. (Pérez and Castellanos) This was in part due to her impoverished upbringing. Another consequence of being born into poverty was that Comandanta Ramona was illiterate for much of her early life, yet despite her lack of formal education developed a strong intellect. (Velasco Yáñez)

Despite both of their contributions to furthering the cause of liberation for Mexican peoples, Comandanta Ramona and Leona Vicario, both now deceased, have been remembered in vastly different ways, with Vicario having a town named in her honor and being recognized as a national hero, while the memory of Comandanta Ramona is carried forward only in the memories of EZLN members as well as for some indigenous women who, in an interesting example of how a religious institution shaped Ramona's public image, "compared her with the Virgin Mary for the strength and self-respect she brought to [indigenous women]." It can be seen how the religious institution would have impacted Ramona's public image more so than Leona

Vicario's as Ramona was part of a pan-indigenous community which surely would have included many devout Catholics and followers of the cult of the virgin.

It remains to be seen whether eventually Comandanta Ramona will be remembered as Leona Vicario was. There is hope for this possibility, however. Much like what has happened to Comandanta Ramona, for a while, Leona Vicario's exploits were nearly forgotten, until being brought back to prominence decades after her death. This brings us to the many similarities between the two Mexican women. (Velasco Yáñez) (Fernández and Tamaro)

Comparing Leona Vicario and Comandanta Ramona

When you begin to compare these two Mexican Women freedom fighters, as is expected, many similarities become clear immediately. Both women were participants within a struggle for liberation without being active combatants for the most part. As we saw, Leona Vicario benefitted her movement with financial aid due to her immense inherited wealth. (Fernández and Tamaro)

In contrast, coming from an impoverished background but with a lot of charisma and a disposition to politics, Comandanta Ramona functioned as the main part of her movement's political outreach arm, serving as a leader of the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee, which was a democratically elected body formed to represent the EZLN. While she was an active combatant early, leading the EZLN on many combat endeavors, during the course of her life, she gained more prestige, goodwill, and respect from many constituents and compatriots for her outreach work and activism instead of her time spent as an active combatant. (Cardenas et al) (Pérez and Castellanos) (Hansen)

Another similarity is that both of them waged a lifelong struggle for what they believed in. Comandanta Ramona was renowned for her unending resolve and dedication to what she believed in. After her aforementioned death in 2006, she was revered in Zapatista circles for her inspirational life, with one EZLN interviewee noting that all of the EZLN hoped to follow in the footsteps of the example set by Comandanta Ramona, who, in the words of the interviewee, “[continued] the fight until the last day of her life” such was her dedication viewed as. (Velasco Yáñez) Much like with Comandanta Ramona, so too did Leona Vicario remain politically active for the rest of her days, no matter how much the Mexican government wished differently. (Fernández and Tamaro)

How Contemporary Institutions Shaped Their Lives

The lives of these extraordinary women were shaped in many ways, big and small, by the institutions which carried clout in their contemporary societies. Firstly, these women were shaped by politics, being political revolutionaries. These included the extraordinarily oppressive Spanish political apparatus of the Viceroyalty which Leona Vicario opposed and the inept failed state controlled by a corrupt PRI which Comandanta Ramona opposed. The political structures opposed by the two women were both on their last legs. Leona Vicario fought the Spanish amid a wave of similar revolutions across Latin America and the Peninsular War, which severely destabilized Spain, granting Mexico a chance for freedom. (Fuentes)

Comandanta Ramona fought the Mexican Government during a period in which the PRI struggled to maintain its grip on power. The contemporary president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, had won the office in the disputed 1988 election, and since then had become enormously unpopular. After the popular reformist politician Luis Donaldo Colosio, a known reformist, was

assassinated, the PRI's grip on power weakened further. Coupled with NAFTA, the failed state we know as today's Mexico began to take shape in 1994, making the era fertile for revolutionary sentiment and the Zapatista insurrection. (Osorno)

We can also see how contemporary cultural and social institutions shaped their lives as well, but perhaps it is more pronounced in the case of Comandante Ramona. This is due to the factor of race. Leona Vicario was politically minded just like Ramona, but she was more of a philanthropist and spy, and not nearly as active in the fighting as Ramona. Plus, she was a white woman, whereas Ramona was not. As a wealthy white woman, even back in the 1800s, Leona Vicario was far more entitled to express her opinions than Ramona was. We can see this in how Ramona took it upon herself to teach her fellow female Zapatistas that they "were [entitled to their opinion] just like men."

It is very telling about the state of women's rights during Comandante Ramona's contemporary period that this was something that needed to be taught just thirty to twenty years ago and is perhaps a lesson that is still being taught today, reflected the long uphill struggle of women's rights in Mexico which has been amplified and highlighted by the women of the EZLN. (Velasco Yáñez) This can also be seen in the public portrayal of her. After being sent for peace talks with the Mexican government, she was dubbed "The Petite Warrior" and had dolls made of her for tourist markets. It is remarkably interesting that a political figure waging active and violent insurrection against the Mexican government at the time was so quickly commodified into a children's plaything.

The circumstances of the dolls' messaging were left unclear by this source, so I am left wondering whether or not this doll was made in solidarity with the women of the EZLN and Comandante Ramona or it was made to mock them. Judging by the period, one might assume

that it would be the latter. (*The Independent*) In response to this, Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesperson of the EZLN solely because he spoke fluent Spanish, was always certain to signify that Ramona was his superior in rank, due to many assuming that as the man giving the interviews and speeches, he was the leader of the EZLN when in reality he was not and was outranked by many in the organization, both women and men. (Hansen)

Because of her class and her race, Leona Vicario, while not by any means shielded from the hardships of being a politically active woman fighting against oppression, still enormously benefited from her status as well as from the fact that she was not as active a participant in her conflict as Comandante Ramona was in her, being a spy and benefactor in place of an active combatant.

All in all, it becomes readily apparent upon a close examination that Leona Vicario and Comandante Ramona, while they didn't share identical ideals, were both active participants in the movements that they believed in firmly, as well as being renown for their ability to meet the challenge of the moment and stare down oppression in all forms, be it the colonialism that Leona Vicario fought against or the failed neo-liberal policies of the PRI-controlled failed-state of Mexico resisted by Comandante Ramona.

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