

Toward the Mother-Bond Principle



During the early evolution of the human race, motherhood was the only recognized bond of relationship.

—BARBARA G. WALKER, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*

According to Nahua legend, the tonalpohualli, calendar and cosmic constitution of the Aztecs, was designed by the grandmother goddess, Ozomoco along with her consort, Cipactonal. The goddess is thus seen as the real author of the almanac.

—BURR CARTWRIGHT BRUNDAGE,
The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World

Generally when men took over control of agricultural work, developing the plough, and other large-scale earth-working tools, they also began to develop ideas of the male as the cosmic generative principle. Watching grain seed germinating as if of itself in the Earth, they could conceive of the male seed as containing already, in itself, the whole germ-energy of life. (Long into the Middle Ages, people believed that a drop of male semen contained a complete miniature fetus) . . .

The female ovum, or egg, wasn't discovered until 1827. So for two thousand to four thousand years of patriarchy all religious, philosophical, biological, and medical theories were based on the assumption of the male as the sole generative physical and cosmic force.

—MONICA SJÖÖ AND BARBARA MOR, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*

Woman, what have I to do with thee?

—JESUS to his mother, John 2:4

While the Vatican proclaims that the Virgin Mother of God always existed, the Jungian determines that all men want a virgin mother, at least in symbolic form, and that the symbol is so powerful it has a dynamic and irrepressible life of its own. . . . Nothing it seems, even to non-Catholics, could be more natural than this icon of feminine perfection, and submission.

—MARINA WARNER, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*

When a Mexican American woman becomes a healer, her status within her circle of devotees surpasses that of any man. It is as if her role of mother is expanded to include all those who are in need of her nurturing ministrations.

—MARGARITA MELVILLE, ed., *Twice a Minority: Mexican American Women*

As a mother, even at the risk of her own life, protects and loves her child, her only child, so let a man cultivate love without measure toward the whole world.

—NANCY WILSON ROSS, *Buddhism: A Way of Life and Thought*

ALONG, LONG TIME AGO, MOTHER WAS NOT A DIRTY WORD

The sexual implication surrounding Mother in association with giving birth and sex is viewed as contemptible by a society that has stigmatized mothers. Mother is a woman, she has had sex. This must mean that some man has violated her, has had his way with her. She is a used thing now. “Put a madre,” “chingada madre,” “a toda madre,” “pinche madre,” “son of a bitch,” “motherfucker.” We fight when we hear these words because deep down inside we fear they contain some truth: our mother had to have sex in order to give birth to us, and sex is bad. But hasn’t she also been our primal source of tenderness and comfort? If only she were the Virgin Mary. Alas, she is not. She is human. She is human and she is very far from perfect, as we come to know shortly after we leave childhood and enter puberty when, along with the rest of society, we learn to resent Mother for having such power over us.

There must have been a time, long ago, when Mother was not seen as every woman’s vocation. Going back earlier than tribal times when men provided protection against predators—there must have been a time in human history when men too, were naturally nurturing, gentle, and bonded to the infants and children of their kinships. Jesus of Nazareth did not invent love for humanity. Muhammad did not, neither did the Buddha. Such was the violence of their times that their voices rose up to remind men of their humanity. While all such “wise men” had something to say about woman on behalf of women, none was inclined to listen to woman; or rather, the followers of prophets did not emulate such rare moments. And so, woman’s voice was lost and human spirituality became imbalanced.

In 2001 I had the occasion to visit an excavated archaeological site in México called Xochitécatl in the state of Tlaxcala. At first impression (and truly the lasting one) it was an important ceremonial site which, if not run by women, had been most certainly populated by women. One indication is the overwhelming number of feminine figurines uncovered there. Also, its name, The Place of Flowers is associated with other aspects of fecundity and the love goddess, Xochiquetzal. Over time I came to know more of it.

We start with popular myth. A beautiful woman in white does her wash at the river bank. A man comes along and allows himself to be seduced by a meeting of the eyes. She asks if he will carry her across with her wash. He promptly props her on his back. You must not turn to look at me, she says. The man’s cargo gets heavier as he wades and midway he is unable to resist the temptation to glance over his shoulder. He no sooner discovers a humongous serpent

than it bites and kills him. Somewhere along this story, it is also said it was when flowers ceased to grow on this once lush hill.

The ceremonial site was active from the late pre-Classic to late Classic periods, lasting centuries. I was extremely taken by this sacred site for reasons that go beyond the scope of this discussion. Regarding women in the flesh as well as the idea of woman associated with fertility and man's fear of that feminine power, however, I will limit remarks to the following. The beautiful woman in the tale is also referred to as Queen Xóchitl. I note that she may have been a flesh and blood queen of the place of flowers and/or represented the goddess of love, Xochitquetzal, who also resided in a heavenly place of flowers. At this site the goddess was worshipped in her many avocations. Principally, she is also honored as Tlazolteótl, another goddess of fertility; she attends women at childbirth and also cleanses her "children" of their sins.

Many human sacrifices were performed at this site—it seems especially of women and children. We may assume, as with other sites, these were performed for the sake of appeasing the gods and desiring bountiful harvests to feed the population. As illustrated by the myth of Tlazolteótl, because of her ability to give birth and nourish her offspring with her milk, woman for centuries was both feared and revered.

Like the rings a stone creates when cast into a pond which widen and multiply, la *hembra* first submits to parents, next to extended family; if she belongs to the church (or is a devout Christian), she then defers to that institution, deeming its mandates sacred and unquestionable. She ultimately must surrender her will to society: school, a husband, and of course, she is aware of the ever-watchful eyes of the all-knowing Father in the sky. Through this rigorous training she is yet not *una mujer completa* until the day she becomes Mother. Then she is at once transformed into a visible and valued entity and becomes an institution in and of herself, a source that at times must be deferred to and paid homage and of which there are always many expectations, a considerable number that are humanly unrealistic.

This idealization is simultaneously juxtaposed with equal denigration of her Mother status. Within the context of our high-tech society, and as the gap grows wider between the few haves in this world and the multitude of have-nots, denigration of Mother eventually penalizes humankind as a whole. Without a society that considers the needs of mothers above all, the world's future citizens suffer and consequently, society as a whole suffers. Throughout this book it has been impossible not to discuss Mother as dictated by society within one context or another, because it is a synonym for woman within our culture; or at least, it is the only unequivocally approved definition of our reason to exist.

I have discussed the historical symbolic relevance of the Virgin Mary in our lives in an earlier chapter, "In the Beginning There Was Eva," referred to our respected roles as curanderas and brujas in "*Brujas and Curanderas*," have counseled rebellion against the Virgin/whore dichotomy in "Saintly Mother and Soldier's Whore," and cited the economic hardships of Mother in "A Countryless Woman," as well as the connections we make as mothers as a result of political activism in "The 1986 Watsonville Women's Strike." In the essay on sexuality I noted the only traditionally accepted reason for our having sexual

relations, which is to become mothers, or more specifically, to reproduce. I remarked on the anachronistic and neurotic regulation of Mother by men in “The Ancient Roots of Machismo” and have suggested the philosophical dilemma we have undergone because men identified our reproductive abilities with nature and excluded man from the cycle of all living things on this planet in “*Un Tapiz*.”

In Aztec society, women who died in childbirth were honored in the same way as warriors who died in battle. Mothers were considered to be giving birth to future warriors. Even at the present time, women are serving the needs of *la patria* when giving birth, producing labor and brainpower for global corporations and fodder for the wars that protect their interests. As a result of the refusal of profit-motivated corporations to adequately provide for the vast majority of the human population, there is poverty, starvation, and rampant disease (including in the United States). Women, whose bodies are controlled by legislatures and modern medical technology are held responsible and punished with unwanted pregnancies, traumatic abortions, and sterilization programs.¹

In our many-tiered world of social privileges, religious and secular practices have customarily established a child’s social status as that of his mother’s; this includes race identification. In the United States, we can recall slaves raped by white men, whose children were then born into slavery as mulattos, the color of their mothers and not the free fathers. However, in New Spain political power, racism, and sexism together were legislated with a very complex breakdown of castes. Shortly after the Conquest, marriage between Europeans and Amerindians was illegal. All mixed bloods were called *castas*. While castas could eventually breed themselves back into the white race, apparently it could not be done with a European woman and a nonwhite male; the idea apparently seemed unthinkable.² This is due to the system’s being patrimonial and patrilineal: the white woman had no real power to pass on to her children. The repercussions of the racial caste system implemented throughout the Americas during colonial times are still felt today. In the United States as recently as the 1960s, marriage between whites and nonwhites in some states, such as Arizona, remained illegal.

NEW KINSHIPS TO NURTURE OUR CHILDREN

The nuclear family is under pressure due to the demands of employment at one end and the fact that related labor migrations force families apart at the other. In México, the sheer need to survive drives indigenas from their villages to the cities and up to El Norte. For a variety of reasons, in the United States, more so than ever in the past, mexicanas and Chicanas are leaving their hometowns to start new lives elsewhere. According to a study on Latino families published in the mid-1990s: “Changing family structures, including marital disruption and cohabitation, could represent the most important issue for Latino family theory and research in the decade ahead.”³ In all cases geographic mobility is encouraged by the individual competition character in urban, postindustrial settings.

What may be retained as the family unit—the roles of “nurturer” and “provider/protector”—undergoes restructure. Nurturer has been associated with the role of Mother, while provider/protector has been associated with men. While these roles provide security and a sense of well-being for a child, they do not have to be restricted to gender or to the child’s biological parents. Moreover, any caring adult in the household may assume these roles. Characteristics such as nurturing, serviceability, and selflessness are valued within the context of Mother. While encouraged in women, such traits are denigrated, deemed worthless, seen as liabilities within the value system in which we live. That system lauds competitive and aggressive behavior for the sake of individual achievement, and above all, sees these qualities as inherent in man’s nature.

New family structures are being formed. Almost a quarter of the 75 million children under age eighteen were living in a single-mother family in the United States in 2010.⁴ Of that percentage nearly one-fourth are headed by Latina mothers. New families include lesbians and gay men who pursue parenthood through adoption and/or artificial insemination, as well as single heterosexuals.⁵ They form nontraditional, nurturing kinships with other adults. While Catholicism seems to be synonymous with our culture, the use of contraceptives and present legalization of abortion allow some women to choose to have fewer children or none. Families are forming out of second and third significant relationships. One or both partners are parenting children that are the products of previous relationships.

There is no evidence of the “maternal instinct” being inherent in woman, although women who reject mothering may be stigmatized with the “Llorona Complex,” that is, they may be ridiculed, humiliated, or even shunned as a result. Just as Freudian analysis—that also stigmatizes female behavior to a great extent—is steeped in classical Greek mythology, the Llorona story also derives from patriarchal mythology and scorns women who deviate from society’s expectations of being an all-sacrificing Mother.

It is true that a woman can bond with the child in her womb, that she lactates at the baby’s feeding time, or when she hears its hungry whimpers, and that she can distinguish that kind of cry from one that signifies something more serious. Mother-bonding when the fetus is in utero and during the early stages of infancy is necessary to ensure the child’s survival. By the same token, the unexplained phenomenon of spontaneous abortion may be a woman’s way of preserving the species by not bringing another human being into the world that she is not prepared to care for, or put another way, that might not survive in the world.

Although the responsibility of mothering is placed on the biological mother, anyone can be motherly. An incorporation of mothering qualities into our value system would radically change our world. Government and media alike have bandied about the need to return to our values as if any reasonably sound member of society had ever deliberately chosen a life for herself and her children that is unsafe, unhealthy, and a shameful dead end.

According to the results of a survey conducted in 2007 of about fifty thousand households, the Pew Research Center, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Census Bureau reported that Hispanic women were twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic women and fewer than 40 percent had a high school diploma. Nearly half of Hispanic women who gave birth

were unmarried. The term *Hispanic* as it is used in this survey refers to those born in the United States. The statistics for immigrant Latinas (Mexicans comprising 60 percent), while showing somewhat more hardship, indicated that just over 60 percent were likely to be married. While some work in office support jobs, they are more likely than non-Hispanics to be employed in blue-collar occupations. Overall, Hispanic women earned approximately one-third less than non-Hispanic women in full time work.⁶

While laws attempt to make noncustodial fathers financially accountable, the burden of maintenance falls for the most part on mothers, and they somehow manage households. Elvia Alvarado, a Honduran mestiza campesina organizer (Honduras is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere), put it this way:

Campesina women are terrific administrators. With the measly dollar a day the men give us, we buy corn, beans, sugar, salt, rice, oil, and coffee. If we can run our homes on a dollar a day, we'd do a better job of running our country than these rich guys can. . . . It's the rich who need the U.S. aid, not the poor. We've lived for years with only our beans and tortillas. If the U.S. stopped sending money, it would be the rich who'd be hurt not us. They're the ones who live off the dollars.⁷

THE WOMEN WHO RESIDED FOR centuries in the ceremonial center Xochitécatl mentioned earlier were not simply there to be fodder for men's religious rituals. The site, associated with the Tlaxcaltec people, also served as an important economic base, which was supported by women's weaving. The chants that are found later in this chapter that instruct women to learn about wool dyeing and weaving is not to imply that it was a home activity. In fact, in Xochitécatl it was a major base of the society's economy. Furthermore, weaving of wool just as basket weaving and pottery making, despite the image projected of these activities as seeming passive were not always "women's work." While Mesoamerican theocracies without question might equally be considered to have been brutal with their ongoing battles, slavery, and human sacrifices, their economic foundation was built on a principle in which members of society were fed and clothed and after childhood all were expected to contribute labor.

If we believe in a value system that seeks the common good of all members of society, by applying the very qualities and expectations we have placed on motherhood to our legislature and our social system—to care selflessly for her young, to be responsible for her children's material, spiritual, and emotional needs—we are providing for the future. Indeed, we may be contributing toward the insurance of a future for our planet.

MOTHERS WHO ARE DAUGHTERS OF MOTHERS

Many of us are daughters of women who may not have wanted to be mothers but who believed that they had no choice, and in fact, may have had none. We may be daughters of women who

thought they wanted to be mothers because they believed that was what they had to be to be seen as grown women. In either case, because of the permeation of religion in Mexican society, almost no mother would admit she did not want to be a mother and that she did not want all the children she received from God. In practice, however, women may nevertheless have practiced abortion to limit childbearing. We can't guess how many or how often, because the church's mandate and society's general disapproval against abortion (and contraception) would keep women from allowing others to be privy to such decisions. The evidence of no abuse by women of the legal so-called "morning-after" pill should provide proof that it is not typical for women to become pregnant frivolously just because they could have an "out."

Most of us are daughters of formidable women. They are formidable in the sense of prevailing over every kind of seemingly insurmountable obstacle. They prevail or they get sick and die. That is usually the alternative. Heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, AIDS; mental disorders; breast, uterine, ovarian, lung cancers; and tuberculosis are among the many illnesses that affect Latina women in disproportionate numbers as compared to whites. It isn't because we are biologically more disposed to disease, but because poverty, which includes lack of proper diet and excessive ongoing stress, make us more vulnerable to illness. Often our mothers have been recipients of poor, if any, health care, and have had no resources for psychotherapy, if indeed they sought it. We, their daughters, have also become formidably strong women. Surviving such hardships toughens us generation after generation.

Many of us are daughters of mothers who married because it was the only option open to them to leave their parent's home, which may have been an abusive or/and impoverished environment. Some mothers married because they were in love, yet others may have thought that was what they were supposed to do—fall in love, get married, have children, become grandmothers, die—if not happy, at least guilt-free, with the knowledge that they fulfilled their role in life as God-fearing women. Some women discovered after marriage that they were no longer in love. But they stayed because of economic necessity, fear of reproach from their family, prohibitions against divorce by the Catholic Church, or any number of reasons long ago established to keep our mothers in their place.

The above are only some examples of what many generations of women who preceded the Baby Boomers and following generations have lived through as well as what many, especially migrant/immigrant women, experience today. My point in citing some examples is to say that we are daughters of women who have been subject to a social system—compounded doubly by Mexican traditions and U.S. WASP dominance that prohibited us from opportunities that may have challenged our creative and intellectual potential in more ways than being wife, mother, and assembly line worker. To explore the web of our mother-daughter relationships under ongoing colonization would be a worthwhile and essential study for our self-comprehension as Xicanistas. By observing the repressive conditions under which many of our mothers became mothers, I mean to emphasize that as we become mothers, biologically or otherwise, because of our new Xicanista consciousness, the definition of Mother is altered from the one we experienced as daughters.

No less significant regarding our self-identification as women is how we have internalized male authority during our upbringing. A woman, because she feels disowned by her mother or because she cannot relate to the role her mother offers, may become more identified with the masculine within her. Jungian Maureen Murdock explains, “Many high-achieving women are considered daughters of the father because they seek the approval and power of that first male model. Somehow mother’s approval doesn’t matter as much; father defines the feminine, and this affects her sexuality, her ability to relate to men, and her ability to pursue success in the world.”⁸

Another kind of father-identified woman learns to get approval and attention in the world when she has been “daddy’s girl.” Unlike the father of the daughter who takes on traditionally male behavior (i.e., seeks to be the family provider, shows little vulnerable emotion in public) the daddy’s girl gets power through seduction, that is, playing on her femininity. Daddy’s girl wants to be pampered, but she rejects the Mother inside her and cannot give of herself to her community as a responsible adult woman. She identifies traits such as listening, caretaking of children or the old and sick as associated with Mother, her first female model, whom she has rejected.

On the other hand, the daughter of the father mentioned earlier, wants nurturing but has also rejected her first female model and therefore does not allow herself to express her need to be taken care of. In both cases, the issue is the way the father-related daughter has responded to her actual mother and to her own subsequent disconnection with the mother archetype. However, in all of society, the masculine has dominated so that there is a collective and individual imbalance of masculine values permeating our lives. Regardless of the dynamics of our personal experiences, we all—male and female—must find our way back to the feminine.

Now, if per chance we believe ourselves in full control of our faculties, economically stable, generally experiencing a satisfying life when we become mothers, we may indeed make some very conscious decisions on what being a mother will mean for us and to our children. Generally, the polemic of defining mothering is twofold, social and psychological. Neither is ever separate. We are informed through society—our culture, the church, and state—what Mothers are or should be. How a mother personally manifests this conditioning affects her children in a very personal way. Among each other, in our private discussions, we may discover that we have experienced our mothers in similar ways because of class and race commonalities. However, there are always some crucial differences, which, as we become women, we find have affected us in vital ways. For example, while there are mothers who indeed preferred their sons to their daughters, there are also some mothers who want to see their daughters reach full potential. Furthermore, there have also been mothers who rejected the self-sacrificing, tortilla-making image that we often assume comes naturally to Mexican women, and instead, despite the dismal consequences they (and their children) may have had to pay—they leave, with or without their children. Still, other mothers “leave” symbolically and

are not, for whatever reason, there for their daughters nor perhaps for themselves.

MOTHERLESS DAUGHTERS—MOTHERLESS MOTHERS

In a society in which church and state concur that male authority must be deferred to, as has been discussed in other chapters here, the female as Mother has been delegated the task of nurturer. However, she has been assigned the role of nurturer of man—who will grow up to be mythical hero and warrior (Quetzalcoátl), divine savior God incarnate (Jesus Christ), breadwinner husband (Joseph), sire of the family bloodline (king), heir, protector, and social mediator for his wife and children—something important, in other words.

On the other hand, when many female children reach puberty (at the very onset of breast development and menstruation), they are already in training to be nurturers—from coddling dolls to babysitting younger siblings. However, while the father may begin to refrain from affectionate demonstrations with his pubescent son, the mother will often continue such behavior with her male children well into adulthood. Again, I make general statements here regarding traditional Mexican culture. Therefore, while girls are taught that they must be givers of affection and caretaking, they are not always given the message that they are deserving of receiving nurturing. In defining for ourselves what kind of mother we will be, we must keep in mind that we may have been symbolically orphaned at puberty. For those of us who may feel this way, as we take on the new role of mothering, where the caring of a child may become the single most important responsibility we have, we must find ways in which we ourselves get nurturance. By doing so, by having others sometimes care for us—even in small ways—it replenishes our energy and positive feelings about ourselves that we need as mothers.

Many women, heterosexual, lesbian, in long-term relationships as well as single, experience a great sense of alienation from dominant society. We still see ourselves reflected on television, in Hollywood productions, popular U.S. literature, or anywhere in mass media in stereotypes (chambermaids and landscapers, gangbangers, cops and hot Latin lovers). We have a body of literature that when penned by and about Latinas is considered primarily for Latinas. Being marginalized in this and other ways provokes a sense of segregation, even if one is surrounded by immediate family and community.

The alienation of a woman who is a mother of young children is intensified by the various ways society restricts mothers from participating in the world. So sometimes, our only actual affirming source is a close friend. Many, not all, heterosexual women have been trained to reserve their tenderness for men. (Most lesbians have been taught this too, but they don't practice it.) Therefore, *comadres* may be a splendid source for companionship, spiritual uplifting, and positive affirmation. By *comadre* I am not limiting the definition to solely the woman who has sponsored a religious ceremony (a significance that implies a lifetime commitment to the child), but to mean a family friend. The *comadre* has often served as confidante and social ally. She is loyal to you in your ongoing struggles with lover, family, society, and that is a special relationship to have indeed. Sometimes she is the only person in

our lives who understands, because in fact, she experiences many of the same struggles.

These comadre relations, however, may also unfortunately slip into unproductive, codependent, and even destructive relationships—drinking or taking drugs together, going out and leaving the children alone, obsessing about unsatisfying lovers, or in fact, mutually holding on to the anguish that comes with experiencing racism, sexism, and economic burdens as part of our daily lives. A comadre that encourages us in negative behavior and attitudes can be seen as an *alcahueta* and should be avoided. The role of *alcahueta* in Aztec society was greatly frowned on because she encouraged women to behave licentiously. If caught, she was cruelly punished in public, but the woman who accepted the *alcahueta*'s assistance suffered even greater punishment.⁹ While historically the *alcahueta* was seen as a go-between for adulteresses, our definition may expand itself to any supposed friend who encourages us, intentionally or not, to be dishonest—first and foremost with ourselves.

Under healthy circumstances, however, the comadre can be our ideal source for sensitive demonstrations of affection and concern. A comadre can massage your feet, wash your hair; she can read out loud to you. She can come over and cook a meal or rock you to sleep. Not only can we hope that our comadre may occasionally babysit for us or lend us a little money for food or other expenses when we need it—as comadres have traditionally done—we can learn to be each other's mothers, even for one day of the month. Comadre means just that: co-madre. It may be a question of saving a mother's sanity.

THE YIN/YANG OF THE MOTHERBODY

As young as eight years of age, a girl child may begin to develop breasts. Soon after she may start menstruation. Henceforth she is no longer an asexual being simply existing in the world; her body's distinctly reproductive abilities have determined her whole existence. This function of our bodies to prepare each month for the possibility of pregnancy takes its toll on our bodies and on us emotionally. For the next three to four decades of her life, every month will be marked by her moon time. Indigenous people in the Americas recognize a woman's moon time (referred to as such because in fact women's menses are affected by the moon's cycles) as a time when she is especially powerful. However, in Western society, a woman's moon time was derogatorily summed up as "the curse." The hormonal effects of a woman's menstruation can affect her in many difficult ways both physically and emotionally. Bloating, depression, cramps, and breast pain can be part of a woman's life for as long as two weeks of every month for most of her life. Women are always aware of our bodies.

When a woman's menses begins to slow down and menopause nears, her body begins new changes. In Eastern thought, she would now begin to have more "yang" (interpreted as masculine) qualities because her estrogen level is dropping. In early societies, when a woman reached menopause, she was reaching the age of wisdom.¹⁰ In Western society, however, she is still regarded negatively, because she can no longer reproduce. Along with the end of her

menses come many other physical and emotional changes. Osteoporosis, hair loss, vaginal drying, hysterectomy (there has been in recent years a notable rise in practice of this severe surgical procedure by the medical profession), mastectomies, weight gain, night sweats, and hot flashes are among the changes that may affect a menopausal woman.

Although women are always aware of our bodies because of reasons mentioned above and elsewhere in this book, we are not always in tune with our bodies. Or rather, the negative connotations contemporary Western society gives to women's reproductive abilities have caused us to feel everything but in tune with our bodies. Moreover, a woman is made to feel that what she looks like and what she feels like is embarrassing if it at all is reflective of her hormones. While the younger woman is pressured to act and look sexy, she must also desire to embrace the Virgin Mary's posture of sexless motherhood. On the other hand, the older woman is often ridiculed if she feels or thinks of herself as "sexy." Since she can no longer aspire to be "blessed with child," the older woman has lost her *raison d'être*. At no time in a woman's life today is she given reprieve from being aware of her *motherbody*, a body that the modern medical profession has made her feel alien from and a body that is often so far from perfect—according to mainstream aesthetics—even she does not want it.

WASP society rendered the indigenous-looking woman invisible, and to date if she does not conform in appearance and dress to the standard of beauty set by white culture or at least conjures a dark exoticism, she is further disregarded. Color, stature, and status or presumed lack thereof all contribute to the bias. However, Jungian therapist, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, remarks, on discovering the Tehuanas of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, "lo! . . . a tribe with giant women who were strong, flirtatious, and commanding in their size."¹¹ She goes on to conclude that from such powerful people outside the United States she learned "to refute ideas and language that would revile the mysterious body, that would ignore the female body as an instrument of knowing."¹² Furthermore, Estés tells women how society conditions us to loathe our bodies, but I think it is especially important for us as *mestizas* to keep in mind that "to attack a woman thusly destroys her rightful affiliation with her own people. . . . In essence, the attack on women's bodies is a far-reaching attack on the ones who have gone before her as well as the ones who will come after her."¹³

Inherent to our intellectual and practical concerns as *Xicanistas* should be our attention to our *motherbody*. The overwhelming aesthetic throughout modern societies around the globe continues to show a preference for the white woman, preferably blonde, svelte but with large breasts, which fuels a multibillion-dollar beauty industry. Above all, she should be young with an air-brushed body. The accompaniment of whitening as women of color become successful, especially but not limited to celebrities, is evident—from Nikki Minaj and Mary J. Blige to Cristina Aguilera to Shakira, JLo, and Beyoncé. Older and younger women with conscientización, however, learn to care for their bodies in such ancient ways it seems radically new. We accept ourselves: whether it is *chapparita* or *cuadrada* stature, our Naha straight black or Afro-influenced hair, our Olmec lips, Mongoloid skin color and fold in the eyes, Nayarit protruding tummies, and our flat Chichimec (or protruding *mestiza*) bottoms. As we age, it is our white hair, lost waistlines or postcancer bodies. In addition to biannual checkups, learning to do breast checkups at home; finding what treatments best suit us during

especially difficult stress and hormonal related times (from over-the-counter medication to acupuncture); claiming “quiet time” for ourselves to rest, meditate, or cry if so inclined; and working some form of exercise into our lifestyle, acceptance of our bodies is an important first step toward self-love.

Among Aztec nobility much pressure was placed on the woman to comport herself and present herself with dignity. Women who did not bathe three times a day were publicly reprimanded as being both dirty and lazy.¹⁴ But her ancestors, the Toltecs, to whom they prayed, in addition to being credited for their beauty, dictated authority among the Aztec nobility. The Tolteca women were also warriors and went out to battle. All our lives we, too, are called to battle. Regardless of what society tells us about our bodies, we must remember that how we personally feel about ourselves and how we take care of ourselves is the ultimate determinant of who we are.

MOTHERGUIDES PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION

Parents, but in particular mothers, are blamed for the “failings” of their children, and yet children are being taught everyday by the world around them. It is a world that women did not create. The impoverished, the working poor, and single mothers have lifestyles with their children that most did not elect intentionally. In fact, many mothers did not get pregnant intentionally. While mothers are responsible for their children, they alone do not teach their children. Today, in the United States, the media and all that constitutes popular culture heavily influences children. As individuals we can’t control what is produced by the Internet, television, and film industries and by the popularity of video games, though we may try to monitor what our children view and experience as “entertainment.” By doing so we can minimize some of the brutal violence, sexism, and racism that children are exposed to. We can be as vigilant as possible about what our children absorb by asking such questions as: What role do we prepare our little boys for when supermacho entertainment found in some videogames, war toys, and the like is readily available and when we show enthusiasm for such combative sports as football and wrestling? What body image issues do we present to prepubescent girls when we encourage make-up, heels, and other fashion “female enhancement” styles?

Although many of us sometimes lack the energy to play with our children, even on weekends, or to always be attentive to what they are experiencing at home, we can make some effort to teach our children about the simple joys in life, that is, to maintain a general positive outlook from day to day. We can play music while we are doing other things at home. We may sing to them and with them. Don’t forget laughter. When they’re small they like to learn to help with chores around the house and, patiently, we can show them how. (Unfortunately, this enthusiasm usually wanes as they get older.) If we don’t have a garden we can start a flower box, some avocado plants, a windowsill cactus garden. We can color with the little ones, take walks, plan an outing: to a museum (on the day when there’s no entrance fee), the park to play

catch, a free mariachi concert—something relaxing, enjoyable, doable—and take friends along, yours and/or theirs. The point is to spend time with them on their turf. Try not to announce plans that you are not sure of to avoid disappointment. These suggestions are by no means meant to imply that caretakers of children don't think of these kinds of activities and many more, on their own. I mention them here as a way of reminding and encouraging guardians to do them. Our other responsibilities are often so pressing, we tend to think of playing with our children as something of a luxury rather than something vital to our lives.

About one-fifth of today's high school graduates are technically illiterate.¹⁵ Reading to our children at an early age is invaluable. There are now culturally appropriate children's books addressing all manner of new family structures and nontraditional experiences. We do not have to resort to the traditional fairy tales that portray a monarchical world of princesses who are rescued by Prince Charming and live happily ever after in a castle. Books are expensive, but there are paper editions and we can ask friends and family to give our children books instead of toys at gift-giving times. Books may also be found in thrift stores and secondhand bookshops, not to mention at the library.

Storytelling, especially to small children at bedtime, can be invaluable for many reasons. First, it is an opportunity to spend time together. We give them personal attention that we may not have been able to give throughout the day, and comfort, which may lead to a more restful sleep and calm child. To my mind, the best storytelling comes spontaneously. We do not have to "make up" stories. We can share our own lives about our childhood and family history with our children through storytelling. As children grow older and become more aware of themselves as people in the world, I think it is reassuring to them to have a sense of connection with their family past, between their own childhood and yours, a sense of who they are and how they fit in the world. Heed the advice in the ancient Nahuátl verse about the Talquetzqui, "The storyteller uses words of joy / flowers are on his lips / his language is strict / his language is noble / the bad storyteller is careless / he confuses words / he swallows them / he says useless words / he has no dignity."¹⁶

Remember that children do not have the capacity to listen objectively to a lot of what they hear from adults. They may end up internalizing or assimilating impressionable accounts they overhear from their parents. Children ought not to be our confidantes. Taken to an extreme, telling our children about our own emotional traumas and disappointments is now identified as a form of incest. In time, they will grow up and meet their own challenges. You are the adult. Your hardships are yours. Children should be spared of your anger and frustration regarding your life. Your children are your responsibility at all times, and they are at no time responsible for your problems.

Very often in Mexican families, our children are made aware of our marital problems or our indiscreet behavior causes them to be exposed to our other problems. Children are blamed by a disappointed parent for the acts of her or his unfaithful, alcoholic, or otherwise irresponsible spouse. While children may not be fated to repeat a pattern of such behavior when they become adults, it is very difficult for them to separate themselves from the pain of having had such models or authority figures during their upbringing. In the United States today, about one out of

three females and one out of four males have been sexually molested as children. This is what has been reported, but the actual figures may be higher. The heterosexist, macho stigma attached to males who have been sexually abused, especially by other males, has kept most males, until very recently, from reporting their victimization. If you are not the one out of three, then you may have a sister or brother who has been the victim of sexual molestation or incest. Do not hold this in for the rest of your life. Do not protect the offender. Seek outside help. This may be the hardest thing you ever do, and it may be the most important. If by chance you are aware that a child in your life is being abused, do all that you can to stop it. If you are the offender, remove yourself from that child's life and get help.

My son,
Eagle, ocelot,
wing, tail,
So beloved—
Listen!
It is right
that you should take care.
This is the place of hardships.

The old ones
of white hair and wrinkled faces,
our ancestors
have let it said for us . . .
Cut wood!
Plant the maguey:
you will have to drink, eat,
wear clothes.
You will be real.
You will walk the path.

My daughter,
precious
as a golden necklace . . .
you are my blood,
my image—
. . . You were not meant
to sell herbs
at the market,
wood,

green chilies,
or saltpeter
on street corners.
You are noble!

When you speak, speak
Not too loud
and not soft
but with honest words
always.
Walk—
Never with bowed head,
Nor
ever raised too high.

Be skillful,
understand,
learn what is Toltec,
what is noble.
Watch with diligence,
curiosity,
alertness
how to weave,
how to apply colors.

Your heart is
a sapphire,
simple and clean.
Listen,
Take note
Of these things.
May they be your torch,
your firebrand
to guide you
through all your days
on this earth.¹⁷

VERY LITTLE RESEARCH HAS FOCUSED on child care patterns and preferences among U.S.

Latinos. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Hispanics are more likely to use child care provided by relatives than are whites and blacks.¹⁸ This information of course may be interpreted in a number of ways, not least among them being cost but also the lack of cultural sensitivity that many facilities show toward Mexican parents and their children. For more than forty years, since the initial activism of early feminists calling these problems to the public's attention, they continue to be a reality. In fact, many of the bilingual and bicultural community-based child care centers started in the seventies have long been closed because of lack of funding. Child care for many of us is virtually unaffordable. And yet, we must have it in order to hold down jobs to provide for our families. Obviously, the obligation of having child care for our children does not end with cost. We must stay attentive to the kind of child care our children are receiving. We must not hesitate for a moment to express concerns we may have regarding the facility or the child care staff. If our concerns are not addressed satisfactorily, we must take suitable action. Our children depend on us for this.

At this writing, the U.S. federal government is finally moving toward a national health care program for its residents. Most parents, as much as they can afford to, try to be attentive to their children's health care. According to the Centers for Disease Control, low-income persons and minority populations, especially African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, are more likely to fall prey to infectious diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis.¹⁹ It is up to us to provide a healthy lifestyle for our children. This must be a priority. Our children depend on us. The best health care, of course, comes through prevention. We cannot prevent all diseases but we can stay healthy to some degree by being diet conscious, staying attentive to our emotional needs, and keeping active. Part of being a good parent means being informed. Read about diet and food. Educate yourself about the beneficial effects of herbs, vitamins, and minerals. Understand that what passes for good food in the supermarket is very often not. The Food and Drug Administration, which is supposed to be looking out for our health so that we feel assured of its safeness (for example, when we buy a package of ground beef stamped FDA approved), is regulated by a bureaucracy that ends up delivering us a mixed set of goods. In actuality, that beef may be injected with hormones that go into and are harmful to our system. While the pesticide-dependent agricultural industry squeezes out small organic farmers, and organic food products are comparatively expensive, we must remember that our family's health is worth more than cutting corners on the food bill.²⁰ Cancer in children, high-blood pressure in adults, and hysterectomies performed on younger women are all examples of possible diet-related illnesses.

Addictive behavior may be learned or it may be genetic. In any case, we do teach our children by our own behavior. We must try not to pass on to our children our own learned bad eating habits, such as junk food addictions and compulsive eating. Along these lines, the list of addictions is probably endless. Alcohol and other drugs, as well as cigarette smoking, are not only addictions that we do not want our children to grow up and start themselves, the damage we do to children because of our own addictions can be irremediable, even tragic.

In addition to the degradation and hardships we may experience, if we come from severely dysfunctional homes, we obviously do not have the skills ready at hand to be parents who are always patient and nurturing and prepared to meet all our children's needs and wishes. There

have been limited support services available to help us overcome some of the trauma, stress, and addictive behavior we experience and to which we expose our children. Nevertheless, when we know we need outside support, we must not hesitate to seek it out. This is as much for ourselves as for our children who depend on us. If you do not know where to turn, start by calling a health clinic for references. Planned Parenthood has served women for decades in all manner of services.

There is the ongoing problem of finding support that is relevant to our cultural experience. Consequently, when we do have the courage to attempt to break the silence of our pain and preoccupations, we are often quickly discouraged because we are misunderstood. It is not only a matter of custom that we hesitate to talk about our “problems” with strangers, but we immediately know that people outside of our cultural experience truly do not have the same point of reference. Nevertheless, we cannot always make it alone. As stated above, mothers of young children especially who find themselves without a ready support network, such as caring relatives, can suffer isolation and anguish. In addition to the time and energy child care takes, our anxiety may be aggravated by financial worries, health issues, work, or personal problems. Therefore, as mothers, we must recognize the point at which we simply cannot carry it all on our own shoulders, and we must, for the sake of our children and our own well-being, seek outside assistance.

A Latina mother (especially but not limited to low-income) deals every day with antagonism against her that is pervasive in society—from the police officer who stops her on the pretext of charging her with a traffic violation but questions whether or not she is a citizen, to employment where she may have worked her way up to management but is harassed by resentful coworkers as if her position is owed solely to Equal Opportunity Employment policies, to shabby treatment by sales clerks and snubbing from neighbors in her new neighborhood. In addition to her own experiences, negative attitudes also affect her children such as through school desegregation programs, gang rivalries, and neighbors and their children who pick up on their parents’ disapproval. Therefore, as mothers we are not only dealing with education, health, and economic burdens but with ongoing experiences that also degrade our children.

We must not only be vigilant about the education that our children receive once they are on their way to learning the three Rs in elementary school; the kind of education they receive in many schools is primarily still run by culturally insensitive administrations and faculty. Today gross stereotypical assumptions continue about our children by those who presume to be educators. We may not have the time to join PTAs, but we must make the time to let teachers and administrators know we care about our children’s curriculum. There is a current attitude among school officials that parents must also be held accountable for their child’s education. I concur wholeheartedly; by the same token, we must hold our schools accountable for the kind of education they are giving our children. Examine your children’s textbooks, talk to your children as often as possible about their day at school, stay attentive to what is going on. When and if you feel something should be questioned, question it.

Not only in large urban environments but also in smaller cities and towns throughout the United States, going to junior high school and high school has become a dangerous activity, even for those of our children who do not want any part of drug or gang violence. Some high

schools have metal detectors at the entrances and students are checked for weapons. Young men and women who have done nothing more than strive to do well in school have been shot and killed as a result of the pervasive violence among youth. Equally frightening, while we may do all that we can to teach our children about the dangers of drugs, they are a fact of life in society. Protecting our children from the day we decide we are going to be mothers to the day they are of legal age and have assured us that they are responsible for themselves requires incessant daily and nightly vigilance that quickly becomes second nature.

If anything can be defined as mother instinct it is this demand placed on mothers to care for their offspring. Society places that expectation as a demand foremost on the mother. The mother-bond principle requires us all to be responsible for all children. As Xicanistas, female and male alike, whether we are biological mothers or not, we can learn to incorporate qualities customarily seen as inherent in mothering and apply them to how we treat ourselves, our relationships, and naturally, the children.