

Maria Elena Gaitan

Fifteen years after she was swept up by the Chicano movement, Maria Elena Gaitan, 33, is flourishing as a poet, writer, actress and musician.

She co-authored "La Condicion Femenina," a play about the Chicana rites of passage, and is working on a second drama, "The Rape of Teresita Dominguez." At 18, Gaitan, a cellist, left the Pasadena Symphony and her studies at what is now the School of Music at the California Institute of the Arts. Instead she marched and lobbied for change in immigration, farm worker and public education policies.

Gaitan has remained active ever since. She has been a candidate for the Los Angeles school board and, at the Hispanic Urban Center, trained parents to be advocates for public education. Her involvement with education carries on a family tradition. Her grandfather, a teacher, led a literacy campaign in Mexico. Her mother, Ana Covarrubias, a classical pianist and former music teacher in East Los Angeles, was active in bilingual education.

Gaitan works as a legal interpreter and has a monthly radio talk show focusing on Latino education issues. She lives in Glendale with her 7-year-old son, Octavio Tizoc.

My music was a gift from my mother, who gave me my first cello lesson when she was going through her divorce After I left high school and went to Cal Arts, I was in that enclave of music, but it was incongruous with the tremendous social movements that were happening among Chicanos as a result of the civil rights movement.

My mother was teaching at Lincoln High School at the heart of where the blowouts (student walk-outs) happened. And here I was, in some institutions that were still segregated, like the Pasadena Symphony where I wasn't prepared for the racism and elitism of the classical music environment. Many of the adults and the rich kids wouldn't even speak to me. It made me angry, and for me, it became a matter of choosing . . . I was on the verge of joining the Musicians Union. It was very painful and it's a crime that I had to make that choice.

As the *movimiento* began developing, I was simply in it. I was in the *marchas*; I would fast (for the farm workers). I saw the Chicano movement at its height and at its fullest, with all its victories, its opportunism, its male supremacy and its rip-offs. . . .

I was in the farm workers movement because the idea of my people being *campesinos* and being exploited was the most enraging of all, that we could be the ones that picked the food and they were calling me a "beaner" at (mostly white) Alhambra High School. . . .

There's a part of me that hates high school because they took my budding person and tried to squash it. Racism can be so brutal. We can't live in this country and not be affected by it.

But I'm not a segregationist. Segregation has been the most critical strategy to keep us apart, isolated and subjected to inequality. The very fact that a society can create nuclei of ghettos and barrios is not something we should romanticize and say, "If it wasn't for the barrio, we wouldn't have culture." Hey, we have culture in spite of the inequities in the barrio and in spite of segregation.

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Two casualties of racism, she observes, are self-image and self-expression.

Racism affects self-image because if everything that you see does not reflect your type, your beauty, what you are, it means that somewhere along the line, someone is deciding that you are not beautiful, capable or worthy. If we hear this long enough, it succeeds in convincing us. That's what fads are all about. You put something out and bait people with it.

I hate seeing Chicanas with blonde hair when their skins are not of that color. They do it to look more European and less Indian. It's an aspect of self-hatred that's real evident to me. Chicanos have to stop being afraid of their own strength and beauty *tambien*.

The way that racism affects self-expression, quite simply, is that it doesn't allow us to learn reading and writing skills the way we should. Most of us are in public schools. Most public schools are segregated and most segregated schools are also overcrowded. That's why the collective ability of Chicanos, the ability of kids of color to read and write, is minimized.

It's quite natural that some of us can't read and write because of how we went into the classroom—many of us speaking Spanish first—and how violently the public school place took away our ability to communicate by forbidding us Spanish.

In 1981, Gaitan attended the Third World Congress of Women sponsored by the Women's International Democratic Federation in Prague during the U.N. Decade of Women.

People all over the world are interested in us. They know what Chicanos are. . . .

(At the congress) I saw women of every color from every country speaking every language. . . .

I thought, "When I go home, I'm going to try to use my resources better than I have because, my God, how do those Palestinian women, those women in South Africa and El Salvador, get up in the morning and face life?"

Because Chicanas are among the most exploited workers in the country, it's more essential for them to be in touch with what goes on in the whole world. That way, they will understand what their position in this society is and fight for their equality.

They will understand there is a history of struggle. They don't have to reinvent it. A Chicana doesn't have to do anything but be active where she is because she affects those around her, her family, her workplace, the politics that go on here.

She has power because she's a fundamental part of the productive society. When Chicanas realize this, hey, honey, I've got news for you. They'll be real angry about how unequally they've been treated and exploited.

When they understand that they had rights this whole time that they were unable to exercise because they weren't given the knowledge of them—when Latin women get that—those sewing machines (in garment factories) might stop. They might get real mad one day and those houses will not be cleaned and those thousands and thousands of beds in all the motels across the land may just not be made and then we'll see where you are.

Despite these conditions, Gaitan refuses to be bitter.

The lack of material things around you, the difficulty of sustaining your life, starving, all of it, can force you to be inhuman.

But, I learned from black women that when you're attacked with hatred and racism, the first thing you must not do is lose your ability to love.

This is the noble nature of suffering, and I'm not glorifying it, but I really do believe that people who have gone through a lot of oppression and suffering—like black people, Mexican people, Indian people, poor people—have had to develop a special dimension of love.

We have to raise the level of expectations in people. We don't want them to stop hoping, to feel weak or to give up meekly, thinking that they have no resources at all.

And, you know what? I expect my people to have jobs. I expect to make money, too. How can I have any expectations for my people if I don't have any for myself?