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RC100: Feminisms in Latin America

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### Elvia Alvarado: a Campesina's Intersectional Struggle

In the 1980s, Honduras was situated in the United States' geopolitical scheme: amidst its hegemonic crusade to stop communism abroad, the U.S. became involved with the Honduran government. The U.S. planned to make Honduras an archetype of democracy for Central America (Alvarado xix). This imperialistic pursuit, however, only benefited the Honduran government, military, and rich landowners, while the campesinos, the poor agricultural workers that made up the majority of the population, suffered. The campesinos worked to hold the government accountable for already existing legislation, such as the Agrarian Reform Law—a piece of legislation designed to redistribute idle land. In *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo*, campesino woman Elvia Alvarado narrates her life story and its relation to the movement she is helping to organize among her counterparts. Although Alvarado doesn't describe herself as a feminist, her story exemplifies how the development of Latin American feminism in the late twentieth century expresses continuity, relying upon the intersection of personal experiences and the identities of women to fight overarching injustices.

Alvarado begins her narrative by recounting her upbringing and personal experiences as a mother. She directly embodies the ways in which her role as a woman and as a campesino intersect. "Our struggle," Alvarado writes, "has to begin in our own homes" (Alvarado 56). As a mother, she has examined firsthand the injustices committed against the campesinos: lack of proper education, rampant malnourishment and alcoholism, and poor health care and drinking

water. As a woman, she is more closely tied to these issues, as many of them relate to the duties she must complete in the domestic realm, such as providing meals for her family with limited food. Additionally, she has experienced injustices unique to campesinos that extend beyond domesticity, such as being accustomed to working at a young age and having a limited education. These experiences are inextricably connected, setting the organizational underpinnings of the entire campesino movement.

Alvarado's political awakening arose from conversations with other women in her community, creating a gateway into their overall involvement in the campesino movement. In womens' groups in her church, she was able to discuss the problems connected to the exploitation from their government with her community members (Alvarado 13). She then became involved with the campesino movement, joining the National Congress of Rural Workers (CNTC), where she was able to organize other women in the struggle. "If we can run our homes on a dollar a day," Alvarado wrote, "we'd surely do a better job running our country than these rich guys can" (Alvarado 105). The benefits of organized women to the campesino movement are apparent to Alvarado; because they are the most marginalized in the campesino movement, their liberation will result in the liberation of all campesinos. Thus, women's organizing has provided sustenance to the struggle: providing food during land recoveries and taking over if the men are imprisoned—all while simultaneously fulfilling domestic duties. Once campesino women are organized, they create the backbone of their movement.

With the strength women provide to the campesino movement, Alvarado and her counterparts then address the overarching hegemony contributing to their oppression: the Honduran government and its connection to the U.S. The pressure the Honduran government faced from the U.S. resulted in increased military presence, which was then used to wield power

over the campesinos. Alvarado explains that “all the money goes for the rich. And we poor Hondurans? Malnourished, without land to work, without jobs, without education. Is that a democracy?” (Alvarado 120). During land recoveries, the campesinos are often met with force from the Hondruan military, and the rich landowners continually win cases disputing property in court because of their connections to the government. The campesinos are denied the principles of democracy, such as freedom of speech, and must operate under an unjust system. Alvarado has experienced these adversary effects, and her campesino struggle is not only fighting this faulty democracy, but the imperialist hegemony of the United States that supports a militant government.

Although Alvarado never explicitly identified as a feminist, her testimonial shows the continuity between late and early twentieth century Latin American feminism. Both underscore that feminism is an intersectional struggle: an idea that illustrates the inextricable connections between the experiences and oppression people may face due to their identities. To highlight intersectionality, Alvarado—like many other Latin American women—are using the feminist principle of the “Personal is Political” to fight larger structures of hegemony, hightlighting how personal experiences are situated within institutional schemes. Although intersectionality and the “Personal is Political” were concreted towards the end of the twentieth century, many earlier anti-imperialist feminists examined their struggle with this mindset. For example, “U.S. intervention in Panama and elsewhere in Central America and the Caribbean took away sovereignty, not only of nations, but of all men, women, and children in occupied territories” (Marino 50). These early twentieth century anti-imperialist feminists knew that their liberation was connected with the liberation of their countries. Similarly, Alvarado’s struggles are not mutually exclusive. She is a woman, and she is a campesino; she has experienced

marginalization from both of these identities, and the freedom of Honduras from its militant regime and U.S. imperialism would guarantee the end of both struggles. Alvarado demonstrates this intersectional fight through her personal experiences and anecdotes, emphasizing how her life has been shaped simultaneously by both identities.

In her testimony, *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo*, Alvarado demonstrates the ways in which her personal identity created the underpinnings of her activism. Because of the inextricable relationship between her identity as a woman and a campesino, Alvarado saw how important it was to organize other women to fight the hegemony of U.S. imperialism and the Honduran government; the liberation of campesino women would guarantee the liberation of campesinos as a whole. Although Alvarado did not directly identify as a feminist, her account illustrates the parallels between early and late twentieth century Latin American feminists, using intersectionality to fight overarching injustices.

Works Cited

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Marino, Katherine. *Feminisms for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press, 2019.