ONE

Introduction
Putting Women at the Center of Politics

Yo como madre de familia, y como residente del Este de Los Angeles, seguiré luchando sin descanso por que se nos respete. Y yo lo hago con bastante cariño hacia mi comunidad, y digo "mi comunidad" porque me siento parte de ella, quiero a mi raza como parte de mi familia, y si Dios me permite seguiré luchando contra todos los gobernadores que quieran abusar de nosotros. [As a mother and a resident of East Los Angeles, I shall continue fighting tirelessly so we will be respected. And I will do this with much affection for my community. And I say "my community" because I am part of it. I love my *raza*, my people, as part of my family; and if God allows, I will keep on fighting against all the government officials who want to take advantage of us.]

Juana Gutiérrez, Mothers of East Los Angeles (1986)

The parole office representatives, they think it won't be long before the residents give up. I told them they would be hearing from us until it is moved. It is the little kids who suffer. I'm sorry, I get emotional about it. It would be OK if it were a high school a block away. But kids in elementary school are still too young to defend themselves.

Annie Rodríguez, Concerned Parents and Residents of Monterey Park (1989)

The words of Juana Gutiérrez and Annie Rodríguez express passionate commitment to the well-being of two different communities. Juana, who immigrated from Mexico to the United States over thirty years ago, lives in Boyle Heights, a densely populated, bustling, inner-city Latino barrio. Juana and her husband, Ricardo, raised nine children in the area. Boyle Heights, located in Eastside Los Angeles, lies only five minutes from the Civic Center, but few non-Latinos venture there because of its image as a dangerous place.

Annie Rodríguez and her husband, Nick, both U.S.-born Mexican Americans, grew up in Eastside Los Angeles. They moved to the suburbs after they married, settling in the ethnically diverse middle-class suburb of Monterey Park in 1975. The quiet neighborhoods, quality services, and proximity to Nick's employment appealed to them as a desirable place to raise their daughter. Ten years later, the positive image of Monterey Park promoted by a Chinese businessman had attracted thousands of new Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, greatly changing the political, economic, ethnic, and racial composition of the city. In both communities, the struggle over community image is a struggle over power.[1]

Early one morning Juana stands with me on the porch of her two-story wooden house on Mott Street, two doors away from Whittier Boulevard, a lively commercial thoroughfare. Her street is so narrow that parking is permitted only on one side. Juana's front yard features an altar with a two-foot statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe, brightly flowering roses and cacti, and rock landscaping rather than a lawn. A six-foot-tall black wrought-iron fence surrounds the yard.

Directly across the street from her home stands the one-block-square Boyle Heights Park and Recreation Center. In 1986 she encouraged neighbors to join her in lobbying the city

to renovate the neglected recreation center, which was being used as an informal dumpsite for stolen cars; the cars were often stripped, abandoned, and then set afire. After the city renovated the center, she shared cuttings from her rose bushes with the Latina gardener who landscaped the barren slopes of the park area. Juana has also acted as an advocate for Eastside Los Angeles, challenging the media portrayal of her barrio as a gangland battlefield teeming with tattooed "homeboys" and drive-by shootings. Stereotypical depictions of Asians, Latinos, and African Americans and their communities are often used to rationalize discriminatory practices. For this reason contesting degraded community images plays a key role in grassroots politics (see Chapter Three).

In 1985, with the encouragement of the local Catholic priest, Juana and other Mexican American women helped establish Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), a group that grew into a network of over four hundred families, mobilized four thousand people, and defeated the first state prison planned for an urban setting. Shortly thereafter, MELA stopped the construction of a toxic waste incinerator, established national political ties with other environmental groups, and emerged as a permanent community voice. In 1990 Mothers of East Los Angeles divided into two groups, roughly along parish lines. Both groups continued to advocate for community well-being and to inspire and affirm other women's community activism. In an adjoining parish Juana Gutiérrez and several other MELA members founded Madres del Este de Los Angeles, Santa Isabel (MELA-SI). In 1992 they created a nonprofit community-based organization. They promoted water conservation and generated jobs and funds that are reinvested in the community. They have also worked on a lead-poisoning and abatement program, immunization awareness, scholarships for

high school and college students, and graffiti removal (see Chapter Five).

Age, birthplace, generation in the United States, regional context, and political views all influence one's choice of an ethnic or racial label. All except one of the women in MELA were of Mexican origin. The women used different terms to identify themselves, including "Mexicana," "American of Mexican descent," "Hispanic," and "Mexican American"; none identified herself as Chicana.[2] Out of respect for the women's choices and in the interest of consistency, I have used "Mexican American." In other contexts, I use "Chicana" for Mexican-origin women born in the United States, and "Latina" or "Latino" rather than "Hispanic" as an inclusive term for people of Latin American or Caribbean origins, both U.S. and foreign born. The diversity of ethnic labels emanates from ongoing political processes that pertain to us all. For the reasons I have just outlined, I use "Anglo" to refer to European American women who used Anglo and Caucasian interchangeably and I use Asian American as a general category to refer to persons of Asian ancestry. Wherever appropriate, I indicate national origin.

Later that week I spoke to Annie Rodríguez, a Mexican American woman who lives in the ethnically diverse middle-class city of Monterey Park, a suburb adjacent to the Eastside. Unlike Eastside Los Angeles residents, who are predominantly blue collar, Latino, and less likely to own their own homes, the Asian, Latino, and white residents of Monterey Park are predominantly middle-class, white collar workers. In a quiet and well-kept housing tract built in the 1950s, we sit in the living room of Annie's hilltop home, with its neatly trimmed front lawn, backyard pool, and view of the city below. In 1988, outraged by the presence of a state parole office

serving felons a few blocks from the local elementary school, she helped to organize an ethnically diverse group of residents called "Concerned Parents and Residents of Monterey Park." On a smaller scale than MELA, the ethnically and racially mixed group of women and men in the middle-class suburban setting played a key role in mobilizing neighborhood opposition to the parole office.

Women much like Juana Gutiérrez and Annie Rodríguez have a long history of mobilizing civic action. Until the 1980s, however, little was written about the dimensions, let alone the dynamics, of women's grassroots political participation. We see children playing in a supervised park or hear about the renovation of a school, but seldom wonder who mobilized the community resources to upgrade the school or to staff the park. The places in which we live, learn, shop, and play are more than simply buildings; they represent outcomes of social relations that we take for granted. The quality of life in a community reflects unrecorded social and political processes, often originating in grassroots activism. Different from electoral politics, grassroots activism happens at the juncture between larger institutional politics and people's daily experiences. Women play a central role in the often unrecorded politics at this level.

This book focuses on the stories of Mexican American women from two Los Angeles communities and how they transformed the everyday problems they confronted in their neighborhoods into political concerns. These stories are more than fascinating human interest stories. They illustrate political processes at the local level. If we place women's experiences at the center of the analysis of local urban politics, we can see the gender, race, and class character of community networks. We can see how women and men help to shape the lo-

cal urban environment as they create the resources for churches, schools, and community services. We also generate new questions and answers about collective action and the transformation of social networks into political networks.

Women's presence in local politics and their absence from conceptual discussions points to the analytic problem in defining and conceiving political participation. As conceived by male social scientists, narrow definitions of political participation have excluded women's contributions to grassroots political action. For many decades political participation meant taking part in electoral politics or holding office in a political organization. Despite much feminist research that challenges established political science concepts, feminist theories, questions, and conclusions have not been integrated into the field. The significance of politics occurring outside political institutions, and women's community activism particularly, continue to be largely excluded from conventional notions of political activity.[3] Since local activism takes place outside political institutions, many social scientists view it as unimportant, marginal, parochial, and therefore theoretically unimportant.

Theories of political action ought to help us to make sense of social relations—the repeated patterns of activity, and the direction of those repeated patterns—without eliminating the dynamic of human creativity and interpretation. However, the language of social science and the everyday language used to communicate information may exclude or include people. The words selected to describe a community may degrade or celebrate it.[4] Language and labels do more than simply reflect our realities; they shape those realities. These women's stories about moving from the personal problems of everyday life to collective action repeat patterns and themes and convey rich complexities about their gender, ethnic, class, and community

identities.[5] Their activities show how gender and ethnicity and class shape each day of their lives.

Because of men's and women's differing social obligations to their families, group solidarity and local collective action emerge from neighborhood networks clearly organized by gender. Women's activities in the inner city and in the suburb differ over time and place; the ethnic and class composition of communities represent more than background or scenery. For example, most of the women activists in Monterey Park worked in white collar jobs and their children attended public schools; many of the women in MELA did not work for wages, but they had spent countless hours volunteering for the Catholic parish where their children attended parochial school. Finally, the ways women and men interpret their social identities—as mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, members of particular ethnic and racial groups, members of the working class or middle class—help them to devise creative strategies to solve community problems.

As a participant observer at rallies, meetings, and hearings, and as a recorder of life stories, I conducted field work continuously from 1987 to 1990, and intermittently during the years 1992–97.[6] I also used local newspaper and television coverage of community events to complement the women's accounts. I asked several questions emphasizing political participation as a process: How does one become a community activist? What is the course of women's grassroots activism, and how does their involvement begin? What is the character of their activism, and what strategies do they use to accomplish their work and convince others to join them? How do the answers differ for women in each community, which themselves differ by class?[7]

Additionally, what perceptions do women hold of their ac-

tivism? Do they see conflict or congruence betweer. their activism and their everyday lives? If they see conflict, how do they resolve it? In the resolution of conflict do they change their conceptions of social identity? Women's activism is rooted in the way they construct their social identity; conversely, women's activism also shapes their social identities. Women activists have implicit theories about power, and they test and reformulate their theories in relation to their mobilizing experiences. Women's narratives of grassroots politics not only make women visible; they illustrate as well as transform the concepts of political participation and urban charge.

I interviewed core activists in each community but not every woman who became involved in different capacities in the community. Activists who had worked for extended periods of time on community issues offered rich observations of the mobilization process. Neither the women's stories nor my observations of their work represent the experiences of all women activists, or even of all the women politically active in these two communities.[8] But they do illustrate some of the fundamental ways women become community activists.

Different from many other social science studies of women of Mexican origin, this study is strength oriented rather than strictly problem oriented. It places women as actors in the center of a community controversy and follows the strategies they use to solve a problem. Patterns of occupational segregation and gang subcultures as experienced by Mexican American women warrant much scholarly attention and study (Melville 1988, Horowitz 1983, Harris 1988). Seldom, however, are Mexican American women seen as actors rather than as victims of poverty and injustice. Only in the last two decades have scholars of the Chicana and Chicano experience begun to document instances of how men and women have fashioned and gathered resources to attack social problems and empower themselves.[9]

The Importance of Latina Activism in Los Angeles

The size in square miles of suburban, multi-ethnic Monterey Park approximates that of the Eastside Latino working class neighborhood of Boyle Heights, but the two differ in ethnic, racial, and class composition, population density, and local governance. People are visible everywhere in Boyle Heights—women walking with their young children, people waiting for buses, adolescents playing ball and riding bikes in the middle of residential streets. By contrast, with half the population of Boyle Heights, the residential streets of Monterey Park seem calm and quiet. But in both communities, the quality of neighborhood life in relationship to urban development and land use drives grassroots activism. Mexican American women in both communities actively confront the consequences of urban growth.

By comparing the local political activities of Mexican American women in two such dissimilar communities, I hope to capture the character and trends in a heterogeneous Latino population. In this country the Latino population, even in what appears to be an ethnically homogeneous community such as Eastside Los Angeles, differs by citizenship status, language dominance, generation, and national origin. Mexican American women in Monterey Park represent the growing suburbanization of the Latino middle class. Different community contexts may result in differences in the types of work and strategies women use to solve community problems. There is no one homogeneous Latino population, and differential economic status and geographical dispersion generates differences and interconnections between Latina community activists.

Current demographic projections indicate that by the year 2010, 50 percent of California's residents will be Latinos. Lati-

nos are more likely to reside in large metropolitan centers, where the public infrastructure—streets, transportation, services—is inadequate and overtaxed. While they are more likely to live in the large cities, they are also dispersed throughout many surrounding suburbs, which are not automatically protected against the problems of the inner city. This residential dispersal means that Latinos will play a significant part in the political processes affecting numerous California communities.[10]

New waves of immigration, particularly from Latin America and Asia, make Los Angeles an exciting and dynamic metropolitan context in which to study women's community activism. The size and ethnic diversity of the city's population define the conditions under which women activists do their work. The region's staggering growth complicates everyday activities associated with neighborhood and community life. Mobilizing others means communicating existing problems and constructing potential solutions even as commercial development, increasing density, inadequate waste disposal, and traffic gridlock destroy the quality of urban life. New international immigrants represent a diversity of ethnic and national origins that pose communication problems. Therefore, the ethnic and racial composition of the places women mobilize determines the material conditions of their work. In Eastside Los Angeles, the women mobilized others who were of the same ethnic origin; in the multi-ethnic suburb, women worked in multi-ethnic groups. Similarly, activists are affected by issues of economic class. In blue-collar communities, women's shared community work often compensates for an inadequate infrastructure. In suburban communities, women fight to defend existing conditions in their neighborhoods by subverting, modifying, or challenging unwanted projects.

"Insider-Outsider" Considerations

We researchers are no more "generic" than are the women and men on whom we center our inquiries. Each researcher brings a unique voice and a personal biography that shapes her interpretation of the places, events, and people she observes. The perspective I bring to my study has produced particular questions and interpretations of what I observed. As a second-generation woman of Mexican descent, I share the same ethnic origins and a similar immigration history with the women I interviewed. I grew up in a blue-collar family in neighborhoods similar to those in Eastside Los Angeles. I participated in the Chicano student movement of the early 1970s and worked in the Eastside. I was part of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium, when twenty thousand people marched down the middle of Whittier Boulevard protesting the Vietnam War. The event marked my growing political consciousness and left a lasting emotional impression. Consequently, I experienced the Eastside as neither dangerous nor foreign. By the same token, my college degrees and professional job as a college teacher made me similar to the middle-class women of Monterey Park.

But my educational, professional, and personal life story also differs significantly from the stories of both the women in the working class community and those in the middle-class suburb. I was not an objective observer at the hearings, meetings, and demonstrations I attended in the course of this study. I agreed with the women's opposition to the state-sponsored projects and assisted in their struggle in small ways—for example, by arranging two media interviews. Indeed, MELA's community concerns corresponded to my work as a Chicana and Chicano studies professor. Although shared ethnic origins and class background may have helped facilitate my entrée

into circles of interaction and communication, I hesitate to say that the similarity of our backgrounds completely explains the ease of my entrée. In both communities, I observed that the women warmly welcomed non-Latino journalists who offered them an opportunity to gain more media coverage and possibly more support for their causes.

One incident helped me to think about the ways a researcher's own familiarity with a community will shape research questions. Women from MELA, an Anglo woman journalist, and I were sitting in the dining room of Juana Gutiérrez's home enjoying a dinner of chile rellenos, rice, and beans that Juana had prepared. The journalist asked how the women might mobilize around a hypothetical case of false imprisonment of an alleged gang member. A momentary silence engulfed the discussion.[11]

Earlier in the evening, the journalist had confided to me her apprehensions about driving out to what she understood to be a rough neighborhood. Her question about the alleged gang member reflected the media assumption that gang activity constituted the most significant problem facing Eastside Los Angeles residents. But the women from MELA were longtime, stable homeowners, most of whose children had already graduated from college. They had all worked in cooperation with the police and in Neighborhood Watch groups in order to discourage drug dealing in the neighborhood. They had also directed collective efforts at getting summer jobs for youth. Gangs had never been the focus of their efforts. Rebuilding a neighborhood park and opposing the prison and a toxic-waste incinerator consumed most of their time. Consequently, they were temporarily at a loss for an answer. The exchange reinforced my understanding of the women's social location in the community and their activism. It also showed me how the

journalist's own perceptions of the women and their community had shaped her questions just as my perceptions were no doubt shaping mine.

Locating Activists

In order to carry out the study, I identified Latina community activists in different ways. In Eastside Los Angeles, the barrio setting, I contacted Father John Moretta, an Italian American priest who was the pastor at Resurrection Parish in Boyle Heights. He referred me to two women who were core activists in MELA; one was Juana Gutiérrez. After Juana and I talked, she called another woman in the group and actually set up the next interview. The following day, I was on a busy schedule, driving from the Eastside to Monterey Park, attending meetings, hearings, demonstrations, and conducting interviews. I was added to the "telephone tree" of people to notify about demonstrations and meetings. I continued to identify other women activists who neither held official leadership positions nor acted as spokeswomen by asking each woman that I interviewed for other names. I used pseudonyms at the request of some of the women that I interviewed.

My entry into the suburban community of Monterey Park was different. First, I had the good fortune to be part of a research team and worked as an assistant to Dr. John Horton, principal investigator for a study, supported by the Ford Foundation, of the changing relations in the community between newcomers and established residents.[12] In that capacity, I assumed the primary responsibility for following the role of women (not exclusively Latinas) in city politics. As I began attending community and city council meetings, I discovered a

grassroots community conflict—resident opposition to a parole office located within half a mile of an elementary school. Although the protesters were not recognized as a women's group, women activists outnumbered men. Two Latinas and one Anglo woman were named as key organizers of the Monterey Park neighborhood opposition efforts, a newly formed and loosely organized group of about thirty-five concerned parents and residents and a Parole Advisory Board composed of four men and nine women. I introduced myself to one of the Chinese American women who made a statement about the parole office at the city council meeting, and subsequently began attending their meetings and interviewing Mexican American, Chinese American, and Anglo women in the group.[13] The controversy in Monterey Park was centered in one neighborhood of the city and began in 1988 and ended in 1991. It differed in magnitude and duration from the Eastside Los Angeles state-prison issue, which began in 1985 and ended in 1992. Aware that events in the field seldom fit tidy, neat categories, I decided to follow the issue because, like the Eastside controversy, it constituted a quality-of-life concern for the women and both groups were opposing a state-sponsored project. Speaking to women *in action* in the suburban and inner-city settings meant I could draw comparisons.[14]

Organization of the Book

Although the stories of women's activism in each community could be told separately, I have chosen to tell the stories in a comparative way to highlight how the class, ethnic, and racial composition of each community affected women's activities and options. The case studies are organized around three main

themes that represent different dimensions of the political process: the politics of community images, becoming an activist, and creating community. Chapter Two, "Community Contexts: The Barrio and the Suburb," contextualizes the process of becoming a grassroots community activist, by which I mean putting the types of work women do and the ways they do it into specific sites, within concrete material conditions, and with specific historical legacies. The chapter provides a demographic overview of ethnicity and immigration in Eastside Los Angeles and Monterey Park and synthesizes the history of grassroots community activism and women's participation in each community.

The heart of the book addresses the themes of ethnic, gender, and class identity and resistance to state-sponsored and commercial projects in each community. Chapters Three and Four examine the politics of community identity by looking at physical and cultural surroundings and presenting the women's visions of their communities. The women weave ethnic, racial, and class contexts throughout their accounts of becoming long-time residents and recall how class, ethnic, and gender identities have shaped their choices for residential location. The chapters also illustrate how women transformed their experiences, observations, and problems into collectively defined interests and solutions. Chapters Five and Six present case studies of the specific conflicts that engaged women's activism—in the Eastside Los Angeles case, a proposed state prison, in the case of Monterey Park, a state parole office. The chapters explore the course of women's involvement and the ways social identities shape and legitimate the strategies they used to oppose the projects.

Chapters Seven and Eight move back in time to examine the women's routine work in neighborhood sites and the an-

tecedents to their involvement in the community conflicts as a way of understanding the unpaid work that preceded their period of activism. Chapter Nine, "Women Transforming the `Political,' " concludes with a comparative analysis of women's community work in the working-class, predominantly Mexican American, inner-city Los Angeles barrio and in the predominantly middle-class, multi-ethnic suburb. The differences and similarities illustrate how communities of different classes resist and challenge the state's definition of social justice. The chapter also addresses the politics of writing about women in urban politics. As a Chicana professor with graduate training in sociology, teaching in an interdisciplinary field, Chicana and Chicano Studies, I draw from feminist studies, ethnic studies, and social science studies. While knowledge is increasingly interdisciplinary, mainstream disciplines slowly and begrudgingly change and acknowledge gender and ethnicity as meaningful categories of social organization (Klein 1996, 121). Crossing disciplinary boundaries enriched my understanding of women's community activism.