

Con Garra

10 Latinas Who Changed History and What They'd Say Today

Con garra means with grit, with tenacity, with claws out. These ten women had it. They changed history in ways that are still being felt — and in some cases, still being erased. Here is what they would say today.

1. Dolores Huerta

Co-founder of the United Farm Workers

Dolores Huerta coined 'Sí, se puede' — Yes, we can — during the grape boycotts of the 1960s. She organized farmworkers when no one believed farmworkers could be organized. She was beaten by police at a 1988 protest and continued organizing into her nineties.

What she'd say today: 'The farmworkers picking your food still don't have the protections they deserve. Nothing is finished. Get back to work.'

2. Sylvia Rivera

Transgender Rights Pioneer

Rivera threw one of the first bottles at the 1969 Stonewall Inn police raid. A transgender Latina who was homeless much of her adult life, she fought for the most marginalized LGBTQ+ people when the mainstream movement wanted to forget them.

What she'd say today: 'They're still trying to erase us. We were here first. We'll be here last.'

3. Sonia Sotomayor

First Latina Supreme Court Justice

Raised in a Bronx housing project by a Puerto Rican mother who worked as a nurse, Sotomayor graduated summa cum laude from Princeton and went to Yale Law. She was confirmed to the Supreme Court in 2009 and has written some of its most important dissents on voting rights and racial justice.

What she'd say today: 'Democracy is not self-executing. Someone has to show up for it.'

4. Frida Kahlo

Artist and Political Icon

Kahlo survived a near-fatal bus accident, a tempestuous marriage, and a lifelong battle with chronic pain to become one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Her work explored Mexican identity, gender, and the body at a time when none of those were acceptable subjects.

What she'd say today: 'Pain is not weakness. It is material. Use it.'

5. Dolores del Rio

First Major Latina Hollywood Star

Del Rio broke into Hollywood in the silent film era and became one of its biggest stars — as a Latina, at a time when that was nearly impossible. She later returned to Mexico and became a legend of its Golden Age cinema.

What she'd say today: 'They will tell you there is no room for you. Enter anyway.'

6. Emma Tenayuca

Labor Organizer, San Antonio

At nineteen years old, Tenayuca led the 1938 Pecan Shellers Strike in San Antonio — 12,000 workers, mostly Mexican-American women, who walked off the job for fair wages. She was red-baited, blacklisted, and forced to leave Texas. She became a teacher.

What she'd say today: 'The workers who make your food, your clothes, your phone — they are organizing right now. Show up for them.'

7. Rigoberta Menchu

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Indigenous Rights Leader

Menchú survived the Guatemalan genocide that killed her family and became the world's most prominent voice for indigenous rights. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 at the age of 33.

What she'd say today: 'When they erase our history, they erase our future. We must document everything.'

8. Antonia Novello

First Latina U.S. Surgeon General

Novello, a Puerto Rican-born physician, served as the 14th U.S. Surgeon General under President George H.W. Bush. She used the platform to address underage drinking, smoking, and health disparities in Hispanic and indigenous communities.

What she'd say today: 'Healthcare is not a privilege. It is what you owe each other.'

9. Luisa Moreno

Civil Rights and Labor Pioneer

Born in Guatemala, Moreno organized Spanish-speaking workers across the U.S. in the 1930s and was a founder of the Congress of Spanish-Speaking People — the first national Latino civil rights assembly. She was eventually deported under the McCarthy-era Palmer Raids.

What she'd say today: 'They deport the organizers. The work continues anyway.'

10. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

U.S. Representative, NY-14

A bartender from the Bronx who ran for Congress because no one else would, AOC became the youngest woman ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018. She has used the platform to advocate for the Green New Deal, healthcare as a right, and economic justice.

What she'd say today: 'You are allowed to want more. You are allowed to demand more. That is not radical. That is the point.'