



Latina *Realities*

Essays on
Healing,
Migration,
and
Sexuality

OLIVA M. ESPÍN

Latina Realities



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LATINA REALITIES

*Essays on Healing,
Migration, and Sexuality*

Oliva M. Espín



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Foreword: *The Enigma of Arrival— Journey and Transformation*

Lillian Comas-Díaz

Latina Realities is a remarkable tapestry depicting women's lives. Oliva Espín's inspiring weaving reveals an extraordinarily rich and diverse portrait of women that emphasizes themes of loss, migration, grief, adaptation, oppression, healing, creativity, and identity. *Journey* is an apt metaphor for the process by which we come to understand the situated knowledge of Latinas. The author shares with us her expert account of Latinas' journeys as well as her own odyssey. Emphasizing a narrative approach to women's lives, Oliva Espín documents not only that the personal is political but also that the distinctly personal touches us all.

Latina Realities is a compilation of essays based on Dr. Espín's extraordinary work over a sustained period. Her own scholastic journey, influenced by her personal migrations, provides a map for understanding the psychology of women. In her journey, Espín transforms herself into a witness, storyteller, subversive, alchemist, and sibyl. As a witness, she encourages Latinas to break their silence by listening to their testimonies. As a *cantadora* (storyteller), she inspires women to compose their lives. As a psychologist, she subversively challenges mainstream theory. Aiming at empowerment, her work transforms victims into victors. She rescues traditional wisdom and restores women's sense of dignity. And as an alchemist, Espín searches for the transforming source of knowledge, a search that culminates in the crafting of a multicultural feminist psychology. Along the way, she examines the arcane knowledge of Latina healers, including *espíritistas*, *santeras*, and *curanderas*, such that Latina ways of knowing transform her into a sibyl. Her scholastic prophecies are conjugated with her superb ability to examine, understand, and translate Latinas' realities.

Latina Realities acknowledges oppression as a psychological force. It documents a collaborative method of empowering women that is culturally congruent. Aided by the Latino tradition of storytelling, Espín's therapeutic stories affirm women's fluid identities. She confronts taboo topics. She reminds us that the sexual behavior of

women serves a function beyond the personal, thus addressing the paradox of Latina sexuality as a source of both oppression and power. This collection restores to the self both power and agency, making the unknown known. It is revolutionary as it challenges the rigid patriarchal knowledge that bans women into the otherland. Espín's feminist tools help to effectively dismantle the master's house. Indeed, she is one of the true architects of the psychology of liberation.

Please join me in celebrating the publication of this book. *Latina Realities* significantly advances our knowledge not only of Latinas and women of color but of all women. It offers a model for addressing women's realities. Underlying it is the belief that those who differ from the mainstream have important knowledge to impart: *Firsthand knowledge of multiple distinct realities sharpens our perspective and makes us see ourselves and others in a new and creative light.* *Latina Realities* provides insightful wisdom to those who reside in the margins of society as well as to those who enjoy the privilege of being insiders. This book solves the enigma of the arrival; our journeys end in transformation. *Latina Realities* is about finding ourselves.

Preface

This book is a collection of selected pieces of my previously published work. The essays chosen for inclusion address a range of topics crucial to contemporary debates in psychology. The main purpose of this book is to contribute to ongoing debates on the impact of social forces on individual psychological development. These essays emphasize psychology's role "as a means of human welfare," focusing on the complexities of the psychological development of immigrant women, Latinas, and other women of color and issues relevant to providing psychological services to them. The essays cover issues of method, sexuality, therapy with Latinas and other women of color, immigrant and refugee women, ethnic-minority and immigrant women of diverse sexual orientations, and theoretical perspectives on feminist psychology and diversity.

During most of my professional career I have been both a faculty member engaged in the training of psychotherapists at the graduate level and a practicing feminist therapist. Since 1990, this combination, which had been central to my professional identity and development, has changed: I have been immersed in the world of women's studies with continuing involvement in psychology. This deeper involvement in women's studies has stimulated my thinking and intellectual growth, yet I remain deeply committed to psychology. In these essays, I speak as a feminist psychologist who has learned as much from practice and teaching as from purely intellectual and research endeavors.

The essays—written between 1984 and 1996—have been collected in this volume with the intention of making readily accessible pieces otherwise scattered in journals, edited books, and conference proceedings. In selecting pieces for inclusion, I have attempted to avoid overlaps while providing representativeness and breadth. I have emphasized those essays that have been most frequently cited by others through the years and those for which I consistently receive reprint requests.

I believe this book will contribute to the increased dialogue on epistemology and method in psychology. Many of these pieces illustrate the use of personal narratives as a source of knowledge in psychology. In this collection, I add my voice to those who have invited and encouraged psychology to embrace a fresh perspective by incorporating the study of narratives at its core. I hope this book helps to "make clear that story making, storytelling, and story comprehension are fundamental conceptions for a revived psychology" (Sarbin, 1986, p.vii). Presently, there is a renewed interest among psychologists in the role of narrative in establishing personal identity. This is based on the premise that a self needs a story in order to be. This collection of

research studies and clinical experiences shows how cultures provide specific plots for lives and how social prescriptions become individually appropriated as one constructs a life story and a sense of self.

When people tell life stories, they do so through commonly understood models specific to their culture. Not only acceptable behavior but also acceptable *accounts* of behavior are socialized. Alongside acceptable behavior, we learn how to tell our stories in accordance with cultural “scripts.” Stories/lives develop through compromises; the individual’s desire and society’s stabilizing power balance each other or push each other’s limits (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). The culture speaks through the individual narrator’s “voice” and the culture provides the individual with the needed support to live, develop, and feel “normal.” Indeed, even models of “craziness” have to meet standards on which the culture has agreed. Explanations of the etiology of psychological disturbance vary cross-culturally and include such dissimilar theoretical perspectives as attributing their causes to spirit possession, the chemicals in the brain, or events in one’s past.

Other social sciences have used narratives and sought cultural explanations to understand human life, but in psychology perceptions of the value of narratives and of the importance of cultural factors on behavior have been contradictory. On the one hand, there is a tradition of using narrative for research in psychology, particularly in the field of personality psychology (e.g., such classic works in the field as Murray’s 1938 *Explorations in Personality* and Allport’s 1942 *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*). Feminist and cultural psychologists have stressed the impact of cultural forces on the individual. On the other hand, psychological research has been dominated by formal research methods that isolate characteristics and behaviors for study through experimental and statistical procedures. This perspective, which has dominated psychology since the 1950s, perceives the use of narrative for research as “soft” and “unscientific.” And for the most part, psychology has persisted in using intrapsychic individual explanatory models.

Paradoxically, the whole field of psychotherapy is based on the use of narrative. Psychotherapy is a reconstruction of the life story, the telling of one’s story to a sympathetic listener. In the process of being listened to and responded to in a different way, one finds that one’s story and one’s habitual modes of reaction take on reinterpreted meaning and become incorporated in a different way. Diagnosis is nothing but a way of organizing a narrative and making sense of disparate symptoms and experiences.

When I started writing the pieces included in this book, I did not make a conscious decision to focus my research through narrative approaches. But as I read these pieces collectively, I saw that they emphasize a narrative approach to women’s lives. The essays collectively offer an answer to questions about life narratives and life transformations. For example: What happens to the individual life, sense of self, and life story when the cultural narrative changes abruptly through migration? Although “the story about life is open to editing and revision” (Polkinghorne 1988, p.154), some stories may require more work than others. “Re-writing one’s story involves

major life changes" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.182). What happens when events that are not "personal events" in the usual way "invade" the life story? These essays present my firm conviction that "external" events are both "social" and "psychological." Some of these events (such as revolutions, war, migration, peace accords, and earthquakes or other natural phenomena) disrupt individual lives for days and weeks; others irrevocably alter one's life course. These events transform the "plots" provided by the culture and social context. At times, they transform the culture itself. In other instances, individuals find themselves in new cultural contexts that allow a different kind of story. Some classical studies of life history have their source in these cataclysms (e.g., Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920/1927). As psychologists, we devise answers for these questions about the effect of sociohistorical dislocation on personal development that have profound implications for the lives of our clients and the theoretical basis of our profession.

In addition to this preface, in which I provide a context for the essays en masse, I include in each section a short introduction to its specific essays. These introductions frame the papers and position them in their historical context: The introductions and the chapters reflect both the development of my thinking and the development of feminist psychology. The introductory comments illuminate each chapter's special qualities and contributions to my thinking. These comments will, I hope, contribute to sharpening the reader's interpretive and critical skills. They also signal that all work is ongoing and no piece of work is ever perfect. These comments ideally will spur further conversation on gender issues in a multicultural context—while bringing psychological understandings to the development of feminist theory. In rereading these essays, I have once again rethought my own interpretations of these issues. I encourage the reader to assume a spirit of authorial kinship with me.

In my introductions to the five different sections, I have aimed to bring the material up to date by (1) critically discussing omissions and silences in each article and (2) providing a brief historical context for each essay. The essays themselves were geared toward different audiences. Some are easily accessible to all readers, regardless of their professional background. Others are more demanding and complex; these require knowledge of the psychotherapeutic process or theories in psychology and feminism. Although I have attempted to avoid repetitions and overlaps among the essays selected for inclusion in this anthology, some are inevitable. When ideas are repeated in several essays, they are presented in the context of different arguments. Each paper's perspective develops through the presentation of a set of arguments that may be needed for the development of a different set of ideas in another paper. Abridgement was not an option; it would create an incomplete and stunted version of the essays. I hope the inevitable repetitions serve to hone and clarify my thoughts anew.

Rereading these essays, some after many years, has refamiliarized me with my development as a scholar. Taken together, several basic threads run throughout. Although I did not intentionally focus on women immigrants in some of my early projects, the studies highlighted them nonetheless. For example, the Latina lesbians and the Latina healers of my early research all "happened" to be immigrants. Similarly, I

see in retrospect that in the articles focused on feminist therapy with women of color I used two clinical examples of Latin American immigrant women. Likewise, during my years as a practicing feminist therapist my clientele consisted almost exclusively of women of color, immigrant and refugee women, and many Latinas. For a quarter of a century, I have done research, taught, and practiced therapy with and about women from diverse countries (particularly Latin American). Through my clinical practice and writing, I sought to understand how these women formed a comfortable identity and a sense of well-being amid turmoil and contradictory role expectations. Through these therapeutic relationships and observations of bilingual/bicultural experiences, I learned to understand the science and practice of psychology in a much richer way than was portrayed to me in textbooks. Since the late 1960s, feminist psychologist researchers, practitioners, and writers have proffered a new vision of gender studies in psychology. My contribution to that process, alongside the work of many others, has been to distill the significance of gender in the psychological development of women who are twice or sometimes three times “othered” by “mainstream” psychology. Through my teaching, writing, and practice of therapy, I hope I have given voice to those other realities. The intermingling of the personal, the political, and the theoretical that I believe so vital to good psychology has been present in my writing and therapeutic work.

A few words about the use of terms in the context of these essays and in the title of the book are in order. The title of this anthology refers to Latinas, who are the focus of most of the articles in the book. *Latina* is the term generally preferred by members of this population to designate themselves and I use it in most of the essays; in some of the essays, I use *Hispanic* interchangeably with *Latina* or *Latino*, reflecting the term current at the time these particular essays were written. Similarly, issues of sexuality and the immigrant experience resound through these essays. And although only one chapter focuses on healing in the traditional sense, all psychotherapy in fact aspires to healing. Thus, the inclusion of the word in the title is merited.

When I refer to psychotherapy in these essays, I usually have in mind a psychodynamic approach. I am obviously cognizant that there are many other varieties and theoretical approaches to therapy, but psychodynamic theoretical perspectives were central to my training and at the time, for me, synonymous with therapy. In the age of managed care, this may not be the predominant or preferred form of therapy, but it was the perspective from which I practiced and thus is implied in my references to psychotherapy. By psychodynamic psychotherapy, I do not mean orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis, but rather an approach that despite its Freudian origins incorporates radically different perspectives—in both theory and practice—from traditional psychoanalysis. From this perspective—nourished by feminist theoretical perspectives, object relations theory, and Kohut’s self-psychology—the therapeutic relationship is central to the healing process. Rogerian person-centered theory has also been influential in forming my belief that the possibility of transforming psychological pain and learning new behaviors is dependent on the quality of the therapeutic relationship. In addition, I have focused equally on the effects of unconscious processes and

on the importance of social forces in shaping individual psychology. In fact, I believe that the power of social forces to shape lives resides in their unconscious assimilation by individuals and societies. But my particular theoretical perspective on practice does not preclude the possibility of extrapolating clinical implications from these essays that could be valuable to practitioners of other psychotherapeutic approaches.

This collection of essays provides relevant information for students, instructors, practitioners, and researchers wishing to study the psychology of women from a multicultural approach. It also provides examples of contemporary approaches in the field. For those within the therapeutic and organizational consulting realm, I hope these essays clarify and promote the uses of narratives, collaborative interactive processes, and issues of diversity. Needless to say, I am not the only—or necessarily the best—representative of a diverse feminist perspective in psychology. No one scholar has the total picture. We all search to produce a piece of the truth and hope for transformation accordingly. My hope is that this collection contributes to the thinking of others and to the development of more accurate conceptions of psychology from a multicultural feminist point of view.

Olivia M. Espín
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No book is ever the work of one person alone. This book, which expands work produced over many years and contexts, owes debts to many people. Friends and colleagues who were influential in my life as these essays were being produced challenged my thinking. The questions I asked ten or fifteen years ago, like the questions I ask today, were often inspired through conversations and spirited discussions with them. Many friends and colleagues have read and offered detailed comments on the pieces contained in this book. Their generous sharing has no doubt improved the quality of my thinking through the years. Although our relationships have changed over time, their inspiration has been profound. There are too many to be mentioned adequately—I trust they know my debt to them.

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I have the good fortune to have been a member of the faculty of the Department of Women's Studies at San Diego State University for the past six years. I owe a very large debt of thanks to all of my colleagues in the department for being a source of support and encouragement. This context has nourished and strengthened me considerably. Without these colleagues and the rich intellectual environment they have provided for me, this book would have never seen the light of day. Susan E. Cayleff in particular is a supportive colleague, trusted friend, and skilled editor. She has the ability to help me say what I am trying to say with new clarity and accessible prose. Pat Huckle, first as associate dean and now as a colleague, has encouraged and supported me and provided wise advice. She has also opened her home on the other side of the border to me, where I rest and think undisturbed. Bonnie Zimmerman, our department chair for many years, has supported every intellectual pursuit and worked hard to provide for all of us structures in which we can develop and flourish.

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The ideas in this book (and the book itself) developed in the context of feminist thought and action. The pieces included in this book were born of the feminist movement. All the psychotherapy clients I worked with through the years while practicing feminist therapy were a source of learning. The questions they posed challenged my thinking and my skills in various directions. My respect for women and their strengths was corroborated through my work with these women. My students in psychology and in women's studies courses have challenged and questioned my positions through the last quarter of a century. Their inquiring minds stimulated new levels of analysis and sharing. The editors and publishers of the books and journals in which these pieces first appeared made possible the initial presentation of these ideas. Their generous permission to reprint these articles and chapters have made this book possible. Abigail Stewart and Cynthia Gómez, my collaborators in one study, graciously agreed to reprinting it in this book.

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O.M.E.

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Part One

Experience as a Source of Theory and Method

Feminist epistemology starts with the conviction that “the personal is political.” Translating the phrase into academic language, I understand it to mean that “the personal is theoretical.” The essays included in this section present significant aspects of the development of my thinking about the theory and practice of psychology. Chapter 1, “Giving Voice to Silence,” summarizes the most significant turning points of my professional development. This chapter offers the reader insights that illuminate most of the other essays in the book. In Chapter 1, originally written as the acceptance speech for the 1991 Award for Distinguished Professional Contribution to Public Service from the American Psychological Association, I reflect on the connections between theory and experience. These reflections illuminate how my personal experiences have affected my theoretical perspectives and also have implications for the theory and practice of psychology.

Chapter 1 identifies the challenges and frustrations that eventually produced professional insights despite the difficulty of questioning traditional ideas of what constitutes knowledge in psychology. My training emphasized the need to be “objective” rather than “subjective” in research. The issues I wanted to explore professionally were already deemed less than deserving of professional attention because they focused on women who belonged to nondominant social groups. In the past decade, however, I have become convinced of the value of subjectivity in the development of knowledge—and less fearful of being judged by pseudoscientific “objective” standards. The notion that personal experience is not objective and thus always suspect represented a barrier to my professional development. But the climate of the scientific world is changing, albeit rather slowly. It is now possible to admit to subjective