

# TELLING TO LIVE

Latina Feminist *Testimonios*



THE LATINA FEMINIST GROUP

Telling to Live  
Latina Feminist *Testimonios*

A BOOK IN THE SERIES

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

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AT LOS ANGELES

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## LATINA FEMINIST *Testimonios*

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham and London 2001*

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Typeset in Carter and Cone Galliard by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

appear on the last printed page of this book.

Cover art, *Circle of Ancestors*, by Amalia Mesa-Bains.

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## About the Series

*LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define “Latin America” while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America’s experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, that rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, that assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and that, correspondingly, demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

*Telling to Live* is a bold articulation of what Cherrie Moraga has called “theory in the flesh.” This book continues the tradition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, and offers *testimonios* that attest to the urgency with which U.S. women of color struggle for autonomy and survival in their journey through the formidable class system in U.S. institutions. Their stories tell secrets of how a traditional, phallogentric Latino family structure serves as one more wall that these women must scale. At the same time, the stories show how knowledge of and from their everyday lives is the basis for theorizing and constructing an evolving political praxis to address the material conditions in

which they live. *Telling to Live* is, in this regard, a manifesto of the color and gender of epistemology and on the plurality of “reason” and “rationality.” The flesh and blood theory many of the narratives deploy marks the Latina feminist subject in process as a new type of intellectual whose knowledge of the political economy of cultural constructions serves to decenter what counts as theory and who can engage in theorizing. These *testimonios* offer the language of Latina intellectuals as an alternative site of knowledge. Written in English and Spanish and often a mixture of both, the texts stress the multiplicity of U.S. Latina experience. The authors of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, and Hispanic origins locate themselves at the borderlands of a reconfigured Latin(a) America.

## Acknowledgments

THE NATURE OF A COLLECTIVE and collaborative undertaking such as ours involves much more than compiling and editing individual writings to form a volume. We began through a collective process and have sustained that commitment and collaboration throughout. When we think about the work we have accomplished, we envision not only the product but the human connection among us, the *cariño, respeto*, and commitment to each other. At the same time, as Latinas, feminists, and academics, we know and want to recognize the importance of individual contributions to our work as a group.

Producing *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* has involved an elaborate collaboration and division of labor among eighteen women of diverse Latina backgrounds, across seven states in the Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, and Western regions of the country. We acknowledge and appreciate the painstaking work of the following group members in envisioning and producing this book: Iris López planted the seed of our collaboration. Patricia Zavella and Rina Benmayor served as general editors as we approached publication, including compiling final versions of the manuscript and rewriting the collectively drafted Introduction. Liza Fiol-Matta, Mirtha Quintanales, Celia Alvarez, Caridad Souza, and Gloria Cuádriz participated significantly in revising the Introduction. Daisy Cocco de Filippis, Clara Lomas, and Luz del Alba Acevedo provided *tertulia* inspirations and important theoretical perspectives. Aurora Levins-Morales helped envision the creative structure of the book. Introductions to the four sections were authored by Caridad Souza (Genealogies of Empowerment), Inés Hernández-Avila (Alchemies of Erasure), Yvette Flores-Ortiz (The Body Re/Members), and Eliana Rivero (Passions, Desires, and Celebrations). Rina Benmayor and Norma Cantú undertook Spanish copyediting. Clara Lomas, Caridad Souza, and Rina Benmayor

wrote early grant proposals. Norma Alarcón, Caridad Souza, and Patricia Zavella wrote our book prospectus. Yvette Flores-Ortiz and Gloria Cuádriz compiled the first manuscript drafts sent out for consideration. Gloria Cuádriz, Ruth Behar, and Patricia Zavella made initial contacts with publishers. Patricia Zavella served as our chief liaison with Duke University Press.

We acknowledge other Latinas who participated in various ways and at the different stages in our evolution as a group: Antonia Castañeda, Doris Correa Capello, Teresa Córdova, Julia Curry Rodríguez, Elena Flores, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Deena González, Mary Pardo, Yolanda Prieto, Alvina Quintana, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. We thank the audiences who enthusiastically received our work at conference sessions of *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS), the Puerto Rican Studies Association (PRSA), the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS), and the Society for Applied Anthropology.

We are *muy agradecidas* to Reynolds Smith, Executive Editor, and Sharon Torian, Senior Editorial Assistant, at Duke University Press. They believed in the significance of this book, went to bat for it, and gave us steady support throughout the publication process. Amalia Mesa-Bains, renowned Chicana artist, MacArthur Fellow, and Director of the Institute for Visual and Public Art at California State University, Monterey Bay, very generously offered the cover image. Her amazing installation piece, titled *Circle of Ancestors*, visually captures and narrates our testimonial process. Aída Hurtado and Norma Klahn gave very helpful constructive criticism of an early draft of the manuscript. *Hermanas, gracias*. Three anonymous reviewers gave us golden words of appreciation even as they recommended important revisions. Thanks to Lynn Walterick, whose copyediting was very insightful and precise, and to Rebecca Johns-Danes, assistant managing editor, for shepherding our manuscript through production. The Document Publishing and Editing Center at University of California, Santa Cruz, provided expert assistance with word processing and formatting the final manuscript. Alexandra Mendoza was a very helpful research assistant. Special thanks to Don Harris of Photographic Services at UCSC, whose magic restored our photographs.

Many institutions supported us over our seven-year collaboration. A substantial seed grant from the Inter-University Program for Latino Research enabled us to come together in 1993 and 1994 to envision and develop this project. We especially thank then-Executive Director Dr. Frank Bonilla and the other IUP Center directors for their support. Dr. María Chacón, then IUP Program Coordinator, and Ana LoBiondo, Program Assistant, believed in and facilitated our project. Dr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Associate Director of Humanities and Arts of the Rockefeller Foundation, gave us a matching grant that took us to Colorado. Our various universities, departments, and centers

also provided funding for meetings, administrative support, meeting space, and material resources: The Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College (CUNY); the Chicano Latino Research Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz; the Institute for Human Communication at California State University Monterey Bay; the Department of Women's Studies and the College of Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University West; the Hispanic Research Center at Arizona State University Tempe; the Southwest Institute for Research on Women at the University of Arizona, Tucson; and the Chicano Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

Since 1995 the Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies at Colorado College has served as the repository of our archives of audiotapes, transcripts, and other materials documenting each stage of our project. The Center continues to act as the fiscal representative for our collective. We are indebted to Jean Lyle, who helped us establish our archives, served as administrative assistant to the project, and planned our first summer institute at Baca.

Clara Lomas deserves special recognition. She made our “summer camps” a reality, inviting us all to the Colorado College Baca Conference Center in the summers of 1995 and 1996. She also secured her university's long-term administrative support for our project. We also honor her mother, María Luisa Lomas, who has been a great source of inspiration to us. She was our first audience at Baca, and in sharing her own experiences with writing she gave us the title of our Introduction, “*Papelitos guardados*.”

In keeping with our testimonial process, we would like to name, thank, and dedicate this work to those who have empowered us in special ways:

LUZ DEL ALBA ACEVEDO: To Emilio Pantojas and Maritza Pantojas for their love and support throughout my struggles; to Alejandrina Pizarro (Alejita) for her faith and prayers; and to God, the source of my strength.

NORMA ALARCÓN: I want to deeply thank my *colegas* of Latina Feminist Group for their engaging friendship. *Sí se puede hacer familia* from scratch!

CELIA ALVAREZ: To mami and papi, for believing in me and Titi Alicia, for being my inspiration—thank you for always being there. To *mis queridas hermanas* in the Latina Feminist Group, thank you for sharing from the heart and creating a safe space for me to be. To Cathy, for awakening me to my truth and your unconditional love and support.

RUTH BEHAR: To all the women of our Latina Feminist Group for their encouragement, friendship, and inspiration. Several of my pieces included in this book were written during time we spent together and I am grateful for the dialogues that made the writing possible. From all of you I have learned that without *cariño* there are no ideas, there is no art. *Gracias!*

RINA BENMAYOR: To my mother, Stella, for her unconditional trust and support throughout my life; in memory of my grandmother, Nona, who empowered me with her example, and my father, Leon, who always opted for the different road. To the many *amigas y amigos del alma*, my extended family across the continents; to my *compañeras y comadres de los papelitos* for making *cariño, confianza*, and *solidaridad* prevail throughout; and to my students, who as they tell their stories hold the promise of alliances to come.

NORMA E. CANTÚ: To *las mujeres* in my life — my mother, grandmothers, *tías, hermanas, sobrinas, amigas*, students, *colegas*. A special thank you to Elvia Niebla and to my *colegas* in the Latina Feminist Group who offered a space in their lives and hearts for my *papelitos*.

DAISY COCCO DE FILIPPIS: *A las Gabrielas en mi vida, mi abuela y mi madre, por la fuerza y bondad que me legaron*. For Nunzio, Nicky and David, Nunzi and Christie, Allison and Jimmy, my constant and generous family . . . *con agradecimiento*.

GLORIA HOLGUÍN CUÁDRAZ: To my mother, Nellie, who has infected my life with her spirit of generosity. If you only knew how much your *luz* guides every moment of my life, especially the teaching ones! To my father, Miguel, whose courage to face the unknown allowed me to pursue this journey. Your example has carried me. My six sisters and one brother have been and remain great sources of love and strength. I thank you all for enriching our lives. To all the *mujeres* and *hombres* whose lives are committed to greater well-being, I stand in awe. To Judith, for your love, friendship, and charm. *Mil gracias*.

LIZA FIOL-MATTA: To my mother, Emma Matta Méndez, and my father, Juan Fiol Bigas, for the example of their lives. To my sisters — Liana, Lynn, Lía, and Licia — and my brothers — Juan, Antonio, and Carlos — for their love and constant support. To Mildred Borrás for her longtime friendship. And, above all, to Louise Murray, *mi adorada compañera*, for challenging me with her insight and for the laughter that fills our home.

YVETTE GISELE FLORES-ORTIZ: *A mi madre, por inspirar y apoyar las y los escritores de la familia; a mis abuelas por luchar siempre contra las injusticias*; to my daughter, Xóchitl, and my son, Alejandro, my students, *comadres*, and friends for their unending support and faith in me, especially Maria Cristina Carrillo, Vilma Wilcoxon and Tiana Arruda. To the men who have inspired and fueled my warrior spirit, my father Claudio Flores and my husband, Arturo Ortiz. Above all, to my psychotherapy clients who have been my teachers, guides, and sources of inspiration, and to two very special women in my life, Dr. Michelle Ritterman and Noreen DiMaggio, RN. *Por ustedes, continúo la lucha*.

INÉS HERNÁNDEZ AVILA: To all the *mujeres y hombres constantes en mi vida*, the ones I see often, and the ones I may go long periods without seeing, and yet when we meet again, it is as if it was yesterday that we saw each other — *por ese espíritu de amor, aprecio, y respeto profundo con que nos tratamos*. To my *esposo*, Juanishi Avila, and my brother, George Longfish, for their wise knowledge of Spirit. *Gracias*.

AURORA LEVINS-MORALES: To my mother, Rosario Morales. We struggled into voice together, each empowering the other and continue to read each other's first drafts. To my father, Richard Levins, who told me stories out of history. To both of them for their respect, their political passions, and for teaching me to think of myself as a radical intellectual. To my brothers, Ricardo and Alejandro, for unending comradeship, concrete help and silliness. To my daughter, Alicia Raquel, for her enthusiastic and shining presence in my life. *Gracias a las mujeres* for love, brilliance, honesty, and laughter and for becoming a "place" I come home to.

CLARA LOMAS: I am indebted to the Latina Feminist Group for seeing this project through to the end, for their undying support, and the million laughs. My deep appreciation to my parents for the family stories, to my children, Clara Cecilia and Luis Alberto Rodriguez, for the inspiration, and to Alma Maldonado Parker, in loving memory.

IRIS LÓPEZ: To an awesome group of women, whose love and vision has made this book possible. To my *compañero*, David Forbes, whose love is a constant source of strength, joy, and inspiration. To my mother and father, my sisters, Jeanette, Francesca, and Madelene, and my brother, Elliot, I love you very much. A special thanks to my sister Jeanette, who has accompanied and supported me especially through my early career. To my nieces and nephews, I wrote this for you. To my friends Sean Krebs, a very special person in my life; Ana María Morales, Gloria Gómez, and Lorraine Lein — thank you for your love and support. To my students and mentors, Leith Mullings, Elliot Skinner, Jim Blake, and Joyce Brawn.

MIRTHA QUINTANALES: My deepest gratitude for the love and wisdom I have received from my parents and my extended family; from all my teachers and friends — in all the forms in which they have appeared along my path; from the awakened inner divinity that constantly showers me with blessings. Because of them, my life is sweet and full of grace.

ELIANA RIVERO: To my mother, María Antonia Rivero, from whom I learned to appreciate beauty and the sound of singing voices, for all the love she gave me, now reflected in my *papelitos*; to Claudia Aburto Guzmán, for



reading my texts, offering good ideas and encouragement; to Melissa A. Fitch, for her detailed reading, continued support, and wonderful suggestions; and to María Teresa Marrero, who gave me wise performance pointers.

CARIDAD SOUZA: To this wonderful group of Latina Feminists who simply overwhelm me in ways I cannot yet speak. A special shout out to the three most important women in my life who continually inspire me with their courage to live, making my life brighter with their presence: my sister, Mayda Noemi Torres; her daughter, Yvette Ramos; and her daughter, Nyshai Noemi Thompson. To Elsa Pérez, a lifelong friend whose love sustains me. To Ralph R. Watkins, whose gentle love and quiet, unconditional support have taught me something about humanness, and who keeps me laughing. And to those special friends who have taught me most about loving perception, especially Marian Barragán, Sarah J. Cervenak, Karina Céspedes, Andrea Straub, and Monica Tate Meléndez.

PATRICIA ZAVELLA: To my grandmother, Eufracia Archuleta, who taught me to stand up for myself and speak my mind. To Jim Jatczynski, for his love, emotional support, and technical assistance in producing the final manuscript. To Laura and Anthony, for teaching me new things about life, and to *las mujeres de este grupo*, for your love and incredible wisdom.

Telling to Live  
Latina Feminist *Testimonios*



## Introduction. *Papelitos Guardados*: Theorizing *Latinidades* Through *Testimonio*

**papel.** *nm.* 1. paper; 2. piece or sheet of paper; 3. document(s), identification paper(s); 4. paper money; 5. receipt; 6. bag; 7. part, role.

**-ito.** *suf. for n or adj.* 1. diminutive; 2. emotive; 3. superlative.

**guardado.** *adj.* 1. guarded, hidden away; 2. watched over, taken care of, kept safe or secret, protected, including by a deity or saint; 3. maintained, preserved; 4. retained, conserved, stored.

Harper Collins Spanish-English Dictionary

OUR VISION FOR THIS BOOK has been to illustrate how Latina feminists come together to engage our differences, face-to-face, and work to find common ground. Our Latina Feminist Group began to meet in 1993 to discuss our concerns as Latina feminists in higher education and to consider possibilities for doing collaborative work. We came from the Southwest, East, and Midwest, Latinas of multiple national and ethnic origins. As we introduced ourselves to each other, described the work we do and why we are compelled to do it, we spontaneously began to weave *testimonios*, stories of our lives, to reveal our own complex identities as Latinas. This book of *papelitos* grew out of these stories, told over the course of seven years.

*Papelitos guardados* has hybrid meanings for us: protected documents, guarded roles, stored papers, conserved roles, safe papers, secret roles, hidden papers, safe roles, preserved documents, protected roles. The phrase was offered by María Luisa Lomas, the mother of Clara Lomas. During one of our sessions, as we read our writings to each other, she revealed that she, too, had her *papelitos guardados*, writings tucked away, hidden from inquiring eyes. As she shared how she sought expression in writing, we realized that she had captured the essence of our project. *Papelitos guardados* evokes the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times. We keep them in our memory, write them down, and store them in safe places waiting for the appropriate moment when we can return to them for review and analysis, or speak out and share them with others. Sharing can begin a process of empowerment. Stepping out of the roles expected of Latina women in the academy and in our communities, we bring to life our *papeles* and render our *testimonios* through autobiographical narratives, short stories, poems, and dialogues.

Initially, we came together in a smaller group, intending to undertake collaborative, comparative feminist research on Latina issues.<sup>1</sup> Very quickly, we found ourselves limited by traditional academic approaches, which, in the move toward comparison, tend to simplify, aggregate, and reduce experience to variables. We wanted to engage in *testimonio* to reveal the complexity of Latina identities in the United States. As Caridad Souza made clear, “We have to figure out how to talk across *latinidades* rather than through disciplinary studies, you know what I’m saying?”

Many of us, in one way or another, are professional *testimoniadoras* (producers of *testimonios*), whether as oral historians, literary scholars, ethnographers, creative writers, or psychologists.<sup>2</sup> From our different personal, political, ethnic, and academic trajectories, we arrived at the importance of *testimonio* as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure. However, we discovered that to move forward and develop theory as a group, we first needed to explore the complexities of *latinidad* — Latina/o identity — and compare how each of us had made the journey to become credentialed, creative thinkers, teachers, and writers. We were all proficient oral historians, ethnographers, and *testimoniadoras*, but we had never explored our diversity. We all professed in the classroom about the connection between life experience and new knowledge construction, but we had never made our own life trajectories a source of inquiry. In addition, while we were all accustomed to engaging other Latinas and/or Latin American women in giving testimony, many of us had not yet participated in public renderings of our own life stories. We had not yet experienced being on both sides of the process, sharing and generating our own *testimonios* with each other as Latina scholars. None of us was prepared for the intensity, despair, poetry, and clarifying power of our own *testimonios*. Meeting as a group over the course of seven years, we have become convinced that the emotional force and intellectual depth of *testimonio* is a springboard for theorizing about *latinidades* in the academy, in our communities, and in our lives.

### Latina Feminisms: Creating Our Own Spaces

Creating spaces for Latina feminisms — *latinidades feministas* — means confronting established and contested terms, identities, frameworks, and coalitions that have emerged in particular historical contexts.<sup>3</sup> In charting our own course through these contested terrains as Latina feminists, we have attempted to expand traditional notions of ethnicity and nationalism, question Eurocentric feminist frameworks, and situate ourselves in relation to the activism and writings by women of color. At the same time, as Latina feminists we have felt the need to create our own social and discursive spaces.

Latina feminists come from a long line of workers, activists, theorists, and writers within their respective Latino communities. They have participated in various movements that denounce social injustice, including civil rights, anti-war, labor, human rights, progressive Cuban American politics, Puerto Rican Independence, Chicano political autonomy, Native American sovereignty, Central American solidarity. They have been central to the formation of Chicano, Puerto Rican or Ethnic Studies. They have taken part not only in the political but also in the literary and artistic activity around these movements — *teatro* and *floricanto* (street theater, poetry and music festivals) — which provide a language to celebrate cultural identity.

Along with participation in social movements, Latinas have also engaged in developing methods of political praxis. Inspired by Paolo Freire's practice of *concientización*, where communities construct self-reflective political consciousness, Latinas have contributed to empowerment efforts through literacy and giving voice, documenting silenced histories.<sup>4</sup> *Testimonio* has been critical in movements for liberation in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community. Similarly, many Latinas participated in the important political praxis of feminist consciousness-raising. The "second wave" feminist movement honored women's stories and showed how personal experience contains larger political meaning. Other feminists have developed self-reflexive research methods and social practices, creating oral histories and feminist ethnographies that capture the everyday lives and stories of women.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from these various experiences, *testimonio* can be a powerful method for feminist research praxis.

Latina feminists, however, have contested the exclusion of questions of gender and sexuality in ethnic studies curricula or political agendas. Cultural nationalism has defined some of these programs or projects, insisting on idealized notions of ethnicity, *familia*, and community. Cultural nationalists often repress women's voices by reaffirming heterosexist utopic visions of colonized peoples. At their most extreme, they discredit Latina feminists as separatist and divisive, and even bait them as "traitors to the race."<sup>6</sup>

In the same vein, Latinas have felt frustrated with marginalizations of difference and token nods in the direction of diversity in feminist political organizations or women's studies programs. The feminist movement often ignores the tremendous internal differences among women of color, including Latinas. The movement also fails to recognize distinctive standpoints of women of color and women of mixed race. In the effort to name and theorize these complexities, Latinas are increasingly finding themselves working with women within their respective national-ethnic communities, or with other Latinas who embrace feminist ideals, even when there is a reluctance to embrace the term "feminism."<sup>7</sup>

Latina activist traditions resonate with those of black and other feminists of

color, and form the basis for bridging different histories and origins, building cross-cultural coalitions and personal relationships. From this crucial political work, women of color theory recognizes the complex intersections of ethnicity, nationality, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and other markers of diverse identities and commitments. Latina feminists propose that difference is not a mask that can be put on or taken off; it forms the basis of who they are in the world, in their scholarship, and in their political practice.<sup>8</sup> It is crucial, at this stage, to move beyond essentialism, which assumes a common Latina experience. Latinas must be placed in their varied histories, illustrating their positions within intersecting systems of power.<sup>9</sup>

Black, Asian American, Native American, and other feminists of color have shown how important it is to write about one's own experiences. Beginning in the 1970s, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko, and many others inspired us and legitimized subject matters and modes of writing that were previously ignored or deemed unacceptable. They brought to print oral traditions, dialects, and characters that conveyed experiences which, with rare exceptions, had not been documented before. The work of women of color inspired many academics of color to expand the "ethnic" and feminist canons. Anthologies such as *Life Notes*, *Double Stitch*, *Making Waves*, and *All-American Women* brought the voices of women of color narrating their daily experiences into our purview.<sup>10</sup> These texts and many more, along with the alternative publishing houses that produced them—Kitchen Table, Aunt Lute, Third Woman, Firebrand, South End—modeled possibilities of combining reading, writing, and social activism. They illustrated the possibilities of collaborative visions, creation, and production that bridged community and academy. The paths established by women of color also helped construct coalitions to negotiate differences among themselves as they moved toward significant moments of solidarity.

Chicana feminists centered in the Southwest also created theories and spaces of their own, exploring the complexities of identity and culture. As the largest group among Latinas, and able to gain access to institutions of higher learning, Chicanas served as a focal point for Latina feminisms. Moving beyond the black-white framework of racial discourse, Chicanas shed light on other facets of racialization, on those that form a continuum of color, phenotype, and privilege. Theorizing the intersection of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, Chicana writings contributed a new vocabulary of *mestizaje*, hybridity, oppositional consciousness, and the critical metaphor of "borderlands." These concepts helped mark a consciousness of resistance to the repression of language, culture, and race, and a recognition of the in-between spaces formed by those with complex identities. Chicana feminist theorists, both heterosexual and lesbian, also illuminated women-centered family life, a complicated ref-

uge and site of male authority and privilege where women negotiate autonomy and support. Contesting their marginalization, Chicana lesbian writers took greater risks and opened up the exploration and celebration of women-centered sexuality, spirituality, and passion, attempting, as Cherríe Moraga put it, to “feed women in all of their hungers.” In these ways, Chicanas, in collaboration with other Latinas, contributed to rethinking feminism, women’s studies, Latino studies, and cultural studies in general.<sup>11</sup>

In forging political connections with feminists of color, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latina writers facilitated a process of theorizing through social activism and autobiographical writing. *This Bridge Called My Back* broke the cultural nationalist paradigm by centering Latinas among women of color and by bringing lesbian identity to the fore in Latina writing. The spate of pan-Latina anthologies that followed *This Bridge*, namely, *Cuentos*; *Bearing Witness/Sobreviviendo*; *In Other Words*; *Woman of Her Word*; *Nosotras: Latina Literature Today*; *Latina*; *Compañera: Latina Lesbians*; *Infinite Divisions*; the special issue of *Third Woman* on The Sexuality of Latinas; and *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, has charted new directions for Latina feminist scholarship and theory. More recently, the organization of activist-scholars *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS) has moved from a Chicana space to one that welcomes lesbians, centroamericanas, indigenous women, and other Latinas, including those of mixed race and from Latin America. Along with *This Bridge*, these works are precursors to our book.<sup>12</sup>

It hasn’t always been easy to negotiate a space where Latinas can collaborate to build scholarship and community. The process of creating oppositional discourses, social spaces, anthologies, or collaborative projects does not usually emerge from long-term group interaction among contributors. In the preface to the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, for example, Cherríe Moraga noted, “The idea of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women.”<sup>13</sup> We acknowledge that we must walk the fine line of contestation and complicity, ever mindful that new hierarchies may develop even within Latina feminist projects, and we must constantly negotiate difference among ourselves.

## Where and How We Enter

Our use of “Latina” recognizes these tensions, even as it builds on pan-Latina/o solidarity, however fragile. We seek those spaces within and across borders where women share parallel emotional and psychic terrain along with intersecting political agendas as a means of theorizing about our experiences. Familiar with the difficulties of solidarity with other women, we self-consciously use “Latinas” as a coalitional term. We are not homogenizing and



leveling our differences into an idealized, unified national/ethnic heritage, into what Eliana Rivero calls “the neutral soup of *Latinismo*.”<sup>14</sup> All of us emerge from various mixed inheritances, whether through ethnicity, race, sexuality, regional culture, religious-spiritual formation, class, generation, political orientation, or linguistic heritage and practice. Included in our social identities are the various places we have inhabited and traversed, and the spaces in which we have worked. Our inherited historical and political formations—maps of our crisscrossing trajectories across borders—affected our professional, intellectual, and personal development. Our testimonials continually disrupt the essentialized, homogenized understanding of Latina as we present our respective genealogical and historical inheritances. As a coalitional term, “Latina” is neither exhaustive of the many ways that Latina women may self-identify, nor reflective of all the distinctive national-ethnic groups from “Latina América” and beyond who live in the United States. Our use of the term “Latina” builds on its emergence in coalitional politics in the United States and signifies our connections through praxis to the rest of the Americas and other multiple geographies of origin.

We come to theorizing *latinidades* at the turn of the century from histories of racial-ethnic and feminist struggles. At the risk of actually losing jobs in “studies programs,” putting careers in danger, or losing important personal or political relationships, we realize that some of those struggles have not necessarily sustained us. As Celia Alvarez noted, “After all this time, why are our stories still invisible in the academy? What is happening to those spaces we fought so hard to create and where does this leave us? What will motivate us to engage and reposition ourselves?” Consequently, to theorize and write about our experiences, we must create our own social spaces.

Situating ourselves in relation to our foresisters and brothers, we acknowledge their enormous contributions, including the published works, histories of struggle yet to be fully documented, and theorizing which continues. However, we also offer the prospect of a new relational process. Through our collaboration, we have been able to negotiate the geographical, political, and emotional challenges of coalitional work. We have created a collaboration that contributes to new ways of theorizing. *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* differs from its precursors in that it is the result of a conscious relational politics and of collaborative *testimonio*, face-to-face theorizing and production.

## Who We Are

Our backgrounds are as diverse as the continent. We reflect Latina experiences in the United States: some of us are of Native American heritage while others

are marked by histories of European colonization and U.S. imperialism, by multiple migrations and diasporas, economic, religious, or political. For us, *latinidad* acknowledges national origins, and at the same time explores the nuances of difference. Our identities include our heritages, cultures, lived experiences, and political commitments.

We are the daughters of field, domestic, factory, and service workers, secretaries, military officers, technicians, artists, and professionals. Our participation in various social movements fundamentally contributed to our political development. Regarding our religious influences, our group includes “Catholic girls,” Protestants, Mormons, Jews, women who grew up in the tradition of *santería*, indigenous spiritualists, and women now reclaiming spirituality that transcends institutional religions. We embody the expression of diverse sexual identities — heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, celibate, single, and those who move between sexual categories. We come from and have created a variety of “families,” including single-parent, nuclear, extended biological, and chosen families that may or may not include children. While some of us do not have birth-children, we are all involved in a variety of nurturing or care-giving relationships with our own children, stepchildren, parents, nieces, nephews, friends, students, colleagues, even pets. Our bodies display a range of physical beauty and voluptuousness. We might be described within our cultures by our skin color as “*las cafecitas, indias, negritas, trigueñas, güeras y blanquitas*” (brown, Indian, black, olive, light or white) — problematic terms of endearment that evoke racist connotations.<sup>15</sup>

We are intergenerational, ranging in age from early thirties to late fifties. Although not the case when our group began, when some of us were graduate students, we now all hold doctorates from U.S. universities. Our academic trajectories include community colleges, liberal arts institutions, public and private research universities, alternative colleges, and “the ivies.” We are disciplinary and transdisciplinary — crossing through fields of American Studies, Anthropology, Chicana/o Studies, Community Studies, Creative Writing, Cultural Studies, English, Latin American and Latino Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Ethnic Studies, Linguistics, Oral History, Political Science, Psychology, Romance Languages and Literatures, Sociology, and Women’s Studies. All of us are professors although some of us do not teach full time. We have worked in traditional academic departments as well as interdisciplinary research centers, programs, and community sites. We are chairs of departments, deans, directors of research centers, pioneers of feminist research in women of color sites, and accomplished writers and scholars.

We have professional privilege, relatively speaking, even though some of us are not tenured, some of us write and do research without institutional support, and some do not have full-time jobs. Our professional privilege comes

from our locations in institutions of higher education, with good salaries and benefits, the luxury of pursuing our passions through our work, and, for some of us, tenure and sabbaticals. However, because of our professional choices — to research, think, and write about Latinas in ways that take the subject seriously — we become marginalized by institutional cultures that reproduce hegemonic relations of power. With so few Latinas in higher education and with intensifying faculty workloads, we are caught between multiple constituencies, needs, and institutional demands. So, despite our relative privilege compared to most Latinas, we are often overworked, exhausted, emotionally burnt out, and not appropriately validated for our contributions. In reaction to institutional violence or in response to our own talents and callings, many of us have created cultural, political, and professional worlds outside academia. Among us are published poets and creative writers, grassroots organizers, cultural workers, musicians, storytellers, healers, and visual artists. Whatever the medium, we yearn for creativity that provides balance in our lives and sustains our sense of wholeness.

The languages we speak come from our colonial and diasporic conditions. Some of us are Spanish dominant, others bilingual; some easily code-switch between English and Spanish; others struggle to learn Spanish or indigenous languages. A few of us negotiate multicultural situations where Black English and regional Spanish, or where different national and class dialects of Spanish, contribute to a complicated polyglot mixture. In writing this book, we made a conscious decision not to privilege standard English or Castilian Spanish, so as to honor our localized uses of Spanish, bilingual code-switching, and variety of dialects. As such, the languages of this text express the lived experiences of Latinas.

### Theorizing Through Process

Our purpose in describing our process of coming together and collaborating over seven years is to illustrate how we came to theorize feminist *latinidades* through *testimonio*. While our writings may stand on their own, our collaborative process, which used the method of *testimonio*, ultimately was framed by common political views about how to create knowledge and theory through our experiences. In this way, product and process became inseparable.

By the 1990s Latina feminist thinkers and writers had been reading one another; however, geographical divides kept us enclaved. With Chicanas and Centroamericanas in the West and Southwest, and Puertorriqueñas, Dominicanas, and Cubanas in the North and Southeast, we each had our own feminist groups, but we did not necessarily know each other.<sup>16</sup> Returning to New York after teaching in California, Iris López proposed: “It would be a great

idea to get funding to bring Latinas from the East and West coasts together, and maybe do collaborative work.” As distinct communities of Latina academics, writers, and cultural workers, we focused our theoretical development and production on the specificities of women in each ethnic group, which entailed a parallel process of constructing a women-centered space in *opposition* to masculinist or white feminist frameworks. Nevertheless, we all were inspired by reading Chicana feminist writings, which were more visible and accessible and spoke to us all, even if our particular histories and issues differed. In addition, our professional lives in academia led many of us to move out of regions where our respective cultural groups reside. We began to criss-cross the continent from East to West, West to East, South to North, across oceans and national boundaries to and from islands and countries south of the Río Grande, studying, working, and living in other Latina/o contexts. Our migrations mirrored larger global movements of cultures, capital, and peoples, transnationally and within the borders of the U.S. nation-state. Our geographic migrations enabled us to create a network. They also gave us insights and lived experiences on which to reconceptualize *latinidad*, as we could relate to the struggles of women in other Latino contexts. To write and theorize about a range of Latina experiences, however, required being in *sustained dialogue* with one another. Hence, we were motivated to convene physically in one place and begin this process.

Our process evolved from a small study group to several national and many regional meetings. At one of the meetings, Liza Fiol-Matta and others pressed for a new type of encounter: “What we need is a place so we can hang out, really get to know one another and see what happens.” From that proposal came the two “summer camps,” as we fondly came to call our institutes in the mountains of Colorado. Gradually and carefully, the composition of our group changed from a predominance of Chicanas and Puertorriqueñas to the broader group evidenced in this book (Chicanas, Puertorriqueñas, Dominicanas, Cubanas, Centroamericanas, Sefarditas, Native American, and mixed-heritage women). With careful nurturing and reflection, our process evolved into *un engranaje de deseo, respeto, confianza, y colaboración* — a meshing of desire, respect, trust, and collaboration. Over the course of these seven years, we have come to cherish the way we interact and work with one another, the atmosphere of mutual support and consultation we have built, and the liberating space of dialogue, debate, and disclosure that we have achieved. This project has been like no other intellectual endeavor we have experienced. The rewards have far exceeded the difficulties.

At the beginning, we were challenged by traditional research models, funding priorities, and different expectations regarding the scope and focus of a pan-Latina project. The expectations of our funding and conventional aca-

dem practice threatened to lock us into traditional models of comparative research that would predetermine the outcome of our labor. We wrote a proposal to the Inter-University Program for Latino Research to bring together Latinas of different origins, geographic areas, and disciplines to share work around established topics and analytical categories. We assumed that a comparative agenda would emerge through individual research contributions, but we found ourselves moving away from these more traditional frameworks.

Initially, we mistakenly assumed that we knew each other simply because we were Latina academics and writers. We had to work through different assumptions and expectations about the purpose of the group, its composition and politics, the direction it should take, and the power of representation — who would speak for the group and how they would frame what we were doing. We struggled against privileging certain aspects of Latina identity so as not to limit full participation by everyone. We learned to be more mindful of the complexities of negotiating collaboration among Latinas, and realized that a pan-Latina project entailed creating a new paradigm. Luz del Alba Acevedo explained the intent to move away from oppositional discourse to a more relational consciousness and practice *among* Latinas: “How we structure the ways we come together and tell our stories affects *how* we tell our stories. We can become more compassionate women, better feminists. And eventually new generations of Latinas will displace us, but instead of doing it in a fighting mode, they will build on our respect for one another.” Implicitly this was a key theoretical and political move away from a project that works within a “hierarchy of oppressions” to one in which all racial-ethnic groups and identity markers — sexuality, race, gender, age, ethnicity, national origins, class, etc. — carry equal force.<sup>17</sup>

In this new pan-Latina framework, we saw all sources of oppression as crucial in structuring the subordinate social location of Latinas. In the middle of a difficult discussion about this viewpoint, Luz del Alba further explained the motivation for pan-Latina collaboration: “We come to this meeting out of a deep sense of love. We want to learn from one another.” We realized that it was imperative to step back and learn more about our internal diversity and trajectories as historical groups and as women. Further, we wanted to situate ourselves in relation to our work, our communities, and our academic lives — while not privileging certain identity markers in a profoundly political project. Our goal became to move toward a different comparative research model that would seek mutually validating perspectives among Latinas, mindful of the complexities of our individual experiences.

In expanding participation to achieve greater Latina diversity, we sought to integrate women who represented other national-ethnic groups and whose work focused on Latinas in the United States. Rina Benmayor raised the

difficulty of negotiating “belonging,” by saying, “I hope we can think of *lati-nidades* not just in terms of nationality or ethnicity, but also in terms of lived cultural experience and political commitments.” The national-ethnic identity categories did not encompass the actual diversity of Latinas, as they ignored difference in class backgrounds, religious traditions, sexual preferences, races, ages, cultural experiences, regional variations, and women of mixed or Native American heritage. Implicitly, we were challenging ideas about Latina identities based on nationality-ethnicity, as our group configuration attempted to reflect the complexity and the multiple material realities represented in our communities.

It was also necessary to create a space where disclosure about ourselves was comfortable, given our new-found awareness that this project would not be easy. Early in the process, Pat Zavella bravely voiced her apprehensions: “It would be so much easier if we could just write out our life stories. That would be familiar to me. Telling them publicly is very difficult, frightening, ’cause I don’t know you all very well. Can we talk about this?” Other women voiced their fears of public story telling, which, in hindsight, given the stories we had kept private, was understandable. By discussing our feelings of vulnerability and mistrust openly, we began to build a space where we learned to listen, evaluate, and question each other in nonjudgmental ways. We learned how to construct a safer space that was not assumed a priori to be safe based simply on gender and national/ethnic affiliations. *Testimonio* was critical for breaking down essentialist categories, since it was through telling life stories and reflecting upon them that we gained nuanced understandings of differences and connections among us. These revelations established respect and deeper understanding for each of us as individuals and as Latinas. Through *testimonio* we learned to translate ourselves for each other.

We also decided that decisions would be made collectively, through consensus. Through the give-and-take needed for collective work, we repeatedly analyzed our group dynamics, noting misperceptions and incorporating debates about our differences into our work agenda constructively. Over time it became easier to say, “That doesn’t include me,” “My experience was different,” or “I disagree, and here’s why,” knowing that disagreement would not generate great tension and that the group would think through expressions of difference or disagreement and incorporate various viewpoints. When the framework does not rest on a hierarchy of oppression, then every form of systemic violence and human agency must be taken into consideration. In sum, we learned to negotiate political and theoretical disagreements among ourselves by adhering to the premises of collective decision making, making a conscious commitment to nonjudgmental listening, building trust, and constructing an alternative, inclusive framework.

What solidified the group and the project, despite tentative beginnings,

were the compelling stories about our personal and professional lives; some deep, longstanding friendships and collegial collaborations as well as a new web of developing friendships; our commitment to *testimonio*; and the common cause of trying to define and work within a relational theoretical framework. For when we narrated our life stories within this framework, we found an emerging pattern of systemic violence and cultural ideologies that continually repositioned us at the margins, despite relative privilege; we saw incredible journeys of achievement despite expectations of failure. Because our stories so powerfully illustrated how these politicized experiences came to shape our lives' work and illustrated connections among Latinas, we abandoned the idea of comparing our academic research on Latinas and decided to become subjects of our own reflection. *Testimonio* would be the primary methodology used in whatever project we pursued. *Testimonio* would be a means to bring together our creative and research backgrounds, a more organic way of collecting and generating knowledge, and a method that would move us toward an understanding of *latinidades*. And *testimonio* was a process that felt comfortable, the familiar story telling that harkened back to our mothers' and other relatives' kitchens.

In the various national and regional meetings that followed, *testimoniando*—telling our stories—generated renewed energy and deeper trust. Initially, we addressed the following key questions: How do we bear witness to our own becoming? How do we define who we are? How have we made *testimonio* the core of our work? What are some important turning points of consciousness? What is our relationship to political identities and intellectual work? What is our relationship to building new paradigms or models? What are we transgressing?

Another area of implicit theorizing brought in dimensions of spirituality, creativity, and conscious caring for the body. We learned to acknowledge and tell how our bodies are maps of oppression, of institutional violence and stress, of exclusion, objectification, and abuse. Since our bodies hold the stress and tensions of our daily lives, we also shared stories of body breakdowns, of how we take care of ourselves, or how we do not. We discussed how our bodies express creative and carnal experiences, and compared our many styles of dancing, our appreciation of good food, relaxation, and laughter.

In 1995 we held our first Latina Feminist Summer Institute at the Baca Conference Center of The Colorado College in southern Colorado. Baca is literally on the Central Divide, in the middle of the country. Meeting at Baca was fortuitous, a real turning point for us as a group. Surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and intersected by rivers, Baca is located in the highest valley in North America. Part of the magic of Baca is that historically it is a site of spiritual meaning, a sacred space for Native Americans where there

have never been wars between indigenous peoples. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains are the mythical place of emergence for the Navajo, who were displaced by the violent incursions of Spanish and Anglo settlers. Today Baca is home to a diverse group of spiritual traditions, including a Christian monastery, a Buddhist temple, a Zen meditation center, and a Hindu ashram.<sup>18</sup> For us, Baca became a site that inspired narration.

### Reconstructing *Testimonio*

*Testimonio* is often seen as a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else, who then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere. Thus, scholars often see *testimonios* as dependent products, an effort by the disenfranchised to assert themselves as political subjects through others, often outsiders, and in the process to emphasize particular aspects of their collective identity.<sup>19</sup> *Testimonios* with women in Latin America have focused much of the critical attention to the genre in the last two decades.<sup>20</sup> These texts are seen as disclosures not of personal lives but rather of the political violence inflicted on whole communities. Here, the *testimoniante*s (subjects of the texts) admit that they withhold secrets about the culture or details of their personal lives that, for political reasons, are not revealed in the stories narrated.

At Baca we created our own *testimonio* process, in which the personal and private became profoundly political. “Summer camp” gave us the time and space, free from the pulls of our busy public and private lives, to engage more deeply in knowing one another’s experiences. In response to previous discussions about fear of disclosure, we carefully framed the first round of *testimonios*. We broke into small groups, each with diverse ethnic, national, or geographic membership, and addressed the following questions: Why did we pursue higher education? What did we think we were doing? What was the enticement? What did we get out of it?

These *testimonios* were critical because we began to see common themes and parallel experiences despite differences of national, ethnic, or regional background. The small groups traced what Aurora Levins-Morales called “genealogies of empowerment”: “How did our ancestors, parents and especially the women in our lives validate our right to think and trust ourselves?” We named the first section of our book after these *testimonios*. We discovered that our own passions for reading and learning, for stories, and for knowing more about our heritages and communities had led us to become researchers and writers. Yet despite our success in the academy and in our creative endeavors, we all could point to moments and events that were deeply painful.

In the next round—in a large-group setting—we began to explore these



difficult experiences. This time the questions were more probing: Where did the points of “breakdown” happen? How did collectivity and isolation figure in our lives? What was the process of resistance and recovery? During these sessions many of us told stories we had never shared with anyone. They were about institutional as well as personal abuses that we, the achievers — *las perfectas, las nenas buenas* — had endured through our lives. Breaking the silence, we uncovered the shame that came from abuse. Some of these *testimonios* eventually became the anonymous pieces in this book — *Latinas anónimas* — since they were about experiences that can and do happen to any Latina. Clearly, we needed to share the experiences that we had kept locked away and begin the healing process through spirited reconfiguration. For racialized ethnic women of subjugated peoples, achievement is always a double-edged sword. In becoming women of accomplishment, we have had to construct and perform academic personas that require “professionalism,” “objectivity,” and “respectability” in ways that often negate our humanity. Acknowledging pain helped to unveil the workings of power in institutional cultures, its human costs, and the ways individuals can and do overcome the ravages of power dynamics and abuses. Thus, honoring Clara Lomas’s phrase “the alchemy of erasure,” we named a section of our collective stories “Alchemies of Erasure.” The section “The Body Re/members” came into being through stories about how the alchemies had disfigured our bodies; and yet, somehow we had found moments or processes of resistance, memory, and recovery. Naming pain and using collective support to begin the process of empowerment became integral to our survival as individuals and as a group. In Gloria Cuádriz’s words, “I’ve been waiting for ten years to feel comfortable enough to say this publicly. I may never say it again, so I am grateful that we have created this opportunity.” Her sentiment was echoed by Clara Lomas, “I shared something that I never shared with anyone else. What a relief to finally let go!”

In our collective debriefing after the *testimonios*, we realized that our experiences reflected oppositions of systemic violence and nurturance, injustice and empowerment. Grandparents, parents, and others noticed and nurtured us, provided guidance and encouragement, and believed in our capacity to succeed in our education. Our writings honor them, with *respeto*, love, and appreciation. On the other hand, in our homes, professions, and communities we struggle with racism, precarious economic circumstances, the consequences of being born female, and resistance to our presence in academia. A critical point in our process of theorizing was recognizing that we needed to acknowledge both dimensions of our experiences. Consequently, our writings represent an effort to name and understand the resources we were given as well as the pain that oppression produces for us. Reclaiming both memory and human agency is critical in a process of change. As the Puertorriqueñas said jokingly: *Nosotras estamos jodidas, pero también somos jodonas.*

Our collective process created other benefits. *Testimonio* engaged us at a deeper level than we had found in other feminist and womanist circles and in our own respective national communities. Our intense conversations, shared laughter, and emotional solidarity and bonding ultimately built trust, *confianza*. Despite being positioned at different points in the hierarchies of our professional lives, we worked together as equals. Invoking the Chicana criticism of people with attitude, Yvette Flores-Ortiz joked, *Aquí no hay chingonas*. In addition, bringing together the mind, spirit, and body, we shared meals and rooms, walked in the hills, went on field trips to the hot springs, the sand dunes, and nearby temples. We read our poetry and shared our writings in a night of *tertulia* we called “Café Baca.” We danced together and explored really important questions such as “What is the difference between Puerto Rican and Chicana styles of dancing salsa?” And “Will you teach me?” We did all of this with the aid of untranslatable jokes and hilarious bilingual one-liners that helped ease the weariness from our intense work sessions that often lasted well into the night.

Baca became our self-declared artists’ colony. We returned in the summer of 1996 to write our *papelitos*, conceptualize the structure of this book, and draft its introduction. We listened to the recorded narratives and read the transcripts from the long hours of *testimonio* and dialogue. We then sat down to write our own pieces, based on our *testimonios*. We shared them with one another, gave extensive feedback, and thus provided the support and courage to continue our writing. Ruth Behar told us that her Cuban *colegas* found that the best method for producing text was simply to put *culo a la silla*—butts to the chair! For most of us, testimonial writing was a new form, which, contrary to our academic voices, allowed us to speak with humor, beauty, spirituality, and sensuality. Many of these pieces form the section titled “Passions, Desires, and Celebrations.” After debate over whether these would reify stereotypes about Latinas as passionate rather than intellectual, Eliana Rivero reminded us: “*Mujeres*, we survived all this stuff and we’re still here, thriving, thank you very much. How can we ignore something so central to our existence?” Throughout, we were creating *comadreo*, the Latin American/Latina tradition of kinship, reciprocity, and commitment.

As we read our individual pieces to each other, the structure of this book began to take shape. For the introduction, we pursued a collective writing process where the whole group theorized the sections. Then, in smaller groups, we debated ideas, composed text, and brought drafts back to the whole, where we did line editing. Having eighteen women in a room, collectively writing and editing a manuscript, is a sight to behold! Of course, later, the introduction to this book was subjected to an intense process of recasting, expanding, deleting, clarifying, tightening, and polishing. A “virtual institute” created through e-mail allowed the designated subgroups and *jodonas* who took



Latina Feminist Group in Baca, Colorado, 1995  
 (l-r, front): Clara Lomas, María Luisa Lomas, Rina Benmayor,  
 Luz del Alba Acevedo, Pat Zavella; (l-r, back) Gloria Cuádriz,  
 Aurora Levins Morales, Celia Alvarez, Liza Fiol-Matta,  
 Caridad Souza

Latina Feminist Group in Baca, Colorado, 1995 (l-r):  
 Inés Hernández Avila, Caridad Souza, Daisy Cocco De Filippis,  
 Mirtha Quintanales, Aurora Levins Morales, Norma Cantú





*Testimoniando* in Baca, Colorado, 1995 (l-r): Caridad Souza,  
Mirtha Quintanales, Daisy Cocco De Filippis, Inés Hernández Avila,  
Eliana Rivero, Liza Fiol-Matta

responsibility for particular tasks to “nag” online. Smaller teams from two to eight participants have variously produced and edited drafts. We fondly designated these as the *culonas* of the group.

From our debates emerged a consensus that *testimonio* is a complex genre that has multiple antecedents and uses. From our various disciplinary backgrounds, we had each worked with a range of testimonial texts. These included oral traditions, such as those documented by nineteenth-century *folkloristas mexicanos* who gathered life stories to preserve their heritage in the face of conquest, Judeo-Spanish ballads preserved through five hundred years in diaspora, indigenous storytelling, and African slave narratives. We had also worked with witness narratives by Holocaust survivors and by Central and South American indigenous peoples and *campesinos*. Others had explored Inquisition “transcripts,” confessional narratives, and even the ethnographic work of the friars who came with the Conquistadores. In social science, we had extensive experience generating life histories about Latina workers, migrations, and family lives. On the literary side, we had worked with various forms of autobiographical writing and life hi/story with antecedents in the Latin American and Caribbean *novela-testimonio*. From this multidisciplinary legacy, we found that our muses are as diverse as Sojourner Truth, Jovita Idar, Anne Frank, Mercé Rodoreda, Rosario Castellanos, Julia de Burgos, Rigoberta Menchú, Adrienne Rich, Elena Poniatowska, Cherríe Moraga, Rosario Morales, Audre Lorde, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Isabel Allende, Toni Cade Bambara, Gioconda Belli, Ntozake Shange, Sara Estela Ramírez, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, Luci Tapahonso, Sandra Cisneros, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Seeking to contest and transform the very disciplines that taught us the



Working with *testimonios*, Baca, Colorado, 1995  
(l-r): Gloria Cuádras and Iris López

Theorizing *Latinidades*, Baca, Colorado, 1995  
(l-r): Norma Alarcón and Norma Cantú





Informal get-together, Baca, Colorado, 1995 (l-r): Yvette Flores Ortiz,  
Liza Fiol-Matta, Clara Lomas, Caridad Souza (in back),  
Ruth Behar, Ceci Lomas (from behind)

skills to recover our subjugated knowledges, we reclaimed *testimonio* as a tool for Latinas to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity. Despite its complicated history, *testimonio* captures Latinas' complex, layered lives. In formulating a testimonial process, we engage the following questions in this book: How can a feminist critical imaginary transform the societies in which Latinas live, love, and labor? How can *testimonio*, as self-construction and contestation of power, help us build the theory of our practice, and the practice of our theory? As a collective, we have come to agreement that our use of *testimonio* takes place within a relational framework. Our group histories and lived experiences are intertwined with global legacies of resistance to colonialism, imperialism, racism, antisemitism, religious fundamentalism, sexism, and heterosexism. When theorizing about feminist *latinidades*, we reveal the interrelationships among these systems of power. Trained as critical thinkers, we are forced to acknowledge that occasionally institutions or discourses about which we are critical, such as religion or the family, produce contradictory effects on us, serving as sources of disempowerment and autonomy, repression and privilege. For example, several of us are critical of organized religion, yet religious traditions, practices, or schools developed our sense of confidence, discipline, and academic training. Our *papelitos* illustrate how we grapple with these contradictions individually.

The reader may well wonder why we call our own pieces *testimonios*, since they are written and published by us, relatively privileged women who are

writers, scholars, and activists. Indeed, some of us have already written and published autobiographical texts in varied genres (poetry, short stories, chapbooks, *teatro*, music, essays, and self-reflexive scholarship), exploring issues similar to those presented here. Although mediated by our privileges, the pieces in this book are closer to the genre of *testimonio* for several reasons. Formally, these writings are the products of narratives lodged in memory, shared out loud and recorded. As such, they follow a common process of generating *testimonio*. In a parallel manner to the way that Rigoberta or Domitila's narratives speak not for the individual but for the experience of a community,<sup>21</sup> we see our stories as expressing the lives of many Latinas in and out of the academy. We hope our collective bearing witness conveys our outrage at multiple forms of violence toward women. Finally, we identify with *testimoniante*s because our collectivity nurtures utopian visions of social formations—families, work teams, social networks, communities, sexual relationships, political groups, social movements—that are formed on the basis of equality, respect, and open negotiation of difference. Like the polyphonic *testimonios*, constructed by accounts from different participants in the same event, this book illuminates the lives of Latinas, making our histories visible.

As feminists, however, we want to go beyond the limitations of *testimonio* and reveal the institutional violence and personal assaults that we have experienced as Latinas. This is not always possible, since many of us feel like “outsiders within,” marginal to the academy, mainstream views, political groups, or even our own families. And despite the feminist mantra that “the personal is political,” as Latina professionals we feel restricted in acknowledging painful personal experiences. Particularly within political projects that include multi-racial groups, or men and women, or are situated within academia, we are often reminded that our needs as feminists are secondary to the “real struggle,” and some of us feel vulnerable to professional or political consequences for personal disclosures.

Our book expands the construction of *testimonio* in our feminist desire to make visible and audible our *papelitos guardados*—the stories often held from public view—and to express the full complexity of our identities, from the alchemies of erasure and silencing to our passions, joys, and celebrations. In dialogue with other hybrid autobiographical modes (ethnoautobiography, “native” or feminist ethnography, autobiographical fiction), we have infused traditional literary genres of poetry and short story with the spirit of testimonial disclosure. At the same time, our *testimonios* express multiple subjectivities of individual lives, marked by uniqueness as well as shared history and context. Departing from the heroic autobiographical tradition, we are not speaking from the voice of the singular “I.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, we are exploring the ways in which our individual identities express the complexities of our com-

munities as a whole. As Latinas who now have experienced being on both sides of the microphone, we view *testimonios* as a practice that seeks to mediate the power relations between ourselves and our subjects. In this way, our book represents a unique praxis within *testimonio* traditions, as we have made ourselves the subjects and objects of our own inquiry and voice.

### *Papelitos Guardados*

“Genealogies of Empowerment” begins this book, affirming that we all carry within us the memory of homelands, communities, families, and cultural traditions that situate us in our life trajectories as writers and teachers. Not merely celebratory or nostalgic, these “stories” also capture the ironies and difficulties of becoming successful, accomplished women. “Alchemies of Erasure” speaks eloquently to the many ways in which our identities have been compartmentalized and made invisible, particularly within academia. “The Body Re/Members” inscribes the corporal memory of pain and recoveries, while “Passions, Desires, and Celebrations” gives voice to moments, symbols, and relationships of sustenance and creativity. Some of the writings in this book retain the flavor of oral speech, others are more stylized. Poetry, fictionalized personal account, interior monologue, dramatic dialogue, novelistic writing, and other forms evolved from the creative process of how best to represent the range of our life experiences. In capturing our experiences, however, we relied more on what we had to say than on producing highly crafted text. We sought to preserve the raw edge of *testimonio*, and to use the voice most accessible to each of us.

Throughout the long effort to make this book a reality, we broke the enclaves, sustained meaningful dialogue, crossed the borders between disciplines and academic practices, and proposed a framework for theorizing feminist *latinidades*. In the process, we ventured into new writing modes, and built a sustaining practice of community where we remain committed to continued dialogue, collaboration, and contact, as a whole and in smaller groups. We affirmed a relational ethic of care and support for each other and for the group. In our experience this is Latina feminism at its most nurturing and creative. We think of this book as a gift to other Latinas, particularly young women, to inspire them to create their own expressions of feminist Latina identities — *latinidades*. We encourage you to carry forward, *testimoniando*.

### Notes

1. The original agenda included these six topics for research: Political Economy of Latina Lives; The Mapping of Toxicities: Environmental Racism; Violence and Human Rights: