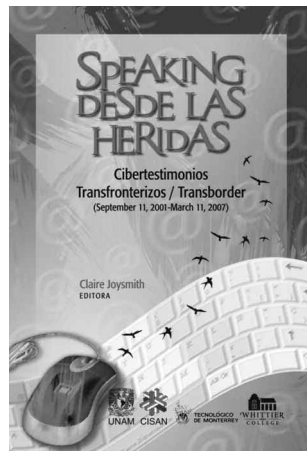


Reviews

Speaking desde las heridas.
Cibertestimonios transfronterizos/Transborder
(September 11, 2001-March 11, 2007)
Claire Joysmith, editor
CISAN, UNAM/Whittier College/ITESM
Mexico, 2008, 652 pp.

September 11, 2001, or 9/11, as it is commonly called, is a date that marks a major shift in history, and yet, a date can be easily erased and mean nothing for future generations, one more thing to remember for the exam, and nothing else. I am thinking of other September 11s, in Chile and South Africa, or of “2 de octubre no se olvida” (October 2 Will Never Be Forgotten). “It will never be forgotten” only applies to those who were there, bearing witness. History as told by those in power becomes a very effective form of censorship: those who want only certain things to be known (the official story), which usually means simplifying things in the style of former President Bush’s discourse (“them, the evildoers,” or “you’re either with us or against us”). *Speaking desde las heridas*, breaks with this one-sided way of retelling, allowing for multiple reflections on and echoing what thousands of us witnessed on the screen “of intruding memory.”¹

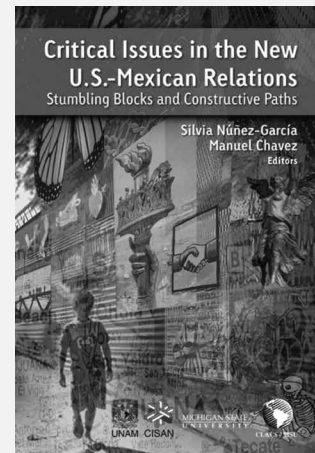
I remember when editor Claire Joysmith sent me an e-mail eight years ago (when I was still living in the United States), asking if I had written something in response to the collapse of the Twin Towers. That was the beginning of *One Wound for Another*, a compilation of testimonios by Latin@s, gathered through “cyberspace,” in response to 9/11.² Five years later, Ms. Joysmith decided to expand the scope of the transborder context in that first book, and the result is an amazing 652-page collection of testimonios, where the wound clearly appears as one collective, political pain which “shatters the world and, along with it, the idea of the world.”³



Critical Issues in the New U.S.-Mexican Relations.
Stumbling Blocks and Constructive Paths
Silvia Núñez-García and Manuel Chavez, eds.
CISAN, UNAM/CLACS, Michigan State University
Mexico, 2009, 155 pp.

The U.S.-Mexican migration corridor is by far the world’s largest. It has been estimated that from 1976 to 2006 the number of persons born in Mexico who reside permanently in the U.S. increased 15 fold to approximately 12 million, and that at least 85 percent of them entered the country without documents every year since 2000. These are some of the most striking findings of Elaine Levine, one of the co-authors of the recently published *Critical Issues in the New U.S.-Mexican Relations. Stumbling Blocks and Constructive Paths*.

The book offers an excellent series of seven chapters on the main problems in Mexican-U.S. relations. Its basic assumption is that culture is the clue and may also be a solution to the complex U.S.-Mexico relations. So, public diplomacy, whether understood as an instrument to facilitate understanding, mutual respect and cooperation or as mere cultural diplomacy, needs “to be reconsidered and implemented as a permanent feature of the binational relationship.” As a matter of fact, according to the editors, misperceptions and reinforced negative attitudes about the “other” have made symmetrical cooperation difficult. Consequently, the relation follows “a complex model of interdependence where decisions made on one side of the border have significant and immediate repercussions on the other.” Actually, Mexicans living in the U.S. may be seen as “cultural hybrids.”



Just from reading the title, questions emerge: how can one “speak a wound,” let alone speak it bilingually? What is a *cibertestimonio transfronterizo*? Joysmith immediately answers these and many other questions in her introduction: “The aim from the outset was to make historical remembrance and amnesia more poignant, and to take a critical look at the complexities and the to-be dismantled inside/outside, near/far, us/them dichotomies.”⁴ The call for responses, and the results of that call, were all done by e-mail, hence the cyber element; the experience was no longer limited to the Latin@s in the U.S., and many “national” boundaries were crossed (hence, “transborder”); and *testimonio* was chosen (once again) as a “means of recovering and documenting lost stories...stories of lived experiences that might otherwise have been ignored, erased from historical memory.”⁵ Every *testimonio*, “the small voice of history,”⁶ is followed by a self-identification, showing how intricately complicated their (our) ethnic backgrounds really are: “Soy defeña...de madre de origen libanés...y padre yucateco”; “nepantlera, spiritual activist, mixed-race person”; “inner border born o mexicano agringado,” and so on.

Some collaborators from the first compilation are here again, like Sandra Cisneros, Norma Alarcón and Ariel Dorfman; “new” collaborators stand out like Raúl Salinas, Carlos Monsiváis, Berta Hiriart, and José Emilio Pacheco. But, even when the majority of them are not necessarily “well known,” their insight and depth of knowledge of the gashing wound born out of Historical Trauma, make their testimony more powerful and meaningful.⁷ As Oliver-Rotger states, “The language of these testimonios is clear, emphatic and direct because it emerges from the soul and contrasts with the vague phraseology of global media and political language.”⁸

In the movie “11’09’01 September 11,” in the segment by Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine, a dead soldier tells him, “You can see me because you are affected by the things that happen... I live in your mind.” The artist responds that he feels furious that people do not think enough about the others. And the soldier responds, “You did nothing to make yourself be heard.” With more than 100 voices in this book, we would expect to be heard, at least a little bit more, even though it would seem but a whisper, the history of human cruelty filling up more volumes than its kindness. *Speaking desde las heridas* is, indeed, a good attempt at counterbalancing this disparity, longing to recover the “conocimiento”⁹ lost along the way. Just as men found out that the Earth is

Why is this? History explains everything, as the past speaks for itself. In her article “Mexican Migration to the United States,” Elaine Levine recalls elements of the past that help us understand the current state of the Mexico-U.S. relationship. Migration has been commonplace ever since Mexico was forced to cede half its territory to the U.S. after losing the 1848 war. For many years after that, movement between the two countries was entirely unregulated and relatively small scale. In 1924, the U.S. began controlling and restricting entry for the first time. Ever since, the control of migration has gradually increased along with the Mexican population living in the U.S., which is nothing if not an economic paradox. At present, the Mexican-origin population has the highest participation in the U.S. work force of all migrant communities: 68.4 percent in 2005.

In his contribution to the book, Manuel Chavez correctly observes that very little is said in the media about migrants’ contributions to the U.S. economy, the type of jobs they do and their independent relationship with labor markets in the service, hospitality and agricultural sectors. His point is fully explained in Levine’s piece: barriers to economic mobility are not rooted in labor markets, but in the nation’s public school systems. To her, the segregation of winners and losers in U.S. society still has a high correlation to race and ethnicity, but most of the segregating occurs before people look for their first job. The public school system is preparing Mexican children for the same kind of low-skilled, low-paying jobs their parents do. Recently, efforts have been made to strengthen migrants’ ties to their homeland. Dual nationality was approved, and hometown associations are actively promoted and supported.

This idea of building networks between the two neighbors is taken up by Silvia Núñez García, who emphasizes the undeniable role of social networks today in determining new spheres of influence. These networks are articulated beyond national borders and have the potential for transnational influence.

SECURITY: THE TURNING POINT OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The largest part of the book is dedicated to security, a hot issue in U.S. foreign policy and an even more worrying one in Mexico’s domestic policy.

not flat, now it is our turn to understand that she is, indeed, alive, as we are, and “our bodies and psyches are internalizing the pain of the larger socio-political body...our ...bodies are also occupied territories in which other wars are taking place.”¹⁰

In another segment of the aforementioned film,¹¹ a teacher tries to explain to dozens of Afghan refugee children living in Iran what had just happened in New York. It seems an impossible task, when they cannot even begin to understand the concept of a skyscraper. But the rest of us, in so called “civilized” countries, in this day and age of instant global connection where news, movies, Internet—in one word, information—is so readily available, with images that can help us understand and actually make us all instant witnesses, why can’t we empathize with the “others,” those who have been left without a home, or live in a town with no men (or men without legs or arms), and that are desperate enough to travel across thousands of miles to try and find a better life so far from their own people, their own language, to a place where they will be seen as the dark invaders? “The demon mythologies of the brown body transfer from race to race, from country to country. Memories, like attention spans, are short and mutable. Color, like disease, is contagious.”¹²

Babel was the name of a tower where no one understood anyone else. How ironic that in New York the towers contained immigrant workers from more than 40 countries, so many and distinct languages and cultures, and yet the U.S. corporate powers that be saw it as an affront to their “freedom” (and their whiteness). Even if the readership of this volume were limited to artists, students and academics, it would, indeed, be a step toward discarding from our vocabularies useless dichotomies, including our blaming the state. As John Beverley says, “What we do as cultural workers and educators is to make, unmake, and remake hegemony; in that sense we have to work *with* the nation-state, at the same time that we try to transform it.”¹³

Speaking desde las heridas is one of many potential tools toward this transformation, which implies transforming our daily ways to inhabit the world, like when Patrisia Gonzales counsels which herbs to use for healing grief and wounds, to calm the brain, and heal the liver and the heart. With utmost humility, she ends by saying, “The plants will know what to do.”¹⁴

It also implies changing the vision we hold of our future. John Brown Childs retells a pre-colonial story told by the

The opening article, “Foreign Policy and Governance in Mexico. A Conceptual and Operational Dilemma,” by José Luis Valdés-Ugalde, describes how Mexico’s 2000 elections signaled the beginning of a transformation of a political regime dominated by a non-democratic political tradition and a political class without a coherent long-term political project. Mexico was a country with a closed, single-party, relatively authoritarian political system. After 2000, there was hope that Mexico was going to play a prominent role in international affairs, a vision that never materialized. The chapter discusses the basic aspects of the not-always-felicitous relationship between domestic and foreign policy. It also explains the Mexican Paradox: for the first time in the history of Mexico since its 1910 revolution, foreign policy has acquired great importance and has been more closely linked to the success of domestic policy. For the last two presidential terms, Mexico has sought to be present and participate more in multilateral discussions and negotiations as the economy became the central focus of its foreign policy.

As the country internationalized, it has had to abandon its anti-U.S. stance, opt for cooperation instead of conflict and forge a partnership mainly in economic but also in political terms with the U.S. and Canada. Mexico’s foreign policy ambivalence, expressed in the so-called “agreement to disagree,” shaped Mexico-U.S. relations for decades, in the sense that it was the only arrangement that allowed a margin of relative independence without endangering Mexico’s most important bilateral relationship, and without officially compromising with any of the parties involved.

From a similar point of view, well-known Mexican specialist Leonardo Curzio offers several reflections on the reactions of the Mexican people after 9/11. Mexico reinforced its borders especially in relation to the so-called restricted nationalities and has accepted supporting the concept of intelligent borders. Furthermore, Curzio addresses the issue of identity. While other regions of the world like Europe have developed an emerging supranational identity and at the same time preserved their national particularities, North America has not moved beyond the free trade level, and, since 2001, the gap between Mexico and the U.S. has grown. Far from developing more trust between the two countries, the agreement has maintained the flow of people

Haudenosaunee people, where the Peacemaker tells the Mother of the Nations that “all peoples shall love one another and live together in Peace,” to which she responds, “Thy message is good but a word is nothing until it is given form... what form shall this message take?” And he replies, “It will take the form of the longhouse, they will all live under one chief mother. They shall have one mind and live under one law. Thinking will replace killing.”¹⁵ Echoing these words in his testimonio, José Skinner defines the war in Iraq as “a direct indictment of conservative thinking, which actually is not thinking at all, but thoughtless reaction.” This echoing and weaving of voices makes this book such a beautiful and powerful way to approach history in the making. As Julio Ortega wrote, “What can memory be but a major project? ... Because violence is the same, yet each victim is different because their suffering is inadmissible. Because the value of the pronoun arises alive in the tower we each make stand. There, where no one is illegal.”¹⁶ ■■■

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NOTES

- ¹ Or TV, as defined by Cristina Rivera-Garza in her prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 95.
- ² *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra. Testimonios de Latin@ through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre de 2001-11 de marzo de 2002)*, Claire Joysmith and Clara Lomas, eds. (Mexico City: CISAN/Colorado College/Whittier College, 2005)
- ³ Cristina Rivera-Garza, prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 95.
- ⁴ Claire Joysmith, introduction to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 27.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ⁶ Title of John Beverley’s prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 77.
- ⁷ Historical Trauma is defined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart as a “cumulative, collective wounding across generations ‘emanating from massive group trauma,’” and is quoted in Patricia Gonzales’ testimonio, in *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 329.
- ⁸ María Antonia Oliver-Rotger, prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 99.
- ⁹ A term used in Spanish by Chicana theorist and writer Gloria Anzaldúa, which literally means knowledge, and quoted in Joysmith’s introduction; the “searching, inquiring and healing consciousness,” p. 20.
- ¹⁰ Guillermo Gómez Peña, “Border Hysteria,” *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 307.
- ¹¹ By Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf.
- ¹² Gómez Peña, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
- ¹³ Beverley, prologue, *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 81.
- ¹⁴ Patricia Gonzales, *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 330.
- ¹⁵ *Speaking desde las heridas*, pp 214-217.
- ¹⁶ Original in Spanish: “¿Qué puede ser la memoria sino un mayor proyecto?... Porque la violencia es la misma, pero cada víctima es diferente porque su sufrimiento es inadmisibile./Porque el valor del pronombre se alza vivo en la torre que cada uno pone en pie./Allí donde nadie es ilegal.” Julio Ortega, *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 475.

and workers. Cooperation was not been oriented toward building bridges, but toward building borders, controls and even fences. The author provides a forecast for U.S.-Mexico relations: if we consider the next 50 years, and we use our political will to overcome the prejudices each side has toward the other, U.S. security will inevitably be formulated from a perspective that unquestionably includes Mexico.

BIODIVERSITY VS. SECURITY

The book closes with an excellent piece on “The United States and Mexico in the Face of Scientific Uncertainty: Regulating Genetically Modified Organisms,” by Edit Antal, an expert in science and technology. The author analyses two different conceptions of risk assessment in the case of genetically modified seeds, especially corn. The differences in the conception of risk assessment between the U.S. and Mexico unfold in the context of NAFTA, which, while it does not directly regulate GMOs, does promote the harmonization of regulatory policies in many ways.

Antal makes her point taking into account that companies like Monsanto have arrived from the U.S. and tried to introduce genetically modified seeds into Mexico. The debate has been huge, especially with regard to corn. However, the author centers her analysis on a more objective basis, that is, risk assessment and discourse analysis of the main actors active in each country’s genetic engineering policies.

As she correctly observes, parameters differ in the two countries. In the U.S., the main interests are economic growth, international competitiveness and the right to be informed, while in Mexico, the issues are food security and the defense of biological and cultural diversity. This idea may be generalized as the book’s common question: what can Mexico do to achieve more symmetrical cooperation with the U.S. and make a point in the global political culture? ■■■

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