

Writing/Healing Wounds After 11 September 2001 Cyberspace Testimonios by Latin@s

Claire Joysmith*



My heart is sick, and I know I'm not alone.... I think of the[...] Mayan calendar, the one which sets the time for the shift into the sixth sun of consciousness and justice, which I understand is 2012. I remind myself we were told it would get very bad before it gets any better, we were told that those who refuse to let go of old patterns of destruction would be left behind....My heart hurts because I can't see right now how

we will get from here to there. (Inés Hernández-Ávila, Native American-Chicana, poet, professor.)

Although this might well have been written a couple of months ago, this was actually taken from a *testimonio* written shortly after 11 September 2001,¹ when the tragic events left their mark on history, leaving painful traces in narratives and discourses, in so many hearts, leaving a "heart-hurt" as Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros calls it.

El mundo nos ha cambiado; el mundo ha cambiado. (Liliana Valenzuela, "reverse" Chicana, born in Mexico City, literary translator, poet.)

Two years after this tragedy, and after other recent events such as the war against Iraq, it is imperative not to fall prey to historical amnesia, sink into the dangerous complacency of normalcy. The events of 11 September 2001 brought with them a rupture vis-à-vis existing paradigms, offering an oppor-

* Researcher at CISAN.

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tunity for critical and humanized reflections, and a simultaneous opportunity to heal many wounds. Carolina Valencia, Colombian writer and translator who has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, wrote the following poem:

Después de la provocación y
del penetrante olor a muerte y a polvo
que entró por la ventana, llegaron:
la incertidumbre,
el vacío
la sensación de vulnerabilidad,
la guerra declarada
el ántrax
y una y otra vez
el vacío.

Después de la provocación y
del penetrante olor a muerte y a polvo
que entró por la ventana
cada uno y cada cual
desde su soledad,
enfrenta el mundo como puede.

This “acontecimiento completamente saturado de sentido,” as Gustavo Geirola (Argentine writer and professor at Whittier College) calls it, also provoked fury and hatred, desolation, confusion, and “alcanzó un grado de saturación de ‘realidad’ [tal] que dejó cabida solamente a la ficción hollywoodesca de los eventos” as Hilda Chacón (Cost Rican-Chicana professor) comments.

Ya no es seguro el significado de nada,
ni siquiera de la bandera que tantos in-

migrantes cuelgan en sitios visibles quizá por patriotismo, por solidaridad o por miedo. (Adriana González Mateos, NYU PhD. student at the time, now professor in Mexico.)

The aim of the present text is to gather a collage of perspectives, of deeply-felt, creative and critical expressions surrounding this event and its immediate effects. All the quoted texts have been taken from a collection of polyphonic voices that answered a call for responses via internet shortly after 11 September 2001; the purpose was to document a variety of perspectives with the greatest spontaneity and immediacy possible.

As I see it this country's real battle is with its shadow —its racism, propensity for violence, rapacity for consuming, neglect of its responsibility to global communities and the environment, and unjust treatment of dissenters and disenfranchised, especially people of color....Abre los ojos, North America, open your eyes, look at your shadow, and listen to your soul. (Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana writer, poet and pioneer theorist.)

These *testimonios* document a wide range of positionalities as part of a cultural, literary, sociological, ethnographic, transcultural and transborder project at the CISAN, UNAM (Claire Joysmith) and at Colorado College in Colorado Springs (Clara Lomas) as

part of a broader Chicana/o-Latina/o-Mexicana/o project.

... cuánto dolor y enojo nos produce ver que los periódicos y la tele nos están escribiendo un guión con el cual no concordamos. No confío en las encuestas que dicen que entre 83 y 94% de los estadounidenses endosan el ataque a Afganistán. (George Yúdice, cultural theorist.)

Over 50 *testimonios* have been selected and compiled into a book edited by the aforementioned scholars and with a prologue by foremost Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska. Entitled *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra: Testimonios de Latin@s in the U.S. Through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre 2001-11 de marzo 2002)*, it is currently at press, published by CISAN, UNAM, Mexico City.

Chicana-Latina videoartist Catherine Herrera wrote the following:

It has been claimed that the current war will leave no stone unturned, we are either with them or against them. Our world will not survive such polarities. After all, religious wars, cultural wars, racial wars have been fought throughout humanity's history. And still, someone like me, of the blood of the conquered and the conqueror, came into being. Eventually, I hope, we will begin to see our similarities instead of our differences....I called my grandma right away, she lives in San Jose, California. I cried to my grandma, not that she could have taken away the pain but that she was seeing this, that the world she and my grandfather, and those of her generation, had built was now lying wounded on ground zero. She

asked me, “Why do they hate us? Why would anyone hate us?” The answer to that question I knew I could not tell her, although I had a sense of the why.

All the respondents were, in fact, unintentional witnesses of the events through mass media, although they wrote cyber-*testimonios* once they felt prompted to narrate and share their particular experiences during these moments of crisis and communicate these to a faceless cyberspace audience that—given the particulars of the circumstances—seemed to be receptive.

Some respondents identified the unique liminal state in which they found themselves, in this way becoming creative and active participants in what George Yúdice has referred to as the dynamics of a “transformative praxis” inherent to the *testimonio* genre within a post-modern setting.

A momentous event such as that of 9/11 es un arrebataamiento con la fuerza de un hacha. [Carlos] Castaneda’s Don Juan would call such times the day the world stopped. I interpret the world stopping as one in which we experience a radical shift in perception, otra forma de ver. Afterwards we view the world differently—the world as we know it “ends”. This puts us in *nepantla* [a psychological, liminal, space between the way things had been and an unknown future] [and] urges us to respond with creative expression and action; it pushes us into engaging the spirit. It directs us to confront our social sickness with new tools and practices I call spiritual activism and, eventually, to a transformation resulting in the healing of our wounds. (Gloria Anzaldúa)

Participants responded spontaneously to the call for a reply specifically as Latin@s:

As a Latina I believe my angst and self-examination in being multicultural are important experiences that allow me to empathize and relate to the pain and suffering caused by random discrimination. I also believe that, as a U.S. Latina, I have seen both sides of the coin, felt both sides of pain, and perhaps from that hope will arise from the ashes. (Catherine Herrera)

Those participating also responded to the multiple resonances of *testimonio*, a genre of great malleability, a counterdiscursive strategy from the margins, a continual bordercrossing between historical, ethnographic and literary fields, enabling the “subaltern” to “speak”.

I have been reading comic strips and articles on how African Americans and U.S. Latinas/os have taken backseat now as targets of racial hatred to people of Middle Eastern descent living in the U.S. I hear that, and read it, and wonder if that will be a lesson, will teach many of us how racialization is an historical process, to see it in process and resist its rhetoric of division. I am sad that while I saw (and see) people coming together as “Americans,” I did not (and still do not) see enough discussion on race in America... one of the

powerful lessons that we can learn from 9/11. The lesson of whiteness, whiteness—that is— as an historical structure of oppression and category of privilege, is that hierarchies are developed and privilege gained by defining what is “American” against what is “other” ...foreign, wild, not to be trusted, above all to be feared. (Demian Pritchard, literature professor who names herself “a Latina of mixed heritage”.)

One of the main purposes of this project was to gather in one volume several Latin@ voices of both genders, some well-known, others not, implicitly addressing issues of visibility and erasure as well as multivocality within the specificity of an event of global repercussions such as 9/11/01.

Qué triste que ahora sí se nota nuestra presencia por todas partes. Digo triste, porque nos miran con sospecha. Al menos aquellos de nosotros que puedan confundirse con gentes mediterráneas y del Medio Oriente. Y que irónico: resulta que antes queríamos que se nos viera, no ser invisibles, sobresalir. Y ahora a lo mejor queremos volver a nuestra invisibilidad, que no nos noten para que no sospechen, para que no nos confundan.... As the twenty-first century unfolds and the U.S. becomes more and more brown in demographic profile, are we Latinas and Latinos finally going to make a dignified appearance on the public screen? We are there already as singers and

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entertainers, but those are exotic celebrities. Where are we pictured, the Latino/a rank and file, as just regular people who belong anywhere because they are everywhere? (Eliana Rivero, Cuban-Chicana writer and professor.)

People from diverse fields responded: writers, poets, artists, performance artists, students, teachers and professors, architects, government workers, accountants and many others.

My job as an artist is to bear witness, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events, and how we can repair el daño. (Gloria Anzaldúa)

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La anécdota cotidiana, en mi opinión, desencadenó un sentido de “comunidad” en este país enorme, donde la gente vive muy aislada la una de la otra. Pero más allá de este sentido de conexión y solidaridad humanas, los profesionales de las universidades y colleges en los E.U. percibimos en esta tragedia también una oportunidad para la reflexión académica. Los estudiantes mismos estaban demandando de nosotros —profesores extranjeros— una explicación válida para entender porque alguien en —otras culturas— puede “odiar tanto” a los E.U. y perpetrar semejante atrocidad. (Hilda Chacón)

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...The first students to express personal agony were my students of color. Coincidence? (Roselyn Costantino, Italian-Mexican-American.)

The call for responses for these *testimonios* was done through cyberspace, a space that, even though it has been appropriated by hegemonic structures, also offers an alternative where resistant transborder discourses may participate and be heard (an example of this would be the Chiapas-based *neo-zapatista* movement). The aim became to document, within the specificity of a post-9/11/01 context, a range of perspectives and positionalities focused on what has recently been termed “latinidades”.²

It is true, many things are now different but many things that we as Latinos/Hispanics hold dear to us, will help all of us as a nation overcome present challenges. With nuestras familias, nuestra fe, y nuestras comunidades, we can work together and strive for peace within each of us, our families, our country, and our world. (George Núñez, Red Cross Rescue team.)

Humor and satire are also given expression:

Given the current atmosphere in the U.S. of overwhelming fear and suspicion....[we] would like to humbly suggest the following performative options: ...In order to avoid misled racist attacks, all Arab-Americans should wear a mariachi hat and a Mexican sarape when going out in public. All Arab-looking Latinos and South Asians should follow suit. (Guillermo Gómez-

Peña and Elaine Katzenberger, performance artist and editor.)

The five main questions sent via internet (focusing on personal and collective reactions vis à vis 9/11/01, changes observed, issues of racism, ethnicity, class and gender linked to the events and associated to self-identification as a Latin@, to globalization, violence, peace, healing processes, and perspectives on Mexico-U.S. border issues), became touchstones for each personal response. These comprised a wide range of creative discursive and literary genres, from the epistolary (or, should we say, cyber-epistolary) to poetry, editorial pieces, post-modern collages and ethnographic-autobiographic writings.

Although our small [editorial] staff spent a good deal of time after September 11 feeling as though our work was somewhat trivial...I now believe exactly the opposite. The need to celebrate the power of the written word, the intellectual freedom we hold dear, and the ability of literature to transport us is stronger than ever. (Kathleen Alcalá, Chicana-Latina writer.)

This way of documenting and studying multiple identities implicit in these “latinidades” became a unique means of taking a glimpse at what we could call a historical moment of rupture, of what could be called a pre- and a post-11 September 2001 discursivity vis-à-vis identity markings and (re)writings.

...We must be highly conscious of how we are implicit/complicit with the matrix of power in which we live. (Amelia María Montes, Chicana.)

Inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, subjectivity/otherness dichotomies, together with the multiplicity of identity bordercrossings, are visibly reconsidered/reconstructed, acquire greater complexities, are problematized, (re)negotiated and reconfigured in a variety of ways. The binary concepts of “us” vs. “them” were inserted into other problematized spaces, that questioned “us” and U.S. (United States) all within a visible rupture of the “we” of American citizenry, all of which demanded a critical positioning from the “latinidades” in a constant problematizing mode!

We talked about how we felt both included and excluded in what was happening... we had to decide, do we join in and fly the U.S. flag or not. We have been very critical of the way our country discriminates and excludes Raza immigrants and all Latinos, but at the same time as Americans, we had been attacked. As my other comadre put it, our link with the [thousands of] people killed is our flag. It is a strange position to find myself in as a Chicana: pulled in by a sense of belonging to this disaster, yet marginalized as a woman of color in normalcy. (Teresa Carrillo, Chicana professor.)

The American people, that is the general public, will not protest much; they are protecting their way of life. Is their way of life our way of life? (Norma Alarcón, Chicana critic and theorist.)

In several *testimonios* the “we” entails a sense of responsibility:

It is for our collective soul as a nation that I weep. Will we never learn? We who have the power, who have the means to

show the world how to achieve justice without violence. When will we learn to be strong in our goodness and not with our might? (Norma Cantú, Chicana writer and professor.)

In others, a “they” is made the subject:

The disappeared, here and everywhere, past and present, must not be forgotten. Can this country see these other faces? Can they hear these other names? Will they ever understand that history is not just September 11, 2001 and that to know this does not diminish September 11, 2001 in any way? (Inés Hernández-Ávila)

These *testimonios* were sent in English and in Spanish, as well as bilingually and interlingually (that is, using code-switching as a linguistic-cultural marker).

We will never forget.
The day the twin towers
que querían alcanzar el cielo
collapsed like sand castles.

Nunca nos olvidaremos.

The day the sun
se cubrió los ojos
and asked the moon
to embrace a City in pain and grief.

In New York City,
bigger than reality,

la cuna y tumba de tantos soñadores,
who mistook a terrorist attack
por una película de horror
hollywoodense,
the sky was coming down:

It's like a movie!
It's like a nightmare!
It could not happen here!
Where was it supposed to happen?
En una tierra extranjera
miles de millas away
from the American Way of Life?

(Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, Latino Puer-
torican Spanish language professor.)

Even issues of migration were re-
positioned in interesting ways:

If you look carefully at the ones who jumped desperately in panic to their deaths, they were the ones who had been there for the night shift, working perhaps up to eight hours, cleaning those two buildings. They were still wearing their work clothes. They weren't office workers. I'm sure that the majority of them were janitors. They were lost birds who had at one time crossed the border between the United States and Mexico. But now they were entering the jaws of death, flying without wings, unable to return to the place from where they had come. They could never be migratory birds in this country, only swallows who had flown their final flight. (Javier Campos, Chilean writer living in the U.S.)

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These *testimonios* also make references to Vietnam, Hiroshima, the Mexico-U.S. border, the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, the coup in Chile in 1973 and other historical events and tragedies.

The resemblance I am evoking goes well beyond a facile and superficial comparison—for instance—that both in Chile in 1973 and in the States today, terror descended from the sky to destroy the symbols of national identity, the Palace of the Presidents in Santiago, the icons of financial and military power in New York and Washington. No, what I recognize is something deeper, a parallel suffering, a similar pain, a commensurate disorientation echoing what we lived through in Chile as of that September 11. Its most extraordinary incarnation—I still cannot believe what I am witnessing—is that on the screen I see hundreds of relatives wandering the streets of New York, clutching the photos of their sons, fathers, wives, lovers, daughters, begging for information, asking if they are alive or dead, the whole United States forced to look into the abyss of what it means to be *desaparecido*, with no certainty or funeral possible for those beloved men and women who are missing. (Ariel Dorfman, Chilean writer living in the U.S.)

And while some talk of falling bodies and of the fall of the Twin Towers, others observe how discourses followed suit:

Las torres caen al mismo tiempo que se desploma esa capacidad enunciativa triunfalista de los medios de no llamar nunca a las cosas por su nombre o de no referirse nunca al mundo mirándolo desde la otra orilla. (Gustavo Geirola)

We might conclude by saying that it may well be within discursive spaces created by “latinidades” in the U.S. where existing yet often not visible perspectives on post- 9/11/01 are available. Perspectives revealing the capacity to maintain a humanized balance between a feeling life and a political stance, what is ephemeral and what is longer-lasting, what is under erasure and what is recovered, all within polyphonic transborder realities of the “global citizenship” Renato Rosaldo refers to.

It is imperative we see beyond what divides us to what connects us. The survival of the human species depends on each one of us connecting to our “vecinos” (neighbors), whether they live across the street, across national borders or across oceans. A tragedy of this magnitude can prompt us to think not in terms of “my country” or “your country” but “our countries,” “our planet”. (Gloria Anzaldúa)

What is lost and recovered, what is forgotten and remembered, why and at what different levels: all this becomes paramount two years after the

fall of the Twin Towers, now the post-9/11/01 era has settled in with its many surprises and tendency towards complacency, the illusory return to “normalcy”, which these *testimonios* may participate in questioning at a deeper level.

Words are power, and *we* can invoke their power to effect change, to bring about justice with peace....I still hold in my heart the hope that [those] who died have not died in vain and that we can learn the lesson of their sacrifice. (Norma Cantú)

Gloria Anzaldúa mentions that “What we do now counts even more than the frightening event, close call, shock, violation or loss we experienced,” and adds a cryptic message that Clara Lomas and myself, as editors of *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra: Testimonios de Latin@s in the U.S. (11 de septiembre 2001–11 de marzo 2002)* have found central to our post 9/11/01 work: “May we do work that matters.” **MM**

NOTES

¹ In the introductory piece to *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra: Testimonios de Latin@s in the U.S. Through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre 2001-11 de marzo de 2002)*, currently at press, published by CISAN, UNAM, Mexico City, Clara Lomas and I refer to the importance of remembering while using the term 9/11 that 11 September, 1973 in Chile was also a tragic date, which is why we use the full date (11 September 2001 or 9/11/01) when referring to the events surrounding the fall of the Twin Towers in New York. [All quotes are from e-mails sent to the aforementioned authors. Editor’s Note.]

² See *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).