

LIVING THEORY, THEORIZING LIVES, CREATING SOLIDARITY

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Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios. By Latina Feminist Group. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. 396 pages. \$79.95 (cloth). \$22.95 (paper).

Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader. Edited by Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aída Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, and Patricia Zavella. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 403 pages. \$89.95 (cloth). \$25.95 (paper).

The two volumes discussed here, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* and *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, both contribute to the expanding field of Latina feminist scholarship through furthering and supporting a heterogeneous approach that includes theoretical and personal writing. The commonality in both works is counterwriting: each author writes counter to the dominant, academic discourse in an attempt to reflect the heterogeneity of the Latina academic community. The message is supported by a particular, textual format (testimonio or essay/response). In other words, the relationship between form and content gives the reader an insight as to how Latina scholarship is produced.

The publication by the Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live*, can be described as a multicultural text that uses the trope of testimonio to represent the authors' experiences within the power dynamics of their particular communities, families, and the academe. The book is divided into four sections, which reflect different aspects of life, including childhood ("Genealogies of Empowerment"), the academe ("Alchemies of Erasure"), experiences of abuse ("The Body Re/Members"), and intimacy ("Passion, Desires, and Celebrations"). The varied

genres of poetry, prose, childhood snapshots, and journal entries help the authors to share their testimonios. Through the foregrounding of human lives, the reader experiences these stories on a human level.

The enormity of the emotional weight, felt merely through reading about the discriminatory, prejudicial, and abusive treatment that was commonplace in the authors' lives, is channeled into a political objective. The fact that the writers inhabit the so-called first world and enjoy a standard of living in accordance to their rank as professors obviously differentiates them from the traditional testimonial giver. However, these authors call attention to their position in the academe not to compare their lives to the lives of those in Latin America but rather to compare their experiences as Latina professors within higher education in the United States—the place where these professors take a crucial stand. Like all testimonial givers, they are heavily invested in the broader issues that stretch beyond the text, beyond the reader, and into the society via the institution known as the University.

Without a doubt, the use of testimonio effects an overtly political method of representation. Testimonio is both a narrative form and a call for change. It has been associated with Latin American subjects who tell their personal histories to academics, journalists, or writers in an attempt to bring worldwide attention to their fight for human rights within their geographical region. These mediators then transcribe the story into a printed text that can be circulated widely, whereby it can reach the eyes and ears of those with the power to bring change to the lives of those suffering from blatant human rights abuses.

In the case of *Telling to Live*, the testimonial genre is appropriated from the authors' own research. Interestingly, the process is uniquely adapted; indeed, the process undertaken to write this text does not include a mediator as in a

typical testimonio. And rather than writing as representatives from the same community, these authors write as individuals from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, although historically, Latinas are mistakenly viewed as members of *one* culture within the academe and society.

Constantly aware that society and the university tend to view Latinas as one homogenous group, these academics wished to resist this misconception that they share a common Latina identity. Initially, they had to release their own unrealistic, false, and stereotypical preconceptions of the “others” within the Latina Feminist Group. To achieve this aim, the group members had to unlearn and erase their prejudices about their fellow members’ identities, which legitimized the group’s unique theoretical and political approach to identity politics. Therefore, developing the framework that would reflect differences within their outwardly homogenous (and inwardly heterogeneous) group became the priority. How should they reject those labels whose connotations result in an oppressive environment of powerful privilege? What type of framework could achieve their aims?

Imperative to the success of the project was the creation of a discursive space in which all “racial-ethnic groups and identity markers—sexuality, race, gender, age, ethnicity, national origins, class, etc.—carry equal force” (10). By reclaiming the testimonio genre in *Telling to Live*, these academics wish to faithfully represent their individual experiences and also portray a sense of urgency—many of the stories involve sexual harassment, rape, and verbal abuse. Furthermore, the decision to appropriate the testimonial approach allows the Latinas to politically empower their stories. The text and its individual contributors confront and contest the “institutional cultures that reproduce hegemonic relations of power” (8). Also, the adoption of a first-person narrative successfully removes distance between the narrator and the implied reader. In

this format of oral discourse, the reader feels more like a listener, perhaps a friend sharing a private talk. Moreover, this strategy permits the authors to be both subjects and transcribers of their own experiences. The process of recording their oral testimonios and then transcribing them into written essays allows for the careful construction of identity, with the objective of educating about the variety of Latina identities while calling for urgent social change toward a supportive, accepting, open, informed, and loving society. *Telling to Live* breaks the silence of these speaking subjects to gain freedom from oppression and to complicate their own as well as their readers' understandings of Latina identity.

The foremost ingredient in attaining validation of all identity markers among the participating academics was a framework based on respect for all. To unlearn and relearn, the members began to listen to one another's life stories. Testimonio allowed them to accept one another and to unlearn oppressive labels as well.

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. (11)

Even though each academic recognizes that she has a uniquely constructed identity, breaking down preconceived notions about the other participants to dismantle any connotations that may have been assigned inadvertently was still a necessity. By stripping away the layers of inaccurate labels, each individual began to appreciate her own self and the others in the group, thereby creating the necessary environment of respect that granted them permission to be simultaneously unique and Latina.

However, through listening and reflecting on difference, “an emerging pattern of systemic violence and cultural ideologies that continually repositioned us at the margins, despite relative privilege” became apparent (12). Clearly, political violence was taking place upon entire communities despite what the writers themselves perceived as differences in nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. As a result, these Latinas no longer view their lives as unique experiences. Testimonio creates a space whereby these women become the subjects of their studies, allowing for the validation not only of the subaltern as subject but also for the subjugated Latina feminist academic. The realization that the group’s members shared the experience of oppression in daily life ultimately created a strong community. Together, through the act of sharing painful memories, the authors could move toward a place of healing. And together they became the powerful community of Latina Feminists, strong in their ability to combat the forces that had attempted to erase, belittle, and discourage their dreams.

One testimonio shares a story about the academy’s attempts to control, define, and co-opt the author into conforming to the unilateral, totalizing, one-size-fits-all definition of Latinas. Appropriately titled “Welcome to the Ivory Tower,” the chapter recounts the trajectory of an anonymous Latina from graduate school to obtaining an assistant professor position. The essay’s title and its tone are both ironic, as the author most certainly did not feel welcomed into the ivory tower but instead experienced prejudice, double standards, sexual harassment, and questionable conduct by mentors, professors, and hiring committees.

In graduate school, for example, the author was told point-blank when she was first introduced to her mentor, “I don’t like people like you who come from ethnic studies” (219). Early in her studies she was labeled a “troublemaker”

because she did not simply regurgitate the words of her professors' favorite theoreticians. When she became pregnant, there was a strong possibility that her fellowship would be taken away, in spite of the fact that no male graduate student had ever lost his fellowship when his wife became pregnant. A most surprising anecdote described the student's visit to a female professor's office to ask for guidance on her dissertation; as she took her leave, the professor spanked her on her way out of the office. Shocked by her professor's unprofessional demeanor and behavior, the student decided to return to her male advisor, who had no direct interest in her research on Chicano literature. When she met with this advisor one last time to hand in her dissertation, he remarked, "You know, you really became a *Chacabna* while writing your dissertation" (221, emphasis in original). At this point in the testimonio, the reader clearly hears the ironic tone when the author silently remarks, "You have absolutely no idea who I am, do you?" (221). This complicity brings the reader close to the narrator, as the reader empathizes with and experiences shock at the mistreatment of Latinas that is apparently so commonplace in academia.

Finally, hiring committees prove to be as troublesome and perplexing as graduate school for this particular Latina. First, there was the committee that would have required her to become the chair of the department while still at the rank of assistant professor—in other words, negating all possibility for tenure. It was during this interview that she was also subjected to sexual harassment. At another university she was grilled by the hiring committee, who reduced her to tears by refusing to let her defend her work, accusing her of arrogance since she did not cite authorities they considered to be important. Much later, she learned that the committee deliberately tried to sabotage her interest in their university, since they wished to hire the second candidate (a friend of the chair, as well as the chair's best friend's lover). Aware that there had to be issues beyond her control, she refused to give up and took the job. Years later, she reflects on how she has

managed to succeed as a Latina, as a feminist, and as an academic: “Knowing where you come from is key to maintaining your balance in the face of institutional violence, along with nurturing alternative venues of support” (223). Indeed, the Latina Feminist project comes out of the urgent need for personal and institutional support for Latina academics who, since they belong to an educated elite, frequently experience ostracism by their own ethnic communities, who view them as privileged and no longer authentic. Furthermore, these Latinas do not receive the benefits of complete acceptance (or citizenship) within academia due to perceived ethnic, racial, or cultural differences.

As I have shown, a marked distinction between the typical testimonio and the stories in *Telling to Live* resides in the role of the transcriber, who does not customarily belong to the collective group being represented. Here, each Latina academic wished to inscribe herself into history in her own words, and thus transcriber and subject are one and the same. In this way, *Telling to Live* inverts the original testimonio by removing what literary critics consider an inevitable ideological manipulation that occurs when the oral words of the speaker are transcribed into print. Normally, the reader does not have access to the original, or for that matter “the official,” testimonios that were recorded on tape. Yet to the reader who questions the credibility of any particular version, it seems that the Latina Feminist Group has attempted to remove the issue of whether the transcriber or the speaker is credible; there is no filter between what was experienced and what is transcribed, nothing mediated through another individual’s ideology. By placing the power within the hands of the “speaking subject,” the academics have asserted their authority to self-represent, thereby minimizing the risk of inaccurate representations that would undermine one of the group’s objectives—to divulge precise descriptions of the experiences that surround Latina academics and influence how each comprehends her own identity as well as her colleagues’ unique identities as Latinas. The resulting

textual space challenges both the opinions and labels, held by members of the group and by outsiders, that ultimately devalue the individuals.

Testimonio has allowed the academics of *Telling to Live* to achieve their multilateral objectives, which include understanding one another's unique identities, bringing attention to their individual and collective suffering as a step toward self-healing, and, most important, demonstrating how to form community around the socially just aims of combating prejudice while educating and arming new generations against its pervasiveness.

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Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader was published only two years after *Telling to Live*. The two works share similar aims and intentions in that they both create Chicana/Latina feminist theory through the fundamental act of sharing personal experiences, valuing them, and responding to them both critically and contemplatively. This publication is an outgrowth of extensive collaborations among the members of the Chicana Feminisms Research Cluster, formed in 1996, at the Chicano/Latino Research Center (CLRC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Originally eight academics were invited to a colloquium in 1997. Those invited were Elba Sánchez, Norma E. Cantú, Beatriz Pesquera, Carla Trujillo, Patricia Zavella, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and Norma Alarcón. Each of these women then submitted essays and names for possible respondents, who were chosen to “explore Chicana feminist thought and the way it is articulated” (xii). Particularly, the editors wished to emphasize the importance of making dialogue explicit, with the intention of extending it in a variety of directions, feminist and nonfeminist.

Like the Latina Feminist Group, whose members shared and transcribed their own testimonios to maintain authority over how their lives were represented (and of course to avoid being portrayed “inauthentically”), the Chicana Feminisms Research Cluster participants were also determined to avoid essentialisms. To achieve this aim, the editors imagined an interdisciplinary approach to their work. There are eleven original essays written individually by members of the group; a second essay responds to, critiques, or expands on the original one. Topics include reflections on one’s own writing process, rancheras, domesticana artistic production, sexuality, the academe, and early Chicana feminists, as well as literary, anthropological, and historical works that emphasize Chicana identity within the complex overlapping of class, sexual orientation, language, region, and age. The variety of mixed genres, in both the original essays and in the response essays, include critical analysis, observations, suggestions, interviews, letters, visual art, and poetry. Also, I should point out that among the respondents there are male authors, which indicates a move toward a nonessentialist feminist practice.

One of the most important elements is the multidisciplinary framework that successfully captures “the process of debate and dialogue that has always been integral to Chicana feminist theory and praxis” (xii). This process has been instrumental “to illustrate how Chicana feminists have instigated passionate responses—dialogue, disagreement, alternative formulations—with each other and from others” (xii). Inviting dialogue and fostering it furthers the legitimization of Chicana feminist theory as such. At present the academe does not fully accept these new theoretical approaches as legitimate. The authors were determined to focus on theory in *Chicana Feminisms* primarily to attempt to reach a wider audience, simply to be heard. In general, the authors are tired of being disparaged by hegemonic academic discourse.

However, by privileging personal experience within the realm of theory, the Chicana academics fear that they will continue to be pushed aside. Ruth Behar sums up her fears in her response to Cantú's essay "The Writing of *Cantícula*." Behar considers the following:

But I worry: As genre outlaws, does our writing become so unclassifiable that it gets lost in the cracks of all those forms we are meshing together? Does its *ni aquí ni allá* quality render it too amorphous to make a mark in the very fields of anthropology, criticism, and fiction writing that we wish both to be accepted by and, at the same time, transform? Will our writing be "too soft" for the academy and "too hard" for our readers outside, most especially for members of our own Latino communities? (111)

For an outside reader with no background knowledge about "token hires" or the pejorative treatment so common toward Chicanas (and Latinas) in the academe, it becomes clear that both Behar's question and the editors' decision to highlight "the process of debate and dialogue" point to a need to underscore the intellectual, academic rigor that forms the dialectic between authors and respondents. It is as if the editors understood the need to be on the defensive even before their book reached the hands of prospective critics. Although such a project should be envisioned as a worthy academic endeavor, too often, sadly, the academic community does not value the contributions of Latina feminists. Rather, their work is regarded as inferior or "less than" by their fellow colleagues who most likely are not labeled as "token hires" by the university.

The need to be as transparent as possible, to remove the stereotypes and the essentialisms surrounding Chicana theory, is based on the authors' stance as creators who continue to shape and define the discourse of the other. Another name is resistance literature. Works such as *Telling to Live* and *Chicana Feminisms*

inscribe themselves into history and remind scholars of the presence of Chicanas and Latinas. These texts are absolutely necessary because of mainstream academe's marginalization of Chicana/Latina theory and feminisms. Moreover, personal experiences must be historicized. This idea is present in Renato Rosaldo's response to Elba Rosario Sánchez's essay, a personal letter that questions Sánchez's idealized and nostalgic view of her childhood in Mexico. Rosaldo points out that the role of patriarchy would most certainly have affected her view of herself if she had stayed in Mexico into adulthood. By emphasizing that role as one more element with which to contend, Rosaldo's response essay underlines the need to historicize personal experiences, pointing to all areas that influence one's identity, *negatively and positively*.

Chicanas counterwrite as much as they write. That is to say, each essay argues certain points, yet at the same time the essay renegotiates the collective idea(l) of hegemonic discourse. Chicana feminists reject not only patriarchy but French and Anglo feminism. They attempt to create their own space, what Emma Pérez calls "third space feminism." As women of color, Chicanas choose to write and self-theorize rather than accept another's identity as their own. Throughout *Chicana Feminisms* several narrative strategies and tropes are used to achieve this aim. Furthermore, authors include code switching to privilege their bilingual readers. Historical documents are presented to provide evidence that women have historically been actively involved in political struggles. And finally, one of the most prevalent techniques is creating theory through narrative. Fundamentally, *Chicana Feminisms* supports "women's humanity, agency and worth" (2).

Politically, the authors from both *Telling to Live* and *Chicana Feminisms* engage in a dialogue that moves away from binary limitations to a more inclusive space, reflected by such terms as *latinidades*, Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness,

Pérez's third space feminism, and Alarcón's *familia* from scratch. Heterogeneity is the goal. In an effort to define themselves, these authors are simultaneously "decolonizing literary space" (114). These works add and speak to the wealth of current writings within Latina literary theory and Chicana feminism. Both volumes contribute to the decentering of the canon and of Western European privilege. They are fundamentally multicultural and counterhegemonic, ever widening the boundaries that limit history, imagination, and self-expression. They are part of the new hybrid genres being explored that allow films, novels, poetry, music, and testimonio to share the same space, with the underlying goal of representing the heterogeneous Latina experience.

Other reviewers of *Telling to Live* and *Chicana Feminisms* have emphasized the importance of celebrating sisterhood in both the political and the personal realms. Attention has been drawn to the oppression that is rampant throughout the academe as well as in everyday life for many Latina artists, authors, and academics. This review advances a particularly Chicana/Latina analysis that emphasizes the complex relationships among scholarship, creative works, and actual life events, a complexity crucial to advancing Chicana/Latina feminism.