

Reviews



**One Wound for Another-Una herida por otra
Testimonios de latin@s in the U.S. through Cyberspace
(11 de septiembre de 2001-11 de marzo de 2002)**

One Wound for Another: Testimonies of Latin@s in the U.S. through Cyberspace (September 11, 2001-March 11, 2002)

Claire Joysmith and Clara Lomas

CISAN/Colorado College/Whittier College

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SO THEY WON'T JUST BE BLOWN BY THE WIND

One Wound for Another-Una herida por otra: testimonios de latin@s in the U.S. through Cyberspace (11 de septiembre de 2001-11 de marzo de 2002) is a unique collection of writings. In spring 2002, the editors Claire Joysmith and Clara Lomas sent out an e-mail request to friends and acquaintances asking for contributions expressing their respondents' thoughts, experiences, sensations and emotions after September 11, 2001. Their stated purpose was to document these views, experiences and emotions in the form of *testimonios*, to be shared with Mexican/U.S. transnational audiences and *para que no se lo lleve el viento* (so they won't just be blown away by the wind). They posed five specific questions pertaining to immediate reactions, personal political or spiritual changes, perspectives on various issues such as peace, war, the media, and the future impact on Mexico-U.S. relations, but also urged that people respond any way they wished.

While several contributors followed the outline of topics and issues as provided by the editors most responded more freely and indirectly to the queries raised. Contributions vary in length from less than a printed page to several pages and range in form from extracts of essays published in newspapers or maga-

zines and poetry to less formal, more personal e-mail replies to the editors or forwarding of those sent to third persons in the aftermath of the events. As Claire and Clara point out, "The wide array of creative expressions was, in itself, indicative of the multiplicity of voices and perspectives."

Not surprisingly, a majority of the contributors are cultural workers, many of them university professors, and some of them are quite well known; others are simply Latinas/os (or spouses or children of Latinas/os) living in the U.S. or Mexico, who are nonetheless unique individuals trying to assimilate and explain to themselves and those around them what happened on 9/11: how? why? and what will the consequences be?

The book begins with a prologue by Mexican author Elena Poniatowska in which, among other things, she calls attention to the ambiguous and contradictory feelings that many Latinas/os and Latin Americans have toward the U.S. Further on she comments, "Curiously enough, the participants do not focus too much on condemning the terrorists," adding, "To condemn terrorism in every country and under any circumstance would be, for me, one of the main premises." Poniatowska also underlines the fact that "The personal is

political; therefore, even though the *testimonios* Clara Lomas and Claire Joysmith have compiled—mainly from intellectual and academic spheres—may be emotional or visceral, their context is nevertheless political.”

As the editors state, “It soon became evident that contestatory voices within the U.S. were being labeled anti-American or simply erased,” and hence their desire to “make these differing alternative views available to a broader Mexican audience—and by extension to a *las Américas* readership—and to those in the U.S. who were dealing with patriotic monolithic discourses through mainstream news media.” They explain to their readers that it was “Our personal queries, our need to participate in a multiple healing process, in addition to our academic concerns regarding racialized constructs of subjective *latinidad*, and our mutual interest in working on exchanging/comparing the varying manifestations of our different yet similar cultural backgrounds, [that] led us to initiate this project.”

Regarding the mechanism chosen to carry out their endeavor Joysmith and Lomas point out, “As articulated by Donna Haraway, cyberspace has become an indispensable medium for the new age of globalization to economically and culturally engulf the world and stifle the potential for change. She further argues, along with others, that paradoxically enough, cyberspace has become a spatial site for global exchange of alternative marginal ideas and perspectives from some of those most traumatically affected by globalization.” In the particular case of *testimonios* from Latinas/os during the aftermath of 9/11, “Cyberspace became a site from which these subjects/agents, facing computers, addressed and reached out to an unknown transnational/transborder audience to tell their own stories from their various geographical vantage points within the U.S.”

The result of this process is an engaging, thought-provoking and often heartrending collection of texts that will no doubt confront readers with their own preconceived notions of identity, race, racialized identity, racialized identity politics, “them”, “us”, the U.S., etc. The fact that the contributors are all somehow identified as or identified with Latinas/os may, to some extent, explain why, as Poniatowska

noted, they didn’t “focus too much on condemning the terrorists.” Perhaps they identified in some way with the terrorists—having themselves experienced, or having relatives, or knowing people in their countries of origin who have suffered from some sort of aggression perpetrated or aided by U.S. interests—or perhaps they feared being identified with the terrorists because of phenotypes or physical characteristics. As Sandra Cisneros wrote in her *testimonio*, “When I look in the mirror I look more like Osama Bin Laden than I do Bush. Osama looks like my tío Nacho. The Afghans look like my brothers. They are my brothers.”

One contributor from Arizona told of how her daughter’s car was vandalized, most likely because of her physical appearance, as she explains how one of the police officers who arrived on the scene said “Pardon me, miss, but I have to ask. Are you Arabic?” In her text she asks, “Has anyone noticed how this is happening only to people of color, whether they be Latinos or Indians or Arabs or Syrians, either Mediterranean looking or with indigenous features?” She goes on to relate, “I don’t remember any white people being harassed after terrorist acts committed by other whites. It’s the same old question of ‘otherness’ of not belonging—the question that Latinos get asked all the time: ‘Where are you from?’ As if we didn’t belong. Reminds me of all the people in this country who still don’t know (and don’t care) that Puerto Ricans are citizens by birth.” Which according to the Constitution is also the case for all those of Latino descent, or any other origin, who are born anywhere in the United States.

Perhaps to many the Bush administration’s response seemed just as horrible as the events of 9/11. Catherine Herrera wrote, “How beautiful our world could have been if instead of the typical response, an alternative, peaceful solution had been sought first. Now instead, thousands and thousands of lives have been disrupted. What about all the refugees that have fled Afghanistan? Who will cry for them in a month as the weather turns gloomy, who will call for justice on their behalf?” She also expressed other concerns: “Politically, my views have changed, although not just as a result of the bombings, but more than anything as a result of the response. I am fearful of

the stripping of civil liberties I had believed were intrinsic to being a U.S. citizen, and worry how these changes, accepted in a time of panic and fear, will play out in the future.”

Colombian-born poet Antonieta Villamil, who has lived in the U.S. for about two decades, responded with several poems, some in Spanish and some in English. She explains her utter stupefaction as she saw the images on television thinking, “Once again the terror. Once again.” She also explains how she felt compelled to reread the first poem she ever wrote in English and how she cried. She cried a lot. The poem is called “My Name is Pedro.” It begins, “I swim in the water of a sea more vicious than salt. I ride the waves of my deprived voice. I am an echo in the memory of the unremembered. The ones that swim and swim, no island near, no shore, no sand.” And some 20-some-odd lines later concludes with, “That grave of which nobody knows. The grave in your chest that is never visited. Without a date. Without an epitaph./ But remember, my name is Pedro./ Pedro is my name even though, / it is not I anymore.” At the end of the poem there are two lines that read, “Antonieta’s brother ‘died of disappearance.’ He is in the long list of people that disappear every day in Central and South American countries.”

One male contributor stated, “Intellectually, I am for peaceful resolutions and concerted agreements to nation[s] disagreements. But it was a unilateral act of war, therefore I support military action, regardless of the casualty (sic).” However he was the only one to explicitly express such retaliatory sentiments. Several others repeated a poster slogan from the New York City peace vigils that says, “An eye for an eye leaves us all blind.” On a lighter note, which nevertheless has serious implications about the hold Hollywood has on people’s thoughts and emotions, there were innumerable references to initial disbelief linked to the U.S. film industry: “For a moment I thought it was some sort of horrible film or movie preview [then] I realized it was life.” “At first I thought it was an advertisement for an upcoming horror movie.” Others felt the need to clarify “this is not a Hollywood movie” or “it seems like the script of a Hollywoodesque blockbuster.” Thus someone else felt compelled to raise the question, “I wonder what it’s like for the kids

who thrive on such images in the movies they watch, the video games they play. How real can it be for them? Is there a total disconnect between their video playland and the real, live NYC in THEIR real country, THEIR tranquil Pennsylvania. What are they feeling?”

As one woman confesses to watching the broadcasts for seven days straight, others expressed feelings of disgust at the endless reiteration and over-saturation offered by the media. Most references to mainstream media were in fact quite critical and many mentioned public broadcasting systems as preferred sources of information. Among the many other weighty issues he dealt with in his lengthy and thought-provoking contribution, George Yúdice points out, “Coverage of opposition to the war has not been part of network news’ agenda setting policies, perhaps a significant reason for such widespread support for the war. Yet opposition to war was quite palpable on the streets of New York almost immediately after the attack on the Twin Towers.”

The list of issues and questions raised by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, as dealt with by the contributors to this collection of *testimonios*, is endless, and it is far beyond our purpose to list them all here since our only intent is to whet the appetite of the book’s potential readers. However even the briefest of lists must by obligation mention the several references to another Tuesday, September 11. The most extensive of these was contributed by Ariel Dorfman. He wrote, “During the last twenty-eight years, Tuesday September 11 has been a date of mourning, for me and millions of others, ever since that day in 1973 when Chile lost its democracy in a military coup, that day when death irrevocably entered our lives and changed us forever. The differences and distances that separate the Chilean date from the American are, one must admit, considerable. The depraved terrorist attack against the most powerful nation on Earth has and will have consequences which affect all humanity....Whereas very few of the eight billion people alive today could remember or would be able to identify what happened in Chile.” As Dorfman concludes, “It is still not clear if the United States—a country formed in great measure by those who have themselves escaped vast catastrophes, famines, dictatorships, persecution—it is far from certain that

the men and women of this nation so full of hope and tolerance, will be able to feel that same empathy towards the other outcast members of our species; we will find out in the days and years to come if the new Americans forged in pain and resurrection are ready and open and willing to participate in the arduous process of repairing our shared, our damaged humanity. Creating all of us together, a world in which we need never again lament not one more, not even

one more terrifying September 11” Helping others to remember and providing them with new and different perspectives about such tragic events, as these *testimonios* do, may contribute in some small way to keeping such things from happening again.

Elaine Levine

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THE OUTLINES OF A COMPLEX WORLD

I would like to begin this review by highlighting the book's first good point: its clarity. Claire Joysmith and Clara Lomas push us to a dawn and a type of transparency after the horror of that Tuesday, after four years of political and emotional density. Claire and Clara clarify in the brightest sense of clarity: dissipating, taking away anything that obfuscates something's transparency, making something less thick or dense. Or, they carry out the function of shedding light, which I perceive as even more appropriate for the book in question: increasing the extension or the number of spaces or intervals in which something exists. Shedding light: increasing the extension by introducing intervals, that is, by making visible the forces that cause an argument *vis-à-vis* another. The space of the interval is what opens precisely between one dense vision and another which responds with equal thickness (I refer to the interval that opens up *vis-à-vis* two thick discourses: that of the blindness of the comments by many Americans, expressed in a whispered phrase, “Why do they hate us so much?” counterposed to the “They deserve it” of our rancorous Latin American world or the world as a whole).

The function of criticism is the production of intervals among thick visions. It propitiates understanding and the direction of intelligence and action away from revenge and hatred. The book makes this greater function of intelligence and emotion possible and its name underlines this: the exchange of one wound for another, of one pain for another, of one equivalence of abysses and thus, of understandings. The phrase,

“Your wound is equivalent to mine” is the transaction, the ultimate emotional and intellectual translation in a chain of the reparations and the compensation of hatred and revenge. What the clarity of the book propitiates is greater: the equivalence of different griefs, the interaction between opposing wounds.

Its achievement is greater because it contributes to a primordial function, that of criticism: disfiguring the easy enemy, the learned, organic enemy, and in this way sketching the outlines of a complex world, a world of the borders not only with the United States, but with different empires, that of the economy and globalization of the local and the national, but also of the desolation and poverty that produces terrorism as an empire of hard-won hatred, the empire of horror, of migrants who die without a name or a body, that of the war born of the harshest patriarchal construction, that of the hard fatherland, that of the fatherland that sees enemies in those who are dissidents or biologically, linguistically, racially or sexually different.

The book, then, functions as an extraordinary critical apparatus, as a border that creates intervals, spaces, making visible tensions that harden. It intervenes in languages to repair based on the concentration of testimonies that move any radicalness learned by hatred or revenge.

But *One Wound for Another*, like any border and like any criticism that works, not only separates and produces intervals, but also connects, propitiates the fraternizing of wetbacks with erudite language, of bridge with bridge.

The 59 intervals build stories that are the product of the wound of September 11, based on an intermediate position, criticism, but not Lettered criticism in the style of Rama, which increases the gaps and makes the environment denser, but the criticism that in addition to clarifying (its primary function), repairs and propitiates an indispensable intellectual act: the understanding that blurs the enemy, that is the understanding that propitiates the withering of the easily pinpointed scourge (I am not referring to that of the adversary who is the fruit of sacrificial pardon, but to that of the enemy as a result of a profound understanding of the concept as the only cause of patriotic, common, individual pain).

The inter-views, intervals of this book between the oral and the written, between the virtual and the real, between the American and the Mexican, between the Spanish and the English, between the brutal memory and reparation, enter(inter)-tain. The book fulfills a strange repairing function through purification; each interval, each inter-view, propitiates a sedimentation, like the particles in a liquid, each of the witnesses propitiates a fall, remembers a fall, not only of the bodies that forcefully and of necessity emerge in our minds, but of a curtain of a layer of fog produced by pain, patriotism against the adversary or indolence.

Claire and Clara not only translate, they interpret. That is to say, they make known the movements of the soul. They purify by posing the stories one after the other, like particles that clarify the water on falling.

Four years after the disaster of the towers, this book reintroduces, revives different indispensable polemics for understanding the mediation of a painful event on the screen (television was the medium that most articulated an opinion). The intervals presented in this book are articulated based on another medium that does not reinforce the function of the screen, which is to protect, but that managed to exhibit and connect: I am referring to the Internet screen, which made it possible to gather the testimonies that can compete with the overwhelming power of the larger screen. Between the oral and the written, a medium whose main virtue is velocity and the privilege of the voice over the body, the

Internet makes possible the voice's winged, out-of-body voyage. In this case the angry authors intervened and caused the bodies to have, in addition to a first and last name, color, ethnicity, nationality and language. The book very effectively opposes the function and efficiency of television and the Internet.

The authors of this dawning reformulate the question that it is indispensable to underline in our current dense political situation: what place does the screen have, what place the reconstruction of an atrocious event, on the border of the comprehensible? Screen, sheet that protects by directing the light far from our eyes. The book redirects the light to our eyes. The theme and its treatment occupy a central place, indispensable for any criticism whose function is dispersing easily labeled adversaries, enemies who blind our intellectual capacity. *One Wound for Another...* situates itself between two screens: the screen that protects and prohibits access and the one that redirects the light to our eyes, between television and the Internet.

Today, as we are experiencing the effects of the broadcast on a screen of all kinds of wars and invented enemies to be eliminated —not dispersed— from the Arab enemies in Iraq to the electoral enemies of the impeachment, the book fills us with hope, it turns rubble and density, smoke and pain into stories, into spaces, into intervals that allow us understanding, memory and something irreplaceable, the dignity brought with the exchange of one wound for another, one grief for another, neither better nor worse, a grief of equivalent dimensions to the one that doubles over our body and tenses our tongue. *One Wound for Another/Una herida por otra...*, one pain for another, a perfect measure of compassion, perfect harmony of living together, of the construction not only of reparations after grief, but of political and democratic living together with the dignity of equity.

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