

# Reviews

Speaking desde las heridas.

Cibertestimonios transfronterizos/Transborder

(September 11, 2001-March 11, 2007)

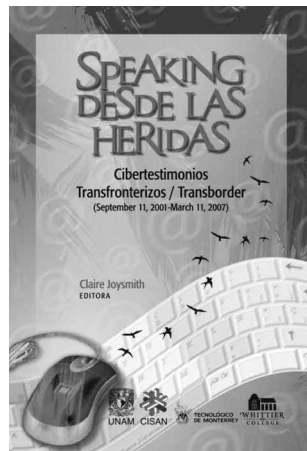
Claire Joysmith, editor

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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>



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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> Every *testimonio*, “the small voice of history,”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup>

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”<sup>9</sup> lost along the way. Just as men found out that the Earth is

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.”<sup>10</sup>

In another segment of the aforementioned film,<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup>

*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.”<sup>14</sup>

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

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> ■■■

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Or TV, as defined by Cristina Rivera-Garza in her prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 95.
- <sup>2</sup> *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)
- <sup>3</sup> Cristina Rivera-Garza, prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 95.
- <sup>4</sup> Claire Joysmith, introduction to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 27.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>6</sup> Title of John Beverley's prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 77.
- <sup>7</sup> 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.
- <sup>8</sup> María Antonia Oliver-Rotger, prologue to *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 99.
- <sup>9</sup> 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.
- <sup>10</sup> Guillermo Gómez Peña, “Border Hysteria,” *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 307.
- <sup>11</sup> By Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf.
- <sup>12</sup> Gómez Peña, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
- <sup>13</sup> Beverley, prologue, *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 81.
- <sup>14</sup> Patricia Gonzales, *Speaking desde las heridas*, p. 330.
- <sup>15</sup> *Speaking desde las heridas*, pp. 214-217.
- <sup>16</sup> 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.