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Reconfiguring Nation and Identity: U.S. Latina and Latin American Women's Oppositional Writings of the 1970's-1990's

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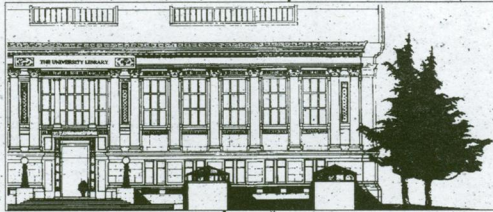
Publication Date

1995

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Laura Elisa Pérez

*Reconfiguring Nation and Identity:
U.S. Latina and Latin American Women's
Oppositional Writings of the 1970's-1990's*



University of California, Berkeley
1995

Morrison Library Inaugural Address Series

No. 2

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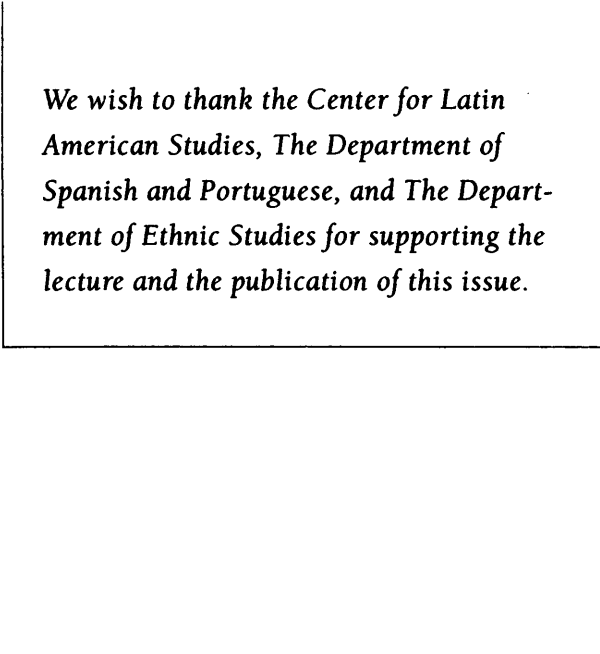
ISSN: 1079-2732

Published by:

The Doe Library
University of California
Berkeley, CA 94720-6000



We wish to thank the Center for Latin American Studies, The Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and The Department of Ethnic Studies for supporting the lecture and the publication of this issue.





PREFACE

The goal of this series is to foster scholarship on campus by providing new faculty members with the opportunity to share their research interest with their colleagues and students. We see the role of an academic library not only as a place where bibliographic materials are acquired, stored, and made accessible to the intellectual community, but also as an institution that is an active participant in the generation of knowledge.

New faculty members represent areas of scholarship the University wishes to develop or further strengthen. They are also among the best minds in their respective fields of specialization. The Morrison Library will provide an environment where the latest research trends and research questions in these areas can be presented and discussed.

Editorial Board

It is a real pleasure and privilege to welcome you this afternoon to the Inaugural Lecture Series of The Library, co-sponsored by the Department of Ethnic Studies, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and the Center for Latin American Studies. Our speaker today, Professor Laura Elisa Pérez, has an important role in the groups I have just named. This year she began an assistant professorship in a joint appointment with the Departments of Ethnic Studies and Spanish and Portuguese, and as a Latin Americanist (among other things) she is affiliated with the Center.


One of the reasons we were so pleased that Laura decided to join us at Berkeley is that she is doing the kind of research and teaching that many of us have said should be done, thinking through the relationship between U.S. Latino cultures and those of Latin America. In other words, she is beginning to redraw the disciplinary and cognitive maps of our fields and is working in Spanish and English, the bilingual expression that is a reality of both the US and of Latin America.

Laura was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago and received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1990 in Romance Languages and Literature. Since then she has held teaching positions at the University of Michigan and at Cal State Long Beach. During 1992-93 she held a Susan B. Anthony Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Rochester. She wrote her dissertation on Nicaraguan poetry and other cultural practices of the vanguard period, 1927-1936, and has since extended her work to a wide range of cultural issues in U.S. minority and Latin American literatures, performance and the visual arts, with particular emphasis on gender.

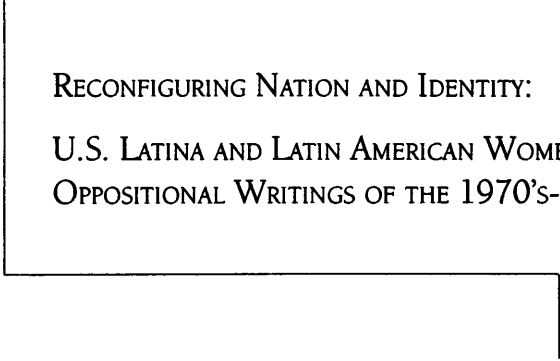
Laura herself is very eloquent in describing her research, but I will give you a list of the titles of some of her recent publications, which will give you an idea of her range and originality. In Fall 1994 she published, with Ali Behdad, "Reflections and Confessions on the 'Minority' and Immigrant ID Tour," another article, "For Love and Theory: An Ofrenda," which will be published this summer, and also forthcoming, "El desorden: Nationalism and Chicano/a Aesthetics" for the volume *Between Women and Nation*.


Her talk today, "Reconfiguring Nation and Identity: US Latina and Latin American Women's Oppositional Writing," is part of her current research project, "Negotiating Neocolonial Conditions: US Latina and Latin American Women's Writings, 1970s-1990s." Her research work has generated an extraordinary and positive response among students in her courses in both Spanish and Chicano Studies. It is a real pleasure to introduce Laura to you today.

Gwen Kirkpatrick, Chair
UCB, Department of Spanish and Portuguese



RECONFIGURING NATION AND IDENTITY:
U.S. LATINA AND LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S
OPPOSITIONAL WRITINGS OF THE 1970's-1990's






I would like to begin by welcoming all fractals of this and other related communities of learning and creativity, as well as any undocumented or aliens that might perchance be among us, and by offering my thanks to all of you present, to the Research Services & Collection Development Department, organizer of this second Morrison Library Inaugural Lecture, and in particular, to yet another translocal member of our community, Mr. Carlos Delgado, for inviting me to share with you my work in progress.

**Nation and University:
Who Owns Our Communities?**

I join you as a new member of this employed community at a time when the internal structures and the social institution of U.S. universities, including this one, are undergoing a process of transformation not unlike that of “the nation”—and by this word I refer to both the United States, and other forms of “nation,” here and elsewhere.¹ What is in question are the very identities of the nation and the university, not abstractly, but *in practice*. Are they indeed at one with their older discourses of identity as *communities* of shared interests, implicitly felt to be produced by *collective* imaginings and will? If “community” is understood as a mutually produced and mutually owned body of people, do nation and university constitute this type of community? Do we have ownership in the organizations we consider our communities, like the nation and the university? What are the relations of exchange between nation and globe, between university and nation? What constitute legitimate habitation and practice within nation, within university? By whom in the nation and the university are such definitions made, and in the interest of whom, and with what communal authorization?

Proposition 187, for example, recently passed by the California State Legislature, forces us to confront the growing interdependence of nation and university, for through it, the state government is in effect legislating the policies and politics of public institutions of education. What the state legislature is mandating through measures such as 187 is that the university redefine itself to more closely reflect the state's definition of community. Undocumented residents that in their labor, community service, cultural practices, and even identities are otherwise productive, if "illegal" members of the national community, are then also to be understood as illegal members of the community of higher learning that has until now defined the university. How are changes within our community to be negotiated? How is ownership in the community to be decided, from within or by forces outside and in some ways more powerful? State legislation like Proposition 187 contribute significantly to the redefinition of the mission and the identity of the university from that of a community engaged in the disinterested production of higher knowledge into that of a corporation whose business is the sale of knowledge to, and its production for, *only* select buyers.

Nevertheless, redefinition of the image and identity discourses of the nation and the university are occurring through ongoing civil rights struggles and through continued, legal *or* illegal, incorporation of migrants from all over the world. From *within* the university, we are experiencing an extremely productive redefinition of what constitutes knowledge and how our study of it should be currently structured. New methodologies are being created to suit such relatively new fields of knowledge as Ethnic, Women's, and Gay and




Lesbian Studies. These fields, in turn, have been productive in the construction of new epistemologies. New epistemologies have emerged that have productively displaced male-, European-, and heterosexual-centered claims to human *universality*. Just as peoples of different national origins, cultural habits, and social values are increasingly coexisting in cities throughout the world, and thus redefining national identities, so too do fields of study within the university based upon outdated conceptions of national language, literature, culture, history, and political and economic structures, increasingly relate to each other in interdependent and transformative new ways.

Both my university appointment and my areas of teaching and research, for example, reflect the transformation of disciplinary fields of study traditionally organized on the basis of national identities that we increasingly recognize as shifting. I am a joint, and sometimes productively disjointed appointment in the departments of Ethnic Studies and Spanish and Portuguese. Part of my work involves the study of “curiouser and curiouser” writings, as Alice in Wonderland would say, of women whose writings interrogate national discourses of identity, and their disciplinary effects on female, or “feminized” national subjects and whole groupings viewed as marginal, excessive, or dangerous by the state. Directly or indirectly, what these writings speak of is the failure of the state (nation-state) to produce *community* and protect it. These writings thus question the politics of personal identity, and its relations to the national. They are *oppositional* in their critique of the nation’s *state of power* as patriarchal, and in their exposure of its social containment and economic exploitation of an increasingly violenced and disempowered

national community. Produced from the 1970s through the 1990s, these writings bear witness to the increasing “disappearance” of members of the national community by the state, and thus to the crisis of the discourse of nationalism. What I would like to share with you today are thoughts about these writings, and thoughts provoked by them.

The Coupling of the Global and the National: Transnational Identities and Writings

It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the writings or the women who produced them as “U.S. Latina” or “Latin American” because the continental circulation and construction of both women and writings is transnationally constituted. That is, their identities and their writings are shaped in ways that complexly exceed national identities and geographical borders. Historically, both are produced through nationally- and globally- interdependent phenomena that might include political repression, economic crisis, environmental devastation, civil and international wars, and social upheavals in the nations or neocolonial territories of the Americas and the Caribbean, during the last three decades in particular. They are part of the complex outcome of these phenomena, not least through the production of migratory flows that have created identity-transforming conditions of physical and national displacement.² Thus, identity based on nationality has become increasingly an experience of *becoming* in fast-forward mode, that transforms both migrating and non-migrating individuals; both nation of origin and nation of residence. As in actual lives, in some of these writings, community is both imagined and experienced as a kind of transnational network linking marginal, op-




positional, or simply safe spaces within or outside of national territories proper. Thus, we see linkages between oppositional nations within Guatemala in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1985) and in *Borderlands/La Frontera: Towards the New Mestiza* (1987). Or between island and U.S. ghetto, as in *Getting Home Alive* (1986). Or from island to metropolitan city park to abortion clinic to sex bar in *The Ship of Fools* (1984). Or from apartment in one country to one in another in *Certificate of Absence* (1981; English 1989).

As oppressed national “minorities,” as legal or illegal immigrants, exiles, and refugees, Latina and Latin American women of the Americas writing in the 1970s through the present have been shaped by experiences of internal and/or external national displacements. What I study are the writings they produce within and about these experiences.

However, there are significant differences and even tensions in the constitution of social and psychological identities shaped by differential access to social empowerment based on class and ethnic differences between Latin American women, as there are between Latinas raised in the U.S., and of course, these kinds of differences function between U.S. Latinas and Latin American women. The experiences of women raised in Latin America as part of a European or mixed “white” dominant culture, such as Cristina Peri Rossi or Sylvia Molloy, are crucially different from those who have lived in the national community experiencing the violencing marginalization of the oppressed minority, such as Rigoberta Menchú (a Quiché), Gloria Anzaldúa (a Chicana), or Rosario Morales (a Puerto Rican) and her (Puerto Rican Jewish) daughter, Aurora Levins Morales.

Thus, even when Latin American-raised women become U.S. Latinas by virtue of permanent residence, they may or may not be subject to some of the oppressive conditions experienced by U.S. Latinas because of ethnic and cultural differences perceived in their bodies and habits, or class origin. Failing to even acknowledge these kinds of differences in social positioning and national identity formation seriously mars Debra Castillo's otherwise interesting *Talking Back. Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (1992), for in it, U.S. Latinas are simply absorbed into a kind of a globalized Latin America that can not account for the transformation of experiences and identities that produce the Nuyorican, the Chicana, the Cuban-American and other Latinas that at the very least have become bicultural "minorities."

Further, since the 1950s, the groups that constituted the U.S. Latina have widely grown to include not only the Chicana and Puerto Rican, but also women with national and cultural roots in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, to name large populations. But the U.S. Latina is of course also women like Sylvia Molloy (Argentina), Marjorie Agosin and Isabel Allende (Chile) from the southern cone and residing in the U.S. permanently. Questions of ethnic plurality beyond the usual definitions of what constitutes the Hispanic or Brazilian are profoundly reframing what can be meant by the identity labels U.S. Latina or Latin America. People appear to be increasingly transnational in their ethnic makeup, but also in their cultural experiences, through their travel and that of others, and through media of course. And thus, to the Northamericanization of Latin America that Ariel Dorfman, for example, spoke about in *How to Read Donald Duck* and *The Empire's Old Clothes*, we can



add Ana López's observations about Galavisión and Univisión's Latinamericanization of U.S. Latina/o audiences, and her wondering about the effect on Latin America of U.S.-produced Spanish-language television programs.³ There are numerous circuits between the Americas and the rest of the globe, of bodies, identities, ideas, and other cultural goods, that no doubt impact upon the displacement of national identities and the emergence of other kinds of identifications.


What then, ties or unties together the writings of the women I have already mentioned, for example? What is common to these women, even to those that might be expected to experience significant privilege within a national community by virtue of class or color, are experiences of gendered and violent displacement within the nation and/or globe. What is also common to them is a rejection of the patriarchal nation and a critique of it through their use of writing as a medium of social communication.

Women's Oppositional Rewriting of Personal and Communal Identities

The types of inquiries into the meaning and the function of received or imposed personal and national identities, and the possibilities of alternative ones which these writings effect, are expressed textually through three interrelated questions of identity that their reading raises: that of the genre ("what kind of writing is it?"); that of the subject ("what and who is the subject?"); and that of the nation ("who or what constitutes it?"). The writings I am characterizing as oppositional bring into crisis traditional genre identities, thereby interrupting the historical reproduction of the differential and ideological classification of certain types of writing as

fine art “literature,” even when they can be classified as novels, like *Certificate of Absence* or *The Ship of Fools*. These writings do not display anxiety over inclusion into national or international literary canons. They are not about mastery within established genres. Instead, they refocus our attention on writing as a medium of communication and social intervention. They do not nation-build so much as reconfigure the idea of community into something other than what it is in practice. Those which are identifiable as novels are constructed through postmodern aesthetics of shifting and fragmented narrative structures, that oppositionally posit identity as an undefinable and changing being.


However, it is not only that these writings are conceived with a politically signifying disregard for the literary and thus intellectually authorized, but also that thematically they raise the larger questions of the delimiting of identities in the name of the nation, the family, or other institutions that are particularly disciplinary with respect to women and sexuality. These writings raise questions about legitimacy, the normative, and justice in social orderings enforced in the name of shared identities, namely the cultural and the national. The notion of socially and historically produced identities that the word “gender” (as opposed to the old term “sex”) is meant to signify is also operative in these writings in their attention to the struggles of women and those who are feminized within patriarchal culture to free themselves from social and national containment.



Bearing Witness to the Failure of a Colonizing Nationalist Project

My Name is Rigoberta Menchú is a text produced through various communities and on various national territories, the Quiché, the Chilean, the French, the U.S., and wherever else it circulates in translation. Part of what it bears witness to is the existence and persistence of another notion of community than that imposed as the nation by the Guatemalan militarized state: the Quiché. Produced orally by Menchú and edited by her ex-patriate editor, Elizabeth Burgos Debray, the final product is conceived as an ideological weapon for them both. The narration of Menchú's life experiences from what by now we can safely assume to actually be her perspective, challenges the Ladino state's monologic claim to represent one and only one nation as defined in its own interest. Menchú's experiences reveal that neither centuries of colonial struggle, nor Guatemalan discourses of national identity, nor the violence with which the state has attempted to impose ideological or cultural unity have succeeded. The Guatemalan history of eurocentric, Ladino, capitalist authoritarian states have failed to absorb, redefine, and contain peoples such as the Quiché who hold alternative visions of personal identity and community. Access to writing and the Spanish language as effective and transnationally circulating media are tactical questions for Menchú. We may well question the potential politics of inequality between the westernized Ladina expatriate editor and the Quiché woman, but it is important to recognize that *both* are political activists engaged in antiimperialist cultural practice through the production of the book, and as we know in Menchú's case as well, through her active participation in defense of the indigenous peoples of Gua-

temala. On a symbolic level, Menchú and Burgos Debray's collaboration, can be read as a more general critique of the authoritarian, militarized state representing historical elites and international capital present throughout the continent, particularly in its secret violence in the homeland. What is particular to the indigenous plight Menchú spoke of is a long history of murder and brutalization of diverse native communities that are forcibly counted as Guatemalan nationals in the maintenance of Ladino oligarchic and militarized control of the state, and most clearly, in order to legally discipline, and socially and politically control these peoples holding different notions of identity, community, and value. However, what can be recognized as a more continental and even global phenomenon in Menchú's history is the fascistic impunity of an undemocratically empowered state that has managed to keep its history of domestic violence silenced and its family members terrorized into submission. In its material exploitation and brutal containment through the discourse of the nation as multiethnic family enduring hardship and discipline in order to reach the happy goal of modernization and global national equality, the ongoing history of the Guatemalan elite state's criminal abuse of the indigenous was and remains an extremely telling allegory about the inhuman treatment of peoples everywhere by the state powers of their so-called national families. What has entered into crises from an oppositional point of view with testimonials such as Menchú's, reports like *Nunca Más*, chronicling the Argentine state's torture, murder, and disappearance of citizens it perceived as dissenting during the 1970s and 80s, and those of global human rights organizations, is the discourse of nation as cultural and territorial "home."




In his recent book, *Global Apartheid, Refugees, Racism, and the New World Order*, Anthony H. Richmond makes the observation that globalization is evident in a diversity of forms besides the well known transnational capitalist enterprise, including the rise and similarly large growth of global environmental or human rights organizations. I would add that the rise and growth of global human rights organizations is perhaps also an indicator of the growing danger that countless states—i.e., government and the institutions that exercise power within a country—have come to represent to the people they govern.

One of the ironies of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia* is that the leftist-inflected consciousness-raising announced in the title of the book can circulate freely, and thus attempt to enact its political objectives in the languages and territories of the oppressors of *other* native peoples, precisely because of the perceived foreignness, geographical and political distance, and thus, intellectual “interest” which the Native American struggle in other national territories represents to dominant culture peoples—as a story, as peculiar and *National Geographic*-like ethnographical accounts of intellectual, and even political interest.

On the Frontier of Alternatively Imagined Identity and Nation

Gloria Anzaldúa’s project, the writing, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a mapping of painful national disorders within the United States that are not unlike those of Guatemala and other Latin American nations in that they also rely upon discursive and physical violence to discipline, disempower, and exploit peoples and individuals that the state views as undesir-

able on the basis of “essential,” and thus, irresolvable, cultural and “racial” differences. Anzaldúa too testifies to a lived history of expropriated lands, cultural oppression, politically organized social marginalization, economic and human exploitation. Anzaldúa’s life is shaped also by a history of physical violence and terrorization of the Mexican-originated populace. The discursive violence of racism that is exposed in *Borderlands* is likewise rooted in the murder, brutalization, and disciplining of Mexicans and Mexican Americans through the earlier decades of this century in lands that the expanding imperialist state of this country wished to exploit. *Borderlands/La Frontera* profoundly critiques the failure of U.S. nationalist discourses of democratic participation and freedom of expression as a brutally classist, racist, sexist, and heterosexist sham. However, what has travelled most easily from her writing has proved to be her notion of identity as essentially shifting and multiple. Her most important contribution is not, as she has been tellingly appropriated, merely to confirm postmodern dominant-culture intellectual discourses while garnishing them with a “culturally specific” mestiza as *metaphor*. *Borderlands* offers a far more serious and broad challenge to both practices of disembodied theory that focus intellectual and political efforts into realities that are not of immediate importance, and to the philosophical and epistemological foundations on which notions of personal and communal identities such as the nation operate in the United States. Through reflecting upon and theorizing from her experiences with Chicana ethnic, cultural, and linguistic mestizaje; through residence in national borderland zones; through lesbian sexual identification in a heterosexist culture; and through feminist conscious-



ness in patriarchal cultures, Anzaldúa elaborates a notion of identity symbolized by the mestiza and the queer as ambiguous, and based upon the negotiation of differences—but crucially, as the normal condition of an integral identity that has an essential core, even as it is changing. Difficult as this may seem to grasp from within eurocentric discourse, Anzaldúa's notion of ambiguity, integrity, and essential identities is *not* constructed from European or even Euroamerican poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of identity.


Anzaldúa reintroduces the significance of the spiritual as central to discussions of at least *her* personal and communal identities. Thus, she seeks to reshape the concepts of identity, and the meaning of personal and communal practices such as writing, art making, and philosophical thinking, through the shards of Toltec philosophy conserved through the translations and studies of codices by scholars such as Miguel León-Portilla. As the title indicates, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, asks us to search as far away as possible from dominant epistemologies in our search for more liberating new forms of knowledge with which to construct new identities and more just forms of community. In Anzaldúa's writing, the concept of nation and its discourse of nationalism have been decentered, even that of Chicano nationalism. Her writing maps the failure of the U.S. and of the 1970's Aztlán, patterned too closely on the modern historical concept, but it also traces a vision of future democracies where community is like borderland culture: a space of coexistence, negotiation, and transformation.

Adrift in Novels Without Nations

Oppositional novels like Cristina Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* (The Ship of Fools) and Sylvia Molloy's *En*

breve cárcel (Certificate of Absence) suggest that women, and that which is queer with respect to the national patriarchal family, have no use for that nation either, whether it is a political state with geographical borders, or stateless, imagined communities like Aztlán.


Sylvia Molloy and Cristina Peri Rossi's fictive universes in *Certificate of Absence* and *The Ship of Fools*, respectively, are places where nation and national identities are carefully unnamed, where places of origin, passage, and current residence serve as painful pitstops in the migratory circuit of their fictive characters' search for national, social, and political zones of freedom where they can become beings with more control over their own individual and collective expression. In both writings, subjective or personal identity is itself an unknown, but an unknown that is struggling against the delimitations of culturally received or externally imposed personal and national identities. One of the various protagonists of *The Ship of Fools*, for example, is named "Equis" (X). We eventually are led to discover that he is a political exile, that in the globe he traverses, he is most often marginal to any sense of community or belonging. He is an undocumented foreigner who is a survivor of the disappearances of the place that was at one time his homeland. By surviving, he has become a man without a nation. Like his travelling companion, Vocinglerix, it is only by leaving what it is no longer possible to continue imagining as a homeland, that he is reappeared, a *reaparecido*. Historical characters like these can only survive elsewhere, even if that elsewhere is not a materialized and political territory, but a fluid, ever-shifting community of paranationals. They are the nineteenth and twentieth century national deviants Foucault described in *Madness and Civilization*. They are



the wild inhabitants of the nation stripped of their citizenship and their lives because they are deemed by the state to be fools or criminals, useless or dangerous in their unwillingness to be disciplined into social and political conformity. But in being forced out of the increasingly unfamiliar territory of the militarized, authoritarian Fatherland, they become decolonized of it, post-nationals. They constitute a new global orphan, adrift upon a ship they were not meant to ever alight from and for whom the modern nation's mythology as home, family, father, mother has been forever destroyed. But *La nave de los locos* is not only a critique of nations like Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, or Paraguay, that are linked to the *desaparecidos reaparecidos* of this text by the historical *desaparecidos*, the murdered and tortured dissidents of the 1970s through the 1980s of those nations and others of Latin America and the rest of the world. It is also a critique of all dominant forms of nation. The forms of nation encountered in this book are in fact, the dangerous, the criminal, the insane, the stupid, and the spiritually useless. Tenderness, intelligence, and positive forms of community are found only on the margins, or in the pockets of these nation-prisons. Circuits of community are built and travelled that criss-cross between and within nations. The protagonists are heroes because they survive the impediments to the fulfillment of their very simple desires, and because they have the courage to persist in protecting their claim to love and free expression. The portable community that emerges to displace the imposed ordering of the community into nation in Peri Rossi's envisioning, is one of lovers who know to trust their unique desires. Thus, "X," a young man, is attracted to the celluloid image of a woman about to be assaulted by a machine; he makes

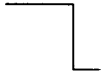
love to a proper and delicate, voluminous, older woman with whom he cannot communicate linguistically; he loves a teenager, unsubjected by disempowering gendered identity; and he is in love with a woman he finds performing transvestite lesbian love scenes. Vocinglerix loves little girls, and Morris and a young boy named Percival fall in love and form a happy threesome with the boy's divorced mother. They travel to each other, with each other, and through each other to new places and on new projects meant to produce transformative knowledges about themselves and the globe they inhabit.

The first-person writer-protagonist of Molloy's book is unnamed, thus cryptically referring to identity only as an unknown, much like Peri Rossi's *Equis* (X). Similarly, the autobiographical-like writing itself, felicitously translated into English as *Certificate of Absence*, is more the travel log of the psychological and physical travels of the one whose life is recorded in these written traces as an uncharacterized *being* and *becoming*. As in Peri Rossi's book, nation and national identity, in being self-consciously unnamed, are obliquely invoked, precisely as absences of meaning or meaningfulness with respect to the constitution of subjective identity. The being who writes is identified as a female, only several pages into the narrative, and always indirectly, first through gendered pronoun reference to her self as she recalls and inscribes into her writing others' conversations to or about her. Gendered identity, at any rate, manifests itself as a reflection of how other's see us and mirror us to ourselves. The writing, however, in being a writing about self, becomes a rewriting or new writing of self, and thus it is a writing of self as selves. But here, the autobiographical is neither a personal historiography,



nor a compilation of cultural habits peculiar to any one nationality. To use a recurring metaphor of the text, she is uncomfortable within her own skin, and thus she is equally at home as a foreigner in all places. We do not know the names of the places she comes from, to put it in a habitual figure of speech, or where she's been; and like her, we do not know where she is going at the end of the book when she waits at the airport, clutching the pages of the writing we have been reading. In the labyrinth of identity, the thread leading out is desire, and Theseus, the Minotaur, the sacrificed, and Ariadne are all one. Significantly, the answers to the life-long riddle of our identity and the meaning of our existence in Sylvia Molloy's writing do not lie within the entangled discourses of national identity, so characteristic of dominant nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American writing up until the present through the work of the male boom writers. The marriage of the male Bildungsroman and the patriarchal national allegory is indeed as queer as it sounds. In Molloy, writing, like Diana, flees the imperatives of the *male* nation building process that has compelled Latin America's central canonical writers, predominantly males, to unify its readers into a national community as envisioned by its colonial or neocolonial economic, political, and social elite, that is, the state. Instead, myth, still today a feminized, marginalized form of knowledge, is quietly but fully placed at the center of the writer-protagonist's rebirth, markedly *not* in Boom-style *mestizaje* with history, to play an enslaved, and raped indigenous Malinche to a Cortésian History. In Molloy's writing, women and their desire for other women occupy the center of the narrative. Modes of knowledge and logic outside of those authorized by Enlightenment-shaped epistemolo-

gies, such as those preserved in what Europeans have called “myth,” dreams, intuition, desire, and the creative practice of storytelling itself, mutually reinforce each other and serve to dissolve the writer-protagonist’s culturally-shaped intellectual and psychological habits of control, authority, and distrust of self and others. Thus, from the petty and vengeful project of wishing to “fix” (*fijar*) the unpossessed and unmastered other through her writing, she is led to writing as the quest for the mysterious source of creativity and female-honoring community, through the enigmatic (telephonic) communication from her dreamed dead father that she search for the Artemis of Ephesus, the many-breasted goddess at the center of esoteric, and seemingly lost, initiation rites. Artemis is an ancient Mesopotamian symbol of female empowerment buried through patriarchal conquest beneath the Roman sterilization, fragmentation, and demonization of her as a male-hating virgin, Diana. Artemis thus represents the unknown, and the absent woman of power. Her precise origin, identity, and functions are lost or veiled in the dominant culture. She represents lost, nonpatriarchal communities, or in our terminology today, nations. Thus, *Certificate of Absence*, like *The Ship of Fools*, is also a medium for verifying the sighting, the survival of a national and historical *desaparecida*: Artemis, symbol of unknown, empowered female identity. It is not coincidental that the symbol of Artemis is only able to reappear when the narrative mode of the first half of the text, inscribed within patriarchal power relations, cedes to other forms of knowledge and narration through the textualized surrender of narrative will and authority, expressed in the acknowledgment of ambiguous feelings, uncertain thoughts, and unclear objectives. When



the writer loses control over the writing, first no longer able, then no longer willing to be its narrator, and allows the writing as expression of enigmatic desire to lead into the unknown, Artemis appears as symbol of the possibility of the realization of empowered, integrated ways of being that are different to those produced in dominant states of being. Artemis is accessible through a female introspection, and through the dissolving pockets of the patriarchal imagination. There is no home in male national projects for women, thus this form of nation and national identity is meaningless in *Certificate of Absence*. It is not writing for nation-building, but rather for the conjuring of free subjective identities from which to heal self and thus make possible loving relationship and community with others.


Between and Beyond and Through

A somewhat similar project that significantly authorizes itself by reference to and allies itself with Anzaldúa's concept of the borderland experience, is Rosario Morales' and Aurora Levins Morales' co-produced *Getting Home Alive*. As in *Borderlands*, in this interspersed collection of writings by mother and daughter, personal and community identity is experienced by multiply-constituted subjects who travel between cultures, languages, and nations, and who more often than not, travel on the margins of both of these. Like Anzaldúa, they heal the painful sense of unrootedness within their identities and their experience of homeland through embracing all of the cultures which constitute them. Thus, while Aurora's father is Jewish, culturally both women have consciously constructed themselves through the Jewish. This agency in the construction of their personal and national identities is what

makes them affirm that home is *both* the Island and the U.S., that they are *both* Puerto Rican and U.S. American, yet something else, as well. Both mother and daughter experience painful national displacements from the U.S. to Puerto Rico in Rosario's case, and from Puerto Rico to the U.S. in Aurora's, and for both within the U.S. as "minority" women, so that home is always *elsewhere* that they are always in transit to or from. Home is the exilic condition of the minority, the immigrant, the conditional citizen. Thus, the national community wherein they feel at home, wherein they anchor their personal identity can only be evoked momentarily, fleetingly, through memory, sounds, smells, habits, desire, and in the writings they produce. A national homeland for them as women of Puerto Rican national origin does not exist. Puerto Rican national identity has been fragmented by its neocolonial subjection to the U.S. as a Free Associated Territory. The nation that the Morales' imagine together is experienced through displacement from one to the other and within each. It lies between and beyond either territory, between and beyond either imagined community. What is imagined is in effect what is recorded in these writings: Home as a community of inclusion of all the cultures that make up their being. For the Morales', there is no going back historically to a past of national purity of origins. If painfully at times, the U.S. has become home *too* for them, but in a way different than in older distinctions between the U.S. Puerto Rican and the islander. Their experience is far more bicultural, and thus blurred.

Reconfiguring Nation and Identity

To "reconfigure" is to imagine with, again. What is most significant to me about these and other opposi-



tional writings by U.S. and Latin American women of these times is that they speak to us about personal and communal identities in ways that stimulate us to take up the new and urgent project of not just rethinking, but reimagining, reenvisioning, what constructively interdependent personal and collective be-ing *could* be like. What U.S. Latina and Latin American women *have* shared in their experiences are histories of extreme and widespread physical and discursive violence within their nations of origin and those of residence by ruling states against significant numbers of the communities they claim to represent. These are histories that become more and more visible to us not only in the sense of their diffusion in the mass media news, but also in the sense of becoming clearer to perceive through writings such as those I have been talking about. Through thinking about writings such as these, we are perhaps able to sit a while longer with our grief over the loss of the sense of deeply belonging to a community and truly having ownership in it. We are perhaps able to better see the interdependency between personal and communal identities, between self and nation, between discipline and desire. Perhaps in our experience of writings such as these we are able to make community with them, to find courage in the creative and visionary project of transforming the nation into community, and recuperating agency in the free expression of our being. ■



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Footnotes:

1. “In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both limited and sovereign.... It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds each lives the image of their communion.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, 1987, p. 15. Anderson’s notion of nation refers to nation-states, however there are other types of imagined communities that call themselves nations, and in effect function as oppositional nations within nations, such as the Chicano Nation (Aztlán) and the Black Nation.

2. Anthony H. Richard, *Global Apartheid. Refugees Racism and the New World Order*, Toronto, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

3. Ana M. López, “Our Welcomed Guests: *Telenovelas* in Latin America,” in *To be Continued: Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. by Robert C. Allen. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.

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