

A BOOK IN THE SERIES
LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

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ABOUT THE SERIES
Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations is a critical series. It aims to explore the emergence and consequences of concepts used to define "Latin America" while at the same time exploring the broad interplay of political, economic, and cultural practices that have shaped Latin American worlds. Latin America, at the crossroads of competing imperial designs and local responses, has been construed as a geocultural and geopolitical entity since the nineteenth century. This series provides a starting point to redefine Latin America as a configuration of political, linguistic, cultural, and economic intersections that demands a continuous reappraisal of the role of the Americas in history, and of the ongoing process of globalization and the relocation of people and cultures that have characterized Latin America's experience. *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* is a forum that confronts established geocultural constructions, rethinks area studies and disciplinary boundaries, assesses convictions of the academy and of public policy, and correspondingly demands that the practices through which we produce knowledge and understanding about and from Latin America be subject to rigorous and critical scrutiny.

LIGHT IN THE DARK LUZ EN LO OSCURO

REWRITING IDENTITY, SPIRITUALITY, REALITY

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DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
DURHAM AND LONDON 2015

PREFACE

Gestures of the Body—Escribiendo para idear

There's something epistemological about storytelling. It's the way we know each other, the way we know ourselves. The way we know the world. It's also the way we don't know: the way the world is kept from us, the way we're kept from knowledge about ourselves, the way we're kept from understanding other people.

ANDREA BARRETT, WRITER'S CHRONICLE, VOL. 32, NO. 3, DECEMBER 1999

When writing at night, I'm aware of la luna, Coyolxauhqui, hovering over my house. I envision her muerta y decapitada (dead and decapitated), una cabeza con los párpados cerrados (eyes closed). But then her eyes open y la miro dar luz a los lugares oscuros, I see her light the dark places. Writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and conocimiento (insight). I am often driven by the impulse to write something down, by the desire and urgency to communicate, to make meaning, to make sense of things, to create myself through this knowledge-producing act. I call this impulse the "Coyolxauhqui imperative": a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the gustos resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestras almas, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is the act of

calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us. The shadow beast and attendant desconocimientos (the ignorance we cultivate to keep ourselves from knowledge so that we can remain unaccountable) have a tenacious hold on us. Dealing with the lack of cohesiveness and stability in life, the increasing tension and conflicts, motivates me to process the struggle. The sheer mental, emotional, and spiritual anguish motivates me to "write out" my/our experiences. More than that, my aspirations toward wholeness maintain my sanity, a matter of life and death. Grappling with (des)conocimientos, with what I don't want to know, opening and shutting my eyes and ears to cultural realities, expanding my awareness and consciousness, or refusing to do so, sometimes results in discovering the positive shadow: hidden aspects of myself and the world. Each irritant is a grain of sand in the oyster of the imagination. Sometimes what accretes around an irritant or wound may produce a pearl of great insight, a theory.

I'm constantly struggling with my own ways of cultural production and the role that I play as an artist. I call the space where I struggle with my creations "nepantla." Nepantla is the place where my cultural and personal codes clash, where I come up against the world's dictates, where these different worlds coalesce in my writing. I am conscious of various nepantlas—linguistic, geographical, gender, sexual, historical, cultural, political, social—when I write. Nepantla is the point of contact y el lugar between worlds—between imagination and physical existence, between ordinary and nonordinary (spirit) realities. Nepantla concerns automatically infuse my writing: I don't have to will myself to deal with these particular points; these nepantlas inhabit me and inevitably surface in whatever I'm writing. Nepantlas are places of constant tension, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable.

Escribo para "idear"—the Spanish word meaning "to form or conceive an idea, to develop a theory, to invent and imagine." My work is about questioning, affecting, and changing the paradigms that govern prevailing notions of reality, identity, creativity, activism, spirituality, race, gender, class, and sexuality. To develop an epistemology of the imagination, a psychology of the image, I construct my own symbolic system.¹ While attempting to create new epistemological frameworks,

I'm constantly reflecting on this activity of idear. The desire or need to share the process of "following" images and making "stories" and theories motivates me to write this text.

Direct interpretive engagements between artists and their images have few precedents. There's very little direct, personal artistic research, so I've had to engage with my own experiences and construct my own formulations. Intento dar testimonio de mi propio proceso y conciencia de escritora chicana. Soy la que escribe y se escribe / I am the one who writes and who is being written. Últimamente es el escribir que me escribe / It is the writing that "writes" me. I "read" and "speak" myself into being. Writing is the site where I critique reality, identity, language, and dominant culture's representation and ideological control.

Using a multidisciplinary approach and a "storytelling" format, I theorize my own and others' struggles for representation, identity, self-inscription, and creative expressions. When I "speak" myself in creative and theoretical writings, I constantly shift positions—which means taking into account ideological remolinos (whirlwinds), cultural dissonance, and the convergence of competing worlds. It means dealing with the fact that I, like most people, inhabit different cultures and, when crossing to other mundos, shift into and out of perspectives corresponding to each; it means living in liminal spaces, in nepantlas. By focusing on Chicana/mestiza (mexicana tejana) experience and identity in several axes—writer/artist, intellectual, scholar, teacher, woman, Chicana, feminist, lesbian, working class—I attempt to analyze, describe, and re-create these identity shifts. Speaking from the geographies of many "countries" makes me a privileged speaker. I "speak in tongues"—understand the languages, emotions, thoughts, fantasies of the various sub-personalities inhabiting me and the various grounds they speak from. To do so, I must figure out which person (I, she, you, we, them, they), which tense (present, past, future), which language and register, and which voice or style to speak from. Identity formation (which involves "reading" and "writing" oneself and the world) is an alchemical process that synthesizes the dualities, contradictions, and perspectives from these different selves and worlds.

In these auto-ethnographies I am both observer and participant—simultaneously look at myself as subject and object. In the blink of an eye, I blur subject/object, class, gender, and other boundaries. My

methodological stances emerge in the writing process, as do the theories. I treat all work, including these chapters, like fiction or poetry.

In formulating new ways of knowing, new objects of knowledge, new perspectives, and new orderings of experiences, I grapple, half-unconsciously, with a new methodology—one that I hope does not reinforce prevailing modes. I come to know how to “read” and “write”; I come to knowledge and *conocimiento* through images and “stories.” I use various storytelling formats consistent with the experiences that I reflect on, and I use whatever language and style correspond to the ways I do the work. I believe that meditation on and conscious awareness of the image’s significance for me, its maker, and for you, its reader/interpreter/co-creator, furthers (not obstructs) the making of art. I gain frameworks for theorizing everyday experiences by allowing the images to speak to and through me, imagining my ways through the images and following them to their deep *cenotes*, dialoguing with them, and then translating what I’ve glimpsed. Sometimes the shadow blocks this process and rules my behavior, making the process painful.

I cannot use the old critical language to describe, address, or contain the new subjectivities. Using primary methods of presentation (autohistoria) rather than secondary methods (interpreting other people’s conceptions), I reflect on the psychological/mythological aspects of my own expression. I scrutinize my wounds, touch the scars, map the nature of my conflicts, *croon* to *las musas* (the muses) that I coax to inspire me, crawl into the shapes the shadow takes, and try to speak with them.

Methods have underlying assumptions, implying theoretical positions and basic premises. There are two standpoints: perceptual, which has a literal reality; and imaginal, which has a psychic reality. In putting images together into story (the story I tell about the images), I use imagistic thinking, employ an imaginal awareness. I’m guided by the spirit of the image. My *naguala* (*daimon* or guiding spirit) is an inner sensibility that directs my life—an image, an action, or an internal experience.² My imagination and my *naguala* are connected—they are aspects of the same process, of creativity. Often my *naguala* draws to me things that are contrary to my will and purpose (compulsions, addictions, negativities), resulting in an anguished impasse. Overcoming these impasses becomes part of the process. This mode of perception is magical thinking: It reads what happens in the external world in

terms of my personal intentions and interests. It uses external events to give meaning to my own mythmaking. Magical thinking is not traditionally valued in academic writing.

My text is about the imagination (the psyche’s image-creating faculty, the power to make fiction or stories, inner movies like *Star Trek’s* holodeck), about “active imagining,” *ensueños* (dreaming while awake), and interacting consciously with them. We are connected to *el cenote* via the individual and collective *árbol de la vida*, and our images and *ensueños* emerge from that connection, from the self-in-community (inner, spiritual, nature/animals, racial/ethnic, communities of interest, neighborhood, city, nation, planet, galaxy, and the unknown universes). I use “dreaming” or *ensueños* (the making of images) to figure out what’s wrong: foretell current and future events; and establish hidden, unknown connections between lived experiences and theory. This text is about ordeals that trigger thoughts, reflections, and imaginal musings.³ It deals indirectly with the symbols that I associate with certain archetypal experiences and processes:

Thoughts pass like ripples through her body, causing a muscle to tighten here, loosen there. Everything comes in through skin, eyes, ears. She experiences reality physically. No action exists outside of a physical context. Every action is the result of a decision, internal conflict, struggle, resolution, or stalemate. The body always reflects inner activity. “Espanto,” in Los En-sueños de la Prieta⁴

For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it’s about being in your body. The body responds physically, emotionally, and intellectually to external and internal stimuli, and writing records, orders, and theorizes about these responses. For me, writing begins with the impulse to push boundaries, to shape ideas, images, and words that travel through the body and echo in the mind into something that has never existed. The writing process is the same mysterious process that we use to make the world.

There’s a difference between talking with images/stories and talking about them. In this text I attempt to talk with images/stories, to engage with creative and spiritual processes and their ritualistic aspects. In

enacting the relationship between certain images and concepts and my own experience and psyche, I fuse personal narrative with theoretical discourse, autobiographical vignettes with theoretical prose. I create a hybrid genre, a new discursive mode, which I call "autohistoria" and "autohistoria-teoría." Conectando experiencias personales con realidades sociales results in autohistoria, and theorizing about this activity results in autohistoria-teoría. It's a way of inventing and making knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscriptions. By making certain personal experiences the subject of this study, I also blur the private/public borders.

In writing this book, I had to figure out how to imagine/create/discover certain concepts/theories, how to shape each essay's structure and design—in other words, I had to map out each essay's universe, the sweep and body of its terrain. I make these discoveries as I write, and not before. I uncover and release the energy shaping each piece, discover its premise, ideas, counter ideas, controlling ideas, and arch plot. I track what lies beyond the originating idea, trace its turning point, its emotional dynamic, and the linking of its parts. I treat each essay as "story" with antagonism, dialogue, crisis, climax, resolution, and poetics. I consider various aspects of craft: narrative technique, use of language—when Spanish is appropriate, theoretical language pertinent, vernacular language suitable.

I don't write from any single disciplinary position. I write outside official theoretical/philosophical language. Mine is a struggle of recognizing and legitimizing excluded selves, especially of women, people of color, queer, and othered groups. I organize and order these ideas as "stories." I believe that it is through narrative that you come to understand and know your self and make sense of the world. Through narrative you formulate your identities by unconsciously locating yourself in social narratives not of your own making.⁵ Your culture gives you your identity story, pero en un buscado rompimiento con la tradición you create an alternative identity story.

This book contains the various kinds of "narratives" that make up my life: feminism, race, ethnicity, queerness, gender, and artistic practice. It deals with the processes that occur in reading, writing, and other creative acts. Shamanic imaginings happen while reading or writing a book. The controlled "flights" that reading and writing send us on are a kind of "ensueños" similar to the dream or fantasy pro-

cess, resembling the magical flights of the journeying shamans. My image for ensueños is of la Llorona astride a wild horse taking flight. In one of her aspects she is pictured as a woman with a horse's head. I "appropriate" Mexican indigenous cultural figures, such as Coyol-xauhqui, symbols, and practices. I use imaginal figures (archetypes) of the inner world. I dwell on the imagination's role in journeying to "non-ordinary" realities, on the use of the imaginal in nagualismo and its connection to nature spirituality. This text is about acts of imaginative flight in reality and identity construction and reconstructions.

In rewriting narratives of identity, nationalism, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetics, I attempt to show (and not just tell) how transformation happens. My job is not just to interpret or describe realities but to create them through language and action, symbols and images. My task is to guide readers and give them the space to co-create, often against the grain of culture, family, and ego injunctions, against external and internal censorship, against the dictates of genes. From infancy our cultures induct us into the semitrance state of ordinary consciousness, into being in agreement with the people around us, into believing that this is the way things are. It is extremely difficult to shift out of this trance.

This text questions its own formalizing and ordering attempts, its own strategies, the machinations of thought itself, of theory formulated on an experiential level of discourse. It explores the various structures of experience that organize subjective worlds and illuminates meaning in personal experience and conduct. It enters into the dialogue between the new story and the old and attempts to revise the master story.

I hope to contribute to the debate among activist academics trying to intervene, disrupt, challenge, and transform the existing power structures that limit and constrain women. My chief disciplinary fields are creative writing, feminism, art, literature, epistemology, as well as spiritual, race, border, Raza, and ethnic studies. In questioning systems of knowledge, I attempt to add to or alter their norms and make changes in these fields by presenting new theoretical models. With the new tribalism I challenge the Chicano (and other) nationalist narratives. My dilemma, and that of other Chicana and women-of-color writers, is twofold: how to write (produce) without being inscribed (reproduced) in the dominant white structure and how to write without

reinscribing and reproducing what we rebel against. Our task is to write against the edict that women should fear their own darkness, that we not broach it in our writings. Nuestra tarea is to envision Coyolxauhqui, not dead and decapitated, but with eyes wide open. Our task is to light up the darkness.

1 | Let us be the healing of the wound

The Coyolxauhqui imperative—La sombra y el sueño

The day the towers fell, me sentí como Coyolxauhqui, la luna. Algo me agarró y me sacudió, frightening la sombra (soul) out of my body. I fell in pieces into that pitch-black brooding place. Each violent image of the towers collapsing, transmitted live all over the world then repeated a thousand times on TV, sucked the breath out of me, each image etched on my mind's eye. Wounded, I fell into shock, cold and clammy. The moment fragmented me, dissociating me from myself. Arresting every vital organ in me, it would not release me.

Bodies on fire, bodies falling through the sky, bodies pummeled and crushed by stone and steel; los cuerpos trapped and suffocating became our bodies. As we watched we too fell, todos caímos. What occurred on September 11, 2001, to the people in the four hijacked airplanes, the World Trade Center twin towers of New York City, and the Pentagon happened to us, too. I couldn't detach from the victims and survivors and their pain. This wounding opened like a gash and widened until a deep chasm separated me from those around me.

In the weeks following éste tremendo arrebato, susto trussed me in its numbing sheath. Suspended in limbo in that in-between space, nepantla, I wandered through my days on autopilot, feeling disconnected from the events of my life. My house whispered and moaned. Within its walls the wind howled. Like la Llorona lost and alone, I was