

A BOOK IN THE SERIES

LATIN AMERICA OTHERWISE: LANGUAGES, EMPIRES, NATIONS

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AT LOS ANGELES

TELLING TO LIVE

LATINA FEMINIST *Testimonios*

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Getting There *Cuando No Hay Camino*

Norma E. Cantú

IT'S ALWAYS DIFFICULT to start at the beginning, for it is often difficult to locate a beginning. I can't truly say exactly when it was that I decided to be a professor, to be a writer, to be an administrator, to be a folklorist, to be a literacy tutor trainer and tutor, to be a poet, or to be any of the myriad of persons that I am. It's far easier to trace how I came to be a daughter, a sister, or any of the various relationships that required no choice, at least not one that I can take credit for.

Given that I did not know a single person with a Ph.D. when I graduated from high school, I find it quite remarkable that I earned one. Graduation from high school began a long process that culminated in a Ph.D. As a Chicana getting a Ph.D. in English in 1982, at a time when it was unusual enough for any of us to graduate from high school, I felt privileged. What an achievement that was for someone like me. There were no maps to follow; the path was not well trodden. No one in my family, indeed no one from my neighborhood or my barrio community, had traveled that path before; only a precious few had earned a high school diploma.

On a day in late May 1965, I graduated from Martin High School in Laredo, Texas. Graduation night. My parents and my aunt cram into the too-small Martin High School gymnasium to see me walk across the stage. That hot humid night I received a high school diploma, which they and I thought was the highest possible attainment for the oldest daughter of eleven children of a working-class family that often worked in the nearby fields when the smelter laid off laborers like my dad. I received two surprises that night: one my best friend Berta had hinted at, a gold seal on the diploma from the National Honor Society; and the other a much more important one, a college tuition scholarship. I had given up hope of receiving any scholarship money

after Ms. Contreras, the senior class counselor, had indicated that I should go work for the telephone company. When I had gone to request the scholarship application forms, she had made it clear that I couldn't possibly expect to go to college, even after my college entrance examination scores had come back not half as bad as I'd feared. When I saw the commencement program, with my name listed as recipient of a tuition scholarship to Laredo Junior College (LJC), I felt tingly all over, and even forgot the one-inch-heel pumps pinching my toes. When they announced the Rotary International scholarships, I was called up to the stage to receive the document that I thought was my lifesaver. I was near tears and ruined the photo the professional photographer snapped with my *muecas*. In fact, several times during the ceremony I actually did shed tears; I surreptitiously wiped them with the edge of the robe that felt as hot as wool in that non-air-conditioned gym that May evening.

It was 1965. The Vietnam War raged on and President Lyndon Johnson had just launched the War on Poverty. Laredo became one of the main battlefields in the antipoverty war. So we had opportunities, at least those of us who were receiving government surplus commodities did. "*El queso*," as my father called it, helped get us by. Although we always received more than just cheese—cornmeal we never used, flour, butter, beans, and canned beef and chicken that my mother fixed with a spicy sauce and even used for tamales during the Christmas season—everyone called it *el queso*. We didn't receive everything every time; usually there were surprises, dried prunes, or peanut butter, raisins or cans of corn. One of the programs designed to battle poverty, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, offered me my first full-time job as an assistant clerk at the Laredo Independent School District personnel office. My duties were to file and fill out index cards for the district's employee files. I was eighteen and anxious to start college. It was tedious work that gave me time to dream and compose poems which I memorized and later wrote down. But after barely a month I was reassigned as a teacher's aide at my old elementary school, Don Tomás Sánchez. There I was under the expert tutelage of Mrs. Adelina García. She soon became my mentor. I wanted to be a teacher, had wanted it since the summer after seventh grade, when I started my own *escuelita* in our backyard. I loved my job. In the fall I would start college and earn my degree and become a teacher. It seemed so easy.

At the time, I was also being courted by a lanky dark doe-eyed boy who waited until I got out of my job and walked me home sometimes. So I knew happiness. But that summer was over too soon and not soon enough. My "boyfriend" and I didn't go too far *con el noviazgo*. I couldn't get phone calls from boys. Besides, he was still in high school, although he was older than I. When my summer job ended and I went on to college, I could only see him in church. Predictably, things deteriorated. I remember his khaki pants, scuffed

brown shoes, and the white cotton short-sleeved starched shirt he wore like a uniform whether he was going to church or to school.

The end of the summer of 1965 brought the end of my first job and my first romance. It marked the beginning of a new life. My mother and I had bought fabric to make my skirts and blouses for school. We also copied some preppy dresses from a magazine — could it have been the issue of *Seventeen* that Berta and I bought at Statler's on Matamoros Street? Statler's. The only newsstand and the closest thing to a bookstore we had in Laredo at the time. One of our favorite downtown hangouts. In the early sixties, going to *el centro* meant taking the bus to a downtown bustling with the business of a border town. Shoppers from Nuevo Laredo added to the hustle and bustle of the Laredo business community. *La gente* went *al centro* to pay utility bills, shop at J.C. Penney's and Sears. The five-and-ten stores, Kress, Neisner's, McClelland all clustered on Convent Avenue, the main thoroughfare to and from Mexico. Berta and I discovered a dusty old bookstore that sold used books and old magazines and *revistas* situated across from Richter's El Precio Fijo. It was on the same side of the street where Polly Adams sold designer clothes and Holloway's bakery sold cream puffs, not just *pan dulce* as did La Reynera or El Aguila bakeries. Berta and I loved to walk downtown and stop at Deliganis Cafeteria for lunch. We felt grown up on our own downtown on a Saturday morning.

Although a year younger, Berta and I were the closest of friends, bound by a love of reading and of words. All through high school we shared the secrets of our crushes and our life's dreams. We belonged to the Pan American Student Forum where we served as officers my senior year; we worked with the school paper, *The Journal*. Both of us were members of the select CSC — the Courtesy Service Club — that glorified service and allowed us to be ushers during football games, as well as PTA and open-house events.

That fall I began classes at Laredo Junior College. On the first day my friend Velma Morán picked me up with one of her older sisters who knew all about college and advised us to be *bien truchas* and register as early as possible so that classes wouldn't be closed. As we arrived to register we went in different directions because the process was alphabetically arranged. Holding onto my precious scholarship letter, first I went into the "Corral," as the student center was called. Here professors were seated behind folding tables filling in names of students, as they came up to register, in long ledgers that were class rolls. They handed you an index card — different colors for the different classes — that you would then turn in to your professor. I waited in line to register for the basic first-year courses: composition and rhetoric, political science, history, algebra, and French. I had wanted to take chemistry, but the class was closed. I refused to sign up for biology like all my other friends because I had heard that you were required to collect insects, a task I knew I could never

complete. The first semester went by too quickly, and although I didn't make the dean's list, I felt proud of my A's, B's and even the C I struggled to get in French — I refused to take Spanish like everyone else because I felt I already knew it and couldn't see the point — even though it would've meant an easy A. I did finally catch on that I needed to devote more time to the French class, and the next semester I improved my grade considerably.

In the second semester I applied for and was hired in some kind of work-study program. It wasn't much, but it helped me buy shoes, bus tickets, and a more substantial lunch than a Baby Ruth candy bar. My parents were unable to help with even these minimal expenses. Books were always a problem, and often I went through a whole semester borrowing and making do without a textbook. It became difficult to get rides from Velma because of my job, though. So I would walk. Mornings, I'd get off the bus at the corner of Convent and Victoria and walk along orange tree-lined Victoria Street, past the Laredo Independent School District offices, where I had worked, past the Victorian mansions, past the railroad tracks and onto the campus, the abandoned Fort McIntosh. I'd sit in old Army barracks turned classrooms — the portbellied stove in the middle of the room and the cigarette burns along the wall attested to the earlier inhabitants. I worked in the library housed in the Fort's old chapel; the musty smells of religion and books greeted and comforted me. Reading and thinking — exactly what college was supposed to be! I overlooked the racist history lessons and the condescending sexist male professors. I pretended all was right with the world even after a crying incident in speech class because I could not distinguish between "kiss" and "keys."

But too soon — in fact, the following year — I see that I must quit. The poverty at home becomes unbearable; I cannot see myself selfishly sitting in a classroom while my siblings need things — shoes, clothes, food, school bus tickets. My family's needs become greater than my own. So I get a full-time job at Central Power and Light Company, forget my dreams of getting a degree, of going out of town to finish college, of becoming a teacher. My college friends apply, get accepted, leave for universities in Denton, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, San Marcos, Kingsville, while I stay behind and cry everyday sitting at the typewriter where I must use carbon paper to make multicolored copies of the records of new electricity connections and disconnections. I'm a clerk so I also cashier at the drivethrough window. Soon I am promoted, fill in for anyone who's sick or on vacation, learning all the "desks," even the contract one where Ted O'Neil sits. My mentor who has trained me at the office, Vicente, commits suicide one Sunday night, and on Monday morning I cry to hear of it. In disbelief I sit dumbfounded all day unable to concentrate. The boss, Mr. Slaughter, comes in smoking a cigar that makes me nauseous. His secretary laughs when I begin taking night classes at the com-

munity college. "Dreams, you'll never get a degree," she sneers as she prepares for her weekly bridge club rendezvous after work. I am surrounded by a new world, the office. I know it is to be temporary, yet fear that it will become permanent, that I will become trapped like everyone says, like my coworkers who have been working for "the company" for over twenty years. I fear that I will suddenly wake up one Monday morning and find I'm ready for retirement with nothing to show for my life except a Ready Kilowatt pin. And I party with the "girls," my coworkers Aminda, Buddy — from Bore for Aurora — Ronnie, Arabella, and some who come to work and then go. In the summer it's college students, the daughters of employees, who work with us. We travel to San Antonio, Monterrey, Corpus Christi, go across to Nuevo Laredo for dinner, drive to Mirando City to Lala's Restaurant for their famous puffy tacos. I even join the bowling league. And yet I'm miserable.

Things at home are better. I can buy shoes for the youngest girls, treat them give them milk money, pay for dance classes for the youngest girls — after all to movies, trips. I buy the Blue Lady — a Rambler station wagon — after years of taking buses everywhere, and I give the kids rides to school and pick up my coworker Emma, who is fifteen years my senior and a friend. All is well at least until my brother quits high school, joins the Army, goes to Nam and is killed. It's 1968. It feels like I'll never be able to finish school and that he's abandoned me — now I must shoulder the load for both of us. I must be "mujer" to work and go to school. I can't see how I'll ever get out. I apply for a transfer to the office in Kingsville so I can attend school there; I already have over ninety hours of junior college credit. Later, when I do move to Kingsville, I realize that the racism in the office had denied me the transfer. But I don't know why I am not transferred and believe it's that I'm not good enough or smart enough. Eventually a branch of Texas A&I University opens in Laredo at the community college campus, and I feel like the mountain has come to me; I won't have to leave — at least not yet. I will get a degree in spite of the geographical isolation and the institutionalized racism of the state's higher education system. To finish all the required courses for a degree in English and political science in secondary education, I must quit the office job so I can do my student teaching. During the long years of night school, some professors understand and let me take classes independently although it isn't policy; others are hard-nosed and skeptical of my ambition, don't trust me to make the grade. But I do and prove them wrong. I read Shakespeare till 3 A.M. and write history papers during lunch hours, and I still manage to have a life. I give myself the weekend for friends, Leticia, Gloria, Ani, Elvira, Becky, most of whom have already come home after getting degrees and now take classes for the hell of it. We hang out in Nuevo Laredo, go to the movies, read Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Marx, register voters, join the Raza Unida Party, dream of

what we'll do when we get on with our lives. Some of these same friends marry, move away; others stay home, take care of aging parents. Twenty years later they are teachers who still take a class now and then for the hell of it. I was the *atravida* that no one doubted, everyone trusted. Parents let their daughters go on trips if I was going — to Corpus to the beach, to Guadalupe, to Monterrey.

Finally, I graduate with my bachelor's degree. But I purposely do not fill out the paperwork required to get certified to teach in Texas public schools — I didn't want to fall into the trap of teaching and becoming stagnant as had happened to some of my friends who had returned from college only to become part of the system we had planned to change. I am bridesmaid to Berta, who marries and moves to Corpus; and to Elvira who marries and stays in Laredo. As I walk down the aisle I try it on for size, and I know that it'll never be for me — that being tied to a man is as alien to me as drinking gasoline. What's good for the car is not good for me. I know that marriage will become another trap. I avoid it.

In 1973, when I apply to the master's program in English and for the teaching assistantship in Kingsville and get both, I cry with regret and with joy. Regret because I really want to go to Stanford, where I've heard all the best teachers are, where I can live in the Bay Area and see plays, films, sit in a café drinking coffee and meeting others who write — Chicanas and Chicanos whom I read about in *El Grito*. Joy because at least I won't have to begin teaching at Martin High School in the fall and eventually apply for the certificate. I am gloriously happy when I move into a cottage in Kingsville with two housemates.

I exist on the periphery of all the drinking parties, the marijuana, the dances — *Tejano* and country — I am on a mission and I focus on my graduate classes. After one semester, I move and go live in a dump, but alone. I send money home from my meager TA's salary, and I feel guilty about the things I can't provide for my youngest siblings Geri and Celia and Ricky, but we manage. I cry every Saturday evening when I walk five blocks to the Circle K to call home on the pay phone and I hear those beloved voices. Sometimes they surprise me and arrive in Papi's white Ford station wagon, with two-year-old Nono my nephew in tow. I live simply, like a nun, and love the simplicity, the solitude, the peace. I don't miss the partying in Laredo, but I do miss my friends. I toy with becoming a Buddhist, spend hours meditating; but I still attend the Newman Center masses and even lead religious retreats patterned after the SEARCH retreats that I led in Laredo from 1970 to 1972. I work with Upward Bound in the summers, and finally in 1975 I move on.

The decision to apply to Ph.D. programs came as a surprise, for I didn't realize that's what I wanted. Dr. Hildegard Schmallenbeck, an English pro-

fessor in Kingsville, first put the idea in my head, and it felt comfortable but scary. One afternoon a classmate originally from Germany, Urte, an outsider like myself, and I spent hours talking about where we would go after the master's, and somehow, suddenly, I just knew I wasn't going back to teach at Laredo Junior College. When I broke the news to my family, Papi made me cry, accusing me of not wanting to come home, of having betrayed the family, of becoming too educated and being ashamed of them. Now I can understand his fears of losing a daughter to the academy, to an alien world. At the time, though, all I could do was feel guilt and hate and resentment. I was accepted by a number of schools in the Midwest — Ohio State, Kent State, Oklahoma — but not to the only school to which I had paid the application fee — Stanford. Alas, I wasn't destined to go there. At the urging of one of the VISTA workers in Laredo, I wrote to the English department at the University of Texas and received a curt letter painting a dismal picture of their graduates' futures, in effect discouraging me from applying. It was, however, Nebraska that asked me to apply. Professor Ralph Grajeda, a Chicano professor in their Department of English, called in early spring and talked to me about applying. The fact that a Chicano professor called made a difference; also, I must confess I felt flattered — they wanted me to apply. So I did. And although I got financial aid packages — mostly in the form of tuition reductions along with teaching assistantships — from other schools, Nebraska offered what I felt was the best deal: a teaching assistantship the first year, instructor level the second year, a flexible work plan so I could take courses and teach the classes I wanted. Nebraska made me what appeared, from 1200 miles away, an offer I couldn't refuse. In mid-April 1975 I announced to my father where I had chosen to go. He continued his tirade against my going anywhere. I grew suspicious, however, when within a couple of weeks he seemed calm and accepting. Soon I learned the reason for his change — the family had received a graduation announcement from a cousin living in Lincoln. I would be staying with family; it was okay to go to Nebraska.

My graduate work was arduous. Because I had not been exposed to much of what other students had and because, being the only Chicana/o in the department I felt a tremendous responsibility, I had to work much more than the other students. Yet I always felt I was just barely prepared. I also worked with the community, visited the prison, did translations, had a Spanish-language radio program, wrote poetry, and managed to keep a high grade point average. There were so many incidents in which I confronted racism that it would take a book to tell of all of them; suffice it to say that I made myself strong and thick-skinned — *hice concha* — to survive. I was still the same person, but I had grown; I had matured and had developed survival skills that served me well. No longer would I believe everything others thought or said about me and my

abilities. I would fend for myself and fight only those battles worth fighting. Many stories from my years in graduate school tell of the racism, the discrimination, the mentoring, and the support that made up that part of my life. I choose not to dwell on them. Maybe someday I will revisit those times and assess how much I've grown.

In 1979, when I received a Fulbright and went to Spain, I found out who my true friends were. Some of my classmates blatantly scorned, claiming that the only reason I had received anything was because I was Chicana. Some professors also expressed amazement, which made me question my abilities. Once I interacted with my fellow Fulbrighters in Spain, the doubts fell by the wayside. I realized I could hold my own with the other graduate students from Ivy League schools as well as from the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan.

My family was supportive but suspicious. Would I return? What was I doing over there? *¿I sola?* My father could never understand. I did return; in fact I came back from Madrid to Laredo to teach at Laredo State University, although I had not finished my dissertation. In 1980 I teach alongside professors who treat me as if I am still their student. I'm the only Chicana, in fact the only female in an academic division of arts and sciences composed of seven male faculty members. I have to speak up for women constantly, point out my colleagues' sexism and their off-handed comments that insulted and harassed women students and me.

For the next two years I worked on my dissertation whenever I could. Since I am a night person, I stayed in the office typing away on the old Smith-Corona that I had inherited from my old mentor, Dr. Briggs. The summer of 1981, Mami and my sister Elsa and her two kids, Nono and Klariza, came with me to Nebraska. While I worked, they took care of all my needs, visited with family and all in all provided support, doing my laundry, cooking; my sister even helped with some research and typing. Without their help, I would not have finished. In the fall of 1981 I still had not finished, and I began my second year of late-night sessions. After teaching all day, I worked on my dissertation. In 1982 I returned to Lincoln alone and determined to finish. But had it not been for invaluable help from the Ford Foundation Dissertation Completion project at the University of Michigan, I don't think I would have. As with many events in my life, it was pure serendipity, or as we say in Laredo, *para chiripada*, that led me to be a fellow that summer. I was in Lincoln housesitting for a professor at the University, Miguel, and his wife Chris Carranza, when I learned of the program. I was lucky to be able to spend an August in Ann Arbor working alongside others who like me lacked only finished dissertations to complete their doctorates. That was when I met Chicano and Chicana scholars including Pat Zavella, Chris Sierra, Laura Rendón, David Monte-

jano, Emilio Zamora, and Aída Hurtado. After a grueling writing schedule, I finished—mostly because Carlos Arce talked to me about the impossibility of the manuscript ever being the perfect one I was shooting for. “Let it go,” he advised, “it’s ready.” I did, and I went back to Lincoln to finish all the details, get the required signatures, and still make it to Laredo in time to begin the fall semester. Driving nonstop from Lincoln to Laredo, I arrived one evening in late August, to be greeted by Papi with open arms: “¿Ya acabaste m’ija?” and I burst into tears of exhaustion, relief, joy, “*Sí, al fin.*”

Reflection and Rebirth: The Evolving Life of a Latina Academic

Iris Ofelia López

Birth Pains/Growing Pains

ON A FRIGID DAY in January 1953, my mother arrived home at her three-room, cold-water flat from the factory where she worked, after picking up my older sister, Francesca, at the babysitter’s. As she stood in front of the tenement, fishing for her house keys in her pocketbook, a huge dog appeared out of nowhere, put his paws on her shoulders, and threw her off balance. She fell backward, flat on her back, but fortunately a mound of snow broke her fall. Because she was nine months pregnant, and my one-year-old sister had landed on top of her, she could not stand up. She lay there until a man walking down the street helped her to the apartment door.

Her labor pains began that night just as a blizzard hit the city. But she refused to let her cousin take her to the hospital because she feared she would be mistreated there as she had been during her first pregnancy. It became too late to call an ambulance; the roads were impassable. I was born at home the following morning and lay attached to my mother by the umbilical cord until the ambulance arrived. Two weeks after my birth, my mother returned to work at the clothing factory because my father was ill and we needed the income.

I sometimes consider this story a metaphor for my life, containing as it does the seeds of my work and most of the elements of my lifelong interest in questions about gender, poverty, ethnicity, family ties (literally and figuratively!), community support, reproductive rights, and the limited choices open to poor women. I became an anthropologist primarily because I wanted to write about the Puerto Rican experience in New York City as I knew it, not as it had been portrayed by others. As I look back, this story resonates with a deeper meaning of birth, the bringing forth of a more integral self-awareness