TELLING TO LIVE
Latina Feminist Testimonios

THE LATINA FEMINIST GROUP
Daughter of Bootstrap

Luz del Alba Acevedo

I was born in the era of Operation Bootstrap, some years after its official beginning according to historians. I witnessed the rapid and dramatic transformation of Puerto Rico into an industrial and urban center. I incarnate the Puerto Rican version of the baby boomers, which we used to call the “Carnation babies’ generation,” after the brand of evaporated milk that led the way in modern advertisement. Carnation Evaporated Milk came to substitute powdered milk as the food of choice for a generation of children of the upwardly mobile white- and blue-collar working classes.

Operation Bootstrap (a free translation of Operación Manos a la Obra—Operation Hands to the Task) is the name given to the set of policies that made up Puerto Rico’s industrialization and modernization program. Following the end of World War II, there was a massive and concerted political, social, economic, and human effort and investment to develop the island’s infrastructure and industrial capacity. A network of roads, electricity, telecommunications, and running water, as well as dams, office buildings, and new urban settlements, sprawled rapidly around the major urban centers of the island.

As the urban middle classes expanded, the two-income household became the norm. The burgeoning middle class embraced the modernization project articulated by Operation Bootstrap. Education and mass consumption became the fulcrum of upward mobility, the tickets that guaranteed the life described in the government slogan el progreso que se ve (the progress that you can see). Private schools proliferated as fast as expressways. Shopping malls (big and small) emerged as the favorite sites for mass consumption by the middle class. The supermercados (supermarkets) replaced the corner grocery stores. Kresge, K-mart, Gem, Zayre’s, and Woolworth became the general
stores. These were followed by other chain stores such as Sears and JC Penney’s, Tom McCann’s, Kinney’s, Baker’s.

I did not realize that I was a daughter of Bootstrap until I looked back on my life from the perspective of a migrant. I am the youngest in a family of four. Mom, Dad, my brother, and Cuco my sato dog, a mongrel mixed with German Shepherd, my father proudly remarked. My early childhood unfolded in Villa Palmeras, a working-class barrio of Santurce, where the houses were built from a combination of wood and cement blocks with cardboard interior divisions. My parents migrated to San Juan from the western towns of Adjuntas and Mayagüez, in search of the Bootstrap dream. My father became a civil servant, while my mother remained a homemaker, although she was a seamstress and dreamt of becoming a high-fashion couturier, like Carlota Alfaro (the famous Puerto Rican fashion designer). As mine was not a two-income household, it took us about ten years to realize one of the Bootstrap dreams, buying a house in one of the new middle-class suburban developments called urbanizaciones. I was about to become an adolescent when we finally moved to one of these urbanizaciones. There were lots of them, with shiny new cement homes, all alike, all perfectly square and lined up along carefully “planned” cement streets. There were urbanizaciones of all kinds and for all tastes, with American names (Country Club, Hyde Park), with Spanish names (Villa Andalucía, Villa Navarra), with names of rural allure (Lomas Verdes, Sierra Linda), and even names in Spanglish (Valle Arriba Heights, Sabana Gardens). These became the living quarters of the new white- and blue-collar workers.

It was in our new suburban home that I finally realized my lifelong dream of having a Christmas tree. A six-foot pine imported from Michigan or Canada was bought in the supermarket's parking lot and decorated with lights and ornaments bought at Sears. The decorations included a white spray that simulated snow. Yes, snow. Another one of those acquired fantasies made possible by movies with Spanish subtitles and dubbed TV series, and materialized when the Mayor of San Juan, Doña Felisa Rincón de Gautier, brought snow in airplanes for children to play in at the San Juan International Airport. I missed the spectacle of snow falling in the tropics because my father would not allow me to go to such an event. This “happening,” broadcast on television, became part of my generation’s collective memory.

American fast food and Spanglish are also products of Bootstrap. Puerto Rican fast food, cuchifritos (fried pig's intestines) and other fried foods (rellenos, alcapurrias), was replaced by Burger King, McDonald’s, Big Boy, and Tastee Freez. Arroz con pollo and fricasé de pollo (chicken with rice and stewed chicken) were quickly replaced by Kentucky Fried Chicken, Golden Skillet, and Church’s Fried Chicken. In looking back on my life, this must have pre-
pared me for migration. Although my cravings for *cuajo* (pig’s stomach) and *mofongo* (mashed fried green plantains) never ceased, I was content with a Whopper or a KFC at the end of a long day.

Party politics was very much part of the environment created by these quick transformations. The *caravanas* (car rallies) became part of the modern political campaign. Long lines of American cars (Chevrolets, Buicks, Fords) drove in caravans down expressways and rural roads, flying party banners in red, blue, or green from the windows, their horns honking frantically, and loud-speakers on the roof of the lead car broadcasting party slogans and jingles: “*Jalda arriba va cantando el popular*” (“The Popular climbs the hill, singing,” the theme song of the Popular Democratic Party), or “*Esto tiene que cambiar*” (“Things must change,” the slogan of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party), or “*Nuestro es el futuro . . . nuestro es el derecho a la libertad*” (“The future is ours . . . the right to liberty is ours,” the jingle of the Independence Party). This scene was repeated every four years, adding social excitement with a folkloric twist to the already hip urban life. The banners showed people’s affiliation to political parties as well as their stance toward the unresolved issue of Puerto Rico’s political status. A red face of a *jibaro* (peasant) painted over a white banner represented Commonwealth, a blue *palma* (a coconut palm tree) represented Statehood, and a white cross over a solid green flag, Independence. Nowadays, Puerto Rican politics still continues the campaign tradition of singing in the streets. Instead of loudspeakers on the roofs of cars, pickup trucks are equipped with amplifiers, blasting music through every community, stopping for hours at the street corners, playing the competing slogans along with popular music, especially *merengues*, the product of our most recent migration, the Dominicans.

Spanglish, as well as code switching, became commonplace in my generation. It was not uncommon for me to speak Spanglish, especially among friends, because it served as a statement of difference. Two factors reinforced this emerging language form: relatives who migrated and the radio broadcasts of *tus canciones favoritas en inglés* (the hit parade), which included songs by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. “She Loves You Yeah, Yeah, Yeah” played alongside Ruth Fernández’s “La Bomba” or Tito Rodríguez’s “Tiemblas,” a bolero from the hit album in Spanish *From Tito with Love*. These songs seduced the minds of the young generation that began to sing English songs with a Spanish accent or songs in Spanish translated from the English. *La Nueva Ola* was the hit matinee TV show where these hybrids came to life in the voices of teenage idols: Celines, Pepe Luis, Luvecita Benítez, Tammy, and Julio Angel.

But most significant of all was the impact of the Fania All Stars salsa music. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Latinos such as Willie Colón, Ray Barreto, Héctor Lavoe, Ismael Miranda, Pete El Conde, Celia Cruz, Johnny Pacheco,
and, of course, *el judío maravilloso* (the marvelous Jew), Larry Harlow, made the first Latin opera Hommy, parts of which appeared in the first hit film in Spanglish, *Our Latin Thing/Nuestra Cosa*. I remembered watching this film four times in a row. I also used to go to the live salsa concerts of the Fania All Stars at the Hiram Bithorn Stadium with my two best girlfriends in school. My girlfriends (one white and another *trigueña*) were Spanglish-speaking, New York-born Puerto Ricans who came to the island as teenagers with their returning migrant parents. There was always debate about the difference in the dancing styles and salsa music culture among Puerto Rican *salseros* in New York and on the island. But, as usual, the resolution to these discursive conflicts was to be found on the dance floor. There, the difference made no difference! We were all *salseras*.

In accordance with my parents’ modern mentality, I was thoroughly schooled. I went to the best school a civil servant’s salary—and his annual loans—could buy, a private Catholic school. This was an extremely expensive proposition, an economic burden shared by the entire family. My grandmother and her sister on my father’s side were the ideological enforcers of the modern mentality that valued education. Based on their personal experiences working as a social worker in the rural areas and a school teacher in the public school system, they appealed to my father’s sense of paternal duty and coaxed him to enroll and keep us in a private school even if it meant no food on the table. We never went without food, literally, but there were times that the only food was *arroz blanco con garbanzos* (rice and chick peas). I hated that meal! But every two weeks or so *la línea* (a car from the public transportation line from Adjuntas to San Juan) would come by our house to deliver a care package from my grandmother: one or two *racimos de guineos verdes* (bunches of green bananas), a box of *viandas* (root vegetables), and a couple of five-pound cans of butter from *la PRERA* (the federal agency that distributed surplus food in the 1940s, later on distributed by the Social Welfare Office, where my grandmother worked as a social worker). It was exciting to hear the horn of the *público* bringing the goodies from my grandmother. Green bananas with olive oil and *bacalao* (salted codfish) were a delightful alternative to rice and chickpeas with no *patitas* (pig’s feet). This “in kind” contribution to our staple diet was the way my father’s family subsidized the high cost of private schooling. The rewards of these economic “sacrifices” were reaped at the end of the school year and during graduation (sixth, eighth, and twelfth grades), when the glowing report cards were received and my name appeared on the honors lists. My achievements were dutifully celebrated by my grandmother, who made a trip in *la línea* to attend our graduations and other celebrations. Like other Puerto Ricans I later saw at airports in New York and Chicago, grandma came loaded with big cardboard boxes tied with rope and full of *guineos verdes*, of course, and candies and gifts for the family.
Attending private school was a difficult economic enterprise laden with social contradictions. The competition was not only academic but social. In a private Catholic school, my peers were mainly from the white upper-middle classes. They belonged to exclusive clubs such as La Casa de España (a hanging place for people from the school sorority), or La Casa Cuba (the hangout for upper-class Cuban exiles). They celebrated their “sweet fifteen” (not sweet sixteen) birthday parties in glamorous hotel ballrooms. In contrast, I was the poor *trigueña*, the dark-skinned girl who lived in a barrio and later moved to a remote working-class *urbanización*. Using her skills as a seamstress, my mother always managed to negotiate the social difference that existed between our life and that of my schoolmates. My mother was my chaperone at all school activities and dances, where she proudly bragged about the uniqueness of my clothes, carefully designed and tailored by her. Her sewing skills were indeed unmatched by the recently arrived off-the-rack boutique dresses; she was indeed the Carlota Alfaro of the working classes. In the realm of clothing and physical appearance, an important terrain for social competition among the youth, I had a distinct advantage of a mom who put into practice her finer sewing skills. In shielding me in the field of social competition, my mother also realized her dreams of “haute couture.” Her dresses were celebrated by my classmates, and she made me feel like a glamour girl. Although I did not hang out in the exclusive clubs, the social differences among classmates were not my consuming obsession. Good grades were.

The color of my skin was an issue, creating a strange twist of national pride with racism. The male peers in my class called me *Taina* because my features resembled what Puerto Ricans think of as “Indian.” This label defined me as an exotic and sensuous prey on the verge of extinction. Even the *piropos* I would get from men, as I walked or crossed the streets, alluded to the image of the *Taino* Indians: “India chula, qué buena tú estás, negra” (“India baby, you’re really hot”). These insulting, offensive, and harassing remarks, filled with racial and ethnic undertones, provoked in me mixed feelings of rage and shame. The burden of these experiences led me to retreat from the social life of my school despite my mother’s willingness to mediate the social tensions. I chose to hide in my room with my books during most of my high school and university years. My reclusive behavior was accepted as long as I kept achieving in school and lived up to my mother’s expectations of becoming like my father, an educated “professional.” I believe that my mother never realized the meaning and implications of her desires until much later.

Ironically, in the context of the emerging modernity and middle-class consumerism, the extended family ties of my rural migrant parents facilitated the income-pooling strategy and personal frugality that enabled me to acquire an education. Education was worth the economic sacrifices. In my parents’ way of thinking, education was the ticket to my future in more ways than one:

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upward mobility for me and an insurance policy in case my husband *me saliera malo* (turned out to be a bum), since my destiny was to be married and have children as my parents did. But life takes many turns, and as it turned out I did not become a lawyer as they wished, my husband did not turn out to be a bum, and I did not “give” my parents a litter of grandchildren. Instead, I went on to study in England and the United States and became a political scientist, a job my parents never quite understood, except for the teaching part.

My decision to attend graduate school abroad in England was met with ambivalent opposition by my father. My parents had an unspoken fear that we would grow apart. As an undergraduate student, I lived at home and spent most of my time with books. I was seen as a model student and daughter who did not date often and went out mostly with female friends, one of whom was an older woman (ten or twelve years older), who shared with me her life experiences and took on the role of a big sister. My education ceased to be an economic burden. I got reduced tuition for making the dean’s honors list, which released the economic pressure of taking out an annual loan to pay school tuition.

But my desires to pursue graduate studies in the social sciences, rather than go to law school, threatened to alter the family order. I became a disobedient and a subversive daughter affirming the modern ambition of attaining a degree, an educational project that they had instilled in me for years, but through a path that they never anticipated. Going to England was out of the question. That was something they could not imagine. My father and mother must have felt like Dr. Frankenstein. Yes, I was going to study; yes, I was opting for a career. But where? I patiently and stoically resisted my father’s authoritarianism and peculiar ways of opposing my desires. I stood firm and unmovable for two long months of his silence, indifference, sarcasm, and accusations of *tú estás loca* (you are crazy). My mind was made up. They had succeeded all too well in making me an educated and independent woman. When a telegram accepting me to graduate school in the land of the Beatles came to the door of our house, four days later my parents and relatives from every point on the island took me to the airport. I was gone.

I still can hear my aunt’s words of farewell (she was a school principal in Adjuntas, who got a university degree attending summer programs and Saturday classes, while my mother took care of my cousin and my uncle): “If I could turn back the clock of my life, I would do exactly the same thing you are doing today.” Her words of support reflected, in a way, the promise of progress made by Operation Bootstrap to her generation. I always felt that my aunt aspired to become what she thought I was becoming, a fearless woman who would travel the world capable of challenging the gender expectations that had tied her to family tradition and rural life in spite of her professional
achievements. This marked the beginning of my journey as an extranjera y peregrina (a foreigner and a pilgrim), a woman migrant in pursuit of the Bootstrap dream, only now outside the geographical boundaries of the island.

My studies abroad awakened me to ethnic and racial dilemmas I had never confronted. In England I was defined as an international student. This was a label that allowed me to be different racially and culturally. I spent most of the time with my Brazilian girlfriend who only spoke Portuguese. I lived for a while in the house of a Chilean exiled couple and spent hours with the Venezuelan crowd. This experience allowed me to discover my Latin American identity. And then I was discovered by first- and second-generation Indian and Pakistani migrants. My physical features resembled those of women from these countries. Yet my fully Westernized appearance and demeanor were looked upon by some with great curiosity. I felt that some Indian and Pakistani men looked at me as a kind of renegade who did not fit their cultural and gender expectations. As I strolled in the streets and wandered in the markets I was approached and addressed in a language unknown to me, and when I could not respond, I was looked upon with disbelief. I also realized then that the negative reactions of some British shop attendants were rooted on my “Eastern” appearance. I became part of the colonial “other” for the British and discovered their racist side.

Racial dilemmas intensified when I moved to the United States and traded labels. I was no longer an international student but a black Puerto Rican woman. This was the label I was given by a Polish man working as a building superintendent in Chicago. When I went to see an apartment for rent I was greeted with the phrase “No blacks are allowed here.” A week into my arrival on the “mainland,” race had become the strongest defining feature of my identity. I remember that during a discussion with my thesis advisors, I defined myself as a black woman and one of them wasted no time in replying, “No you are not! You are a Puerto Rican?” At that moment I felt that I was required to make an impossible choice between race and ethnicity, as if they could not coalesce in a defining self. Later on, after I became a professor, this tension became an excruciating issue. For some of my colleagues and students I was a positive role model who embodied the gender, race, and ethnic trinity, while others defined me as the insubordinate other. The racial complexities and ethnic prejudices encountered in my academic and professional journey as a Puerto Rican black woman were not part of the instruction manual handed to the migrant children of Bootstrap.

My journey back to the island, in 1995, has made me realize that I am a woman whose view of the world was deeply affected by the modernity project of Operation Bootstrap. I do not see Bootstrap as a good or a bad program but as a political project that affected people’s lives differently. For Puerto Rican

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women on both sides of the ocean, modernity implied different life options and meant radically different things. The values of modernity gave me the strength to survive a pilgrimage. I had a sense of direction despite the vagaries of life. At the same time, the racial, ethnic, sexist, academic, and professional experiences I lived empowered me to confront the vestiges of my contradictory heritage as the daughter of Bootstrap.

As a society, Puerto Rico is not what the architects of Bootstrap envisaged. It can be described as a peripheral postmodern society. The modern coexists with the postmodern. Class, race, and gender identities coexist with new identities shaped by consumption, new-age spiritualism, and lifestyles (surfers, rappers, rockers, auto club identities, etc.). Each morning we wake up listening to the never-ending news of yet another victim of domestic violence, child abuse, corruption in the high circles of government, killings, and police takeovers of public housing to control gangs. Political campaigns are not concerned with the traditional means of political persuasion but with selling carefully crafted images of a young governor whose appeal is not the “modern sense and sensibility” but the postmodern allure of living la vida loca, life in the fast lane. The politics of peripheral postmodernity contrast sharply with the rational pretenses of the project of modernity. The governor campaigns going from one beach to another in a highly polluting jet ski, delivers one-line speeches while singing and dancing to Ricky Martin’s worldwide pop hit song La Copa de la Vida. He arrives in jeans, riding a bike to the electoral college, and when the political campaign is over, the governor amuses the public by rappelling in caves at a tourist recreational site. As we are entertained by this style of political leadership, corrupt public officials and civil servants swindle money from AIDS programs to finance their personal consumption and political campaigns. Super-moms, of all types, married, divorced, single, heterosexual, and lesbian, all of them white and middle class, are coming out to put “the house in order” and rescue the country from collapse. Women have become politicians and are competing with men and other women in electoral politics for the highest positions at all levels of government.

At the personal level, I have rediscovered the love of an aging mother who has a hard time understanding what I have become, a professional woman, the very thing she wanted me to become. I am not what she envisioned in her dream of modernity. My mother, who endured my father’s verbal abuses, the family hardships, and loneliness, believes that daughters, unlike sons, are supposed to take care of mothers and surround them with grandchildren. I have come home to face the contradictions of modernity and must reconcile myself to an identity forged in multiple cultural sites through experiences of difference. Almost fifty years after my mother left Mayaguez, we visited her hometown. Things had changed but they were neither better nor worse, they just
were. You cannot go home again. Home is wherever you are and whatever you have become. It is not the place: it is the memories that inspire a life course that ties us down or sets us free. Recordar es volver a vivir; only this time remembering was an act of re-living differences within ourselves and with others. In the visit to my mother’s hometown we realized that difference was the source of our strength and that what has brought us together is an act of love, not family obligation or sociocultural imposition. We finally understood that the pursuit of the Bootstrap dreams set our lives apart and contradictorily shaped our identities in ways neither of us ever imagined.

I am, indeed, a daughter of Bootstrap. My parents, willingly or not, participated in the process of producing the conditions of modernity espoused in the political project of Operation Bootstrap. I participated more as a consumer of modernity than a producer of it, and I had to endure the trials of living with new values, rules, norms, and social expectations regarding modern life. My identity reflects the contradictions brought by the process of socioeconomic and cultural transformation that shaped my life experiences and determined the opportunities that paved the way to the woman I have become. The woman I have become, in turn, represents a site of political struggle over the definition of self that synthesizes the national and transnational dimensions that determine my experience as a Puerto Rican woman regardless of the geographical spaces I occupy. I am a woman, a professor, a daughter, a wife, a Puerto Rican. Not a mother, not an American, not a migrant anymore, but a wanderer at heart. I have enjoyed the journey but I have not yet arrived. There is still more to come and this papelito is just at the midpoint.
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TELLING TO LIVE: LATINA FEMINIST TESTIMONIOS
published by Duke University Press 2001

Loretta J. Williams, Ph.D., Director
Latina studies/Memoir

_Telling to Live_ embodies the vision that compelled Latina feminists to engage their differences and find common ground. Its contributors reflect varied class, religious, ethnic, racial, linguistic, sexual, and national backgrounds. Yet in one way or another they are all professional producers of _testimonios_—or life stories—whether as poets, oral historians, literary scholars, ethnographers, or psychologists. Through coalitional politics, these women have forged feminist political stances about generating knowledge through experience. Reclaiming _testimonio_ as a tool for understanding the complexities of Latina identity, they compare how each made the journey to become credentialed creative thinkers and writers. _Telling to Live_ unleashes the clarifying power of sharing these stories.

The complex and rich tapestry of narratives that comprises this book introduces us to an intergenerational group of Latina women who negotiate their place in U.S. society at the cusp of the twenty-first century. These are the stories of women who struggled to reach the echelons of higher education, often against great odds, and constructed relationships of sustenance and creativity along the way. The stories, poetry, memoirs, and reflections of this diverse group of Puerto Rican, Chicana, Native American, Mexican, Cuban, Dominican, Sephardic, mixed-heritage, and Central American women provide new perspectives on feminist theorizing, perspectives located in the borderlands of Latino cultures.

_"Telling to Live" is a groundbreaking text—important in its outreach, inclusiveness, and power—that expands, qualifies, complicates, and illuminates the ground of our discourse the way the best texts do—through transformative narratives, stories, and poems that resist the neat paradigms and -isms of our time. It is also a text that will fill an alarming gap in the academy, where silence or simplification of Latina perspectives still prevails._

—JULIA ALVAREZ, author of _How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents_

_"Twenty years after the publication of _This Bridge Called My Back_, this stunning collection of writings by Latina feminists raises the stakes of collaboration across race, class, nation, and sexuality. _Telling to Live_ challenges prevailing research practices and forges a model of deep collaboration for future generations of scholars._—ANGELA Y. DAVIS, author of _Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday_