

Latina Landscape: Queer Toronto

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Photo by Joe Paczuski

Setting

Lengua Latina meets in room 34 on the third floor of The 519 Church Street Community Centre, Toronto, Canada, Aztlán.¹

Underneath the floor is a century old ballroom, “once considered to have ‘the best dance floor in Toronto.’”²

Underneath the ceiling of this present day auditorium, “one can still find the letters ‘GC’ engraved in the plaster border,” for the illustrious Granite Club that commissioned the building.

Underneath was an enlistment centre and drill hall for soldiers leaving to fight World War II.

Underneath lies the East Room, where German musicians of the 1930’s played the piano for their friends “until the wee small hours.”³

Underneath, before there was electricity, there were once ice-men artisans who “spread” “beautiful checkerboard” skating rinks across the length of winter nights.⁴

Underneath are the playgrounds of the rich and famous of the late 19th century, “greens... recognized...to be among the finest in Canada.”

Underneath is land given as a gift by the first British Lieutenant of Upper Canada to a friend to ensure wealth for his family for generations.⁵

Underneath is a park named for one of Toronto’s wealthiest founding fathers, now the cruising ground for gay men.

Underneath is land traveled and settled by Anishnabi, Haudenosaune (Iroquois), Huron, Erie, Petuns and Neutrals. It is rich earth with a moderate climate and abundant food supplies, where “many cultures and peoples met” for trading, recreation, hunting, farming, and healing,” “not dissimilar to the Mediterranean in the Old World.”

Underneath is land that “supported many different types of habitat, which in turn supported various forms of wildlife such as fish, beaver, muskrats and frogs in the rivers, streams and lakes, deer and caribou in the forest, and various kinds of fowl in the trees.”⁶

Underneath is the roaring of the subway and the silence of buried rivers.⁷

Underneath is a pathway traveled for 12,000 years.

Underneath there are Aboriginal footprints and bones.

Introduction

The places in which we live, learn, shop, and play are more than simply buildings; they represent outcomes of social relations that we take for granted.⁸

A group of Latinas⁹ sat down one day around a wooden table on the third floor of a downtown Toronto community center, lit candles and began to write. We came together through a flier I created inviting all Latinas interested in writing. On the second meeting, we named ourselves Lengua Latina (Latin Tongue). Lengua Latina is a structure established by women of diverse Latin American origins to answer a need for expression and community in Canada. As many as ten of us at any given time wrote and performed together for over six years.¹⁰ The 519 Church Street Community Centre was the foundation of

our learning.¹¹ The building and geography drew us together.

How did we come to learn together in this building and on this land? How did our histories and identities motivate our travels? I suppose we were fleeing as much as we were searching. We arrived as an answer to a call for Latina identity in Toronto. Each woman's journey was her own, but there were shared tendencies and conditions: a resistance to colonization, an insistence upon women's strength, and a liberation within queer life.

Quests [1-4]

By quests for identity I refer to personal (and sometimes collective, as in the case of nationalisms) journeys through space and time—material, psychic, and at a variety of scales—that are constructed internally as being about the search for an integrated wholeness as individual humans living in some kind of community...¹²

1. *Rivers*

The science of colonization was consumed with the ordering of the world, the charting of land, water, animals, plants, people. Building upon Carl Linnaeus' categorization of plants (family, genus, species) naming and slotting every plant he could get his hands on, John Burke then rendered humanity into five categories: Wild man, Asiatic, European, American, African. Individual identities were eliminated and replaced with group behaviours, the Europeans possessing the only desirable characteristics; the others were in such a diminished state as to justify the need for Europeans to govern them. Within the confines of grids, the uncertainties, contradictions, and complexities could be cut away, eliminated. The neatly ordered universe was easier to contain, name, and ultimately possess. The colonized land was cut open, parceled, sold. The colonized peoples fought against the force of armies and knowledge that would have them surrender their humanity.¹³

I trace the colonization of Toronto along the markings of lost rivers. In a map of Toronto designed by surveyors Alexander Aitkin and Joseph Bouchette in 1793,¹⁴ large black charcoal veins wrap themselves around this land. The black representing the water is ubiquitous and unruly. The Don and Humber Rivers appear to be the most insistent. These rivers are what linked the peoples of the North and West to the Toronto landscape. It is land valued for millennia by virtue of the waterways that lead to it, forming it. The tiny city grid that the surveyors drew to contain this land is vague and ridiculous compared to these coal markings. When Monica Bodirsky, the program coordinator at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto told me the histories she knew, she spoke of how numerous and powerful these rivers had been. As the child of a suburban desert, I asked with naiveté where they went, how does one go about eliminating rivers?

"You bury them," she responds to my shock.

Rivers filled over. Rivers searching for alternative paths deep beneath us. Lost rivers. When I walk the city I can sometimes hear the water moving but I cannot find it. The City of Toronto recommends “inserting inscribed ‘stones’ or ‘plates’ in sidewalks or streets to commemorate a lost river.” City planning today involves the recognition of what city planning before has destroyed. “During pre-Contact times, watercourses were active sources of life-sustaining fluid and also served as highways if the stream was large enough.” It is no longer legal to build on rivers, nor on top of buried rivers. “Maps of lost or buried streams” are used to protect them, as well as to find archeological sites for ancient Aboriginal lives.¹⁵ And for modern Aboriginal peoples, if there was any doubt that their fishing rights in the area have been disrespected, I would think that the mass burying of rivers clarifies just how thoroughly.

It is the water of Toronto which shapes the historical novel *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje. It is a Macedonian man swinging from the half-finished Bloor Street Viaduct high above the Don Valley River; it is Italian, Greek, Irish, and Black men “dig[ging] underneath one of the largest lakes in North America beside a hissing lamp, racing with the speed of their shadows.” It is the poor and the immigrants building the empire with their bodies pounding against water and land: “The grunt into hard clay. The wet slap. Men burning rock and shattering it wherever they come across it. Filling hundreds of barrels with liquid mud and hauling them out of the tunnel.” It is the poor and immigrants who have built Toronto the city. Because geography is so very undisciplined, manipulating it is difficult work. Those who draw the grids, who reduce the complexity of the land and water into squares, are generally not the ones who make the physical alterations. Part of the colonial project is finding people to build what has been drawn on these maps.

But water is “life-sustaining liquid,” and while colonial projects attempt to control it, it continues to be the location for peace, pleasure, and revolution of the people. Ondaatje shows a humanity in his novel: beautiful and flawed individuals finding meaning through their relationships to land and water. Ondaatje is showing specific communities and he is imagining the lives of the immigrants who built this city. These immigrants are not the biological ancestors of today’s Latinas, but they shaped both the nation and a non-British immigrant’s position within it. He presents Toronto from the early twentieth century as the intensely international communities that reflect Toronto today, “he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew.” It is his image of a community gathering that I read my first year living in Toronto which inspired my research:

An hour after dusk disappeared into the earth the people came in silence, in small and large families, up the slope towards the half-built waterworks. Emerging from darkness, mothlike, walking towards the thin rectangle of the building’s southern doorway...Inside the building they moved in noise and light. It was an illegal gathering of various nationalities and the noise of machines camouflaged their activity from whoever might have been passing along Queen Street a hundred

yards away. Many languages were being spoken...The four-piece band was playing by the stage. It was a party and a political meeting, all of them trespassing, waiting now for speeches and entertainment.¹⁶

Beside the water, hidden behind the noise of machines, there are communities resisting authority, listening to music, creating life and art, bringing together histories from across the world.

Beside the flowing water Aboriginal life is found;¹⁷ it is where immigrants work through colonial visions, and where Marisol, the daughter of the Americas, landed after the length of her swim.

2. *Marisol*

We, the women of Lengua Latina, have been influenced as much by the land as the colonizations of this land. Marisol is our collective hero; she is the young girl we imagined as the birth and goddess of Latinas in Canada; she is our navigator. She uses the water to escape the danger. Given the history of this land, the rivers that have brought migrants here for thousands of years, I do not think it is a coincidence that Marisol arrived here, nor each of our members from across the Americas.

Marisol emerged from a writing exercise in which I instructed everyone to pull out a piece of paper that could be torn. On the first piece, I asked them to write the name of a female character, write an age, a fear she possesses, an activity she loves to do. They then tore the piece off and threw it into a pile. Then I asked them to begin writing on another piece of paper a location, a time of day, the temperature, the smell. They then tore these and threw them into a second pile. Finally, each member drew one character and one location from the piles to use as their writing prompts. And it was through this process that Marisol, la hija de las Americas, was born. Two personal narratives were produced, and as a group we determined other ideas for pieces that could connect them. Marisol led our subsequent performance at a local lesbian art show in 2002:

“Marisol: Hija de las Americas”: *an excerpt of a short play*

Setting: A downtown Toronto art gallery with broad hardwood floors. A red brick castle along a stretch of nightclubs. A former factory renovated into huge studio rooms. It is a hot and humid summer night. The packed room (mostly women, many lesbians) is sweating in tank tops. A group of Latinas stands on a makeshift stage, performing the lines of a new collaborative script.

(A soundtrack of the ocean’s rhythm fills the room then fades.)

- Marisol is the girl who escaped.

- They say she swam right across Llorona’s shores, that she swam the length of the Americas.

- The lands were full of war.

- But Coyolxauqui protected her, pushed the ocean through her limbs.

- She is la hija de las Americas

- que nació en el sur
- lives in the North
- y no es ni de aqui, ni de allá

(Ranchero music rises. The Latinas reposition themselves on the stage. Marisol remains. She is a brown woman with dark braids who stands confidently near the edge of the stage, delivering her clever adventure story. She is in her mid-twenties, but with swimming goggles across her forehead, and a child's voice, she appears to be eight or nine years old. She speaks to another brown woman who has long dark curly hair and is playing the part of her abuelita, her grandmother who guides her. A light-skinned, shorthaired narrator woman stands to the side.)
 Abuelita: In a time of guerra y tristeza nació mi pequeña Marisol, with her came happiness.

Narrator: Marisol le da dulcura y nacimiento al mar y al sol. Wise soul, navegante de la vida a la edad de nueve años. Nadadora de los rios y mares

Abuelita: She comes home every day after school and tells me her secrets. She's full of stories.

Marisol: Lita, I decided today that I don't like boys.

Abuelita: Mi pequeña Marisol, already a little fighter. Ella no tiene miedo de decir nada.

Marisol: Abuelita told me that girls aren't supposed to kiss girls, right after I told her that I am going to marry Melisa, because see, Melisa wants to be a poet, and I want to be a swimmer, so we figured it all out, she's going to write while I swim. She'll write about me in the water and I'll swim and swim and swim until I am the best swimmer ever and some big man up in America pays me to tell my story of how I swam with her on my back all the way across the Atlantic ocean as she wrote her poems. I know it sounds silly, but my Lita, the same one that told me I couldn't marry Melisa also told me that if I believe in something badly enough, it will come true.¹⁸

Marisol is an example of a collective historical legend and current community production. She is all naïveté and daring. She is a piece of our childhoods, and the girl we have created, as displaced adults, to lead us. Part poetry and story, part history and mythology, she embodies our migrations spread across Latin America, the United States and Canada. The search for a sense of home along these thousands of miles involves loss and survival, the imagination to immigrate, and the creativity to regroup memories, bodies and land.

Marisol is the hero of our short play, one tough little girl, doing all the hard work necessary to care for the women around her. We have high expectations of Marisol: she gracefully survives sexism, heterosexism and war. The contemporary wars of Latin America, such as in Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and Argentina, are in part the consequences of European colonization and more recent U. S. imperialism. They have created dangerous living conditions and often prompted Latina/o immigration to Canada. Marisol is driven as much by young, queer desire, her love of Melisa, as her will to survive these wars and succeed in another land:

Abuelita: From cooking tortillas

Narrator: To analyzing los sistemas de poder

Abuelita: Las tradiciones no nos pueden vencer! (pause). Mi pequeña Marisol is my pride. She is growing now, and welcoming womynhood to her door
Narrator: Marisol will be a swimmer de la vida, swimming up the lakes and rivers until her arms become tired. To the world has been born
Abuelita: una valiente revolucionaria!¹⁹

In forming her, we conceive of richer lives for ourselves. As Chicana theorist Emma Perez explains, “Many of us try with our passions to reconstruct the epics, dramas, comedies, and tragedies in a narrative that will echo ‘truth.’”²⁰ If we lack histories of our ancestors, if we were too young to remember our own journeys, if our parents and grandparents offer some pieces of the past but we hunger for more, then we must come together and write new legends from our imaginations. (As for Marisol, la hija de las Americas, she takes no chances. She carries Melisa, her poet scribe on her back, as she swims across the oceans.)

3. *Monica*

In June 2000, Monica located Lengua Latina and became one of its first members. Her mother “went through hell and back to bring me to a country, not speaking the language and being like twenty-years old herself.” Emigrating from Colombia, Canada is the nation where Monica and her mother have landed and build their lives. Their reception on this land has often been less than hospitable. As Monica explains, “I know what it is to be the little kid standing in front of my mother in a K-Mart store when they’re talking to her like she’s nothing, and that’s difficult.” Incidents of disrespect are systemic. They are examples of the legacy of continental colonialism. The colonization of the Americas has been a complex process. At its core is violence waged against Indigenous peoples, lands and knowledge by European peoples. However, like a crime gone wrong, the consequences multiply; numerous bystanders become complicit and/or damaged. I believe that the nothingness sensed by Monica, a horrible recognition of the treatment of one’s parent, and oneself, is part of the fall-out; mundane social encounters loaded with potential questions and hazards: What meanings does Latina hold for Canadians? Why would Latinas be met with disrespect?

Latinas converge upon the Toronto landscape as descendants of both colonizers and Indigenous peoples, holding conflicted membership in the Americas. Given Canada’s colonial legacy, this nation receives Latinas with mixed feelings. Our treatment is as variable as our colouring. Because many Latinas (and other immigrants) share Indigenous colouring and features with the Indigenous peoples residing within Canadian boundaries, they can be subjected to similar acts of racism.²¹ Our mixed race status also contributes to a conflicted relationship of both insider and outsider to Canadian land. Most Latinas are not native to the land contained by the precise national boundaries, but many know themselves to be partially descended

from Indigenous peoples of the larger Americas. By bloodline we probably share the most similar ancestry with the Métis, even as we are often understood to be part of Canada's multicultural immigrants.

To compound governmental policies of colonization, Hollywood offers a cultural invasion. In order to maintain power over its massive supply of Mexican workers, U.S. economic and military force is supplemented with Hollywood Latina/o stereotypes, "bandits and buffoons, whores and exotic clowns, Latin Lovers and Dark Ladies marks them as symbols of ethnic exclusion."²² As huge consumers of Hollywood productions, what are the results for the Canadian imagination?

Such an onslaught of colonial histories and cultural production not only affect how other Canadians view Latina Canadians, but also how we view ourselves. In the most upsetting moment in my research, Monica spoke about the images of Latinas who appear on her television:

Monica: I've never seen a Latina do anything. I can barely find a feminist Latina who I can speak to on a daily basis...and the few Latinas I see on T.V., like we were watching that show *Nip & Tuck*...and for the first time they showed a woman who maybe looked more Colombian than what they usually show. And I was feeling like, wow, she's here, fine she's here to get plastic surgery, but maybe this will be different than—And it turned out she was carrying the cocaine in her breast, right. I knew it would always turn into cocaine. And after that I'm like, change the channel, like could it ever not be about cocaine? But my whole thing was like, for a second I'm like, that's pretty cool, watching a Colombian woman do something on T.V. other than drug related. And I was...disappointed about that. Like double, double implants in each breast, isn't that awful?

The Hollywood depiction is a double violation, attacking Latina/o values and inserting poison into an actual woman's body. While this particular manifestation of colonialist imagery may be new, Latina and Indigenous bodies have been perceived as open and available for European desire and violence since the Spanish first arrived. For Columbus, colonizing land and women became synonymous in his diary, both were "beauty and fertility," both awaiting his "possession and domination."²³

Monica responds to these unwelcome appearances in her living room with revulsion. She turns away from this innovative rape of another Latina. She hungers for a reflection of herself as a Latina in the world, one that resembles some element of the reality of her life. Part of this absence is due to the poor imagery of Latinas produced in North American contexts, and part is due to having left Latin America, not having daily access to an abundance of Latinas of all types. She describes her need to encounter other Latinas on and off screen as "starvation," "never, ever [having been] exposed to a strong Latina in any way, not on T.V., not in the media, not like in music, art, school." It is the hunger for rich, full stories of one's people, an overwhelming physical need for connection, that drive many marginalized individuals to write²⁴ and to seek writing communities.

She wanted to speak and write with other Latina feminists in order to counter the effects of isolation and colonization. Colonization affects how we speak, write, dream, relate to others, and imagine ourselves in the world. If the characteristics of the land itself offer some insight into how our group came to gather here, the colonization of these lands plays a significant role in our practice, in the content and motivation of our writing and conversation.

Chicana writer Cherrié Moraga discovers the muse of her work in Aztec Mythology, specifically “the hungry woman...the story that has never been told truly, the story of that hungry Mexican woman who is called puta/bruja/jota/loca because she refuses to forget that her half-life is not a natural-born fact.”²⁵ It is a refusal to settle for anything less than humanity and risk the consequences of resistance. It is Monica recognizing that they made a monster of her on screen, and searching the city and searching inside herself for the evidence to disprove them. And when a Latina is hungry, searching the streets of Toronto for feminism, Monica will tell you that the only sensible thing for her to do is to head downtown.

As a feminist Latina, she believed she could find others like her downtown rather than in the suburbs, “I mean if there is a call out in Mississauga for Latinas to make empanadas I mean that’s not me. I wouldn’t have been there. I’m not religious. I’m not, like you know, there’s not twenty crucifixes in my house, it’s just a different mindset.” Monica is more engaged by Colombian politics and artists than “dancing at the Latino club every Friday night,” interests that led one suburban Latino to question her authenticity as a Latina. Latina Canadian geography is a suburban dance hall as well as a downtown activist organization. While Latina feminists may actually inhabit every corner of Canada, not only the downtown core, Monica’s words speak to the perceptions and successes of travelers’ encounters there. Perhaps the suburban feminists are just not as easy to find.

Four years after Monica arrived at Lengua Latina, she describes the room as a unique Latina-Canadian space where she was finally “comfortable to be [herself], to feel “affirmation,” and to “know that everyone else knew where [she] was coming from.” However, when I asked her what she thought she learned through this process of writing together, she began with the significance of the street:

Karleen: What did you learn in the group?

Monica: Um...

Karleen: Could be anything.

Monica: I think I learned a lot about the gay culture. Things I didn’t know...I don’t know what specifically...but, I mean I’d never been down, what street was it we were on?

Karleen: Church

Monica: We were on Church. I’d never been down there ever, except for gay pride, which I went a couple times, but that doesn’t count, and like...

Karleen: (laughs) Why doesn’t it count?

Monica: Because it's so commercial and like everyone goes and they think it's like the Santa Claus Parade, like no-one cares about that. You know, I'd never been down there so much just on an average day, so I think the different treatment I got—like one night the falafel guy who would always just ignore me, he's giving everyone else great service. It made me so mad, just things like that...

Monica is not alone in her response. In fact I was surprised to find that several of the members (heterosexual and queer-identified) stated that they learned what it was like to be gay. Obviously queer identities are as varied as Latina identities, but perhaps they saw and absorbed the contrasts between this queer street and the largely heterosexual remainder of the country. Monica responded that she learned that Latina lesbians are not stereotypes, that they can look like anyone, the full spectrum of style, shape, masculinity and femininity. She also spoke about a strong sense of acceptance, what she describes as a privilege to be accepted by the women around her who identified as queer. And finally, she found that as a beautiful heterosexual woman walking through the gay ghetto, she might be ignored or even disrespected in a manner she has not experienced outside its perimeter.

I see Church Street today, above all else, as men desiring other men. There are many others of us walking around, but mostly just as obstructions between their gazes upon one another. We are invisible, which as Monica has noted can have its negatives, but we are also left fairly free to commit whatever queer desire or subversion we might carry out. We are invisible, but free to write the stories, poetry, and plays that become Latina representation in Canada.

4. Karleen

Church Street

Within the geography of the city, gay ghettos establish both a marginal physical space and an imaginary one, a space of deviance, unregulated desire, lawlessness—a zone of sexual otherness.²⁶

I've been told that if you really want to get anywhere in the city, you should take the pathways that are not straight lines, step off the colonial grid. Take the streets that swirl at untidy angles through the city; these are the original Indigenous routes. The path most commonly noted is Davenport Road. It is a route traveled for over 12,000 years. And before then, it was the original shoreline of Lake Ontario. I find it best by bicycle, riding in the breeze, curving down the edge of the land. And when you reach the end of this historical route, you glide directly into a modern day queer village.

If you're a queer and caught up on your media consumption, you've seen it before. It pretends to be Pittsburgh in *Queer as Folk*. Those are not the real street signs on TV. The real ones are metal rainbows where the name of the street lies under the words "Church & Wellesley Village." Americans know

Canadian streets well, they just don't know that they are Canadian streets. As for Canadians, they have probably seen too much of Toronto already.

February 28, 2004 (Fieldnotes)

Today it is 8 degrees Celsius, warm enough to ride my bike, park on Church Street, and look around. The sun is very bright as it peers between the high-rises all around me. There are lots of dogs. There are lots of men. Everyone is smoking. At the end of February, hundreds of cigarette butts emerge from the melting snow in front. People in motorized wheelchairs zip by me. I have also noticed several people limping. Some people speak loudly to each other. Some people speak loudly to themselves. There are torn jeans, dirty jackets, there's a beer store. Public structures such as trash cans and utility poles are covered with glue and posters advertising shows. People look kind of weird [There are visible cues of disability, poverty, drunkenness, queerness—nonconforming gender expression and nonconforming expressions of intimacy all around]. It's the land of riff raff and I feel right at home.

I commence a walking tour originally planned by community activists for an occasion in 1978. It was a community that loved its land enough to fight and successfully win a city park and a community centre, to stop the demolition of historic buildings, and the street itself. It was an organization that loved its land enough to research, gather stories, publish a photocopied guide, and plan a walking tour event, followed by coffee, dinner, and a dance, 26 years ago. In that gorgeous 1970's typewriter cursive font [whatever happened to that anyway?] they tell of their land through stories.²⁷

There are bordellos, poltergeists, a bookie, sleigh races, a duel, an illustrious fireplace, a barking dog, artists, and the National Ballet. Still characterizing much of the street is “tall, narrow, Victorian row housing...built in 1891-1892, the years of a great building boom in the neighborhood.” What once housed “shopkeepers, merchants, carpenters, lawyers, ‘commission travelers,’ and one motion picture operator,” now houses queer restaurants, bars, non-profit organizations, businesses and a community centre. Long lines of old “cottages” along Church Street housed the workers who once serviced the rich people on Jarvis Street [which opened in 1845]. “Jarvis Street was ‘The first street to be paved in Toronto, the first to hear the clatter of hooves as the carriages drew up to the mansions of Upper Canada’s first Establishment.’” Church Street stood in the shadow of riches, flanked on one side by the Jarvis mansions and on the other by the commercial success of Yonge Street. “Church Street served as the route for farmers taking their produce to St. Lawrence Market, so that they could bypass the tolls on Yonge Street.” Church Street has a history as an alternative path, a place to sidestep the establishment.²⁸

One frozen winter afternoon I traced my path from México to California to Canada while sharing a tequila with a Mexican transsexual woman. I think it was the cold that made us stop and search for our homeland in a small red bar overlooking Church Street. I taste my abuelita's desert in the sweet burning cactus down my throat.

I tell this woman in the bar about how I came to be in Canada. I repeat the story told to me throughout my childhood that my mother's family had immigrated to California because of the revolution, a cannonball shot right through the town church. My abuelita often acted out the terror of the wood splintering over her body. Later I learned that my great grandma was also escaping a drunk husband. Or maybe she left México for better work, or for more rights as a woman, or to flee the death of her young mother. All have been proposed as *the* reason for our immigration by my abuelita.

Seventy-five years later I fled California. My reasons were not so different from those of my great grandmother: quality of life, human rights, loss, and love. I escaped a state where racism and homophobia are publicly affirmed with each new referendum, and where I was haunted by the death of my own young mother. I followed a new love to a nation more accepting of my queer desire, and a land where I had no memories.

I remake myself on Church Street. I knew to go to Church Street because of my marked queer body; I am a visible butch and have always sought the queer zones of every community to find relief from the stares and at best, the awkward words of straight people. It has served as "Queer Aztlan,"²⁹ a piece of space and time comforting my queer Latina body. I decided I could stay in this country when a Latina drag queen sat on my lap one night and sang me a Mexican ballad on this street. I could stay in this country if México was a part of it. I have been searching for México ever since high school when a schoolmate announced that Mexicans were thieves and the teacher allowed it. I have searched for México in family, friends, books, classes, in the country itself, and inside myself. I have searched for a México that is good and beautiful, and hurtful and hard.

I helped to found Lengua Latina because I needed a space to search for México in Canada. In a room full of Latina writers, I could remember, document, and share these stories of my life and family. I have lived most of my life as a (mixed Anglo and Mexican) Chicana in California cities filled with Latinas. It has always been easy to find Latina communities within these cities. In Toronto you cannot simply walk out the door and bump into dozens of Latinas on your way to anywhere. In Toronto you must create ways to purposely bump into each other, or you could walk alone for a long time. I helped to found Lengua Latina because I found my passion in writing and in the Latina and queer communities within which I have immersed myself. Lengua Latina brought these three desires in my life together.

The only question that remained for me was where specifically on Church Street I could find an inviting place for a new group to write together. I wanted our group to be open to Latinas of any sexual orientation, but for the queers to hold the upper hand; I figured that the only way they would come is if they felt this higher level of safety. I wanted a relationship to the alternative communities inhabiting this lively area. I wanted to be able to have

a room where we could close the door so that women would share their most important ideas and memories. I wanted the cost to be low or to be free, so that our group would be accessible to all Latinas. I decided that the public-run 519 Church Street Community Centre might fulfill these many needs. I entered, filled out a form, and received permission to use room 34 every other week on Wednesday nights.

The 519

The 519 embodies what I love about life in Toronto, it represents tolerance and acceptance. Look at some of the diverse groups here: a gay square dance club, the Toronto Centre—Rosedale Liberal Riding Association, a transgendered youth group and the 43rd Toronto Girl Guides. Whoever walks through its doors is welcomed, treated with respect and dignity.³⁰

February 27, 2004 (*sitting in front of the 519*)

It is a sturdy old building, red brick, grand staircase. They say the man who designed it was a dreamer. He was a highly ambitious architect who died so young that people speculated he had known his fate. I'm sitting on the short wall at Cawthra Square, "A City within a Park" the plaque informs me. The air smells cold. Across from me is a modern two-story building called Progress Place 576 and then The Beer Store. There are billboards for Tim Horton's and Sprint. A mural of bright colours of people coming together is painted on one side of The 519. In the park there are many benches, many single men. On the north side, the fence is a fancy collection of thick arches, remnants of the old army drill hall. Straight to the back is the playground where I sometimes take my kids. Today I stop at the circle of stones and silver plates engraved with the names of those community members who died of AIDS. I find a name I know and trace it with my finger; in the shade it feels frozen. I look with a bit of relief at the numbers trailing off after 1996, when the new medicines brought back most of the dying.

Room 34

December, 2006

It is the last night of Lengua Latina. Three of us meet to bring our group to an end. It's the right thing to do. Jobs, homes, and lovers have changed. The hunger to share our stories here has been satisfied. Nobody's been coming regularly for a few months, and we'll soon lose the right to the community space.

Three Latinas sit around a wooden table in a small room overlooking Church Street. There is wax sliding down five long blue candles. Their wavy light spreads across our journal pages. We've brought chips, chocolates, and pop to share. We, three, have attended regularly since the first night. We stare at each other. How do we remove ourselves from six years in room 34?

I start a writing exercise. The other two women appear a little startled; on the last night together, I still insist on writing. In my mind, I can't leave

the group unfinished, nor have I any other ideas of how to get through this. There are very few constraints in my exercise, little direction, not my style at all. But the night calls for such freedom of movement. I ask for words until we compile a list together: flame, 34, transformation, Lengua Latina, entre sus piernas [between her legs]. “Use as many as you wish,” I suggest, “Write as long as you want.”

34 confessions
34 emotional affairs
34 tears
34 scattered dreams
34 chismes
34 ghosts
34 shots of tequila
34 foolish thoughts
34 tostadas
34 lies
34 traveling stories
34 days of mourning
34 ofrendas

Lengua Latina you've connected me to this frozen land. Cut away from the mountains and sea, cut away from my mother's body, I drove here full of bravado and break-up songs, blasting in my Mustang for 3,000 miles. Lengua Latina, you're the women who have taken care of me here, made me grab hold of my own romantic chaos and spread my legs across these pages.

Gracias.

Notes

- ¹ The spiritual homeland of the Chicana/o people.
- ² Richard Delorme, Ian Warner, and Ronny Yaron, *The 519: In Days Gone By*, ed. Deborah Hierlihy, Joan Miles, Betty Miller, Ian Warner, and Ronny Yaron (Toronto: The 519 Church Street Community Centre, 1999), 3.
- ³ The 519 Church Street Community Centre Volunteers and the North Jarvis Community Association, *North Jarvis Historical Fair, Saturday, May 13th, 1978* (Toronto: The 519 Church Street Community Centre Volunteers and the North Jarvis Community Association, 1978), 3, 2, 1.
- ⁴ D. Rodwell Austin and Ted Barris, *Carved in Granite: 125 Years of Granite Club History* (Toronto: Macmillan Canada, 1999), 35-36.
- ⁵ Delorme, Warner, and Yaron, *In Days Gone By*, 2,3
- ⁶ A. Rodney Bobiwash, “The History of Native People in the Toronto Area: An Overview,” in *The Meeting Place: Aboriginal Life in Toronto*, ed. Frances Sanderson and Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Toronto: Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, 1997), 6-7, 5.

- 7 Toronto Historical Association, Maps Project and Partners, *A Glimpse of Toronto's History: Opportunities for the Commemoration of Lost Historic Sites* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2001), 8.
- 8 Mary Pardo, *Mexican American Women Activists: Identity and Resistance in Two Los Angeles Communities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 5.
- 9 "Contemporary maps of Latin America begin with México and end with the islands at the tip of Chile, with the Antilles cradled between the land masses of the north and south. Under this rubric a Latina would be a woman from Latin America, or of Latin American descent." In Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 10.
- 10 A note on our membership: We ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-thirties and our roots lie across the Americas. We were a testament to Latina mestizaje; the colors and shapes of our bodies varied considerably. Mestizaje refers to the broad range of racial and ethnic "mixing" (European, Native American, African, Chinese) which are the roots of Latina/o peoples. Most of the long-term members had obtained some degree of post-secondary education, some of the members had working class origins, some were still members of the working class, some were members of the middle class. Our sexualities included heterosexual, and bisexual, but most of us were lesbian. Our genders included woman, femme, butch, and transgender. Some of us immigrated to Canada as children, some of us as adults, two via the United States, most directly from Latin America. None of us was born in Canada. All of us have ancestors from Latin America. We wrote together for over six years. These numbers are an approximation because there was no explicit commitment required for membership. Members came and went, choosing to write with us some Wednesdays (bi-monthly), to perform with us on other occasions, or at times simply to attend our performances and provide encouragement.
- 11 Celia Haig-Brown, "Learning, Teaching and Community: Contributions to Situated and Participatory Approaches to Educational Innovation," in *Learning, Teaching & Community: Contributions of Situated and Participatory Approaches to Educational Innovation*, ed. Cindy Pease-Alvarez and Sandra Schecter (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).
- 12 Larry Knopp, "Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: Queer Quests for Identity and their Impacts on Contemporary Geographic Thought," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 11, no. 1 (March 2004): 122.
- 13 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15-37.
- 14 Alexander Aitken and Joseph Bouchette (Surveyors), *Plan of York Harbour by Order of Lt. Govr. Simcoe* [Map], (Toronto: Dept. of Public Works, 1793).
- 15 Toronto Historical Association, Maps Project and Partners, *A Glimpse of Toronto's History: Opportunities for the Commemoration of Lost Historic Sites* (Toronto: City of Toronto, 2001), 6, 8, 8.
- 16 Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1987), 105, 105, 112, 115.
- 17 Toronto Historical Association, *A Glimpse of Toronto's History*, 8.
- 18 Valeska Gomez-Castillo, Karleen Pendleton Jiménez, Veronica Reyes, and Janet Romero [Unpublished Script] *La hija de las Americas* (2002).
- 19 Ibid.

- 20 Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), xv.
- 21 Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2000), 1-13.
- 22 Charles Ramirez Berg, "Stereotyping in Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular," in *Latin looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. media*, ed. Clara E. Rodríguez (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 111.
- 23 Margarita Zamora, *Reading Columbus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 162.
- 24 Cherrie Moraga, *The Last Generation* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 61; and Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 166.
- 25 Moraga, *Last Generation*, 147.
- 26 Larry Knopp in Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 91.
- 27 The 519 Church Street Community Centre Volunteers, *North Jarvis Historical Fair*.
- 28 Ibid, 18, 18, 9, 9, 3.
- 29 Moraga, *Last Generation*, 164. Moraga proposes a "Queer Aztlán," a Chicana/o nation, which is "strong enough to embrace a full range of racial diversities, human sexualities, and expressions of gender."
- 30 Salah Bachir, Chair, "The 519 Capital Campaign," widely distributed business letter, no date listed—but I received it in 2004.