INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600
PICKING UP THE THREAD: 
AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE IN 
TORONTO, 1983-1990

by

RUTH MAGALY SAN MARTIN

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements 
for the degree of Master of Arts 
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education 
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the 
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Ruth Magaly San Martin 1998
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-40671-7
Abstract

Master of Arts, 1998
Ruth Magaly San Martin
Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
University of Toronto

This thesis deals with the existence and experiences of the Latin American Women’s Collective (LAWC) in Toronto from 1983 to 1990. This (her)story comes into being through the voices of four women from the Collective. It is also shaped through the use of historical material and informed by critical race and feminist theory. This work examines issues of exclusion and racism that women from the Collective faced with other women’s organizations, especially the “progressive” white women’s movement as embodied in the International Women’s Day Committee. It also discusses how exclusionary power relations were echoed within the internal dynamics of the Collective. And, it uncovers how LAWC provided a space where women could question their roles, share their concerns and do politics - a space that sustained deep friendships and a new concept of family that for a historical moment gave the participants a taste of what the future could be like.
Acknowledgements

The success of this thesis stem largely from the insights, encouragement and patience of my Thesis Supervisor, Dr. Ruth Roach Pierson, whose profound knowledge and attention for detail have made an impact on this thesis. Also, my thanks to Dr. Cecilia Morgan who, with very short notice, took the time to provide me with very helpful and important advise.

I have many women to thank for this work. My sister Maritza who fed me my favorites, my sister Erika that provided support with the transcripts. My niece Karina, who reluctantly understood why it took me so long to take her to the cinema. I want to thank especially, my friend Lorena who has given me support emotionally and as an editor, taught me that not everything is “crucial”, likes my titles and laughs at my jokes. To the women of the Collective of course, I owe a lot of my political and personal formation having been there with them in the good and the sad times. And finally, to my other close women friends who always rescued me with music, wine and food when the hygienic halls of academia got too dark and too cold.

Thanks to you all.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. iv

Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

Experience, identity and voice ..................................................................................................... 3
Methodology .................................................................................................................................... 8
The relationship between the researcher and the narrator of a life history ...................... 12
Some ways of dealing with privilege ......................................................................................... 14
After the interview: interpretation and truth ............................................................................. 15

Chapter One
"The Era is birthing a Heart" ....................................................................................................... 24
"We never unpacked our bags" .................................................................................................... 31
A woman in exile" ......................................................................................................................... 33

Chapter Two
The Family We Created: The Latin American Women's Collective in Toronto ............. 39
The events .................................................................................................................................... 44
Finances ....................................................................................................................................... 47
"Mujeres" the newsletter ............................................................................................................... 48
The family we created ................................................................................................................ 50
The structure ............................................................................................................................... 53
Admissions ................................................................................................................................. 54
Inventing new relationships ...................................................................................................... 56

Chapter Three
Of Skirts, Uterus and Ovaries ..................................................................................................... 60
The relationship of the LAWC with the "progressive" white women's movement .................. 60
The Latin American women's collective .................................................................................... 60
"We do not fight for the clitoris":
Links with Latin American women in Toronto ...................................................................... 68
The women of the solidarity movement .................................................................................... 71
Watering Our roots:
The Latin American feminist movement .............................................................................. 74
Chapter Four
Contradictions that Wound .................................................................81

The creation of the "Immigrant women" label.................................82
"After all we have done for you"......................................................91
"There are no lesbians in the Collective"........................................99

Chapter Five
Still Dreaming Utopias........................................................................108

The social impact of the LAWC .........................................................108
Class and gender............................................................................111
The baptism: "Immigrant Women"..................................................112
From violence of the state to violence in the home.......................114
A new meaning of the word "compañera".........................................116
Personal growth............................................................................118
Picking the threads for the future..................................................120

Bibliography ....................................................................................123
INTRODUCTION

I write to record what others erase when I speak,
to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you.
To become more intimate with myself and you.
To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make, to achieve self-autonomy
-Gloria Anzaldúa

The idea of investigating and recuperating the history of the Latin American Women’s Collective came about from a series of controversial discussions regarding issues of identity, racism and homophobia that took place at the First Latin American Women’s Encounter, held in Toronto during the summer of 1995. During these discussions, I became perplexed by the fact that the existence of the Collective was being ignored or dismissed by present day Latin American women’s organizations in Toronto. This experience is not new; in a sense it can be said that historically Latin American women’s participation in social struggles both in Latin America and Canada has usually been diminished or simply ignored. Although women’s historical influences have traditionally been denied and their radical actions swept under the carpet, it was astonishing to see that it was the women themselves who were participating in this process of “social amnesia.” The project to reclaim the experience and (her)story of the Latin American Collective and the women who took part in this organization has become a part of a larger process of reclaiming a rightful place in history for ourselves.

Before I fully begin the work of unearthing the Collective’s past, I must acknowledge that I have a personal investment in the project. I was formally part of the Collective from the years 1984 until 1986. After this time I continued to provide support for the work of the organization, although in a more or less informal manner. I believe, therefore, that my participation in this
group has influenced and shaped the political analysis I have of the world. Thus, the project of reclaiming a rightful place in history for the Collective entails, for me, becoming involved in what Himmani Bannerji calls a "situated critique" where one begins: "...from experience not as an isolated self, but from (a) sense of being in the world, presuming the same for others...making these experiences, in as social a way as possible, always in history."  

The project was received enthusiastically by some of the women in the Collective when I began in December 1996 to work on the research. At this point, I encountered the first main problem: lack of solid documentation. There was no systematic record keeping of the activities (dates and chronology), processes (planning and evaluations) and discussions that ensued within the Collective. The reasons for this lack of documentation were somewhat obvious, as a grassroots organization the resources we had were extremely limited. We simply did not have the time, energy or financial resources to keep up-to-date information or records. Fortunately, a few women have kept some notes, speeches, letters, newsletters, posters of events that have helped clarify a fuzzy chronology. I also began to look for alternative sources of information, such as audio-visual material, and I found a series of taped evaluations and a video.  

However, during this effort, it became clear to me that the mere collecting of this material would not suffice to construct the Collective's (her)story. I realized that the telling of this (her)story would mainly disentangle from the memories of the women who had actively participated in Collective. This is how the idea of doing an "oral (her)story" project emerged. This methodological tool has been favored by many feminists researchers who are actively engaged
in reclaiming women’s “voices”;\(^5\) notwithstanding, there are poignant epistemological and ethical questions that come to the fore.

**Experience, identity and voice**

One of the greatest contributions of feminist research has been the effort to rediscover and incorporate women’s perspective or “experience” into history. Honouring “women’s experience” became the central tenet of the “second wave” feminist movement; this is reflected in the famous phrase, “the personal is political.” Theoretically, the influence that this perspective has had can be seen in the increasing numbers of scholarly works where, as Ruth Roach Pierson points out, “...feminist women’s historians have used the concept of ‘women’s experience’ to challenge the universality of the ‘grand narrative’ of western history...”\(^6\)

Ironically, the fight against the user of words like “man” to define and describe the whole of humanity did not prevent some feminist theoreticians from falling into a similar trap where the word “woman” now meant all women. In this manner gender also became essentialized. This essentialism has served to hide the experience of diverse groups of women under the category “woman.” As a result, practices like racism have not been recognized as being one of the obstacles to the incorporation of “women of colour”\(^7\) to the (her)story of the Canadian white women’s movement.

Besides this particular practice of exclusion, women in the Latin American community have had to face the sexism that exists within their own community;\(^8\) in many instances, this sexism has
effectively erased from our collective consciousness part of the lives and experiences of the women who participated in the women's movement. Consequently the task for oppressed groups like ourselves has been one of demystifying the concepts of “woman”, and of “sisterhood” for that matter, and beginning to talk about difference. In this climate, telling the story of this particular group of Latin American women becomes a political action and an act of resistance in which “our” experiences become not only public but also “historical.” This position, however, is not without its difficulties and contradictions.

Under the influence of postmodernist thought debates began to take place regarding the contradictions in the utilization of concepts and categories of identity, experience, and voice. At one extreme of the continuum it was argued that only those who “experience” oppression could really analyse it and present “true knowledge” of what it really meant to be oppressed. Those who oppose this view have indicted this type of “identity politics” as a means of monopolizing oppression, as a way of silencing and excluding through guilt and, thus, as being reactionary in essence. For example, Diana Fuss argues in her book Essentialy Speaking that marginalized groups invoke the “authority of experience” to silence others in the classroom. Thus, “identity politics” exclude others and contain knowledge by positing that only those who have experienced oppression can understand it.

Although, there is always the risk that “identity” and “experience” may be perceived as the only way to knowledge, becoming an essentializing practice, the processes involved in “identity politics” and the recognition of the epistemic potential of “experience” remains a consciousness-
raising practice. bell hooks, when responding to Diana Fuss, writes: “Identity politics emerges out of the struggle of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important vital dimensions of any learning process.”¹⁰

For “women of colour,” “identity” and “experience” are still organizing principles that reflect a particular material reality and social location. And although these women have become keenly aware of the exclusionary dangers of “essentializing” notions, they continue to build alliances based on “common” elements, despite the postmodern criticism. As Bannerji contends: “[T]hose who dismiss so disdainfully all projects of self-naming and self-empowering as ‘identity politics’ have not needed to affirm themselves through the creative strength that comes from finding missing parts of one’s self in experiences and histories similar to others.”¹¹ The process of “identity” must lead to the development of liberatory theory that allows for change in the world. In this context, “women of colour” must examine their own lives to understand the oppressive systems and structures in which we live. Hence, in this political framework only “events” that are mediated by theoretical interpretation become “experience.”¹²

Defining the parameters of the (her)story of the Collective, therefore, requires historicizing, that is, taking into consideration the context surrounding the experiences. This means having an acute awareness that the conception that we have of ourselves and of our identities is produced within the framework of the existing ideology. Digging up the experience of women who participated
in the Collective makes sense only if we go on to develop analysis or theory for social change. In emphasizing the importance of experience, bell hooks concludes, "I know that experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know. Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity as a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory."13

Within the milieu of Toronto progressive politics, the story of the Collective is a story from the "margins." That is, it is not "about" but "from". Kirby and Mckenna define "the margins" as: "[T]he margins refers to the context in which those who suffer injustice, inequality and exploitation live their lives. People find themselves on the margins not only in terms of resources. Knowledge production is also organized so that the views of a small group of people are presented as objective, as 'The Truth.' The majority of people are excluded from participating as either producers or participants in the creation of knowledge."14 To reclaim our voices from the "margin" becomes a project that subverts the one version of the 'The Truth' and adds knowledge that has been hidden or swept aside from the narrative of the women's movement.

In order to respect and maintain this perspective from "the margins," it is essential to be conscious of issues of privilege that may go undetected. Again, an understanding of one's own social location is crucial to identify the particular lenses that can distort the research. In my case, I have to reiterate that I was a participant of the Collective from the years 1984 to 1986. I shared
most of the characteristics of the women in the Collective although I was the youngest. Since my years in the Collective, I have gone on to be involved in a number of other women’s groups. I define myself mostly as an activist to whom the issue of racism has become exceedingly focal in my analysis of the world. I am doing this research as part of the requirements for the completion of a graduate degree. It is through these lenses that I go back to reclaim the (her)story of the Collective. These are some of the elements that informed my decision to focus on certain issues and not others and, therefore, in some way or another, shape the narratives of the women whom I interviewed. The story is being told through my voice.

Since dominance has been identified as the most important element in appropriating the experience and voice of “others,” one must be extremely careful to identify one’s privilege. Ruth R. Pierson explains this best when she says, “In the triangle of experience, difference and dominance and its relation to voice, it is not inexperience or difference in experience alone but different experience combined with ‘power over’ that disqualifies: the dominant group’s power systematically and systemically to negate or disfigure the experiences of others separates it from the oppressed group’s lived experience of that negation or disfigurement.”¹⁵ In some instances the issues of difference/dominance are such that many feminists researchers postulate that it is ethically impossible, for example, for academics that come from developed countries to do research on “Third World” women.¹⁶ This position assumes something which may not be true all of the time, namely, that the academics referred to are white, middle-class women.

In this particular study I believe that there is an urgency to reclaim a part of the Latin American
women’s movement in Toronto that has been ignored or dismissed both by the “progressive” white women’s movement and also by the Latin American community as a whole. I believe that both the fact that I am a Latin American woman and that I participated actively in this group provides me with a healthy connection. This is what Pierson speaks of when she states that, “...a connection between identity and the experience of difference would appear to underlay and indeed forge a connection between an experienced difference in identity and the decision to write the history of the group identified as different.”

I believe, therefore, that for the effort to recuperate the voices of the women of the Collective, someone who not only identifies as Latin American but who was a participant of the group will provide a critical perspective on the research by giving voice to our experiences in order to reflect and analyse them and hence understand better our own reality.

Methodology

The utilization of “Oral History” as a method to gather “data” does not necessarily imply that one is engaging in the use of feminist methodology. It is the specific use of this methodology combined with considerations such as: who is going to benefit from the research and in what manner, that makes this method feminist; and what the character of the relationship is between the researcher and the respondent. The argument that members of oppressed groups do have a “lived” experience that gives them claim to first-hand knowledge has been postulated by many. In this context, oral history projects have become the tools used par excellence to excavate and reassert the experiences of women in their own voice. In order to make oral history a feminist
methodology, however, one must elaborate feminist objectives, which include the following characteristics:

They presuppose gender as a (though not the only) central analytical concept; they generate their problematic from the study of women as embodying and creating historically and situationally specific economic, social, cultural, national, and racial/ethnic realities; they serve as a corrective for androcentric notions and assumptions about what is 'normal' by establishing or contributing to a new knowledge base for understanding women’s lives and the gendered elements of the broader social world; they accept women’s own interpretation of their identities, their experiences, and social worlds as containing and reflecting important truths, and they do not categorize and, therefore, dismiss them, for the purposes of generalization as simply subjective. [Italics in the original]

The study of the Latin American Women’s Collective in Toronto fulfills a number, if not all, of these characteristics. Since there has been little research done about Latin American women in Toronto, this research will begin to fill the void and challenge some of the images of Latin American women that are available to us.

In addition, doing progressive research involves clarifying for oneself the how and the why the research is being done as well as who is being researched. A crucial part of this process includes dealing with what Kirby and McKenna call “the conceptual baggage” and the interview process.

The process referred to as dealing with “conceptual baggage” is defined by Kirby and McKenna as follows: “Conceptual baggage is a record of your thoughts and ideas about the research question at the beginning and throughout the research process by which you can state your personal assumptions about the topic and the research process. Recording your conceptual data
will add another dimension to the data, one that is always present, but rarely acknowledged.”

In this sense, then, dealing with “conceptual baggage” can be an extension of self-identifying personal, particular locations and the lenses that the researcher is using.

It is with my experience as a member of the Collective and as a Latin American woman in Canada together with the experience that I have gained since I have left the Collective that I approach the recuperation of the (her)story of the Collective. My experience and my own interest, then, have informed the issues, the choice of questions and the emphasis that I have given to certain topics. For example, since I was interested in the baggage that I inherited from the traditional Leftist parties that most of us Collective members came from at the beginning, I kept insisting on the conflicts that in retrospect may have been residues of political dogmatism so common in the Latin American Left at the time. My insistence on this particular issue, while doing my first interview, led one of my respondents to manifest fears that I would be only mentioning the “bad” experiences of the Collective. For me, the realization that I, as a researcher, have an “agenda” came as a real breakthrough.

Interviews are used by social researchers as a matter of course without really analysing the fact that interviews are a form of discourse and that meaning is derived from them depending on a series of factors like, for example, speech competence and shared symbolism. In this new optic, the interview is regarded as a dialectical discursive process where meaning, and the creation of meaning, become fluid. And it is both the interviewer and the participant who are engaging simultaneously in this process. As a consequence, each interview becomes a specific
unit of analysis to be analysed as such since the construction of meaning is dependent on what occurs in each context, that is, in each interview. In addition, it is important that the context, the interview, reflect a shared cultural understanding between the participants.

In the case of the interviews that I carried out, the questions were not structured and I decided to conduct the interviews more as a conversation than a structured question-answer dialogue. This meant that some of the questions were not the same in the interviews and that the participants were able to focus on telling their own stories. The understanding and creation of meaning were based on our common cultural background as well as on the constant checking and clarification of terms.

It is important, therefore, that the questions that we formulate must definitely reflect the feminist objectives emphasized above. The feminist researcher must be acutely aware of her preconceived notions about herself and her world and the narrator and her world. As well, it is also important to keep in mind that as researchers it is critical to gather evidence against which oral histories can be evaluated, verified, or contextualised. We should not, as Ruth Roach Pierson argues, "...‘simply accept at face value’ oral testimony any more than the written records of women’s memories..."24 This is extremely important, because as Pierson goes on to say: "...the stories we tell to explain ourselves to others and even to ourselves are shaped in a myriad ways not only by narrative devises and conventions of story telling but also by cultural notions of believability and hegemonic explanatory theories, of which we, as storytellers, may or may not be aware."25
Thus, to contextualise, in the case of the Latin American Women’s Collective, we need to explore issues of immigration and refugee patterns for the community, the political discourse at the time, the Latin American institutions, the activities taking place in the community and at large, and so forth.

**The relationship between the researcher and the narrator of a life history**

Feminist oral history presupposes a different kind of relationship between the researcher and the narrator of the life history than non-feminist oral history. Feminist researchers have pushed us to question and to rethink concepts such as distance, objectivity and neutrality, making them almost antithetical to the feminist agenda. However, there are different interpretations regarding what is the most “democratic” relationship that can ensue between the researcher and the narrator. Because each interview presents totally different kinds of dynamics and different aspects to watch for discussions about the relationship between researcher/narrator are extremely complex.

Researchers worried about ethical issues, which surface when using “life history” methodologies, have developed a new model that feminist researchers have adopted. This new model is the “participatory model,” as Cotterill defines it: “this model aims to produce non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to overcome the separation between the researcher and the researched.”

One of the initial positions taken by feminist researchers vis-à-vis their work was that because
theirs was a feminist endeavour then in principle it would be possible to forge alliances based on the fact that both the researcher and the interviewee were women. It was assumed that since interviews were usually instances that could allow for a certain kind of intimacy to develop then the researcher and narrator could cement friendship ties. This position, however, may prove rather problematic as it might reflect only a one-way expectation. As Myerhoff found out when trying to implement a model of “symmetry of relationship,” her expectations of friendship were not reciprocated by the participant in her studies. The psychological/emotional aspects involved in this kind of relationship may become confusing to understand if one is not alert.

Other feminist researchers have criticised stances that posit a total merger with the narrator or that uncritically assume identification between researcher and narrator based on gender. Their critique is based on the fact that this stance serves to posit a universalized notion of gender which disregards other factors, like differences based on race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, life experience, and physical ability. Conversely, since “difference” may occur based on many levels, to insist that, as feminist critics have done, that the researcher is always in a power/dominance position, may be problematic.

Paradoxically, opposite things can happen in an interview. For example, in the case of the women of the Collective, there is a certain level of friendship and social interaction that still occurs because we work in the same milieu. Because there is a basic level of trust, interviews can be quite intense, and women may feel free to talk about private/painful matters. However, there is the possibility that these “confessions” could be regretted later on and become a potential
source of tension in the relationship. On the other hand, the mere fact that as an interviewer I showed up with a tape recorder may give the interview a different context. There is an intrinsic attitude to accord "authority" to someone who is doing research, especially if it is as part of a prestigious institution. This may lead the participants to be careful about the answers that they give; this has been defined as the "best face" phenomenon.

Again, one must evaluate this position carefully, since it is probably true that the relation between the researcher/narrator is asymmetrical no matter how much effort we put into having an equal partnership. As a result, we have to always keep in mind that the potential for exploitation is ever present, especially if we take into consideration specific aspects of race, class and so forth. Ultimately, however, in our research the issue of respect has to incorporate the notion that participants are capable individuals, able to defend a particular political position, or worldview.

**Some ways to deal with the issue of power and privilege**

Although we, as researchers, may try as much as possible to reduce the power imbalances inherent in the relationship with the participants, we have to face the fact that inescapable factors may stand in the way of our efforts. Since, for the most part, the research that I am carrying out takes place within the context of academia, I have to acknowledge that I am in the process of becoming familiar with different analytical and conceptual tools that, in turn, influence the manner in which I analyse things. And it is the attainment of these tools that might give me the upperhand, in terms of privilege. Thus, to pretend that knowledge does not represent a specific
type of power is to leave myself open to the misconception that the interview situation is equally democratic for both the participants and myself.

Since in each interview situation the number of elements to take into consideration regarding the above mentioned matters can vary, it is possible to be critically aware of only some of the many dynamics that may be going on. Therefore, one of the best ways to deal with the interview situation may be to be genuinely honest as to what your objectives are as a researcher as well as how these fit with the objectives of the participants.

Notwithstanding the kind of challenges, with regards to power and privilege, that this kind of research poses, there are ways in which power can be shared more equally. For example, women participants can be involved in the process of editing their own interviews so that they too are satisfied with the results. The women from the Collective that participated in the research were able to read and keep a copy of the transcript of the interview, when there was feedback it was incorporated into the text, for example, in a particular case, a part that contained political information was deemed too sensitive and confidential and, thus, changed. Although this did not surface in my own research, the researcher must also be open to the existence of disagreements in interpretation and not try to impose her own as the real and valid interpretation. Another way to bridge opposing interpretations is to clearly identify the multiple voices of the respondents and to show the different, or even opposing views, expressed. In my own research on the history of the Collective, I have included different points of view when it was pertinent to reflect the ambiguities regarding certain key issues.
After the interview: interpretation and truth

Some of the power conflicts that have been pointed out previously do not only occur during the interview but also extend beyond it to the moment when the final story is being written and retold or reconstructed by the researcher. At this point the crucial question for the researcher becomes, whose opinion or view will take precedence in the final product? The researcher, therefore, must be cognizant that when she engages in this kind of re-construction issues of power and authority are still present, for it is she, the researcher, that is putting forth her assumptions, interpretations and analysis in the telling of the story. As mentioned before, “experience” and voice cannot automatically be taken at face value; it is crucial to historicize and contextualize these experiences because “identity” is shaped and limited by the social organization and its accompanying ideology. Thus, it is important that the researcher take the task of contextualizing seriously.

In my research, because I had been part of the Collective, I had multiple roles as researcher/interviewer and source. As a result, when challenging the women interviewed on certain issues in order to produce more of a debate, I found myself in a difficult situation. Although in some instances my multiple roles provided me with an advantageous position with regards to the construction of the story, at other points I felt as though I was imposing my own specific view. Dilemmas arose with the interviews in terms of analyzing, remembering or perceiving events in totally different ways, sometimes from radically different points of view.

Since my interest in the Latin American Women’s Collective is founded on the fact that I want to pursue a particular hypothesis with regard to our political stance, especially with regards to
race and sexual orientation, the possibility is always present that I may be appropriating/misappropriating other stories to corroborate what I believe to be the reasons for a particular political position.

In terms of re-constructing history the whole notion of the researcher/interpreter as a “neutral” and “objective” observer does not accurately reflect actual or real phenomena. Similarly, when it comes to the respondent, although the main point is to respect the informant and her recollections of events, it is important to remember that narratives are “...selected memories, retained through time-real, embellished, imagined or a combination of all three, which best serves [her] current definition of self.” This makes the whole notion of “The Truth” problematic. One of the ways in which the researcher can minimize the ever present danger of imposing her version of the “truth” on the narrative, especially when interpretations seem contradictory, is to constantly strategize in order to minimize this occurrence. One of the ways of doing this is for the researcher to show in the final production of the text all the contradictions present in its elaboration which would also reflect that the “Truth” is limited and relative. This is what I have attempted to do.

An added problem arises when the interviews not only have to be transcribed but also translated. Again this is an exercise in maintaining, insofar as possible, the “true” voice of the woman respondent. Since most of the women I interviewed came from different parts of the South Cone of Latin America, and even though we shared Spanish as the common language, subtle and sometimes not so subtle uses of the lexicon gave completely different translations. This brings
forth the importance of the concept of "cultural translation" to my research. That is, when doing the translation I cannot just translate directly or verbatim because I have to make sure that the final translated product makes sense to the women who are telling the story as well as to those who are reading it. Therefore, I agree with Marjorie Shostak when she says that part of the ethical considerations include: "...Translating, editing and presenting the informants 'true' voice in such a way that the idiosyncratic and the generalizable can be distinguished."34

In present day struggles the idea of becoming a subject entails having both an awareness and an awakening of consciousness. This means that we have to see how different structures of domination have influenced our own lives and how the struggle against these have been reflected in organizations such as the Latin American Women's Collective. Asserting our identity, experience and voice is crucial if we want to reclaim the historical niche that belongs to us. Since knowledge is socially constructed, the project of doing an oral history of the Collective can provide a "different truth" that comes from those of us that have been left at the margins.

This endeavor is not without difficulty, particularly since the project is defined as a feminist one and as such has to utilize a methodology that asserts and complies with feminist objectives. In this effort, attempts to acknowledge or to minimize the inherent differences in power between researcher and participant become imperative. However, as already discussed, the democratization of this process may prove to be more difficult than anticipated.

In attempting to deal with the inherent power imbalances present in the researcher/respondent
dyad it is vital to keep in mind that each of the interviews that take place occur as unique instances. Therefore, the context of the situation, the way a person recreates her story from the standpoint of the present and the way the interviewer shapes the course of the interview are all to be seen as dialectical processes. The interview, as context, is an interaction in which both the researcher and the narrator become involved in constructing a story, in telling a tale. And, the relationships that may occur inside this creative process may vary from person to person and from situation to situation. Thus, it is imperative that each situation be evaluated separately and uniquely in terms of the ethical issues that may arise. For this there no set recipe, and as T. Minh-ha Trinh encourages us, “[T]he story depends on every one of us to come into being.”

The acknowledgment that there might be multiple truths about reality is essential. Thus, as I wove the story of the Latin American Women’s Collective, it has become necessary for me to recognize that his particular rendering of the story will reflect our voices and our understanding in accord with our own interests as part of a specific historic moment. In this way it will serve to not only interpret our reality but, hopefully, to have a hand in shaping it.
NOTES


2. From here on identified alternatively as the LAWC or the Collective.

3. Interview with Ruth Lara by R. Magaly San Martin, February 27, 1996, Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, Toronto. Transcript p.19. Translation mine. It is not the focus of this paper to hypothesize on the reasons for the dismissal of the Collective; however, I would venture that there is still a persistence of political dogmatism that would deny the existence of self-defined Latin American feminist organizations compounded by the fact that most of the experience of the Collective remains undocumented.


7. I will be using the term "women of colour," for lack of a better one, to refer to women that do not have black skin or white skin. Women who are "brown-skinned": Latin American "mestizas," women of Asian origins, South-Asian women, native women, and others. Although initially many "women of colour" assumed the label of "black," this tended to erase the real privileges of lighter skin colour.

8. The Latin American community, of course, is not a monolithic or homogeneous group. We come from 23 countries in Latin America, from different races and ethnic groups, with urban and peasant backgrounds, different educational backgrounds, social classes, religious affiliations, and so forth. From the 70's to the 80's more or less there was an influx of Latin Americans escaping
right-wing dictatorships; this political group became very active in the solidarity movement in Toronto. Lately, political views may be more diverse as dissidents from Socialist countries have arrived in Toronto. For more on the Latin American community see: Fernando Mata, *Latin American Immigration to Canada* (1946-81): Figures and Features from the Official Statistics; Raul Rojas, *Latin Americans in Toronto*; Andre Jacob, "Adaptation of Salvadorean Refugees in Montreal," *Migration World*: Stuart D. Johnson and Cornelia B. Johnson, *Prairie Forum* 7 (Fall 1982): 227-235; Laurie Nock, "We Never Unpacked Our Bags: Chilean Refugees as Immigrants," paper delivered at the Tenth Biennial Canadian Ethnic Studies Association Conference in Calgary, Alberta, October 21, 1989; Milen Robles & Carmen Alicia Robles, "The Personal Adjustments of Acculturation of the Chilean Emigre in the City of Regina," a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Social Work, Faculty of Social Work. University of Regina, Regina Saskatchewan, October, 1981. All these papers can be found in the Archives of the Cross Cultural Communication Centre.


17. The International Women’s Day Committee (IWD) espoused a much more radical position than other Canadian feminist groups, for example, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), in terms of its inclusion of class; yet they failed to identify their own politics of exclusion.
18. An example on how issues that affect women are not taken into consideration in the Latin American community was poignantly reflected when the Latin American Community Centre organized the Second Encounter for the Latin American Community in 1994. This Encounter was to deal with issues of representation, identity and democracy within our community. Ironically, there were no workshops that dealt with women's perspectives on these issues. As a result, the Latin American Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Children (LACEV) lobbied and pressured the organizers to include at least a two-hour workshop. The following year, LACEV organized the First Latin American Women's Encounter in Ontario.


21. Kirby and McKenna, Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods from the Margins. 32.


29. For example, see Cotterill, "Interviewing Women: Issues of Friendship, Vulnerability and Power," 597.


32. The South Cone usually includes countries from the southern part of Latin America: Peru, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia.

33. Silvana Hernando, “Cultural Interpretation: An Issue of Power and Accessibility,” Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly nos. 44/45 (summer 1994), 30-34; Ministry of Citizenship and Culture (Producer); Garcia, Osvaldo (Director). (1986). Beyond Words A video on Cultural Translation [video]. Toronto, Ont: Ministry of Citizenship and Culture. This concept was extremely useful in providing better services in terms of translation to the non-English speaking community.


I

"THE ERA IS BIRTHING A HEART"¹

The 1970's in Latin America were a time of effervescence, political and social euphoria, treason, persecution, terror and, finally, for many, exile. With the rise of social ferment, women from all classes and backgrounds became exceptionally active in the profound social transformations that were taking place. Women got directly involved within social movements, such as unions, students' organizations, political parties, workers' organizations. Everyone involved in this radical tide thought that the future utopia that would provide freedom and democracy was just around the corner. In this upsurge women within the Left were usually the invisible threads of the movements, most often located behind the scenes as organizers, secretaries, and support givers. Hidden and not recognized, the work of these women played an essential and formative role in the efforts to create a "new" society.

It is important, however, to recognize that not all women shared the same visions and ideals of the Left with regards to social transformation. In the extremely polarized societies of Latin America, right-wing women also got involved in the struggle to defend their class interests. In Chile, for example, the notorious "pots and pans" were demonstrations staged by upper-class women where they would noisily bang on empty pots in efforts to show the world that the left-wing government of Salvador Allende was incapable of putting food on the table. These actions provoked mockery and contempt within the Chilean Left, which tended to limit its political criticism to the fact that these women were not to be taken seriously. Many of the Left's slogans and songs concentrated on ridiculing these women, as in the refrain "what an ugly, ugly old hag,
gluttonous and fat..." And although it was true that hunger was not a problem for the upper class, the analysis of the left regarding these women paralleled the patriarchal values of the right.

Dreams, dogmatism and sectarianism all got muddled up in what passed for revolutionary action. But even in the midst of chaotic problems, progressive reforms were still taking place. Consequently, imperialistic interests and the local bourgeoisie had to escalate their political and economical sabotage until this alone was not sufficient and, one by one, each of the countries that sought revolutionary changes, fell to military dictatorships. To completely dismantle the powerful political organizations that had been built up on the Left the repression that ensued was massive and brutal: people faced death, imprisonment, "disappearances", and a constant state of siege.

The women who were imprisoned suffered as women and as political entities. Many of the testimonies relate that the military would be more vicious to women militants. Women had dared to be politically active, they had abandoned the realm of the house and they had gone "outside" into the public realm of politics. To the military, the political participation of these women became a rejection of woman's traditional and correct role, a violation of male space and, as such, they were to be regarded as "sluts". In order to reestablish the male military order, sexual abuse and torture methods specifically designed to break women were introduced. Rape by dogs, mice introduced in the vagina, the witnessing of relatives being killed and tortured, in addition to gang rape were commonly utilized to punish these women.
Paradoxically, many women who may not have been militant in particular political organizations before the military coups assumed the role of organizing for the release of political prisoners and searching for their “disappeared” relatives. Confronted with the call of right-wing dictators to be “good Christian women,” these women, under the guise of being self-abnegating mothers and exemplary wives, became increasingly politicized and belligerent in confronting the brutal dictatorships. Oftentimes, it was only groups of women like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who dared to demonstrate against the military. 

The 1970’s were a period of time when we all thought that “the era was birthing a heart”. The example of Cuba, the guerrilla movements, and the upsurge of the many political organizations gave us the illusion that the revolution was a real possibility, that individuals and organizations could overthrow the oppressive economic systems and give rise to the “new dawn”. These hopes were crushed when one by one the political movements in the different countries of the South Cone began to be systematically destroyed. The coup d’état in Chile that overthrew the Socialist government of Salvador Allende in September 11th, 1973 was the coup de grace that initiated one of the bloodiest repressions in the continent. To many survivors, the era only brought unimaginable horror and death.

When we arrived in Canada we all wanted to shout to the world what we had gone through, the joy and the atrocity of what we had lived. To us, these experiences weighed heavily on us; yet, to outsiders, our pain was invisible and intangible. As soon as people stepped into this new country their past was erased. Because many could not speak the language it was assumed that
they had nothing to tell. In the stereotypical manner of the benevolent protector, mainstream Canadian society categorized the immigrants and the refugees fleeing repressive systems in Latin America only as “victims” who had been uprooted. Beyond the persecution that had made them “refugees”, they had no other past.

The women who were involved with the Latin American Women’s Collective brought diverse stories with them, borne out of their different experiences within their own countries. However, a unifying thread wove their lives together: all had been involved in the social struggle for change. The voices of these women were voices of political participation and survival; their voices contained a wealth of experience for these women had already tasted change, and could envision revolution. These women were not “poor, little, immigrant, women”; these were women whose strength had been forged in action, in history, in their past.

The Collective was formed as a feminist, autonomous organization mid-1983 and continued, more or less, until 1990. It was structured so as to function as a collective where decision-making power and responsibilities were shared by all members equally. As many as fifty women participated in the Collective at one time or another; however, the constant number was between six to eight active members. An interesting factor has to do with the fact that most of the women participants came from the South Cone. I extensively interviewed mainly four women: Ruth, Maria Rosa, Ana Maria, and Maria Teresa. These women were pivotal in the formation of the Collective and, with the exception of Maria Teresa, all kept active within the organization until it ceased to exist. For other women, such as Gina, I make use of written testimonies.
It became important for me in telling the (her)story of the collective to make visible in as clear a way as possible that the majority of the women who founded the organization brought with them a history of political engagement. Being politically active in their home countries had often exacted a high price, even subjection to persecution and torture.

Gina⁶ was imprisoned while she was pregnant. She gave birth to her daughter in the infamous “Tres Alamos” prison, a women’s prison in Chile where political prisoners tended not to survive. Her activism is marked by her experiences in “Tres Alamos”. It was there that for the first time she saw that women could organize and support each other in the absence of their male comrades. She learned that women could survive torture with dignity. And it was in this prison that she began to realize that the repression that women suffered focused more on the fact that they were women than on their having political agency. She realized that women because of their gender were not regarded as real threats to the political order; rather, theirs was a crime against patriarchal values. When Gina was released from prison and came directly afterwards to Canada, she already knew that she wanted to work with women.

Ana Maria escaped to Chile from Argentina and, ironically, just as she and her partner had become members of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, MIR) the Chilean Coup d’état took place, “We had begun to work with the MIR a month before the Coup (laughing) you can see that was an excellent time to join the MIR...”⁷ During her time in Chile, she was active in the building of “popular power” organizations like the Juntas de Abastecimiento Poblacional (JAPS) which were neighborhood associations
responsible for the distribution of food in order to control the black market speculation. The objective of these grassroots groups was to take over the distribution of food, the factories, the organization of workers’ daycares, and so forth. These popular institutions were considered to be the seeds of the coming socialist society. In the crucial months before the Coup many people were exhorted to become more committed and to join a political party. Ana Maria made the choice of joining a radical leftist party, the MIR, aware of the implications of such a decision. After the Coup, members of the MIR were brutally hunted down in order to be completely exterminated. Ana Maria and her baby went into hiding and, after several months, it was decided that she should leave the country. She arrived in Alberta in 1975.

Maria Rosa participated in cultural activities that became increasingly threatening to the Argentinean government in the latter part of the dictatorship. She was a member of an artisan community that utilized their kitchen as a cultural workshop where neighbors would be invited to participate in cultural events that would raise consciousness about the political and social reality confronting Argentineans at the time. She participated in several activities, including the creation of a puppet theater designed to facilitate communication with the audience through popular education techniques. In addition to the consciousness raising and educational activities, covert support was given to artists as a powerful tool of resistance and as such became suspect in the eyes of the government. Maria Rosa’s house was searched four times. Eventually, all of these types of groups became labeled as “terrorists” and were actively repressed. Maria Rosa recalls the crucial point when her group started to be persecuted: “We were at the local library and the military police showed up. We were ordered to the ground, while they began to turn
everything upside down, chairs, tables, and then they set fire to the library.... At the last moment they told us to get out, but the leader told us ‘next time it will be you.’ After that we decided to emigrate....”

Maria Teresa was a law student, a militant of the Movimiento de Accion Popular Unitario (MAPU), a centre-left party, and a member of one of the most bourgeois families in Chile. When she heard in the radio about the coup d’etat, she grabbed her linchaco and took off to her partner’s house. “They had told us that in the event of a Coup, all of us should go and defend the Industrial Workers’ Belt. I was 23 and ready to fight. I had no idea of the repression that would ensue...When I got to my friend’s house, I told them ‘let’s go’. They grabbed me by the shirt and pushed me inside the house. We spent three days on the floor while the bullets flew around in the downtown area.”

Ruth’s experience was different. Presumably, of the all countries in the South Cone. Peru was the most stable country. The guerrilla movement had not caused an overt disruption of the country. However, the degree of poverty was, and it is still, appalling: a breeding ground for political organizing. Ruth was the coordinator of a community development project that worked with the “Pueblos Jovenes,” the shantytowns that surround the outskirts of Lima. Here, literacy courses and basic skills training were offered to the women of the community with the objective of enabling the women to engage in economic projects of survival. Daycare and leadership training were provided so that the women could become active within the shanty town movement. The Centre struggled for women’s rights without defining itself in feminist terms.
This phenomenon was quite common in many groups were the argument was, and still is, that the label “feminist” would alienate the grassroots. Nonetheless, the Peruvian context included a lot more work specifically with women than in the other surrounding countries. Ruth became involved in politics at 17, “...fortunately, since from the beginning of my political militancy, I began combining the two aspects, political struggle and the struggle for the rights of women.”¹²

She, like many other young women, worked on various political fronts: the student movement, a political party and a women’s group. After several years, disillusioned with the leftist political parties because of their intransigence with regards to gender issues, she quit. It was much later though that she began to contextualize the sexist practices and it was even later, while participating in the Toronto Collective, that she finally defined herself as a feminist.

“*We never unpacked our bags*”

The process of fleeing the countries under siege, either by seeking refugee status or immigrating, was not an unproblematic one. There has been much written about the post-traumatic psychological effects related to what has been called “survivor guilt”.¹³ The shame of having run away, of not having lived up to the idealized revolutionary expectations, of having talked under torture, or simply of not having been able to live in terror were all burdens that followed Latin American political immigrants to Canada. Thus, to compensate in part, most political exiles developed an almost manic activism to support the struggle in their countries of origin.

In tandem, there was a feeling of uneasiness experienced about living in the "belly of the beast", the First World, the territory of the enemy with all its material temptations. A number of studies,
particularly about the Chilean community living in Canada, concluded that, due to political and survival strategies, the Chilean community tended to group amongst themselves and resisted assimilation into Canadian society. The phrase “we never unpacked our bags” came to symbolize the Chilean community in exile. “Unlike immigrants who have come to Canada to improve their standard of living and who have sought assimilation into Canadian society, many Chileans have sought to resist assimilation through developing organizations which emphasize solidarity with Chile.”

I would like to venture that these findings can be tentatively applied to other Latin Americans who also fled repression. The politically active “Latin American community” directed all of its efforts to the harsh political realities in our countries of origin. Living for doing solidarity work and always waiting to go back home tomorrow gave us the illusion or hope that our stay in Canada would be only transitory. This sense of transience was reflected in another study: “...the majority of their [Chileans’] responses implied that they long for ‘home,’ and also indicated that they wanted to return...If given the opportunity the majority of Chilean heads of households would return to their homeland provided the present military junta were to be replaced with a civilian government.”

In this climate, any perceived identification with Canadian society, reflected in the acquisition of material things, for example, a car, would mean that the person was either falling prey to the “comforts” of capitalism, or was not planning to go back to the struggle. Similarly, at the level of participation in local provincial or federal Canadian issues there was considerable community
pressure to become disengaged, both politically and emotionally. Because the only experiences and activities validated were those that related somehow to our countries of origin, our local experience of such things as racism were not politically analyzed. Issues like women’s oppression and gay and lesbian politics were not even contemplated as relevant to the political agenda and, if they did come up, they were dogmatically dismissed as maladies affecting North America due to advanced capitalism.¹⁹

Political orthodoxy and dogmatism engendered the gender segregation and sexism of the traditional Left parties where women’s issues were seen as unimportant to the struggle and even divisive for the central class struggle focus.²⁰ At best, women were told that their issues would be taken care of after the revolution. Countries from the Eastern Bloc and Cuba were held up as examples where social reforms such as free abortion on demand, child care facilities, access to free education, state daycares, and so forth, had benefited women. Nonetheless, women were active participants in political groups, sometimes developing “women only” groups that acted as support for the Party or took on themes that were considered feminine such as peace.

**A woman in exile**

Exile was harder for women. The microcosm reality of exile bred discontent among women militants and among women whose partners devoted all their time to political organizing. And, while men were often engaged in political work on a full-time basis, women had to assume the financial and emotional responsibility for the family’s welfare. Many times, women were also party militants.
During this time, a few women began to question the male hegemony of the political parties and social movements in exile. Maria Teresa remembers a particular moment ingrained in her mind when she began to suspect that there was something really unrevolutionary in her experience:

"I was in the kitchen washing the dishes while, quite literally, with one foot I was rocking the baby stroller and in the other I was trying to read the literature of the party (laughs), not to mention that I was supporting the house. So, in comes my partner, commenting that this woman in the party had written a marvelous article and that he did not understand why I could not do something like that...something happened to me then...this rage just came out."\(^{21}\)

Experiences of violence also led to a sort of consciousness raising. Both Maria Rosa and Ana Maria faced violence from the men in their relationships and had no where to turn. Ana Maria was visited by a group of party members (men) who told her that she had to support her partner. "I couldn’t believe what they were saying. I was being abused and they were trying to convince me that I should be more understanding of my partner because he was going through rough times."\(^{22}\) In the beginning, instances of domestic violence were regarded as a private problem; however, even later on, when there was some understanding due to the consciousness raising that the Collective engaged in, calling the police was out of the question since both men and women had traumatizing experiences that led to mistrust and hatred of state police.\(^{23}\)

Many other elements contributed to women’s beginning to be utterly dissatisfied with the left. Exile provided a context that made it harder but at the same time provided more opportunity for women to leave harmful relationships. Many men left their wives for Canadian white women
and women did not receive the support of the political parties who usually sided with the men. Others, like Ruth, had already become disillusioned with the Left back in Latin America. Women like me, who were the daughters of refugees, and had become politically active in exile, witnessed the sexual double standard of the left, when we were called “loose” because we participated in groups with men. Also, as women began to work, especially in the community agencies, they were exposed to many organizations that dealt with “women’s issues”. Over time, a number of Latin American women began to embrace a feminist analysis but had no particular place to share it with other Latin American women.

A group of Latin American women began to yearn for a place where “women’s concerns’ could be taken seriously, a political space where issues of sexuality, family, violence, and so forth could be brought to the fore. In the absence of traditional networks of support, women wanted to create a space where they could have a shoulder on which to cry and where women could deal together with the practical problems of living in the “present”. In short, women wanted a space where their concerns would not be erased and they could find emotional support and ties, where their children could feel safe and cared for and where information important for survival could be shared. These women wanted a stable ground that could facilitate the growing of roots in a new land: these women wanted a family of sorts.
NOTES

1. Silvio Rodriguez, “The Era is Birthing a Heart,” copyright 1978. Rodriguez is a Cuban musician and one of the greatest Latin American songwriters.

2. This verse was part of a song by Quilapayun. This group was part of a cultural movement denominated The New Song in Latin America.

3. “In Our Midst Educational Aids to Work with Survivors of Torture and Organized Violence: A Reflective Interactive Approach,” (eds.) Christina Whyte-Earnshaw and Dieter Midgeld (Toronto: Canadian Center for Victims of Torture, undated). There is ample evidence that sexual repression is purposely used by dictatorships. As this quote from the manual illustrates, “…the ideology behind sexual torture of women is rather the abolition of political power/potency by the activation of sexuality. The aim is to induce shame and guilt in the women for being a ‘whore’ because in this way, the authorities seek to identify political activity with sexual activity…” 31. Inger Agger, “Sexual Torture of Political Prisoners: An Overview” Journal of Traumatic Stress, #2, 1989, 305-318.


7. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, May 8, 1997, Toronto. Transcript p.2. Translation mine. The Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) was one of the groups that supported armed struggle in Chile.


9. Linchaco is a wooden stick used in martial arts. Most of the so-called military (guerrilla) training that the youth got in Chile consisted of learning to fight with this wooden stick.

10. The Industrial Workers’ Belt was located in the outskirts of Santiago and was composed of nationalized industries. Presumably, the workers who run these factories had been trained to defend them with arms, if need arose. In the drama that unfolded, many workers were massacred because the arms never arrived.

36


14. Stuart D. Johnson & Cornelia B. Johnson, Prairie Forum 7 (Fall 1982), 227-235; Laurie Nock, “‘We Never Unpacked Our Bags’: Chilean Refugees as Immigrants,” paper delivered at the Tenth Biennial Canadian Ethnic Studies Association Conference in Calgary, Alberta, October 21, 1989; Milen Robles & Carmen Alicia Robles, “The Personal Adjustments of Acculturation of the Chilean Emigre in the City of Regina,” a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Social Work, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, Regina Saskatchewan, October, 1981. All these articles can be found in the Archives of the Cross Cultural Communication Centre.

15. This image was used in a number of plays presented in Toronto by a Chilean playwright that lived in Paris. One of the plays, “The Incredible Life of Mataluna,” presented the character carrying an unopened suitcase until the end of the play. I myself participated in a play where the same metaphor was used.

16. Laurie Nock, “‘We Never Unpacked Our Bags’: Chilean Refugees as Immigrants,” 18.


18. Laurie Nock, “‘We Never Unpacked Our Bags’: Chilean Refugees as Immigrants,” 25.

19. Ana Castillo, Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays in Xicanisma (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1994) 40. Castillo mentions similar political views that were held by the Chicano Movement in the United States in the 60's.


21. Interview with Maria Teresa Larrain by R. Magaly San Martin, tape #2, side #1.
22. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 5

The Latin American Women's Collective in Toronto

The Latin American Women's Collective (LAWC) sprang up in Toronto in 1983, as a reflection of the discontent of some women with the traditional political parties of the left that dismissed the issues of gender. The increased participation of Latin American women in community organizations that dealt exclusively with "women's issues" began to allow women to verbalize some of the problems that had haunted women militants for some time. It was in these settings that women were confronted with the issues of violence, discrimination, and the oppression and exploitation that women suffered because of their gender. Together with other immigrant women's organizations some Latin American women began to analyze women's issues within the framework of class but it was soon clear that gender differences could only be understood from a feminist perspective. Moreover, another influence in the development of a feminist consciousness for some Latin American women in Toronto was the fact that back in our countries of origin women had begun to question their role in the different social movements and therefore to confront sexist practices in popular movements, head on.

The revolutionary movements of Nicaragua and El Salvador incorporated an unprecedented number of women in the armed struggle and in positions of power. In Nicaragua, the Nicaraguan Women's Association Luisa Amada Espinoza (AMNLAЕ) was a magnificent force to be reckoned with, both for the dictatorship and, after the revolution, for the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN). These developments provided sufficient ideological ammunition to
the women living in Toronto to want to organize in an autonomous group.

The LAWC was formed in mid-1983 in conjunction with a conference. Memories are blurred with regards to exactly how and when exactly the first meeting occurred. Maria Antonieta Smith, a former worker at Working Women Community Centre (WWCC) and one of the organizers of the first meeting, recalls that it all began when the WWCC was approached by a solidarity group that wanted to educate themselves with respect to the issue of “women”. Thus, the idea of organizing a Latin American Women’s Conference started to take shape. This conference would include workshops on sexuality, violence, immigration issues, and so forth. Unfortunately, funding did not materialize for this endeavour and the Conference never took place; however, a group of women continued to meet and later formed the Collective.

Another version comes from Maria Teresa Larrain, who believes that some Latin women had already participated in an “Immigrant Women’s Conference” organized by Women Working with Immigrant Women (WWIW), and the idea to create a Latin American Women’s group was the result of participating in this altogether different event. As the coordinator for WWIN, Maria Teresa and a group of women had presented a paper that focused on the immigrant women’s issues at this conference. The paper had prompted these women to begin to analyze the particular situation of Latin American women in Toronto.

Whichever event was the triggering cause, the first meeting of the LAWC took place at the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples in the summer of 1983 and about 20 women participated,
including community workers. It was immediately clear at this first meeting that the women present had very different expectations of what this group should do, but more importantly, there were conflicting political views. It is difficult, in retrospect, to identify exactly what the particular political positions might have been. However, there were women who participated in traditional parties of the Left; usually they were more interested in expanding their parties’ political platform where women’s activities were seen simply as supportive of the “real” struggle. There was also a smaller group that rejected any class analysis. In addition, some of the women wanted an organization within the framework of “community work” and they were the ones who had come up with the idea of a conference in the first place. And finally, there were some of us who wanted to incorporate the analysis of class and gender into praxis within an autonomous group.

Two problems arose for the group that served to define the membership. The funds for the conference did not materialize which meant that those more interested in a social service approach to politics left the group. Concurrently, the political differences among the rest of the women proved irreconcilable and the numbers of the group dwindled. It was only a handful of women from different countries, mostly from the South Cone, that began to meet first in a café and afterwards in Maria Teresa’s house in Monarch Park.

In the beginning the group functioned more as a support group where women could meet to discuss their particular situations as women living in exile. The group took about two years to jell and throughout this time there were always discussions as to what the focus of the group
should be. There was also the discussion of whether to “come out” as feminists to the community. Ruth remembers that when she joined the Collective this discussion was still going on: “There were women that were firm in saying that we should go out to the community as feminists and others that we should simply come out as fighting for women’s rights...”

Precisely because the Collective embraced a feminist perspective that began to incorporate the personal is political aspect into the political analysis from the beginning, there was conflict as to the role of the group. “It’s in this context that the first women that formed the Collective needed it as a group of political support...” to their feminist activities. That is, women who remained active in the male-dominated political parties or the solidarity movement needed a group in which to began to think aloud about feminism, the new found political tool that could be used to make sense of their own lives, without feeling intimidated, questioned or chastised.

To others, the first contact with the group was more of an emotional experience. Ana Maria, for example, had recently arrived in Toronto with her four children escaping from an extremely abusive situation. She did not know anyone and she had been isolated from the political group to which she belonged: “I remember that it was my birthday that day when someone knocked on the door and it was some of the women of the Collective with a birthday cake. I will never forget it.... I had been here in Toronto for six months, with four children and running away from a violent situation.”
This emotional support was like water for someone who has been lost in the desert. When the women met for the first times of the Collective there was a lot of emotional healing that began to happen, talking about the isolation, the loneliness, the violence. The group had more of consciousness raising tilt. Women would talk about their relationships, the gender roles and the behaviour that was expected of us and our aspirations for the future. However, this was not entirely fulfilling to the women who wanted to do more solidarity work with women in Latin America. In fact, this difference in focus was a recurrent conflict in the Collective, and there were cycles of what some of the members of the group called disdainfully “therapy” alternating with periods of frantic political work. Maria Rosa describes the process as follows: “...there was a period of a lot of political activism where there were women that had a clearer political vision...they had a strong and concrete ideology and they brought their [party] line to our militancy in the Collective. But at the same time other people came that needed emotional support, and at the same time we were giving it to them, there was a struggle within us. That some thought ‘no, we cannot meet only to sit and cry and to tell each other our sorrows, this is not that kind of group’ and others would say ‘but what I need is to come and to cry, and I am alone and isolated and I don’t have anybody to talk to, and I have a lot of children and nobody helps me’...”

Eventually, the group succeeded in integrating a feminist perspective into our political and social commitment. In a pamphlet developed to introduce the group to the Latin American community, this process was explained: “...we learned through collective work, open discussion, and experience that as women committed to social change, our struggle was double,
and therefore, it must be waged in the social arena, as well as in our arena as an oppressed gender. And although the Latin American Left in Toronto in general refused to deal with issues affecting women, the women in the Collective were well aware that women back home in Latin America had become active participants in the social struggle while holding a gender perspective. With this in mind, the Latin American Women’s Collective was to become pivotal in providing a space for a complex interrelation of gender and class issues.

Conflicts did arise in terms of the direction of the group and, with the involvement of women who had been militant in political parties, it became a more political group. Although the emotional support aspect was always present in the more informal gatherings of the Collective, formally, the group developed a set of objectives that guided the political work of the Collective. These objectives were incredibly ambitious:

- To support financially and politically the liberation processes of our struggling countries of origin.
- To make known to our Latin American community in Toronto our vision of what constitutes the political, social and economic reality of women, so that by discussing and learning together, women’s issues shall be considered an essential part of any political struggle, be it at the community level, union struggle, immigrant struggle, etc.
- To participate actively in the Canadian women’s movement. There are two fundamental reasons for our work in this area:
  a) to participate in a movement that defends our interests as women, and
  b) to take to the women’s movement our anti-imperialist stance and include it as part of our demands as women.
- To reach out to the Latin American immigrant women in Toronto in order to share, to educate ourselves, and to work together around issues of mutual interest, for example, violence at home, pornography, union participation, etc.
The events

The (her)story of the Collective is made up of numerous events that were organized in order to fulfill the objectives. An enormous amount of time was devoted to fund-raising activities directed at obtaining financial support to send to women's groups in Latin America. For instance, money was sent to a Peruvian women's group in jail and also to a women's community kitchen where a stove was needed, to a Chilean women's group, to AMNLAE, and to the Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES), to the Mothers of Plaza Mayo in Argentina, to the Committee of Mothers and Families of Political Prisoners in Uruguay, etc. As we explained in an article, "[O]ur work has ranged from the selling of food in public events as part of fund-raising to taking part in the research of government organizations in order to make our voice be heard."¹³

The Collective participated in an infinite number of workshops, conferences and interviews, and the themes that the Collective explored were varied and included imperialism, violence, pornography, and feminism. One of the most important events took place in September 27, 1987. The Collective organized the first Latin American Family Conference in Toronto. The idea was to begin the discussion within the community about issues that included violence against women, and the relationship of state violence to domestic abuse. Also we wanted to begin to explore the perceptions that our community had regarding issues such as the social discrimination against women, how it would be reflected in parenting styles, and in assigning
gender roles for the children, and so forth. The event was introduced to the community in an advertisement brochure in a manner that was quite sensitive, and therefore, interesting to quote at length:

There is a lot of talk about the crisis that affects the family. Does this crisis affect our Latin American family? To leave our countries, our loved ones and the world that we knew, has forced us to change. These changes (good or bad) have affected our family relations. Our husbands (wives) seemed different, communication with our children becomes difficult. We ‘blame’ Canada and we might be partly right. However, there are other reasons that we might take into account...Have our hopes with regards to our partners materialized? Has the relationship helped us grow and develop as people? Do we know how to communicate with our partners and children? Do we both know how to confront violence, either as a perpetrator or as a victim? Do we both feel respected in this relationship? Do we respect our children or do we demand only to be respected by them?14

The discussion groups at the Conference were organized into women-only groups, a mixed group, and a men’s group facilitated by a Brazilian educator who had worked extensively with the women’s popular movement in Brazil. The children’s event included a puppet show that was aimed to facilitate the discussion of family conflicts and violence among children who were present at the meeting. The premise of the meeting was to talk about better “communication” with our friends, partners and children, in order to have happier relationships in a festive and non-judgemental environment. Approximately one hundred people participated in the Conference.

Political representation in feminist coalitions and participation in political ad hoc groups were also of crucial importance to the women in the Collective. For example, we were represented in the International Women’s Day Committee from 1984 to 1988. We also considered it
extremely important to become part of the Anti-intervention Coalition, especially in the face of the revolutionary struggle that was being waged by Nicaragua and El Salvador. In addition, we also participated in and worked on specific projects with other various Solidarity organizations that represented struggles around the world. The Collective also sponsored events where renowned Latin American women were invited to Toronto and later on, when more resources were available directly invited some prominent women, such as Norma Sanchis and Lucrecia Oler, both Argentinean feminists and organizers of “Lugar de Mujer” (“A Woman’s Place”), a shelter for battered women.

It became extremely important for the Collective to develop links with the women’s movement in Latin America. An effort was made to participate as a group in the Third Latin American Feminist Encounter in 1987 that took place in Taxco, Mexico. With the idea of bringing some of the discussions of the women of Latin America to the community in Toronto, a slide show was prepared to be shown at various workshops that were organized. For the Fourth Feminist Encounter that took place in Argentina in 1990, the Collective took on a much more active role. The idea was to make it possible for a larger group of women to attend the Conference. This took a lot of organizing, preparation and fund-raising. In addition, the Collective assumed the responsibility of organizing the global mailing for the conference. It was from Toronto that the Collective distributed the correspondence to the rest of the world.

**Finances**

The Collective organized an incredible amount of activities in order to do fundraising. These
included the sale of food at the International Women's Day Fair at Ryerson from 1985 to 1987. This became the major fundraising activity for the Collective. All resources were put into motion for this event. Parents, children, friends, lovers: all were asked to provide support in making, carrying and selling food at the Fair. At that time, we had no microwaves, so food consisted of sandwiches, pastries, and eventually when we got a thermic pot, *chile con carne*. The activity was highly stressful and the amount of work was colossal. Once the menu had included egg salad sandwiches and this entailed the boiling of approximately 2,000 eggs. Needless to say, my house where the eggs were boiled, smelled of eggs for months. The amount of money that we obtained from the sales was used mainly for our solidarity work.

Initially, the political position of the Collective, reflected in the Bi-laws, made clear that the group could not be economically dependent on any individual or organization, in order not to compromise the Collective’s principles. Since most of the fund-raising was directed at solidarity work, it was done through events within the community. So, we also organized *peñas*: these were events that emerged from the radical student *cafes* in Latin American, and they included cultural presentations such as theater, folk (Andean) music, and poetry. There would be traditional food and, later on at night, a dance. These events were really hard to organize and meant an incredible amount of effort and the money left after all the expenditures usually did not merit the effort.

Government support in the manner of grants was only sought later when the efforts of the group began to concentrate on the education of the community. There was still dissension about what
it would mean to begin to be dependent on grants and project money from the state. Many members believed that such support would comprise the autonomy of the group.

“Mujeres” the newsletter
To become visible the Collective had to let our voices be heard. As such we participated in any event that would put us closer to the community. “We have participated in the radio and television, we have been interviewed by newspapers. Our voice has always been present, inviting people to events, putting forward our opinions, taking part in discussions…”

In order to make a dent in the political spectrum, the Collective also produced five issues of a newsletter called simply “Mujeres” (Women). The first issue was published in December, 1985; the second March, 1986; the third March, 1987; the fourth in December, 1987; and the last one in November, 1990. The newsletter had a simple, sometimes rudimentary format as many times articles were hand written and covers would be drawings that women themselves did. Nonetheless, different topics were discussed and different voices incorporated. Articles included political analysis about imperialism, feminism, and class struggle, news from Latin America, women’s voices from the community, testimonies and poetry, accounts of events in Toronto, and other topics of interest such as critical analysis of food (i.e., the role of sugars in food). Different women were asked to participate either by writing or by helping to translate the articles. The newsletter was distributed throughout the web of community centres and by hand.

It was in our newsletter that the issue of violence against women and the Collective’s position
on that issue began to be discussed for the first time. Later on, with the financial support of the Ontario Women’s Directorate, a complete issue of Mujeres was devoted to violence. The Collective had its own political analysis that contextualized violence in a larger grid than what other groups were arguing at the time. The Collective identified violence as a political tool that was used in a capitalist/patriarchal society to prevent social change and equality. The Latin American Left could clearly recognize the former link but rarely admitted to the latter. Indeed, this analysis provoked a lot of controversy within the community that tended to see violence as an individual, domestic problem, sometimes justified as a result of repression and persecution.

The newsletter became crucial in terms of beginning to break into an almost entirely male stronghold - the written analysis.

**The family we created**

Despite the amount of political work that the Collective took on, there was always time to share at other levels. Firstly, in order to thank our supporters it was common to have parties where not only friends participated but also the extended families of the members of the Collective. Parties had a distinctive Latin American flavour, meaning that food preparation, singing, dancing, and drinking would take place in a space where children, adolescents, parents and lovers would be present. The women of the Collective remember these times as always full of laughter and pleasure. “We were like a family! In Lilian’s house we would celebrate Christmas, everyone brought food, and everyone knew that papas a la Huancaína were Ruth’s speciality, and it was ...I don’t know...it was beautiful!”¹⁷ This was very much part of a conscious effort to
develop new kinds of relationships as well as new kinds of making politics. This recreational aspect was even included as part of the activities that we let the community know about in our pamphlets: “[we hold] periodic activities of social sharing for us and our families on occasions such as International Women’s Day, Mother’s Day, Christmas, etc.”18

Children and parents, especially mothers, became an integral part of the Collective. In a more or less informal manner, for example, some of the mothers of the women in the Collective began to meet on their own and to become friends and to develop their own group. Indeed, their support of the activities of the Collective was of paramount importance to the success of many of the gigantic tasks that we took on. Meetings would happen in the midst of the crying children, children’s games, and general havoc, and these interruptions were taken for granted. We only had to develop flexible ways to carry out a meeting.

At the time, there were two honorary members of the Collective: Nicolas, Maria Teresa’s son, and Aurelio, Lilian’s son, both of whom at the time were around 11 years old. Their participation at IWD’s Ryerson fair became the object of many humorous stories. In this event, they took on the responsibility of selling “Latin American” pastries, which in reality were any kind of pastries we managed to get from a Uruguayan bakery. They took this task really seriously, and did extremely well, taking into consideration that the pastries were horrible and no one really liked them that much. Sometimes, it was their desire to get together as children that would force the women to meet, the children’s usual question being “so, when are we having a meeting?”
The Collective provided plenty of space for emotional connections amongst the women. Extremely important relationships developed in a context where all the women knew that these relationships reflected a new particular way of relating to other women. Although it can be argued that women’s networks are in fact common occurrences in Latin American countries, the fact that these relationships had a political analysis to them, that we were trying to live our feminist ideals made them revolutionary.\textsuperscript{19} Maria Teresa touched on this point when she commented that, "...men may come and go out from one’s life, but the [women] friends are there forever..."\textsuperscript{20}

Just as \textit{Che}\textsuperscript{21} had exhorted the Latin American working class to become the “New Men” of the Socialist future, unselfish, willing to give up one’s life, incorruptibly revolutionary, the women of the Collective believed they/we were inventing and creating a counterpart of the “new men”, the part that had not been included in \textit{Che’s} notion, the “New Women.” Maria Rosa elaborates on this point: "...there were a lot of activities where we came together as a family. I think that was one the important political things that our organization had. To transform not only the system outside, society, but also to transform our homes, our relationship with our children, the relationship with our compañeros, our relationships with ourselves...some of us developed profound relationships with each other..."\textsuperscript{22} This commitment was even specified in the By-laws of the Collective. “The Collective is willing to give emotional, practical and financial support (if possible) to a compañera that finds herself in a difficult position; however, we think that we can more effectively help the compañera if we transform her problem into a political matter.”\textsuperscript{23} Thus, there was always tension between the aspect of unconditional emotional
support and political pragmatism. Furthermore, this utopic ideal could not really survive in the context of unquestioned power relations that surfaced in the political work, as well as in the dyads that formed the emotional links between the women in the Collective.

The structure

The structure of the Collective was based on the notion of collective decision-making. This kind of structural organization was thought to be in direct opposition to the authoritarian, patriarchal hierarchical models. As Honor Ford-Smith comments in her analysis of Sistren, "[W]e did not want to reproduce a structure that equated skill with authority or that divided brain from hand..." Once again, this idea was based not only on the feminist model that believed in the essentializing notion that women “naturally” could work in a manner that avoided power relationships but also, as in the case of the Collective, the belief in democratic centralism, the foundation of popular power. It consisted in the ability of the people to make their own decisions in a really democratic manner. The ideology behind both models was never questioned and there was never a manner in which issues of power could be addressed, even if we had been conscious of there being a problem.

Power relations in the Collective sprang from different ideological perspectives, personality, class differences, competition, and so forth. The collectivist structure, though, prevented us from assigning responsibility for decision-making to anyone, since we all participated equally. What developed was what has been identified as “the tyranny of structurelessness” in which “hidden leadership is more manipulative and less democratic than formally visible
leadership." It is interesting that even now some women of the Collective cannot really come up with healthy criticism of the power relations that existed within the Collective. Practical problems developed as with many other grass-roots organizations, as Ford-Smith discusses in relation to the Sistren Collective: "We had no formal way of recording General Meeting decisions as a set of precedents, the general principles of which could be applied as part of the collective's practice. We had no system of checks and balances on our operations."26

The women who left the Collective at one point or another all left because of the unspoken power relations that turned into personality conflicts and different styles of functioning. The vertical (also called Stalinist) modus operandi, so criticised by the new progressive groups, began to be reproduced in the Collective in the interest of effectiveness. The argument that we were so few and things had to be done, that while we engaged in indulgent complaints, women and men were dying back in our countries of origin, led to vertical decision making, overseeing and checking, harsh and painful criticism.

Admissions

At some point the Collective developed its internal guidelines. These clearly established the admission criteria, namely that for a woman to be part of the Collective she had to be a) Latin American and b) in agreement with the principles of the Collective. Reality was a different matter. Ana Maria mocked the entire procedure: "One of the objectives of the Collective was that it was a completely open, completely...I don't remember the word that we used, that we accepted, we invited and received women from any background, sexual orientation,
anything...and this was not true, because when women approached us we had a series of filters, we had to ask them whether they were in agreement with the objectives: [jokingly] had they taken their communion, had they fasted, had they brought their blood analysis...[laughing] and after all of that, we would say, ‘...it seems to me, that so and so, should not be accepted, and neither the other one...’ ”

The entire procedure was also demarcated in the guidelines: “The person interested in belonging to the Collective must be introduced and be recommended by a member of the Collective. The Collective will decide together on the pros and cons of the incorporation of the new member, taking into account, in addition to the admission criteria, that the new compañera must contribute to the group’s enrichment and must not threaten the homogeneity and harmony of the group.” [italics added]. Thus, the admission process was highly discriminatory. In principle, the Collective purported to be accessible to all women who were interested in participating; however, in practice, there was a tremendous fear that the Collective would be subverted from within.

In terms of the regular operating manner attendance at meetings was deemed to be extremely important, and if unable to attend for three consecutive times a woman had to explain her absence and the group had to decide whether this was acceptable. The loss of membership was always a threat. In reality, however, the group was extremely tight in terms of emotional relationships, so it was difficult to impose the rules and really punish someone by taking away their membership.
Daycare was provided for women at some point, although it was more common for women to take their children to the meeting so they could socialize. There used to be a joke that it was the children, as already mentioned in the case of Nicolas and Aurelio, who pushed to have more frequent meetings. Nevertheless, the Collective assumed the responsibility in writing to provide care for the children during its activities, meeting or events.

**Inventing new relationships**

The Collective provided the framework for a myriad of relationships to occur. Emotional support and shared experiences of loneliness, violence, estrangement from the family due to the exile, gave way to profound friendships, sometimes for the first time in our lives. The women in the Collective not only gave each other affection but also unconditional loyalty, sometimes taking enormous risks. For example, when at an event one member's ex-partner physically threatened her, the only people who came to her aid, to the point of physically attacking the man in question, were other members of the Collective. Ana Maria, in talking about her relationship with Maria Rosa, describes it as: "... almost a symbiotic relationship, like an umbilical chord..." Such profound feelings also led to bitter disillusionment and pain when women felt betrayed.

Thus, the women who participated in the Collective were deeply influenced by the political analysis and the emotional space that was built. The Collective supported our development as feminists and expanded our analysis of class. The activities of solidarity not only provided us with a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that we could organize events on our own,
but also provided us with that political link to Latin America. Maybe there was a sense that we could only deal with more *personal* issues if we continued to send economic support to the revolutionary struggles. Whatever the case, the Collective provided the only space where all important issues for us converged.
NOTES

1. The Nicaraguan Women’s Association Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE). This organization was named after an eighteen-year-old woman murdered by the Somoza dictatorship. Later on, the organization became pivotal in pushing for specific demands for women.

2. It is important to point out, though, that women’s issues were dealt with differently in the different revolutionary movements and that women’s participation was not without a struggle. AMNLAE, for example, began to define its work as “feminist”. The Salvadorean Women’s Association refused to use this label as feminism was perceived to be a North American phenomenon that tended to, in their opinion, ignore class struggle.


4. Personal communication. Maria Rosa concurs that this is how the Collective began to function. Probably, the idea was in the mind of many of the women that brought it to reality; like many other ideas, it came from many streams.


15. The First Latin American Women’s Encounter took place in Bogota, Colombia, in 1981; 300 women attended. The Second Encounter took place in Lima, Peru, in 1983, and 700 women attended. The Third Encounter took place in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and 1,000 women attended.


17. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p.18.


19. Liisa North, “Feminist Currents in Latin America.” The article is based on interviews with feminists and material collected in Lima (Peru), Quito (Ecuador) and Bogota (Colombia) during July-August 1984. Here the author quotes feminist Latin American women as trying to invent new kinds of social relations, in “defiance of the traditional Latin American women’s maxim – ‘Distrust your best friend.’” p.1. Archives Cross Cultural Communication Centre, undated.

20. Interview with Maria Teresa Larrain by R. Magaly San Martin, Tape#3, side #2.

21. Ernesto Che Guevara, Argentinean doctor that participated in the Cuban Revolution and was later assassinated by the CIA in Bolivia.

22. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 12.


27. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 20.


29 Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 17.
The relationship of the LAWC with the “progressive” white women's movement

In April 1983, the now defunct feminist publication *Broadside* published a letter and an opinion piece which reflected the polemical climate characterizing International Women's Day (I.W.D.) that year. The letter, signed by Mary O'Brien and Frieda Forman of the Women's Resource Centre (it was located at OISE then and still is), stated amongst other things that there had been an “erosion of feminist content” that year and that the number of participants in the march had been “inflated by male dominated groups.” The tone of the letter was bitter and sarcastic, and the authors concluded that women had been asked like robots to show solidarity with Palestinian women (to the exclusion of Israeli women). Particularly infuriating to them was the outrageous demand by the MC to the women in the audience: “...to show our solidarity, by chanting in *Spanish!* (is that the universal language of struggle now?)...Is an I.W.D. rally, a day when presumably we show our sisterhood with all women, the time and the place to shout simplistic Spanish slogans which are certain to divide us?” [italics in the original]¹

The main accusation throughout the letter was that the word “feminist” had not been mentioned in the events in which the “immigrant women”² had participated, and consequently the authors argued, a feminist analysis had been absent. The effort to name diversity at the event was mocked: “we were told that we were working women, immigrant women, lesbians, even vegetarians; were there no feminists there at an I.W.D. rally?”³ Specific demands for jobs, abortion and peace were also deemed insufficient to convince O'Brien and Forman that there had indeed been a feminist perspective at the event.
In the same issue of *Broadsie*, Lois Lowenberger, a Toronto lawyer, also expressed her dismay at how I.W.D. had handled that year's celebration. She charged that it had been "divisive and insensitive." She echoed the complaints of O'Brien and Forman that International Women's Day was "increasingly becoming dominated by male-oriented leftist issues, to the exclusion of feminist issues...The choice and execution of this year's themes (with the exception of freedom of choice) ignored many issues of crucial importance to women...it was far too oriented towards the male left, and paid only lip service to feminism."  

All of this began when Maria Teresa Larrain, at the time co-ordinator of Women Working with Immigrant Women, and a few other women from the Latin American community became involved in I.W.D. to bring the perspective of feminist "immigrant women" to the women's movement. This participation was limited to the appearance of a Latin American woman as MC at the rally and the organization of a workshop around the only theme in which we were considered to be experts: Imperialism.

The workshop on the theme of women's right to peace was entitled "Women's Liberation, Disarmament and Anti-Imperialism" and had been mainly organized by a group of Latin American women and a group of white socialist feminist women. Invited to the panel were Niginska Hinsach, from the National Union of Eritrean Women, Nahla Abdo, from the League of Arab Democrats, Fely Vilasin, from the Coalition Against the Marcos Dictatorship, and Margaret Hancock, from the Women's Action for Peace. The women selected were to speak about crucial political struggles that were being waged at the time.
and in which women were active participants. The woman from the Philippines also was to include in her own analysis of the Marcos dictatorship references to conflictive situations that Nicaragua and El Salvador were facing, implicitly stating the connections and similarities of the struggles.

Admittedly, part of the incensed response to the events had been the decision of the women organizing the workshop not to invite an Israeli woman to the panel. This decision to allow only one part of that particular conflict to be present clearly indicated the political stand of the committee with respect to who were the “victims” and who were the “aggressors.” Jewish feminists stood on both sides of the issue, and in a third position that denounced war as a patriarchal exercise of power, exonerating women from both sides. Indeed, there had been an effort to form a group of Arab and Jewish women that opposed the war. Regardless, the event proved to be a detonator that sparked the formation of a “Committee Concerned about the Israeli/Palestinian Question and I.W.D.” Other concerns expressed in the aftermath to that I.W.D. panel (celebration) reflected more of a liberal positivistic attitude, exalting “objectivity,” “neutrality,” and the need to present both sides of a story.

But the most incendiary charge coming from the brutally critical white women feminists was that: “immigrant women,” profoundly committed to the liberation struggle of their countries, were not feminists. Basically, white women stood up at in the discussion period after the panel presentation and arrogantly told the women of the panel they were puppets of
the "male left." The anti-left sentiment had already been part of embittered divisions within the white women's movement, as Becki Ross quotes, "socialism was what seemed to be 'stopping women' from being able to be 'real feminists'".\(^5\)

We, the "immigrant women," were enraged, humiliated and hurt. O'Brien and Forman described the situation from their own perspective: "...the shameful hissing and booing that were heard when a woman attempted to raise the level of discussion to include a feminist perspective"\(^6\) had been further proof that "immigrant women" could not participate in an elevated feminist debate. Certainly, the "immigrant women" had been incensed; personally I was unable to control my own frustration and I nearly grabbed a chair and hit the same woman on the head. I, of course, was acting on my leftist male tendencies since according to these white women no real feminist could feel this intense anger towards other women. For us, the dreams of the "sisterhood" came crumbling down. These white women were no allies of ours. At the time, there had been no discussion about "essentializing" but we the "immigrant women" knew that our priorities were different from those of the white "progressive" women's movement.

Many of us had struggled long to assume a feminist identity. This meant alienation in our community, confrontation and pain. We had turned to the white women's movement for solace, solidarity and support, only to find out we were not really wanted. The bulk of the "progressive" white women's movement claimed to want to reach out to other women, but that meant mainly other white women. Thus, as Lois Lowenberger succinctly put it: "The women's movement in general, and the International Women's Day in particular, should be
careful not to unnecessarily alienate women who support us by focusing on issues that which are, at best, peripherally relevant to feminism, to the exclusion of more universal problems.” [italics mine]

Her preoccupation with the alienation of certain groups of women did not extend to the immigrant women who had participated that year. In fact, it was precisely the issues of class and different political priorities, brought forward by “immigrant women,” that became “divisive.” Lowenberger felt completely comfortable stating these issues were not relevant to feminism and that there were other more “universal problems.” She did not find it necessary to explicate what the “universal problems” were; clearly, she had a particular audience in mind, and it was the prerogative of this group to define what was a feminist issue.

There was another interesting argument in the debate that embodied the essentializing of “immigrant women.” It seemed that if “immigrant women” were to be present, they automatically became the representatives of the women of the “Third World.” Ironically, at the same time, the “immigrant women” who participated in I.W.D. were also accused of not being “representative” enough. Suddenly, it was we who had become exclusionary. Once again it was Lowenberger who had the gall to emphasize this point: “On International Women's Day we should talk not just about women in South American (sic), the Philippines, the Palestinian refugee camps, and a select group in Africa, but about all women --women in Israel, other Arab countries, the African continent, the Caribbean,
China, India, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos, Thailand, Afghanistan, the Eastern Block, Iran and Pakistan..." Once again, she did not bother to explain who would take on this task.

So we were to assume that the rest of the struggles of the women in the world would be discussed in a three-hour workshop, the only space devoted to the women who were not white, the workshop on anti-imperialism. The fact that only women from five countries participated in this workshop led Lowenberger to shamelessly comment that omissions of other struggles, for example the Iranian women’s march against the fundamentalist government in Iran, meant that maybe the group of "immigrant women" who organized the event supported these regimes in power. She maliciously stated: "Perhaps all these women are ignored because they are oppressed by the wrong people." So "representativeness" implicitly, it would seem, fell by default on the shoulders of the few "immigrant women" participating at I.W.D.

The debate raged on in the white women’s community and in academe. Other groups of mainly white women, i.e., the I.W.D. committee, and a group of socialist-feminists, were quick to respond to the accusations. Notably absent from the written debate in the white feminist public space of the newspaper was the voice of the "immigrant women," who were blamed for the disruption that had taken place. The only exception, to my knowledge, was Mariana Valverde, who provided an excellent analysis of privilege and class. Nowhere, though, was the concept of racism mentioned. This polemical debate was the official welcome to the feminist Latin American women who began their participation in International Women’s Day events that year.
The Latin American Women's Collective

This controversy preceded and possibly hastened the formation of the Latin American Women's Collective (LAWC). One thing was for sure: this experience determined the future relationship that the group would have vis-à-vis most of the “progressive” feminist movement in Toronto, namely one of courteous hostility.

Since the main objectives of the group were to provide solidarity with Latin American women’s groups in our countries of origin, to raise consciousness in the Latin American community in Toronto regarding women’s issues, and to become active in the women’s movement, participating in the women’s movement was crucial for the group. Our intention was: a) to become part of a movement that represented the interests of women and (b) to include anti-imperialism as part of the demands of women. Furthermore, though not explicitly stated as an objective, it became vital for us, and other minority women’s groups, to bring to the women’s movement the voice of “immigrant women” and their particular demands. For the Collective, International Women’s Day was the yearly event that brought to the fore the pressing issues of the movement. Thus, we focused our participation in the women’s movement by taking part in the March 8th Coalition that organized International Women’s Day during the years of 1984-1988.

The March 8th Coalition was mainly a white, middle-class, “progressive” women’s organization that functioned in a manner that was completely foreign to us. Meetings were conducted according to the Robert’s Rules of Order and the discussions tended to alienate all of those that did not really know how to follow the procedures. It is interesting to note that
not only "immigrant women"\textsuperscript{11} were intimidated by the structural procedures. Other groups of marginalized women felt alienated as well. For example, when a representative of an organization of prostitutes was invited to a meeting, she commented she was really surprised women did not jump into the discussion all at once. Instead, there was a "speaker's list." She found this particularly amusing. Another time, a group of single mothers from Riverdale came to a meeting and silently left. We never saw them again. Not everyone in the Collective participated in these meetings. Maria Rosa explains that for her, "I think that the women that were stronger inside our organization found a space, the rest of us did not feel we had a space...meetings had rigid rules, I did not feel free to express myself."\textsuperscript{12}

The 1983 I.W.D. controversy made it more obvious that "immigrant women" were not perceived as truly "feminist." Subtle and outright racist comments and attitudes suggested or implied we were controlled by the "male left." We were perceived to be passive "pawns" used by our "machista" comrades. The stereotypical "other" created by the North was ingrained in the psyches of white women. This stereotype brought back images of the brutal, backward, ignorant, violent and lazy Mexican men of the Westerns: big bellied Pancho Villa and the men taking the siesta under a cactus. Concurrently, if the men in our community were "machista,"\textsuperscript{13} then the binary opposite, the "submissive" woman must also be present. For Latin American women in the LAWC, the stereotypical and mythical "macho" man became an intrinsic part of the measure against which our own feminist analysis was deemed suspect.

Although it was vital for the LAWC to work in the white feminist movement, in this climate
many members of the Collective chose not to be involved directly with the white feminists precisely because they felt a certain contempt toward them. Ana Maria also recalls that she personally avoided being involved in IWD: "...It was frustrating to be there...although we made a dent. We begun to participate in the feminist movement furthering the presence of Latin American women...it was very difficult...we were practically invisible."14

"We do not fight for the clitoris"15: Links with Latin American women in Toronto

Although the group was well received by a large number of Latin American women, LAWC constantly had to fight for recognition as a valid and serious group in the Latin American political scene, where women's issues were viewed with hostility. In public events, LAWC usually faced the accusation from other Latin Americans present, that the group was composed of bourgeois women, implying a class conflict. This became a powerful label that affected our location in the constellation of Latin American solidarity/political groups. Many women who were active in the traditional Latin American groups were outright aggressive, and considered the group to be shallow and dangerous to the overall political objectives of their groups.16

Our relationship with the Latin American militant women was epitomized in a particular incident where our participation was effectively barred. "The Feminine Front,"17 a group of women who belonged to different traditional political parties of the Latin American and Canadian Left, began to organize a Conference of Latin American and Caribbean women in Toronto to take place in May 1985. Initially, we were invited to participate. However, our feminist analysis of gender and our perceived political sympathies (accusations varied from
Maoist to Trotskyist) proved to be too much for the group. The process for the organization of the event became absurdly undemocratic. As Maria Rosa recalls, “there are forms of isolating you, they can say ‘come and be part of the committee but whatever you say we will not implement it’. They used to change the time for the meetings, or we would show up and it had been moved to another place, so we’d missed it, someone had sent a messenger dove and it had not arrived...”\textsuperscript{18}

The Collective responded to these incidents in the customary political manner. We wrote a letter to the organizers. It is illuminating to analyse what were the issues and how we sought to address them. An excerpt from the letter reads: “The first problems emerged during the first meeting called by the Feminine Front January 22, 1985 in Cecil St. On this occasion, the compañeras of the Front brought to the meeting an already elaborated and approved list of guests from Latin America to the Conference...”\textsuperscript{19}

The letter goes on to enumerate the incredibly totalitarian methods that this group of women used to eventually oust the Collective from the organization of the event. Part of the list mentioned in the letter included: members of LAWC were not allowed to speak at meetings, the woman who facilitated the meetings was always the same woman, who in addition also took the minutes, creating an administrative chaos, meetings were used to simply inform those present of decisions already taken, and so forth. Part of the problems definitely reflected the stale and Stalinist methods of working that characterized traditional parties of the Left. However, this need to control was exacerbated by the fact that these women
thought that they were dealing with the “enemy” (read the bourgeoisie) and had a clear mandate from their groups to get rid of the Collective.

Still at the event, that included guests such as the (former) Vice-president of Nicaragua, Sergio Ramirez, and many women leaders from the Salvadorean FMLN, it was clear that we were not wanted. This was especially true after one of the women representatives of the Salvadorean guerrilla explained that, although women’s issues were fundamental for women involved in the guerrilla movement, they categorically rejected the label “feminist”. Thereafter, women and men were openly hostile to the presentations of LAWCA and tried to prevent us from speaking.

These methods of silencing us became so common that we developed strategies to deal with them. At other meetings with the male-dominated Latin American Left, if one of us asked a question and was not allowed to finish, then another one of us would take it up and pursue it, until whoever was being questioned was obliged to answer. Maria Teresa remembers how at different events we used to get up and ask uncomfortable questions. A particular event was a Chilean event with Gladys Marin where we had simply asked about her experience as a woman in the Central Committee of the Chilean Communist Party. As usual, other women who were present jumped up to defend the Party against what was assumed to be an attack. Members of the audience hissed, swore at us and called us the expected insults “lesbians,” “crazy,” “bourgeois.” According to Maria Teresa, though, Gladys Marin herself was not as belligerent and actually responded to the question by dwelling on her experience as a woman in the Party.
Another issue of contention in the Latin American community was our analysis of domestic violence. The fact that we dared to name this publicly seemed like a betrayal to the men in our community that other women did not take lightly. Maybe domestic violence was simply too painful an issue to deal with since it exposed amongst other things, that our conduct as irrefutable militants, the better revolutionary human beings that we were supposed to be, was more an idea than a reality.

The methods that the Collective used to introduce topics into the Latin American community that were new and taboo were innovative, creative and decidedly non-confrontational. For example, as Ruth recalls, the idea was to simply allow for the critical thinking to extend to the personal aspect of one's life: "You had the women that had never questioned their gender situation in society, they came to the Collective, attended three or four meetings and began to question stuff in their homes, how she was going to change her life at the level of her relationships, with her children...a small influence but a big change."23

Many women (and men) changed their attitudes, perceptions and political outlook after being in contact with the Collective.

**The women of the solidarity movement**

The definition of solidarity work has always been problematic.24 The belief still abounds, even in progressive spheres, that Human Rights violations occur because “Third World” countries are “uncivilized” rather than because of a particular economic and political system that implicates the so called “First World.”25 The links to the solidarity movement and the women who participated in it became another interesting arena where conflict arose.
Many of the white Canadian women who participated in solidarity movements and who were usually feminists as well, also had a vision of "Third World" women. This particular perception had repercussions for Latin American women involved in solidarity in Toronto, in terms of how we were viewed and how our political opinions were taken into consideration. Once again, there was an uncomfortable awareness that, although LAWC provided the colourful "third world" accent, revolutionary rhetoric and rhythm, we were discouraged from becoming too involved in the decision-making process of organizing. Although lip service was paid to, say, women in Nicaragua, we were still regarded as "submissive". Mohanty describes this phenomenon as common in the North American feminist tradition: "...feminist studies...discursively present Third World Women as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives, victimised by the combined weight of 'their' traditions, cultures and beliefs...".

There was also an aspect of "sexual competition" that I will only touch upon. Many white heterosexual women travelled to Nicaragua or Cuba and became involved in the solidarity movement to find partners or to have sexual relations with Latin American men. Eventually, if the relationships did not work out they criticised these men for being "machista". Sometimes Canadian women would become involved in the political parties and their loyalties would be with the men in these parties. Ana Maria, who was fighting for custody of her children with her ex-partner, a member of a traditional left party, had to confront a number of women, including a famous progressive lawyer, who came to his defence and testified that Ana Maria was emotionally unfit. I believe this particular aspect of the historical competition of women for men and the racist implications has not been
systematically analysed in the Latin American community yet. However, bell hooks, for example, has made comments regarding the attitude of tolerance that white women have towards black men and how in general this becomes an obstacle to the black women who are struggling for changes.\textsuperscript{28} Ironically, myth has it that many men of colour become involved with white women because they want a woman who is independent and "liberal"; in many cases, though, these men are leaving their partners (women of colour) because they have become "too independent and difficult."\textsuperscript{29}

At the same time, however, there was a small group of socialist, white women feminists, mostly lesbians, that provided great support to the Collective in terms of our anti-imperialist position. These women educated us in terms of what was expected of us in the political arena, and they began to question us regarding our position regarding "sexual orientation". These women became intrinsically our support and were those that enabled the Collective to hold a space in the women’s movement that was pivotal for our political development.

Amidst all the contradictions and painful struggles, it seemed that the Collective in spite of all the obstacles, won the respect of many of the people involved in the solidarity movement, the white women’s movement and even some militants of political parties that had been struggling for a real democratization of political groups. In addition, the Collective continued to provide financial support to the liberation movements, and had a clear class analysis that could not be dismissed easily.
Watering our roots: the Latin American feminist movement

Throughout the life of the LAWC, the main focus was to build bridges and to support the work of women in different struggles within the framework of the larger political resistance going on at the time in Latin America. Our main concern was to provide women with material resources to continue to struggle. This meant that every time there was a chance for a member of the Collective to visit a country, usually their own country of origin, contact was established with diverse women's groups. Money was sent to Peruvian women in prison, to Uruguayan women, to Chilean popular kitchens, and to any other group that was active in changing the conditions of women in Latin America.

Historically, the Collective had supported a host of women's organizations in Latin America. However, contact with specific feminist organizations had been limited. Thus, in the last phase of the Collective it was necessary to become more in touch with the Latin American feminist movement. Therefore, the members of the Collective decided to participate in the Third Feminist Encounter that took place in Mexico in 1987 and the Fourth Latin American Feminist Encounter that took place in Argentina in 1990. Once again, this need may have come from the incessant search for “allies”; the constant need to be in the company of those who were like us, shared our same experiences and political points of view, a place where all our “issues” converged, always led us to go back to our roots. The experience, however, also proved to be a painful reality check.

The Encounter in Mexico provided an opportunity for the women of the collective to experience part of the struggle that was going on in Latin America at the time. Ana Maria
was mesmerized: "...we saw the peasant women’s movement, native women, we also saw troubling conflicts, we saw how the presence and militancy of the Latin American lesbians was becoming evident, they were part of the movement, the movement as something diverse...it was the time of Nicaragua, it was the moment we were living, the intensity that made us...that welded us together."³⁰

It was on the basis of this positive experience in Mexico that the Collective decided to become more involved in the organization of the next Encounter. The Collective had concluded that women needed to attend these events in order to maintain contact with the movement back in Latin America. Therefore, a whole campaign of fundraising was launched to subsidize the trip for a group of women. The fundraising also served to publicize the Encounter in Toronto and to disseminate information regarding the current issues being discussed in Latin America. The preparation for the Argentinean Encounter lasted a bit more than a year. As well, the Collective assumed the responsibility for the coordination of the mailing for the entire project. The task of the mailings alone was of herculean proportions but deeply satisfying for the women who participated in it. More then forty women participated in the fundraising campaigns and eighteen women travelled to Argentina. An effort was made to be as diverse as possible and as Maria Rosa recalls, “there were housewives, political militants, women who were economists, women who were feminists..."³¹ The Collective also prepared a number of workshops in the community to give information and to receive feedback from women to take to the Encounter with the idea to report back on these after they came back from Argentina.
The Encounter in Argentina, however, reflected the internal division of the feminist movement in Latin America along the lines of the women who controlled the event, usually members of N.G.O.s, and the women from the grassroots feminist movement. Therefore, the experience in Argentina proved to be very different from the meeting in Mexico for the women of the Collective. As a result of the changing political climate and the disappearance of the Nicaraguan struggle as a point of unification, the internal contradictions in the Latin American feminist movement became tangible and visible. For some women, class was the immediate factor. Ana Maria recalls, that as soon as the women from the Collective arrived at the airport they were met by a woman that exuded arrogance: “...these were only bourgeois white women...professionals, those that had the leadership and the control, and one could tell the contempt for the Native women and women from the working class...there was definitely a separation.” The leadership of the Argentinean Encounter then were women from the upper classes that had domestic servants and had little in common with the women from the Collective. As well, the women from the Collective did not take lightly to the assumption that they were connected to infinite financial resources, a common mythology held with respect to anyone coming from the “First World”. Resentment became a problem when the women of the Collective who were mostly single mothers realized the irony that they probably had more in common with the domestic servants than with their hosts.

Conflict with women from more working classes may have stemmed from the fact that Latin Americans in the progressive movements in general are weary of anyone that comes from the “belly of the beast”. Resentments may intensify when, for different reasons, some
women living in the “First World” adopt the same attitudes and values their white, feminist counterparts hold, and try to impose a particular point of view or philosophical current on the women in Latin America. There seems to be a belief that the “First World” has a monopoly on what “real” feminism means and therefore any woman who lives in the “First World” has a far better analysis of women’s oppression. Feminist women living in Latin America may feel that having lived, struggled and survived dictatorships provides them with elements that affect their analysis in a completely different manner. In any case as Maria Rosa comments, “In Latin America we don’t have a space either, we have to struggle to gain a space over there as well.”

Consequently, after the women came back from Argentina some efforts were made to organize public events. However, after some time the group gradually disbanded. Exactly what was the reason for the disappearance of the Collective is not clear, although exhaustion and disillusion may have played a part. To be perpetually outsiders dealing with painful contradictions may lead to a sense of hopelessness, especially in the context of the 90’s when “post-feminism” and the eradication of ideologies became fashionable. For some of the women in the Collective this had tremendous emotional repercussions; we remained displaced and orphaned.
NOTES

1. Mary O'Brien and Frieda Forman, Letter to the Editor, *Broadside: a Feminist Review* 4, no. 6 (April 1983), 2. Interestingly enough the slogans tried to include "Third World" women, for example: "women from Eritrea, present!...now and forever!" and so on.

2. I will be using the term "immigrant women" to refer to women who were not been born in Canada, whose mother tongue was not North American English, including women with white skin privilege and women of colour. The term will be problematized later on in the essay.


11. I want to emphasize that the LAWC was not at all a homogeneous group. Some women in the LAWC for example were members of the upper crust in their countries of origin, some had a high level of education, and most came from active militancy in political parties. Needless to say, this facilitated their participation in these meetings.


13. Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers, Essays in Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 14. She provides the best definition of "machismo" that I have seen. "White men seem to associate machismo with a kind of Mexican, male killer instinct...I point to them that 'machismo' is an exaggerated demonstration of male virility that is inherent in most cultures, but it is exemplified most in the United States by their own Anglo leaders, who in the past decade maintained an olympic trillion-dollar defence budget." The perfect example of who's got 'it' the biggest.

15. This comment was recalled by Ana Maria Santinoli and was made by one of the women members of the “Mothers of Plaza Mayo” movement in Argentina. Their objective was to find “disappeared” relatives, especially sons and daughters. Their means was to take advantage of the “motherhood” ideology to organize politically. These women considered gender issues irrelevant and shallow.


17. The adjective they chose to describe themselves is embedded in the sexist notion that women who are politically active must still be “feminine” and that women’s participation in a feminine role is crucial to support the struggle. They were the appendages of the party.

18. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 7.


20. FMLN stood for the Salvadorean National Liberation Front Farabundo Martí. This was a Coalition of political groups from the Left that began an armed insurrection against the Right-wing Salvadorean regime.

21. Gladys Marin was a member of the Central Committee of the Chilean Communist Party.


25. As an illustration, I was at a rally protesting the police murder of a fifteen-year-old. His mother who had become active in denouncing the racism in police violence at one point in her speech mentioned that “after all we are not one of those ‘Third World’ countries...”


27. In the years of the “Trojan Horse” (1978-82), a coffee house in the Danforth where the Chilean and Greek exiles played music, there was a joke that Canadian women would come and ask for a “coffee and a Chilean to go.” This apparently was made famous by Nancy White, a progressive Canadian singer.

29. I was invited to do a presentation to Brown College students about the Latin American women’s movement in Toronto. It became quite clear that Latin American women continue to be viewed as submissive and dependent. Interestingly, female students recounted numerous occasions were Latin American men had presumably commented that they “preferred Canadian women.”

30. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 16.

31. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 12.

32. Interview with Ana Maria Santinoli by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 16.

33. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 13.
IV

CONTRADICTIONS THAT WOUND

The Collective like many other progressive social groups experienced internal contradictions. It was puzzling, although not entirely unexpected, that having gone through the painful experience of confronting the Latin American Left in Toronto, with regards to their conflicting views vis-à-vis women, we remained blind and oblivious to crucial differences within our own group. Perhaps some of the blame can be placed on the inherent difficulties involved in the efforts to unveil and expose one’s own privilege, particularly in situations when one is accustomed to looking at oneself through the eyes of a marginal identity.

As I have already discussed in Chapter Three, the Latin American Women’s Collective faced considerable opposition to its practices from both the Latin American Left in Toronto and the Women’s Movement in general. The intensity of these struggles at both the emotional and political level left the Collective in a position where its own existence and identity had to be continually reaffirmed. In this situation, it became easier to merge into a unified and homogeneous whole than to explore our internal contradictions. In this manner, the profound differences among the women of the Collective became subsumed under the necessity for internal cohesion and strength. Difference in terms of class, educational levels, region of origin, political participation, skin colour, English language skills and so on was erased and not even the absence of women from specific groups, such as Black and Native women from South and Central America as well as lesbians, was questioned.
The creation of the “Immigrant Women” label

The women who participated in the LAWC were acutely aware of the discrimination we faced within the women's movement from the first moment we became active in it, a feeling which we were able to confirm in the 1983 controversy. We, however, explained these differences as discrimination towards “immigrant women” based on “cultural differences”. White women did not culturally understand us nor did they understand our way of doing politics. To us it was a case of political myopia on the part of the women's movement that would prove detrimental; it was their loss. As a consequence, when the issue of racism within the I.W.D. exploded in 1985, the LAWC limited its participation to the role of witness in the fierce political struggle that ensued.

Our limited participation in the debates that took place was justified and rationalized in terms of our own political reality. The LAWC's objectives, from the very beginning, had reflected the aims of the politically active Latin American community in general and, therefore, our political priorities were determined by the decision to financially and politically support the liberation struggles in our countries. There was a sort of psychological need to devote our entire efforts ourselves towards the political events taking place in Latin America. This sort of urgent activism was closely related to the major revolutionary upheavals occurring in the continent at the time and to the euphoric feeling that “everything was possible” that accompanied them. Accordingly, our energies at I.W.D. were directed at very prosaic and pragmatic practices, discussed in more detail in Chapter Three: for example, the food concession at the I.W.D.
Ryerson Fair, a major source of fundraising for our organization in 1983, 1984 and 1985. We were too busy supporting women political prisoners and women's groups in Latin America to devote time to the political storm that was brewing within the "progressive" women's movement with regards to racist practices at I.W.D.

In retrospect it is easier to point to three specific and interrelated problems that made it difficult to position ourselves wholly within the debates and struggles that were taking place in I.W.D. The first is related to the existence of a historic binary paradigm of racism in North America that has polarized struggles around racism in terms of white/black issues. Within this framework, people of colour, other than black or white, have found it difficult to feel represented. The general perception that racism is limited to a black/white dichotomy has left little space for the experiences and voices for women of colour, women with brown skin, to be heard, in this manner effectively marginalizing us from the struggle. Ana Castillo draws our attention to this experience when she talks of Chicano movement in the United States, "[L]ooking different, that is not being white nor black but something in between, in a society that has historically acknowledged only a black/white racial schism, is cause for great anxiety." For the LAWC, the debates and struggles around racism in I.W.D. were informed and shaped within and through this binary paradigm of racism and, as a result, we did not feel like we fit or even belonged in this fight.

The second problem was more closely related to the specificities of the women's movement in
Toronto at the time. In the struggle around racism, two groups were pivotal in shaking the

ground at the complacent I.W.D. committee: The Black Women's Collective and the Native

Women's Caucus. The latter posed an added dilemma to the Latin American women

participating at I.W.D. because according to them all non-native Latin Americans were defined

as "Hispanics" and, as such, as part of the oppressors.² This highly essentialist definition was

very troubling and provoked much anger among Latin American women for it superimposed an

identity that none of us, and indeed very few progressive Latin American would have identified

with. We did not feel "Hispanic" and even though many of us could identify some European

ancestry in our heritage, we did not identify primarily with it. For us it was important to

recognize our mixed heritage. The "Hispanic" label made us uneasy and fidgety, as Judit

Moschkovich angrily explains: "Latin American people residing in the U.S. are not some vague

'Spanish' conqueror race, but are a multi-racial/cultural people of Native, Black and European

background."³ Feeling unjustly marked the Collective felt alienated and chose to not participate

in the ensuing discussions.

Our self-imposed exile from the debates around racism was further complicated by the fact that

the issue of racism has been historically a particularly thorny one for Latin American feminists.⁴

It seems vital to recognize that a lack of critical analysis vis-à-vis racism is due in part to Latin

America's history as well as to the experience of the "common sense" racism of everyday. A
cursory look into this multi-faceted issue will show that racism and colour hierarchies were and

are acutely present in the Latin American consciousness; they are clearly identified as part of the
dominant structure while at the same time they are denied adamantly.

In spite of the claims to the contrary, racial oppression remains a concrete material reality of everyday life in Latin America. The discourse around the complex concept of "mestizaje" has served in many cases to render invisible the racial hierarchies that exist in the different social formations that make up Latin America. For example, "mestizaje" has served to underlie the sameness of all Latin Americans by pointing to the commonality of our histories, our nation-building efforts and our linguistic background. In this manner "mestizaje" becomes the unifying sign that proves to us that we all come from the same background and that, at the same time, serves to hide our differences. These homogenizing efforts are further aided by the stereotypical and mythological representations of Latin Americans which the "First World" wishes to impose on us.

The people of Latin America, however, cannot identify themselves as being of one particular "race", partly because the experience of colonization in Latin America differs radically from that of the English colonies. The Spanish conquistadores tended to mix freely with the population. In addition to the massive rapes that occurred in the Conquest, there were also cases of interracial marriages. Although the Church and the Crown prohibited these arrangements, instances of mixed marriages were extremely popular. In Mexico, beginning with Cortez and Malitzin, many women were given to Cortez as a token of good will from the Mexica Lords. In 1810, a collective marriage in the Metropolitan Cathedral showed that of 184
couples there was a Spanish male with a Black female, seven Spanish males with Native females and at least ten of Spanish women with Native males. Because the race lines have become more diffused for the “mixed” population in Latin America, most people tend to identify themselves in national terms.

Furthermore, in most of the national cultural discourse there seems to be a litany about how Latin America is a mixture of Native, Black, Spanish and sometimes other European cultures. The phenomenon of appropriating, “rescuing” and making this mixture visible, is a form of resistance that seeks to contradict white hegemony. For example, Native music is played on European instruments, and some national traditional dances were invented by the indigenous population to mock Spanish dances. As Moschkovich comments, “[L]atin American culture is quite different from Anglo culture in that each country has retained and integrated the indigenous cultures in food, music, literature, etc.” However, rifts and fissures in the discourse of “mestizaje” are flagrantly prominent. For example, acknowledgment of past Indigenous greatness abounds. The Incas, Mayans and Aztecs are exalted in their splendorous past. That is, “mixed” populations of Latin American have been bequeathed incredible cultural wealth and noble characteristics from our ancestors. But, in the Latin American imaginary, this past has nothing to do with the indigenous populations that are presently living in Latin America. The only glorious “Indian” is a dead “Indian”. Living Indigenous populations are stripped of their past and their origins; living Mayans are called “descendants of the Mayans,” that is, a
degenerative descendence, not the real thing. In this manner a simultaneous act of acknowledgment and erasure is accomplished where the Mayans of the past are honored while the Mayans of the present are racially discriminated against and oppressed.

In analysing the British colonizing mind, Anne McClintock refers to this displacement of the living indigenous populations to the past as their assignment to an “anachronistic space,” that is, “[C]olonized people -like women and the working class in the metropolis -do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency -the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’."

In everyday practice our indigenous heritage is referred to with pride, particularly when speaking about the courage of our ancestors in their fight against the Spaniards. In this way, the characteristics for which indigenous populations are presently punished, that is, their combativeness, assumed to be the result of their “primitiveness”, their indomitable nature, become safe when applied to some mythical past where seemingly their fierceness aided in the efforts of national formation. In this vein, everyday racist expressions go unquestioned; for example, it is common to refer to someone who loses his/her temper as someone who has let their “Indian on the loose.” Utilized in this manner, being marked as “Indian-like” means being uneducated, backwards, ugly, dirty, fierce looking and dangerous. Because of the implications contained in this racist labeling, those who are “mixed” actually rely on their mixture to save
them from the contagion—blood blended with European blood becomes better and more desirable.

Those of us who come from the working class, and/or are primarily dark mestizas, or members of the most marginalized groups, that is, the Indigenous and Black populations, know perfectly well the value of white skin. In Latin America there is a direct correlation between class and skin colour. Throughout the continent, the higher the social class, the whiter people are likely to be. Whiteness has also come to aesthetically define those deemed desirable, “Oh! She is dark but still beautiful” is a comment that is made many times when referring to girls. This racialization of gender has constructed black and dark women as sexual “primitives” who possess all those characteristics not present in their white counterparts. Dark becomes a synonym of lasciviousness, unbound sexual appetite and “primitiveness” while white becomes a symbol of purity, romantic beauty and “civilization”. Between these two extremes it is the latter which represents the ideal to have or to attain.

This racist practice is nowhere more reinforced than in the visual media representations of people. By watching television and looking at popular magazines one would think there were no people of colour inhabiting the various countries of Latin America. Similarly, when children are born, the first consideration after the gender is their colour of skin. As Bannerji explains, it is in these insidious practices that racism becomes the “normal” way of being: “It is in these diffused normalized sets of assumptions, knowledge, and so-called cultural practices that we
come across racism in its most powerful, because pervasive, form.” In this cultural context, white skin privilege becomes a recognized asset. Thus while the discourse of “mestizaje” forces us to recognize our “mixed” lineage, everyday practices of racism enable the continuous erasing of our Black and Native ancestry.

Historically the issue of racism and the anti-racist struggle in Latin America have been subsumed under the banner of class politics. Racism as such has been conceptualized as an offshoot of the capitalist system; therefore, it has gone unquestioned in the ranks of the Left. Racism, like gender oppression, has been considered an issue that will automatically disappear in a socialist state, thus basically a non-issue for the present struggle. The case of Nicaragua became exemplary in exhibiting how unprepared revolutionary leftist groups were to deal with issues of indigenous autonomy and self-determination. The intransigence of the Sandista National Liberation Front (FSLN) vis-à-vis native populations, like, for example, the Miskitos, resulted in the latter’s alienation from the revolutionary process.

Thus, while in Latin America issues of race could remain contained within the discourse of class politics, the experience of immigration to Canada forced many Latin American refugees and immigrants to confront issues of colour and discrimination. These new experiences were hard to explicate in terms of class and gender. To Ruth, for example, racial discrimination became an issue after she had lived in Toronto for some time. “...I noticed when I went back to Peru how people there suffered the same discrimination that I suffered here, then I become
more conscious of what racism was. When you arrive here, you have no consciousness of racism, when you come here, uf! everything is beautiful, the ‘gringos’\textsuperscript{10} are beautiful, they are so nice. See how they treat you, then you begin to understand the language better, the culture, how they behave and then you begin to feel the racism...\textsuperscript{11} Ruth is referring to the fact that there are large indigenous and black populations in Peru. However, being “mixed” herself, she never noticed the racism that permeated Peruvian society until she found herself in a similar situation in Toronto. Even then, it seems that this realization only affected her analysis of her personal social location and not necessarily an understanding of her own implication in the race relations in Peru.

As I have already discussed, the women in the Collective identified themselves as “immigrant women” since that was the element that provided cohesiveness to the group. Differences of class, skin colour, educational level, age, and so forth were minimized or altogether ignored. The group was composed of women of colour (mestizas) and women with white skin colour, we spoke the same language and, politically, we held more or less the same views. More crucially, we shared the recent and traumatic experience of being “immigrant women” in a hostile environment. When we arrived here with our families, each and everyone of us had no possessions, no money and no job. We furnished our homes with furniture picked up from the streets, we worked low status jobs and tried our best to deal with experiences of discrimination. Regardless of our class or educational background we all found ourselves in the same boat and, in many respects, this proved a humbling experience for many of us.
To the women of the Collective the issue of class as it intersected with gender was the main philosophical/political perspective. As socialist feminists there was a tendency to analyse every aspect of the social relations of power within this political framework. Therefore, politically, the issue of race became a paradox within the group. We were conscious through personal experience and from critically analysing our social milieu of the pernicious effects of racism. For example, we would declare: “[T]he specter of discrimination and racism haunts us as well, everyday of our lives. They are not issues around which we should organize, but rather realities we contend with continually, sometimes in a very brutal manifestation, other times in a more sophisticated form.” Therefore, despite this recognition our tendency was to reproduce the position of the Left which viewed the issue of racism only in terms of class struggle.

“After all we have done for you”

In Chapter Three I analysed the relation of the Latin American Women’s Collective to the Canadian mainstream white women’s movement. Here I want to deal with the responses that we developed as a group and individuals being “othered”. In the paradigm of dominance/oppression we often overlook the point of view of those who are actively categorized as oppressed and are, therefore, perceived as somehow inferior. It is assumed that “victimization” leads to a certain passivity on the part of the oppressed. The response that we at the LAWC developed, far from being “passive”, was one of arrogance. In the LAWC the lack of a comprehensive analysis of racism was compensated with a profound analysis of class and gender that provided the group with a critical understanding of how capitalism and patriarchy
ruled our lives as women, as “immigrant women” and as a people coming from south of the Rio Grande. These ideological tools made us feel better equipped than our white counterparts to critically analyse oppression. In our minds, because we had these analytical tools, we were better feminists. This realization gave us a sense of agency rather than a sense of helplessness in view of the discrimination we faced within the women’s movement. This “arrogance” may have complicated the perception that the Collective held regarding the discrimination that we confronted. Even at present, this sense of “superiority” prevails. In Ruth’s view this is clear: “... ‘gringas’ are very intelligent, they knew that we had the analysis and that it went further than just the [white] feminist analysis...that is why, they just don’t want to give us the space...”

Interestingly, only when the Latin women were perceived to be “victims” were they treated with sympathy. This seems to be one of the operating norms when groups with white privilege, no matter how progressive, are dealing with oppression. As bell hooks discusses in Killing Rage, many white people need to see blacks as objects of pity: “White folks promote black victimization, encourage passivity by rewarding those black folks who whine, grovel, beg, and obey.” Victims are harmless when they spend their time whining, crying, immobilized by learned helplessness. Under these circumstances, white women are able to enter the picture as saviors and teachers and can proceed to tell us what to do and when. Racism often infantilises the “other” in order to treat them as dependent, as in need of guidance. Perceiving the “other” as worse off gives white women a position of superiority. Nfa-Abbenya describes this poignantly in relation to African women: “So long as the ‘other’ is kept squarely in the position of victim,
it somehow lessens the western woman's own victimization. It puts the oppression of western women on a plane of its own, such that they can look down and say, 'Boy, we are fighting inequality, but these African women still have a long, long way to go.' If, however, the "other" dares to be angry and to demand to be treated with respect, if the relations of power are named, then the usual response of the white women is to feel that they have been misunderstood, that their care and solidarity have been scorned, "after all we have done for you." Maria Rosa illustrates this point when she says: "If you are going to tell a story where you are the one oppressed, they [white women] can take you in and say 'we are going to do something for this story, because the system must be changed', but if you want to participate on an equal footing, it is very difficult."

In the 1983 I.W.D event, discussed in Chapter Three, there was an attempt to reinscribe the image of the stereotypical "Third World" woman as basically a non-entity. By suggesting that "immigrant women" were being manipulated by the "male Left", white women participated in the "victimization" of "immigrant women". With one broad stroke of the brush, white women robbed "immigrant women" of their self-determined agency, minimized these women's capacity for analysis, and disregarded the fact that "immigrant women" had confronted their own communities in bringing women's issues to the fore. Fully recognizing this situation, the Latin American women who formed the Collective realized that just as we had done within our communities we would have to negotiate a space in the women's movement.
A middle ground was reached when the LAWC members began to participate within the “progressive” white women’s movement as “experts on imperialism” which we thought we were. Our participation in events became limited to this issue. Nevertheless, we believed that even with this limited role our participation was positive since we attained a platform from which to push for some recognition for our own issues. Because of the limited nature of our inclusion within the “progressive” white women’s movement, we were unable to actively participate in issues related directly to our lives as women living in Toronto. We took no part in the struggles for reproductive rights, in the struggle against pornography, violence against women and so on.

Our limited inclusion, although at times rewarding, turned out to be a double edge sword because we were not considered “real feminists”. Feminist practice at that time within the mainstream white women’s movement had not advanced to the point where issues such as imperialism and classism were considered to be feminist issues. When we brought “our” class analysis forward, we often felt that many of the white women would sit there, listening politely to our interventions without seriously taking them into consideration. At the time, it was difficult for most white women to understand that the LAWC was pushing for new directions within feminism where anti-imperialism would not be considered a separate issue but be considered an integral part of feminist practice. Our difficulties in getting our point of view across are illustrated by the following excerpt of a speech presented at an event organized by the Black Women’s Collective: “Someone asked us the other day, ‘how can you be a feminist and
anti-imperialist?’ Of course we Latin American women are anti-imperialist! It is imperialism that is killing our children, that rapes our sisters, and mothers, that destroys our ecological and economic systems.”18

Participation in other issues, then, was only on a “token” basis. Tokenism allowed and allows the white women’s movement to pay lip service to “representation” without actually having to fully practice it. Within both the Canadian “progressive” white women’s movement and the solidarity movement in particular, “immigrant women” and more specifically Latin American women became the examples, the ones that provided the testimonials of oppression/exploitation. And, although they allowed us to speak our histories, they did not permit us to engage in the analysis of our situation. Ruth remembers, for example, “...cases of women who had a very good analysis but when they have been invited to a panel they have not been invited as the sociologist, or the economist...no. Rather it’s been more like ‘here is the immigrant woman who is going to give you a testimony of her experience....’ They hold you as the “example” as the “token”. You are not going to be part of the discussion....they give you the space to speak but the title they give you is different....”19

Our experience with limited “token” inclusion gave a very clear idea of the barriers that we faced as “immigrant women” or Latin Americans within the white women’s movement. However, this understanding did not translate into action and participation within the debates and struggles around racism that were taking place within the white women’s movement at the
time. Because the LAWC's political analysis centered around classism, which we believed was the correct perspective, we felt that anything that took away from its centrality was trivial. At a time when women were dying in the jails of Latin America, when repression was at its full height and when popular movements needed money and support, struggles around racism in the local women's movement did not appear important. In short, racism was not on our agenda: “Our struggle as immigrant women is a daily struggle, we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of identifying current or fashionable issues to do our political work around.”20 Another factor which may have contributed to our lack of interest and participation in the struggle around racism may have been, as María Teresa points out, a certain amount of hesitation and fear of losing the support of some the white women who had become our “allies”. Perhaps, we did not want to alienate the white socialist feminists who had at one point or another intervened in our behalf and who had played a pivotal role in bestowing the Collective with “political” presence.

Connection and participation in joint activities with the Black Women’s Collective, however, did not stop. In retrospect, María Teresa comments “…my God, they must have had so much patience with us, we were so hard-headed.” There are many anecdotes of conversations, debates and discussions that took place about the difference between discrimination and racism. One conversation between a LAWC member and a member of the Black Women’s Collective was based on the point that accents could change, they could eventually improve or even disappear; skin colour, however, remained the same. However, in spite of these discussions the LAWC was not able at the time to grasp the full repercussions and complexity of the issue of
racism. The LAWC’s lack of understanding did not prevent us from working together with, and, in fact, receiving the generous support of, the Black Women’s Collective in our solidarity events and activities.

I believe that the LAWC began to deal much later with the issue of racism; however, it is not entirely clear whether the Collective eventually developed a comprehensive or even an approximate analysis vis-à-vis racism. Some of the LAWC’S members remember that it was only after a black Latin American woman began to participate within the Collective’s activities that questions arose about the representation and inclusion of black and native women from Latin America. Other members, however, do not recall that discussions around these issues ever took place. There was only one clear indication that some effort was made to analyse racism. In the November 1990 issue of Mujeres, the article “Reflections About Racism” defines racism as systemic and as a sophisticated tool that is used by those in power to preserve economic and political control. In the article, racism is described as ranging “...from offensive jokes and verbal insults to physical mutilation, rape and murder, and it also includes: discriminatory immigration, lack of access to services, the refusal of housing and employment and the general rejection of people.”

The article as an effort in the direction of questioning racist practices is not altogether bad; however, its analysis remained limited because, once again, issues of racism were externalized and dealt with as experiences that women faced only with regards to Canadian society. And,
more significantly, the explanation given for the existence of racism borders on the absurd; it posits that as Spain and Britain had been competitors as colonizing powers, then it was expected that Anglo-Saxon people would not trust Spanish-speaking peoples. Another highly “creative” explanation was that since Anglo-Saxons were forced to study Latin, they tended to associate this hated subject with the Latin people. And finally, it was argued that Anglo-Saxons project onto Latin American women the hatred that they have against the Latin American “macho”. Although this particular article cannot be said to represent the political position of the Collective as a whole vis-à-vis the issue of racism, it did reflect the efforts of one individual member to begin an exploration of this subject, although admittedly in a very *sui generis* manner. To its credit, the article does identify the fact that Hollywood produces specific images of Latin Americans in North America which become the basis for their stereotypical representation. As well, the article provides a critical view of multiculturalism, arguing that the latter can be used very effectively to separate diverse people into cultural ghettos. Nonetheless, the article provides no serious analysis on how and why racism is utilized as a tool of oppression, nor does it deal with how racism is intrinsically imbedded within our discourses and experiences as Latin American women.

When women went back to Latin America and faced the same racist comments that they had heard in Toronto directed toward black or native people, their consciousness began to change. This may have been reflected in the Collective. In Ruth’s opinion, “Even though we did not come out in public under the banner of racism, there were internal discussions that took place.
I remember when black women joined the Collective. The discussion regarding racism began. They questioned why there were no black or native women. It was then that we began to have these discussions. It was a bit late, though, because it was when the Collective was in its last phase...”22

Unfortunately, there are no documents that reflect the discussions and critical analysis that took place later on around the issue of racism. In my opinion, I believe that the issue of racism in Latin America and even within the Latin American feminist groups in Canada has not been extensively analysed in all its complexity and in terms of the implications for the struggle for social change.

“There are no lesbians in the Collective”

Part of the stereotypical/mythical representation of the Latin American community has included the generalization that the community is more homophobic than other cultures. The “macho” stereotype as irrationally anti-gay and the image of the subservient, obsessively feminine and hence heterosexual woman have tended to be very present in the psyche of the white feminist women. In this way both racism and sexism interlock to create a representation of people of colour in general as being far more homophobic than the more “enlightened” white population. In addition, there is the racist perception that women of colour or “Third World” women practice an inferior type of feminism that prevents them from grasping the complexities involved in the struggle for gay rights. In truth, however, there is no actual proof that women of
colour are more or less homophobic than the general population. In Latin America repression against gay people has been brutal in some countries while in others, like revolutionary Nicaragua, for example, tremendous advances were made in terms of gay rights. Furthermore, there has been an incredible upsurge of gay and lesbian groups in Latin America.

It must be kept in mind that just like white feminists, feminist women of colour have had to face the intimidation tactics of male supremacy that seek to de-value and denigrate their feminist practice by labeling them “anti-male” and “lesbians”. How individual women and feminists have reacted to these tactics has created controversy and divisions within the feminist movement in general. The Latin American community in Toronto was no exception to this process.

In the Latin American Women’s Collective heterosexism was only trivially analysed although contradictions arose all the time. As a group, we maintained close contact with white lesbians feminists. Our connection to lesbian women was based more on a similar class analysis than on an understanding of lesbian sexuality and politics. Thus, because the women of the Collective needed to foster solidarity in order to provide support to the women in Latin America, overt homophobia was kept under control so as not to jeopardize the links with the political groups that had lesbian members. In fact, major alliances were made with lesbian, socialist and white feminist women. This is not to say that instances of homophobia, reflected in personal comments and attitudes from particular individual members of the Collective, did not occur, but
these were kept in check by the rest of the participants. Once again in the straight/lesbian binary it seems that the Latin American women of the Collective found that they could not “take on” the issue of lesbianism because there were no lesbian women in the Collective. In fact, no efforts were made to interrogate the absence of lesbians (or black or native women for that matter) and how the Collective may have limited their access to the group in the first place. It was not until 1989 that one lesbian woman became active in the Collective.\textsuperscript{24}

Interestingly enough, in the same issue of \textit{Mujeres} where the article mentioned earlier dealing with racism appears, there is an article written by the Latin American Lesbian Collective, \textit{“No me digas que no sabias.”}\textsuperscript{25} The article entitled “Latin American and Lesbian Voices in Toronto” denounced the invisibility to which Latin American lesbians have been historically subjected in the continent and pointed to the fact that even though many lesbian women had been active participants in the feminist movements in Latin America and/or in the movements struggling for women’s rights, they had been unable to “come out” as lesbians. The article also discusses that homophobia as an oppressive practice is not only to be found among the reactionary conservative sectors of Latin American society but also within the so-called revolutionary movements. As well, the racist practices of both the white gay and feminist movement in Toronto are discussed: “It’s been difficult to keep our identity as Latin American women and to negotiate our differences of race, culture and class with sectors of the feminist movement led by white women. In the same manner that we experience imperialism in Latin
America, we also experience it here with the North American homosexual and lesbian communities.”26

The relationship between the Latin American Women’s Collective and the group “No me digas que no sabias” was hazy. The Latin American lesbian feminists expected the heterosexual Latin American feminists to fully and actively support the lesbian struggle. Whether their expectations were actually met is not too clear. Some of the narratives in the interviewing process identify the initial stages of dealing with internalized homophobia in the latter part of the 1980’s when a lesbian joined the Collective and homophobic attitudes began to be questioned. There are contradictions in terms of the impact of such discussions. Ruth remembers that, “There was a big debate in the later years regarding homophobia. We had strong discussions when bisexual women joined the Collective...sometimes it was not very ‘ladylike’ but it was an enriching discussion...my own position with respect to homosexuality was influenced by these discussions,...because when the ideas and the experiences come from the same compañeras that are suffering the discrimination, your consciousness raising is stronger than when you only read about it...”27 Ana Maria, on the other hand, was very clear on how the discussion had come about: “Someone made the comment ‘there are no lesbians in the Collective’ (as if this was something good!!) and this sparked a confrontation within the Collective. Although I believe that was the end of it. Definitely, the Collective never dealt with
the issue of homophobia really..."28 Maria Rosa also believes that there were efforts to include lesbians women: "We tried to work with lesbian women, we invited them to our group... Latin American women, we asked to write an article for our last newsletter."29

All in all, it is clear to me that in general we had a “theoretical” position that forced us to include issues of homophobia in our analysis, at least in theory if not in our practice. By consciously taking on the label of “feminists” we had encountered the accusation from the Latin American male-dominated community that we were lesbians. On the other hand, many women in the white women’s movement assumed that there were lesbians in the Collective because many of us had developed very strong personal relationships through our joint activism. We felt no strong compulsion to “explain” or emphatically deny whether there were lesbians or not within the group; privately we assumed that there were none.30

Although the LAWC was able to challenge the narrow view that class struggle was the only aspect that would lead us to social equality by including the question of gender, our efforts fell short, and made the same mistake as narrow class politics, with regards to other issues of oppression. Class and gender were discussed in depth by LAWC; colour, sexuality and nation were dismissed as irrelevant. As Latin American women involved in the feminist movement, it has been very difficult for us to confront issues of racism and homophobia. It would seem to me that although presently there have been some advances towards an understanding of homophobia, racism is still a problem for us within our community, as well as how we confront
it from without. It is always easier to recognize our own pain and to point the finger. Acknowledging privilege, on the other hand, is a risky endeavor and it may even threaten the fragile threads that hold us together as a “community”. Nonetheless, we must assume this responsibility, if indeed our project to change the existing relations of power is to survive.
NOTES


2. This position has been espoused by some Native representatives from Latin America that have come to Toronto. However, most would recognize that non-native populations are mostly "mixed". A Mapuche woman referred to non-Mapuches as "Chilean" and Native groups from Guatemala refer to non-natives as "Ladinos".


4. Latin American Coalition to End Violence Against Women in Children, "First Latin American Women's Encounter in Ontario, June 16, 17 and 18, 1995" Report to the Ministry of Health and the Ontario Women's Directorate. Sept. 10, 1995. The most controversial issues during the Encounter were the issues of homophobia, racism and discrimination within the Latin American community based on region of origin.


8. This is mainly a Chilean expression but analogous expressions exist in almost every country in Latin America.


10. *Gringos* is a slang term utilized in most of Latin America to refer to white North Americans or anyone who is a white, Anglo-Saxon. Myth has it that, when the United States invaded Mexico, they wore green uniforms; therefore one of the battle cries of the Mexicans became "green go", meaning of course that the invaders should return home. It is also an example, of the margins hegemonizing the centre.


13. This phrase became famous in the inner circles of the women of colour movement after the events that took place at Nellie's Hostel Inc. in 1992. Two black women from the Collective began a grievance process due to racism within the Collective. The two read a letter at a Board meeting which prompted June Callwood to exclaim to one of the women "After all we have done for you!" This referred to the fact that the Black woman had been a user of the service before being a staff. This information was, of course, confidential.


18. Latin American Women's Collective, speech. 3.

19. Interview with Ruth Lara by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 15. This has been extensively analysed by "women of colour". For example, in Paula M. L. Moya, "Postmodernism, ‘Realism,’ and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism," in Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures (eds.) M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra T. Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997) 125-150. Moya argues that white women theoreticians such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway appropriate and misrepresent the "Chicana" experience to illustrate their own theories and effectively discard the theoretical interpretations advanced by "Chicanas" themselves.

20. Latin American Women's Collective, speech, 1.


23. See, for example, Ruth Roach Pierson "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in

24. It would seem that this woman was not “out” as a lesbian and that most women in the Collective did not know her sexual orientation.

25. The name “No me digas que no sabias” translates into “Don’t tell me you didn’t know.” The idea was to play with the notion that everyone knows that lesbianism is present in the everyday life of Latin America yet everyone denies its existence or pretends it doesn’t exist. The name then confronted Latin American women with the unavoidable fact that lesbianism needed to be acknowledged.


29. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 9.

30. A Latin American Lesbian Group developed later on. The Collective “Don’t Tell Me You Didn’t Know” opened a space in the Latin American community, although their focus was outreach and providing information to Latino lesbians. In addition, at the First Encounter of Latin American Women in Ontario, there was a workshop exclusively for lesbian and bisexual women. This created a controversy because heterosexual women who wanted to learn more about this issue were not allowed into the space.

31. Latin American Women’s Encounter, June 16, 17 and 18, 1995, Toronto. At the Encounter there was a great interest and even eagerness on the part of heterosexual women to participate in the lesbian workshop. In the workshop against racism, however, women who participated adamantly denied that there existed racism within the community.
The social impact of the Latin American Women’s Collective

In the mid 1990s, feminist Latin American women have established a number of organizations that deal with gender issues; however, Latin American women’s voices continue to be largely unrepresented within the main organizations working for social justice and gender equality. Part of the problem is that our diversity, for example in terms of race, makes it difficult for many of us to fit neatly within the usual categories. At the same time, we have undergone pressures for group homogenization stemming from the demands of the Canadian multiculturalist state. At the same time we have experienced social and systemic barriers which tend to keep us outside the mainstream and to force us into a kind of “ghetto.” The tendency to associate oneself with members of one’s own group is both an emotional and strategic response to such pressures. By associating with one another we protect each other from feelings of displacement and alienation while at the same time we encourage one another to continue struggling for a better future and a better present.

Both the exterior pressure to define us as Latin Americans and the internal pressure to use this labelling as a place of unity have created a particular situation where our intricate homogeneity finds itself continuously striving to create a space where living and struggling can take place. As a result of all our struggles, both within and without, we have managed to build our own particular vision of feminism and of feminist struggle which emanates from our past experiences as Guatemalans, Salvadoreans, Chileans and so on, as well as from our present
position as Latin Americans in Canada. Our particular brand of feminism recognizes that it is by looking back that we recognize where we are standing today and, similarly, it is our present life and actions which will define our future.

Perhaps one of the greatest changes undergone within our community is that, particularly in the case of women, the label feminist is no longer feared. Indeed, in areas like social work where many Latin American women work, it has become crucial to define oneself as feminist in order to find a job, whether one can ideologically defend this particular political option or not. As Ana Maria commented, there has been a professionalization of the “feminist woman working with violence”. Regardless of the level of personal ideological commitment to feminism, there certainly has been an increase in awareness and understanding about gender oppression within Latin American women and their organizations.

Latin American women living in Canada have also had the opportunity to learn, become inspired by and participate in the efforts of women in the Latin American continent who have organized around feminist issues. Since the beginning of the 1980s, continental women’s Encounters have been organized every two years in different countries. There have also been continental Latin American Lesbian Encounters and Women of Colour Encounters. Feminism, as a political and academic movement, has grown and gained respect. Latin American feminists no longer fear the reaction of the dogmatic Left to feminist issues and continue to pressure it to deal with gender based inequalities.
The local and continental embracing of feminism by Latin American women has created a situation where we have evolved and developed our own praxis of feminism. In addition, our own development has benefitted from the fragmentations that have occurred in the “progressive” Canadian women’s movement which have generated an opportunity for a more fluid analysis of feminism. It is within this context that in 1995 the Latin American Coalition organized an Encounter for Latin American women in Ontario, with the participation of approximately 500 women and 200 children. Although not explicitly defined as a “feminist” event a number of workshops utilized feminist theoretical frameworks and provided feminist analysis. Women’s issues were discussed in more than 30 workshops and the final recommendations clearly addressed gender and ethnicity concerns.

This women’s encounter marked an important occurrence in our community. It was an event that represented years of struggle within ourselves and within our community. It clearly did not come about all of a sudden nor did it operate in a vacuum. In a way, it developed as what Trin Minh Ha calls “the voice,” that is, as something both collective and historical. Without the earlier struggles of the Latin American Women’s Collective, the 1995 Latin American Women’s Encounter could not have been possible. Thus, unlike Athena who emerged fully created from her patriarchal father, the Encounter represented a continuation and a concretization of Latin American women’s feminist struggle.
Class and gender

The hostile environment that the Latin American Women’s Collective (LAWC) confronted from 1983 to 1990 inside the Latin American community and inside the white dominated women’s movement of their time provided the context that made this group compact and cohesive. These homogenizing forces led the Collective to develop an interesting analysis of class and gender. The LAWC was the first group of Latin American women in Toronto to adopt a feminist point of view and to develop a thorough analysis of gender inequalities within the class struggle. This development did not occur without attacks from those who felt that by foregrounding gender as a category of analysis and struggle class would move into the background. Feminism in Latin America had developed apart from the activities of progressive sectors in society. Distrustful and weary, the Latin American Left tended to attack women’s groups as part of the right’s attempt to divide “the struggle”. Similarly, in Toronto this monolithic view of class struggle was reinforced by the exile experience; as Said states, “...the slightest deviation from the accepted group line is an act of the rankest treachery and disloyalty...”\(^2\) Thus, to develop a position that took into consideration the interrelation of class and gender in Toronto was not a small task. Maria Rosa expressed the difficulty of this experience by saying, “the Canadian women’s movement accused us of being there because we wanted to do solidarity with Latin America and in our community they us told you want to be here because you want to be feminists. And maybe it was true, maybe what we were doing was taking the struggles to the different locations, because we knew that a voice was missing...”\(^3\)
The baptism: “Immigrant women”

In view of the hostility that the LAWC faced both in our own communities and from the “progressive” women’s movement, there was a natural process of submerging diversity within the Collective. Profound differences based on class, race, educational level, and urban versus peasant backgrounds disappeared from our consciousness and we concentrated on our perceived needs as “immigrant women”.

Having an analysis of class reflected the experience and background of the members of the Collective. The women involved in the LAWC in this first phase (mid-1983 to approximately 1987) came from social and political movements in the South Cone. Most of these women possessed a solid understanding of the complex relations of class. Consequently, to develop a political position as “immigrant women” was an expected response to the new social situation that we were facing. The adoption of the label “immigrant women” as a valid identity created a space where a group of heterogeneous women could come together under a specific banner. This process enabled us to face the hostility emanating from our own community, the white women’s movement and the solidarity movement. Ruth refers to the importance of the uniting impact of the “immigrant woman” identity when she says, “...I believe that there were two things that united us, we were women and we were immigrants. These were common themes because we were women but also because we were immigrants, specifically immigrants from the South Cone.”

The LAWC’s feminist analysis, then, was firmly rooted in an analysis of class in terms of how
class had affected us personally and collectively in our countries of origin and in Canada as “immigrant women.” The majority of the LAWC’s work was directed toward developing an analysis of our exploitation as workers located in the worst-paid jobs in the Canadian labour market: “...we form part of the struggle of immigrants in Canada, as responsible members of Canadian society, where class struggle takes other forms.”

Part of the LAWC’s work entailed working in collaboration and solidarity with other immigrant women’s groups in Toronto. We understood that because of their experiences many of these groups chose to refrain from labelling themselves feminist, feeling that feminism as practiced in Canada tended to be exclusionary and to represent the interests of white women. The LAWC, however, continued to call itself feminist, endeavouring to share our particular feminism with other immigrant communities. We felt that in spite of the negative experiences of women of colour with the white women’s movement that feminism itself as a tool which exposed the underlying machinations of patriarchal society was worthy of maintaining. In fact, the LAWC even undertook to challenge the patriarchal ordering principles operating in the so-called socialist utopias. Nevertheless, our particular brand of feminism also put us at odds with the “progressive” white feminist movement; oftentimes we had to put up with the ethnocentric arrogance of white feminists who felt that they had the power to define the “real” feminist issues.
From the Violence of the state to violence in the home

As political conditions changed in Latin America, there was a decrease in solidarity activity. The LAWC became increasingly involved in local issues of extreme relevance to our community in Toronto. In this second phase (from 1987 to 1990's), although the Collective’s overall objectives did not change publicly, an internal revision took place. New emphasis was placed on the importance of addressing the needs of women within the community who lived in situations of violence. Outreach activities became particularly important at this point.

The LAWC’s change in focus occurred because of many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that at least three of the women within the Collective were themselves survivors of domestic violence. It was their personal experiences confronting isolation and lack of support from their political parties that led these women to become active in publicly denouncing domestic violence. No longer were these women willing to suffer violence in silence, no longer were they willing to accept lame excuses like “the poor comrade had been tortured.” As Maria Rosa recalls, “...we came out to the community with the theme of violence against women, and it was a theme that had never been talked about, where many times it was the same compañeros that were in charge of the political organizations, the ones that were beating the shit out of their own women.”

The personal experiences of domestic violence by some of the Collective’s members undoubtedly helped the LAWC’s change in focus. The LAWC, however, did not only denounce domestic violence but began to make the connection with State violence. The
analysis that LAWC endorsed vis-à-vis violence was a comprehensive vision that encompassed violence from the State to violence in the home. This approach was not unanimously endorsed by all members of the Collective, some women thought that violence was solely a domestic issue. Other women, particularly those that belonged to political parties in Toronto, adamantly expressed their concern that these domestic issues were not to be brought into the political arena.

Part of the reason for this reaction was the fact that many men who were political activists were also abusers. When such abuse was denounced publicly, it became a highly controversial matter not only because these men were our supposed compañeros but also because many of them had been political prisoners and tortured. For these reasons, the issue of police involvement became more complicated. In addition, many in the community justified these men’s abusive behaviour as the result of their experiences with political repression. The difficulty of this situation is clearly exemplified in an article in Mujeres, written by a woman who had ended a relationship of violence with a militant who had been imprisoned and tortured. This article clearly reflected the internal contradictions felt by women who were victims of abuse by men who had been abused by the state. In this difficult situation, the writer talked about the tension she experienced between her feminist politics and her understanding that her partner’s experiences of State repression and violence had indeed contributed to the violence in her relationship. In the end, though, she chose to press charges against her abuser and paid the price of being condemned by the political community to which she belonged.
Under these circumstances, many women found it very difficult to speak out; they feared that public denouncement would be followed by some kind of reprisal. They were not wrong. Those women that found the courage to say that the “emperor had no clothes” and particularly the women who worked educating the community around issues of violence and abuse paid a high price. They were ostracized, threatened by political groups, discredited as being emotionally unstable, called lesbians, anti-male and, of course, denounced as “bourgeois” or traitors to the cause. In addition, a great deal of hostility was expressed against the Collective. The LAWC was accused of being authoritarian and its practices compared to those of the military in Latin America. During public meetings Collective members were exposed to continuous harassing and silencing. Vicious attacks against the LAWC came not only from men but also from women political activists.

In spite of the attacks, the Collective continued its work on violence against women drawing support from many women in the community who found themselves in this predicament and from the work of white women’s groups working against violence. It is interesting to note that many of the women who began their anti-violence work with the LAWC eventually became “professionals” on issues of violence against women and continued to work with the community.

A new meaning to the word “compañera”

The Collective organized innovative events such as camping for women and children, social gatherings, outings, and so forth. The idea was to provide recreation to women who had no
access to resources while at the same time raising consciousness about the different issues women faced. Throughout this period the emphasis was more on providing a safe space where women could meet and talk freely about their concerns. It was at this point that membership in the Collective became more flexible. Some women would come only for a few times, others maintained contact to participate in specific events, others were active on and off. The estimates vary but it seems that the Collective housed up to fifty women.

In addition to making membership more flexible and thus more in tune with women who had to meet other obligations (e.g., housework, jobs, childcare, etc.), the Collective also began to realize that political activity with diverse women necessitated a more complex understanding of women's lives and experiences. For example, women in our community tend to not respond well to feminist approaches which portray men as the enemy and which tend to be separatist. In a situation where immigrant men and women are subjected to racist and classist practices, the family represents one of the few havens from a hostile society and women are unlikely to turn against their men. In terms of political organizing it also became clear that grassroots organizing was compatible with democratic centralism and both, in turn, were compatible with the aims of the feminist movement. It also became clear that feminism as a political and philosophical approach was not something which could be espoused merely as a "militant"; in the public, political arena; it was important to create ways in which knowledge at the intellectual level could be translated not only into political action in the public realm but also into everyday and private practice.
Following the lead from its membership, the Collective recognized the importance of including men, and male children, in the LAWC’s activities. Autonomy and self-determination for the LAWC did not exclude the possibility that men could support our activities with concrete work. In the mainstream women’s movement, men supported IWD, for example, by providing childcare. The Collective began to ask for this same support in the its events. Men also supported the Collective in terms of money and when we took on projects that required a lot of “person power”. Although these changes may seem insignificant, it was the first time that men took on roles of support to women in the Latin American community. The men who participated also faced the typical mockery of being called wimps, gay, and other “derogatory” feminine labels.

Personal growth

The Collective became an entity that provided a space to develop politically and personally. It became a fertile ground that seemed to be capable of endlessly providing for us. Women developed professionally, organizationally, emotionally and politically. With both its successes and limitations, the Collective gave women something new, a definition of themselves. In the retrospective view of the women who shared their memories, reflections and evaluations with me, it is poignantly obvious that the Collective had an incredible impact on their lives:

Maria Rosa, “It gave me a strong sense of identity, that I still have. It gave me a sense of myself that allowed me to work within the women’s movement, and in the job that I have even nowadays, and emotionally it gave a lot of support...” 9 “I would say that I am a woman that struggles for the rights of women, whatever those rights are, the glass of milk, her right to own a piece of land, her right to express herself, her right not to suffer violence in her
home, her right to have access to positions of power in Canadian society, since I believe that as immigrant women we do not have access....with funding cuts we are being excluded from jobs and from the political spaces...”

Ruth, “You had to provide answers to the women that were in crisis. I believe that the Collective was there also for that, for the big activities, and to give answers to women who were in crisis. I believe that was one of the enriching aspects of the Collective, to have a political perspective to the outside, but also to have the ability of when women came in crisis to give them support, and when she came out of the crisis make her see why she was in crisis, show her historically and politically why women are in crisis in this society. And even if women did not stay to become a militant, or to attend all the meetings, and fund-raisings, or to go to the activities, or to sell empanadas, the woman would leave with something and I think that was invaluable.”

Ana Maria, “…that was a good moment, there was a lot of great amplitude, the space for expression, where we went out, went out to occupy all the spaces that we could, we did all kinds of tasks, really disseminating the analysis of violence, of feminism, of women’s oppression all...as part of the oppressed, we had a good moment...of a lot of solidarity, of union, of beautiful work...”

The reflections of many of the original members of the LAWC point to the positive experiences they gained from being part of such a tremendously ambitious project. And, indeed, the Collective did provide a space where many women could experience growth. However, the LAWC was not exempted from experiencing limitations and contradictions. One of the most salient of these is perhaps the failure to acknowledge and/or realize that race and sexual orientation are issues that affect women’s experiences, including women in our community. By failing to give voice to these experiences the Collective became a place where women who confronted racist and heterosexist oppression felt alienated. Small and highly specialized as it was, the LAWC remained a place where membership was tightly controlled. This had the
effect of limiting discussion and or working its membership to the point of exhaustion. As Ruth comments, “I think that one of the biggest mistakes, and because of it many women were burn-out, was that we wanted to do too much, we wanted to do too much with a small group, with a small organization.”

**Picking the threads for the future**

In 1998, Latin America women in Toronto are still grappling with a series of issues such as regionalism, racism and homophobia. On the positive side, feminism and being called a feminist no longer holds the same negative connotations. Although much work still needs to be done. Contact with the feminist movement back in our countries of origins and the debates taking place locally in the “progressive” white women’s movement, and inside our own groups, indicate that the present political context has become more complex, more fluid and intertwined, which facilitated the integration of struggles into a holistic struggle. Marcela Lagarde, one of the main feminist theoretician in Latin America, situates the feminist struggle as follows:

In the current political climate, globalization, the feminization of poverty, forced migration in the Americas, the war against the indigenous peoples, the eradication of social programs, the increase in the racism/discrimination, it is a matter of life and death to bring about a feminist consciousness that brings forth, a paradigm that proposes for the first time, equality not only between persons who are the same but also between people who are different; not antagonistic, nor complementary, only diverse and equivalent.

The Latin American Women’s Collective was a group of women that engaged in active insubordination to the gender and political discourses of the time. It rebelled not only against
the expectations of the progressive Latin American community but also those of the white women’s movement. This thesis has brought to the fore and textualized a piece of (her)story that has been lost to the memories of the women that directly participated the LAWC’s project. It has provided the social context and shown where our subjectivity and agency stem from as well the limitations of our analysis. The Collective gave birth or prepared the ground for many of the feminist organizations that exist today in the Latin American community. Many of the members that participated in the Collective have continued their feminist work creating and/or expanding numerous women’s services and support groups in the community. For example, both Maria Rosa and Ruth work in the women program of the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples. Ana Maria has been pivotal in the building of many grassroots women’s projects; including soup-kitchens projects, and other amazingly creative endeavours. Maria Teresa has gone on to work in film. The LAWC, its work and legacy live within the work of these women.
NOTES


5. Latin American Women's Collective, speech delivered by the Latin American Women's Collective at an event organized by the Black Women's Collective, Toronto, March 5, 1988. p. 3. In author’s possession.

6. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 6.


8. The connotation of the word “militant” draws more heavily on its Leftist heritage in Latin America. That is, someone who is a militant is someone who has undergone a process in the party from being a sympathizer to being a pre-militant, then a militant and finally, a cadre. Therefore, being militant means someone not only committed to the struggle but also someone who has been tested and tried by the rest of the group.

9. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 10.

10. Interview with Maria Rosa Pinedo by R. Magaly San Martin, p. 18.


13. Interview with Ruth Lara by R. Magaly San Martin, p.15.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Kirby, Sandra and McKenna, Kate. Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods from the Margins (University of New Brunswick: Garamond Press, 1989).


Whyte-Earnshaw, Christina and Midgeld, Dieter. (eds.) "In Our Midst Educational Aids to Work with Survivors of Torture and Organized Violence: A Reflective Interactive Approach," (Toronto: Canadian Center for Victims of Torture, undated).
Archival material


Latin American Women’s Collective, Bi-laws, undated. In author’s possession Translation mine.


Latin American Women’s Collective, letter to the women of the Feminine Front, undated. In author’s possession. Translation mine.

Latin American Women’s Collective, Mujeres (December 1985), editorial.

Latin American Women’s Collective, Mujeres no. 6 (November 1990), 2.

Latin American Women’s Collective, speech delivered by the Latin American Women’s Collective, at an event organized by the Black Women’s Collective, Toronto, March 5, 1988, In author’s possession.


North, Liisa. “Feminist Currents in Latin America.” The article is based on interviews with feminists and material collected in Lima (Peru), Quito (Ecuador) and Bogota (Colombia) during July-August 1984. p.1. Archives Cross Cultural Communication Centre. Undated.


Community Newspapers and reports


Audiovisual Material


Interviews


