

Latin American Women's Organizing in Canada

An Introduction to MUJER and its Leadership Training for Young Latinas

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Ce texte nous présente l'organisme Latino-américain / Latino-canadien MUJER et son travail qui préconise un programme de formation au leadership pour les jeunes Latinas. L'objectif est de leur présenter un important organisme communautaire féministe de la communauté latino-américaine au Canada. On utilise tout d'abord la forme d'entrevues qui scrutent de près un de ces programmes ainsi que la réflexion qui a servi de base à son implantation pour en arriver à étudier plus spécifiquement l'impact sur les expériences politiques des jeunes Latinas.

Este artículo presenta el trabajo de la organización feminista comunitaria Latina-Canadiense MUJER, particularizando su programa de entrenamiento de líderes para las jóvenes latinas. Usando fuentes primarias en forma de entrevistas, el objetivo es presentar las expectativas que hay detrás de su implementación, particularmente en relación de cómo sus objetivos impactan las experiencias políticas de las latinas jóvenes.

The aim of this paper is to introduce the Latin American/Latina-Canadian¹ organization, MUJER,² and its work with young Latinas by focusing primarily on its leadership training program for young Latinas. The observations presented here are based on a couple of interviews: one with MUJER's executive director, Lilian Valverde³ and the second, with Magaly San Martin,⁴ as member of MUJER and part of the curriculum developing team for the leadership training program. Additional information on the program was obtained via MUJER's website and by accessing the little material available on Latin American feminist and women's organizing in Canada. The objective here then is to present, using for the most part primary sources, an important feminist community organization within the Latin American community in Canada by taking a closer look at one of its programs and the thinking that has gone behind its implementation, particularly in terms of how it aims to impact young Latinas' political experiences.

Before I move onto a discussion of MUJER and its leader-

ship-training program for young Latinas, I would like to provide a bit of a context. As a Latina-Canadian organization, MUJER is embedded within the particular experience of Latinas/os in Canada. Latin American immigration to Canada is typically explained by researchers as a series of waves. Starting with the arrival of political refugees from South America in the 1970s and from Central America in the 1980s, the first demographically significant wave of Latin Americans settled in Canada. This was followed in the 1990s by an ongoing economic wave of immigrants from a variety of Latin American countries (Ginieniewicz 37). The nature of Latin American immigration has also been marked by experiences of marginalization—both political and economic—in their countries of origin. But, how have they fared as newcomers, in Canada? To answer this question requires knowledge about the specific immigration experience of Latin American populations in Canada. At this point, there is very little work produced in the academy that deals directly with the Latina/o experience in Canada, although a few key works have appeared in the last few years.⁵ Adding to this small but important body of work is the research produced at the community level by Latina/o-Canadian organizations like the Latin American Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Children (LACEV), the Canadian Hispanic Congress, the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples and the Hispanic Development Council to name a few.⁶ A common theme emerging from this research, at both the academic and community levels, is that the Latin American community as a whole inhabits a vulnerable space of marginalization in Canada. Social indicators point to the lack of access to well paying and stable jobs, to lack of suitable housing and, more recently, to problems being encountered in the educational system by Latina/o youth, as troubling indicators for the Latin American community in Canada. As Lilian Valverde put it in our interview, "...all of these questions are very complex. In terms of what Canada offers ... yes, it does offer, but what it does not seem to

offer is good paying jobs, affordable housing, so what it really doesn't offer is serious opportunities for newcomers to get ahead" (Transcript #16: 15).

Mainstream, "common sense" explanations as to why newcomers and visible minorities fail to incorporate successfully into the different sectors of Canadian society have approached the issue as one of cultural deficit. That is, it is visible minorities' own cultural difference that is presented as the main cause or obstacle that makes them not quite capable of successfully assimilating to Canadian society. This view of ethnoracial communities as fixed in a space

this general context of *latinidad*⁷ in Canada then that the work of MUJER needs to be situated.

MUJER—A Latin American/Latina Women's Organization in Canada

The organization MUJER, as a Latin American non-profit, anti-racist and anti-oppressive inclusive women's organization is the direct descendant of the Latin American Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Children (LACEV). LACEV emerged in the early 1990s as a Latin American

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of backwardness, explained by their "irrational" adherence to "culture," has been challenged by Canadian scholars in a variety of disciplines (see Li 1999, 2000; Henry and Tator; Bannerji; Tastsoglou; Galabuzi; Razack) who point out that factors like extant racial and gender regimes in the "host" country affect the likelihood of successful immigrant integration. According to Grace-Edward Galabuzi and Peter S. Li (2000), the practice of measuring successful integration in terms of eventual immigrant approximation to a "Canadian norm," in terms of employment status, education, housing and other social indicators is no longer a possibility as the majority of immigrants fall well outside what used to be taken for granted outcomes. As they demonstrate in their research, immigrant communities are facing greater obstacles to employment, housing and educational attainment.

An important dimension that directly relates to the kind of life, or "life chance," that immigrants are able to negotiate in the "host" country has to do with the way in which they are located within the predominant structures of society (Portes and Rumbaut). Latin Americans in Canada, as a relatively new community and more importantly as a designated visible minority, tend to live in modest, rented housing, with very little evidence of private property ownership. In terms of employment, Latinas/os are found in the lower-paying, less secure jobs in the service, construction, and manufacturing sectors. To compound this situation of marginalization, education scholars and community members have noticed a troubling trend—among Latina/o youth there's a 40 percent dropout rate in Toronto public high schools (Mantilla, Schugurensky and Serrano 6). De facto socio-economic conditions for visible minority Canadians and newcomers tell us about the reality of the everyday experience of "diversity" and of the limits of multiculturalism's discourse. It is within

women's organization with a mandate of education and prevention of violence within the Latin American community (Transcript #16:1). As part of its activities, LACEV organized in June of 1995 the first "Latin American and Caribbean Women's Encounter" and in January of 1996, the "De Mujeres" Post-Encounter. Both these conferences represented significant events in the history of Latin American women's organizing in Canada bringing together more than 650 women and children to participate in workshops, group discussions, and roundtables as well as cultural events. The workshops and discussions organized at the *Encuentros* (Encounters) dealt with a wide variety of themes: including issues on violence against women within the Latin American community; issues of identity and participation for young Latinas; gender equality and feminism; feminism and anti-racism; Latina lesbians and issues of inclusion and exclusion; women of colour and issues of racialization; and, Latin American women's particular experiences as immigrants/refugees in Canada.⁸

An important outcome of both these events was a report on the 1995 and 1996 *Encuentros* that included a variety of recommendations. One of the most significant recommendations was a call for the creation of an organization that would be representative and inclusive of all Latin American women, "...our 'dream organization'—an organization that includes, widely represents, supports and advances Latin American women in Ontario" (MUJER). It is out of this community mandate that MUJER was formed in 2003.

But, more than a brand new organization, the formation of MUJER represented a continuation of women's organizing and feminist anti-oppressive work within the Latin American community. Part of LACEV's work that continues to be of importance and priority for MUJER was the recognition of the organization and its membership as

valuable resources and important sites of organic knowledge production. Independent and grounded research, although difficult to produce by community, given the lack of funding available and generalized lack of support for it, is of key importance for women's organizations. In a context in which women's knowledge is still inferiorized—this being especially the case for women who are from groups that are socially and economically marginalized—the production of situated knowledge becomes of key importance in the interruption of dominant scripts about women's, and in this case, Latin American women's everyday experiences and realities. In 2000 and 2002 LACEV produced a couple of very important foundational works on Latin American women in Canada and processes of marginalization. The first one was LACEV's 2000 report, *No (Wo)Man's Land*, a case study of Latin American women's experiences with Canada's sponsorship program. According to Luin Goldring, Carolina Berinstein and Judith Bernhard, of particular importance is the manner in which *No (Wo)Man's Land* points to the gendered dimension of sponsorship programs and how they disproportionately affect women and children (17). This is an issue which according to these same researchers, continues to be scarcely addressed in the scholarship, "...available social science research in Canada on the experience of non-status immigrants has been limited to a few important case studies..." (4). Of equal significance, given the dearth of published scholarly material presently available on the subject, is LACEV's 2002 report on Latin American migrant exotic dancers, *Coming to Dance, Striving to Survive: A Study on Latin American Migrant Exotic Dancers*. Utilizing qualitative research techniques, this case study focuses on the everyday experiences of Latin American exotic dancers in Canada and how their marginalization is produced via legal mechanisms that enable their ghettoization and victimization.

It is within this history of community, pedagogical and epistemological activism that MUJER is born in 2003 and represents an important continuation of earlier Latin American women's mandate to address issues of violence against women in a more integral or inclusive manner. As their Open House invitation in 2003 made clear,

Many of you who are familiar with and have supported LACEV's mandate and the work it has accomplished during the past 13 years. MUJER will continue its commitment to eradicate violence against women, as well it will focus on promoting the integral development of women in Ontario. It will work towards the advancement and enhancement of Latin American women by improving opportunities for equal and full participation in Canadian society. (MUJER 2003)

One of the most important new initiatives undertaken by MUJER since 2005 has been the Leadership Training Program for young Latinas. According to Magaly San

Martin (2008), one of the curriculum developers for the training workshops in the program,

The overall goal of the project was to strengthen the community response to the increasing violence in intimate relationships, experienced by teenagers and young adult women in the Latin American community in Toronto and to contribute to the decrease in violence in the lives of young Latinas in Toronto.

MUJER's leadership training program runs in four phases: selection of participants; training workshops in leadership skills; peer-educators; and, project evaluation. Here, I will focus on the first, second and third phases in further detail. As mentioned, in the first phase outreach and recruiting is done to find young Latinas to participate in the program. The target group is young women between 18 and 28 years old who are interested in issues of violence against women from a variety of perspectives and experiences, including, for some, direct experience with violence (San Martin 2008). Another important component in the selection process is that the young women already need to have a positive identification with their Latina/o roots and community. This means that it is important that regardless of whether they speak Spanish well or whether they were born in Canada that they have a personal and political interest in forming an active part of the Latin American community in Toronto. According to Lilian Valverde, this is important because it is through this positive identification with *latinidad* that these young women will be able to commit themselves to ongoing feminist and anti-oppressive work within the Latin American community (Valverde).

The second phase entails the training workshops themselves. Starting in 2005 the program has been made up of six, three hour workshops that have addressed topics as varied as: violence against women in a cultural context; violence in intimate relationships; self-esteem and self-worth; sexuality and reproductive rights; addressing changes in society; promoting healthy and equal relationships; and, young Latin American women as agents of change (MUJER). According to San Martin (2008), an important consideration for curriculum developers was to focus on an alternative conception of leadership; one grounded in anti-oppressive, inclusive and non-individualized organizing principles. This means that gender oppression is seen as a vector of difference that interlocks with other negatively ascribed social categorizations in order to understand oppression in its complexity. Under this approach, leadership leaves behind its more individualized connotations and acquires a social and collective significance.

An alternative conception of leadership defines it a process of social influence in which an individual or a group of individuals are able to get the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a collective task. Leadership, then, emerges as something that allows people

to make sense of their everyday lives rather than merely observing the individual who is given or takes the role of leader. For example, women like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo became leaders of powerful political movements as a result of the heinous dictatorship that murdered and disappeared their children and kidnapped their grandchildren. So, a feminist conception of leadership would entail the following objectives: to connect and mobilize; to train and educate effective communicators; to raise our voice in diverse fora; and, to access power by participating politically (San Martin 2008).

Thread: An Oral History of the Latin American Women's Collective in Toronto, 1983-1990 and Mónica Escobar in, *Exile and National Identity: Chilean Women in Canada*. In these important foundational works on Latin American women in Canada, one of the key points addressed is that many Latin American women, before immigrating to Canada, already possessed important political organizing skills which they continued to exercise, despite the difficulties of immigrant life in Canada. That is, both Escobar and San Martin present Latin American women as agential subjects with knowledge that is not only useful but also

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The importance of MUJER's innovative leadership training program for young Latinas is that leadership is seen within a context of not only individual advancement but also as a means to "lift" the Latin American community as a whole and Latin American women, including young Latinas, in particular. Lilian Valverde, speaking about how MUJER understands the role of the training workshops imparted under this program, explains:

So what we ended up concluding after our previous research on the subject, is that what is really needed here is the creation of leaders, to create social activists, to shape social activists, and that they be the ones that are able at some time in the future, to channel all this, to make possible community centres and that they can make available whatever other type of service to help Latin American women....

Embedded within this consciousness of solidarity and of commitment to Latin American women and community, MUJER's leadership training workshops and discourse of leadership as social activism interrupt mainstream understandings of leadership skills as a personal endeavour designed only to favour an individual's personal advancement in society. With its emphasis on experience and interest in issues of violence against women and a personal positive identification with latinidad, as well as a pedagogic approach that emphasizes the collective and political aspects of leadership training, MUJER provides a space of feminist Latina organizing that reclaims Latin American women's knowledge and experience of social activism. This latter point, which refers to the powerful kinds of knowledge that exists within the community thanks to the experience and knowledge that Latin American women bring to Canada, is addressed by both Magaly San Martin in *Picking Up the*

relevant to women's organizing in Canada, particularly to women who belong to marginalized communities. Made up by and for Latin American and Latina women, MUJER has been able to successfully tap into the Latin American community's extant organizational resources and create innovative programming from a perspective that engages and respects the value of women's situated knowledge.

In the third phase, skills learned in the training workshops are put to work in the peer educator component of the program. The objective here is to have workshop participants who have already been through phase two of the program, develop outreach strategies and educational material for elementary and high-school students on the prevention of violence against women. The idea is to design a two hour workshop to be delivered in pairs in Toronto elementary schools and high schools. This has proven to be a very successful and important component of the leadership program where the participants have felt that going out into the community has been a thoroughly rewarding experience both emotionally but also in terms of being able to learn methodologies and skills for effective training and organizing (San Martin 2008).

The participants were very appreciative of being in a group with other young Latinas. For many of them this was the first time that they've had the opportunity to be in a women's group. Many of them expressed that they felt that they had gained a space to build relationships with other young women. They also benefited from learning practical skills for imparting effective training workshops. Participants also mentioned that they wanted to continue working with women and that they had developed a more critical consciousness through their participation in the program. (San Martin 2008)

Privileging the role that young Latinas can play, not only for their own personal edification and advancement, but also through collective action that positively impacts the community and other young Latinas/os, MUJER is able to provide a site of feminist organizing that is inclusive and anti-oppressive. Bringing together Latin American women of diverse backgrounds, including diverse nationalities, along with young Latina women—many of whom are second generation—represents an innovative way of creating political space for women's organizing among Latina youth. In my own research with 1.5⁹ and

Latin American women themselves in order to engage in a collaborative pedagogic practice to train young Latinas as leaders who, in turn, themselves become mentors/teachers to other young women in the community. And, fourthly, it is through collaborative practice and in solidarity with one another and with the Latin American community that the young women involved in the leadership training program learn that they can become mentors and active agents of social change.

The four elements just mentioned—giving back; community as resource and site of empowerment; collaborative

A mentorship model is used that allows MUJER to tap into the knowledge of Latin American women themselves in order to engage in a collaborative pedagogic practice to train young Latinas as leaders who, in turn, themselves become mentors/teachers to other young women in the community.

second generation young adults, they often mention the need to have mechanisms that allow them to connect to the community beyond those provided through familial ties. For these young Latinas/os, the family or *la familia*, represents an extremely important site through which encounters with latinidad and the development of stable links with it are exercised. However, the young women and men that I interviewed for my research on issues of identity performativity and construction among young adults of Latin American descent, also expressed that it was important for them to find spaces within the community, *la comunidad*, that would welcome them as equal participants.¹⁰

These young women have shown a deep commitment and passion to achieving results. They daily demonstrate the effectiveness of MUJER's Leadership Program, in training a younger generation of women to lead activities and action in our community. We believe that by mobilizing young people as agents of change in preventing violence and promoting healthy relationships we can build strong organizational capacity and a more vibrant, resilient and healthy community. (MUJER 2007: 2)

In this brief exploration of three of the four phases of MUJER's leadership training program key concepts emerge that are worth emphasizing. First, we can see that the idea of giving back to the community - of not leaving the community behind - is very important. Secondly, the community itself is regarded as a site of knowledge and empowerment therefore interrupting 'common sense' discourses that construct immigrant communities as 'problem communities'. Third, a mentorship model is used that allows MUJER to tap into the knowledge of

practice; and, mentorship articulated with advocacy/activism—encompass a significant part of what scholars are identifying as important components of what can be called feminist leadership practices (see Irby and Brown; Reynolds and Young; Kark; Chin). Although many of them point out that it is difficult at this point to clearly define what feminist leadership is exactly for there is a paucity of scholarly literature on the subject (Chin 4) accompanied by a "dominance of mainstream positivist approaches to the concept of leadership," (Ford 247) there are some identifiable elements of feminist leadership practices. As Bernice Lott points out, feminist leadership promotes open discussion and democratic participation, shares resources and promotes feminist values of collaboration and consensus building that empowers all participants. Importantly, Lott also says that in order for these feminist values to become part of a feminist praxis, they have to be articulated with a practice of advocacy for social change (28). For women of colour scholars there is yet another important dimension to feminist leadership practices—the recognition that women of colour's unique location as gendered and racialized bodies presents unique and real challenges to their leadership practices.

As Melba Vasquez and Lillian Comas-Díaz explain, the way in which Latinas are positioned within society seriously impacts their ability and possibility of attaining leadership roles. One of the ways in which these challenges and obstacles are faced by women of colour is to expand the notions of collaboration, solidarity, and empowerment to include not only other women of colour but also their communities (Vasquez and Comas-Díaz; Hall, Garrett-Akinsay and Hucles; Kawulich). Community involvement then becomes very important in promoting, "a positive cultural consciousness of values and behaviors" that may lead to personal and community empowerment (Hall et al 292).

MUJER's leadership training program successfully creates the space for young Latinas to participate and learn to become social activists for their own benefit and for the benefit of the community as a whole. In so doing, MUJER, brings together the knowledge of diverse Latin American immigrant women with the knowledge of young Latinas to engage in a process of collective action based on theoretical/social framework that privileges anti-oppressive knowledge. Personal agency, solidarity based on political consciousness and collective community action come together in the work of MUJER in order to reclaim Latin American women's political knowledge and generate a new space for young Latina women's organizing in Toronto through a new conception of leadership: a feminist one that values individual development but that sees the latter as always articulated with political consciousness and collective action for community improvement.

I will end this brief look at MUJER with a quote from one of its founding members that succinctly and elegantly expresses MUJER's belief in the power of community to engage in positive change,

Many things have not changed since the time when I was a young activist: sexism, racism and violence. But now, we have far more tools to confront these oppressions and, more importantly, there is far more of us to rely on each other. MUJER opened a path. It is the women who tread on it that will make it into a wider road for all of us. (San Martin qtd. in MUJER 2007: 5)

Special thanks to Magaly San Martin for making the time to talk to me extensively on MUJER's leadership program. Without our lengthy telephone conversation much of the information contained here regarding details of the program would not have been possible to access. I also want to thank Lilian Valverde, MUJER's executive director, for agreeing to be interviewed for my research on identity among Latin/o Canadian youth and for graciously giving of her time and knowledge. I also want to thank all the young Latinas who continue to participate in the building of a better community for us all.

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¹Latin American/Latina-Canadian is used by me here to

signify that MUJER is an organization located in Toronto, Canada that represents both Latin American immigrant women as well as 1.5 and second generation Latinas who form part of the diasporic reality of *latinidad* in Canada.

²The word *mujer* means woman in Spanish.

³This is a much longer in-depth interview conducted with MUJER's executive director, Lilian Valverde, who graciously accepted to be interviewed and shared with me her time and knowledge. This interview was conducted as part of a larger project for my Ph.D research on the subject of Latina/o identity in Canada among 1.5 and second generation Latina/o-Canadian young adults.

⁴This interview was conducted over the phone on November 19, 2008.

⁵Particularly noteworthy is the work of Jorge Ginieniewicz and Daniel Schugurensky, eds., *Ruptures, Continuities and Re-learning: The Political Participation of Latin Americans in Canada*, and Daniela Mantilla, Daniel Schugurensky and Jose Francisco Serrano, eds., *Four in Ten: Spanish-Speaking Youth and School Dropout in Toronto*.

⁶An interesting look at community organizations within the Latin American community in Toronto is provided in Goldring, Landolt, Bernhard and Barriga, "Toronto hispano/Toronto latino: Latin American Institutional Community Development in the Greater Toronto Area (1973-2005)."

⁷*Latinidad* is used within the field of Latina/o Studies as a concept that denotes both the historical commonalities of the Latina/o experience as well as its differences, "Latinidad serves to define a particular geopolitical experience but it also contains within it the complexities and contradictions of immigration, (post)(neo)colonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, and the politics of location." (Rodríguez 10)

⁸This is knowledge obtained through personal participation in the Encuentro of 1995 as both audience and community artist.

⁹The term 1.5 refers to the generation that is in between the first generation of immigrants, i.e., those born in another country and who arrived as adults in the country of immigration, and those of the second generation, i.e., children of immigrants born in the country of immigration. As Daniel Schugurensky defines it, "We are using the term generation 1.5 to refer to those who migrated to Canada during childhood or adolescence. The "generation 1.5" had a primary socialization in one country and a second socialization in another, and this difficult transition is compounded by the need to learn a second language. Members of generation 1.5 tend to be fluent in both languages and to have a strong connection with both the host society and the home society..." (Ginieniewicz and Schugurensky 2007: 336)

¹⁰These are interviews with young Latinas/os that I have done for my research on Latina/o identity among young adults of Latin American descent in Canada.

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ANGELA BELCASTRO

Inside/out

Each word curls back.

I tuck them under,
pleat image by image
backward
like paper folding,
caressed many times.

From a corner they slide,
vowels murmur, edge to surface.
I catch hold, cradle them inside:

all language needs a firm womb.

Outside,
words spill helpless like ether
and fall,
touching no one.

Angela Belcastro's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

PRISCILA UPPAL

Anacrusis

such to me, the missing foot I was meant to hear,
dropped accent of an unknown country of my birth.
Mother, your leaving meant my false beginning—
the extra long hours of study to fit into the scheme, foreign
toes like landmines, breath pauses like choked memories
I refused to contrive. Where do you sit and rest? Childhood
is the caesura of my tears—I have not held you long enough
to mourn you—I will be eight forever and ever. Unable to fix
a meter, a song, decipher your rhythm until we return to proper
places in line. Like Egypt, we must be known for our Queens
in order to claim worthy ancestry. Which sands do you sink
in? How damaged are these strings? Striking up a tune is
impossible without an instrument.

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Salvadorian Women's Diaspora

Ana Rivera's Story

MIRNA E. CARRANZA WITH ANA RIVERA

La diáspora salvadoreña a envoyé des milliers de Salvadoriens dans les États nord américains. Cet article raconte l'histoire d'Ana Rivera qui a quitté son pays d'origine pour une terre d'exil. Elle nous parle de ses difficultés et aussi de sa résilience et sa résistance face à des circonstances accablantes.

La Diáspora salvadoreña trajo millones de personas de El Salvador a Norte América. Este artículo presenta la experiencia de vida de Ana Rivera, en su país de nacimiento y en el país donde se estableció. Su narrativa incluye sus dificultades, el proceso de adaptación y la resistencia a las circunstancias opresivas de su vida.

From 1980 to 1990 El Salvador was engaged in a bloody civil war (Cienfuegos 164). During this time the Salvadorian government unleashed a wave of terrorism against the civilian population. This violence, along with constant psychological warfare, drastically impacted the lives of Salvadorian women and their families (Martín-Baró 111-12). Many lost beloved family members, and many endured persecution and torture at the hands of "death squads" (Diez 15). Millions of Salvadorians fled to North America. In 1982 and 1983, nearly 3,000 refugees came directly from El Salvador to Canada. A second wave of approximately 7,000 people arrived in Canada during the mid-1980s and included people who had first settled illegally in the United States (Da 2). Between 1974 and 2001, a total of 33,860 Salvadorians came to Canada, a fairly small number compared to other immigrant groups (García 32).

This article presents Ana Rivera's narrative of her life experiences in both her country of origin and her settlement country. I have been privileged to know Ana for about 15 years. I witnessed not only her struggles, but also her strength and remarkable resistance to oppressive circumstances. Hers is one of the millions of stories of people who came to North American countries during the Salvadorian Diaspora as refugees.

Family History

Ana was born in the city of Santa Ana on August 3, 1955, the third of five sisters. Her father, José, owned a carpentry workshop. He was the Salvadorian representative of the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (PRTC) (Central American Workers' Political Party). He was also the regional leader of the *Sindicato Nacional de Obreros* (National Factory Workers' Union [NFWU]). He worked in collaboration with Julio Pinto in the publication of the emerging newspaper *El Independiente* (The Independent). The goal of the newspaper was to protest the injustices and to expose the secret killings of civilians that were happening at the time

Ana worked as a pharmaceutical assistant, during her spare time she helped her father organize the union meetings and kept track of the paperwork. She was also a sympathizer of the emergent resistance movement *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (). The FMLN was a left-wing political party formed on October 10, 1980, as an umbrella group for several left-wing guerrilla organizations: the *Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí* (FPL), the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), the *Resistencia Nacional* (RN), the *Partido Comunista Salvadoreño* (PCS), and the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* (Cienfuegos 154-162).

Ana's father was also the leader of a youth group, and he played an important role in educating young people about the oppression endured by Salvadorian people. Ana recounted how listening to her father talk to the youth group "opened [her] eyes" to social justice and human rights issues. Ana reported that these experiences made her acutely aware of the inherent social inequalities in Salvadorian society, which many perceived as "normal" and part of the social order of her country. She felt compelled to align herself with the oppressed, exploited, and excluded.

Persecution and Flight

In August of 1981, Ana's life was changed forever. Three army trucks came to her father's shop to perform *un cateo* [search for arms and propaganda without a court order]. They destroyed the place and killed one of the workers, thinking he was Ana's father. Ana's father went into hiding, but not without first letting her know what had happened. Ana refused to submit to fear and continued her work at the pharmacy where she was employed, and her activism/involvement with the union and the youth group.

“I was late for work that day. One of my kids was sick. When I arrived my boss and all my other coworkers were very pale. They told me that the military broke a lot of stuff looking for me.... My boss told me that it was better for me to leave.... I left my four children and went to Guatemala only with what I had on me...”

Months later, Ana's father came out of hiding. They both thought that the military had forgotten about them. With sadness in her eyes, Ana recalled:

We were wrong, very wrong. [The Army] came looking for me. I was supposed to be there, but ... I was late for work that day. One of my kids was sick, I think. I had to take him to the doctor. When I arrived my boss and all my other coworkers were very pale. They told me that the military had made a mess in the pharmacy. That they broke a lot of stuff looking for me.... My boss told me that it was better for me to leave.... I left immediately.... I didn't know what to do. I left my four children and went to Guatemala only with what I had on me.... I sent a message to my family letting them know where I was. A couple of months later, my husband came to join me in Guatemala because [The Army] wouldn't stop looking for me and we were afraid that they would do something to him just to send me a message.... We couldn't afford to bring the children. We thought it would be too hard to move around with them.

Ana always thought of herself as loyal to the Salvadorian cause, yet within 12 hours she found herself in a new country and away from her children and loved ones. Her journey did not stop there. Ana did not feel safe in Guatemala because of its proximity to El Salvador and the military collaboration between the two countries.

A Second and Third Migration

After a few months in Guatemala, Ana and her husband decided to venture to Mexico, and they lived there for a period of five years. Her sisters followed her and subsequently settled illegally in the United States. Ana's father,

however, refused to leave El Salvador and told her that even the thought of leaving his *compañeros* made him feel like a traitor. During this time, the communication with family members left in El Salvador was sporadic; via telegrams using pseudonyms and containing only a few code words that let the receiver know that they were still alive. Ana's partner supported the idea to travel to Mexico as he was afraid for his and the children's lives. During this time, the Salvadorian army made it their practice to kill entire families or relatives of the person they were looking for in order to instill fear and intimidation.

Once in Mexico, Ana's strong work ethic helped her obtain employment as a pharmaceutical assistant in Guadalajara. She was 26 years old. Her husband became employed as a factory worker

A couple of months later we went to Mexico. We lived there illegally for several years.... One day I had to go back to El Salvador in the middle of the night to get my dad because he had a close call. He had been shot. I was afraid for his life.... I went because I thought that it would be easier for me to go in disguise than my husband, or maybe because I thought my husband did not have the courage to go and get my father and bring him safely to me.... Also, because my husband's brother had disappeared. We later found out that he had been tortured and murdered by the Army.... The family found his remains in a trench. The Army used to dig these holes all the time. They would just throw in the bodies of the people they had tortured and killed.... He had been buried anonymously, together with other people. We did not know if they were looking for my husband. I did not want him to risk himself.... I mean I was afraid for his life too.... Or maybe I thought it was my responsibility, not his.

Ana, like many other Salvadorian women at the time, did not hesitate to put herself at risk to protect the men in her family. Ana eventually brought her entire family to Mexico without visas. She did so by paying *mordidas* (bribes) at each immigration site. She arrived in Mexico with her 70-year-old father, her 60-year-old mother, and her four children: Maria, eleven; Juan, nine; Tanya, eight; and Manuel, five. Their illegal status prevented the children from attending school beyond the elementary grades. Ana demonstrated her courage and resilience once again:

Mis zipotes [my children] couldn't go any further in school. My bosses knew that we were living in Mexico illegally. They really liked me and they offered to help me get my legal status, but that was going to take years.... I couldn't wait. So we decided to apply to Canada. We waited about 18 months. We [Ana with her husband and children] came first, and a week later my parents arrived. We thought our hardships would lessen here, but we began a new adventure. It was very tough at the beginning.

Life in Canada

Ana and her family arrived in Canada as government-sponsored refugees. Ana requested to be sent to a small city, and the government brought them to Kitchener-Waterloo in September 1986. At that time, Waterloo Region did not have a history of receiving people of colour or refugees from developing countries. This meant that Ana and her family received very little support and understanding regarding unprocessed issues around the loss of their culture and the experiences of war and persecution.

Ana and her husband, Mario, attended English as a Second Language classes for about seven months. Ana received training as a seamstress and managed to find part-time employment in this field. Mario secured employment at a factory and worked there for 20 years.

Experiences of racism and prejudice became part of Ana's daily life:

I remember that people would stare at us like we were animals in the zoo. People did not want to rent us an apartment. It was hard for us to find a decent place to rent because there was no appropriate housing. There were eight of us and we couldn't find anything at the time.... Landlords were rude and would tell us, "No, we don't want your kind here." I remember feeling so alone. I could not find work in my field. I learned a little bit of English, enough to get around, and went to work in a factory. The coworkers treated me like an animal there. The manager would give me the toughest jobs there. I mean work that not even the men wanted to do. Look at me; I am a very small woman! ... I had no choice but to work because I had my parents and my children to support. I did not want to live off the welfare system, you know. I thought, I am a healthy woman and [welfare] is for sick people.

Ana's experience in Canada represents the experience of many Salvadorians and other people of colour. Everyday experiences of race discrimination remind people like Ana that Canada is not the safe place they thought it would be.

Ana noted that the Salvadorian community was almost nonexistent at the time. Therefore, she had nobody to turn to in this process:

We were the fourth Salvadorian family to arrive in Kitchener in 1986. A lot more Salvadorians arrived in the following years. It was very hard back then because we were so few. We would be so surprised and happy when we found people on the bus or the street who spoke Spanish. We would come home and share that we had met other people who spoke Spanish.... There were no stores that would sell our spices or any of our foods. It was very hard because our diet was so different.

Meanwhile, Ana's sisters, who had been living illegally in the United States, moved to Canada and settled in Kitchener-Waterloo. Ana told me, "I was so happy. I thought I would never see them again. My parents were so happy too."

In the meantime, Ana's father had an aneurism. One of her sisters looked after him, while Ana continued working part time. Her father died on November 28, 1995. More than ever, Ana felt a sense of responsibility and duty to continue her father's work. In spite of this, she felt that she had no choice but to begin working full time at Kitchener Printing. She worked there for ten years, before she hurt her shoulders and became incapacitated.

Ana reported that she felt very frustrated and useless at the time. She found that the existing services did not meet her needs. Therefore, she began to do volunteer work in the community; her primary goal was to help decrease the multiple barriers that immigrants and refugees encounter during their acculturation process. In 1999 she founded an initiative called Bridging Resources, which was funded by the Department of Canadian Heritage and Immigration in partnership with K-W Counselling. She recalled:

There were so many injustices committed against immigrants at the time. There were no resources available for immigrants. We were treated like second-class citizens, especially when you did not speak the language. There were agencies that supposedly [were there to help and to] advocate for the needs of immigrants but they didn't do so. [The workers in these agencies] are as oppressive as those working in mainstream agencies as well. Some staff members in those centers have very little power or authority, but they use it to oppress other immigrants.

As the leader of the Bridging Resources initiative, Ana was able to help numerous people in her community. She collaborated and networked with agencies such as Lutherwood and Family and Children's Services, as well as several schools.

Ana also received training as a facilitator for Wrap-Around, a community-based program that responded to families that had multiple needs. She became the regional leader in advocating for the needs of immigrant families. However, most of the problems that Ana and the families she worked with faced were related to blatant discrimination:

The problem was that the families were facing discrimination as much as I was. I called the Ministry to complain but nothing was done. I called the MP and nothing was done. I called the Mayor and nothing was done. I felt so frustrated. The bureaucracy here was, and still is, so big that one person cannot even make a dent in the glass ceiling that predominates in Canada.

It is important to note that Ana uses the imagery of “glass ceiling” to denote the prejudice and discrimination that many immigrants and refugees of colour experience while trying to incorporate themselves in Canadian society. That is, the contradictions that exist between the welcoming national Canadian policy of multiculturalism and the lived realities of people of colour. Discriminatory hiring practices due to accent, lack of acceptance and validation of foreign experience, negative stereotypes, apathy and rudeness from front line workers, managers and government officials toward the needs of immigrants and refugees of colour are some examples.

While caring for her children and her aging mother, Ana found time to do volunteer work. When her mother, Dolores, died on May 23, 2003, Ana felt “overwhelmed with grief, and abandoned by the system.” She decided to give up on social justice issues for a while.

On November 1, 2005, Ana opened her own business selling second-hand clothing. Ana thought that she was finally going to be able to relax. However, her husband lost his job in December 2005.

In spite of her own financial struggles, Ana continued her leadership in the community, as people seeking help continued to knock at her door. She created a small space in her store where she met with people needing some guidance or support. Ana acknowledged that some changes had taken place in Kitchener since her arrival (29 years ago), both negative and positive. The negatives changes relate to the financial cut backs that the government has made to social programs through the years. The positives changes relate to the increase of service for immigrant and refugee women who endure domestic violence. Ana’s challenges had not ended yet. The City of Kitchener began street construction work in April 2006 and closed access to her store for what was supposed to be six months but continued for almost a year. The business declined, and Ana eventually had to close her small business:

I went to advocate for myself at the city hall. The K-W Record published an article in October 2006, but nothing was done. [The article] was done to bring light to the issue, you know. I hoped that something would be done. I mean like stop construction or at least to finish it in an appropriate amount of time. There was no financial compensation for any of the business owners in the block. I had no choice but to close my business on January 28, 2007.



Ana Rivera and her grandchildren

Ana put all the store merchandise in storage and went to work at a department store in order to save enough money to open her store again. Her new job involved physically demanding tasks that made her old injuries flare up. Ana kept herself going with the idea of someday reopening her store. She reopened her own store on March 1, 2008, relocating it to Kitchener’s downtown area. She hopes that this time around there will be no construction or anything impeding her desire for self-employment. I saw that Ana was excited about reopening her store, and asked her, “What sort of hopes do you have for the future?” She responded:

I have ten grandchildren now. I think it is important to teach them about strong family loyalty between family members, about our ethnic heritage, and the history of oppression, survival, and resistance of the Salvadorian people. I also think that it is important to teach them about social justice so they can fight for themselves and for others who are at a disadvantage. I learned this from my father. He taught me to be proud of my indigenous roots. I taught the same thing to my children. I am teaching it to my grandchildren too. I just hope that God gives me enough life to do this, because some of them are still very young. I am teaching them to speak Spanish too. They are the fourth generation now. We only speak Spanish at home. I think they need to feel proud of their race and culture.

Ana will be 54 this August. In the more than two decades that she has lived in Canada, she has strongly advocated for increased access and inclusive services in Waterloo Region. Yet she has done so without recognition for her commitment to social justice and her dedication to helping those in need. Ana remarked:

I figure I am in [social justice work] for life. This is not something that I chose. This is my life purpose and I cannot get away. Believe me I tried [laughter]. I love it. I would have loved to go to school and obtain some sort of formal education for this, maybe then I would have more credibility.... But I did not have money to pay for university or college. I had to feed my family.

Ana's close connection and commitment to her country of birth continued throughout the years, from a distance. She has maintained her relationships with close family members through telephone calls on a monthly basis. She has not visited her native land since that early morning in mid-August 1981. Ana stated that although El Salvador's political upheaval has decreased, "fear for my life has kept me away from my homeland for about 29 years."

Conclusion

It is important to draw attention to the fact that in her narrative, Ana did not use language that denoted trauma or victimhood. Ana thinks of herself as a strong woman who had to endure many life adversities as a result of oppressive circumstances and exclusion. However, fear has been an active force in her life, and it has been a key principle in the decisions she made in organizing her life. Most importantly, it has kept her away from her homeland. Her ethnic pride and her faith have been sources of strength and resilience during her moments of vulnerability.

This narrative describes the lifelong efforts of a woman whose work as a community advocate and organizer has remained largely invisible. Ana's story also illuminates the struggles that immigrant women continue to face because of discrimination. Overt and covert racism continue to heavily influence the settlement process of women of colour and to cheat them of equal opportunities. Ana's story is one of remarkable strength and resilience in oppressive circumstances. Thousands of Salvadorian women in Canada have faced many such challenges in their search for a safe haven.

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SUSAN MCCASLIN

Demeter, Drowning, Remembers a Lover of her youth

Demeter flails desperately,
having lost sight of the beach

with its small breathing holes for crabs,
the figure eights of the tides,

and dance of kelp-drawn lines.
Breath folds, arms are weakening
tentacles.

She sees in her mind black earth,
new beans listing in their pods.

Soon she will relive
the blue-black flanks of Poseidon

who sought her once,
became half-stallion for her skin.

Now she is a single spar,
dragged to his Sargasso eye,

lone witness of her self-abandonment
sinking to his element, the sea.

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