

Testimonio

September 10, 1993 - January 2, 1994



Doña Petra Allende, c. 1935

All immigrants mold past experiences into memories, relived and retold in response to new times and places. Whether Irish, Italian or Jewish from earlier years or Puerto Rican, Dominican or Mexican in more recent decades, newly arriving groups give testimony to their heritage and its changing meaning in the face of new conditions and challenges.

Despite the many continuities and resonances, there are also important differences between the experiences of the “old immigrants” who came mainly from European homelands in the late 19th and early 20th century and the “new immigrants” who have been arriv-

ing since 1940s, most of whom come from Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East. Conditions of departure, arrival and resettlement have changed, as have the memories and testimonies that accompany them. Guiding ideals of assimilation and the “American Dream” no longer apply, or take on new, often contrary meanings.

What is new about the “new immigration”? What social conditions and historical experiences make the “testimonio” of Latinos different from those of earlier immigrant generations?

First, the economic situation in the United States, and on a world scale, has changed dramatically: while the masses of European immigrants came in response to strong industrial expansion and a demand for labor, the “new immigrants” leave their homelands and encounter U.S. society at a time of economic shrinkage and transition. The new immigrants find work harder to come by, and a society less willing or able to welcome their values and ways of life.

These broad changes in economic circumstance have occurred concurrently with major adjustments in U.S. immigration laws. Since the 1920s, U.S. government and corporate powers have intensified the close control over numbers and origins of newcomers. Appeals to the US “national interest”—economic, political and cultural—have taken priority over human needs in setting the shifting agenda for who’s let in and who’s kept out and contribute to the stigmatization and labeling of particular groups as “undesirable.”

The new immigrants, whether from Asia or Latin America, are overwhelmingly “people of color,” and are therefore more subject to racial prejudice and discrimination than were their European predecessors. Originating from colonial and neo-colonial nations, often with African and indigenous ancestries, new Latino immigrants are particularly vulnerable to the kind of nativist and racist hostility that has alwaysounded immigrant peoples, but which in recent decades has become more vehement.

Ironically, as unfavorable as real conditions have become, the expectations of migrating groups are as high as ever, the “American dream” kept alive in the imagination by the pervasive influence of the media. Images of mainstream American life on television, movies and magazines fuel hopes and create illusions far more palpable and intense than anything encountered by earlier immigrants. This syndrome of rising

expectations only makes the sense of disillusionment more severe, and the search for other options more pressing.

Nevertheless, the Civil Rights struggles and social movements of the 1960s and 70s opened new spaces for the maintenance and affirmation of home cultures and a public politics of empowerment. Within this new climate, established educational and cultural institutions have begun to alter their methods for understanding and representing different realities.

Testimonio aims to expand the ways in which universities and museums can serve as viable forums for representations of daily life, culture and politics by enlarging the parameters of what is usually shown in museums and who traditionally participates. Organized collaboratively by The New Museum, the CAMEO Project of the Center for Cultural Studies of the City University of New York Graduate School, and residents, artists, workers and community based organizations in East Harlem, Washington Heights and Williamsburg, New York City, *Testimonio* highlights the importance of memory as a reservoir of history, and the crucial role of storytelling as a means of building community. Together, we explore the possibilities for combining the politics of identity with the politics of survival.

Testimonio seeks to redefine not only the approach to Latino reality, but also the relationships between university workers, museum workers, artists, community residents, activists and the viewing public. Our goals are to work together to explore new strengths in each of the participating constituencies; to reconsider our understanding of what is “true,” “real,” “important” and “valuable”; and to question the ways in which we make distinctions between “us” and “them,” between one’s self and an other.

As important as the exhibition itself has been the year-long process of its creation. The art works were not conceived as ends in themselves. Rather, they are more akin to “snapshots” of an ongoing process. The artists’ book created at El Barrio Popular Education Program was made as part of a year-long writing and printmaking workshop. The series of photographs produced by activist Petra Allende and CAMEO fellow Carmen Medeiros can only hint at the richness of all the conversations shared by the two women.

As a medium whose primary material is social interaction, video has played a central role in the project. The combination of experimental ethnography and cultural organizing results in a video program focusing on processes of political and cultural empowerment; initiatives for fair political representation; struggles over needs and rights to housing and health care; access to resources and public cultural spaces; and the affirmation of life against death.

These, and other issues, are examined through the voices and testimonies of only a small number of people. No single voice is meant to represent all others. Redrawing the contours of an emancipatory cultural politics means recognizing the vast cultural and political diversity of Latinos, differentiated not only by national identities, but by racial, gender, sexual and class identifications that point toward distinct experiences and agendas. We hope this project is a positive step toward a truly post-colonial Latino identity, and the remaking of a more just and democratic America.

—*Testimonio Project Participants*



El Barrio Popular Education Program, *Nuestras voces (Our Voices)*, 1993

Testimonio Project Participants

Doña Petra Allende in collaboration with Carmen Medeiros/CAMEO

My name is Petra Allende. I am a woman, a Puerto Rican and an American citizen born in the Island of Puerto Rico in 1920, and I'm loyal to the land where I first saw sunlight. I moved to El Barrio in New York City in the late 1940s and am the mother of six children, sixteen grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. I worked for many years in factories, in city government, and as an activist to abolish the literacy test for voters. Since 1982 I have dedicated my time to helping senior citizens, and working for the rights of senior citizens, women, and all those in need.

Some people do not know what it is like to be old, poor, or sick, with language and cultural barriers to benefits and services. I have discussed these things with Carmen Medeiros during a series of extended dialogues and walks through the East Harlem neighborhood. We present a series of photographs to give a feel for life in El Barrio and the condition and status of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

AREITO ART in collaboration with Agustín Laó/CAMEO

Los desarrolladores de pensamientos — The developers of thoughts.

The Dominican community of New York City is a young one. The 1970s and '80s constituted an important period in our formation as a group. Thanks to the victories of other "minority" communities, we have been able to establish ourselves and fight the forces which oppose our presence.

Washington Heights is the second capital of the Dominican Republic. The more our country is exploited and its economy destroyed, the more Dominicans will take a fragile boat to escape a silent strangulation at home. We are here to stay! We want respect and equal rights. Our project, a memorial mural to Kiko García, killed by the police in July 1992, and Manuel Mayí, killed by six Italian boys in Corona, Queens, in March 1991, reflects these realities.

Diógenes Abreu / Born 1959 in the Dominican Republic. Studied art at the School of Fine Arts in Santo Domingo, and at City College, NYC.

Madeline Peralta / Born 1976 in the Dominican Republic. Studies art at the Fiorello H. LaGuardia HS of Music & Art, NYC.

Félix Polanco / Born 1974 in New York City. Graduated from the HS of Art & Design, NYC. Now is entering Skills College, while training his art skills with Valiant Comics.

Vincent Ramírez / Born 1978 in New York City. Currently attending the HS of Art & Design, NYC, taking courses in the basic elements of art.

Carol Vargas / Born 1975 in the Dominican Republic. Studies Fine Arts at the Fiorello H. LaGuardia HS of Music & Art, NYC.

Raphael Vélez / Born 1976 in New York City. Junior at Fiorello H. LaGuardia HS of Music & Art, NYC.

The CAMEO Project (Community, Autobiography, Memory, Ethnography, Organizing) was initiated by the Center for Cultural Studies of the CUNY Graduate School to generate collaborative, participatory research between professors and students and Latino community residents. This partnership entails the joint definition of the research agenda and what counts as important knowledge in order to make academic research a mutually empowering enterprise. CAMEO members have been working in Williamsburg, East Harlem, and Washington Heights since 1991 producing video documentation of significant community events, videotaping life histories of community residents, and participating in important political and cultural activities.

El Barrio Popular Education Program (EBP) is a community based adult, native language literacy program located in one of the oldest and most vibrant Puerto Rican communities in the United States. It began as a research project of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies of the City University of New York, and in 1987, was incorporated as a not-for-profit, independent organization. The program has attracted national recognition because of its participatory approach to the education of Latino adults, and in 1991, was selected as one of nine national models. The program offers all levels of basic education in Spanish from basic literacy through high school equivalency classes,

as well as English as a Second Language, leadership development and interactive computer instruction. Presently 99 percent of the adults enrolled in the program are women. The overall goal is for students to be bilingual, bicultural, and involved in active citizenship. Because of the high incidence of unemployment and underemployment in our community, the program also implements economic development activities in the form of worker cooperatives. EBP staff and students have worked with Catalina Parra and Mayda Perez of The New Museum to produce a limited edition artists book, entitled *Nuestra voces* (Our Voices), which addresses issues that affect us, our families, and our communities:

Where are we from?

Why did we come to New York and what did we expect?

How do we see our futures, either in New York City or, if we return, in our countries?

Our individual rights

The need for effective community organizing

Musica Against Drugs (MAD) is a client-driven, community based organization dedicated to serving Latino/as and their loved ones in the Williamsburg area affected by the HIV/AIDS and drug addiction epidemics. MAD's focus is on outreach and education through arts and culture, client services and community resource development. All MAD's efforts seek to promote the survival and the quality of life of People With AIDS (PWAs), those at risk, and their families, as well as to prevent the spread of the disease. MAD looks to Latino culture itself as a fundamental tool with which to struggle against the ravages of AIDS and addiction which have victimized our friends, neighbors and families. By viewing each client as a whole person—with cultural and recreational lives as well as medical needs—MAD integrates Latino PWAs and recovering addicts into a social service network. Our philosophy is best described by the phrase "La Cultura Tambien Cura"—"the culture also heals."

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, founded in 1977, is the only museum in New York City devoted exclusively to the work of living artists. Unlike a traditional museum, we have no permanent displays. Instead, we organize exhibitions and educational projects which provide timely opportunities for exploring critical issues in contemporary art and culture. Since 1989 we have conducted a series of participatory projects, such as the "Rhetorical Image Resource Room" and "Homemade TV," designed to expand the conversation that surrounds art to include people who are not art professionals, as well as those who are. Through *Testimonio* we hope to expand the potential for museums to serve as forums for a broad range of communities, interests, and cultural practices.

Greg Pomales in collaboration with Rubén Díaz, Adolphe La Torre, Juan Piñero, and Pedro Rivera/CAMEO

Greg Pomales, the son of immigrants from Puerto Rico, began his artwork on the Lower East Side. Several years ago he and some friends were commissioned to paint public murals in the Bronx, and began to involve local youth in painting and designing t-shirts, jackets, logos and other graphics. The murals in *Testimonio* show how members of the young generation express positive aspects of their lives through graffiti art.

Southside TV (SSTV), founded in 1991 in Southside Williamsburg, Brooklyn is a community based video collective. SSTV's goals are to train Southside community members in video production in the course of making political organizing videos. We document social histories, provide organizing tools through video, and begin a process in which community members produce videos of social and political importance. Our tapes have dealt with the struggle for fair access to public housing, discrimination in the police department, Latina leadership and women's issues. The video component of *Testimonio* has been organized by SSTV with *Zoya Kocur* of The New Museum and *Pedro Rivera* of CAMEO. The videotapes consist of documentaries; "testimonio"; and home videos, incorporating footage and finished tapes from many sources.

Kukuli Velarde is a Peruvian artist living in the South Bronx. *The American Dream: Our Game* addresses opportunities and challenges to the survival of Latino immigrants in New York City.