

Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora



Marta Moreno Vega • Marinieves Alba • Yvette Modestín

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of the Afro-Latina Diaspora

Edited by

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and her sacrifice—her life.

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Introduction

MARTA MORENO VEGA, MARINIEVES ALBA AND YVETTE MODESTIN

THE TRANSNATIONAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNITIES THAT THE movement of Afro-Latinas and their families are experiencing reflect the need for understanding, for redefining and restructuring definitions and practices that address present conditions. For example, Afro-Latina/o communities in Colombia are targets of paramilitary forces that are trying to displace them from lands that are rich in natural resources. Afro-Latinas in Brazil and the Dominican Republic continue to combat poverty while being promoted to the world as “sexual objects” within their countries and as cultural exotic tourism opportunities. At the same time, progress is being made. Epsy Campbell’s success in forming part of a new political party in Costa Rica, through which she ran for vice president of the country, certainly indicates hard-won opportunities. But even with such examples of progress, the lives of African descendents are still primarily framed by a marginality that continues to foster poverty, as well as by the lack of educational, fair housing and economic opportunities. What is different is that there is a growing political activism headed by women of African descent. These women are creating an

international movement that will have a positive effect on their families and communities.

Recognizing and celebrating the place of Afro-Latinas in contemporary global society also means accepting the social, economic and political dislocation of these communities, and honoring the freedom fighters, change-makers and everyday people who fuel the Afro-Latina/o struggle for holistic development. Contesting illusory notions of a multi-racial utopia in which European, indigenous and African descendents live harmoniously without addressing the effects of colonialism, imperialism and enslavement, *Afro-latinidad* not only demands recognition for the historical presence and contributions of African descendents since the end of the transatlantic slave trade, but also heralds a shift with regard to how Latin American identity is constructed today.

From North America to the Southern Cone, the concept of Afro-latinidad in the Americas continues to stir deep emotional responses while inspiring local, national and international movements for racial justice and equality. Challenging both Eurocentric constructions of Latin American identity and narrow U.S.-centered constructions of “black” identity in the Diaspora, Afro-Latinas/os are demanding their place in history as purveyors of resistance and as the progeny of a deep-rooted legacy. Afro-Latinas are indisputably at the heart and the helm of this struggle.

Who are the women who lead the struggle against inequality and social, economic and political underdevelopment? Who are the frontline warriors—organizers, cultural workers, teachers, politicians and healers—who are cultivating the next generation of the movement’s leadership? Furthermore, who is the next generation? How does Afro-Latina identity shape the place of that generation in the world? How is that identity defined?

Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora reflects the voices of Afro-Latinas who are actively committed to visions of equity and justice in all aspects of their lives and of their communities. The writers are Afro-Latina activists who are committed to transforming the historical legacy of racism and discrimination that continues to hold Afro-Latinas and their communities at the periphery of their nations' development. The contributors span a range of professions from grass-root community scholars to academicians, elected officials and international policymakers. They are women who have faced the barriers of race, education, class and gender to create spaces of liberation from which to battle their governments, international agencies, and sometimes the fears of their own communities. Grounded among their people, they use their positions to advocate for justice, racial equality, cultural equity and human and civil rights.

The life stories of the women featured in this anthology are known within their countries and influence national and international policies. Yet their lives and their work remain virtually unknown outside their linguistic cultural contexts. This anthology seeks to provide the general public with access to the life stories of remarkable Afro-Latinas. The life stories of these writers offer insight into the lives of more than 150 million African descendents who reside in Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean, the United States and Latin America.

Increasingly, migratory and immigration patterns indicate that the population of Afro-Latinas/os is a large part of the U.S. population descended from Africans. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, Dominicans and other cultural groups from Latin America and the Caribbean are changing the meaning of the term African American within the United States. This confluence of Afro-Latinas/os and other African descendents and Africans from the continent has created an

international population of the African Diaspora within the United States. These cultural encounters have developed and deepened an informal interlocking dialogue among communities of African descent. This conversation was further solidified during the United Nation's World Conference Against Racism and Discrimination in 2001.

The role and activism of Afro-Latinas in making the issues of African descendent communities visible within their countries and to international communities are virtually unknown. In *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*, these pioneering women share their empowering stories and encourage others to share theirs. Their stories provide insight into the conditions that have led Afro-Latinas to challenge systems of inequity, including the "machismo" that is still prominent in Spanish-speaking cultures. Most importantly, the anthology communicates that "ordinary" women are extraordinary when they commit to a dream and seek to transform adverse realities. Each of the women writers is deeply engaged within her community, working on the ground locally as well as in international settings to bring attention and solutions to the legacy wrought by more than four hundred years of African enslavement in the Americas. At the UN's Conference of 2001, which took place in Durban, South Africa, it was women such as Sergia Galván, Dorotea Wilson and Nirva Camacho who framed the strategic agenda for Afro-Latinas/os by lobbying for the visibility of more than 150 million African descendents in Spanish-speaking countries.

The story of these women's lives will resonate with readers who question their color, their purpose in life and their future. Each story is unique, yet each contains points of similarity with the others in that they all wrestle with the issues of human rights, social justice, race, gender and visibility, respect, intellectual property and power. The essayists and poets are women who have faced the barriers of race, educa-

tion, class and gender to create spaces of liberation from which to battle their governments, international agencies, and sometimes the fears of their own communities. Many are grounded in their communities and use their positions to advocate for justice.

Wrestling with these issues requires extraordinary personal commitment and risk-taking. The women whose stories are contained in this anthology possess these qualities and have used them to leap above confining barriers in order to create a vision of racial and social justice. Their stories invite us to confront our barriers.