

# THIS BRIDGE

# CALLED MY BACK



WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR

EDITED BY **CHERRIE L. MORAGA AND GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA**

FOREWORD BY **TONI CADE BAMBARA**

This Bridge  
Called My Back

writings by radical  
women of color

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# This Bridge Called My Back

writings by radical  
women of color

Edited by

Cherríe L. Moraga

and

Gloría E. Anzaldúa

Foreword by Toni Cade Bambara

Women of Color Series

Third Woman Press

Berkeley

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Marsha Gómez, *Madre del Mundo*, 1988,  
Courtesy of Marsha Gómez's Estate.

Life-size fiberglass sculpture unveiled during the Mother's Day Peace Action Protest against the bombing and desecralization of the land, as well as other treaty violations by the US government. The sculpture is mounted facing the Nevada Missile Test Site outside of Las Vegas on Western Shoshone land.

*para*

*Elvira Moraga Lawrence y  
Amalia García Anzaldúa  
y para todas nuestras madres  
por la obediencia y  
la insurrección  
que ellas nos enseñaron.*

*for*

*Elvira Moraga Lawrence and  
Amalia García Anzaldúa  
and for all our mothers  
for the obedience and rebellion  
they taught us.*

## **Publisher's Note**

*This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was first published in 1981 by Persephone Press, a white women's press located in Watertown, Massachusetts. When Persephone Press ceased operation in the Spring of 1983, the co-editors negotiated retrieval and control of the book, which was subsequently republished by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York.

The second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* published by Kitchen Table Press was conceived and produced entirely by women of color. In 1995 Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press ceased operation, and the book was once again out of print.

In the Spring of 2000, Third Woman Press began conversations with the co-editors in order to acquire the rights to put in print, once again, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Both editors believed that it was most appropriate that a press run by women of color print the revised third edition. It is very unfortunate that Third Woman Press founded in 1979 has become virtually the only press of color surviving from that earlier feminist activist period. It is our great pleasure to publish *Bridge* in the year of its 20th anniversary. Though the copyright will read 2002, the work was begun and completed in 2001. For us at Third Woman Press the whole year has been a birthday celebration.

Third Woman Press wants to acknowledge the many women of color, all of them volunteers and interns, who ensured the success of the project. No one is a full time employee, all work elsewhere, and are undergraduate and graduate students, primarily at the University of California, Berkeley. Special thanks are due to Karina Cespedes, *Bridge* Project Director, who kept track of us and all the threads that were to actualize the project. Karina's work has been invaluable. Also, many thanks to Yolanda Venegas (TWP Associate Publisher), whose unfailing commitment to the press during the last three years has been crucial to its operations and has ensured the success of this and other projects. Also indispensable to the publication of *This Bridge* has been the dedicated and excellent work of Martha A. Duffield. Mattie Richardson and Robert Barkaloff have also gifted the edition with their talents, as bibliographer and graphic designer, respectively, and the additional collective made up of

interns who worked on this project included: Anne Befu, Nerrisa Kunakemarkorn, Jessica Luna Mancera, Letizia Rossi, Luz C. Valverde, Lauren Valencia, Jennifer Wei, Justine Certeza, and thanks to Professor Laura Pérez of UC Berkeley, and John Berry Native American Studies Librarian at the UC Berkeley Ethnic Studies Library. We are also very grateful to Karineh Mahdessian, Maylei Blackwell, and all the volunteers and performers who helped make the Third Woman Press benefit for the republication of *This Bridge* such a great success.

Norma Alarcón  
Publisher

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## **From Inside the First World Foreword, 2001**

*(A)nd when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed*

– Audre Lorde, *Litany for Survival*

The publication of a new edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* comes as the United States presses the world's peoples to the precipice of global warfare. Beginning this writing on the afternoon of the tragedy of September Eleventh, I had misgivings about foregrounding this collection of US women of color words, which originated over twenty years ago, clouded by my own present doomsday, albeit justified, reflections. My hesitance was fleeting, for one fact remained unalterably true: the conditions of invasion, war and terrorism have existed for people of color in this hemisphere since the mistaken arrival of Columbus to our shores.

What has changed after five hundred years of colonialism is the degree to which economic globalization, and its subsequent cultural dominion, has engendered for Third World peoples (within and outside the United States) a necessary expanded citizenship as members of a global community. Geo-political borders mean little when the technological capacity of destructive weaponry available to nation-states (as well as the "terrorist" discontent) ensures our shared status as a world population of potential victims. In a very brutal way, all that has changed with the attacks of September 11 is the illusion that United States borders protect those who reside within them, an illusion seldom shared by this country's residents of color.

### **Love It or Leave It**

I remember as a somewhat naive anti-war protester in the late sixties, the John Birch society had put out millions of bumper stickers addressed to us "peaceniks." "LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT," they read. And I see how even today I fall so easily into the trap of believing that somehow the government gets to determine what "America" is. In the same manner, a generation ago, men

of color tried to determine what “revolutionary” meant, censoring women from voicing their opposition within the people of color movements of the late 60s and early 70s. In the name of a different “nation” they protested, “Love it or leave it,” and many of us did in fact leave, but not forever.

We returned. We returned twenty years ago on the pages of this book and the streets of this country, veteranas of the Chicano, Black Power, Asian American and American Indian Movement. We returned veteranas of the anti-war/anti-imperialist movement against the US involvement in Vietnam. We were among the hundreds of thousands that forced a US president out of office and we went on to declare our rights as feminists, lesbians, and renegades of some of the most radical of social change movements of the period. We were driven by the conviction that the established race-based política was not radical enough; for, it did not go to a fundamental root of injustice, which some of us believed to be the gender-defined divisions of labor and loving. Then in the mid-70s, feminism, too, betrayed us in its institutionalized Euro-centrism, its class prejudice, and its refusal to integrate a politic that proffered whole freedom for women of color. My disillusionment in those movements marked my own coming of age politically, for it required of me, as it did for so many women of color, the creation of a critical consciousness that had not been reflected in mass social movements. To be sure, I was not alone in 1978, but my beliefs were also not sustained by thousands.

In the two decades since the original publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, women of color have emerged globally as full participants in political movements toward the radical transformation of the countries in which we reside. A generation ago, our definition of a US feminism of color was shaped by a late 1970s understanding of the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the United States, as well as our intra-cultural critique of the sexism and heterosexism in race-based liberation movements. We recognized and acknowledged our internally colonized status as the children of Native and African peoples (“the first and forced Americans,” as a friend once put it) and found political alliance in the great granddaughters of the disenfranchised Chinese railroad workers of the late 1800s and

the daughter-survivors of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Noticeably absent in the *Bridge* of 1981, however, is a full portrait of the ever-expanding demographics of who we are as women of color in the United States today: Dominican women combating AIDS in New York City; Haitian refugee women making home in a hostile Miami, Florida; Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian immigrants who at the turn of the 21st Century came of age as women of color in the United States; the descendants of the Quiché and Pipil peoples living in the Mission District of San Francisco, having fled the civil wars of Central America; the voices of Puerto Rican women political prisoners, many of whom now have been released and have returned to their native Puerto Rico; native Hawai'ian women activists working for the political and cultural sovereignty of their islands and people; South East Asian feminist immigrant rights workers; and, as we fear a full-scale (un)holy war against the Muslim world, the perspective of Arab-American women on this "terrorist" war against "terrorism" and its impact on the lives of women and children in the war zone.

The continually changing demographics of people of color in the US are the product of the United States' cultural and economic invasion around the globe. As "refugees of a world on fire,"<sup>1</sup> the strategy for our liberation is not confined to our state-imposed identity as residents of the United States. Instead our origins oblige us to assume a position of a global women of color activism, while at the same time remaining specific to our concerns as Native, Asian, African-originated women living within specific nation-states.<sup>2</sup>

What then is the radical woman of color response to these times of armored embattlement? United States representative, Barbara Lee, took a decidedly radical woman of color position, standing alone among the members of Congress, stating her opposition to war. She is one individual Black American woman, refusing to fall prey to US patriotic propaganda. If we are to take the idea of democracy at its word, it obligates my congressional representative and myself, as women of color, to not only protest this war, but also the conditions that help create it: United States foreign policy.

On the morning of September 11, I turn on the news to watch the twin towers of the World Trade Center fall to the ground. I



am deeply shaken, as everyone, by the immensity of the assault. My children, leaving their morning oatmeal, run to the TV set. I watch their eyes, mesmerized. The scene is right out of an action thriller. "This is *really* happening," I say. I am, I believe, afraid, but of what? In the futuristic action film that is now our lives, the "bad (foreign-looking) guys" blow down the World Trade Center and "good (whitish-looking) guys" bring out the big guns to defend the US against the assault. But this scenario can produce nothing but pure hopelessness because terrorism will never be defeated by big guns, only by big minds and hearts and a mass collective reckoning with the United States' own history of global economic terrorism. As a South East Asian sister has called it, "the fundamentalism of free enterprise."

Individuals govern the United States at the highest level, a ruling corporate-government elite who personally wields political power for profit. These individuals have, at an unprecedented rate in the last generation, destroyed the lives, livelihoods, and environment of those areas around the globe where the greatest profits can be made with the least amount of resistance, for the most part, the Third World. As a result, individuals were killed en masse on September 11, for the most part, the wrong individuals. But, in the opinion of those suicide jet bombers, somebody gotta and gonna pay for CorporateAmerika's cultural arrogance.<sup>3</sup> Lamentably, the only lesson that Amerika,<sup>4</sup> as represented by our "selected" government officials and defended by the US military, will learn from this disaster is to devise ever more aggressive means to protect the "freedom" of its ability to make profit at the expense of the Third World. This position will only serve to further endanger the lives and threaten the well being of the peoples of the US.

By 4 o'clock of the Eleventh, my idea of the necessary politics of our times – what I envision for a future of radical activism – has shifted as dramatically as the collapsing spine of the World Trade Center. I must confess, I am shocked and horrified by the disaster, but I am not surprised. There resides in me, as in so many others, a deep sense of the inevitability of the United States' demise. The position of the greatest power, like those twin towers which once stood sentinel, shadowing "the gate to the new world," as news anchor, Peter Jennings, described the Statue of Liberty, also occupies the location of the greatest

vulnerability. As members of a global citizenry, we are forced to acknowledge that the United States has appropriated well more than its share of world's resources, and as such becomes, rightfully, the most visible target for the world's discontent. The bigger you are, the harder you fall. I speak in cliché or are these phrases, which now rise to the surface of our daily discussions, simply tried and true axioms that this country has forgotten?

Upon the news of the attack, major network television ran images of Palestinians dancing in the streets. Although there was no credible evidence to confirm that the filming in fact occurred after the World Trade and Pentagon attacks (which raised serious questions regarding the US media's role in manipulating US anti-Arab sentiment), the images struck me with a profound sense of awe, as they forced the American public to recognize how thoroughly the United States is hated by the victims of its policies. The Palestinian people have watched their sons and daughters and elders die opposing the Israeli occupation of their land for more than fifty years. Bombs dropped on Palestine civilians bear the United States insignia. Is not four billion dollars a year to support the Israeli state a form of terrorism against Palestinian people? Are their children, mothers, fathers, and elders, any less deserving a viable life than any citizen of the United States is?

I do not believe in the "terrorists" cause or their methods. I condemn the murderous acts of September 11 with the same outrage in which I condemn the murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis by the US military to "defend" US oil interests in Kuwait. George Bush, senior, executed that war in 1991. Ten years later, it's Junior's turn. Our current President may not have been driving the plane that crashed into the World Trade Center, but he is the most recent pilot of this turn-of-the-century disaster, who promises to drive the United States into an increasingly vulnerable world position by its collective refusal to acknowledge its history of cultural and economic genocide. As hard as it is for this nation to admit, the "terrorists" were not "cowards," as Bush refers to them, but people who believed so fundamentally in their cause that they were willing to kill *and die* for it. In the same way, many of our sons and daughters will be willing to kill and die in this impending world war in order to

protect the freedom of enterprise in the Western World, erroneously called "Democracy."

When my son asks me why the people as brown as him are celebrating in the streets of Palestine, I respond: "We are not the good guys." Why is this so difficult for the US to acknowledge? Do we really believe the Hollywood version of our story? We are always the good guys; they, those "others," always the bad. The speeches for National Day of Remembrance on September 17 reflected exactly this kind of national egocentrism, where speakers, for the most part, espoused a chest-pounding self-aggrandizing moral superiority over the "uncivilized" Muslim world. If the truth be told, all the token gestures made toward US Muslim communities since September 11 are just that - token, and belie a profound xenophobic distrust and disdain of cultures that elude the obsessive individualism of Western thought.

The United States is the only country in the world that feels entitled not to suffer the consequences of its actions. This country constructed through acts of thievery and invasion imagines it will never be robbed or invaded. Even Western Europe of the Twentieth Century endured the bombing of its cities and countryside. Pearl Harbor was only a tiny taste of assault against the United States, but one that instigated a revenge unparalleled in world history: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To be sure, the United States "won" that war and, by its perverse ethnocentric definition, it will surely "win" the war it currently wages against the Muslim fundamentalist world, but at what price? It is unthinkable.

In my recurring dream of a different América, just as in the replays on the network news, the World Trade Center, along with the Pentagon surely fall to the ground in defeat; but, in my dream, there are not 20,000 workers inside. In my dream, we, the workers, are not fodder for the US crimes of greed. In my dream, the profiteers pay, not us. As I told a friend, "If Indigenous América had blown up the Pentagon, I'd be dancing in the streets, too." Is it heresy to state this? But that is just a dream. In real life, I sit at the kitchen table and shake my head in despair, in full knowledge of the deaths to come. And they will surely come to our communities: barrio boy turned soldier as dead and as brown as any Afghan.

My child of eight is frightened. "Will they bomb here?" he asks, eyes glued to the TV screen; and I realize in all honesty, I cannot answer, "No, not here," as I would have before September 11. Because we live on the edge of the ocean, on the borderline of this nation-state; we live in a major metropolitan city, in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Transamerica Building; we are the symbol of greed and arrogance that is Amerika on the West Coast. "I don't know," I answer. How do you teach a child a politic where there is no facile "us and them," where the "us" who is his ostensive protector against bombing of his city, his home, is at the same time the "them" who brought the bombs down upon this soil.

*September Twenty-Five*

*It is an hour before the dawn of my forty-ninth birthday. The house sleeps. Linda stirs as I leave our bed to find my journal and scratch out these words. I pass by darkened open-door'd rooms on my way to kitchen and my morning café. I discern my son curled into the bottom bunk of his blue-painted room, under quilt and cotton sheets. There is a full basket of action figures and other plastic toys by his bedside. Across the hall, my almost-daughter, Camerina, lies with one adolescent leg tossed out of the covers, spanning the full-length of her bed diagonally, the same position her grandmother assumes once I leave our bed for these early aurora-instigated writings. In a few hours, la familia will all rise, ready themselves for school and work. I'll pack lunches. Linda will make avena con fruta and our day will begin.*

*It is the most peace I have ever known.*

The night before that day's dawn, an awesome storm broke over the Bay. Bold strikes of lightning crisscross one another in the early evening skyline, followed by a quaking thunder. My young son calls me to the bathroom where he finishes his evening bath.

"I'm afraid," he tells me.

"Of what?" I ask. The lightning cracks behind our voices.

"That a new world is emerging and I will lose you."

The day before, we had joined with friends and familia in a fire ceremony against the impending war. The kids were in and out of the circle, left to play around the yard and house as their

relatives sat and prayed and analyzed until the sun had set and the half-moon had risen over the Bay waters. I realize my son had heard the tenor and tone, if not the substance of our remarks and rezos, and carried with him his own concerns about the war. “Emerge” is the word my eight-year-old used and I thought much of this afterwards. *Is this in fact what we are bearing witness to: the end of one epoch and the painful birthing of another?*

At the ceremony, Linda remembered and acknowledged the Pre-Columbian prophets. She spoke of the message they had given to our ancestors as they suffered the near-Conquest and its bloody consequences. *“When we no longer have to grow our own food and build our own houses . . .”* she said, *“when every moment of our lives is to not be exhausted in sheer effort to survive, we, their descendants, would rebel.”* Did they mean we would “emerge” a wronged and righteously resistant people? Is this the time?

Stupidly with the ethnocentrism of an Amerikan, I had imagined that real radical movement would arise from us, the US citizenry. I had not dreamed that the world would rise *against* Amerika and that we would have to take a side. But this is exactly what is required of us now: to suffer the slings and arrows delivered by our own compatriots as they name us traitors to “American Principles.” But what exactly are those principles beyond the freedom to buy? With the collapse of the World Trade Center, our “selected” President assures his citizenry in speech after identical speech, that he, his lawmakers, and military will continue to preserve “our way of life.” I imagine this means the level of comfort and convenience and anesthetization from world events that middle class Amerika enjoys and has come to equate with democracy. And, indeed they *have* preserved “our way of life” at the expense of the majority colored and non-Christian population of the world. They have made us, as dutiful consumer citizens, accomplices in the destruction of once self-sustaining cultures around the world. And so we must die too, finally. In this sense then, those workers murdered at the World Trade Center become our first public martyrs for the war of resistance we, as US citizens, have refused to fully wage against the Nation State of Amerika. We are not yet witnessing the same mass graves of El Salvador in the 1980s, but this is *our* Civil War, where our compatriots are being buried under corporate scrapers.

*A radical woman of color response? Betray your country and save your people.*

## **Our Civil War**

*This morning I dreamed the bodies of the fallers, those who jumped off the top floors of the blazing World Trade Center. Not to save their lives, but their skins, to escape that deadly burning of flesh. They drop head over heels, their arms stretched out against the sky in their wish for wings. Upon awakening, I remember my poem from twenty years ago, "I'm falling . . ." the murdered child cries as s/he drops off the cliff. "Can't you see . . . I'm falling?" Suddenly, I hear the voice of Amerika's children, all of us abandoned by our country.*

We are witnessing an incredible opportunity for the collective character of this country to distinguish itself from its leaders and make reparations for injustices done. As citizens, we must require the United States to assume a politic of mutually interdependent economic and ecological responsibility with all the nations of the world, where culture is no longer a commodity to be traded for profit and, if profitless, exterminated. Such an opportunity will absolutely be rejected unless en masse the people of the United States require it. Unfortunately, its people are being schooled daily in passive acceptance of the standard uncritical version of the story propagated every night on the network news hour and each morning in the daily paper.

One evening, a few days after the "terrorist" assaults, I step outside our home and watch the city lights. Some thing is changed, something beyond the sudden flash of red-white-and-blue draped from every third house. There is a pervading quiet lying over the city, the obvious result of an aircraft-empty sky, our home several miles from the airport. Everything has slowed down, stillness settles over the city. Express mail means trucks, not jets and my Linda reminds me how I always ask for this, for everything to slow down. If a plane never flew again, I would not miss it. But the quiet also betrays a profound somberness. I do not believe it is only the six thousand dead that the country mourns, but the death of our illusion of invulnerability, of plain old safety as demarcated by US borders. As Egyptian writer, Nawal El Saadawi tells us, "Scared people are easy to control."<sup>5</sup> And so a very frightened Amerikan public agrees to relinquish its

power to corporate-funded leaders, surrender “a few civil liberties,” postpone critical thought, and cloak its national anxiety under a red-white-and-blue security blanket called “patriotism.” It is also patriotism that protects us from the deeper harder acknowledgment of our complicity with those 6,000 deaths and the thousands more to come.

I wonder if I worry more about a protracted war or the failure for us to use this opportunity to successfully expose the murderous hypocrisy of the United States mono-culturism and foreign policy. I look out over the Oakland skyline and I am in full realization that what has changed so dramatically since 9/11 is intensification of the national deception buried in the rhetoric of democracy and freedom. I dream a full-scale effort to expose the lies. I look behind me for sister-warriors.

The *Bridge* of 1981 called for a radical re-structuring of this country. Twenty years later, civil war rises ominously into the horizon of our consciousness. As a consequence, even as we struggle to dissolve the superimposition of geo-political borders, which divide US women of color from our sisters of origin, our resistance work resides most significantly within the borders of the US. If we must wear ribbons, let us tie them around our finger to remind us of the daily practice of countering US collective amnesia.

Writer-activist, Toni Cade Bambara, who first introduced *This Bridge Called My Back* twenty years ago,<sup>6</sup> countered institutionalized amnesia in her own dangerous writings before her untimely death in 1995. She writes: “Amnesia: the inability or unwillingness to recall due to trauma or enforced taboo.”<sup>7</sup> Is there any better way to describe our shared resistance mission as writers and activists residing inside the numbing disgrace of this occupied América? We must insist on what we remember to be true. History precludes false loyalties to the conqueror nation-state and prescribes renewed loyalty to the work of a reconstituted América. This most recent “invasion” of the continental United States is nothing less than the product of a five-hundred year history of invasion, beginning with the first European colonizer-settlers and their wholesale theft of Native lands in the Américas. We don’t forget.



As the Palestinians don't forget the illegal and brutal occupation of their lands, supported by US funds and weaponry since 1967.

As the Maya turned Zapatistas remember through armed struggle a forever-history as the original inhabitants of the territory of Chiapas.

As the women of Afghanistan do not forget who trained the "terrorists" whom the US now calls "enemy."

I remember.

In my lifetime . . . *Should I start the list?* In my lifetime my comadre, una mestiza lesbiana, was killed by her only son, my sister in indigenism was kidnapped and executed by the US-aggravated civil war in Colombia. Numerous friends have died from breast cancer and AIDS. I have witnessed the CIA's overthrow of Allende and ten years later, the usurpation of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. In my lifetime, the United States has force-fed to Native, Asian, African and Spanish-speaking América a poisoned alphabet (WTO, IMF, NAFTA, FTAA) economic soup where "development" has meant little more than La Finca being replaced by La Maquiladora.

This nation-state is constructed on forgetfulness and the trauma of invasion, while further acts of invasion are daily perpetrated to throw more displaced bodies between remembering and ourselves. Sanctions against a dissident América are imposed to such a degree that it is "taboo" to even say aloud that we do not stand "united" as every billboard, new car sales lot, dry cleaners and auto repair shop attest. But we do not stand united.

María Elena sits among two-dozen or so of us around the circle of the fire. With full conviction, she states: "I am an Indian. This is not my country, but it is my land."

Myrtha, puertorriqueña, cries full-bodied tears: "I hate this country. I want to burn down every American flag I see." When the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in 1962, she packed it up and left for Puerto Rico. She did not want to die on US soil, she told me. Nearly forty years later and Puerto Rico is still not a free and sovereign nation.

Millicent got ancestors calling to her in her dreams. They urge her to come on home with them, this slavery has been a long enough deadly enterprise.

Oh yes, I am a traitor, a traitor to the geopolitical borders that divide nations of people, which separate me from emotionally identifying with the loss and death of human relatives across the globe. *Who are truly my allies? Certainly not those US leaders (white or white-minded) who exercise genocide in my name.*

### **Sisters of the Corn**

For a number of years, I have been looking at questions of cultural nationalism in the face of economic globalization and so much warfare in the name of tribal/religious affiliations. The civil war in Bosnia of the 90s and the human rights violations executed by the Taliban regime, especially against the women of Afghanistan, are only two examples. In some ways, the violent manifestation of tribalism we are witnessing today is the result of the efforts by Western nation-states to dominate the world economically justified by a kind of moral (Christian) superiority where the “winners” are the blessed and the “losers,” the sinners.

Among feminists of color in the United States, the strategy toward achieving sovereignty for indigenous peoples and the state-sanctioned recognition of, and respect for, people of color cultures within the United States, remains the subject of much debate and, at times, deep disagreement. As survivors of the ethnic and cultural nationalisms of the sixties and seventies, which silenced and severely castigated women’s freedom of movement and expression, as survivors of rape perpetrated in the name of nation, as widows of race wars and the mothers of murdered children, it is no wonder women of color can feel a deep ambivalence or downright fear when questions of “nation” appear within a political context.

At times I feel we lack the right language to speak of revolution. The words at our disposal have been usurped and we find ourselves silenced by useless leftist revolutionary rhetoric or feminist theoretical language through which the more ambiguous contradictory sites of struggle are averted. As women of color we are the female members of cultures and ethnicities disenfranchised by CorporateAmerika, Transnational Capital,

and Euro-centrism. As such, women of color issues include immigrant rights, indigenous peoples' water and land rights, the prison industrial system, militarism, reproductive rights, global economic terrorism, homophobic violence and more.<sup>8</sup> To date, no US progressive political movement has fully incorporated into their analysis of oppression and liberation strategy the specificity of the woman of color experience. As Angela Davis queries, in speaking of violence against women of color, "How do we develop analyses and organizing strategies . . . that acknowledge the race of gender and the gender of race?"<sup>9</sup>

Fundamentally, what this war is about is profit-motivated violence, violence perpetrated against nations of people and nation-states composed of people; that is, individual people who are gendered, sexualized and raced. As a consequence, female persons experience the effect of war distinct from men, as they experience the effects of colonialism distinctly, but always within the context of our racial and ethnic identities. For this reason, the struggle for sovereignty within occupied nation-states and Indigenist rights remain crucial to the liberation of women of color globally.

I take my leadership from Indigenist women practitioners of freedom in these Américas, from the Zapatista rebel women to Rigoberta Menchú, Winona La Duke, Mililani and Hunani Kay Trask and the late Ingrid Washinawatok. I stand with las xicanas-indigenas organizing in the effort to bring a woman-centric Xicano/a Nation to the tribal circles of Indigenist America, North and South. I think here of the young women of La Asamblea de Xicana Indígenas, based in Southern California, and elder-teatristas, Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, doing cultural organizing in the barrios of "Manhatitlán" (New York City).

Still, Indigenism, like any other political movement, creates no easy alliance. I must admit my heart pounds when I am forced to speak publicly of my lesbianism in some Indian gatherings, when I dare to give equal weight to the freedom of the expression of that desire as we do to the freedom of nations. In my mind and heart, both freedoms remain intimately interdependent. I have been told, even by other queer Indian women, that my lesbianism is a "private matter," and not the stuff of political struggle. But lesbianism can never be a private

matter until it is publicly protected. Still, I draw the greatest hope from the Native notion of “two-spirit”<sup>10</sup> and much encouragement from the recent emergence of two-spirit gatherings where Xicanas/os and African-Indians are in regular attendance. I dream a world where truly two-spirit folks (I speak here especially of my younger transgender brothers and sisters) can fully inhabit the gender they experience without damage to their bodies. We have infinite space to go in this regard.

What these personal meditations attest to is that there is no safe place for any of us in revolutionary work. We make and break political alliance as we continue to evolve and redefine what is our work in this life. As a Xicana, I throw my lot in with these revolutionary “sisters of the corn,” as Toni Cade Bambara called Native women. Indigenism gives shape to the values in which I attempt to raise my children; it informs my feminism, my sense of “lugar” on this planet in relation to its creatures, minerals and plant life. It is a philosophy not of a rigid separatism but of autonomy and reciprocity. It is my sure-footed step along that open road of alliance with my “sisters of the rice, the plantain, and the yam.” It is as much a religion as I can believe.

## **Lo Elemental**

*What does it mean to be a writer nearing 50 instead of 30 as we re-issue this volume of writings by “Radical Women of Color?” What does it mean to be writing on the very precipice of the United States’ fatal fall into global warfare?*

In first approaching this foreword, what I wanted to write was what was never told to me as a young woman. That is, that one’s world and the possibilities for it, be it a change of heart or a change of address, look very different when one is no longer young. I am no longer young. Neither am I old, but soon enough old age will come, as the fragile eighty-seven years of my mother constantly remind me. We are born and die within a particular epoch and it is within that era, we may affect whatever small changes we can upon this pitiful planet. Changes . . . small acts of courage.

I remember being so scared as a young woman with an emerging consciousness amid the political turbulence of the late

sixties and early seventies; scared of dining room political debates where my “college-indoctrinated radical ideas” alienated me from my loved ones; scared of the faces of Chicanos on the evening news, who could be cousins, protesting what I had been, for the most part, protected from: racial discrimination. I also remember being afraid, at times paralyzingly so, of coming out as a lesbian to that same familia and community. I did come out, finally and, in the act, drew from a courage that would sustain me for the numerous battles of conscience that lay ahead. What I had not realized is that consciousness births consciousness and that the state of embattlement never really changes in our lifetimes, not at one’s inner core. What changes are the political circumstances, which take shape in the exterior world around you.

I see the World Trade Center falling before the eyes of my parents, my father a WWII vet, my mother born during the period of the Mexican Revolution. They are US citizens and in the latest hours of their lives, they watch symbols of US power crumble like castles of sand. Would those buildings have been sand castles, structures built in full creative knowledge of our ephemeral life spans, our vulnerability to the righteous forces of nature. Call it “karma,” if you will, moral debts are being paid.

For the first time I fear for my children and the world they will inhabit after my death. For the first time, it occurs to me that as residents of the United States we are finally subject to the global violence we have perpetrated against the Non-Western world. What has also shifted is my sense of time. Maybe the revolution I had hoped and feared for in my lifetime *will* be realized. Or maybe I will only live long enough to witness the dreaded violence that anticipates revolution and the erosion of the real quality of our lives not bought on the Internet.

The real quality of our lives. Pulling my son out of the bath, I urge him, “Hurry, put on your piyamas. Come outside and watch the lightning storm.” And in the twenty minutes before a relentless downpour, he, Camerina, and I pull out the folding chairs and watch the better-than-fireworks lightning. The sky splits open. Crack! The kids jump up from their seats, grab hands and dance to bring the rain down. Nobody’s dollars bought this moment. The sky’s for free.

Maybe a new world is emerging. I got a full belly and healthy kids who still dance under the rain clouds. Es un momento fugaz. How long can we even claim this small spot of peace? It is a privilege threatened by war. And war, at its most elemental, is death for all of us, "Not in my backyard" no longer exists, Amerika.

*In my backyard. September 22.*

*Linda tells me "We'll make the tamales con las tres hermanas?"*

*"Cuales?" I ask, "Which sisters?"*

*El maíz, el frijol, la calabaza.*

*Days after la tamalada and twelve hours after ceremony, we feast and the sustenance of those sisters settles inside of me with the familiarity of old relatives. They bring me back down to earth. This is what the women had said of that Mexican medicine we had eaten before dawn. It tasted familiar, like dirt. Yes, like dirt, that ground we lack too often in our lives, that dirt we will return to.*

In the twenty years since *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published, some of our hermanas as elemental to our women of color movement as corn, squash and bean have returned to the dirt: Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Toni Cade Bambara. I re-read Toni Cade Bambara's "Foreword" in this collection and I cry. I cry because revolution was not realized in her lifetime, a woman who woke up every morning and practiced the preaching. Writing of the women in *Bridge* and beyond, she counsels: "It takes more than the self-disclosure and the bold glimpse of each other's life documents to make the grand resolve to fearlessly work toward potent meshings."<sup>11</sup>

Maybe *This Bridge Called My Back* is a book written especially for young women. Maybe not. Maybe to the young ones, I'd say, "work tirelessly when you do not grow tired at night. Do not waste your lives, your good health, strong bones and resilient muscles. Use them." Maybe I would preach those things. Echoing Toni's words: "Sisters of the yam. Sisters of the rice. Sisters of the corn. Sisters of the plantain putting in telecalls to each other. And we're all on the line." And Toni Cade Bambara was not talking about surfing the web. She was talking about a

relentless warriorhood defined by us as mothers, daughters, sisters and healers. She called building a network among the daughters of the ancient mother cultures “a mighty, a glorious life work.” Because Toni believed, as I do, that we women of color have not fully forgotten, not in that cave of memory where the freest part of us resides, the basic elements of our lives.

The mother-ground that brings sweet sustenance to the world’s children.

The mother-ground in which we finally lay down our bones and brain to rest.

A woman of color movement is a movement in the act of remembering earth. And so our politic remains beholden to it, to this ailing planet and its creatures.

Last time I saw Toni Cade Bambara she limped terribly. She already knew she was sick . . . maybe dying. I did not ask.

*Toni Cade Bambara, sister on the other side. . .*

*Now closer to your age, I read your words and they drop into that hole of the artist’s hunger that few women in my life have touched in flesh and bone. You are there with me hovering above the humbling terror of the blank page, the blank canvas of amnesia. You are there as I climb into my writer’s chair like some sacred site of transformation because we must believe, we colored women writers, that we are greater than our lives. We must believe, as you did, that we are visited by grander forces than ourselves, and as such can rise to the occasion of revolution.*

*I read of the real threat upon your life. And I wonder who it was who wanted to see you dead and silent? Help me understand this. How does one write truth, find courage in spite of threats real and imagined against us? Is it vanity to imagine ourselves sister-warriors? This is . . . I am your little sister so frightened most days. I return to your words, your books, after twenty years of reading elsewhere and in them I find a pure thread of continuous connection, of elder consejo my generation lacks in our own lives.*

I eat tamales made of corn, squash and bean. I work from the ground up, the inside out. The United States does not need to be defended; it needs to be cured. The collective denial of guilt in this country weighs so heavily upon its national psyche that soon the day will come when not one scapegoat (neither Muslim



fundamentalist, Mexican immigrant, nor lesbian of color) will be able to carry it. In her novel, *The Salt Eaters*, published the year before *This Bridge Called My Back*, Toni Cade Bambara proffered this question to women of color, "Can you afford to be whole?" It is a question to ask my country, it is a question to ask myself. What do we do in that movement toward wholeness? Pray. Pick up axe. Practice a fearless radicalism, all along knowing, as Audre Lorde writes, "we were never meant to survive."<sup>12</sup> But survive we must and survive we will. The planet depends on it.

Cherrie L. Moraga  
7 noviembre 2001

## Notes

1. See the Foreword to the Second Edition in the Appendix.
2. That cultural specificity has been critical to our work as feminists of color and refutes any First World definitions of Global Feminism, which women of color were successful in debunking as feminist imperialism in the 1980s.
3. In very real terms the "cultural" arrogance of the United States translates into domestic and foreign policies, which directly affect the global environment and economic self-sustainability of countries throughout the world. Within George W. Bush's first year in office, he announces his refusal to abide by the Kyoto Agreement signed by Bill Clinton in 1997 to reduce global warming. Similarly, in 1992, 500 years after the arrival of Columbus, in a gesture of unrelenting conquistador bravado, the elder George Bush refuses to sign the Earth Summit Agreement of Rio de Janeiro. And as recently as one week before the tragedy of September 11, the United States withdraws from the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, in protest over the Conference's working declaration, equating Zionism with Racism.
4. I purposely use this spelling to distinguish the United States' version of the nation-state of "America" and "American," from the more expanded definition of América and americano, which includes North, South and Central America.
5. As heard on a November radio broadcast of KPFA, Berkeley, CA.
6. See her Foreword to the original edition in this volume.
7. Bambara, Toni Cade. *These Bones Are Not My Child*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1999.

8. I want to thank Andrea Smith for her analysis on the subject of women of color and multiple oppression, especially as discussed in her article "Violence Against Women of Color," which was published as a leaflet through INCITE, a national organization of women of color against violence. INCITE can be reached through [www.incite-national.org](http://www.incite-national.org) or at P.O. Box 6861, Minneapolis, MN 55406.
9. "The Color of Violence against Women" as addressed to the participants at the Color of Violence Conference in Santa Cruz in 2000, published in *Colorlines*, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2000.
10. The term "two-spirit" is used here to refer to contemporary Native American and Xicana/o gay men, lesbians, transvestites and transgendered folk.
11. See the Foreword, 1981 by Toni Cade Bambara.
12. "A Litany for Survival" from *The Black Unicorn*. Norton: New York, 1978.

## Foreword, 2001

*counsels from the firing...past, present, future*

With this edition we commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Despite its intermittent out-of-print status it has weathered the generations well. It validated, and still verifies many of our experiences, still confirms our realities. *Bridge* created a reflective and passionate space for discussion by representing many of our diverse faces. It continues to be a refuge, linking us with each other, renewing old connections among women of color, and prompting alliances with the younger generations of women and with women and men of other tribes and continents. Social movements cross borders—ours is no different. Like a stone thrown into a pool, this book's ripples have touched people on numerous shores, affecting scholars and activists throughout the world.

We look back to the last two decades with a sense of accomplishment, of having found, gathered, or created not just one community but many—grassroots activists, scholars, teachers, queers. Some of these pueblos are not just those of color, not just those of women. It forces whites to examine their own privilege, racism, and blank (blind) spots, as well as their histories and ethnicities. Yet despite *Bridge's* great impact on international feminisms, despite the discussions it has provoked, the theories it has inspired feminists of color to generate, the activist organizations it has motivated, despite its growing legacy, there's even more work to be done. Though the roots of contemporary feminisms of color have spread through distant soils, the struggles of some activists are still unknown to those who theorize feminist work, the voices of other marginalized peoples are still absent from this and other anthologies. Yes, collectively we've gone far, but we've also lost ground—affirmative action has been repealed, the borders have been closed, racism has taken new forms and it's as pervasive as it was twenty-one years ago. Some of the cracks between the worlds have narrowed, but others have widened—the poor have gotten poorer, the corporate rich have become billionaires. New voices have joined the debate, but others are still excluded. Lesbians feature prominently in *Bridge* but our role has been downplayed.

Though it's queer folk who keep walking into the teeth of the fire, we have not been given our due.

For the past years all of us have been fired in the kiln of daily trials, traumas, raptures, and triumphs. We've surrendered to the white heat of the furnace, our bodies, minds, and souls, the clay scored and transformed by the blaze. Though wounded in the firing, bodies blistered, psyches cracked, our souls have not exploded. Emerging red hot from la lumbre we've been plunged again and again into the icy waters of adversity—fear, anger, intolerance, hatred, poverty, violence. Como salamandras we've risen from the pyre reborn, souls tempered with compassion. Among the ashes traces of our roots glow like live coals illuminating our past, giving us sustenance for the present and guidance for the future.

The seed for this book came to me in the mid-seventies in a graduate English class taught by a “white” male professor at the University of Texas at Austin. As a Chicana, I felt invisible, alienated from the gringo university and dissatisfied with both el movimiento Chicano and the feminist movement. Like many of the contributors to *Bridge* I rebelled, using writing to work through my frustrations and make sense of my experiences. I wrote an essay, with the pretentious title “Growing Up Xicana,” in an autobiographical politically engaged voice rather than in the dispassionate, disembodied language of academic discourse pushed on graduate students. Much to my surprise this white man championed my writing. Later I taught a course in Chicano Studies titled *La Mujer Chicana*. Having difficulty finding material that reflected my students' experiences I vowed to one day put Chicanas' and other women's voices between the covers of a book. At around that time a white gay male friend invited me to guest lecture his class. The idea of el mundo zurdo—the vision of a blood/spirit connection/alliance in which the colored, queer, poor, female, and physically challenged struggle together and form an international feminism—came to me in his class. Two years later in San Francisco while attending a workshop by Merlin Stone, a working class, spirituality-practicing, goddess-loving “white” woman I experienced subtle and blatant forms of racism and classism from the white participants. With Merlin's encouragement I decided to compile a book of US Third World women's voices and, before leaving the workshop, composed a

call for papers. Months later I asked Cherrie Moraga to join me in editing the book. I was seriously ill part of the time and without her the project would not have been completed.

Without the writers who risked their work with two unknowns, who risked revealing their vulnerabilities this book would not have affected so many in such deep permanent ways. The energy generated by this collection of “stories” proved to be an alchemical one, rendering the whole greater than the parts. Without Toni Cade Bambara to “make revolution irresistible” *Bridge* could not have gotten us there-here. Persephone, a “white”/Jewish press, and later Kitchen Table Press, a woman of color press, put to use all their resources to produce the book, and with this edition, the third firing in the kiln, Third Woman Press, also a woman of color press, has picked up the torch. Without *las mujeres* (y hombres) of all “races” in the Bay Area, Boston, New York, and elsewhere who helped promote *Bridge* it would not have become so widely read. Without the readers who sustain the book’s wide-spread, multicultural roots, the ever-increasing new generations of students, y *las activistas* who make our visions a reality this book would not have become a foundational text, would not now be a site of creative dialogue and criticism.

Los consejos from the firing of the last two decades are many. The first counsel reminds us that *Bridge* has multicultural roots and that it is not “owned” solely by *mujeres de color*, or even by women. Like knowledge, *Bridge* cannot be possessed by a single person or group. It’s public; it’s communal. To exclude is to close the bridge, invite separatism and hostilities. Instead we (Third World feminists) must invite other groups to join us and together bring about social change. We must align ourselves with and support those who challenge their own inherited or acquired privileges, examine their social positions, and take responsibility for their assumptions.

To trust the other (i.e. whites) is hard when in the past they’ve betrayed us, and when our very lives have depended on not trusting. Though there are no longer pure victims or pure villains, differences in power and privilege are very real. When power is unequal relationships are conflicted—it’s difficult for dialogue to occur among individuals of unequal power. Similarly it’s naïve to automatically trust others because they’re

like us and “belong” to the same categories. For the past twenty years identity politics have been extremely useful, but they too are constraining. We need new strategies, new conceptions of community.

From this vantage point of greater *conocimiento* we recognize *otro consejo del fuego*—the rhetoric of racial categories imposed on us is partial and flawed and only serves to cage us in “race” and class-bound spaces. Subtle forms of political correctness, self-censorship, and romanticizing home racial/ethnic/class communities imprison us in limiting spaces. These categories do not reflect the realities we live in, and are not true to our multicultural roots. Liminality, the in-between space of *nepantla*, is the space most of us occupy. We do not inhabit un mundo but many, and we need to allow these other worlds and peoples to join in the feminist-of-color dialogue. We must be wary of assimilation but not fear cultural *mestizaje*. Instead we must become *nepantleras* and build bridges between all these worlds as we traffic back and forth between them, detribalizing and retribalizing in different and various communities. The firing has bequeathed us *el conocimiento* (insight) that human and the universe are in a symbiotic relationship that we live in a state of deep interconnectedness *en un mundo zurdo* (a left-handed world). We are not alone in our struggles, and never have been. *Somos almas afines* and this interconnectedness is an unvoiced category of identity.<sup>1</sup> Though we’ve progressed in forging *el mundo zurdo*, especially its spiritual aspect, we must now more than ever open our minds to others’ realities.

It is risky to venture outside the confines of our color, class, gender and sexuality, as it is to make alliances with others who do not fit into the categories of our self-identity. One of the biggest risks is isolation from the group with which we identify. One experience I had with this was when I was attacked by straight Chicanas at the 1984 NACS conference in Ypsilanti, Michigan and was accused of being more concerned with orgasms and the lesbian movement than with helping *La Raza*. Often ostracism gives us a way out of the isolation—daring to make connections with people outside our “race” necessitates breaking down categories. Because our positions are *nos/otras*, *both/and*, *inside/outside*, and *inner exiles*—we see through the illusion of separateness. We crack the shell of our usual

assumptions by interrogating our notions and theories of race and other differences. When we replace the old story (of judging others by race, class, gender, and sexual groupings and using these judgments to create barriers), we threaten people who believe in clearly defined mutually exclusive categories. The same hands that split assumptions apart must also span the cracks, must wield the mutual exchange of stories. The solution is not exclusivity and dominance, but receptivity to new theories, stories, visions. We must surrender our privilege, scant though it may seem. We must hold out our *manos* to others and share our gains.

The primary counsel from the firing is that change, that swift-footed salamandra, is our only option. We either move or petrify. Change requires great heat. We must turn the heat on our own selves, the first site of working toward social justice and transformation. By transforming the negative perceptions we have of ourselves we change systems of oppression in interpersonal contexts—within the family, the community—which in turn alters larger institutional systems. In challenging our own negative, unconscious assumptions of self-identity we make ourselves so uncomfortable we're forced to make changes. Our images/feelings/thoughts have to be conflicted before we see the need for change. Restoring dignity and overcoming a stigmatized status changes our self-image; changes in the self lead to changes in the categories of identity, which in turn precipitate changes in community and traditions.

Using imagination (images/feelings/thoughts), love, and vision to implement change is another counsel from the firing. Imagination links us with what lives outside of us. Like radio waves our thoughts/consciousness travel on air and impact others. Imagination offers resolutions out of the conflict by dreaming alternative ways of imaging/feeling/thinking. For positive social change to happen we need to envision a different reality, dream new blueprints for it, formulate new strategies for coping in it. But because change, positive and negative, is always a source of tension, because it has no sense of closure, of completion, we resist it. We must be motivated by love in order to undertake change—love of self, love of people, love of life. Loving gives us the energy and compassion to act in the face of hardship; loving gives us the motivation to dream the life and

work we want. To help me “dream” this foreword I spread the Medicine Cards and pulled horse, the power that brings visions. This book is our horse; it carries our messages, our gifts to the people.

A final counsel from the firing is that awareness of spirit, el conocimiento of the links of carne y hueso, the bonds of suffering lie behind all our acts, not just those of compassion and vision. Spiritual awareness is on the rise; humans are turning inward, looking at what’s behind the eye as well as in front. A spiritual understanding of humanity’s role in the universe is now required of us. Before, this radical change in consciousness, this burgeoning of a worldwide spiritual activism, this common cause among the world’s peoples, this paradigm shift, was a dream—now it’s a necessity. Our work of casting a spiritual light on the bridge enables us to venture into unknown territories. It prepares us to fortify the old bridges, build new ones and cross these when we come to them. It will help us deal with new life trials, awaken the young women and men from post-feminist sleepwalking, and rouse us older folk who have become complacent and apathetic.

In this millennium we are called to renew and birth a more inclusive feminism, one committed to basic human rights, equality, respect for all people and creatures, and for the earth. As keepers of the fire of transformation we invite awareness of soul into our daily acts, call richness and beauty into our lives; bid spirit to stir our blood, dissolve the rigid walls between us, and gather us in. May our voices proclaim the bonds of bridges.

Contigo en la lucha,  
Gloria E. Anzaldúa  
November 2001

## Notes

- 1 AnaLouise Keating, ed. *Interviews/Entrevistas* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 164.



## Foreword, 1981

*Toni Cade Bambara*

How I cherish this collection of cables, esoesses, conjurations and fusil missiles. Its motive force. Its gathering-us-in-ness. Its midwifery of mutually wise understandings. Its promise of autonomy and community. And its pledge of an abundant life for us all. On time. That is to say – overdue, given the times. (“Arrogance rising, moon in oppression, sun in destruction” – Cameron.)

Blackfoot amiga Nisei hermana Down Home Up Souf  
Sistuh sister El Barrio suburbia Korean The Bronx Lakota  
Menominee Cubana Chinese Puertorriqueña reservation  
Chicana compañera and letters testimonials poems  
interviews essays journal entries sharing Sisters of the yam  
Sisters of the rice Sisters of the corn Sisters of the plantain  
putting in telecalls to each other. And we’re all on the line.

Now that we’ve begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together. Rise up and break our chains as well. For though the initial motive of several siter/riters here may have been to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supercede their invitations to coalesce on their terms (“Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable” – Lorde), the process of examining that would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks (“We have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin” – davenport)

and a new connection:	US
a new set of recognitions:	US
a new site of accountability:	US
a new source of power:	US

And the possibilities intuited here or alluded to there or called forth in various pieces in flat out talking in tongues – the possibility of several million women refuting the numbers game

inherent in “minority,” the possibility of denouncing the insulated/orchestrated conflict game of divide and conquer – through the fashioning of potent networks of all the daughters of the ancient mother cultures is awesome, mighty, a glorious life work. *This Bridge* lays down the planks to cross over on to a new place where stooped labor cramped quartered down pressed and caged up combatants can straighten the spine and expand the lungs and make the vision manifest (“The dream is real, my friends. The failure to realize it is the only unreality.” – Street Preacher in *The Salt Eaters*).

*This Bridge* documents particular rites of passage. Coming of age and coming to terms with community – race, group, class, gender, self perversions – racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder. And coming to terms with the incorporation of disease, struggling to overthrow the internal colonial/pro-racist loyalties – color/hue/hair caste within the household, power perversities engaged in under the guise of “personal relationships,” accommodation to and collaboration with self-ambush and amnesia and murder. And coming to grips with those false awakenings too that give us ease as we substitute a militant mouth for a radical politic, delaying our true coming of age as committed, competent, principled combatants.

There is more than a hint in these pages that too many of us still equate tone with substance, a hot eye with clear vision, and congratulate ourselves for our political maturity. For, of course, it takes more than pique to unite our wrath (“the capacity of heat to change the shape of things” – Moraga) and to wrest power from those who have it and abuse it, to reclaim our ancient powers lying dormant with neglect (“i wanna ask billie to teach us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record” – Gossett), and create new powers in arenas where they never before existed. And of course it takes more than the self-disclosure and the bold glimpse of each others’ life documents to make the grand resolve to fearlessly work toward potent meshings. Takes more than a rinsed lens to face unblinkingly the particular twists of the divide and conquer tactics of this moment: the practice of withdrawing small business loans from the Puerto Rican grocer in favor of the South Korean wig shop, of stripping from Black students the Martin Luther King scholarship fund fought for and delivering those funds up to

South Vietnamese or white Cubans or any other group the government has made a commitment to in its greedy grab for empire. We have got to know each other better and teach each other our ways, our views, if we're to remove the scales ("seeing radical differences where they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical" - Quintanales) and get the work done.

*This Bridge* can get us there. Can coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other's ways of seeing and being. Of hearing each other as we heard each other in Pat Lee's *Freshtones*, as we heard each other in Pat Jones and Faye Chiang, et al.'s *Ordinary Women*, as we heard each other in Fran Beale's *Third World Women's Alliance* newspaper. As we heard each other over the years in snatched time moments in hallways and conference corridors, caucusing between sets. As we heard each other in those split second interfacing of yours and mine and hers student union meetings. As we heard each other in that rainbow attempt under the auspices of IFCO years ago. And way before that when Chinese, Mexican, and African women in this country saluted each other's attempts to form protective leagues. And before that when New Orleans African women and Yamasee and Yamacrow women went into the swamps to meet with Filipino wives of "draftees" and "defectors" during the so called French and Indian War. And when members of the maroon communities and women of the long lodge held council together while the Seminole Wars raged. And way way before that, before the breaking of the land mass when we mothers of the yam, of the rice, of the maize, of the plantain sat together in a circle, staring into the camp fire, the answers in our laps, knowing how to focus...

Quite frankly, *This Bridge* needs no Foreword. It is the Afterword that'll count. The coalitions of women determined to be a danger to our enemies, as June Jordan would put it. The will to be dangerous ("ask billie so we can learn how to have those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves" - gosselt). And the contracts we creative combatants will make to mutually care and cure each other into wholesomeness. And blue-prints we will draw up of the new order we will make manifest. And the personal unction we will

discover in the mirror, in the dreams, or on the path across *This Bridge*. The work: To make revolution irresistible.

Blessings,  
Toni Cade Bambara

Novelist Bambara and interviewer Kalamu Ya Salaam were discussing a call she made in *The Salt Eaters* through *The Seven Sisters*, a multi-cultural, multi-media arts troupe, a call to unite our wrath, our vision, our powers.

Kalamu: Do you think that fiction is the most effective way to do this?

Toni: No. The most effective way to do it, is to do it! <sup>1</sup>

## Notes

1. "In Search of the Mother Tongue: An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara." *First World Journal* (Fall 1980).

## **Preface, 1981**

*Cherrie L. Moraga*

Change does not occur in a vacuum. In this preface I have tried to recreate for you my own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color. I want to reflect in actual terms how this anthology and the women in it and around it have personally transformed my life, sometimes rather painfully but always with richness and meaning.

### **I Transfer and Go Underground**

*(Boston, Massachusetts – July 20, 1980)*

It is probably crucial to describe here the way this book is coming together, the journey it is taking me on. The book is still not completed, and I have traveled East to find it a publisher. Such an anthology is in high demand these days. A book by radical women of color. The Left needs it, with its shaky and shabby record of commitment to women, period. Oh, yes, it can claim its attention to “color” issues, embodied in the male. Sexism is acceptable to the white Left publishing house, particularly if spouted through the mouth of a Black man.

The feminist movement needs the book, too. But for different reasons. Do I dare speak of the boredom setting in among the white sector of the feminist movement? What was once a cutting edge, growing dull in the too easy solution to our problems of hunger of soul and stomach. The lesbian separatist utopia? No thank you, sisters. I can't prepare myself a revolutionary packet that makes no sense when I leave the white suburbs of Watertown, Massachusetts and take the T-line to Black Roxbury.

Take Boston alone, I think to myself and the feminism my so-called sisters have constructed does nothing to help me make the trip from one end of town to another. Leaving Watertown, I board a bus and ride it quietly in my light flesh to Harvard Square, protected by the gold highlights my hair dares to take on, like an insult, in this miserable heat.

*I transfer and go underground.*

Julie told me the other day how they stopped her for walking through the suburbs. Can't tell if she's a man or a woman, only know that it's Black moving through that part of town. They wouldn't spot her here, moving underground.

The train is abruptly stopped. A white man in jeans and tee shirt breaks into the car I'm in, throws a Black kid up against the floor, handcuffs him and carries him away. The train moves on. The day before, a 14-year-old Black boy was shot in the head by a white cop. And, the summer is getting hotter.

I hear there are some women in this town plotting a *lesbian* revolution. What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know. I am a lesbian. I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to Black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt.

Arriving in Roxbury, arriving at Barbara's<sup>1</sup>.... By the end of the evening of our first visit together, Barbara comes into the front room where she has made a bed for me. She kisses me. Then grabbing my shoulders she says, very solid-like, "We're sisters." I nod, put myself into bed, and roll around with this word, *sisters*, for two hours before sleep takes on. I earned this with Barbara. It is not a given between us – Chicana and Black – to come to see each other as sisters. This is not a given. I keep wanting to repeat over and over and over again, the pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it.

But the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through. This book, as long as I see it for myself as a passage through, I hope will function for others, colored<sup>2</sup> or white, in the same way. How do we develop a movement that can live with the fact of the loves and lives of these women in this book?

I would grow despairing if I believed, as Rosario Morales refutes, we were unilaterally defined by color and class. Lesbianism is then a hoax, a fraud. I have no business with it. Lesbianism is supposed to be about connection.

What drew me to politics was my love of women, the agony I felt in observing the straight-jackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my own family in. But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such blind

faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. *I call my white sisters on this.*

I have had enough of this. And, I am involved in this book because more than anything else I need to feel enlivened again in a movement that can, as my friend Amber Hollibaugh states, finally ask the right questions and admit to not having all the answers.

## **A Bridge Gets Walked Over**

*(Boston, Massachusetts – July 25, 1980)*

I am ready to go home now. I am ready. Very tired. Couldn't sleep all night. Missing home. There is a deep fatigue in my body this morning. I feel used up. Adrienne asks me if I can write of what has happened with me while here in Boston. She asks me if I can, not would. I say, yes, I think so. And now I doubt it. The pain of racism, classism. Such overused and trivialized words. The pain of it all. I do not feel people of color are the only ones hurt by racism.

Another meeting. Again walking into a room filled with white women, a splattering of women of color around the room. The issue on the table, Racism. The dread and terror in the room lay like a thick immovable paste above all our shoulders, white, and colored, alike. We, Third World women in the room, thinking back to square one, again.

*How can we – this time – not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?* Barbara says last night: "A bridge gets walked over." Yes, over and over and over again.

I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, "race," the word, "color." The pauses keeping the voices breathless, the bodies taut, erect – unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.

What the hell am I getting myself into? Gloria's voice has recurred to me throughout this trip. A year and a half ago, she warned and encouraged: "This book will change your life, Cherrie. It will change both our lives." And it has. Gloria, I wish you were here.

A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. You know, I really did. But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over.

I wrote in my journal: "My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!"

## **A Place of Breakthrough: Coming Home**

*(San Francisco, California - September 20, 1980)*

When Audre Lorde, speaking of racism, states: "I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there."<sup>3</sup> I am driven to do so because of the passion for women that lives in my body. I know now that the major obstacle for me, personally, in completing this book has occurred when I stopped writing it for myself, when I looked away from my own source of knowledge.

Audre is right. It is also the source of terror - how deeply separation between women hurts me. How discovering difference, profound differences between myself and women I love has sometimes rendered me helpless and immobilized.

I think of my sister here. How I still haven't gotten over the shock that she would marry this white man, rather than enter onto the journey I knew I was taking. (This is the model we have from my mother, nurturing/waiting on my father and brother all the days of her life. Always how if a man walked into the room, he was paid attention to [indulged] in a particular Latin-woman-to-man way). For years, and to this day, I am still recovering from the disappointment that this girl/this sister who had been with me everyday of my life growing up - who slept, ate, talked, cried, worked, fought with me - was suddenly lost to me through this man and marriage. I still struggle with believing I have a right to my feelings, that it is not "immature" or "queer" to refuse such separations, to still mourn over this early abandonment,



“this homesickness for a woman.”<sup>4</sup> So few people really understand how deep the bond between sisters can run. I was raised to rely on my sister, to believe sisters could be counted on “to go the long hard way with you.”

Sometimes for me “that deep place of knowledge” Audre refers to seems like an endless reservoir of pain, where I must continually unravel the damage done to me. It is a calculated system of damage, intended to ensure our separation from other women, but particularly those we learned to see as most different from ourselves and therefore, most fearful. The women whose pain we do not want to see as our own. Call it racism, class oppression, men, or dyke-baiting, the system thrives.

I mourn the friends and lovers I have lost to this damage. I mourn the women whom I have betrayed with my own ignorance, my own fear.

The year has been one of such deep damage. I have felt between my hands the failure to bring a love I believed in back to life. Yes, the failure between lovers, sisters, mother and daughter – the betrayal. How have we turned our backs on each other – the bridge collapsing – whether it be for public power, personal gain, private validation, or more closely, to save face, to save our children, to save our skins.

“See whose face it wears,”<sup>5</sup> Audre says. And I know I must open my eyes and mouth and hands to name the color and texture of my fear.

I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology. I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because I couldn’t stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously. I first felt this the most acutely with Black women – Black dykes – who I felt ignored me, wrote me off because I looked white. And yet, the truth was that I didn’t know Black women intimately (Barbara says “it’s about who you can sit down to a meal with, who you can cry with, whose face you can touch”). I had such strong “colored hunches” about our potential connection, but was basically removed from the lives of most Black women. The ignorance. The painful, painful ignorance.

I had even ignored my own bloodline connection with Chicanas and other Latinas. Maybe it was too close to look at,

too close to home. Months ago in a journal entry I wrote: "I am afraid to get near to how deeply I want the love of other Latin women in my life." In a real visceral way I hadn't felt the absence (only assumed the fibers of alienation I so often felt with anglo women as normative). Then for the first time, speaking on a panel about racism here in San Francisco, I could physically touch what I had been missing. There in the front row, nodding encouragement and identification, sat five Latina sisters. Count them! Five avowed Latina Feminists: Gloria, Jo, Aurora, Chabela y Mirtha. For once in my life every part of me was allowed to be visible and spoken for in one room at one time.

After the forum, the six of us walk down Valencia Street singing songs in Spanish. We buy burritos y cerveza from "La Cumbre" and talk our heads off into the night, crying from the impact of such a reunion.

*Si, son mis comadres.* Something my mother had with her women friends and sisters. Coming home. For once, I didn't have to choose between being a lesbian and being Chicana; between being a feminist and having family.

## **I Have Dreamed of a Bridge**

*San Francisco, California – September 25, 1980*

Literally, for two years now, I have dreamed of a bridge. In writing this conclusion, I fight the myriad voices that live inside me. The voices that stop my pen at every turn of the page. They are the voices that tell me here I should be talking more "materialistically" about the oppression of women of color, that I should be plotting out of a "strategy" for Third World Revolution. But what I really want to write about is faith. That without faith, I'd dare not expose myself to the potential betrayal, rejection, and failure that lives throughout the first and last gesture of connection.

And yet, so often I have lost touch with the simple faith I know in my blood. My mother. On some very basic level, the woman cannot be shaken from the ground on which she walks. Once at a very critical point in my work on this book, where everything I loved – the people, the writing, the city – all began to cave in on me, feeling such utter despair and self-doubt, I received in the mail a card from my mother. A holy card of St.

Anthony de Padua, her patron saint, her “special” saint, wrapped in a plastic cover. She wrote in it: “Dear Cherrie, I am sending you this prayer of St. Anthony. Pray to God to help you with this book.” And a cry came up from inside me that I had been sitting on for months, cleaning me out – a faith healer. Her faith in this saint did actually once save her life. That day, it helped me continue the labor of this book.

I am not talking here about some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts. I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives. Otherwise, why this book? It is the faith of activists I am talking about.

The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women’s lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched.

Our strategy is how we cope – how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person’s skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other.

This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality.

It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.

For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for that vision. *This Bridge Called My Back*.

In the dream, I am always met at the river.

Cherrie L. Moraga

## Notes

1. I want to acknowledge and thank Barbara Smith for her support as a sister, her in-sights as a political activist and visionary, and especially for her way with words in helping me pull this together.
2. Throughout the text, the word "colored" will be used by the editors in referring to all Third World people of color unless otherwise specified.
3. From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (see her essay in this volume).
4. Adrienne Rich "Trancendental Etude," *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), 75.
5. From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (see her essay in this volume).

## **Introduction, 1981**

*Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

### **How It All Began**

In February of 1979, Gloria attended a women's retreat in the country just north of San Francisco. At Merlin Stone's insistence, three Third World women were to receive scholarships to her workshop on goddesses and heroines taking place during the retreat. Only one made it – Gloria. The management and some of the staff made her feel an outsider, the poor relative, the token woman of color. And all because she was not white nor had she paid the \$150 fee the retreat organizers had set for the workshop. The seed that germinated into this anthology began there in Gloria's talks with Merlin.

What had happened at the women's retreat was not new to our experience. Both of us had first met each other working as the only two Chicanas in a national feminist writers organization. After two years of involvement with the group which repeatedly refused to address itself to its elitist and racist practices, we left the organization and began work on this book.

In April, 1979, we wrote:

We want to express to all women – especially to white middle-class women – the experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement. We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions. We want to create a definition that expands what “feminist” means to us.

(From the original soliciting letter)

### **The Living Entity**

What began as a reaction to the racism of white feminists soon became a positive affirmation of the commitment of women of color to our own feminism. Mere words on a page began to transform themselves into a living entity in our guts. Now, over a year later, feeling greater solidarity with other feminists of color across the country through the making of this book, we assert:

*This Bridge Called My Back* intends to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the US.

We named this anthology “radical” for we were interested in the writings of women of color who want nothing short of a revolution in the hands of women – who agree that that is the goal, no matter how we might disagree about the getting there or the possibility of seeing it in our own lifetimes. We use the term in its original form – stemming from the word “root” – for our feminist politic emerges from the roots of both of our cultural oppression and heritage.

## **The Parts of the Whole**

The six sections of *This Bridge Called My Back* intend to reflect what we feel to be the major areas of concern for Third World women in the US in forming a broad-based political movement: 1) how visibility/invisibility as women of color forms our radicalism; 2) the ways in which Third World women derive a feminist political theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience; 3) the destructive and demoralizing effects of racism in the women’s movement; 4) the cultural, class, and sexuality differences that divide women of color; 5) Third World women’s writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution; and 6) the ways and means of a Third World feminist future.

## **The Writers and Their Work**

The women in whose hands *This Bridge Called My Back* was brought identify as Third World women and/or women of color. Each woman considers herself a feminist, but draws her feminism from the culture in which she grew. Most of the women appearing in this book are first-generation writers. Some of us do not see ourselves as writers, but pull the pen across the page anyway or speak with the power of poets.

The selections in this anthology range from extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses. In addition, the book includes poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews. The

works combined reflect a diversity of perspectives, linguistic styles, and cultural tongues.

In editing the anthology, our primary commitment was to retaining this diversity, as well as each writer's especial voice and style. The book is intended to reflect our color loud and clear, not tone it down. As editors we sought out and believe we found, non-rhetorical, highly personal chronicles that present a political analysis in everyday terms.

In compiling the anthology, Cherrie was primarily responsible for the thematic structure and organization of the book as a whole. She also wrote the introductions to the first four sections of the book which cover 1) The Roots of Our Radicalism; 2) Theory in the Flesh; 3) Racism in the Women's Movement; and 4) On Culture, Class, and Homophobia. Gloria wrote the introductions to the final two sections of the book which explore The Third World Woman Writer and The Vision of the Third World feminist. Together as editors, we both bore the burden of the book (even more than we had anticipated – this being our first attempt at such a project), not only doing the proof-reading and making editorial decisions, but also acting as a telephone answering and courier service, PR persons and advertisers, interviewers and transcribers, and even occasionally, muses for some of the contributors during their, sometimes rather painful, "writing blocks". Most importantly, we saw our major role as editors being to encourage writers to delve even more deeply into their lives, to make some meaning out of it for themselves and their readers.

## **Time and Money**

Many people have commented on the relative speed in which this book was produced. In barely two years, the anthology grew from a seed of an idea to a published work. True, everyone has worked fast, including the publishers.

The anthology was created with a sense of urgency. From the moment of its conception, it was already long overdue. Two years ago when we started, we knew it was a book that should already have been in our hands.

How do you concentrate on a project when you're worried about paying the rent? We have sorely learned why so few

women of color attempt this kind of project – no money to fall back on. In compiling this book we both maintained two or more jobs just to keep the book and ourselves alive. No time to write while waiting tables. No time for class preparation, to read students' papers, argue with your boss, have a love life or eat a decent meal when the deadline must be met. No money to buy stamps, to hire a lawyer "to go over the contract," to engage an agent. Both of us became expert jugglers of our energy and the few pennies in our piggybanks: Gloria's "little chicken" and Cherrie's "tecate bucket."

### **Agradecimientos**

But oh there were the people who helped: Leslie, Abigail, Leigh and her IBM selectric, Randy, David, Mirtha's arroz con picadillo and loving encouragement, Merlin and Adrienne's faith in the book, Jane and Sally's letting Cherrie change her mind, our women's studies students at San Francisco State University who put up with their two over-tired grumpy teachers, Debbie's backrubs, Jo who typed the whole damn manuscript, Barbara C. and her camera and crew, Barbara S.'s work in spreading the word in Boston, the friends who lent us money, and all the other folks who supported our readings, our benefit parties, our efforts to get this book to press.

Most especially, of course, we wish to thank all the contributors whose commitment and insight made the nightly marathons we spent pulling out our hair worth it. They inspired the labor.

### **Putting our Words into Practice**

With the completion of this anthology, a hundred other books and projects are waiting to be developed. Already, we hear tell in the wind from other contributors the possibility of a film about Third World Feminists, an anthology by Latina lesbians, a Third World feminist publishing house. We, women of color, are not without plans. This is exactly the kind of service we wish for the anthology to provide. It is a catalyst, not a definitive statement on "Third World Feminism in the US."

We see the book as a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colors. Just as we have been radicalized in the



process of compiling this book, we hope it will radicalize others into action. We envision the book being used as a *required* text in most women's studies courses. And we don't mean just "special" courses on Third World Women or Racism, but also courses dealing with sexual politics, feminist thought, women's spirituality, etc. Similarly, we want to see this book on the shelf of, and used in the classroom by, every ethnic studies teacher in this country, male and female alike. Off campus, we expect the book to function as a consciousness-raiser for white women meeting together or working alone on the issues of racism. And, we want to see our colored sisters using this book as an educator and agitator around issues specific to our oppression as women.

We want the book in libraries, bookstores, at conferences, and union meetings in every major city and hole-in-the-wall in this country. And, of course, we hope to eventually see this book translated and leave this country, making tangible the link between Third World women in the US and throughout the world.

Finally tenemos la esperanza que *This Bridge Called My Back* will find its way back into our families' lives.

The revolution begins at home.

## The Bridge Poem

*Kate Rushin*

I've had enough  
I'm sick of seeing and touching  
Both sides of things  
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody  
Can talk to anybody  
Without me  
Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister  
My little sister to my brother to the white feminists  
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church  
folks  
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the  
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends'  
parents...

Then  
I've got to explain myself  
To everybody

I do more translating  
Than the Gawdamn UN

Forget it  
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against  
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations  
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners  
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches  
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white  
people

lviii *Kate Rushin*

Find another connection to the rest of the world  
Find something else to make you legitimate  
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood  
Your manhood  
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to  
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self  
Oh behalf of your better selves

I am sick  
Of having to remind you  
To breathe  
Before you suffocate  
Your own fool self

Forget it  
Stretch or drown  
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate  
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true self  
And then  
I will be useful

# Children Passing in the Streets

The Roots of Our  
Radicalism



Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, *Mattie Looks for Steven Biko*, 1985  
Photocollage, 22" x 24"  
Collection of the Artist

# Children Passing in the Streets

## *The Roots of Our Radicalism*

*I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so  
that there is room for paradoxes.*

– Maxine Hong Kingston<sup>1</sup>

We are women from all kinds of childhood streets: the farms of Puerto Rico, the downtown streets of Chinatown, the barrio, city-Bronx streets, quiet suburban sidewalks, the plains, and the reservation.

In this first section, you will find voices from childhoods, our youth. What we learned about survival – trying to-pass-for-white, easy-to-pass-for-white, “she couldn’t pass in a million years.” Here, we introduce to you the “color problem” as it was first introduced to us: “not white enuf, not dark enuf,” always up against a color chart that first got erected far outside our families and our neighborhoods, but which invaded them both with systematic determination.

In speaking of color and class, Tillie Olsen once said: “There’s no such thing as passing.”<sup>2</sup> Here are women of every shade of color and grade of class to prove that point. For although some of us traveled more easily from street corner to corner than the sister whose color or poverty made her an especially visible target to the violence on the street, *all* of us have been victims of the incisive violation which happens indoors and inside ourselves: the self-abnegation, the silence, the constant threat of cultural obliteration.

We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes: the lighter sister, the mixed-blood cousin, being the darkest one in the family. It doesn’t take many years to realize the privileges, or lack thereof, attached to a particular shade of skin or texture of hair. It is this experience that moves light-skinned or “passable” Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. From those families we were on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes.

We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism.

### Notes

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 35.
2. From a talk given at The Women's Building sponsored by The Feminist Writers' Guild. San Francisco, November 1979.

# When I Was Growing Up

*Nellie Wong*

I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How? you ask.  
Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me  
I was dark and I believed my own darkness  
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision

when I was growing up, my sisters  
with fair skin got praised  
for their beauty, and in the dark  
I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines  
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,  
sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become  
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear  
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud  
of my English, my grammar, my spelling  
fitting into the group of smart children  
smart Chinese children, fitting in,  
belonging, getting in line

when I was growing up and went to high school,  
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,  
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere  
sweaters,  
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have  
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered  
for American food, American styles,  
coded: white and even to me, a child  
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese  
was feeling foreign, was limiting,  
was unAmerican



when I was growing up and a white man wanted  
to take me out, I thought I was special,  
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit  
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed  
of some yellow men, their small bones,  
their frail bodies, their spitting  
on the streets, their coughing,  
their lying in sunless rooms,  
shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask  
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.  
They named all colors except white, the shell  
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt  
dirty. I thought that god  
made white people clean  
and no matter how much I bathed,  
I could not change, I could not shed  
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore  
I would run away to purple mountains,  
houses by the sea with nothing over  
my head, with space to breathe,  
uncongested with yellow people in an area  
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned  
was a ghetto, one of many hearts  
of Asian America

I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How many more ways? you ask.  
Haven't I told you enough?

## on not bein

*mary hope w. lee*

*be a smart child trying to be dumb...  
not blk enuf to lovinly ignore...  
not bitter enuf to die at a early age...*

– ntozake shange<sup>1</sup>

she never wanted  
no never once  
did she wanna  
be white/to pass  
dreamed only of bein darker  
she wanted to be darker  
not yellow/not no high brown neither  
but brown/warm brown  
she dreamed/her body  
moist earth brown  
she prayed/for chocolate  
semi/sweet/bitter/sweet  
dark chocolate nipples crownin  
her small chested tits  
2 hersheys kisses  
sittin sweet like top of  
2 round scoops of smooth  
milk chocolate ice cream



momma took her outta  
almost all black lincoln high  
cuz she useta catch hell  
every day in gym class  
the other girls reactin to her like  
she was the cause of some  
kinda gawdawful allergy they all had

contact could be fatal  
survivors would be scarred  
with kindness

cuz she wasn dark enuf  
was smart enuf  
wasn rowdy enuf  
had a white girl friend  
cuz none of them would be

beige or buff/ecru or chamois  
jus wasn color/ed enuf  
to get picked for the softball team  
wasn sufficient protection  
'gainst getting tripped in the shower

she wondered/  
would they have treated florence ballard  
so shabbily



but she envied them all  
felt every once now and then  
they just mighta been  
righteously justified  
since/after all  
they was brown like  
the sun loved they skin special  
cuz it warmed 'em

chestnut  
bronze  
copper  
sepia  
cinnamon  
cocoa  
mahogany

her/she was drab faded out  
yellow like a scorched july sky  
just fore it rains & rinses  
away the hint of brown from the smog

she wasn/  
no maureen peal

no 'high yellow dream child'  
not/dichty

        a hex muttered  
not/hinky

        a curse let fly  
not/saditty

like girls was spozed to be  
did they went to catholic school or  
was they from germantown or  
baldwin hills or  
valencia park



[the man she married/cuz he was the first one to ask/her  
bein afraid no body else would/said he thought he was gonna  
hafta marry hisself white cuz/he couldn find him no colored  
girl was/in-tel-li-gent e-nuff/but with her bein the next best thing  
to white...

## Notes

1. *Nappy Edges*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978.

# For the Color of My Mother

*Cherrie L. Moraga*

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth  
the wide-arched muzzle of brown women*

at two  
my upper lip split open  
clear to the tip of my nose  
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield  
that traveled down six floors of hospital  
where doctors wound me into white bandages  
only the screaming mouth exposed

the gash sewn back into a snarl  
would last for years

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her*

at five, her mouth  
pressed into a seam  
a fine blue child's line drawn across her face  
her mouth, pressed into mouthing english  
mouthing yes yes yes  
mouthing stoop lift carry  
(sweating wet sighs into the field  
her red bandana comes loose from under the huge brimmed  
hat moving across her upper lip)

at fourteen, her mouth  
painted, the ends drawn up  
the mole in the corner colored in darker larger mouthing yes  
she praying no no no  
lips pursed and moving

at forty-five, her mouth  
bleeding into her stomach  
the hole gaping growing redder

deepening with my father's pallor  
finally stitched shut from hip to breastbone  
an inverted V  
*Vera*  
*Elvira*

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother speaking  
for her*

as it should be  
dark women come to me  
sitting in circles  
I pass through their hands  
the head of my mother  
painted in clay colors

- mother's draw -  
funds

touching each carved feature  
swollen eyes and mouth  
they understand the explosion the splitting  
open contained within the fixed expression  
they cradle her silence  
nodding to me

# I Am What I Am

*Rosario Morales*

I am what I am and I am US American I haven't wanted to say it because if I did you'd take away the Puerto Rican but now I say go to hell I am what I am and you can't take it away with all the words and sneers at your command I am what I am I am Puerto Rican I am US American I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx I am what I am I'm not hiding under no stoop behind no curtain I am what I am I am Boricua as boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan and I croon Carlos Gardel tangos in my sleep and Afro-Cuban beats in my blood and Xavier Cugat's lukewarm latin is so familiar and dear sneer dear but he's familiar and dear but not Carmen Miranda who's a joke because I never was a joke I was a bit of a sensation See! here's a true honest-to-god Puerto Rican girl and she's in college Hey! Mary come here and look she's from right here a South Bronx girl and she's honest-to-god in college now Ain't that something who would believed it Ain't science wonderful or some such thing a wonder a wonder

And someone who did languages for a living stopped me in the subway because how I spoke was a linguist's treat I mean there it was yiddish and spanish and fine refined college educated english and irish which I mainly keep in my prayers It's dusty now I haven't said my prayers in decades but try my Hail Marrrry full of grrrace with the nun's burr with the nun's disdain it's all true and it's all me do you know how I got an English accent from the BBC I always say For years in the mountains of Puerto Rico when I was 22 and 24 and 26 all those young years I listened to the BBC and Radio and Moscow's English english announcers announce and denounce and then I read Dickens all the way thru three or four times at least and then later I read Dickens aloud in voices and when I cam back to the US. I spoke mockdickens and mockBritish especially when I want to be crisp efficient I know what I am doing and you can't scare me tough that's why I am what I am and I'm a bit of a snob too Shit! why am I calling myself names I really really dig the funny way the British speak and it's real it's true and I love too

the singing of yiddish sentences that go with shrugs and hands  
and arms doing melancholy or lively dances I love the  
sound and look of yiddish in the air in the body in the  
streets in the English language nooo so what's new  
so go by the grocer and buy some fruit oye vey gevalt  
gefilte fish raisele oh and those words hundreds  
of them dotting the english language like raisins in the bread  
shnook and schlemiel suftik tush schmata all those  
soft sweet sounds saying sharp sharp things I am what I am  
and I'm naturalized Jewish-American wasp is foreign and  
new but Jewish-American is old show familiar schmata  
familiar and its me dears its me bagels blintzes and all I  
am what I am Take it or leave me alone.



## Dreams of Violence

*Naomi Littlebear Morena*

I was awakened by the sound of school children screaming at each other. I thought I heard them beating some one. Loud solid thumps quivered in my ears, a hoarse voice, horribly chanting in rapid succession, "oh my god, oh my god"...

I closed my eyes and sunk into a panic that terrorized my morning. I flew back in time, somewhere in grade school, walking home with my cousin Virginia...

### I

There was an unmistakable bitter taste in the air around us, forewarning. It was the moment before the actual sight of them coming that froze our hearts with fear. Suddenly like a stampede of wild bulls they plummeted towards us. A half dozen or more boys, a frenzied blur of leather jackets, screaming wild devils, thrashing at us with the harsh stiff leather, metal teeth zippers battering our bewildered bodies. We ran on rubber band legs; I could hear Virginia calling, "Mama, Mama." In my ears was a sound like the beating of wings, barbed wings that stung my skin, that made my lip swell in pain, we ran hard thru the obstacle course of confused bodies, their horrifying shrieks of rage thru the rain of leather.

By some miracle they scattered, the same force that brought them seemed to snatch them up again and they were scattered to other dark corners of the barrio.

My face was hot and swollen, i felt my tears burning rivers down my cheeks. I could still hear Virginia crying for her mother, though now she was just a mass of pain & crying. I could remember my own silence thundering thru my body.

As we neared home, my fear increased. I knew what would await me there. I could close my eyes and see the vision a hundred times over.

I would slowly approach the door and before my entire body entered, she could smell the mischief, sense the energy – my grandmother immediately stopped whatever she was doing and

demanded a full story. But always my story would be cut in mid-sentence. Because whatever state i was in, i provoked it.

“Why are you Dirty?” “Have you been fighting?” “Did you tear your dress?” – a volley of quick demands and accusations came threateningly to me, making me feel scared, watching her come towards me, reaching over to the door where the razor strap hung, “her bonito,” as she called it. Reaching towards me, strap in hand. My feet turning to lead. Trying to run away, backing into a corner.

## II

But where the strap couldn't reach me, a vicious pinch could. I flew thru the door being chased by more leather stings.

I ran far, sometimes two blocks away, my skin boiling, red criss-crosses atop the scratches that the leather jackets had made. I cried alone barely able to make out the shapes of people and cars thru my tears.



I am awake now, my lover still sleeping beside me, wondering how we can blend our two worlds. How to mend the holes in our pasts, walk away bravely from the nightmares.

Her attacks were more subtle, hidden within the false shelter of her home; instead of gangs of boys chasing her, her brother was the nightly intrusion, using her young child body to masturbate with, as she closed her eyes too numb and scared to speak.

We both have no choice but to be survivors though the fears are still there. Whenever i see a crowd of men, my heart sinks to my feet, whenever i hear sudden noises, sudden crashing, anger, male noises, their very laughter is abrasive to my ears. I shrink inside, walk close to the walls of my soul, i look for a place to hide.

## He Saw

*Chrystos*

his roots/went back to the reservation old  
pain/old hunger  
None of the ghosts were there  
He went fishing caught  
one or more every  
day The fishing is what he needed to do  
Gathering wild rice, remembered after years of suits, ties, clocks  
adjustments  
what he began  
& left  
He writes me about the fish  
I grow hungry

He gave me all the whitest advantages  
square house, football school, white mother baking white bread  
in a white oven

He wanted to spare me his pain  
didn't

Silently our misunderstandings shred rage clouds our blood  
ties

I stare at his words wonder who he is  
Lonely red daddy cradling ghost of his mama died when he  
was nine

pretending he was born without a father without  
straightjackets

Daddy you write in a painfully practiced scrawl  
you learned learned learned beaten down a dying fish

You go back & can't stay

Bring me a sack of rice

I want your wildness, want the boy who left on a freight car

I want a boy who cried because his mother is dead

& his daddy's gone crazy

I want the one who gathered water & wood

I don't want this man who cut off his hair

joined the government

to be safe

We are both in danger

He Saw 17

of your ancient fear  
I learned to fish on my own  
stopped  
Now I'm learning to weave nets



Entering the  
Lives of Others  
Theory in the Flesh



Yolanda M. López, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgen de Guadalupe*, 1978  
Oil pastel on paper, 32" x 24"  
Collection of the Artist

# Entering the Lives of Others

## *Theory in the Flesh*

*I am not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those bastards of the pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.*

– Barbara Cameron

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

The theme echoing throughout most of these stories is our refusal of the *easy* explanation to the conditions we live in. There is nothing *easy* about a collective cultural history of what Mitsuye Yamada calls “unnatural disasters”: the forced encampment of Indigenous people on government reservations, the forced encampment of Japanese American people during WWII, the forced encampment of our mothers as laborers in factories/in fields/in our own and other people’s homes as paid or unpaid slaves.

Closer to home, we are still trying to separate the fibers of experience we have had as daughters of a struggling people. Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves. “My mother and I work to unravel the knot” (Levins Morales). This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our “wounded knee” (*Chrystos*).



# Wonder Woman

*Genny Lim*

Sometimes I see reflections on bits of glass on sidewalks  
I catch the glimmer of empty bottles floating out to sea  
Sometimes I stretch my arms way above my head and  
wonder if

There are women along the Mekong doing the same

Sometimes I stare longingly at women who I will never know  
Generous, laughing women with wrinkled cheeks and  
white teeth

Dragging along chubby, rosy-cheeked babies on fat,  
wobbly legs

Sometimes I stare at Chinese grandmothers

Getting on the 30 Stockton with shopping bags

Japanese women tourists in European hats

Middle-aged mothers with laundry carts

Young wives holding hands with their husbands

Lesbian women holding hands in coffee-houses

Smiling debutantes with bouquets of yellow daffodils

Silver-haired matrons with silver rhinestoned poodles

Painted prostitutes posing along MacArthur Boulevard

Giddy teenage girls snapping gum in fast cars

Widows clutching bibles, crucifixes

I look at them and wonder if

They are a part of me

I look in their eyes and wonder if

They share my dreams

I wonder if the woman in mink is content

If the stockbroker's wife is afraid of growing old

If the professor's wife is an alcoholic

If the woman in prison is me

There are copper-tanned women in Hyannis Port playing tennis

Women who eat with finger bowls

There are women in factories punching time clocks

Women tired of every waking hour of the day

I wonder why there are women born with silver spoons

in their mouths

Women who have never known a day of hunger  
Women who have never changed their own bed linen  
And I wonder why there are women who must work  
Women who must clean other women's houses  
Women who must shell shrimps for pennies a day  
Women who must sew other women's clothes  
Who must cook  
Who must die  
In childbirth  
In dreams

Why must woman stand divided?  
Building the walls that tear them down?  
Jill-of-all-trades  
Lover, mother, housewife, friend, breadwinner  
Heart and spade  
A woman is a ritual  
A house that must accommodate  
A house that must endure  
Generation after generation  
Of wind and torment, of fire and rain  
A house with echoing rooms  
Closets with hidden cries  
Walls with stretchmarks  
Windows with eyes

Short, tall, skinny, fat  
Pregnant, married, white, yellow, black, brown, red  
Professional, working-class, aristocrat  
Women cooking over coals in sampans  
Women shining tiffany spoons in glass houses  
Women stretching their arms way above the clouds  
In Samarkand, in San Francisco  
Along the Mekong

# La Güera

Cherrie L. Moraga

*It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own.*

– Emma Goldman<sup>1</sup>

I am the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate. My mother was born in Santa Paula, Southern California, at a time when much of the central valley there was still farmland. Nearly thirty-five years later, in 1948, she was the only daughter of six to marry an anglo, my father.

I remember all of my mother's stories, probably much better than she realizes. She is a fine storyteller, recalling every event of her life with vividness of the present, noting each detail right down to the cut and color of her dress. I remember stories of her being pulled out of school at the ages of five, seven, nine, and eleven to work in the fields, along with her brothers and sisters; stories of her father drinking away whatever small profit she was able to make for the family; of her going the long way home to avoid meeting him on the street, staggering toward the same destination. I remember stories of my mother lying about her age in order to get a job as a hat-check girl at Agua Caliente Racetrack in Tijuana. At fourteen, she was the main support of the family. I can still see her walking home alone at 3 a.m., only to turn all of her salary and tips over to her mother, who was pregnant again.

The stories continue through the war years and on: walnut-cracking factories, the Voit Rubber factory, and then the computer boom. I remember my mother doing piecework for the electronics plant in our neighborhood. In the late evening, she would sit in front of the TV set, wrapping copper wires into the backs of circuit boards, talking about "keeping up with the younger girls." By that time, she was already in her mid-fifties.

Meanwhile, I was college-prep in school. After classes, I would go with my mother to fill out job applications for her, or write checks for her at the supermarket. We would have the scenario all worked out ahead of time. My mother would sign the check before we'd get to the store. Then, as we'd approach the checkstand, she would say – within earshot of the cashier – “oh honey, you go ‘head and make out the check,” as if she couldn't be bothered with such an insignificant detail. No one asked any questions.

I was educated, and wore it with a keen sense of pride and satisfaction, my head propped up with the knowledge, from my mother, that my life would be easier than hers. I was educated; but more than this, I was “la güera:” fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made.

No one ever quite told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family (who were all Chicano, with the exception of my father). In fact, everything about my upbringing (at least what occurred on a conscious level) attempted to bleach me of what color I did have. Although my mother was fluent in it, I was never taught much Spanish at home. I picked up what I did learn from school and from over-heard snatches of conversation among my relatives and mother. She often called other lower-income Mexicans “braceros,” or “wetbacks,” referring to herself and her family as “a different class of people.” And yet, the real story was that my family, too, had been poor (some still are) and farmworkers. My mother can remember this in her blood as if it were yesterday. But this is something she would like to forget (and rightfully), for to her, on a basic economic level, being Chicana meant being “less.” It was through my mother's desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became “anglocized;” the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future.

From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because, (as Goldman suggests) these stories my mother told me crept under my “güera” skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. *I had no choice.* I took her life into my

heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual.

When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression – due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana – was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.

You see, one follows the other. I had known for years that I was a lesbian, had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge, gone crazed with the knowledge, wallowed in the silence of it. Silence *is* like starvation. Don't be fooled. It's nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized – if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection – if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection. For me, the connection is an inevitable one.

What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle. We're both getting beaten any way you look at it. The connection is blatant; and in the case of my own family, the difference in the privileges attached to looking white instead of brown are merely a generation apart.

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.

When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? Her very presence violates the ranking and abstraction of oppression. Do we merely live hand to mouth? Do we merely struggle with the “ism” that’s sitting on top of our own heads?

The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression – will only insulate, rather than radicalize us.

To illustrate: a gay male friend of mine once confided to me that he continued to feel that, on some level, I didn’t trust him because he was male; that he felt, really, if it ever came down to a “battle of the sexes,” I might kill him. I admitted that I might very well. He wanted to understand the source of my distrust. I responded, “You’re not a woman. Be a woman for a day. Imagine being a woman.” He confessed that the thought terrified him because, to him, being a woman meant being raped by men. He *had* felt raped by men; he wanted to forget what that meant. What grew from that discussion was the realization that in order for him to create an authentic alliance with me, he must deal with the primary source of his own sense of oppression. He must, first, emotionally come to terms with what it feels like to be a victim. If he – or anyone – were to truly do this, it would be impossible to discount the oppression of others, except by again forgetting how we have been hurt.

And yet, oppressed groups are forgetting all the time. There are instances of this in the rising Black middle class, and certainly an obvious trend of such “unconsciousness” among white gay men. Because to remember may mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our gender, race, class, or sexuality.

Within the women’s movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word “oppression” has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe

women's fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.

What prompted me in the first place to work on an anthology by radical women of color was a deep sense that I had a valuable insight to contribute, by virtue of my birthright and background. And yet, I don't really understand first-hand what it feels like being shitted on for being brown. I understand much more about the joys of it – being Chicana and having family are synonymous for me. What I know about loving, singing, crying, telling stories, speaking with my heart and hands, even having a sense of my own soul comes from the love of my mother, aunts, cousins...

But at the age of twenty-seven, it is frightening to acknowledge that I have internalized a racism and classism, where the object of oppression is not only someone outside of my skin, but the someone inside my skin. In fact, to a large degree, the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin. I have had to confront the fact that much of what I value about being Chicana, about my family, has been subverted by anglo culture and my own cooperation with it. This realization did not occur to me overnight. For example, it wasn't until long after my graduation from the private college I'd attended in Los Angeles, that I realized the major reason for my total alienation from and fear of my classmates was rooted in class and culture. CLICK.

Three years after graduation, in an apple-orchard in Sonoma, a friend of mine (who comes from an Italian Irish working-class family) says to me, "Cherrie, no wonder you felt like such a nut in school. Most of the people there were white and rich." It was true. All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words "class" and "color" to the experience, did my feelings make any sense. For years, I had berated myself for not being as "free" as my classmates. I completely bought that they simply had more guts than I did – to rebel against their parents and run around the country hitch-hiking, reading books and studying "art." They had enough privilege to be atheists, for chrissake. There was no one around filling in the disparity for me between their parents, who were Hollywood filmmakers, and my parents, who wouldn't know the name of a filmmaker if their lives depended on it (and precisely because their lives didn't depend

(or it, they couldn't be bothered). But I knew nothing about "privilege" then. White was right. Period. I could pass. If I got educated enough, there would never be any telling.

Three years after that, another CLICK. In a letter to Barbara Smith, I wrote:

I went to a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading. There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking a language that I knew – in the deepest parts of me – existed, and that I had ignored in my own feminist studies and even in my own writing. What Ntosake caught in me is the realization that in my development as a poet, I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my brown mother – the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems – emotions which stem from the love of my mother.

The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply I was affected. I felt that I had to start all over again. That I turned only to the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women. I am shocked by my own ignorance.

Sitting in that auditorium chair was the first time I had realized to the core of me that for years I had disowned the language I knew best – ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me. The sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping – half in English, half in Spanish – while drinking cerveza in the kitchen. And the hands – I had cut off the hands in my poems. But not in conversation; still the hands could not be kept down. Still they insisted on moving.

The reading had forced me to remember that I knew things from my roots. But to remember puts me up against what I don't know. Shange's reading agitated me because she spoke with power about a world that is both alien and common to me: "the capacity to enter into the lives of others." But you can't just take the goods and run. I knew that then, sitting in the Oakland auditorium (as I know in my poetry), that the only thing worth writing about is what it seems to be unknown and, therefore, fearful.

The "unknown" is often depicted in racist literature as the "darkness" within a person. Similarly, sexist writers will refer to fear in the form of the vagina, calling it "the orifice of death." In contrast, it is a pleasure to read works such as Maxine Hong



Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, where fear and alienation are described as "the white ghosts." And yet, the bulk of literature in this country reinforces the myth that what is dark and female is evil. Consequently, each of us – whether dark, female, or both – has in some way *internalized* this oppressive imagery. What the oppressor often succeeds in doing is simply *externalizing* his fears, projecting them into the bodies of women, Asians, gays, disabled folks, whoever seems most "other."

*call me  
roach and presumptuous  
nightmare on your white pillow  
your itch to destroy  
the indestructible  
part of yourself*

– Audre Lorde<sup>2</sup>

But it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on. He fears the immobilization threatened by his own own incipient guilt. He fears he will have to change his life once he has seen himself in the bodies of the people he has called different. He fears the hatred, anger, and vengeance of those he has hurt.

This is the oppressor's nightmare, but it is not exclusive to him. We women have a similar nightmare, for each of us in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another. We are afraid to admit how deeply "the man's" words have been ingrained in us.

To assess the damage is a dangerous act. I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite "caught up" with my "woman-identified" politics. I have been afraid to criticize lesbian writers who choose to "skip over" these issues in the name of feminism. In 1979, we talk of

"old gay" and "butch and femme" roles as if they were ancient history. We toss them aside as merely patriarchal notions. And yet, the truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society's fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt "not woman enough" for her. I have sometimes felt "not man enough." For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions. Similarly, in a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in some one we least expect to rub up against.

When we do rub up against this person, *there* then is the challenge. *There* then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us. But we usually shrink from such a challenge.

Time and time again, I have observed that the usual response among white women's groups when the "racism issue" comes up is to deny the difference. I have heard comments like, "Well, we're open to *all* women; why don't they (women of color) come? You can only do so much..." But there is seldom any analysis of how the very nature and structure of the group itself may be founded on racist or classist assumptions. More importantly, so often the women seem to feel no loss, no lack, no absence when women of color are not involved; therefore, there is little desire to change the situation. This has hurt me deeply. I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress, is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally.

The other side of the story is that women of color and working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women. It is much easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy, rather than take responsibility for changing our own lives. We have failed to demand that white women, particularly those who claim to be speaking for all women, be accountable for their racism.

The dialogue has simply not gone deep enough.

I have many times questioned my right to even work on an anthology which is to be written "exclusively by Third World

women.” I have had to look critically at my claim to color, at a time when, among white feminist ranks, it is a “politically correct” (and sometimes peripherally advantageous) assertion to make. I must acknowledge the fact that, physically, I have had a *choice* about making that claim, in contrast to women who have not had such a choice, and have been abused for their color. I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that Southern Californian privilege as far as conscience would let me.

Well, now I feel both bleached and beached. I feel angry about this – the years when I refused to recognize privilege, both when it worked against me, and when I worked it, ignorantly, at the expense of others. These are not settled issues. This is why this work feels so risky to me. It continues to be discovery. It has brought me into contact with women who invariably know a hell of a lot more than I do about racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of their writing.

↳ I think: what is my responsibility to my roots – both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently.

But one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins. It is essential that radical feminists confront their fear of and resistance to each other, because without this, there *will* be no bread on the table. Simply, we will not survive. If we could make this connection in our heart of hearts, that if we are serious about a revolution – better – if we seriously believe there should be joy in our lives (real joy, not just “good times”), then we need one another. We women need each other. Because my/your solitary, self-asserting “go-for-the-throat-of-fear” power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. ↳ I can’t afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let’s do it: this polite timidity is killing us.

As Lorde suggests in the passage I cited earlier, it is in looking to the nightmare that the dream is found. There, the survivor emerges to insist on a future, a vision, yes, born out of what is dark and female. The feminist movement must be a movement of such survivors, a movement with a future.

September, 1979

**Notes**

1. Alix Kates Shulman, "Was My Life Worth Living?" *Red Emma Speaks*. (New York: Random House, 1972), 388.
2. From "The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches," *The New York Head Shop and Museum* (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), 48.

## **Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster**

### *Reflections of an Asian American Woman*

*Mitsuye Yamada*

Last year for the Asian segment of the Ethnic American Literature course I was teaching, I selected a new anthology entitled *Aiiiiieee!* compiled by a group of outspoken Asian American writers. During the discussion of the long but thought-provoking introduction to this anthology, one of my students blurted out that she was offended by its militant tone and that as a white person she was tired of always being blamed for the oppression of all the minorities. I noticed several of her classmates' eyes nodding in tacit agreement. A discussion of the "militant" voices in some of the other writings we had read in the course ensued. Surely, I pointed out, some of these other writings have been just as, if not more, militant as the words in this introduction? Had they been offended by those also but failed to express their feelings about them? To my surprise, they said they were not offended by any of the Black American, Chicano or American Indian writings, but were hard-pressed to explain why when I asked for an explanation. A little further discussion revealed that they "understood" the anger expressed by the Black Americans and Chicanos and they "empathized" with the frustrations and sorrow expressed by the American Indian. But the Asian Americans??

Then finally, one student said it for all of them: "It made me angry. *Their* anger made *me* angry, because I didn't even know the Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn't expect their anger."

At this time I was involved in an academic due process procedure begun as a result of a grievance I had filed the previous semester against the administrators at my college. I had filed a grievance for violation of my rights as a teacher who had worked in the district for almost eleven years. My student's remark "Their anger made me angry...I didn't expect their anger," explained for me the reactions of some of my own colleagues as well as the reactions of the administrators during those previous months. The grievance procedure was a time-consuming and emotionally draining process, but the basic principle was too important for me to ignore. That basic

principle was that I, an individual teacher, do have certain rights which are given and my superiors cannot, should not, violate them with impunity. When this was pointed out to them, however, they responded with shocked surprise that I, of all people, would take them to task for violation of what was clearly written policy in our college district. They all seemed to exclaim, "We don't understand this; this is so uncharacteristic of her; she seemed such a nice person, so polite, so obedient, so non-trouble-making." What was even more surprising was once they were forced to acknowledge that I was determined to start the due process action, they assumed I was not doing it on my own. One of the administrators suggested someone must have pushed me into this, undoubtedly some of "those feminists" on our campus, he said wryly.

In this age when women are clearly making themselves visible on all fronts, I, an Asian American woman, am still functioning as a "front for those feminists" and therefore invisible. The realization of this sinks in slowly. Asian Americans as a whole are finally coming to claim their own, demanding that they be included in the multicultural history of our country. I like to think, in spite of my administrator's myopia, that the most stereotyped minority of them all, the Asian American woman, is just now emerging to become part of that group. It took forever. Perhaps it is important to ask ourselves why it took so long. We should ask ourselves this question just when we think we are emerging as a viable minority in the fabric of our society. I should add to my student's words, "because I didn't even know they felt oppressed," that it took this long because we Asian American women have not admitted to ourselves that we *were* oppressed. We, the visible minority that is invisible.

I say this because until a few years ago I have been an Asian American woman working among non-Asians in an educational institution where most of the decision-makers were men;<sup>1</sup> an Asian American woman thriving under the smug illusion that I was *not* the stereotypic image of the Asian woman because I had a career teaching English in a community college. I did not think anything assertive was necessary to make my point. People who know me, I reasoned, the ones who count, know who I am and what I think. Thus, even when what I considered a veiled racist remark was made in a casual social setting, I would "let it

go" because it was pointless to argue with people who didn't even know their remark was racist. I had supposed that I was practicing passive resistance while being stereotyped, but it was so passive no one noticed I was resisting; it was so much my expected role that it ultimately rendered me invisible.

My experience leads me to believe that contrary to what I thought, I had actually been contributing to my own stereotyping. Like the hero in Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*, I had become invisible to white Americans, and it clung to me like a bad habit. Like most bad habits, this one crept up on me because I took it in minute doses like Mithradates' poison and my mind and body adapted so well to it I hardly noticed it was there.

For the past eleven years I have busied myself with the usual chores of an English teacher, a wife of a research chemist, and a mother of four rapidly growing children. I hadn't even done much to shatter this particular stereotype: the middle-class woman happy to be bringing home the extra income and quietly fitting into the man's world of work. When the Asian American woman is lulled into believing that people perceive her as being different from other Asian women (the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman), she is kept comfortably content with the state of things. She becomes ineffectual in the milieu in which she moves. The seemingly apolitical middle class woman and the apolitical Asian woman constituted a double invisibility.

I had created an underground culture of survival for myself and had become in the eyes of others the person I was trying not to be. Because I was permitted to go to college, permitted to take a stab at a career or two along the way, given "free choice" to marry and have a family, given a "choice" to eventually do both, I had assumed I was more or less free, not realizing that those who are free make and take choices; they do not choose from options proffered by "those out there."

I, personally, had not "emerged" until I was almost fifty years old. Apparently through a long conditioning process, I had learned how *not* to be seen for what I am. A long history of ineffectual activities had been, I realize now, initiation rites toward my eventual invisibility. The training begins in childhood; and for women and minorities, whatever is started in

childhood is continued throughout their adult lives. I first recognized just how invisible I was in my first real confrontation with my parents a few years after the outbreak of World War II.

During the early years of the war, my older brother, Mike, and I left the concentration camp in Idaho to work and study at the University of Cincinnati. My parents came to Cincinnati soon after my father's release from Internment Camp (these were POW camps to which many of the Issei<sup>2</sup> men, leaders in their communities, were sent by the FBI), and worked as domestics in the suburbs. I did not see them too often because by this time I had met and was much influenced by a pacifist who was out on a "furlough" from a conscientious objectors' camp in Trenton, North Dakota. When my parents learned about my "boy friend" they were appalled and frightened. After all, this was the period when everyone in the country was expected to be one-hundred percent behind the war effort, and the Nisei<sup>3</sup> boys who had volunteered for the Armed Forces were out there fighting and dying to prove how American we really were. However, during interminable arguments with my father and overheard arguments between my parents, I was devastated to learn they were not so much concerned about my having become a pacifist, but they were more concerned about the possibility of my marrying one. They were understandably frightened (my father's prison years of course were still fresh on his mind) about repercussions on the rest of the family. In an attempt to make my father understand me, I argued that even if I didn't marry him, I'd still be a pacifist; but my father reassured me that it was "all right" for me to be a pacifist because as a Japanese national and a "girl" *it didn't make any difference to anyone*. In frustration I remember shouting, "But can't you see, I'm philosophically committed to the pacifist cause," but he dismissed this with "In my college days we used to call philosophy, foolosophy," and that was the end of that. When they were finally convinced I was not going to marry "my pacifist," the subject was dropped and we never discussed it again.

As if to confirm my father's assessment of the harmlessness of my opinions, my brother Mike, an American citizen, was suddenly expelled from the University of Cincinnati while I, "an enemy alien," was permitted to stay. We assumed that his stand as a pacifist, although he was classified a 4-F because of his



health, contributed to his expulsion. We were told the Air Force was conducting sensitive wartime research on campus and requested his removal, but they apparently felt my presence on campus was not as threatening.

I left Cincinnati in 1945, hoping to leave behind this and other unpleasant memories gathered there during the war years, and plunged right into the politically active atmosphere at New York University where students, many of them returning veterans, were continuously promoting one cause or other by making speeches in Washington Square, passing out petitions, or staging demonstrations. On one occasion, I tagged along with a group of students who took a train to Albany to demonstrate on the steps of the State Capitol. I think I was the only Asian in this group of predominantly Jewish students from NYU. People who passed us were amused and shouted "Go home and grow up." I suppose Governor Dewey, who refused to see us, assumed we were a group of adolescents without a cause as most college students were considered to be during those days. It appears they weren't expecting any results from our demonstration. There were no newsmen, no security persons, no police. No one tried to stop us from doing what we were doing. We simply did "our thing" and went back to our studies until next time, and my father's words were again confirmed: it made no difference to anyone, being a young student demonstrator in peacetime, 1947.

Not only the young, but those who feel powerless over their own lives know what it is like not to make a difference on anyone or anything. The poor know it only too well, and we women have known it since we were little girls. The most insidious part of this conditioning process, I realize now, was that we have been trained not to expect a response in ways that mattered. We may be listened to and responded to with placating words and gestures, but our psychological mind set has already told us time and again that we were born into a ready-made world into which we must fit ourselves, and that many of us do it very well.

This mind set is the result of not believing that the political and social forces affecting our lives are determined by some person, or a group of persons, probably sitting behind a desk or around a conference table.

Just recently I read an article about "the remarkable track record of success" of the Nisei in the United States. One Nisei

was quoted as saying he attributed our stamina and endurance to our ancestors whose characters had been shaped, he said, by their living in a country which has been constantly besieged by all manner of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes. He said the Nisei has inherited a steely will, a will to endure and hence, to survive.

This evolutionary explanation disturbs me, because it equates the “act of God” (i.e. natural disasters) to the “act of man” (i.e. the war, the evacuation). The former is not within our power to alter, but the latter, I should think, is. By putting the “acts of God” on par with the acts of man, we shrug off personal responsibilities.

I have, for too long a period of time accepted the opinion of others (even though they were directly affecting my life) as if they were objective events totally out of my control. Because I separated such opinions from the persons who were making them, I accepted them the way I accepted natural disasters; and I endured them as inevitable. I have tried to cope with people whose points of view alarmed me in the same way that I had adjusted to natural phenomena, such as hurricanes, which plowed into my life from time to time. I would readjust my dismantled feelings in the same way that we repaired the broken shutters after the storm. The Japanese have an all-purpose expression in their language for this attitude of resigned acceptance: “Shikataganai.” “It can’t be helped.” “There’s nothing I can do about it.” It is said with the shrug of the shoulders and tone of finality, perhaps not unlike the “those-were-my-orders” tone that was used at the Nuremberg trials. With all the sociological studies that have been made about the causes of the evacuations of the Japanese Americans during World War II, we should know by now that “they” knew that the West Coast Japanese Americans would go without too much protest, and of course, “they” were right, for most of us (with the exception of those notable few), resigned to our fate, albeit bewildered and not willingly. We were not perceived by our government as responsive Americans; we were objects that happened to be standing in the path of the storm.

Perhaps this kind of acceptance is a way of coping with the “real” world. One stands against the wind for a time, and then succumbs eventually because there is no point to being stubborn against all odds. The wind will not respond to entreaties

anyway, one reasons; one should have sense enough to know that. I'm not ready to accept this evolutionary reasoning. It is too rigid for me; I would like to think that my new awareness is going to make me more visible than ever, and to allow me to make some changes in the "man made disaster" I live in at the present time. Part of being visible is refusing to separate the actors from their actions, and demanding that they be responsible for them.

By now, riding along with the minorities' and women's movements, I think we are making a wedge into the main body of American life, but people are still looking right through and around us, assuming we are simply tagging along. Asian American women still remain in the background and we are heard but not really listened to. Like Musak, they think we are piped into the airwaves by someone else. We must remember that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects, or let them speak freely and not listen to them with serious intent.

We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us "This is so uncharacteristic of you." To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone.

## **Notes**

1. It is hoped this will change now that a black woman is Chancellor of our college district.
2. Issei – Immigrant Japanese, living in the US.
3. Nisei – Second generation Japanese, born in the US.

# **It's In My Blood, My Face – My Mother's Voice, The Way I Sweat**

*Max Wolf Valerio*

## **Hey ya hey ya ho – where the sun does not malign the seasons**

I remember the place where the sun does not malign the seasons flutes of penitentes & headdresses for the Okan! we rub our offerings of dried meat into the earth and the holy woman comes out and dances she is wearing the sacred headdress she is one of the last qualified to do this my mother says it is because she has only been with her husband and never any other man it makes her a virgin of sorts my mother says it's hard to find a woman like that these days a holy woman and that is why I sometimes don't want to think about being Indian why sometimes I could really care less these days it's sad. There was a time three years back when I was so angry so proud I wanted so much to reclaim my language the symbols and sacred gestures the land but now? I went back to the reserve for two months traditional cultures are conservative and this one is patriarchal.

What does it mean that it is a holy woman who sets up the Okan? and why does it make her holy that only one man has touched her? is it really because she has been a good little piece of property to that one man or is it because she is a pure vessel of female power not permeated with the male? is her setting up the Okan – which is the principal ceremony of the culture – a hearkening back to earlier matriarchal times? it seems as though you can't always trust people's interpretations as their minds have been colored by Catholicism – t.v. etc. Some would like to believe that the values of the Roman Catholic Church and the values of the Native American tribal religions are one and the same. Hah! being totally traditional seems wrong as well as it seems the task is first to find out what was our tradition – feel it through the skin.

My earlier memories are the best innocence may be an escalation of memory brings desires smells of morning – standing on the porch smelling morning blue sky rolling

hills unrest ecstasy was in my soul there seemed to be balance then before I knew the meaning of the word later I wanted to go back to it the wild spacious morning air the horses corralled the red barn and the sticky hot summer nights watching the pickup trucks come in from town Being an Indian...I didn't even realize that's what I was – an Indian – in fact I jumped up and down in protest “I'm not an Indian – I'm not an Indian!” when my relatives would tell me I was. After all, Indians were the bad guys on T.V. and though we didn't have running water that year or even telephones – yes – we did have television. Apparently, there were also times when I'd scream “I'm an Indian, I'm an Indian” when my relatives would say I wasn't...Such has been life.

Just what it is to be an “Indian” – Native American – a Skin...& more importantly how do I – half blood Indian and half Chicana relate to it all? Well, sometimes I've made quite an occupation of thinking about it and sometimes, more recently, I'd rather not bother. Why bother? It seems too conceptual – and worse – too bound up with invectives. Yet – I cannot forget and I don't want to. It's in my blood, my face my mother's voice it's in my voice my speech rhythms my dreams and memories it's the shape of my legs and though I am light skinned it is my features – my eyes and face shape...it must even be the way I sweat! Why it's damn near everything! and I feel it's my yearning for wide spaces – for the flat and nude plains. Yes, I've been denied. What a shame not to speak Blackfoot. It was my mother's first language – she'd talk it over the phone long distance – she'd speak it when she went home (the blood reserve in Southern Alberta) she even spoke it in my dreams but I never learned. All that talking denied me.

### **Weird, superstitious, unnatural – Imagine in this day and age!**

My mother talking: “Christopher's wife cries by his bed. His dead wife, she cries by his bed. He had to go to a medicine man to see what was happening. She committed suicide a couple years back, she must be restless.” “My, imagine...What must it be like?” I say, “My that's something, weird.” Weird? The word foreign to me as soon as I've said it. Weird? A shadow flits

across my mother's eyes. How could that have come up? I recoil inside, I don't know the part of me that's said it. My stomach tingles. I feel tight. The word is dry, false – "weird." Of course, I remember, of course I know. "Weird" only a non-Indian would say that. Someone who doesn't know, who hasn't been raised to see that life is a continuous whole from flesh to spirit, that we're not as easily separated as some think. I knew that.

"Yea – that's good he went to see that medicine man," I say. I've been around too many people who don't see it that way, that easily. Spirits? They need proof, they are skeptical. One time I talked with some white friends for nearly two hours straight about ghosts. "Who knows? Ghosts might be real: sometimes there is proof," they said. They told me there are pictures now. Good, maybe now they will know. And that is where I learned to say "weird." Weird, superstitious, unnatural – Imagine, in this day and age.

### **The weeping was all of our pain – a collective wound**

I remember my great-grandfather Makwiyapi in his tipi. Smelling the sweet grass, mother telling me it was holy and not to touch his things. I never really got to know him. Makwiyapi, "Wolf Old Man" his english was broken and he always spoke Blackfoot. He had a sweat<sup>2</sup> lodge outside his house. He was a medicine man and once cured a man of face cancer by dreaming of a certain mixture of herbs and roots. This came to him in a dream. I grew up knowing about dreams and remedies, spirits – the still black nights on the plains. I attended my first sweat when I was sixteen, it was high in the mountains. We went to a lodge afterwards. This first sweat was so miraculous, so refreshing and so magical – it was as though God had appeared before me and walked about and danced. It reinstated my sense of the Marvelous and also a sense of sacredness. I cried inside that sweat, it seemed as though I could never stop crying as though my heart was being tugged at and finally torn loose inside my chest. Other people cried too. So much emotion is expressed in the sweat and in the medicine lodge. And the weird think about it is – you don't really know what it is you're

crying about. The emotions seem to come out of some primeval cavity – some lonesome half-remembered place. It seems when I cried it was more than an individual pain. The weeping was all of our pain – a collective wound – it is larger than each individual. In the sweat it seems as though we all remember a past – a collective presence – our past as Native people before being colonized and culturally liquidated.

### **Barrier between myself and my people**

At age seven I had a wild crush on a girl a year younger than myself that lasted a whole year. I would stare at her picture in the second grade yearbook and cry. I drew her pictures of dragons and gave them to her. It seemed a bit odd to me, but I wanted to marry her. I felt as though I was the only girl who'd ever felt these things. Perhaps there had been a mistake. I decided it would be better to be a boy and I stayed awake at night praying to turn into one. If I was a boy it would be easier to be a superhero and to be president. Finally – I decided to remain a girl and make the best of it.

We moved and I left her behind – but the memory of that early, intense feeling stayed on. It seemed so natural and heartfelt and it scared me a little. I was already becoming aware of my emotions as a lesbian – as different.

That is one of the barriers between myself and the reserve. How to explain, who can I tell, should I tell anyone? I grew up with these people, my relatives, my cousins, my aunts and uncles – various friends. I grew up loving that land and always needing to return there. Three years ago, in '77, I lived there for two months. I went out to Babb and drank at the Indian bar, I went to sweats (not right after partying however – as you have to either give up drinking completely or wait four days after last imbibing before entering the sweat lodge). I'd chase horses – go get them to ride, I jogged on the plains (all the while watching for bulls which might chase me) and hung around the house – reading, watching television and cleaning. I felt the ennui of reserve life, the timelessness, I also sensed conservatism and a limitation. People expected me to be more tied to my parents than I am, to want to live close to them, to feel more homesick at the age of

twenty for my mother and father. And yet sometimes I feel almost crippled by a homesickness inside me.

There is something sturdy and healthy about extended families, the way people care for each other, the way they depend upon and take care of one another. I feel lucky to have been touched by such a situation while growing up. But now, I would find that hard to live with. More than anything because it is patriarchal, women have a certain limited role (as do men), and I am gay. Perhaps in the old days, in some way or other I could have fit in there. But today, my lesbianism has become a barrier between myself and my people. What to say when my grandmother or aunt asks if I've met a boyfriend. The perennial lesbian problem – how to tell the folks and what to tell them.

It is hard to be around other people talking about their lives and not be able to talk about your own in the same way. It causes a false and painful separateness – which I'll have to live with and ignore until I know how and what to do otherwise.

### **You will return to the Indian way**

I lived at the North End for about a year. I was five. We had no running water so when we bathed we got water from a nearby river. For a year I enjoyed the nearby hills where there are supposed to be spirits. Now the river is thick with pollution from a factory upstream, the grass has grown tall around the old house, my grandfather has been dead twelve years. Still, each year my family visits the reserve.

Once an uncle of mine came to me in a dream, he picked me up as though I was a child saying, "Apoyakee, Apoyakee when are you going to come home and take care of the little ones?" Apoyakee is my Blackfoot name given to me by my grandpa, Shade. It means, "Light or fair-haired woman," obviously given to me because of my light hair (I was blonde as a child, the only fair complected person in my family).

Off and on, I think of going back "home" to live for a good six to twelve months. Work, have a good time, learn Blackfoot, learn how to set up a sweat, how to open up a medicine bundle, maybe learn the handgame and some songs.

Five years ago I dreamt myself waking out of my home in Littleton and out to a flat, long desert. There, beneath a shelter



of poles and sticks, an old Kainah woman sat, dressed in a kerchief and a long blue dress. Some strange looking pipes were being passed around, none of them were handed to me as none were quite right for me. These pipes were not holy or in any way recognizable to me as anything special. The old lady looked at me a long time, then she said, "You will return to the Indian way."

### **Notes**

1. The Sundance.
2. A sweat is a religious purification ceremony.

## **“Gee, You Don’t Seem Like An Indian From the Reservation”**

*Barbara Cameron*

One of the very first words I learned in my Lakota language was *wasicu* which designates white people. At that early age, my comprehension of *wasicu* was gained from observing and listening to my family discussing the *wasicu*. My grandmother always referred to white people as the “*wasicu sica*” with emphasis on *sica*, our word for terrible or bad. By the age of five I had seen one Indian man gunned down in the back by the police and was a silent witness to a gang of white teenage boys beating up an elderly Indian man. I’d hear stories of Indian ranch hands being “accidentally” shot by white ranchers. I quickly began to understand the *wasicu* menace my family spoke of.

My hatred for the *wasicu* was solidly implanted by the time I entered first grade. Unfortunately in first grade I became teacher’s pet so my teacher had a fondness for hugging me which always repulsed me. I couldn’t stand the idea of a white person touching me. Eventually I realized that it wasn’t the white skin that I hated, but it was their culture of deceit, greed, racism, and violence.

During my first memorable visit to a white town, I was appalled that they thought of themselves as superior to my people. Their manner of living appeared devoid of life and bordered on hostility even for one another. They were separated from each other by their perfectly, politely fenced square plots of green lawn. The only lawns on my reservation were the lawns of the BIA<sup>1</sup> officials or white christians. The white people always seemed so loud, obnoxious, and vulgar. And the white parents were either screaming at their kids, threatening them with some form of punishment or hitting them. After spending a day around white people, I was always happy to go back to the reservation where people followed a relaxed yet respectful code of relating with each other. The easy teasing and joking that were inherent with the Lakota were a welcome relief after a day with the plastic faces.

I vividly remember two occasions during my childhood in which I was cognizant of being an Indian. The first time was at about three years of age when my family took me to my first pow-wow. I kept asking my grandmother, "Where are the Indians? Where are the Indians? Are they going to have bows and arrows?" I was very curious and strangely excited about the prospect of seeing real live Indians even though I myself was one. It's a memory that has remained with me through all these years because it's so full of the subtleties of my culture. There was a sweet wonderful aroma in the air from the dancers and from the traditional food booths. There were lots of grandmothers and grandfathers with young children running about. Pow-wows in the Plains usually last for three days, sometimes longer, with Indian people traveling from all parts of our country to dance, to share food and laughter, and to be with each other. I could sense the importance of our gathering times and it was the beginning of my awareness that my people are a great and different nation.

The second time in my childhood when I knew very clearly that I am Indian occurred when I was attending an all white (except for me) elementary school. During Halloween my friends and I went trick or treating. At one of the last stops, the mother knew all of the children except for me. She asked me to remove my mask so she could see who I was. After I removed my mask, she realized I was an Indian and quite cruelly told me so, refusing to give me the treats my friends had received. It was a stinging painful experience.

I told my mother about it the next evening after I tried to understand it. My mother was outraged and explained the realities of being an Indian in South Dakota. My mother paid a visit to the woman which resulted in their expressing a barrage of equal hatred for one another. I remember sitting in our pick-up hearing the intensity of the anger and feeling very sad that my mother had to defend her child to someone who wasn't worthy of her presence.

I spent a part of my childhood feeling great sadness and helplessness about how it seemed that Indians were open game for the white people, to kill, maim, beat up, insult, rape, cheat, or whatever atrocity the white people wanted to play with. There was also a rage and frustration that has not died. When I look

back on reservation life it seems that I spent a great deal of time attending the funerals of my relatives or friends of my family. During one year I went to funerals of four murder victims. Most of my non-Indian friends have not seen a dead body or have not been to a funeral. Death was so common on the reservation that I did not understand the implications of the high death rate until after I moved away and was surprised to learn that I’ve seen more dead bodies than my friends will probably ever see in their lifetime.

Because of experiencing racial violence, I sometimes panic when I’m the only non-white in a roomful of whites, even if they are my closest friends; I wonder if I’ll leave the room alive. The seemingly copacetic gay world of San Francisco becomes a mere dream after the panic leaves. I think to myself that it’s truly insane for me to feel the panic. I want to scream out my anger and disgust with myself for feeling distrustful of my white friends and I want to banish the society that has fostered those feelings of alienation. I wonder at the amount of assimilation which has affected me and how long my “Indianness” will allow me to remain in a city that is far removed from the lives of many Native Americans.

“Alienation” and “assimilation” are two common words used to describe contemporary Indian people. I’ve come to despise those two words because what leads to “alienation” and “assimilation” should not be so concisely defined. And I generally mistrust words that are used to define Native Americans and Brown People. I don’t like being put under a magnifying glass and having cute liberal terms describe who I am. The “alienation” or “assimilation” that I manifest is often in how I speak. There isn’t necessarily a third world language but there is an Indian way of talking that is an essential part of me. I like it, I love it, yet I deny it. I “save” it for when I’m around other Indians. It is a way of talking that involves “Indian humor” which I know for sure non-Indian people would not necessarily understand.

*Articulate. Articulate.* I’ve heard that word used many times to describe third world people. White people seem so surprised to find brown people who can speak fluent english and are even perhaps educated. We then become “articulate.” I think I spend a lot of time being articulate with white people. Or as one

person said to me a few years ago, "Gee, you don't seem like an Indian from the reservation."

I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between the white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy balance to maintain. Sometimes some of us are not so successful with it. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate.

When I was about 20, I dreamt of myself at the age of 25-26, standing at a place on my reservation, looking to the North, watching a glorious, many-colored horse galloping toward me from the sky. My eyes were riveted and attracted to the beauty and overwhelming strength of the horse. The horse's eyes were staring directly into mine, hypnotizing me and holding my attention. Slowly from the East, an eagle was gliding toward the horse. My attention began to be drawn toward the calm of the eagle but I still did not want to lose sight of the horse. Finally the two met with the eagle sailing into the horse causing it to disintegrate. The eagle flew gently on.

I take this prophetic dream as an analogy of my balance between the white (horse) and Indian (eagle) world. Now that I am 26, I find that I've gone as far into my exploration of the white world as I want. It doesn't mean that I'm going to run off to live in a tipi. It simply means that I'm not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those who are not bastards of the Pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.

Racism is not easy for me to write about because of my own racism toward other people of color, and because of a complex set of "racisms" within the Indian community. At times animosity exists between half-breed, full-blood, light-skinned Indians, dark-skinned Indians, and non-Indians who attempt to pass as Indians. The US government has practiced for many years its divisiveness in the Indian community by instilling and perpetuating these Indian vs. Indian tactics. Native Americans are the foremost group of people who continuously fight against pre-meditated cultural genocide.

I've grown up with misconceptions about Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. I'm still in the process of trying to eliminate my racist pictures of other people of color. I know most of *my* images of other races come from television, books, movies,

newspapers, and magazines. Who can pinpoint exactly where racism comes from? There are certain political dogmas that are excellent in their "analysis" of racism and how it feeds the capitalist system. To intellectually understand that it is wrong or politically incorrect to be racist leaves me cold. A lot of poor or working-class white and brown people are just as racist as the "capitalist pig." We are *all* continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we *all* pump it out. I don't think there are easy answers or formulas. My personal attempts at eliminating my racism have to start at the base level of those mind-sets that inhibit my relationships with people.

Racism among third world people is an area that needs to be discussed and dealt with honestly. We form alliances loosely based on the fact that we have a common oppressor, yet we do not have a commitment to talk about our own fears and misconceptions about each other. I've noticed that liberal, consciousness-raised white people tend to be incredibly polite to third world people at parties or other social situations. It's almost as if they make a point to SHAKE YOUR HAND or to introduce themselves and then run down all the latest right-on third world or Native American books they've just read. On the other hand it's been my experience that if there are several third world gay people at a party, we make a point of avoiding each other, and spend our time talking to the whites to show how sophisticated and intelligent we are. I've always wanted to introduce myself to other third world people but wondered how I would introduce myself or what would I say. There are so many things I would want to say, except sometimes I don't want to remember I'm Third World or Native American. I don't want to remember sometimes because it means recognizing that we're outlaws.

At the Third World Gay Conference in October 1979, the Asian and Native American people in attendance felt the issues affecting us were not adequately included in the workshops. Or representation and leadership had minimal input which resulted in a skimpy educational process about our struggles. The conference glaringly pointed out to us the narrow definition held by some people that third world means black people only. It was a depressing experience to sit in the lobby of Harambee House with other Native Americans and Asians, feeling removed from other third world groups with whom there is supposed to be this

automatic solidarity and empathy. The Indian group sat in my motel room discussing and exchanging our experiences within the third world context. We didn't spend much time in workshops conducted by other third world people because of feeling unwelcomed at the conference and demoralized by having an invisible presence. What's worse than being invisible among your own kind?

It is of particular importance to us as third world gay people to begin a serious interchange of sharing and educating ourselves about each other. We not only must struggle with the racism and homophobia of straight white america, but must often struggle with the homophobia that exists within our third world communities. Being third world doesn't always connote a political awareness or activism. I've met a number of third world and Native American lesbians who've said they're just into "being themselves," and that politics has no meaning in their lives. I agree that everyone is entitled to "be themselves" but in a society that denies respect and basic rights to people because of their ethnic background, I feel that individuals cannot idly sit by and allow themselves to be co-opted by the dominant society. I don't know what moves a person to be politically active or to attempt to raise the quality of life in our world. I only know what motivates my political responsibility...the death of Anna Mae Aquash – Native American freedom fighter – "mysteriously" murdered by a bullet in the head; Raymond Yellow Thunder – forced to dance naked in front of a white VFW club in Nebraska – murdered; Rita Silk-Nauni – imprisoned for life for defending her child; my dear friend Mani Lucas-Papago – shot in the back of the head outside of a gay bar in Phoenix. The list could go on and on. My Native American History, recent and past, moves me to continue as a political activist.

And in the white gay community there is rampant racism which is never adequately addressed or acknowledged. My friend Chrystos from the Menominee Nation gave a poetry reading in May 1980, at a Bay Area feminist bookstore. Her reading consisted of poems and journal entries in which she wrote honestly from her heart about the many "isms" and contradictions in most of our lives. Chrystos' bluntly revealing observations on her experiences with the white-lesbian-feminist-

community are similar to mine and are probably echoed by other lesbians of color.

Her honesty was courageous and should be representative of the kind of forum our community needs to openly discuss mutual racism. A few days following Chrystos' reading, a friend who was in the same bookstore overheard a white lesbian denounce Chrystos' reading as anti-lesbian and racist.

A few years ago, a white lesbian telephoned me requesting an interview, explaining that she was taking Native American courses at a local university, and that she needed data for her paper on gay Native Americans. I agreed to the interview with the idea that I would be helping a "sister" and would also be able to educate her about Native American struggles. After we completed the interview, she began a diatribe on how sexist Native Americans are, followed by a questioning session in which I was to enlighten her mind about why Native Americans are so sexist. I attempted to rationally answer her inane racist and insulting questions, although my inner response was to tell her to remove herself from my house. Later it became very clear how I had been manipulated as a sounding board for her ugly and distorted views about Native Americans. Her arrogance and disrespect were characteristic of the racist white people in South Dakota. If I tried to point it out, I'm sure she would have vehemently denied her racism.

During the Brigg's Initiative scare, I was invited to speak at a rally to represent Native American solidarity against the initiative. The person who spoke prior to me expressed a pro-Bakke sentiment which the audience booed and hissed. His comments left the predominantly white audience angry and in disruption. A white lesbian stood up demanding that a third world person address the racist comments he had made. The MC, rather than taking responsibility for restoring order at the rally, realized that I was the next speaker and I was also T-H-I-R-D-W-O-R-L-D!! I refused to address the remarks of the previous speaker because of the attitudes of the MC and the white lesbian that only third world people are responsible for speaking out against racism. *It is inappropriate for progressive or liberal white people to expect warriors in brown armor to eradicate racism.* There must be co-responsibility from people of color and white people



to equally work on this issue. It is not just MY responsibility to point out and educate about racist activities and beliefs.

Redman, redskin, savage, heathen, injun, american indian, first americans, indigenous peoples, natives, amerindian, native american, nigger, negro, black, wet back, greaser, mexican, spanish, latin, hispanic, chicano, chink, oriental, asian, disadvantaged, special interest group, minority, third world, fourth world, people of color, illegal aliens – oh yes about them, will the US government recognize that the Founding Fathers (you know George Washington and all those guys) are this country's first illegal aliens.

*We are named by others and we are named by ourselves.*

### **Epilogue...**

Following writing most of this, I went to visit my home in South Dakota. It was my first visit in eight years. I kept putting off my visit year after year because I could not tolerate the white people there and the ruralness and poverty of the reservation. And because in the eight years since I left home, I came out as a lesbian. My visit home was overwhelming. Floods and floods of locked memories broke. I rediscovered myself there in the hills, on the prairies, in the sky, on the road, in the quiet nights, among the stars, listening to the distant yelps of coyotes, walking on Lakota earth, seeing Bear Butte, looking at my grandparents' cragged faces, standing under wakiyan, smelling the Paha Sapa (Black Hills), and being with my precious circle of relatives.

My sense of time changed, my manner of speaking changed, and a certain freedom with myself returned.

I was sad to leave but recognized that a significant part of myself has never left and never will. And that part is what gives me strength – the strength of my people's enduring history and continuing belief in the sovereignty of our lives.

### **Notes**

1. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

## **“. . . And Even Fidel Can't Change That!"**

*Aurora Levins Morales*

1

Cherrie, you asked me to write about internationalism, and at first it made sense...I'm a Latin woman in the United States, closely involved with Latin American movements in the rest of the continent. I *should* write about the connection. But when I tried, all I could think was: No, write about the separation.

2

For me the point of terror, the point of denial is the New York Puerto Rican. My mother was born in New York in 1930, raised in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. I represent the generation of return. I was born deep in the countryside of Puerto Rico and except for four years when I was very young, lived there until I was 13. For my mother, the Barrio is safety, warmth. For me, it's the fear of racist violence that clipped her tongue of all its open vowels, into crisp, imitation British. She once told me her idea of hell was to be a single mother of two children under five in the South Bronx. I'm afraid of ever knowing what she meant.

Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with the kids who called me "Americanita," but I stayed on the safe side of that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom, not spic - living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the dark, bad city kids in Nueva York.

3

The point of terror, of denial, the point of hatred is the tight dress stretched across my grandmother's big breasts, the coquettish, well made-up smile: grandmother, aunt and greataunts all decked out in sex, talking about how I'm pretty, talking about how men are only good for one thing, hating sex and gloating over the hidden filthiness in everything, looking me over, in a hurry to find me a boyfriend, and in the same breath: "you can't travel alone! You don't know what men are like...*they only want one thing...*" Women teaching women our bodies are disgusting and dirty, our desires are obscene, men are all sick

and want only one sickening thing from us. Saying, you've got to learn how to hold out on 'em just enough to get what you want. It's the only item you can put on the market, so better make it go far, and when you have to deliver, lie down and grit your teeth and bear it, because there's no escape.

4

And yet, I tell you, I love those women for facing up to the ugliness there. No romance, no roses and moonlight and pure love. You say pure love to one of these women and they snort and ask you what the man has between his legs and is it pure? I love these women for the bitch sessions that pool common knowledge and tell the young wife: "Oh, yes, the first time he cheated on me I tried that, too, but he just beat me. Listen, don't give him the satisfaction. The next time..." These women don't believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond, the inviolable privacy of the husband-wife unit. The cattiness is mixed with the information, tips. The misery is communal.

5

Claustrophobia. A reality I can't make a dent in...because it's the misery that's communal. The resistance is individual and frowned upon. It rocks the boat. How many times has a Latin woman stood up for me in private, then stabbed me in the back when the moment comes for the support that counts. How many times has a Latin woman used me to bitch to and then gone running to men for approval, leaving me in the lurch. The anger is real and deep: You have forced me to turn out of my own culture to find allies worthy of the name; you have forced me into a room full of Anglo women who nod sympathetically and say: "Latin men are soooo much worse than Anglo men..." Why the last time I was in Mexico, you couldn't walk down the streets without some guy...It must be so hard for you to be a Latin feminist..." And not to betray you in the face of their racism, I betray myself, and in the end, you, by not saying: It's not the men who exile me...it's the women. I don't trust the women.

6

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. Light skinned, fine, black hair: I'm Italian, she would tell them, keeping the dark-skinned husband, keeping the daughters out of sight. I have pretended that pain, that shame, that anger never touched me, does not stain my skin. She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and giridle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanness neighborhoods.

7

Piri Thomas' book *Down These Mean Streets* followed me around for years, in the corner of my eye on bus terminal bookracks. Finally, in a gritted teeth desperation I faced the damn thing and said "OK, tell me." I sweated my way through it in two nights: Gang fights, knifings, robberies, smack, prison. It's the standard Puerto Rican street story, except *he* lived. The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English, nothing but my mother marrying into the middle class, between me and that life.

8

The image stays with me of my mother's family fleeing their puertoricanness, the first spics on the block, behind them, the neighborhoods collapsing into slums. There was a war, she told me. The enemy was only a step behind. I borrow the pictures from my other family, the nightmares of my Jewish ancestry, and imagine them fleeing through the streets. My mother never went back to look. This year she saw on television the ruins of the Tiffany Street of her childhood, unrecognizable, bombarded by poverty and urban renewal into an image of some European city: 1945. Like the Jews, like many people, the place she could have returned to has been destroyed.

9

I saw a baby once, the same age as my fat, crowing baby brother, then six months old. I was twelve, and under the

influence of our Seventh Day Adventist teacher some of the girls in the seventh grade took up a collection for two poor families in the neighborhood. We bought them each one bag of groceries. This baby was just a little bit of skin stretched over a tiny skeleton. It hardly moved. It didn't even cry. It just lay there. The woman's husband had left her. The oldest boy, he was 13 or 14, worked picking coffee to help out. When we came the younger kids hid in the mother's skirts and she just stood there, crying and crying.

I ran straight home when we left and the first thing I did was to find my brother and hug him very tightly. Then I spent the rest of the afternoon feeding him.

If something had happened to my father, the ghost over my mother's shoulder would have caught up with us. Papi was our middle class passport. I grew up a professor's daughter, on the road to college, speaking good English. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton.

## 10

Writing this I am browner than I have ever been. Spanish ripples on my tongue and I *want* the accent. I walk through the Mission drinking in the sounds. I go into La Borinqueña and buy *yautia* and *plátano* for dinner. Facing up to the terror, ending the denial, refusing to obey the rule "Don't talk bad about your own people in front of anyone else." I have never learned to dance salsa. My body goes rigid when the music plays. Oh yes, I tap my feet, and now and then I do a few steps, swing around the room with someone who doesn't know more than I do...but if I'm in a Latin scene I freeze. I can't make my hips fluid or keep my feet from tripping. It's the perversion of sexuality that frightens me. It's the way the women around me exude a sexiness that has nothing to do with the heart. Of course Latin Women love as well as any other women...but while the chilliest Anglo-Saxon repression of sex pretends it simply doesn't exist, Latin repression says it's a filthy fact of life, use it for what it's worth...shake it in his face, wear it as a decoy. It's all over the

floor and it's cold and savage. It's the hatred of the powerless, turned crooked.

11

Sitting in the kitchen in oh-so-white New Hampshire with old friends, mother and daughter, Ceci says, "It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughter will have it easier, but *her* daughter will be raised differently. In the third generation the daughters are free." I'm not thinking then of this essay, but days later when I sit down again to work, the phrase keeps ringing: *In the third generation the daughters are free.*

12

"Don't you think I've swallowed my mouthful of blood? It's different for a man. You're too stubborn...you've always wanted your own way. It was this way for my grandmother, it was this way for my mother, it was this way for me...because this is the way it is. God made men and women different and even Fidel can't change that! Anything is better than being alone."

Older woman in *Portrait of Teresa*  
Cuban film, 1979

13

The relationship between mother and daughter stands in the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world.

*A revolution capable of healing our wounds.* If we're the ones who can imagine it, if we're the ones who dream about it, if we're the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it.

*We're the ones.*

# **I Walk in the History of My People**

*Chrystos*

There are women locked in my joints  
for refusing to speak to the police  
My red blood full of those  
arrested, in flight, shot  
My tendons stretched brittle with anger  
do not look like white roots of peace  
In my marrow are hungry faces who live on land the whites  
don't want  
In my marrow women who walk 5 miles every day for water  
In my marrow the swollen faces of my people who are not  
allowed  
to hunt  
to move  
to be

In the scars on my knee you can see children torn from  
their families  
bludgeoned into government schools  
You can see through the pins in my bones that we are prisoners  
of a long war

My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it  
The pus of the past oozes from every pore  
The infection has gone on for at least 300 years  
My sacred beliefs have been made pencils, names of cities,  
gas stations  
My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly  
Anger is my crutch  
I hold myself upright with it  
My knee is wounded  
see  
How I Am Still Walking

*And When You Leave,  
Take Your Pictures  
With You*

*Racism in the Women's  
Movement*





Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972  
Mixed media, 11.75" x 8" x 2.75"  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum  
Photo by Benjamin Blackwell

# And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You

## *Racism in the Women's Movement*

*The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.<sup>1</sup>*

– Barbara Smith

We women of color are the veterans of a class and color war that is still escalating in the feminist movement. This section attempts to describe in tangible ways how, under the name of feminism, white women of economic and educational privilege have used that privilege at the expense of Third World women. Although the original intent of including a section in this anthology specifically about racism in the movement was to make a *connection* with white women, it *feels* now more like a separation.

Things have gotten worse. In academic and cultural circles, Third World women have become the subject matter of many literary and artistic endeavors by white women, and yet we are refused access to the pen, the publishing house, the galleries, and the classroom. “Only for the sake of art/Millicent, do you rise/tall from the ink” (Daniels). Our traditional native cultures are ripped off from us and are displayed as the artifacts of “primitive” peoples by white Bohemian liberated women headed for the West Coast. In leftist feminist circles we are dealt with as a political issue, rather than as flesh and blood human beings. We represent the party line, but the truth is, “We’re not as happy as we look/on their/wall” (Carrillo). We have had it with the word “*outreach*” referring to our joining racist white women’s organizations. The question keeps coming up – where exactly then, is *in*? It smells like white to us. We have had it.

Repeatedly acknowledged throughout this section and infusing the entire contents of this anthology is our understanding that theory alone cannot wipe out racism. We do

not experience racism, whether directed at ourselves or others, theoretically. Neither do white women.

How does one then emotionally come to terms with racism? None of us in this book can challenge others to confront questions that we ourselves have not confronted. How do we deal with the ways in which this diseased society has infused our very blood systems? How do we take personal responsibility for our own racist actions and assumptions?

As Third World women we clearly have a different relationship to racism than white women, but all of us are born into an environment where racism exists. Racism affects all of our lives, but it is only white women who can “afford” to remain oblivious to these effects. The rest of us have had it breathing or bleeding down our necks.

But you work with what you have, whatever your skin color. Racism is societal and institutional. It implies the power to implement racist ideology. Women of color do not have such power, but white women are born with it and the greater their economic privilege, the greater their power. This is how white middle-class women emerge among feminist ranks as the greatest propagators of racism in the movement. Rather than using the privilege they have to crumble the institutions that house the source of their own oppression – sexism, along with racism – they oftentimes deny their privilege in the form of “downward mobility,” or keep it intact in the form of guilt. Fear is a feeling – fear of losing one’s power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Guilt is *not* a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is real. Possibly this is the emotional, non-theoretical place from which serious anti-racist work among white feminists can begin.

The women writing here are committed feminists. We are challenging white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still *want* to believe that they really *want* freedom for *all* of us. The letter from Audre Lorde to Mary Daly appearing in this section is an example to all of us of how we as feminists can criticize each other. It is an act of love to take someone at her word, to expect the most out of a woman who calls herself a feminist – to challenge her as you yourself wish to be challenged.

As women, on some level we all know oppression. We must use this knowledge, as Rosario Morales suggests, to “identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt.”

....For “We are all in the same boat.”  
And it is sinking fast.

### Notes

1. From a talk given at the closing session at the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) Conference, May 1979; appeared in *Frontiers*, vol. v, no. 1 (1980).

## **And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You**

*Jo Carrillo*

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
sitting at a factory machine  
wielding a machete  
in our bright bandanas  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives  
Our white sisters  
radical friends  
should think  
again.

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
walking to the fields in hot sun  
with straw hat on head if brown  
bandana if black  
in bright embroidered shirts  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
smiling.

Our white sisters radical friends  
should think again.

No one smiles  
at the beginning of a day spent  
digging for souvenir chunks of uranium  
of cleaning up after  
our white sisters  
radical friends

And when our white sisters  
radical friends see us  
in the flesh

And When You Leave . . . 67

not as a picture they own,  
they are not quite as sure  
if  
they like us as much.  
We're not as happy as we look  
on  
their  
wall.

## **Beyond the Cliffs of Abiquiu<sup>1</sup>**

*Jo Carrillo*

She calls you a rock.  
He calls you a rock.  
They both agree that you  
are unworthy  
of anything  
but a slow death.

Her skin is white;  
more parched than  
the land she hates.  
Silver fades into her arm  
turquoise matches  
nothing  
more than her  
eyes  
but she wears it.

two cliffs little trees lots of rocks  
is this land nothing but a rock? She asks  
while gracefully walking back to her  
MG

OH, yes I know, I live here  
in this desert  
and let me tell you...!  
The whole place is  
parched.  
Just one great big rock.

Let me see,  
do I have time to put on my  
my  
my  
squash blossom.

It's Authentic Navajo Indian Laguna Pueblo  
design from  
Buen Muir Indian Trading Post

completely  
staffed  
by  
whites  
except of course  
for the janitor.

How can it be  
that the mines  
the uranium cancer causing dangerous radon gas emitting  
mines  
are worked by Navajos and other assorted  
types  
and the trading posts  
are all  
all  
worked over  
by whites?

The mines belong to them  
too;  
don't enjoy the work as much?  
Rather sell Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made  
real  
live  
Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingos?

It's  
less  
of a mess.

Oh, those Indians.  
They are  
all  
just  
drunks.  
Can't even go through Gallup  
without seeing at least  
at least  
at least



ten of them.

Oh, let's step into this Navajo rug shop  
while we're here.

But you don't have *that*  
in San Francisco Los Angeles New York  
Albuquerque.

They are really lovely rugs  
my whole house is done  
in

Navajo rugs

it's adobe

in Corrales

by the river

lots of

rich

whites

with Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made real live

Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingo

artifacts.

There is a village

over

that

hill.

## Notes

1. My poem to the land that, along with South Dakota, is a "proposed National Sacrifice" area for energy (uranium, coal, coal gasification, etc.).

# **I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me**

*Chrystos*

5:23 am – May 1980

I am afraid of white people      Never admitted that before  
deep secret

I think about all the white women I knew in San Francisco  
Women with Master's degrees from Stanford University & cars  
that daddy bought, women with straight white teeth & clear skins  
from thousands of years of proper nutrition      They chose to be  
poor      They were quite convincing in the role of oppressed  
victim      I want to tell them to go down to Fillmore & Haight &  
tell somebody about it      Tell Jim my old landlord who picked  
cotton since he was 6 moved here for a better life lost his hearing  
& his teeth & his hair from working in the shipyards for 35 years  
The constant vibration of his drill on the metal literally shook his  
teeth out      He went bald from always wearing a safety helmet  
He can't hear after years of that racket      He worked so hard for  
35 years & he is still poor      They live on Webster street, across  
from the projects      The house is an old Victorian which will not  
be paid off unless he lives to be 89 which is unlikely.

I read the funniest line in a health book yesterday      It said,  
that for some "unknown" reason, more black people had  
hypertension than white people      Not funny      No mystery  
Most Indian people don't usually live long enough to even GET  
hypertension      All the deaths I carry so heavily      Faces I knew  
Mani murdered in Phoenix by whites outside a bar      whites  
who still have not gone to trial      Ron dying of pneumonia      I  
still mourn him      death      None of my relatives has a degree  
from Stanford      Neither did Jim      So those poor white girls are  
still suffering mightily in my old home town of San Francisco

It did not help that it occurred to me that no amount of  
education was going to improve my lot in life if I didn't also  
change my attitude about the society      I still think that 98% of  
what happens – liberal, conservative or radical lesbian separatist  
is: bullshit      My attitude is all I own      so I quit school

All the schools & crazy houses I was in were simply  
brainwashing & most of the feminist movement that I worked so

hard to be a part of was propaganda. This is heresy but it held no solution for me. Surely Jane suffers oppression on her job because she is a woman. All the problems and issues which feminism raises are valid & important. It simply does not give me any answers for correct behavior in my own life. Certainly I won't obey that lesbian mafia nonsense that one must dress in a certain way or cut off one's hair to be real. Those are all the most superficial rules. Silly. I no longer believe that feminism is a tool which can eliminate racism – or even promote better understanding between different races & kinds of women. I have felt less understanding between different races & from many lesbian women than I do from some straight people. At least their heterosexual indifference allows me more freedom to be myself. I felt so much stricture & censorship from lesbians I was supposed to be a carpenter to prove I was a real dyke. My differences were sloughed over. None of them came to a pow wow or an AIM<sup>1</sup> fundraiser to see about *me*. Above all I could not enjoy & love being a woman. Jane commented when I first met her that she didn't care for most lesbians because they didn't like women. They didn't like themselves. Of course it is extremely difficult to like oneself in a culture which thinks you are a disease.

Many of the lesbians I knew seemed to throw off the outer trappings of their culture & were very vocal in criticizing it. Yet, they had no joy, no new roads. Night after night in endless picky meetings discussing everyone's inadequacies & faults & the harm which men do or night after night in dreary body shop bars drinking themselves into a stupor I worked so hard as part of a local women's coffeeshop & bookstore, harder than I've ever worked. I ordered for the kitchen, & the art shows, did shifts, brought flowers, cleaned, met the pest man & phone man, did entertainment, washed a million coffee cups. Recently someone told me that a young lesbian whose parents have given her a law practice, commented that she remembered me. I didn't work she said. All I did was talk to people. I remember her too. She was one of the thousands of women whose names & faces I memorized & tried to understand only to have them disappear after 3 months or whenever they found a lover. After 3-1/2 years I had so little left of myself. So many bitter memories of women who disrespected me & others. A woman

who called herself a communist but supported capitalist enterprises of women, rather than our brave collective worker-owned effort The lies, pretensions, the snobbery & cliquishness The racism which bled through every moment at every level The terrifying & useless struggle to be accepted The awful gossip, bitchiness, backbiting & jealousy The gross lack of love

I left the women's movement utterly drained I have no interest in returning My dreams of crossing barriers to true understanding were false Most of the white women I thought I was close to want nothing to do with me now Perhaps white women are so rarely loyal because they do not have to be There are thousands of them to pick up & discard No responsibility to others The bathing beauties They want the status of reality & respect without labor Respect us simply because we exist Give us what we want now My bitterness distorts my words

I don't understand those who turned away from me

## Notes

1. American Indian Movement

## **Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism**

*Mitsuye Yamada*

Most of the Asian Pacific American women I know agree that we need to make ourselves more visible by speaking out on the condition of our sex and race on certain political issues which concern us. Some of us feel that visibility through the feminist perspective is the only logical step for us. However, this path is fraught with problems which we are unable to solve among us, because in order to do so, we need the help and cooperation of the white feminist leaders, the women who coordinate programs, direct women's buildings, and edit women's publications throughout the county. Women's organizations tell us they would like to have us "join" them and give them "input." These are the better ones; at least they know we exist and feel we might possibly have something to say of interest to them, but every time I read or speak to a group of people about the condition of my life as an Asian Pacific woman, it is as if I had never spoken before, as if I were speaking to a brand new audience of people who had never known an Asian Pacific woman who is other than the passive, sweet etc. stereotype of the "Oriental" woman.

When Third World women are asked to speak representing our racial or ethnic group, we are expected to move, charm or entertain, but not to educate in ways that are threatening to our audiences. We speak to audiences that sift out those parts of our speech (if what we say does not fit the image they have of us), come up to shake our hands with "That was lovely my dear, just lovely," and go home with the same mind set they come in with. No matter what we say or do, the stereotype still hangs on. I am weary of starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite. It is too bad not many people remember that one of the two persons in Seattle who stood up to contest the constitutionality of the Evacuation Order in 1942 was a young Japanese American woman. As individuals and in groups, we Asian Pacific women have been (more intensively than ever in the past few years) active in community affairs and

speaking and writing about our activities. From the highly political writings published in *Asian Women* in 1971 (incisive and trenchant articles, poems and articles), to more recent voices from the Basement Workshop in New York City to Unbound Feet in San Francisco, as well as those Asian Pacific women showcased at the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences in New York, Hawaii and California this year, these all tell us we *have* been active and vocal. And yet, we continue to hear, "Asian women are of course traditionally not attuned to being political," as if most other women are; or that Asian women are too happily bound to their traditional roles as mothers and wives, as if the same cannot be said of a great number of white American women among us.

When I read in *Plexus* recently that at a Workshop for Third World women in San Francisco, Cherríe Moraga exploded with "What each of us needs to do about what we don't know is to go look for it," I felt like standing up and cheering her. She was speaking at the Women's Building to a group of white sisters who were saying, in essence, "It is *your* responsibility as Third World women to teach *us*." If the majority culture knows so little about us, it must be *our* problem, they seem to be telling us; the burden of teaching is on us. I do not want to be unfair; I know individual women and some women's groups that have taken on the responsibility of teaching themselves through reaching out to women of color, but such gestures by the majority of women's groups are still tentatively made because of the sometimes touchy reaction of women who are always being asked to be "tokens" at readings and workshops.

Earlier this year, when a group of Asian Pacific American women gathered together in San Francisco poet Nellie Wong's home to talk about feminism, I was struck by our general agreement on the subject of feminism *as an ideal*. We all believed in equality for women. We agreed that it is important for each of us to know what it means to be a woman in our society, to know the historical and psychological forces that have shaped and are shaping our thoughts which in turn determine the directions of our lives. We agreed that feminism means a commitment to making changes in our own lives and a conviction that as women we have the equipment to do so. One by one, as we sat around the table and talked (we women of all

ages ranging from our early twenties to the mid-fifties, single and married, mothers and lovers, straight women and lesbians), we knew what it was we wanted out of feminism, and what it was supposed to mean to us. For women to achieve equality in our society, we agreed, we must continue to work for a common goal.

But there was a feeling of disappointment in that living room toward the women's movement as it stands today. One young woman said she had made an effort to join some women's groups with high expectations but came away disillusioned because these groups were not receptive to the issues that were important to her as an Asian woman. Women in these groups, were, she said "into pushing their own issues" and were no different from the other organizations that imposed opinions and goals on their members rather than having them shaped by the needs of the members in the organizations. Some of the other women present said that they felt the women's organizations with feminist goals are still "a middle-class women's thing." This pervasive feeling of mistrust toward the women in the movement is fairly representative of a large group of women who live in the psychological place we now call Asian Pacific America. A movement that fights sexism in the social structure must deal with racism, and we had hoped the leaders in the women's movement would be able to see the parallels in the lives of the women of color and themselves, and would "join" *us* in our struggle and give *us* "input."

It should not be difficult to see that Asian Pacific women need to affirm our own culture while working within it to change it. Many of the leaders in the women's organizations today had moved naturally from civil rights politics of the 60's to sexual politics, while very few of the Asian Pacific women who were involved in radical politics during the same period have emerged as leaders in these same women's organizations. Instead they have become active in groups promoting ethnic identity, most notably ethnic studies in universities, ethnic theater groups or ethnic community agencies. This doesn't mean that we have placed our loyalties on the side of ethnicity over womanhood. The two are not at war with one another; we shouldn't have to sign a "loyalty oath" favoring one over the other. However, women of color are often made to feel that we must make a choice between the two.

If I have more recently put my energies into the Pacific Asian American Center (a job center for Asians established in 1975, the only one of its kind in Orange County, California) and the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences (this first of its kind in our history), it is because the needs in these areas are so great. I have thought of myself as a feminist first, but my ethnicity cannot be separated from my feminism.

Through the women's movement, I have come to truly appreciate the meaning of my mother's life and the lives of immigrant women like her. My mother, at nineteen years of age, uprooted from her large extended family, was brought to this country to bear and raise four children alone. Once here, she found that her new husband who had been here as a student for several years prior to their marriage was a bachelor-at-heart and had no intention of changing his lifestyle. Stripped of the protection and support of her family, she found the responsibilities of raising us alone in a strange country almost intolerable during those early years. I thought for many years that my mother did not love us because she often spoke of suicide as an easy way out of her miseries. I know now that for her to have survived "just for the sake" of her children took great strength and determination.

If I digress it is because I, a second generation Asian American woman who grew up believing in the American Dream, have come to know who I am through understanding the nature of my mother's experience; I have come to see connections in our lives as well as the lives of many women like us, and through her I have become more sensitive to the needs of Third World women throughout the world. We need not repeat our past histories; my daughters and I need not merely survive with strength and determination. We can, through collective struggle, live fuller and richer lives. My politics as a woman are deeply rooted in my immigrant parent's and my own past.

Not long ago at one of my readings a woman in the audience said she was deeply moved by my "beautifully tragic but not bitter camp poems which were apparently written long ago,"<sup>1</sup> but she was distressed hear my poem "To A Lady." "Why are you, at this late date, so angry, and why are you taking it so personally?" she said. "We need to look to the future and stop wallowing in



the past so much.” I responded that this poem *is not* all about the past. I am talking about what is happening to us right now, about our nonsupport of each other, about our noncaring about each other, about not seeing connections between racism and sexism in our lives. As a child of immigrant parents, as a woman of color in a white society and as a woman in a patriarchal society, what is personal to me *is* political.

These are the connections we expected our white sisters to see. It should not be too difficult, we feel, for them to see why being a feminist activist is more dangerous for women of color. They should be able to see that political views held by women of color are often misconstrued as being personal rather than ideological. Views critical of the system held by a person in an “out group” are often seen as expressions of personal angers against the dominant society. (If they hate it so much here, why don’t they go back?) Many lesbians I know have felt the same kind of frustration when they supported unpopular causes regarded by their critics as vindictive expressions to “get back” at the patriarchal system. They, too, know the disappointments of having their intentions misinterpreted.

In the 1960s when my family and I belonged to a neighborhood church, I became active in promoting the Fair Housing Bill, and one of my church friends said to me, “Why are you doing this to us? Haven’t you and your family been happy with us in our church? Haven’t we treated you well?” I knew then that I was not really part of the church at all in the eyes of this person, but only a guest who was being told I should have the good manners to behave like one.

Remembering the blatant acts of selective racism in the past three decades in our country, our white sisters should be able to see how tenuous our position in this country is. Many of us are now third and fourth generation Americans, but this makes no difference; periodic conflicts involving Third World peoples can abruptly change white Americans’ attitudes towards us. This was clearly demonstrated in 1941 to the Japanese Americans who were in hot pursuit of the great American Dream, who went around saying, “Of course I don’t eat Japanese food, I’m an American.” We found our status as true-blooded Americans was only an illusion in 1942 when we were singled out to be imprisoned for the duration of the war by our own government.

The recent outcry against the Iranians because of the holding of American hostages tells me that the situation has not changed since 1941. When I hear my students say "We're not against the Iranians here who are minding their own business. We're just against those ungrateful ones who overstep our hospitality by demonstrating and badmouthing our government," I know they speak about me.

Asian Pacific American women will not speak out to say what we have on our minds until we feel secure within ourselves that this is our home too; and until our white sisters indicate by their actions that they want to join us in our struggle because it is theirs also. This means a commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment we do not seem to have at the present time. I am still hopeful that the women of color in our country will be the link to Third World women throughout the world, and that we can help each other broaden our visions.

### Notes

1. Mitsuye Yamada. *Camp Notes and Other Poems*. San Francisco: Shameless Hussy Press, 1976.

## Millicent Fredericks

*Gabrielle Daniels*

*Millicent Fredericks* is part of my anthology of forgotten Third World women celebrated in poetry, *A Woman Left Behind*. She was Anais Nin's housemaid, and the quotes about her and on black people in general are the original ones from Anais' Diary.

Millicent has been on my mind since I first read the Diaries while getting my B.A. (I am going for my Master's now). One day it just poured out. I haven't been able to find a publisher for her, because some people will not touch it. Too much for them to take, I guess. Too damn bad. All our saints have a few taints of sin...

Millicent Fredericks was a black woman from Antigua, who married an American black man and had four children. He had a trade as a tailor that he refused to implement after a while. Millicent was an alien, therefore she could not teach school as she had in Antigua. The only way out was housework. As far as I know she remained the sole support of her family. As noted in the Diaries of Anais Nin, one son was shot up in a gang war.

Here were two women, one black and one white, both educated and silenced in their own ways, yet could not help each other because of race and class differences.

Anais could not get beyond the fact of Millicent's blackness and poverty and suffering. The stench of the patrona just reeks about her:

"I would like to write the life of Millicent. But saint's lives are difficult to do. A Negro is a concept Millicent perhaps . . . becomes a symbol of what they have to endure . . . the very first day she came to me sent by my mother and she sat sewing, the thread rolled to the floor and I picked it up for her . . . This gesture established the quality of our relationship . . . I would like to devote my life to the recognition of the Negro's equality, but I always feel ineffectual in political battles . . . one can only win by force or trickery . . . she has fine features, which a Gauguin would have enjoyed painting . . ."

– from the Diary of Anais Nin

Only for the sake of art  
Millicent, do you rise  
tall from the ink  
in the pupils you sought  
dark and wide  
taking you in like the letters  
you would have performed  
scratched indelibly on slated memories, chalk dust  
gold on your fingers. A teacher.

From A to B  
from Antigua to Harlem  
is no giant step. Brown syrup  
from the cane stills of home  
stick like skin  
adheres to the sharpened ribs of shanty girls  
running careless like your husband from responsibility  
catches white heat rubbing shoulders  
on the New York trolley, the floors and windows  
sucking the strength from your maid's fingers  
your teats dribbling the same tar sweetness on  
to your smacking children the same curse.

Beyond introductions  
the thread of your lives intersected,  
ran from the tangled nest in the sewing basket.  
The spools dared equality. Two aliens  
two mothers well met, living on little thanks.  
The pin money feebly spread out  
for Dad and his drink, Patchen  
a pair of shoes for the youngest, the press  
Pressure. Glimpses in the lilt of clipped English  
from both sides of the ocean:  
Harlem clubs, black street gangs cutting up  
a son, the broken families and the literati  
dining on themselves  
The mending to be done, the mending of words  
the hunger knit in the growling guts of the mind  
Publish, publish our cries.

You the ministrant  
above the small white fact  
which was but one seam  
pinched in emergency in the creeping taxi  
is your last conscious scene.

No curtain calls in the proceeding pages  
in the wake of her saving move to California,  
you continue  
to rummage through days-old bread,  
trickle down shops. The killing routine  
she admired of you, and because of you  
escaped to write, to cable Henry  
ever the last sum. "The writer", she said,  
"must be served and taken care of,"  
lessening the time  
you could afford for breath  
to clean your own home for Sunday meetin'

Perhaps to dust off your teacher's diploma  
with more care.

No islander, despite her praise  
Gauguin could not have traced  
the furrows in your face,  
the buried seeds waiting in vain  
for spotlight to flower  
a smile, Madonna, smile please...

In your uniform  
you were like everyone of them  
at war to survive  
and then like no other. I have learned  
from such self-denial,  
martyrs and saints are made  
or forgotten.

## “– But I Know You, American Woman”

*Judit Moschkovich*

*I am Latina, Jewish and an immigrant (all at once). When I tell people who I am, I usually see a puzzled look on their face. I am likely to tell them, “I realize that you are a little confused by me – how I can be both Jewish and Latin American at the same time – but just take my word for it. It is possible!”*

The following letter was originally written in response to a letter which appeared in a women’s newspaper with national distribution. This letter reflected the blatant ignorance most Anglo-American women have of Latin cultures. My response is directed to all women of the dominant American culture.<sup>1</sup> The Anglo woman’s letter represents spoken and unspoken views and feelings that I have repeatedly encountered in many Anglo-American women.

My immediate reaction to reading the letter was: don’t speak about someone/something unless you can admit your ignorance on the subject. Or, “you don’t know me, but I know you, American women.” I believe that lack of knowledge about other cultures is one of the basis for cultural oppression. I do not hold any individual American woman responsible for the roots of this ignorance about other cultures; it is encouraged and supported by the American educational and political system, and by the American media. I do hold every woman responsible for the *transformation* of this ignorance.

In her letter, the Anglo woman seems to ask for information about Latin culture.<sup>2</sup> She wants to know what we want as Latin people, what we are struggling for, etc. First of all, it is hard for me to respond to even a simple request for more information about Latin cultures without experiencing strong and conflicting feelings. We’ve all heard it before: *it is not the duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor*. And yet, I often do feel pressured to become an instructor, not merely a “resource person.” I don’t usually hear “Hey, what do you think of the work of such and such Latin American feminist author,” but rather, “Teach me everything you know.” Latin America women write books,

music, etc. A great deal of information about Latin American is readily available in most libraries and bookstores. I say: read and listen. We may, then, have something to share.

Second, it is very hard to respond to a request for information when it follows paragraph after paragraph that belittles and insults Latin culture. Anyone that was raised and educated in this country has a very good chance of being ignorant about other cultures, whether they be minority cultures in this country or those of other countries. It's a sort of cultural isolationism, a way of life enforced on the people in this country so as to let them have a free conscience with respect to how they deal with the rest of the world or with subcultures in America. Notice the lack of emphasis on learning other languages, and the lack of knowledge even about where other countries are located. Often, I am asked questions like, "Is Argentina in Europe or Africa?" or "Don't you speak Portuguese down there?" How can one feel guilt about screwing over someone/some country she knows nothing about?

Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance. It is the same situation when it comes to dominant and non-dominant or colonizing and colonized cultures/countries/people. As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.

My Latin culture means many things to me: the food I like to eat, the music I love, the books I read, the language I speak, the land and trees I remember in another country, the jokes I tell, how I am used to kissing and hugging people when I greet them, etc., etc., etc. I could go on forever. It also means the things I'd like to change in Latin culture and I'm not speaking of changing men, but of changing *systems* of oppression. As a result of these changes, I do not foresee a culture-less vacuum because "all cultures are bad so I don't want any of them." That culture-less vacuum proposed would actually be the American culture of

French Fries and Hamburgers (or soyburgers), American music on the radio (even if it's American women's music on a feminist radio show), not kissing and hugging every time you greet someone, etc. And it would ultimately still be the culture of exploitation of other countries/cultures combined with ignorance about them.

I want to illustrate more specifically some of the un-informed statements made in the Anglo woman's letter. The fascist government of Spain which she refers to (and suggests as Latin people's sole nation of heritage) was made possible by ample economic and political support from the US, as are multiple other fascist governments in the world right now, particularly in the Third World. When people are not democratically represented by their government, there is a real difference between the policies of that government and the country's people/culture. If one knows about the bitter struggle of the Spanish people against fascism during the Spanish Civil War, and during Franco's regime, one would never equate Spanish with fascist. I do not equate "American" with imperialist/racist, but I *do* equate American people who do *not* transform their ignorance about "non-dominant" cultures and their relationship to these cultures, with imperialism and racism.

As to the "historical" accident that both North and South America are not dominated by Latin (i.e. non-Anglo) culture, I don't call the appropriation of Mexican land an accident, but an imperialist/expansionist move by the United States. Latin America is a mixture of Native, Black, Spanish and sometimes other European cultures, but it is *dominated* by American *mass* culture as Latin American economic systems are dominated by American interests (this applies to most Latin American countries, not all). In Latin America, in addition to our own cultural expressions, we watch American T.V. shows, listen to American music on the radio, wear American jeans (if we can afford them); in other words, we do anything that is economically profitable to America. In comparison, how often do you hear songs in Spanish on the radio in the US or see a Spanish show on T.V.? I'm not talking about radio or T.V. shows by and for the Latin community; I'm talking about *mainstream American* media.



No one will deny that the Spanish conquistadores did in fact conquer the native people of Latin America, and that the latter are still being oppressed there. It is important, however, to know that the Latin American people residing in the US are not some vague "Spanish" conqueror race, but are a multi-racial/cultural people of Native, Black and European background. Latin American culture is quite different from Anglo culture in that each country has retained and integrated the indigenous cultures in food, music, literature, etc. For example the folk music of Argentina is largely Native Indian folk music, played on traditional and European instruments, speaking about traditional themes, using lyrics in Spanish and/or indigenous languages. In the US, you don't often think of Native American music as "American folk music."

I'm sick and tired of continually hearing about the destructive aspects of Latin American culture, especially from women who don't know the culture and can only repeat well-known and worn-out myths. Let Latina women tell you what's going on, the good and the bad. I've lived there and I damn well know what it's like. Listen to what I have to say about my culture, rather than believe hearsay, myths or racist stereotypes. No one ever talks about "terminally depressed Scandinavians," or the cut-throat competition instilled by American culture, or the lack of warmth and physical contact in Anglo culture. These are all destructive aspects of Anglo culture, and they cannot be ignored.

The unspoken question always seems to be: "Aren't Latin (or Black, etc.) men *more* macho and women *more* oppressed in that culture?" My answers to that are: 1) It is absurd to compare sexist oppression. Oppression is oppression in whatever form or intensity. 2) Sexist and heterosexist oppression is more or less visible depending on how communicative people in a culture are. That Anglo culture is more Puritan and less visibly expressive does not mean it is less sexist. 3) Most of Latin America is a land economically colonized by the US, and as such can't be compared with a colonizing culture (US). Women's condition in Latin America would be much better were they not living in colonized countries. 4) Most importantly, are we as feminists concerned with men or with women? There is always a women's culture within every culture. Why is everyone so willing to accept the very male view of Latin American culture as

consisting simply of macho males and Catholic priests? There are scores of strong women living in Latin America today and our history is full of famous and lesser known strong women. Are they to be ignored as women have always been ignored?

Culture is not really something I have a choice in keeping or discarding. It is in me and of me. Without it I would be an empty shell and so would anyone else. There was a psychology experiment carried out once in which someone was hypnotized and first told they had no future; the subject became happy and as carefree as a child. When they were told they had no past they became catatonic.

Anglo people should realize when you say we should discard all cultures and start anew that you are speaking English with all its emotional and conceptual advantages and disadvantages.<sup>3</sup> You're not really about to change your taste in food, your basic style of relating to people, nor the way you talk.

I've heard many people say “Immigrants to this country should learn English, act American, and stop trying to keep their own culture. That's what I would do if I went to another country!” I say Bullshit! Being an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced.<sup>4</sup> Would an American woman move to another country and not hold dear her memories of childhood places and people? Would she not remember with longing some special song or food that she has no access to in her new country? And would she not feel her communication limited, no matter how well she learned her second language, because some very deep, emotional things can only be expressed in one's native tongue? Or would she speak to her parents in her newly adopted language? From my personal experience I can say the American woman would experience all these things. It is very hard to deny who you are, where you come from, and how you feel and express yourself (in the deepest possible sense) without ending up hating yourself.

In conclusion, I hope this letter expresses my frustration. When Anglo-American women speak of developing a new feminist or women's culture, they are still working and thinking within an Anglo-American cultural framework. This new culture would still be just as racist and ethnocentric as patriarchal American culture. I have often confronted the attitude that

anything that is “different” is male. Therefore if I hold on to my Latin culture I am holding on to hateful patriarchal [constructs]. Meanwhile, the Anglo woman who deals with the world in her Anglo way, with her Anglo culture, is being “perfectly feminist.”

I would like us some day to get past the point of having to explain and defend our different cultures (as I am doing in this letter). For that to happen the process of learning about other cultures must be a sharing experience. An experience where American women learn on their own without wanting to be spoon-fed by Latinas, but don’t become experts after one book, one conversation, or one stereotype. It is a delicate balance which can only be achieved with caring and respect for each other.

Everything I have written about here has been from my personal experience as an immigrant to this country as a teenager. I’m by no means an expert, but these are issues I constantly deal with in myself and with others. I do not speak for all Latinas, or for all non-Anglo-American women. I would like to acknowledge the support and feedback I received from my friends throughout the writing of the original letter. They were all Anglo-American women (at the time there were no Latinas around me); and they cared enough to get beyond their guilt and/or ignorance.

## Notes

1. When I say “American culture” I obviously do not include Afro-American, Native American, Asian American, Chicana, etc. I am speaking of the Anglo culture which dominates American society.
2. When I say “Latin culture” I mean Latin American cultures, which have a history of expression different from the European Latin cultures (French,, Italian, etc.)
3. Let me illustrate some differences in language. English expository writing goes in a straight line (sound familiar?) from introductory paragraph, to thesis sentence, to conclusion. Spanish composition follows a form more like a zig-zag, sometimes deviating from straight, linear thinking. I am fighting against this when I write in English so I can be understood by English readers.
4. As a Latina and an immigrant, I cannot ignore the fact that many Hispanics have been in this country for more generations than Anglos. The Hispanic cultures in the West and Southwest were

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established long before their land was colonized by Anglos. The Hispanic people have as much right to their cultural heritage as any Anglo (if not more so, since they were here first).

## **The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin**

*doris davenport*

A few years ago in New Haven, I tried to relate to feminism through a local [womon's] center (located in a Yale basement). I was politely informed that I should "organize" with Black wimmin. In other words, get out. I wanted to start several projects that would include more third world wimmin, but I was told to talk to black wimmin about that. In short, white only. Then, the socialist study group I was interested in was suddenly closed just at the time I wanted to join. And once, in a wimmin's group when a discussion of men came up, it was revealed that half the white wimmin there feared black men, which included me (from the way they glared at me). In other words: *nigger, go home.*

Last year in Los Angeles, after volunteering to work for a local white feminist magazine, repeatedly offering my services and having my ideas and poems rejected, I was finally called to be one of the few token black wimmin at a reception for Ntozake Shange. And the beat, like the song says, goes on. From coast to coast, the feminist movement is racist, but that news is old and stale by now. It is increasingly apparent that the problem is white wimmin.

We, third world wimmin, always discuss this fact. (Frankly, I'm a little tired of it). However, we usually discuss the varied, yet similar manifestations of racism, without going into *why* white wimmin are racist.

In this article, which I conceive of as a conversation with third world wimmin, I want to explore the whys. I don't see the point of further cataloguing my personal grievances against white racist feminists. You know. Whatever you have experienced, I have too. Extrapolate a little. I think that one of our limitations in dealing with this issue is that we stay on the surface. We challenge symptoms of the disease while neglecting the causes. I intend to examine the causes.

If I were a white feminist and somebody called me a racist, I'd probably feel insulted (especially if I knew it was at least partially true). It's like saying someone has a slimy and incurable

disease. Naturally, I would be reactionary and take out my health department/liberal credentials, to prove I was clean. But the fact is, the word "racism" is too simplistic, too general, and too easy. You can use the word and not say that much, unless the term is explained or clarified. Once that happens, racism looks more like a psychological problem (or pathological aberration) than an issue of skin color.

By way of brief clarification, we experience white feminists and their organizations as elitist, crudely insensitive, and condescending. Most of the feminist groups in this country are examples of this elitism. (This anthology came to be as a result of that.) It is also apparent that white feminists still perceive us as the "Other," based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual, but less cerebral, more interesting, perhaps, but less intellectual; and more oppressed, but less political than they are. (If you need specific examples of this, think about your *own* experiences with them.)

When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we're seen in only one of two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests. So when I say racist, these are some of the things I mean. I know this, and so do many white feminists. Because of their one-dimensional and bigoted ideas, we are not respected as feminists or wimmin. Their perverse perceptions of black wimmin mean that they continue to see us as "inferior" to them, and therefore, treat us accordingly. Instead of alleviating the problems of black wimmin, they add to them.

Although black and white feminists can sometimes work together for a common goal with warmth and support, and even love and respect each other occasionally, underneath there is still another message. That is that white feminists, like white boys and black boys, are threatened by us. Moreover, white feminists have a serious problem with truth and "accountability" about how/why they perceive black wimmin as they do.

For example, in a long, and long-winded article, "Disloyal to Civilization, Feminism, Racism, and Gynephobia"<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich attempted to address an issue similar to this one. Instead

she did what she accused other feminists of doing, she “intellectualized the issues.” She evaded it, after apologetically (or proudly, it’s hard to tell) saying that “the most unconditional, tender...intelligent love I received was given me by a black woman.” (Translated, she had a black mammy as a child.) Then, she hid behind a quasi-historical approach that defused the subject. After about fifteen pages, she got close, but apparently also got scared, and backed off. It seems she found it hard, after all, to tell the truth and be “accountable.”

On the other hand, and as a brief but necessary digression, black wimmin don’t always tell the whole truth about and to white wimmin. We know, for example, that we have at least three distinct areas of aversion to white wimmin which affect how we perceive and deal with them: aesthetic, cultural, and social/political. Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. That is, their skin colors are unaesthetic (ugly, to some people). Their hair, stringy and straight, is unattractive. Their bodies: rather like misshapen lumps of whitish clay or dough, that somebody forgot to mold in-certain-areas. Furthermore, they have a strange body odor.

Culturally, we see them as limited and bigoted. They can’t dance. Their music is essentially undanceable too, and unpleasant. Plus, they are totally saturated in western or white American culture with little knowledge or respect for the cultures of third world people. (That is, unless they intend to exploit it.) The bland food of white folks is legendary. What they call partying is too low keyed to even be a wake. (A wake is when you sit up all night around the casket of a dead person.) And it goes on and on.

Socially, white people seem rather juvenile and tasteless. Politically, they are, especially the feminists, naïve and myopic. Then too, it has always been hard for us (black folk) to believe that whites will transcend color to make political alliances with us, for any reason. (The women’s movement illustrates this point.)

We have these aversions for one thing, because we saw through the “myth” of the white woman. The myth was that white wimmin were the most envied, most desired (and beautiful), most powerful (controlling white boys) wimmin in existence. The truth is that black people saw white wimmin as

some of the least enviable, ugliest, most despised and least respected people, period. From our "close encounters" (i.e., slavery, "domestic" workers, etc.) with them, white people increasingly did seem like beasts or subnormal people. In short, I grew up with a certain kind of knowledge that all black folk, especially wimmim, had access to.

This knowledge led to a mixture of contempt and repulsion. I honestly think that most black feminists have some of these feelings. Yet, we constantly keep them hidden (at least from white wimmin), try to transcend them, and work towards a common goal. A few of us even see beyond the so-called privilege of being white, and perceive white wimmin as very oppressed, and ironically, invisible. This perception has sometimes been enough for us to relate to white feminists as sisters.

If *some* of us can do this, it would seem that some white feminists could too. Instead, they cling to their myth of being privileged, powerful, and less oppressed (or equally oppressed, which ever it is fashionable or convenient to be at the time) than black wimmin. Why? Because that is all they have. That is, they have defined, or re-defined themselves and they don't intend to let anything or anybody interfere. Somewhere deep down (denied and almost killed) in the psyche of racist white feminists there is some perception of their real position: powerless, spineless, and invisible. Rather than examine it, they run from it. Rather than seek solidarity with wimmin of color, they pull rank within themselves. Rather than attempt to understand our cultural and spiritual differences, they insist on their own limited and narrow views. In other words, they act out as both "white supremacists" and as a reactionary oppressed group.

As white supremacists, they still try to maintain the belief that white is right, and "godly" (sic). Not matter how desperately they try to overcome it, sooner or later it comes out. They really have a hard time admitting that white skin does not insure a monopoly on the best in life, period.

Such a "superiority complex" is obviously a result of compensation. I mean, if whites really knew themselves to be superior, racism could not exist. They couldn't be threatened, concerned, or bothered. I am saying that the "white



supremacist” syndrome, especially in white feminists, is the result of a real inferiority complex, or lack of self-identity. Just as a macho male uses wimmin to define himself or to be sure he exists, white feminists use wimmin of color to prove their (dubious) existence in the world.

Anyone familiar with the literature and psychology of an oppressed or *colonized* group knows that as they initially attempt to redefine themselves, they react. Their immediate mental, spiritual, and physical environment is chaotic and confused. The fact is, white wimmin are oppressed; they have been “colonized” by white boys, just as third world people have. Even when white wimmin “belonged” to white boys they had no reality. They belonged as objects, and were treated as such. (As someone else has noted, the original model for colonization was the treatment of white wimmin.) Nobody has yet sufficiently researched or documented the collective psychology of oppressed white wimmin. So consider this as a thesis: they know. And so do I. The reality of their situation is the real pits. Lately, having worked free of the nominal and/or personal control of white boys, white wimmin are desperately reactionary. As a result, they identify with and encourage certain short-sighted goals and beliefs. Their infatuation with the word “power” in the abstract is an example of this: power to them mainly means external established power or control. They have minimal, if any, knowledge of personal power. But most importantly, as a reactionary oppressed group, they exhibit a strange kind of political bonding or elitism, where white wimmin are the only safe or valid people to be with; all others are threatening. Clearly, this state of mind is a political dead-end, and the reasons for it stem from their great confusion.

So this is my contribution to the conversation. The cause of racism in white feminists is their bizarre oppression (and suppression). This, I contend, is what lies beneath the surface. This pathological condition is what *they* have to admit and deal with, and what we should start to consider and act on. Too often, we discuss their economic freedom while ignoring other aspects of life. We sometimes dwell at length on their color, forgetting that they are still wimmin in a misogynist culture. They have been seriously mutated as a result.

In other words, their elitism and narrow-minded rigidity are defense mechanisms and that, in part, is why they create "alternatives" for themselves and put up psychological signs saying **white women only**. Part of the reason is fear, as a result of centuries of living with dogs and having no identities. Now, they are threatened by anyone different from them in race, politics, mannerisms, or clothing. It's partly a means of self-protection but that does not excuse it. Feminism either addresses itself to all wimmin, or it becomes even more so just another elitist, prurient white organization, defeating its own purposes.

As a partial solution to some of the above, and to begin to end some of the colossal ignorance that white feminists have about us, we (black and white feminists) could engage in "c.r." conversations about and with each other. If done with a sense of honesty, and a sense of *humor*, we might accomplish something. If overcoming our differences were made a priority, instead of the back-burner issues that it usually is, we might resolve some of our problems.

On the other hand, my experiences with white feminists prevent me from seeing dialogue as anything but a naïve beginning. I honestly see our trying to "break into" the white feminist movement as almost equivalent to the old, outdated philosophy of integration and assimilation. It is time we stopped this approach. We **know** we have no desire to be white. One the other hand, we know we have some valid concerns and goals that white feminists overlook. By now, in fact, a few of their organizations are as rigid and stagnant as any other "established" institution, with racism included in the by-laws.

So, sisters, we might as well give up on them, except in rare and individual cases where the person or group is deliberately and obviously more evolved mentally and spiritually. This is, un-racist. We should stop wasting our time and energy, until these wimmin evolve. Meanwhile, we can re-channel our energies toward ourselves.

We can start to develop a feminist movement based on the realities and priorities of third world wimmin. Racism would have to be a priority. Misogyny is another major problem of third world wimmin. Not only that, many of our communities are more homophobic (or "lesbophobic") than white ones. Also,

a lot of our sisters are straight, and have no intention of changing. We cannot afford to ignore them and their needs, nor the needs of many third world wimmin who are both feminists and nationalists; that is, concerned with our sex and also our race. Finally, a lot of third world wimmin are ignorant about each other. We have yet to make our own realities known to ourselves, or anyone else. So we really do have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin. What we need to do is deal with us, first, then maybe we can develop a wimmin's movement that is more international in scope and universal in application.

It is time we stopped letting the rest of this oppressive society dictate our behavior, devour our energies, and control us, body and soul. It is time we dealt with our own energies, and our own revolutionary potential, like the constructive and powerful forces that they are. When we *do* act on our power and potential, there will be a *real* feminist movement in this country, one that will finally include all wimmin.

### **Notes**

1. Adrienne Rich. *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 9.

## We're All in the Same Boat

Rosario Morales

November 1979

*I am not white. I am not middle class.*

I am white skinned and puertorican. I was born into the working class and married into the middle class. I object to the label white and middle class both because they don't include my working class life and my puertoricanness, but also because "white & middle class" stands for a kind of politics. *Color and class don't define people or politics.* I get angry with those in the women's movement and out of it who deal with class & color as if they defined politics and people.

My experience in the Puerto Rican communist & independence movements has made me suspicious of and angry at Puerto Rican (& other Latin American) activist women. They have been sexist and supported the macho line that we *needed to fight against imperialism first – only later could we think about women as women.* I desperately want Latina women in the feminist movement while I fear the entry of hispanic & often black women because I fear they will play an anti-feminist role.

Racism is an ideology. Everyone is capable of being racist whatever their color and condition. Only some of us are liable to racist attack. Understanding the racist ideology – where and how it penetrates – is what is important for the feminist movement, not "including" women of color or talking about "including" men. *Guilt* is a fact for us all, white & colored: an identification with the oppressor and oppressive ideology. Let us, instead, identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt.

I want to be whole. I want to claim my self to be puertorican, and US american, working class & middle class, housewife and intellectual, feminist, Marxist, and anti-imperialist. I want to claim my racism, especially that directed at myself, so I can struggle with it, so I can use my energy to be a woman, creative and revolutionary.

*April, 1980*

This society this incredible way of living divides us by class  
by color It says we are individual and alone and don't  
you forget it It says the only way out of our doom of our  
sex our class our race is some individual gift and character and  
hard work and then all we get all we ever get is to change  
class or color or sex to rise to bleach to masculinize  
an enormous game of musical chairs and that's only at its fairy  
tale Horatio Alger best that's only at its best

From all directions we get all the beliefs to go with these  
divisions we believe all kinds of things about: what real men  
really are what women must want what black people feel  
and smell like what white people do and deserve how  
rich people earn their comforts and cadillacs how poor  
people get what's coming to them

O we are all racist we are all sexist some of us only  
some of us are the targets of racism of sexism of homophobia of  
class denigration but we all all breathe in racism with  
the dust in the streets with the words we read and we struggle  
those of us who struggle we struggle endlessly endlessly to think  
and be and act differently from all that

Listen you and listen hard I carry within me a vicious anti-  
semitic voice that says jew him down that says dirty jew  
that says things that stop me dead in the street and make the  
blood leave my face I have fought that voice for 45 years  
all the years that I lived with and among jews who are almost me  
whose rhythms of speech and ways of laughing are close beside  
me are dear to me whose sorrows reach deep inside me  
that voice that has tried to tell me that that love and  
identification are unreal fake cannot be and I refuse  
it I refuse its message

I carry a shell a white and crisp voiced shell to hide my  
brown golden soft Spanish voiced inner self to pass to  
hide my puertoricanness

I carry a pole 18 inches long to hold me at the correct  
distance from black-skinned people

I carry hard metal armor with spikes with shooting  
weapons in every joint with fire breathing from every hole  
to protect me to prepare me to assault any man from 13 to 89

I am a whole circus by myself a whole dance company  
with stance and posture for being in middle class homes in  
upper class buildings for talking to men for speaking with  
blacks for carefully angling and directing for  
choreographing my way thru the maze of classes of people and  
places thru the little boxes of sex race class nationality  
sexual orientation intellectual standing political  
preference the automatic contortions the exhausting  
camouflage with which I go thru this social space called

### CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

a daunting but oh so nicely covering name this is no way to  
live Listen listen with care class and color and sex  
do not define people do not define politics a class society  
defines people by class a racist society defines people by  
color We feminists socialists radicals define  
people by their struggles against the racism sexism  
classism that they harbor that surrounds them

So stop saying that she acts that way because she's middle  
class that that's all you can expect from that group because  
it's white that they're just men, quit it!

We know different things some very much more  
unpleasant things if we've been women poor black or lesbian or  
all of those we know different things depending on what sex  
what color what lives we live where we grew up What  
schooling what beatings with or without shoes steak  
or beans but what politics each of us is going to be and do  
is anybody's guess

Being female doesn't stop us from being sexist we've had  
to choose early or late at 7 14 27 56 to think different dress  
different act different to struggle to organize to  
picket to argue to change other women's minds to  
change our own minds to change our feelings ours  
yours and mine constantly to change and change and change  
to fight the onslaught on our minds and bodies and feelings

I'm saying that the basis of our unity is that in the most  
important way we are all in the same boat all subjected to  
the violent pernicious ideas we have learned to hate that we

must all struggle against them and exchange ways and means  
hints and how tos that only some of us are victims of sexism  
only some of us are victims of racism of the directed arrows  
of oppression but all of us are sexist racist all of us.

# An Open Letter to Mary Daly

Audre Lorde

Dear Mary,

Thank you for having *Gyn/Ecology* sent to me. So much of it is full of import, useful, generative, and provoking. As in *Beyond God The Father*, many of your analyses are strengthening and helpful to me. Therefore, it is because of what you have given to me in the past work that I write this letter to you now, hoping to share with you the benefits of my insights as you have shared the benefits of yours with me.

This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering, I hope.

I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish, and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change. In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a black and a white woman.

When I started reading *Gyn/Ecology*, I was truly excited by the vision behind your words, and nodded my head as you spoke in your first passage of myth and mystification. Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power.

So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess-images only white, western-european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo and Mawulisa? Where are the warrior-goddesses of the Vodun, the Dohemeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her



scope and to deal only with the ecology of western-european women.

Then I came to the first three chapters of your second passage, and it was obvious that you were dealing with non-european women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. Your inclusion of African genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

To dismiss our black foremothers may well be to dismiss where european women learned to love. As an African-American woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much matches my own. As women-identified women, we cannot afford to repeat these same old destructive, wasteful errors of recognition.

When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.

What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.

It is obvious that you have done a tremendous amount of work for this book. But simply because little material on non-white female power and symbol exists in white women's words from a radical feminist perspective, to exclude this aspect of connection from even comment in your work is to deny the fountain of non-european female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions. It is to make a point by choice.

Then to realize that the only quotations from black women's words were the ones you used to introduce your chapter on African genital mutilation, made me question why you needed to

use them at all. For my part, I felt that you had in fact misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of color. For my words which you used were no more, nor less, illustrative of this chapter, than *Poetry Is Not A Luxury* or any number of my other poems might have been of many other parts of *Gyn/Ecology*.

So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question. To me this feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-logy and work of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western-european frame of reference. Even your words on page 49 of *Gyn/Ecology*: "The strength which Self-centering women find, in finding our Background, is our *own* strength, which we give back to our Selves" has a different ring as we remember the old traditions of power and strength and nurturance found in the female bonding of African women. It is there to be tapped by all women who do not fear the revelation of connection to themselves.

Have you read my work, and the work of other black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words that would legitimize your chapter on African genital mutilation in the eyes of other black women? And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming? If, on the other hand, it was not black women you were attempting to reach, in what way did our words illustrate your point for white women?

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women - the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that non-white women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of black women, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make black women

prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city.<sup>1</sup> When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.

This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable.

Mary, I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine with your self that aids your speaking. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.

I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force towards change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, and some of which we do not. For instance, surely you know that for non-white women in this country, there is an 80% fatality rate from breast cancer; three times the number of unnecessary eventurations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. These are statistical facts, not coincidences nor paranoid fantasies. I had hoped the lesbian consciousness of having been "other" would make it easier to recognize the differences that exist in the history and struggle of black women and white women.

Within the community of women, racism is a reality force within my life as it is not within yours. The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight. (If you and I were to walk into a classroom of women in Dismal Gulch, Alabama, where the only thing they knew about each of us was that we were both Lesbian/Radical/Feminist, you would see exactly what I mean.)

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism.

We first met at the MLA<sup>2</sup> panel, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." Shortly before that date, I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy, because of their destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another, at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing. This letter attempts to break this silence.

I would like not to have to destroy you in my consciousness. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

Whether or not you do, I thank you for what I have learned from you. This letter is in repayment.

In the hands of Afrekete,  
Audre Lorde  
May 6, 1979

### Notes

1. In the Spring of 1979, twelve black women were murdered in the Boston areas.
2. Modern Language Association.

## **The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House**

*Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel  
(Second Sex Conference October 29, 1979)*

*Audre Lorde*

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of American women; difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. For the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory in this time and in this place without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say of existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of third world women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists

between lesbians and women-identified-women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world. For it is only under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the "I" to "be," not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive "be" and the active "being."

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been

forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor and third world women know there is a difference between the daily manifestations and dehumanizations of marital slavery and prostitution, because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. The Black panelists' observation about the effects of relative powerlessness and the differences of relationship between black women and men from white women and men illustrate some of our unique problems as black feminists. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in aspects of our oppressions, then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.

Why weren't other black women and third world women found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of black feminists? And although the black panelist's paper ends on an important and powerful connection of love between women, what about inter-racial co-operation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same

evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps black women's art out of women's exhibitions, black women's work out of most feminists publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue,"<sup>1</sup> and black women's texts off of your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us – white and black – when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

Simone DeBeauvoir once said:

"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw strength to live and our reasons for acting."

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and this time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

## Notes

1. *Conditions* of Brooklyn, NY is a major exception. It has fairly consistently published the work of women of color before it was "fashionable" to do so. (Editors' footnote)





# *Between the Lines*

*On Culture, Class,  
and Homophobia*



Judith Francisca Baca, *Las Tres Marias*, 1976 (Photographed with the artist, 1990)  
Mixed media, three panels, 68" x 16" x 2.5" each  
Collection of the Artist

## **Between the Lines**

### *On Culture, Class, and Homophobia*

*I do not believe/our wants have made all our lies/holy.*

– Audre Lorde<sup>1</sup>

What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor.

As Audre Lorde states in the closing piece of the preceding section, “Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.” It is critical now that Third World feminists begin to speak directly to the specific issues that separate us. We cannot afford to throw ourselves haphazardly under the rubric of “Third World Feminism” only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances.

As Third World women, we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe our total experience. Culture differences get subsumed when we speak of “race” as an isolated issue: where does the Black Puerto Rican sister stake out her alliance in this country, with the Black community or the Latin? And color alone cannot define her status in society. How do we compare the struggle of the middle class Black woman with those of the light-skinned Latina welfare mother? Further, how each of us perceives our ability to be radical against this oppressive state is largely affected by our economic privilege and our specific history of colonization in the US. Some of us were brought here centuries ago as slaves, others had our land of birthright taken away from us, some of us are the daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, others of us are still newly immigrated to the US.

Repeated throughout this section is each woman’s desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified and involved as feminists. One of the biggest sources of separation among women of color in terms of feminism has been homophobia. This fear that we (whatever our sexuality) breathe in every day in

our communities never fully allows us to feel invulnerable to attack on our own streets, and sometimes even in the homes we grew up in (let alone in the white man's world). So often it is the fear of lesbianism which causes many of us to feel our politics and passion are being ignored or discounted by other Third World people. "There's nothing to be compared with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own..." (Barbara Smith). But we refuse to make a choice between our cultural identity and sexual identity, between our race and our femaleness. We even claim lesbianism as an "act of resistance" (Clarke) against the same forces that silence us as people of color.

*We write letters home to Ma.*

Surfacing from these pages again and again is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves as specifically female persons. So, we turn to each other for strength and sustenance. We write letters to each other incessantly. Across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is plotted. We talk long hours into the night. It is when this midnight oil is burning that we secretly reclaim our goddesses and our female-identified cultural tradition. Here we put Billie Holiday back into the hands and hearts of the women who understand her.

The difference that we have feared to mention because of our urgent need for solidarity with each other begins to be spoken to on these pages, but also the similarities that so often go unrecognized – that a light-skinned Latin woman could feel "at home" and "safe" (Morales) among her Afro-American sisters – that among many of us there is a deep-rooted identification and affinity which we were not, logically, supposed to feel toward each other living in segregated white-america.

We turn to each other to make family and even there, after the exhilaration of our first discovery of each other subsides, we are forced to confront our own lack of resources as Third World women living in the US. Without money, without institutions, without one community center to call our own we so often never get as far as dreamed while plotting in our kitchens. We disappoint each other. Sometimes we even die on each other. How to reconcile with the death of a friend, the death of a spirit?

We begin by speaking directly to the deaths and disappointments. Here we begin to fill in the spaces of silence between us. For it is between these seemingly irreconcilable lines – the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance – that the truth of our connection lies.

### Notes

1. “Between Ourselves,” *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), 112.

# The Other Heritage

*Rosario Morales*

*(for June Jordan and Teish and all other Black women at the San Francisco Poetry Workshop; January 1980)*

I forgot I forgot the other heritage the other stain refrain  
the silver thread thru my sound the ebony sheen to my life to  
the look of things to the sound of how I grew up which was in  
Harlem right down in Spanish Harlem El Barrio and bounded I  
always say to foreigners from Minnesota Ohio and Illinois  
bounded on the North by Italians and on the South by Black  
Harlem A library in each of these almost forbidden places so no  
wonder I didn't take off with books till I hit the South Bronx  
What I didn't forget was the look of Ithaca Rochester  
Minneapolis and Salt Lake bleached bled and bleached  
the street full of white ghosts like Chinese visions And the first  
time Dick and I drove back thru New York past Amsterdam  
Avenue right thru the heart of Harlem I breathed again safe  
brown and black walking the streets safe My mami taught  
me my teacher taught me everybody taught me watch out  
black smelly savage keep out of the way I did too  
so how come I come to feel safe! when I hit Harlem when  
I hit a city with enough color when a city gets moved in on  
when Main Street Vermont looks mottled agouti black and  
brown and white when the sounds of the english Black folk  
speak and the sounds of Spanish wiggle thru the clean lit air I  
still shy and start from black men from about thirteen on but  
then I shy and start from all men starting from when they think  
to be men and so do the things men do my mami taught me  
that and that stuck but then I learnt that on my own too I got  
myself a clean clear sense of danger that's what smells not  
black skin but danger stalking the streets for me I can smell  
it a mile away wafting to me in the breeze I keep downwind  
raise my head to sniff the air I only muse and rest my neck  
when in the herd and in the day and loping thru people traffic  
on the streets surrounded by the sounds of wheeled traffic in the  
streets I think and plan and forget and forget to look but not  
alone and not at nite I lift my head I sniff I smell the danger  
and the wheel and run long before he thinks maybe she

looks about right a morsel for my appetite I bound away and  
pant safe for this time safe but all I feel when I sit down  
with you black woman the only danger in my air is from some  
whirring voice inside that always says you don't belong and  
if you don't utter just just right they will know you don't belong  
and toss you out and I feel that every time with every group  
of any color no matter what they speak but what I feel inside  
nowhere near that grating prating voice is well OK! this  
sounds just right this here music is music to my ears here I  
hear something that feels like oh like Carlos Gardel  
moaning his tangoes like the special beat caribbean drums do  
I forgot this heritage african Black up here in this cold place  
the sound of african in english of drums in these musics I  
forgot I breathed you with my air and declared fine and  
when you're not there I look and ask for where you've gone  
but I know I know why I forgot I'm not supposed to  
remember what I do remember is to walk in straight and white  
into the store and say good morning in my see how white how  
upper class how refined and kind voice all crisp with consonants  
bristling with syllables protective coloring in racist fields looks  
white and crisp like cabbage looks tidy like laid out gardens  
like white aprons on black dresses like please and thank you  
and you're welcome like neat and clean and see I swept and  
scrubbed and polished ain't I nice que hay de criticar will  
I do will I pass will you let me thru will they let me be  
not see me here beneath my skin behind my voice crouched  
and quiet and so so still not see not hear me there where I  
crouch hiding my eyes my indian bones my spanish sounds  
muttering mierda que gente fría y fea se creen gran cosa  
aí escupe chica en su carifresca en su carifea meate ahí  
en el piso feo y frío yo valgo más que un piso limpio yo  
valgo más yo valgo cagate en l'alfombra chica  
arrancale el pelo yo quiero salir de aquí yo quiero salir de  
ti yo quiero salir you see she's me she's the me says  
safe sarita safe when I see you many and black around the  
table behind me in the big room and up in front June  
Jordan how you belt it out and how I take it in right to where  
she sits brown and golden and when she and I laughed big  
last nite I was not "too loud" I was not "too much" I was just  
right just me just brown and pink and full of drums inside



beating rhythm for my feet   my tongue   my eyes   my hands  
my arms swinging and smacking   I was just right   just right  
just right   sépanlo niñas m'hijas   trigueñas bellas   sépalo  
June Jordan   mujer feroz   aquí me quedo y aquí estoy   right!

## **billie lives! billie lives**

*hattie gossett*

yeah billie holiday lives.

shes probably got a little house somewhere with yemanya jezabel the queen of sheba and maria stewart. plus sojourner truth ma rainey ida cox lil hardin and sapphire & her mama are there. and what would they do without sister rosetta thorpe big maybelle dinah washington long tall sally & her aunt mary and fannie lou hamer? and please dont forget ruby doris smith robinson tammie terrell sara gomez and sister woman cruz they are probably all there too helping with the free community music and life school that billie started. and you know that anaci the original spiderman david walker chaka denmark vesey baby brother lester prez young john coltrane beanhead ray malcom x and stephen biko probably be around the house all the time too. plus the amistad crew and shango. but its billies house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

of course we know that charlie bird parker lives cuz folks be saying and writing bird lives! all the time. they even got buttons. and this year 1980 has been declared the year of the bird. but when i woke up this morning i woke up thinking billie lives! so after i got through talking on the phone to this sister who called me up right in the middle of when i was thinking billie lives! i got up and put on a tape of an old record by billie and listened to it again for the first time in a long time while i made a pitcher of orange & lemonade and drank some. then i took the tape and went outside to sit in the sun and listen to the tape some more and write this poem down in a hurry.

cuz billie lives and i wanna call her up and make an appointment and go by and visit her one afternoon and take her some violets and orchids and some peaches (and if you dont like my peaches dont shake my tree) one afternoon when shes got a few hours when shes not too busy and shes relaxed and dont mind being bothered with somebody asking her a whole lotta questions about all kinds of stuff but the main thing i wanna ask her about is how did she do it and what did she do when she

made this record that i am listening to now on this tape that had those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing themselves that time.

oh you never heard of that record.

well to tell you the truth i hadnt either til this other sister told me about it. or rather i had heard of the record and i had even listened to it. but i hadnt heard of the effect that the record had on the bigtime daddies. that's what i hadnt heard about. you know the effect that this record had is somehow strangely not mentioned in the movie or in any of the books articles etc. that are supposed to be telling the billie holiday story. thats why i wanna ask billie about it and listen to her run it down about how it was that she had all them bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing themselves behind this record.

now you know this record had to be bad cuz it had to be taken off the radio. thats how bad this record was. as a public service it was taken off the radio cuz everytime the record played on the radio the bigdaddies would be knocking each other outta the way to get to the window and take concrete nosedives. in droves.

plus they dont play it on the radio that much even now. when they do play something by billie once every other blue moon they dont hardly ever play this. and when me and this other sister who first told me about the effect the record had when we wanted to listen to it we couldnt find nobody that we knew that had it. oh they had heard of it. but they didnt have it. so when we wanted to listen to the record we had to git on a train and ride way downtown then switch over to the path train and ride a while then switch again to the underground streetcar for a few blocks then walk a few more blocks to this special library in newark new jersey just to hear it. cuz we couldnt find it in the nyc public library though later we found out that if we had some money and had had known what to ask for we could have bought this album called the billie holiday story volume 2 which contains this song i am talking about but we didn't have no money nor did we know what to ask for.

and i cant even repeat what we had to go through to get this tape of the original 78 that i am listening to now. if you get my meaning.

anyway. this record was made august 6 1941 just 4 months to the day before the japanese took everybody by surprise with that early morning bombing raid on pearl harbor in the early summer days of billies career and it was 78 on the okeh label called gloomy sunday subtitled hungarian suicide song with the teddy wilson orchestra. it was one of those my man is dead so now i am gonna throw myself in the grave too funeral dirge numbers (tragic mulatress division) that they used to mash on on billie when she went into the studio.

it wasnt even no bad blues.

it was some of their shit and billie said okay watch this and she took the tune and she turned it around on them.

yeah. i am telling you she had them bigdaddy blip d blips leaping outta the windows in droves honey.

in droves do you hear me.

i wonder what it was like when billie sang this song in person. i guess i better ask her that too when i go for my appointment. can you imagine what that was like. cuz you know billie used to sing at the café society downtown in greenwich village at one time which was one of them slick bigdaddies main hangout joints at that time and after billie got off work down in the village she would catch a cab and go uptown to harlem to the afterhours spot and jam and hangout and have a good time talking to people and it could possibly be that if she had sung that song during the last set at one of those café society gigs that while she was uptown cuttin up and stuff you know who was downtown plunging downward off the roofs of their penthouses.

and then when she woke up later that day the papers would have big headlines about who had taken the plunge during the early dawn hours. do you think billie had a good laugh to herself when she read those headlines? or are you one of those people who would say billie wasnt aware of what was going on? that she was only a po lil gal from baltimore who was just trying to sing and entertain people or that if she was aware then she was confused and heartbroken that her music was being taken in the wrong way? niggguh pullease! well but if you think like that then you dont belong in this poem so i am gonna cancel you right out. go somewhere and write yo own poem.

well anyway when i go for my appointment i am gonna ask billie about it cuz i wanna hear what she says. plus i wanna see if she will explain how she did it. did the juju women give her some kind of special herbal potions to purify her throat and vocal chords and lungs and what not. did the wise women teach her an ancient way of breathing ennucciating. did she have a certain type of dream the night before the recording session during which the goddesses appeared and gave her a sign and said go ahead on in that studio tomorrow sister and turn that shit around on then bigtime blank t blanks so we can get them off our backs and move forward to a brighter day.

i wanna ask billie about it. and i wanna see if she would teach some of us how to do it too. do you think she would? when i go see her i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn how to use their voices the same way billie did on this record.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but things are different now. we are more sophiscated now and we have learned some more sophiscated methods. like subliminal seduction. you know those tapes with that weird nonmusic and those hidden voices playing in the supermarkets and other stores that numb our minds and then plant suggestions in our minds that trick us into spending all our money on a buncha stuff that we dont need? and those tapes they play in restaurants and elevators and on the phone when they put you on hold? yeah thats subliminal seduction. people could ride bicycles or delivery trucks with hidden high frequency killer diller tape cassettes through certain neighborhoods at certain hours.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods.

yeah billie lives.

shes probably got that house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

i wanna go see her and ask her if she will teach some of us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record i am listening to now on this tape so we can learn how to have these modern time bigtime so & sos jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves so we can raise up offa our knees and move on to a brighter day.

saturday august 23 1980.

## **Across the Kitchen Table**

### *A Sister - to - Sister Dialogue*

*Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith*

In June 1980, we sent Beverly and Barbara a number of questions regarding their experiences as Black feminist in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

The Editors

### **Feminism: More than a "Click" and a Clique**

**The Editors:** What do you see as the effects of the pervasiveness of white middle class women in the feminist movement? In your experience how do class and race issues intersect in the movement?

**Beverly:** ...on Saturday night, what happened is that she was flossing her teeth after the meal. I was just so impressed with the fact that she would take such good care of her teeth. And so she said that the reason was that when she was a child her mother had saved up money for her to go and visit her grandmother or something down South. And she had been looking forward to it all year. I think that she usually went. But what happened is that this particular year she went to the dentist right before, and she had 7 cavities. And that wiped out her vacation. Because it was a matter of either/or. But of course, that's not the poorest you can get either. "My God" I said "I bet there's hardly a white woman that we come into contact with that would have any perception of what that meant." And yet it sounded so familiar to me.

**Barbara:** Exactly. What we want to describe in this dialogue are the class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high-level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to.

An example I can think of and which drives me crazy is the arrogance some white women display about "choosing" not to finish school, you know, "downward mobility". But the thing is they don't have to worry about being asked "Do you have a degree," and then being completely cut out of a whole range of jobs and opportunity if they don't. Race is a concept of having

to be twice as qualified, twice as good to go half as far. And I feel like at this point, in these economic times, it's like being three times as good to go half as far. No way in Hell would I give up getting a degree or some piece of paper that would give me more economic leverage in this "boy's" system. That's not necessarily a perception that white women have. In fact, I know a lot of white women who never finished college, yet are functioning in ways that if they had been Black women would be completely unavailable to them.

This ties in with another thing we had talked about in the past, which is the difference between women's politics, who come to a realization that oppression exists say at 22, 25 or even 18, versus Black women's and other women of color's perspective which is that your oppression is a lifelong thing. There is a political savviness, I don't know what words to use, canniness – some difference in attitude I think between Black and white feminists. I think what it is, is like the surprise factor. There is virtually no Black person in this country who is surprised about oppression. Virtually not one. Because the thing is we have had it meted out to us from infancy on. And I think that when we are dealing with white women in coalitions, or whatever, that often we're at very different places about how you deal with a problem, how you think about a problem, how you react to a problem. Because they are coming from a perspective like, "Oh! I didn't know. I didn't know. I never knew until...I never knew until..." There is a difference when you come in to your politics because you're Black and oppressed on that level.

**Bev:** What I would really want to talk about is why the women's movement is basically a middle class movement. What does it mean? At least middle class in tone. I am not saying everyone in the women's movement is middle class but the thing is that I think that it is middle class women who dominate in terms of numbers and in terms of what actually gets done, and just how things get done. What gets made the priorities and what have you.

What really are the similarities and differences between women's oppression and class and racial oppression? My perception about racial oppression and class oppression is that it's something that starts from Day One.

**Bar:** You're born into it and it's grinding.

**Bev:** It's grinding. And it continues. My sense about the oppression of women is that it's something that people come to often times, but not always, in a more intellectual manner. It's something that's pointed out to them. It's something that they read about and say "Oh, yeah!" I mean even the concept of the "click", you know, that you can read about in *Ms.* magazine.

**Bar:** They still have "clicks!"

**Bev:** Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women's oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a "click." Well I mean, I guess there are "clicks" among racial lines, but the thing is they're so far back in terms of class that they're almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it's a different kind of thing.

**Bar:** Another thing when you talk about experiencing racial oppression and class oppression from the very beginning, if indeed you are a recipient of those oppressions what is happening to you is from moderately bad to horrible. In other words, being Black in this country there is very little about it that is mild. The oppression is extreme. Probably the only Black people where oppression is somewhat mitigated are those who have class privileges and that is certainly not the majority of Black people here. Likewise if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you are poor, you are working class and therefore day to day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on. The thing that's different about women's oppression is that you can be white and middle class and female and live a so-called "nice" life up until a certain point, then you begin to notice these "clicks," but I think the quality of life for the upper or middle class white woman is so far ahead of the quality of life for the Black person, the Black child, the working class child or the poor child.

**Bev:** I want to attempt to make comparison between different types of oppression. When I think of poverty, I think of constant physical and material oppression. You know, you aren't poor one day and well-to-do the next. If you're poor it's a constant thing, everyday, everyday. In some ways it's almost more constant than race because, say you're middle class and you're a Black person who is of course subject to racism, you don't necessarily experience it every single day in the same intensity,



or to the same degree. Whereas, poverty is just something you experience constantly. So what I was trying to come up with is – Is there any oppression that women experience that is that total, in other words literally affects their physical well-being on a day to day basis?

**Bar:** Can I make a joke, Bev?

**Bev:** What?

**Bar:** Heterosexuality. Well, moving right along...

**Bev:** Yes, they *are* suffering... Well, battering is maybe something, but not necessarily, only in some extreme incidences.

**Bar:** Well, I think in a way we're almost comparing apples and pears. We don't have a language yet or a framework as to what is the true nature of women's oppression, given where it takes place and who it comes from and how. Maybe the battered woman is not beaten every day, but she has to wait on her husband every day and her children. She's either bored out of her mind or worrying and scraping, trying to make ends meet, both in the context of the nuclear family. Women's oppression is so organic or circular or something. One place on the circle is battering, one place is cat calls, another is rape, another place is the fact that no one takes you seriously even while you worked to put your husband through college. There's a whole range of stuff, that's why it's so hard to pin something down.

**Bev:** I think for purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, "Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

**Bar:** And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that. I think maybe what we have defined as an important component of Black feminism is that maybe, for the short run at least, that's all right. We don't have to rank or separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us.

**Bev:** Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle class movement actually deal with *all* women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to

represent their own interests? I think this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face.

**Bar:** What we've got to look at is what is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work. What are those issues and how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movements? I am thinking here of all the Black women who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer is a name we know, but there were countless thousands of other women whose names we don't know whose material conditions would not indicate that they would have the wherewithal to struggle politically but then they did. Even more recently, poor women have been involved in issues like tenants rights or welfare organizing, etc.

**Bev:** Sometimes I think maybe twenty-five to fifty years from now we might really understand what the origins of the women's movement were, much more so even than we know today. We may lose some of the proximity, but we'll gain some of the hindsight and the perspective. One of the things we might discover is that the origins of the feminist movement were basically middle class, but there are reasons for that. Already there is analysis about that from people who are somewhat anti-feminist, Marxists and leftists that have the perception that the women's movement is just an indication that we're in an advanced stage of capitalism. They say that the fact that the women's movement developed in this country at the time it did had to do with how capitalism had developed, in other words, a high enough rate of profit or surplus. I don't know what the terminology is, exactly, but this material surplus made it possible for women to have the "leisure" to demand certain rights.

As I see it, the welfare rights movement comes out of the needs expressed and experienced by the women receiving welfare. In the same way, there is a path the women's movement has followed that originated out of the needs of middle class women.

**Bar:** Yes, I think that is quite verifiable... There is just so much class conflict in this society that it is hard for people who are economically and/or racially oppressed to believe that there are some people who may experience their oppression differently. I think that this is where the laughability of the women's movement comes in. The women I teach a class with told me

how she has a friend who was teaching John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a class who had a decent number of Black students in it and the Black students refused to believe that it was about white people. *Refused* to believe, you know? John Steinbeck, Great White Novelist! That's just incredible! What it shows is the class conflict, the class division, that is totally enforced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situations, commonalities, etc.

### **The Whitewash of Cultural Identity**

**Eds:** *By virtue of your education, what class assumptions are made about you by white feminists? How do you experience white women trying to "whitewash" you?*

**Bar:** This is very complicated. There is a sociologist, a Black woman who's here in Boston, she said something very astute about this whole issue of class. She was talking about how sociologists often confuse class with lifestyle. They will throw out all their knowledge about income level, and assume people are of a different class. So they'll see a Black family who makes \$6000 a year, but the thing is they have books and they are stable and blah blah blah and all this crap, you know, they're trying to send their kids to college and they do and the sociologists say, "Well, then, they must be middle class." As she said so succinctly, "\$6000 dollars worth of money buys \$6000 worth of goods." (That would make them poor today. Twenty years ago, working class). It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a difference between class in that narrow sense of values, you know? Because I think we come from that kind of home...

**Bev:** Sure. Sure.

**Bar:** Where there were priorities put on things that poor working class Black people weren't supposed to be thinking about.

**Bev:** Yeah, it's very confusing. The fact that education was something that was always valued in our family, not just in our generation, but for generations back. I think that's where a lot of white feminists get confused about us. Because of the fact of the education we had and the emphasis on cultural development and on intellectual development that has been in our family at least for three generations, makes people think, well, we must have come from a middle class background.

**Bar:** Oh yeah! Sure!

**Bev:** It's true, we never starved. But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I just think if they looked at the house, would they understand what our class background actually was? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms...

**Bar:** The fact that there was no automatic washing machine.

**Bev:** The fact that when you got a chest of drawers, a dresser, and a bed in one of the bedrooms, literally there was no floor space. I think that a lot of where we came from had to do with, as you said, values and managing. One of the values is that you handled money in such a way that you made it stretch as far as you possibly could.

**Bar:** Don't I remember! (laughing) It was a real value that you live as decently as possible on the money you do make.

**Bev:** Exactly.

**Bar:** There was a lot of emphasis on trying.

**Bev:** Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our people are.

**Bar:** In order for people to understand what our background was, in order to place us, they need to have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period. There is a cookbook, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* by these two Darden sisters. The reason why I mention it is because they have family history in there. This was a successful Black family, and yet these people worked like hell! They were people who were ex-slaves. Almost anybody in their family who wanted to go to a Black college could have, but that's not nearly the same thing as a family who sent all of their sons to Harvard, all of their daughters to Smith, or whatever. There's just a different social context. Even though this is a successful Black family, there is poverty, struggle, oppression, violence in the history of that family that is totally unrecognizable to outsiders...

**Bev:** Just like within ours. You know one of the thing that I've felt for a long time being involved in the women's movement, is that there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice.

**Bar:** Indeed! Indeed!

**Bev:** And that's very upsetting to me. It really makes me think about the choices I have made, either implicitly and less consciously or very consciously. It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise. And that's just something that is very appalling to me.

**Bar:** It's just too true. It's too true.

Too appalling! I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" and I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! I realized, too, it was my regret for the past, for those July 4ths that were essentially just like the one I was watching right outside my window and for the fact that it will never be that way again. Well...

I don't think we can ever give it to each other as peers because there is a kind of family bonding across generations that is very Black that doesn't happen.

**Bev:** One of the things I was getting at is that there are ways we act when Black people are together that white women will never see in a largely white context. So I think that's one of the reasons that again, to use to phrase that was asked to us, they are able to "whitewash" us. Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I *do* mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think, "Well why bother? Why waste your time?" If what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, *you talk in your second language*.

**Bar:** This is so different from being in a Black context. For example, it just occurred to me this experience I had visiting an old friend of mine that I have known for a number of years. She was staying in this house with this regular old Black nuclear

family. And the woman of the house was clearly the person who kept the whole thing together. They had food layed back! (laughing) and the thing is it was really a lot of fun for me to see that, “pervert” that I am – that’s in quotes – dyke that I am, I could sit down at a table with these middle-aged Black women who were playing pokeeno and be able to hang, you know? And it was very nice. I had a good time.

**Bev:** Only one question, Barbara, did you play? (laughing)

**Bar:** Yeah, I played for a little while. Throughout the day, there must been twenty people in and out of the house. And it was no particular occasion, just twenty people in and out of the house. At one point, we were talking about television and the woman said, “Oh Barbara doesn’t watch T.V. She’s an intellectual.” It was a joke and I felt good enough in that context with people I hardly knew to understand that they said that with a great deal of affection. I realized they were complimenting me and being supportive for something I had accomplished. I’m sure they felt proud of the fact that Alice, the doctor, and Barbara, who teaches at U. Mass, were sitting around on a Sunday evening. And the thing is that it was not the kind of hostility that I have sometimes experienced from my so called peers of Black women about those very same struggles and accomplishments. And it certainly is not the misunderstanding that I have gotten from white women about the meaning of that. Because of course, these people are trying to send their children to school too.

**Bev:** I wonder is this the trade-off, is this what everyone who has our identity has to sacrifice? One of my constant questions is how do other lesbians of color live their lives? The other question I have is – “Is this ‘fly in the buttermilk’ existence a function of our feminism more than our lesbianism?” To ask the question more explicitly – Do black lesbians, who do not identify as feminists and base their lives in the Black community, feel this struggle? I think the answer is that they don’t all the time. It’s hard to figure out.

**Bar:** I think the isolation is probably a result much more of being a feminist. I think this has some class factors in it. This almost takes us back to where we began because in order to be involved in this women’s movement, as it stands today, you have to be able to deal with “middle-classness.” And the Black

women who can take it are often the ones with educational privilege.

## **Lesbian Separatism**

**Eds:** *Is a lesbian separatist position inherently racist? Is this position a viable political position to take?*

**Bar:** As we said in our collective statement (Combahee) I think we have real questions because separatism seems like such a narrow kind of politics and also because it seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege. Women who don't have those kinds of privilege have to deal with this society and with the institutions of this society. They can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess. Women of color are very aware that racism is not gender specific and that it affects all people of color. We have experiences that have nothing to do with being female, but are nonetheless experiences of deep oppression... and even violence.

**Bev:** Maybe the reason that white women got into lesbian separatism was because in being separatist they were separating themselves from white men, given how there is so much oppression in this world currently that white men have visited on people. In some ways they felt that they had to separate themselves from white men to even have a fighting chance.

**Bar:** So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. If you define certain movement issues as straight women's issues, for example reproductive rights and sterilization abuse, then these identifiable sexual/political issues are ones you are not going to bother with.

We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing often do zap acts. For example they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. We sometimes think of separatism as politics without a practice.

**Bev:** One of the problems of separatism is that I can't see it as a philosophy that explains and analyzes the roots of all oppression and is going to go towards solving it. I think it has some validity

in a more limited sphere. To begin to talk about being separate from men is viable. It has some worthwhile aspects.

**Bar:** Many lesbians are separatist in that sense. You are very aware of the choice – that in being a lesbian you understand that you really don't need men to define your identity, your sexuality, to make your life meaningful or simply to have a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have no comprehension of the oppressions that you share with men. And you see white women with class privilege don't share oppression with white men. They're in a critical and antagonistic position whereas Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race.

What white lesbians have against lesbians of color is that they accuse us of being “male identified” because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not seeing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. And it's not like we like their sexism or even want to sleep with them. You can certainly be concerned as we are living here this summer in Boston when one Black man after another ends up dead.<sup>1</sup>

**Bev:** It's not only being concerned, it is observing what happens – who does racist acts and who are the targets for racism. It would be incredibly dishonest to say that racism is a thing just experienced by Black women.

**Bar:** And also politically inexpedient. I think that people who define themselves as Black feminists certainly have decided that the bulk of their political work is in concert with other Black women. That doesn't mean that you're totally oblivious to the reality of racism. I feel that the one thing about racism is that it doesn't play favorites. Look at the history of lynching in this country. And also look at how Black women have experienced violence that is definitely racial. When you read about Black women being lynched, they aren't thinking of us as females. The horrors that we have experienced have absolutely everything to do with them *not even viewing us as women*.



Because if we are women some false chivalry would enter in and maybe certain things wouldn't happen. I've never read an account of a lynching of a white woman, or one who was pregnant. I think there's a difference between the old usual rape-murder that happens to all women and the lynching that happens specifically to Black women. A contemporary example of that is how Black women who are battered and who physically defend themselves are treated differently than white women by the courts. It's seen differently by the courts when a white middle class woman murders her husband. Then it's so-called self defense. I was just reading a case involving a Black woman in Michigan where the Black woman was sold down the river obviously because she was Black. A negative image of Black men and women got her fate delivered.

**Bev:** One of the most dangerous & erroneous concepts that separatists have put forward is that other oppressions, in addition to sexism, are attributed to men only. Some separatists believe that although women are racist, when men disappear and no longer rule, racism will not be a problem. It's very analogous to people who are Marxists who say, "Well, when class oppression and racism end, definitely the oppression of women and lesbians will end." What lesbian separatists are saying is that when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end, too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have.

There is also a dishonesty that I have come across in some lesbians who although they do not regard themselves as separatists, they also do not acknowledge the separatism in their own lifestyles. Many lesbians who don't consider themselves separatists would never live with a man and would not go very far to befriend a man (although they may have a few token men in their lives), but they don't go any further than to disavow their separatism.

**Bar:** I disagree with that. The so-called disavowal is, from my perspective, the lack of need to deify or glorify those very kinds of choices. Separatists get angry at the fact that I don't make much of the fact that I don't see a man socially from one end of the week to the other. I feel they are trying to collapse political positions that I do not consider in any way trivial. Who you have

parties with, as far as I am concerned, is not the bottom line of defining your political commitment.

I also want to say that I don't think that white lesbian separatists are more racist than any other white women in the women's movement that we deal with. I just think it takes different forms. White lesbian separatism has almost a studied obliviousness to instances of oppression whereas another group of feminists, for example socialists, are even sectarian. The way their racism would manifest itself – they would know that racism was an important issue but they wouldn't be dealing with it in any way except as a theoretical radical issue. Their discomfort in dealing around women of color would be just as palpable; that attitude would be just as apparent. All white people in this country are victims of the disease of racism.

There is no such thing as a non-racist. Sometimes it's as simple as who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch. There are bunches of white women for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color.

**Bar:** Beverly is fixing this little teddybear. She's been doing surgery on it for the last couple of hours. The bear shows remarkable stamina, like no human being. You could say that we are having a series of operations in our lives.

**Bev:** If it weren't for Barbara and her relationship with this person who is not myself, I wouldn't be dealing with it.

**Bar:** I don't see that as being relevant to this conversation.

**Bev:** It is relevant. I'm talking about how I got involved in this surgery.

## Homophobia in the Black Community

**Eds:** *Describe your experience in dealing with homophobic Black sisters.*

**Bar:** There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own...I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. They make great cases for how fucked up it all is, and therefore cover their asses admirably. *Is homophobia more entrenched in the Black community than in the white community?*

**Bev:** You can argue about that until Jesus comes, really.

**Bar:** I really must say historically, politically there are more reasons for the Black community to be homophobic, one of them being that the women's movement has made fewer inroads into the Black community, as well as gay rights. We can assume that a community that has been subjected to the ideas of the movement is going to have more consciousness. And given how up until the last couple of years the feminist movement has not touched Third World communities, we can expect their attitudes to be much as they have been in the past.

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality – you know, the “Black bulldagger” image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don't have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them.

**Bev:** This country is so racist that it is possible to take many, many things and concepts that have nothing to do with race and talk about them in racial terms. Because people are so dichotomized into either black or white, it defines a continuum. This is so strict and so overwhelming in this country, you can take things that have nothing to do with race and refer to them racially.

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things – sexuality behavior, conflicts, whatever they don't like – and saying, “That's white.” Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, “Yeah, suicide is a white thing.”

**Bar:** Oh yeah, we used to believe that. And of course one felt all the worse for having considered it. I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange's play “for colored girls who have considered suicide.” It's very brave. I mean, she's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even considered it, if it's supposed to be a white thing.

**Bev:** Any behavior Black people say is despicable, they can disregard by saying this doesn't belong to the Black community.

There's hardly a thing in this world in our experience that is not referred to being either Black or white, from animals on – people talking about white dogs. They weren't talking about dogs that were white in color, they were talking about dogs that belonged to white people.

**Bar:** So often lesbianism and male homosexuality are talked about as a white disease within the Black community. It is just so negating of our lives. Very upsetting.

**Eds:** *Are Black women more vulnerable to homophobic attack?*

**Bar:** Yes, Black women are more vulnerable to homophobic attack because we don't have white skin privilege, or class privilege to fall back on if somebody wants to start a smear campaign against us. As I said in my essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," it's (heterosexual privilege) always the last to go. We don't have any of the other privileges. It really is jumping off the edge in a very fundamental way. Somebody who is already dealing with multiple oppression is more vulnerable to another kind of attack upon her identity.

**Bev:** I also feel that Black women are more vulnerable to physical attack as lesbians because they're Black. The stories you hear over the years of Black lesbians being attacked for being lesbian, usually by white men!

**Eds:** *What is the relationship between Black women's resistance to identifying as feminists, and lesbianism?*

**Bar:** It's real connected. Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but "lesbians" to the Black community as well. There was a considerable effort in the early seventies to turn the Black community off to feminism. You can look at publications, particularly Black publications making pronouncements about what the feminist movement was and who it reached that would trivialize it, that would say no Black women were involved, that did everything possible to prevent those coalitions between Black and white women from happening because there was a great deal of fear. Black men did not want to lose Black women as allies. And the white power structure did not want to see all women bond across racial lines because they knew that would be an unbeatable unstoppable combination. They did a very good job. You can just document those happenings during that period.

So, yes, most Black women think that to be a feminist you have to be a lesbian. And if not that, then at least you have to deal with being around lesbians. And you see, that is true. It's very hard to be in the women's movement and not be around lesbians. And if you're so homophobic that you can't deal with the thought of lesbianism then you probably won't be involved. I think these things are changing. More and more Black women are becoming sensitive or sympathetic to the women's movement.

### **Third World Women: Tokenism or Leadership**

**Ebs:** *How, as women of color, can we prevent ourselves from being tokenized by white feminists? How do you see Third World women forming the leadership in the feminist movement?*

**Bev:** One looks at the question about tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are so many possibilities of tokenization. One of the most tokenized situations that Barbara and I find ourselves in is when we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in the position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists. One of the things that helps is to get paid and to put it on that level so you don't feel so exploited.

**Bar:** I think that the service Gloria thought of having and calling it "Dial a Token" – I mean that's a good thing. For one thing it puts it out there. It's saying, "Hey, I know what you're doing and I want to get paid for it."

Another thing, try not to be the only Third World person there. I was thinking of the meeting that Cherrie went to when she was here with us. And even though there were several Third World women we were still tokenized (laughing). I guess that I am really talking about support as opposed to defusing tokenization.

**Bev:** Given the state of things between Black and white women, we're going to be tokenized quite a bit. It's so hard to get around that.

**Bar:** A solution to tokenism is *not* racial separatism. There are definitely separatist aspects emerging among Black and Third World feminist community and that is fine. But, ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity

and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with.

This brings me back to the issue of lesbian separatism. I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What *I* really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think *that* is really radical because it has never been done before. And it really pisses me off that they think of themselves as radical. *I think there is a difference between being extreme and being radical.*

This is why Third World women are forming the leadership in the feminist movement because we are not one-dimensional, one-issued in our political understanding. Just by virtue of our identities we certainly define race and usually define class as being fundamental issues that we have to address. The more wide-ranged your politics, the more potentially profound and transformative they are.

**Bev:** The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic. I so often think of the speech that Sojourner Truth made not because of the contents so much but more because of the function. She says, "Now children, let's get this together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let me lay it out for you." I must admit that the reason I think of it so often is that I have thought of myself in that situation. "Let me explain this to you one more time, let me take you by the hand, etc." I find myself playing that role. But there's a way though that I feel that Third World women are not in actual leadership *positions* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But position in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision.

We are in the position to challenge the feminist movement as it stands to date and, not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival. It is organic to our very existence.

**Bar:** Thank you, sweetheart. Teddybear just gave me a kiss.

Bye Girls.

## Notes

1. An even more striking example of the connection between a Lesbian separatist stance and the disavowal of racism as a central feminist concern can be seen in the incredibly negative responses to Elly Bulkin's fine article "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics" coming primarily from separatists.

# Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance

*Cheryl Clarke*

For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. (A resistance that should be championed throughout the world by all the forces struggling for liberation from the same slave master.) No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism – in the closet, in the state legislature, in the bedroom – she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy. Men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonize women, when they cannot circumscribe our sexual, productive, reproductive, creative prerogatives and energies. And the lesbian – that woman who, as Judy Grahn says, "has taken a woman lover"<sup>1</sup> – has succeeded in resisting the slave master's imperialism in that one sphere of her life. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship – roles notwithstanding.

Historically, this culture has come to identify lesbians as women, who over time, engage in a range and variety of sexual-emotional relationships with women. I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is. Lesbianism is a recognition, an awakening, a reawakening of our passion for each (woman) other (woman) and for same (woman). This passion will ultimately reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture. Women, through the ages, have fought and died rather than deny that passion. In her essay, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand" Adrienne Rich states:

... Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. Those women, our fore Sisters, millions whose names we do not know, were tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later in



"scientific" tracts, portrayed in art and literature as bizarre, amoral, destructive, decadent women. For a long time, the lesbian has been a personification of feminine evil.

...Lesbians have been forced to live between two cultures, both male-dominated, each of which has denied and endangered our existence... Heterosexual, patriarchal culture has driven lesbians into secrecy and guilt, often to self-hatred and suicide.<sup>2</sup>

The evolving synthesis of lesbianism and feminism – two women-centered and powered ideologies – is breaking that silence and secrecy. The following analysis is offered as one small cut against that stone of silence and secrecy. It is not intended to be original or all-inclusive. I dedicate this work to all the women hidden from history whose suffering and triumph have made it possible for me to call my name out loud.<sup>3</sup>

The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the world-wide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels. As far as I am concerned, any woman who calls herself a feminist must commit herself to the liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue. The lesbian-feminist struggles for the liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all socio-political structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination.

However, there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship. Also there is no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians. Not all women who are involved in sexual-emotional relationships with women call themselves lesbians or identify with any particular lesbian community. Many women are only lesbians to a particular community and *pass* as heterosexuals as they traffic among enemies. (This is analogous to being black and passing for white with only one's immediate family knowing one's true origins.) Yet, those who hide in the closet of heterosexual presumption are sooner or later discovered. The "nigger-in-the-woodpile" story retells itself. Many women are politically active as lesbians,

but may fear holding hands with their lovers as they traverse heterosexual turf. (This response to heterosexual predominance can be likened to the reaction of the black student who integrates a predominantly white dormitory and who fears leaving the door of her room open when she plays gospel music.) There is the woman who engages in sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself *bisexual*. (This is comparable to the Afro-American whose skin-color indicates her mixed ancestry yet who calls herself "mulatto" rather than black.) Bisexual is a safer label than lesbian, for it posits the possibility of a relationship with a man, regardless of how infrequent or non-existent the female bisexual's relationships with men might be. And there is the lesbian who is a lesbian anywhere and everywhere and who is in direct and constant confrontation with heterosexual presumption, privilege, and oppression. (Her struggle can be compared to that of the Civil Rights activist of the 1960's who was out there on the streets for freedom, while so many of us viewed the action on the television.)

Wherever we, as lesbians, fall along this very generalized political continuum, we must know that the institution of heterosexuality is a die-hard custom through which male-supremacist institutions insure their own perpetuity and control over us. Women are kept, maintained, and contained through terror, violence, and spray of semen. It is profitable for our colonizers to confine our bodies and alienate us from our own life processes as it was profitable for the European to enslave the African and destroy all memory of a prior freedom and self-determination – Alex Haley notwithstanding. And just as the foundation of Western capitalism depended upon the North Atlantic slave trade, the system of patriarchal domination is buttressed by the subjugation of women through heterosexuality. So, patriarchs must extol the boy-girl dyad as "natural" to keep us straight and compliant in the same way the European had to extol Caucasian superiority to justify the African slave trade. Against that historic backdrop, *the woman who chooses to be a lesbian lives dangerously.*

As a member of the largest and second most oppressed group of people of color, as a woman whose slave and ex-slave forefathers suffered some of the most brutal racist, male-supremacist imperialism in Western history, the black lesbian has

had to survive also the psychic mutilation of heterosexual superiority. The black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism – like every other nigger in America – and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community, some of whom seem to have forgotten so soon the pain of rejection, denial, and repression sanctioned by racist America. While most political black lesbians do not give a damn if white America is negrophobic, it becomes deeply problematic when the contemporary black political community (another male-dominated and male-identified institution) rejects us because of our commitment to women and women's liberation. Many black male members of that community seem still not to understand the historic connection between the oppression of African peoples in North America and the universal oppression of women. As the women's rights activist and abolitionist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pointed out during the 1850's, racism and sexism have been produced by the same animal, viz. "the white Saxon man."

Gender oppression (i.e. the male exploitation and control of women's productive and reproductive energies on the specious basis of a biological difference) originated from the first division of labor, viz. that between women and men, and resulted in the accumulation of private property, patriarchal usurpation of "mother right" or matrilineage, and the duplicitous, male-supremacist institution of heterosexual monogamy (for women only). Sexual politics, therefore, mirror the exploitative, class-bound relationship between the white slave master and the African slave – and the impact of both relationships (between black and white and woman and man) has been residual beyond emancipation and suffrage. The ruling class white man had a centuries-old model for his day-to-day treatment of the African slave. Before he learned to justify the African's continued enslavement and the ex-slave's continued disenfranchisement with arguments of the African's divinely ordained mental and moral inferiority to himself (a smokescreen for his capitalist greed) the white man learned, within the structure of heterosexual monogamy and under the system of patriarchy, to relate to black people – slave or free – as a man *relates* to a woman, viz. as property, as a sexual commodity, as a servant, as a source of free or cheap labor, and as an innately inferior being.

Although counter-revolutionary, Western heterosexuality, which advances male-supremacy, continues to be upheld by many black people, especially black men, as the most desired state of affairs between men and women. This observation is borne out on the pages of our most scholarly black publications to our most commercial black publications, which view the issue of black male and female relationships through the lens of heterosexual bias. But this is to be expected, as historically heterosexuality was one of our only means of power over our condition as slaves and one of two means we had at our disposal to appease the white man.

Now, as ex-slaves, black men have more latitude to oppress black women, because the brothers no longer have to compete directly with the white man for control of black women's bodies. Now, the black man can assume the "master" role, and he can attempt to tyrannize black women. The black man may view the lesbian – who cannot be manipulated or seduced sexually by him – in much the same way the white slave master once viewed the black male slave, viz. as some perverse caricature of manhood threatening his position of dominance over the female body. This view, of course, is a "neurotic illusion" imposed on black men by the dictates of male supremacy, which the black man can never fulfill because he lacks the capital means and racial privilege.

Historically, the myth in the Black world is that there are only two free people in the United States, the white man and the black woman. The myth was established by the Black man in the long period of his frustration when he longed to be free to have the material and social advantages of his oppressor, the white man. On examination of the myth, this so-called freedom was based on the sexual prerogatives taken by the white man on the Black female. It was fantasied by the Black man that she enjoyed it.<sup>1</sup>

While lesbian-feminism does threaten the black man's predatory control of black women, its goal as a political ideology and philosophy is not to take the black man's or any man's position on top.

Black lesbians who do work within "by-for-about-black-people" groups or organizations either pass as "straight" or relegate our lesbianism to the so-called "private" sphere. The more male-dominated or black nationalist bourgeois the

organization or group, the more resistant to change, and thus, the more homophobic and anti-feminist. In these sectors, we learn to keep a low profile.

In 1979, at the annual conference of a regional chapter of the National Black Social Workers, the national director of that body was given a standing ovation for the following remarks:

Homosexuals are even accorded minority status now... And white women, too. And some of you black women who call yourselves feminists will be sitting up in meetings with the same white women who will be stealing your men on the sly.

This type of indictment of women's revolution and implicitly of lesbian liberation is voiced throughout the bourgeois black (male) movement. But this is the insidious nature of male supremacy. While the black man may consider racism his primary oppression, he is hard-put to recognize that sexism is inextricably bound up with the racism the black woman must suffer, nor can he see that no women (or men for that matter) will be liberated from the original "master-slave" relationship, viz. that between men and women, until we are all liberated from the false premise of heterosexual superiority. This corrupted, predatory relationship between men and women is the foundation of the master-slave relationship between white and black people in the United States.

The tactic many black men use to intimidate black women from embracing feminism is to reduce the conflicts between white women and black women to a "tug-o'-war" for the black penis. And since the black lesbian, as stated previously, is not interested in his penis, she undermines the black man's only source of power over her, viz. his heterosexuality. Black lesbians and all black women involved in the struggle for liberation must resist this manipulation and seduction.

The black dyke, like every dyke in America, is everywhere – in the home, in the street, on the welfare, unemployment and social security rolls, raising children, working in factories, in the armed forces, on television, in the public school system, in all the professions, going to college or graduate school, in middle-management, et. al. The black dyke, like every other non-white and working class and poor woman in America, has not suffered the luxury, privilege or oppression of being dependent on men, even though our male counterparts have been present, have

shared our lives, work and struggle, and, in addition have undermined our "human dignity" along the way like most men in patriarchy, the imperialist family of man. But we could never depend on them "to take care of us" on their resources alone – and, of course, it is another "neurotic illusion" imposed on our fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands that they are supposed to "take care of us" because we are women. Translate: "to take care of us" equals "to control us." Our brothers', fathers', lovers', husbands' only power is their manhood. And unless manhood is somehow embellished by white skin and generations of private wealth, it has little currency in racist, capitalist patriarchy. The black man, for example, is accorded native elite or colonial guard or vigilante status over black women in imperialist patriarchy. He is an overseer for the slave master. Because of his maleness he is given access to certain privileges, e.g. employment, education, a car, life insurance, a house, some nice vines. He is usually a rabid heterosexual. He is, since emancipation, allowed to raise a "legitimate" family, allowed to have his piece of turf, viz. his wife and children. That is as far as his dictatorship extends for, if his wife decides that she wants to leave that home for whatever reason, he does not have the power or resources to seduce her otherwise if she is determined to throw off the benign or malicious yoke of dependency. The ruling class white man on the other hand, has always had the power to count women among his pool of low-wage labor, his means of production. Most recently, he has "allowed" women the right to sue for divorce, to apply for AFDC, and to be neocolonialized.

Traditionally, poor black men and women who banded together and stayed together and raised children together did not have the luxury to cultivate dependence among the members of their families. So, the black dyke, like most black women, has been conditioned to be self-sufficient, i.e. not dependent on men. For me personally, the conditioning to be self-sufficient and the predominance of female role models in my life are the roots of my lesbianism. Before I became a lesbian, I often wondered why I was expected to give up, avoid, and trivialize the recognition and encouragement I felt from women in order to pursue the tenuous business of heterosexuality. And I am not unique.

As political lesbians, i.e. lesbians who are resisting the prevailing culture's attempts to keep us invisible and powerless,

we must become more visible (particularly black and other lesbians of color) to our sisters hidden in their various closets, locked in prisons of self-hate and ambiguity, afraid to take the ancient act of woman-bonding beyond the sexual, the private, the personal. I am not trying to reify lesbianism or feminism. I am trying to point out that lesbian-feminism has the potential of reversing and transforming a major component in the system of women's oppression, viz. predatory heterosexuality. If radical lesbian-feminism purports an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions and proscriptions, *then all people struggling to transform the character of relationships in this culture have something to learn from lesbians.*

The woman who takes a woman lover lives dangerously in patriarchy. And woe betide her even more if she chooses as her lover a woman who is not of her race. The silence among lesbian-feminists regarding the issue of lesbian relationships between black and white women in America is caused by none other than the centuries-old taboo and laws in the United States against relationships between people of color and those of the Caucasian race. Speaking heterosexually, the laws and taboos were a reflection of the patriarchal slave master's attempts to control his property via controlling his lineage through the institution of monogamy (for women only) and justified the taboos and laws with the argument that purity of the Caucasian race must be preserved (as well as its supremacy). However, we know that his racist and racialist laws and taboos did not apply to him in terms of the black slave woman just as his classist laws and taboos regarding the relationship between the ruling class and the indentured servants did not apply to him in terms of the white woman servant he chose to rape. The offspring of any unions between the white ruling class slave master and the black slave woman or white woman indentured servant could not legally inherit their white or ruling class sire's property or name, just their mothers' condition of servitude.

The taboo against black and white people relating at any other level than master-slave, superior-inferior has been propounded in America to keep black women and men and white women and men, who share a common oppression at the

hands of the ruling class white man, from organizing against that common oppression. We, as black lesbians, must vehemently resist being bound by the white man's racist, sexist laws, which have endangered potential intimacy of any kind between whites and blacks.

It cannot be presumed that black lesbians involved in love, work, and social relationships with white lesbians do so out of self-hate and denial of our racial-cultural heritage, identities, and oppression. Why should a woman's commitment to the struggle be questioned or accepted on the basis of her lover's or comrade's skin color? White lesbians engaged likewise with black lesbians or any lesbians of color cannot be assumed to be acting out of some perverse, guilt-ridden racist desire.

I personally am tired of going to events, conferences, workshops, planning sessions that involve a coming together of black and other lesbians of color for political or even social reasons and listening to black lesbians relegate feminism to white women, castigate black women who propose forming coalitions with predominantly white feminist groups, minimize the white woman's oppression and exaggerate her power, and then finally judge that a black lesbian's commitment to the liberation of black women is dubious because she does not sleep with a black woman. All of us have to accept or reject allies on the basis of politics not on the specious basis of skin color. *Have not black people suffered betrayal from our own people?*

Yes, black women's experiences of misogyny are different from white women's. However, they all add up to how the patriarchal slave master decided to oppress us. We both fought each other for his favor, approval, and protection. Such is the effect of imperialist, heterosexist patriarchy. Shulamith Firestone, in the essay, "Racism: the Sexism of the Family of Man," purports this analysis of the relationship between white and black women:

How do the women of this racial Triangle feel about each other? Divide and conquer: Both women have grown hostile to each other, white women feeling contempt for the "sluts" with no morals, black women feeling envy for the pampered "powder puffs." The black woman is jealous of the white woman's legitimacy, privilege, and comfort, but she also feels deep contempt... Similarly the white woman's contempt for the black woman is mixed with envy: for the black woman's greater sexual



license, for her gutsiness, for her freedom from the marriage bind. For after all, the black woman is not under the thumb of a man, but is pretty much her own boss to come and go, to leave the house, to work (much as it is degrading work) or to be "shiftless." What the white woman doesn't know is that the black woman, not under the thumb of one man, can now be squashed by all. There is no alternative for either of them than the choice between being public or private property, but because each still believes that the other is getting away with something both can be fooled into mis-channeling their frustration onto each other rather than onto the real enemy, "The Man."<sup>3</sup>

Though her statement of the choices black and white women have under patriarchy in America has merit, Firestone analyzes only a specific relationship i.e. between the ruling class white woman and slave or ex-slave black woman.

Because of her whiteness, the white woman of all classes has been accorded, as the black man has because of his maleness, certain privileges in racist patriarchy, e.g. indentured servitude as opposed to enslavement, exclusive right to public assistance until the 1960's, "legitimate" offspring and (if married into the middle/upper class) the luxury to live on her husband's income, etc.

The black woman, having neither maleness nor whiteness, has always had her heterosexuality, which white men and black men have manipulated by force and at will. Further, she, like all poor people, has had her labor, which the white capitalist man has also taken and exploited at will. These capabilities have allowed black women minimal access to the crumbs thrown at black men and white women. So, when the black woman and the white woman become lovers, we bring that history and all those questions to the relationship as well as other people's problems with the relationships. The taboo against intimacy between white and black people has been internalized by us and simultaneously defied by us. If we, as lesbian-feminists, defy the taboo, then we begin to transform the history of relationships between black women and white women.

In her essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," Rich calls for feminists to attend to the complexities of the relationship between black and white women in the United States. Rich queries:

What caricatures of bloodless fragility and broiling sensuality still imprint our psyches, and where did we receive these imprints? What happened between the several thousand northern white women and southern black women who together taught in the schools founded under Reconstruction by the Freedmen's Bureau, side by side braving the Ku Klux Klan harassment, terrorism, and the hostility of white communities?<sup>6</sup>

So, all of us would do well to stop fighting each other for our space at the bottom, because there ain't no more room. We have spent so much time hating ourselves. Time to love ourselves. And that, for all lesbians, as lovers, as comrades, as freedom fighters, is the final resistance.

## Notes

1. Grahn, Judy. "The Common Woman," *The Work of a Common Woman* (Oakland: Diana Press, 1978), 67.
2. Rich, Adrienne. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: WW Norton, 1979), 225.
3. I would like to give particular acknowledgement to the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement." Because this document espouses "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," it has become a manifesto of radical feminist thought, action and practice.
4. Robinson, Pat and group. "Poor Black Women's Study Papers by Poor Black Women of Mount Vernon, New York." In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1970), 194.
5. Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), 113.
6. Rich, op. cit., 298.
7. One such example is the Port Royal Experiment (1862), the precursor of the Freedmen's Bureau. Port Royal was a program of relief for "freed men and women" in the South Carolina Sea Islands, organized under the auspices of the Boston Education Commission and the Freedmen's Relief Assoc. in New York and the Port Royal Relief Assoc. in Philadelphia, and sanctioned by the Union Army and the Federal Government. See *The Journal of Charlotte Forten on the "Port Royal Experiment"* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1969). Through her Northern bourgeois myopia, Forten recounts her experiences as a black teacher among the black freed men and women and her Northern white women peers.

## Lowriding Through the Women's Movement

Barbara Noda

One road winds down the mountains, past apple orchards, and into the half-awake town of Watsonville, California. Not quite disturbed by the university students of Santa Cruz or the tourists of Monterey, an eye-distance from the blue roar of the Pacific, Watsonville is still a sleepy town where lowriders drag Main in search of non-existent action. The lowriders are left to their own destiny, to cruise against a backdrop of fog-shrouded artichokes when the sun has gone down. Thorny spears thrust into a star-studded night, and the lowriders bail out at deserted beaches, drink six-packs of beer and stare at the foam.

Sharon's kitchen in Watsonville was the center of a different kind of activity. We assembled in the evening: Sharon; Sharon's zealous sister who would soon be led to Christianity; a black lesbian who lived in a cottage behind Sharon's house who was an unforgivable romantic and who probably led a past life as an opera singer; a Chicana, self-named after a revolutionary, struggling to earn a doctorate in the University of California's ethereal mountaintop program called "History of Consciousness;" and myself.

We were probably among the first of our kind back in the early seventies: a third world women's group. There, in the quiet of residential Watsonville, we discussed the "colonized" and the "colonizer". Sharon distributed green tea, Chinese pastries, and Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. As the evening wound down we stormed out together - third world sisters - and dragged Main with the masses, drank beer and howled at the empty, innocent face of the sky who oppressed us.

Whether *Race* was our answer or our question, certainly it held us together if even for a few brief months in our lives during a time when *nothing else* in the world that we saw around us had any solid identity or meaning. It was a vaporous season, like a lost summer, and desperately we needed to hold onto each other and croon a few songs from the underworld.

Now, so many years later, it is still difficult to believe that Sharon is dead. I keep thinking that one day I'll see her in the

midst of a demonstration, shouting through a megaphone and glaring into the pale eye who dares to tell her to "go back to where you came from." She is *not* from China. But perhaps shouting into a megaphone was not her way. I remember the last time I saw her in newly established living quarters in the Outer Mission. We shared a sweet piece of watermelon that floated like a bright red iceberg in the middle of our plate, unmistakably a bite of paradise. Old differences over "correct" politics slithered harmlessly from our mouths with the black seeds we spit out. We talked about Asian American poetry and Tule Lake, co-existed for a moment then parted ways.

For one who was so sincerely dedicated to the "cause" for her to be broadsided while driving past the pine and sand that border Highway One and killed instantly is a mystery beyond all comprehension. There is no understanding of such things. Maybe we knew something then that we needed to forget in order to live more meaningful lives, when we joined the lowriders in the flagrant pursuit of their destiny.



I rode the elevator down from the 21st floor, marched to the bakery where Sharon used to buy pastries on her visits to the city, and ate my lunch in Portsmouth Square. I had been plugged into a dictaphone all morning and Chinatown squirmed with life.

Pigeons softly gurgling. Game tables obscured and surrounded by the beating hearts of groups of men. Women carrying bags of groceries nearly flying above sedate heads, like kites trailed by small children. Old people deciphering the ancient language of their worn out books. The red benches. My red sweater. The color RED sang out at me, and I was a glorious part of it.

Across the street was the leveled site of the I-Hotel. A fortress barricaded with the strategy of ardent organizers, it was now a parking lot. The damp cold of the building, the loneliness of the tenants and of us (I was not sure whether we had been the youthful guardians of the building or stray cats who had

wandered in) had been demolished into a flattened expanse of less than nothing. Even nothing speaks. This was merely city grime, fumes, noise, pollution. The humanity that had kept us warm and huddled together through makeshift Christmas dinners, internal crises and external warfare had been strained from the air. Not even a mirage existed, only the city life around me.

## Letter to Ma

*Merle Woo*

January, 1980

Dear Ma,

I was depressed over Christmas, and when New Year's rolled around, do you know what one of my resolves was? Not to come by and see you as much anymore. I had to ask myself why I get so down when I'm with you, my mother, who has focused so much of her life on me, who has endured so much; one who I am proud of and respect so deeply for simply surviving.

I suppose that one of the main reasons is that when I leave your house, your pretty little round white table in the dinette where we sit while you drink tea (with only three specks of Jasmine) and I smoke and drink coffee, I am down because I believe there are chasms between us. When you say, "I support you, honey, in everything you do except...except..." I know you mean except my speaking out and writing of my anger at all those things that have caused those chasms. When you say I shouldn't be so ashamed of Daddy, former gambler, retired clerk of a "gook suey" store, because of the time when I was six and saw him humiliated on Grant Avenue by two white cops, I know you haven't even been listening to me when I have repeatedly said that I am not ashamed of him, not you, not who we are. When you ask, "Are you so angry because you are unhappy?" I know that we are not talking to each other. Not with understanding, although many words have passed between us, many hours, many afternoons at that round table with Daddy out in the front room watching television, and drifting out every once in a while to say "Still talking?" and getting more peanuts that are so bad for his health.

We talk and we talk and I feel frustrated by your censorship. I know it is unintentional and unconscious. But whatever I have told you about the classes I was teaching, or the stories I was working on, you've always forgotten within a month. Maybe you can't listen - because maybe when you look in my eyes, you will, as you've always done, sense more than what we're actually saying, and that makes you fearful. Do you see your repressed anger manifested in me? What doors would groan wide open if

you heard my words with complete understanding? Are you afraid that your daughter is breaking out of our shackles, and into total anarchy? That your daughter has turned into a crazy woman who advocates not only equality for Third World people, for women, but for gays as well? Please don't shudder, Ma, when I speak of homosexuality. Until we can all present ourselves to the world in our completeness, as fully and beautifully as we see ourselves naked in our bedrooms, we are not free.

After what seems like hours of talking, I realize it is not talking at all, but the filling up of time with sounds that say, "I am your daughter, you are my mother, and we are keeping each other company, and that is enough." But it is not enough because my life has been formed by your life. Together we have lived one hundred and eleven years in this country as yellow women, and it is not enough to enunciate words and words and words and then to have them only mean that we have been keeping each other company. I desperately want you to understand me and my work, Ma, to know what I am doing! When you distort what I say, like thinking I am against all "caucasians" or that I am ashamed of Dad, then I feel anger and more frustration and want to slash out, not at you, but at those external forces which keep us apart. What deepens the chasms between us are our different reactions to those forces. Yours has been one of silence, self-denial, self-effacement; you believing it is your fault that you never fully experienced self-pride and freedom of choice. But listen, Ma, only with a deliberate consciousness is my reaction different from yours.

When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a little ten-year-old Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much

more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self-contempt because of our race, our sex, our sexuality. For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into self-contempt, passivity, and despair. I am sure that my fifteen years of alcohol abuse have not been forgotten by either of us, nor my suicidal depressions.

Now, I know you are going to think that I hate and despise you for your self-hatred, for your isolation. But I don't. Because in spite of your withdrawal, in spite of your loneliness, you have not only survived, but been beside me in the worst of times when your company meant everything in the world to me. I just need more than that now, Ma. I have taken and taken from you in terms of needing you to mother me, to be by my side, and I need, now, to take from you two more things: understanding and support for who I am now and my work.

We are Asian American women and the reaction to our identity is what causes the chasms instead of connections. But do you realize, Ma, that I could never have reacted the way I have if you had not provided for me the opportunity to be free of the binds that have held you down, and to be in the process of self-affirmation? Because of your life, because of the physical security you have given me: my education, my full stomach, my clothed and starched back, my piano and dancing lessons - all those gifts you never received - I saw myself as having worth; now I begin to love myself more, see our potential, and fight for just that kind of social change that will affirm me, my race, my sex, my heritage. And while I affirm myself, Ma, I affirm you.

Today, I am satisfied to call myself either an Asian American Feminist or Yellow Feminist. The two terms are inseparable because race and sex are an integral part of me. This means that I am working with others to realize pride in culture and women and heritage (the heritage that is the exploited yellow immigrant: Daddy and you). Being a Yellow Feminist means being a community activist and a humanist. It does not mean "separatism," either by cutting myself off from non-Asians or men. It does not mean retaining the same power structure and



substituting women in positions of control held by men. It does mean fighting the whites and the men who abuse us, straight-jacket us and tape our mouths; it means changing the economic class system and psychological forces (sexism, racism, and homophobia) that really hurt all of us. And I do this, not in isolation, but in the community.

We no longer can afford to stand back and watch while an insatiable elite ravages and devours resources which are enough for all of us. The obstacles are so huge and overwhelming that often I do become cynical and want to give up. And if I were struggling alone, I know I would never even attempt to put into action what I believe in my heart, that (and this is primarily because of you, Ma) Yellow Women are strong and have the potential to be powerful and effective leaders.

I can hear you asking now, "Well, what do you mean by 'social change and leadership'? And how are you going to go about it?" To begin with, we must wipe out the circumstances that keep us down in silence and self-effacement. Right now, my techniques are education and writing. Yellow Feminist means being a core for change, and that core means having the belief in our potential as human beings. I will work with anyone, support anyone, who shares my sensibility, my objectives. But there are barriers to unity: white women who are racist, and Asian American men who are sexist. My very being declares that those two groups do not share my complete sensibility. I would be fragmented, mutilated, if I did not fight against racism and sexism together.

And this is when the pain of the struggle hits home. How many white women have taken on the responsibility to educate themselves about Third World people, their history, their culture? How many white women really think about the stereotypes they retain as truth about women of color? But the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes is really very helpful for whites; they use them to justify their giving us the lowest wages and all the work they don't want to perform. Ma, how can we believe things are changing when as a nurse's aide during World War II, you were given only the tasks of changing the bed linen, removing bed pans, taking urine samples, and then only three years ago as a retired volunteer worker in a local hospital, white women gave themselves desk jobs and gave you, at sixty-nine, the same work you did in 1943? Today you speak more fondly of being a nurse's

aide during World War II and how proud you are of the fact that the Red Cross showed its appreciation for your service by giving you a diploma. Still in 1980, the injustices continue. I can give you so many examples of groups which are “feminist” in which women of color were given the usual least important tasks, the shitwork, and given no say in how that group is to be run. Needless to say, those Third World women, like you, dropped out, quit.

Working in writing and teaching, I have seen how white women condescend to Third World women because they reason that because of our oppression, which they know nothing about, we are behind them and their “progressive ideas” in the struggle for freedom. They don’t even look at history! At the facts! How we as Asian American women have always been fighting for more than mere survival, but were never acknowledged because we were in our communities, invisible, but not inaccessible.

And I get so tired of being the instant resource for information on Asian American women. Being the token representative, going from class to class, group to group, bleeding for white women so they can have an easy answer – and then, and this is what really gets to me – they usually leave to never continue their education about us on their own.

To the racist white female professor who says, “If I have to watch everything I say I wouldn’t say anything,” I want to say, “Then get out of teaching.”

To the white female poet who says, “Well, frankly, I believe that politics and poetry don’t necessarily have to go together,” I say, “Your little taste of white privilege has deluded you into thinking that you don’t have to fight against sexism in this society. You are talking to me from your own isolation and your own racism. If you feel that you don’t have to fight for me, that you don’t have to speak out against capitalism, the exploitation of human and natural resources, then you in your silence, your inability to make connections, are siding with a system that will eventually get you, after it has gotten me. And if you think that’s not a political stance, you’re more than simply deluded, you’re crazy!”

This is the same white voice that says, “I am writing about and looking for themes that are ‘universal.’” Well, most of the time

when “universal” is used, it is just a euphemism for “white:” white themes, white significance, white culture. And denying minority groups their rightful place and time in US history is simply racist.

Yes, Ma, I am mad. I carry the anger from my own experience and the anger you couldn’t afford to express, and even that is often misinterpreted no matter how hard I try to be clear about my position. A white woman in my class said to me a couple of months ago, “I feel that Third World women hate me and that *they* are being racist; I’m being stereotyped, and I’ve never been part of the ruling class.” I replied, “Please try to understand. Know our history. Know the racism of whites, how deep it goes. Know that we are becoming ever more intolerant of those people who let their ignorance be their excuse for their complacency, their liberalism, when this country (this world!) is going to hell in a handbasket. Try to understand that our distrust is from experience, and that our distrust is *powerless*. Racism is an essential part of the status quo, *powerful*, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught to all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear there are no exceptions?”

And as if the grief we go through working with white women weren’t enough; so close to home, in our community, and so very painful, is the lack of support we get from some of our Asian American brothers. Here is a quote from a rather prominent male writer ranting on about a Yellow “sister:” “...I can only believe that such blatant sucking off of the identity is the work of a Chinese American woman, another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow. Pussywhipped again. Oh, damn, pussywhipped again.”

Chinese American woman: “another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow.” According to him, Chinese American women sold out – are contemptuous of their culture, pathetically strain all their lives to be white, hate Asian American men, and so marry white men (the John Smiths) – or just like Pochahontas: we rescue white men while betraying our fathers; then marry white men, get baptized, and go to dear old England to become curiosities of the civilized world. Whew! Now, that’s an indictment! (Of all women of color.) Some of the male writers in the Asian American community seem never to support us. They always expect us to support them, and you know what? We almost always do. Anti-Yellow men? Are they kidding? We go

to their readings, buy and read and comment on their books, and try to keep up a dialogue. And they accuse us of betrayal, are resentful because we do reading together as Women, and so often do not come to our performances. And all the while we hurt because we are rejected by our brothers. The Pochahontas image used by a Chinese American man points out a tragic truth: the white man and his ideology are still over us and between us. These men of color, with clear vision, fight the racism in white society, but have bought the white male definition of "masculinity:" men only should take on the leadership in the community because the qualities of "originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" are "traditionally masculine."<sup>1</sup>

Some Asian men don't seem to understand that by supporting Third World women and fighting sexism, they are helping themselves as well. I understand all too clearly how dehumanized Dad was in this country. To be a Chinese man in America is to be a victim of both racism and sexism. He was made to feel he was without strength, identity, and purpose. He was made to feel soft and weak, whose only job was to serve whites. Yes, Ma, at one time I was ashamed of him because I thought he was "womanly." When those two white cops said, "Hey, fat boy, where's our meat?" he left me standing there on Grant Avenue while he hurried over to his store to get it; they kept complaining, never satisfied, "That piece isn't good enough. What's the matter with you, fat boy? Don't you have respect? Don't wrap that meat in newspapers either; use the good stuff over there." I didn't know that he spent a year and a half on Angel Island; that we could never have our right names; that he lived in constant fear of being deported; that, like you, he worked two full-time jobs most of his life; that he was mocked and ridiculed because he speaks "broken English." And Ma, I was so ashamed after that experience when I was only six years old that I never held his hand again.

Today, as I write to you of all these memories, I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.

But not all white women are racist, and not all Asian American men are sexist. And we choose to trust them, love and

work with them. And there are visible changes. Real tangible, positive changes. The changes I love to see are those changes within ourselves.

Your grandchildren, my children, Emily and Paul. That makes three generations. Emily loves herself. Always has. There are shades of self-doubt but much less than in you or me. She says exactly what she thinks, most of the time, either in praise or in criticism of herself or others. And at sixteen she goes after whatever she wants, usually center stage. She trusts and loves people, regardless of race or sex (but, of course, she's cautious), loves her community and works in it, speaks up against racism and sexism in school. Did you know that she got Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker on her reading list for a Southern Writers class when there were only white authors? That she insisted on changing a script done by an Asian American man when she saw that the depiction of the character she was playing was sexist? That she went to a California State House Conference to speak out for Third World students' needs?

And what about her little brother, Paul? Twelve years old. And remember, Ma? At one of our Saturday Night Family Dinners, how he lectured Ronnie (his uncle, yet!) about how he was a male chauvinist? Paul told me once how he knew he had to fight to be Asian American, and later he added that if it weren't for Emily and me, he wouldn't have to think about feminist stuff, too. He says he can hardly enjoy a movie or TV program anymore because of the sexism. Or comic books. And he is very much aware of the different treatment he gets from adults: "You have to do everything right," he said to Emily, "and I can get away with almost anything."

Emily and Paul give us hope, Ma. Because they are proud of who they are, and they care so much about our culture and history. Emily was the first to write your biography because she knows how crucial it is to get our stories in writing.

Ma, I wish I knew the histories of the women in our family before you. I bet that would be quite a story. But that may be just as well, because I can say that *you* started something. Maybe you feel ambivalent or doubtful about it, but you did. Actually, you should be proud of what you've begun. I am. If my reaction to being a Yellow Woman is different than yours was, please know that that is not a judgment on you, a criticism or

denial of you, your worth. I have always supported you, and as the years pass, I think I begin to understand you more and more.

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American Woman. We have such a proud heritage, such a courageous tradition. I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out in the schools. And the full awareness of being a woman makes me want to sing. And I do sing with other Asian Americans and women, Ma, anyone who will sing with me.

I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle. In loving ourselves for who we are –American women of color – we can make a vision for the future where we are free to fulfill our human potential. This new framework will not support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation, but will be a human and beautiful framework, created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.

Ma, today, you are as beautiful and pure to me as the picture I have of you, as a little girl, under my dresser-glass.

I love you,  
Merle

## Notes

1. *AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, editors Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974).

# I Come with No Illusions

*Mirtha Quintanales*

Columbus, Ohio  
December 27, 1979

Querida Chabela (Isabel Yrigoyen),

...Woman love. Never knew it would be so hard to leave anyone. Even though it means everything to me to move on, to finally embark on this self-healing journey. Torn by guilt. My lover. Working-class "white" woman from a small town. She has no more privileges than I do. As alone as I am. She is not my enemy. World upside down.

...What lies ahead? A mystery. Do not dare even consider the possibility of a love relationship with a Latina, a Cuban woman, even to dream that I could find such partnership...family. Work. It is my life. It is all I have. It is what now ultimately propels me to make this move. You, my friends, will sweeten my life. I know that. But I come to you with no illusions. I join you because I must. Give of myself to those who can give to me of themselves. Sisters. Sharing. I look for, expect nothing more. Is there really something more?

Setting myself up? Closing up, putting up barriers? Perhaps. Perhaps just trying to be "my own woman." Perhaps just trying to be one, not one-half. Can I find happiness "alone?" Americans tell me that I should strive for this blessed state of self-contentment as "one" if I intend to survive. Yet often I have doubts. Is this the kind of world I want to live in? A world where ultimately only the "I" matters? Millions of people living in self-constructed little boxes, Incomunicado.

I ponder over the meaning and possible repercussions of the choices I am about to make. What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? What are the implications of separating myself from American women and creating a separate community with women I identify as my counterparts?

It means, for one thing, that I am admitting failure. Failure to adjust, adapt, change, transcend cultural differences. Yet this is not only a personal failure. It is one which I share with millions. The reality of ethnic minority enclaves throughout the world tells

me a great deal about the process I am going through. It is neither unique nor new. And ultimately it may have a lot more to do with "success" than with failure. It is after all, a survival strategy – particularly in the context of a power imbalance between "natives" and "foreigners" – where the latter are in a better bargaining position as a *group* than as scattered individuals fighting their own personal battles.

For myself – as a Latina lesbian/feminist, it also means a real narrowing of options and privileges. I have extremely limited resources. No money, no access to power, no legitimacy. If there are many like me I do not know. Nor is it going to be easy for me to connect with them if I should learn that there are. Their resources are likely to be as limited as mine. This is a socio-economic, political reality that acts as a barrier to the formation of a strong and visible community. Not only the "social goodies" (money, power, fame, and other minor privileges) but life's necessities (a job, a roof over my head...) depend on my ties, my interactions with American men and women. To say "I do not like the nature of this tie with the powerful" is dangerous; for the implications are that I may strive to break free from it and in doing so reduce my chances of making it in this society.

But what of human feeling? It is after all, great personal need, not political analysis that drives me to take this stand, to turn away from my American sisters and put all my energies into creating a community with my Latina sisters. What is the nature and significance of this need? Is it true that love knows no boundaries? Or that being "human" somehow means being ultimately undifferentiated – "all alike?" Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that in fact "human nature," bound as it is to "culture," implies variability and difference. Yes, we all need to eat and sleep, keep ourselves warm, protect ourselves from harm, be nurtured into maturity; touch and be touched, etc. But, how we choose to meet these needs varies and changes from time to time, place to place and is dependent both on history and the particular set of environmental circumstances contextual to our lives. What both puzzles me and distresses me is the degree to which we seem to be "culture bound." As if "setting the cultural mold" implied never quite being able to break free from it. At least not completely. This seems to be



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particularly true in the most private activities of our lives – how we express and share feeling in the context of our intimate interpersonal relationships. The wonder of it! And the pain...

Con mucho cariño, tu amiga  
Mirtha

# I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance

*Mirtha Quintanales*

Columbus, Ohio  
January, 1980

Dear Barbara (Smith),

Thanks for your letter. I can appreciate your taking the time to write. It can get *so* difficult for busy people to keep up with correspondence... I only hope that you have taken some time to rest, gather your energies. I'm just beginning to emerge from a several-week period of semi-hermitdom myself. I, too, was exhausted. Too much work too many responsibilities - often the worry of not moving fast enough, or too fast to have any kind of an impact. After a brief peaceful interlude, the pressures are beginning to build again, Oh well...

I wanted to tell you about my visit to San Francisco, about coming together with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters. The joy and the pain of finding each other, of realizing how long we've "*done without*," of how difficult it's going to be to heal ourselves, to find our voices... But how perfectly wonderful to finally have a family, a community. Yet I find that there is too much to tell. Cannot easily compress it all in a letter. How I wish that we could meet and talk! So much of the Black lesbian/feminist experience speaks to our own... I passed around all the literature you'd handed out at conferences - including *Conditions* 5. And the Latina sisters were amazed. Lorraine Bethel's "*What Chou Mean We White Girl?*" was especially telling... Many of our feelings given form, meaning. Please let her know that her work has been very helpful to us - particularly in sorting out what we want and don't want in our relationships with white, mainstream American feminists. Yes, there is a lot we can learn from each other.

But Barbara, I am worried. At the moment I am in the process of organizing a roundtable for the NWSA<sup>1</sup> conference, on the topic of racial and ethnic minority lesbians in the US. There are two other women involved - a Greek friend of mine from Berkeley, and a Black woman from San Francisco. And I feel the tension building. The Greek woman's many attempts to

"connect" with Third World lesbians and "Women of Color" (most poignantly at last year's conference) have been met with outright rejection. Unfortunately, being loud, aggressive and very Greek-identified, she has found a great deal of rejection in white, mainstream lesbian/feminist circles as well. Clearly she does not fit there either.

The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing (always a very tenuous situation – since acknowledgement of ethnic ties is inevitably accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice and various kinds of discrimination – the problem is not just personal, but "systemic," "political" – one more reality of American "life.") How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies:" race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of class and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.

Not all Third World women are "women of color" – if by this concept we mean exclusively "non-white." I am only one example. And not all women of color are really Third World – if this term is only used in reference to underdeveloped or developing societies (especially those not allied with any superpower). Clearly then it would be difficult to justify referring to Japanese women, who are women of color, as Third World women. Yet, if we extend the concept of Third World to include internally "colonized" racial and ethnic minority groups in this country, so many different kinds of groups could be conceivably included, that the crucial issue of social and institutional racism and its historic tie to slavery in the US could get diluted, lost in the shuffle. The same thing would likely happen if we extended the meaning of "women of color" to include all those women in this country who are victims of prejudice and discrimination (in many respects), but who nevertheless hold racial privileges and may even be racists.

I don't know what to think anymore. Things begin to get even more complicated when I begin to consider that many of us who identify as "Third World" or "Women of Color", have grown up as or are fast becoming "middle-class" and highly educated, and therefore more privileged than many of our white, poor and working-class sisters. Sometimes I get angry at my lover because she does not seem to relate to my being a "Cuban" lesbian. And yet, can I really relate to the fact that she grew up in a very small town, in a working-class family – with little money, few other resources, little encouragement to get an education, etc.? Yes... and no. There have been times in my life when my family had little money or food. There have been times in my life when I lived from day to day not knowing if I would be alive "tomorrow" – not knowing really how it felt to plan for "next month," or "next year."

Yet, even though I grew up having to heat my bathwater and sleep in a very lumpy bed, even though I grew up often being ashamed of bringing my friends home because our furniture was old and dilapidated, I went to private schools, spent summers at the beach, traveled, had plenty of toys and books to read; took music and dancing lessons, went horseback riding – my parents being very conscious of, and being very *able* to give us the best (if not always in terms of material comforts) that their middle-class resources gave them access to – including the services of a long string of nurse-maids (my mother worked, and in Cuba often the maids had maids – even if it meant putting little girls to work as servants and baby-tenders – economic exploitation galore!).

Yes, I have suffered in this country. I have been the victim of blatant prejudice and institutional discrimination. As an ethnic minority woman and a lesbian I have lived in the margins, in fear, isolated, disconnected, silent and in pain. Nevertheless, those early years of relatively "blissful" middle-class childhood (although I have to say that after age 7 it was *hell* – political violence and death always lurking) in my own country where I was simply part of the "mainstream" if not a little better off because of my father's professional status, have served me as a "cushion" throughout my life. Even in the United States, as an essentially middle-class (and white-skinned) woman, I have had "opportunities" (or have known how to make them for myself), that my very white, working-class American lover has never had.

Having managed to graduate from college (one out of three in her graduating high school class who managed to make it to college) against tremendous odds, she is still struggling with the fact that she may never really learn the ropes of surviving well in mainstream, middle-class American society. And need I add that mainstream white, middle-class American feminism is as insensitive to her needs as it is to mine?

I realize that I cannot fight everybody's battles. But need I create false enemies in order to wage my own? I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the "white woman" – especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges – regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American "White Trash" and destitute.

But I am also a bit concerned when a Black sister generalizes about/dismisses all non-black women, or all women who are not strictly "women of color" or strictly "Third World." If you are not WASP in this country, if you or your family have known the immigrant experience or ghetto life, you are likely to be very much acquainted with the social, economic political reality of internal colonization. Yes, racism is a BIG MONSTER we all need to contend with – regardless of our skin color and ethnic affiliation. But I think we need to keep in mind that in this country, in this world, racism is used *both to create false differences among us and to mask very very significant ones* – cultural economic, political... And yes, those who have been racially oppressed must create separatist spaces to explore the meaning of their experiences – to heal themselves, to gather their energies, their strength, to develop their own voices, to build their armies. And yes, those of us who have not been victims of racial oppression must come to terms with our own racism, our own complicity with this system that discriminates and oppresses on the basis of skin color and body features. And of course it would be irresponsible liberal folly to propose that social and institutional racism could be eliminated by simply "becoming"

personally non-racist, by becoming "integrated" in our private lives... How ridiculous for white folk to think that a long history of slavery and every other kind of oppression, that an *ongoing* and *insidious* reality of social, economic, political exploitation could be magically transcended through a few individual choices... And even if everybody's skin should suddenly turn black, it would be quite impossible to truly know what it means to have grown up - generation after generation - Black and female in America. Of course our skin is not likely to "turn," and so regardless of how "conscious" we claim to be of the "Black experience" in America, we shall always be limited by our own history and the reality of our white skin and the privileges it automatically confers on us.

Ironically, when a Black American sister (or anyone for that matter) puts me, or other ethnic women of this society in the same category with the socially dominant White American Woman on the basis of lighter-than-black skin color, she is in fact denying my history, my culture, my identity, my very being, my pain and my struggle. She, too, is being *personally* racist. When she fails to recognize that the "social privileges" of lighter-than-black ethnic-minority lesbians in this society are almost totally dependent on our denial of who we are, on our *ethnic death*, she also falls prey to the racist mythology that color differences are the end-all indications of social inequality. That those who happen to have the "right" skin color are not only all alike but all hold the same social privileges. Yes, lighter-than-black skin color *may* confer on some ethnic minority women the option of becoming "assimilated", "integrated" in mainstream American society. But is this really a privilege when it always means having to become invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated? The perils of "passing" as white American are perils indeed. It should be easy enough at least for *lesbians* to understand the meaning of being and yet not being, of "merging" and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society.

And while it is true that a lesbian/feminist community and culture have emerged, while it is true that Black, Latina and other Third World/lesbians "of color" have begun to speak up, it is not true that we have yet engaged in a truly un-biased, un-prejudiced *dialogue*. We are still measuring each other by the yardstick of the White, Capitalist, Imperialist, Racist American

Patriarch. We are still seeing radical differences when they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical. And most disastrously, we are failing to recognize much of what we *share*. Is it not possible for us to recognize, respect and settle our differences; to validate our various groups' struggles and need for separate spaces, and yet to open our eyes to the fact that divided we are only likely to succeed at defeat?

It is pure folly to think that a small group of Latina or Black or Chinese American lesbians can, on its own, create a feminist revolution. It is pure folly to think that middle-class wasp feminists can do so...

Barbara, I ache to live with and love with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters – to speak "Spanglish," to eat arroz con frijoles, to dance to the salsa to openly talk sex and flirt with one another; to secretly pray to Yemayá, Chango, Oshun, and the Virgen de Guadalupe. I run to them for refuge, for dear life!

But when I meet you and other Black lesbian sisters – and am moved by what we seem to share, I ache for you also. I spend time with Stacy (Anastasia) and other Southern European/North African/Mediterranean lesbian sisters – and am stirred by what we seem to have in common, I feel deep yearning for them... I read the words of other ethnic American lesbian sisters and I find that I understand them and want to share in these women's lives. And I live, love and work with working-class sisters. Have lived, loved and worked in the poor urban ghettos of Chicago and Boston. Have spent some time in the poor, rural, isolated mountains of New Mexico. Have traveled to Latin American countries, to India, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong-Kong, Japan – feeling the pain of my poor and hard-working sisters – struggling against all odds to stay alive, to live with dignity. I cannot sleep sometimes – haunted by the memories of such all-encompassing poverty – the kind of poverty that even poor Americans could not begin to conceive. India. India was the unraveling. How insignificant our troubles seem in the United States... How ridiculously small my own struggles... I don't feel guilt or shame, but this nausea... To find us squabbling over who may or may not be called a feminist, who may or may not join or take part in this or that particular political group, etc., etc. The privilege of having feminist "groups" – most women in the world just eat shit.

And lesbians – who really knows the fate of most lesbians in the world, especially the Third World?

Is it not possible for all of us here in America to turn *right now* to *all* the sisters of the world – to form a common, human-woman-lesbian bond?

I have lost some sleep lately pondering over this race/culture/class problem... We've got to do *something!* Many of us Latinas are non-white – as a matter of fact, most of us are racially mixed to various degrees. Ask a Black or "mulatto" Puerto Rican woman what her identity is, though, and most likely she will tell you "*Puerto Rican.*" All Chinese American women are non-white. But ask any of them what her identity is. She will not tell you "yellow," she will tell you Chinese, or Chinese American. Many African peoples are "Black," but ask a Nigerian, an Ethiopian, etc. what her identity is, and she will tell you "Nigerian," or "Ethiopian," or whatever... Obviously "Black Culture" is an American phenomenon. Many of us don't really understand this. I know I didn't for a long time. When I first came to this country I just assumed that Black people were simply American (for that matter I just assumed *all* Americans shared the same kind of "American Culture"). I grew up with people of all kinds of skin-color – but we were all *Cuban* and understood each other, even though we *could* recognize the most minute "color differences," even though we *could* recognize class differences. How was I supposed to know – given the propaganda – that there was no such thing as a "melting pot"? How was I supposed to know that racism was so widespread and so deeply ingrained in American society? I was *shocked* in my sophomore year in college when several Black women implied that I was a racist when I said I could not figure out what was different about being Black or Yellow, or White, or Red in the United States. I could understand not knowing about a "culture", but not knowing about a "race"? Was "race" per se so important? Was it really linked to a "culture"? This was a weird notion to me indeed!

Well I paid very hard for my immigrant ignorance. I'm still paying – even though I have learned a great deal since then about American sub-cultures and about American racism. Many of my Latina sisters have had similar experiences, and the big question is always there – Will we ever really be accepted by our



Black American sisters? I cannot really convey the pain – especially in those of us who *are* Afro-Hispanic-American but light skinned – of seeing so much of ourselves in, of being so drawn to African-American women, and yet feeling that we are very likely to be denied a connection, to be rejected. The fucking irony of it! Racism. It has so thoroughly poisoned Americans of all colors that many of us can simply not see beyond it. I'm sorry about this long letter Barbara – especially this last part. But I have not been able to get over this pain. I used to have this recurrent dream (for years) that I would alternately become black and white and black and white over and over and over again... It felt really good. But I've never quite figured out all of what it meant... Well, take care Barbara.

In sisterhood,  
Mirtha

### **Notes**

1. National Women's Studies Association.

## Earth-Lover, Survivor, Musician

*Naomi Littlebear Morena*

The following is an excerpt from a letter in response to Cherrie's request that Naomi write an essay on "language & oppression" as a Chicana.

January, 1980

Cherrie,

I have a clear image in my mind about the things we talked about, your anger about language, identification – given the brief acquaintance, I personally could relate to a lot of what you were saying – i realize that those feelings had a lot to do with why i wrote the book i'm sending you<sup>1</sup> - that was a very important time in my life. However I realize now that it wasn't for me exactly the most balanced part of my life. It was only a time in which i hurt so bad i had to shake off the dust of one too many insults in order to carry on. Nonetheless, my criticism, analysis, etc. did not come from a natural place in me. It was not the "voice of my mothers" nor did it completely reflect the way i was brought up to be. I wrote that book as a brown woman's retort to white *people*, white middle class leftists who were trying to redirect my spirit. I was *supposed* to be the angry chicana speaking her vengeance against whites, against the capitalist system.

*I am a sad chicana lesbian woman who is woman-identified earth lover, survivor, musician – music and beauty are my tools against my aches and pains – striving to bring peace into an otherwise tumultuous past.*

I am not the scholar analyst you are – which I totally respect. I'm clear about why i am and how i am - *i cannot extricate the lesbian from my soul no more than i could the chicana – i have always been both.*

The woman I am right now is not struggling with language – this time – i am closest and clearest right now about violence – i am haunted by dreams from my childhood and not-too-distant past. I could not adequately write about language unless i was right there with the problem, as you seem to be – you are fairly bursting with reasons and important thoughts, insights into our mutual experience with the degradation and denial that came with our language loss (abduction?).

Imagine the process you would have to go thru if I asked you to write me a paper on violence in the barrios and how that affected your personal life? *I need to feel control of my own life – violence has on some deep level rendered me helpless and given me a deep fear of being powerless* – our language being stripped from us creates similar fears. I need to figure out what is closest to me. I have done some work in exorcising the demons of communication – my current observation is that i feel comfortable with words again, except when i try to make scientific discoveries – that is me reacting to male energy that says women are stupid & emotional.

My emotions & intuitions are there for a purpose. They are honest perceptions. I don't have to try to be grassroots. I do have to try to relate my straight feminist politics.

Wanting to be loving and have a family is my connection with my culture. I am doing that. Going to meetings is not part of my ethnic background.

I got real turned around when i got involved with leftist politics. I am now trying to piece my life together, discard the violence & humiliations, accept that i am a complete person with nothing lacking. My mind and heart are capable of deciding what's best for me.

For once in my life i have to let my self deserve a home, food on the table, and a handful of loving friends – this is a time of healing and taking the blame of the rapes and attempted rapes, the child beatings i received, taking all that pain off my shoulders and giving it back to who it belongs.

I want you to accept me as i accept you. Be an amiga, not a comrade to me. I will send you more words if you like but right now the hurt's all around me and i feel like flying away. I will fight back with music, but don't ask me to fight with words. Trust my instincts, my knowledge – i am not a sheltered little wetback – i've been through so much pain that i've popped out the other side. *We* have been thru so much pain that now we have no place to put that pain but to leave it out of our lives – because the pain was given to do its worst damage by festering in our soul, by growing comfortable in our flesh that we more often hurt each other 'tho infested by the same disease.

I have no solution but to go on. I will not carry the stigma that so many have tried to burden me with. These words are mine because this now is *my* language – 13 years of English, 13 years of Spanish – that’s when I flipped out – the day of my two “children’s” anniversary. I was prompted by devils – clinical radicals who instructed me in self-autopsy. Please applaud my victory over those fuckers – it is *your* victory as well – remember they think we’re all related. We’re not at all where they expected us to be – we just slipped through – because we knew damn well it was a lie.

I refuse to be separated from your life by these words. I read you loud & clear: the story-telling, my crazy aunts, the laughter, deep-hearted joy, celebrating *anything* with a six-pack of beer.<sup>2</sup>

I remember. And as long as i know you too were once there – it is something that can warm us both this winter.

Because i haven’t seen my cousins in years.

That is what i miss, that is what i’m looking for.

March 23, 1980

Now that the ice has melted and the flowers begin to bloom i welcome the season of growing. Thank you for sharing with me. I do believe we have in common – the cultural rip off, the anger, the wisdom, the fullness of life.

... I have started this letter many times, wanting to send you these stories. I appreciated your letter very much. It’s still on my desk reminding me how hard we are working to be visible.

We are touring again, maybe we’ll meet.

## Notes

1. *The Dark Side of the Moon*. (Portland: Olive Press, n.d.). Book of essays & poetry on life in the barrio, and the topics of the Church, Family, Education & the Left.
2. Here Naomi is referring to experiences Cherrie describes in her essay, “La Güera.” (see essay in this volume).



*Speaking in Tongues*  
*The Third World*  
*Woman Writer*



Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Aveugle Voix (Blind Voice)*, 1975  
Black & white photograph, image #3, 9.75" x 6.5"  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum  
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archives

## Speaking in Tongues

### *The Third World Woman Writer*

*who told you anybody wants to hear from you, you aint  
nothing but a black woman.*

- hattie gossett

*Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could  
write.*

- Gloria E. Anzaldúa

As first generation writers, we defy the myth that the color of our skins prevents us from using the pen to create. hattie gossett's piece, the introduction to her first book, is presented here in recognition of that act of defiance. But it is not enough to have our books published. We must also actively engage in establishing the criteria and the standards by which our work can be viewed. As Barbara Smith laid the groundwork in developing literary criticism for Black women in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,"<sup>1</sup> here Norma Alarcón plants the seed which germinates a feminist criticism involving the history, mythology, and writings of La Chicana. This article represents the kind of literary criticism that is beginning to appear in every segment of the Third World women's community.

We are Third World women writers, so similar yet so different, similar in the issues we confront, different in approach and style. What we have in common is our love of writing and a love of the literature of women of color. In our common struggle and in our writing we reclaim our tongues. We wield a pen as a tool, a weapon, a means of survival, a magic wand that will attract power, that will draw self-love into our bodies.

And though often we may feel ambivalent about our devotion to the female self, we continue to swim *fearless with the length of our own bodies (Wong)* in a sea of words. We continue to swim toward that raft and lifeline which is *ourselves - ourselves as mother, ourselves as hero*. What we choose finally is to *cultivate our colored skins*.



a teacher taught me  
more than she knew  
patting me on the head  
putting words in my hand  
- "pretty little Indian girl!"  
saving them -  
going to give them  
back to her one day . . .<sup>2</sup>

*A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared . In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.*

### **Notes**

1. *Conditions 2*. NY: Brooklyn, 1977.
2. Anne Lee Walters, Dexter Fisher, ed. *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers in the US*. (Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 109.

# Speaking In Tongues

## *A Letter To Third World Women Writers<sup>1</sup>*

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

21 mayo 80

Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing -

I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you. Black woman huddles over a desk on the fifth floor of some New York tenement. Sitting on a porch in south Texas, a Chicana fanning away mosquitos and the hot air, trying to arouse the smoldering embers of writing. Indian woman walking to school or work lamenting the lack of time to weave writing into your life. Asian American, lesbian, single mother, tugged in all directions by children, lover or ex-husband, and the writing.

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing.

How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course.

My dear *hermanas*, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose - we never had any privileges. I wanted to call the dangers "obstacles" but that would be a kind of lying. We can't *transcend* the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance.

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The *lesbian* of color is not only invisible, she doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skills for writing nor the confidence that we were

correct in using our class and ethnic languages. I, for one, became adept at, and majored in English to spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty. And Spanish was not taught in grade school. And Spanish was not required in High School. And though now I write my poems in Spanish as well as English I feel the rip-off of my native tongue.

I *lack imagination* you say

*No*. I lack language.  
The language to clarify  
my resistance to the literate.  
Words are a war to me.  
They threaten my family.

To gain the word  
to describe the loss  
I risk losing everything.  
I may create a monster  
the word's length and body  
swelling up colorful and thrilling  
looming over my *mother*, characterized.  
Her voice in the distance  
*unintelligible illiterate*.  
These are the monster's words.<sup>2</sup>

– Cherríe L. Moraga

Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me? I'll do anything to postpone it – empty the trash, answer the telephone. The voice recurs in me: *Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?* How dare I even consider becoming a writer as I stooped over the tomato fields bending, bending under the hot sun, hands broadened and calloused, not fit to hold the quill, numbed into an animal stupor by the heat.

How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less feel and believe that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does

not our class, our culture as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us?

The white man speaks: *Perhaps if you scrape the dark off of your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don't cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world.*

Man, like all the other animals, fears and is repelled by that which he does not understand, and mere difference is apt to connote something malign.<sup>3</sup>

I think, yes, perhaps if we go to the university. Perhaps if we become male-women or as middle-class as we can. Perhaps if we give up loving women, we will be worthy of having something to say worth saying. They convince us that we must cultivate art for art's sake. Bow down to the sacred bull, form. Put frames and metaframes around the writing. Achieve distance in order to win the coveted title "literary writer" or "professional writer." Above all do not be simple, direct, nor immediate.

Why do they fight us? Because they think we are dangerous beasts? Why *are* we dangerous beasts? Because we shake and often break the white's comfortable stereotypic images they have of us: the Black domestic, the lumbering nanny with twelve babies sucking her tits, the slant-eyed Chinese with her expert hand - "They know how to treat a man in bed," - the flat-faced Chicana or Indian, passively lying on her back, being fucked by the Man a la La Chingada.

The Third World woman revolts: *We revoke, we erase your white male imprint. When you come knocking on our doors with your rubber stamps to brand our faces with DUMB, HYSTERICAL, PASSIVE PUTA, PERVERT, when you come with your branding irons to burn MY PROPERTY on our buttocks, we will vomit the guilt, self-denial and race-hatred you have force-fed into us right back into your mouth. We are done being cushions for your projected fears. We are tired of being your sacrificial lambs and scapegoats.*

I can write this and yet I realize that many of us women of color who have strung degrees, credentials and published books around our necks like pearls that we hang onto for dear life are in danger of contributing to the invisibility of our sister-writers. "La Vendida," the sell-out.

*The danger of selling out one's own ideologies.* For the Third World woman, who has, at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment. Its followers are notorious for "adopting" women of color as their "cause" while still expecting us to adapt to *their* expectations and *their* language.

How dare we get out of our colored faces. How dare we reveal the human flesh underneath and bleed red blood like the white folks. It takes tremendous energy and courage not to acquiesce, not to capitulate to a definition of feminism that still renders most of us invisible. Even as I write this I am disturbed that I am the only Third World woman writer in this handbook. Over and over I have found myself to be the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings.

*We cannot allow ourselves to be tokenized. We must make our own writing and that of Third World women the first priority.* We cannot educate white women and take them by the hand. Most of us are willing to help but we can't do the white woman's homework for her. That's an energy drain. More times than she cares to remember, Nellie Wong, Asian American feminist writer, has been called by white women wanting a list of Asian American women who can give readings or workshops. We are in danger of being reduced to purveyors of resource lists.

*Coming face to face with one's limitations. There are only so many things I can do in one day.* Luisah Teish addressing a group of predominantly white feminist writers had this to say of Third World women's experience:

If you are not caught in the maze that (we) are in, it's very difficult to explain to you the hours in the day we do not have. And the hours that we do not have are hours that are translated into survival skills and money. And when one of those hours is taken away it means an hour that we don't have to lie back and stare at the ceiling or an hour that we don't have to talk to a friend. For me it's a loaf of bread.

Understand.

My family is poor.

Poor. I can't afford

a new ribbon. The risk

of this one is enough  
to keep me moving  
through it, accountable.  
The repetition like my mother's  
stories retold, *each* time  
reveals more particulars  
gains more familiarity.

You can't get me in your car so fast.<sup>4</sup>

- *Cherrie L. Moraga*

Complacency is a far more dangerous attitude than outrage.<sup>5</sup>

- *Naomi Littlebear Morena*

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. 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 myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

*Why should I try to justify why I write? Do I need to justify being Chicana, being woman? You might as well ask me to try to justify why I'm alive.*

The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as "other" – the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We

knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered "normal," white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. And those that don't survive? The waste of ourselves: so much meat thrown at the feet of madness or fate or the state.

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It is dark and damp and has been raining all day. I love days like this. As I lie in bed I am able to delve inward. Perhaps today I will write from that deep core. As I grope for words and a voice to speak of writing, I stare at my brown hand clenching the pen and think of you thousands of miles away clutching your pen. You are not alone.

Pen, I feel right at home in your ink doing a pirouette, stirring the cobwebs, leaving my signature on the window panes. Pen, how could I ever have feared you. You're quite house-broken but it's your wildness I am in love with. I'll have to get rid of you when you start being predictable, when you stop chasing dustdevils. The more you outwit me the more I love you. It's when I'm tired or have had too much caffeine or wine that you get past my defenses and you say more than what I had intended. You surprise me, shock me into knowing some part of me I'd kept secret even from myself.

- Journal entry

In the kitchen Maria and Cherrie's voices falling on these pages. I can see Cherrie going about in her terry cloth wrap, barefoot, washing the dishes, shaking out the tablecloth, vacuuming. Deriving a certain pleasure watching her perform those simple tasks, I am thinking *they lied, there is no separation between life and writing.*

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates

us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing. *No topic is too trivial.* The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment.

The problem is to focus, to concentrate. The body distracts, sabotages with a hundred ruses, a cup of coffee, pencils to sharpen. The solution is to anchor the body to a cigarette or some other ritual. And who has time or energy to write after nurturing husband or lover, children and often an outside job? The problems seem insurmountable and they are, but they cease being insurmountable once we make up our mind that whether married or childreared or working outside jobs we are going to make time for the writing.

Forget the room of one's own – write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron – you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write.

*Distractions* all – that I spring on myself when I'm so deep into the writing when I'm almost at that place, that dark cellar where some "thing" is liable to jump up and pounce on me. The ways I subvert the writing are many. The way I don't tap the well nor learn how to make the windmill turn.

Eating is my main distraction. Getting up to eat an apple danish. That I've been off sugar for three years is not a deterrent nor that I have to put on a coat, find the keys and go out into the San Francisco fog to get it. Getting up to light incense, to put a record on, to go for a walk – anything just to put off the writing.

Returning after I've stuffed myself. Writing paragraphs on pieces of paper, adding to the puzzle on the floor, to the confusion on my desk making completion far away and perfection impossible.



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Dear mujeres de color, I feel heavy and tired and there is a buzz in my head – too many beers last night. But I must finish this letter. My bribe: to take myself out to pizza.

So I cut and paste and line the floor with my bits of paper. My life strewn on the floor in bits and pieces and I try to make some order out of it working against time, psyching myself up with decaffeinated coffee, trying to fill in the gaps.

Leslie, my housemate, comes in gets on hands and knees to read my fragments on the floor and says "It's good, Gloria." And I think: *I don't have to go back to Texas, to my family of land, mesquites, cactus, rattlesnakes and roadrunners. My family, this community of writers. How could I have lived and survived so long without it. And I remember the isolation, re-live the pain again.*

"To assess the damage is a dangerous act,"<sup>6</sup> writes Cherríe Moraga. To stop there is even more dangerous.

It's too easy, blaming it all on the white man or white feminists or society or on our parents. What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us, so let us own our responsibility, place it in our own hands and carry it with dignity and strength. No one's going to do my shitwork, I pick up after myself.

It makes perfect sense to me now how I resisted the act of writing, the commitment to writing. To write is to confront one's demons, look them in the face and live to write about them. Fear acts like a magnet; it draws the demons out of the closet and into the ink in our pens.

The tiger riding our backs (writing) never lets us alone. *Why aren't you riding, writing, writing?* It asks constantly till we begin to feel we're vampires sucking the blood out of too fresh an experience; that we are sucking life's blood to feed the pen. Writing is the most daring thing that I have ever done and the most dangerous. Nellie Wong calls writing "the three-eyed demon shrieking the truth."<sup>7</sup>

Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.<sup>8</sup>

– Alice Walker

I have never seen so much power in the ability to move and transform others as from that of the writing of women of color.

In the San Francisco area, where I now live, none can stir the audience with their craft and truthsaying as do Cherríe Moraga (Chicana), Genny Lim (Asian American), and Luisah Teish (Black). With women like these, the loneliness of writing and the sense of powerlessness can be dispelled. We can walk among each other talking of our writing, reading to each other. And more and more when I'm alone, though still in communion with each other, the writing possesses me and propels me to leap into a timeless, spaceless no-place where I forget myself and feel I am the universe. *This* is power.

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue – *organic writing* I call it. A poem works for me *not* when it says what I want it to say and *not* when it evokes what I want it to. It works when the subject I started out with metamorphoses alchemically into a different one, one that has been discovered, or uncovered, by the poem. It works when it surprises me, when it says something I have repressed or pretended not to know. The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much *I* put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve.

Audre said we need to speak up. Speak loud, speak unsettling things and be dangerous and just fuck, hell, let it out and let everybody hear whether they want to or not.<sup>9</sup>

– Kathy Kendall

I say *mujer mágica*, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same. Stop the chatter inside their heads.

Your skin must be sensitive enough for the lightest kiss and thick enough to ward off the sneers. If you are going to spit in the eye of the world, make sure your back is to the wind. Write of what most links us with life, the sensation of the body, the

images seen by the eye, the expansion of the psyche in tranquility: moments of high intensity, its movement, sounds, thoughts. *Even though we go hungry we are not impoverished of experiences.*

I think many of us have been fooled by the mass media, by society's conditioning that our lives must be lived in great explosions, by "falling in love," by being "swept off our feet," and by the sorcery of magic genies that will fulfill our every wish, our every childhood longing. Wishes, dreams, and fantasies are important parts of our creative lives. They are the steps a writer integrates into her craft. They are the spectrum of resources to reach the truth, the heart of things, the immediacy and the impact of human conflict.<sup>10</sup>

- Nellie Wong

Many have a way with words. They label themselves seers but they will not see. Many have the gift of tongue but nothing to say. Do not listen to them. Many who have words and tongue have no ear, they cannot listen and they will not hear.

There is no need for words to fester in our minds. They germinate in the open mouth of the barefoot child in the midst of restive crowds. They wither in ivory towers and in college classrooms.

Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked - not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.

*Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper.*

We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled.

Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up. Do not fake it, try to sell it for a handclap or your name in print.

Love,  
Gloria

### Notes

1. Originally written for *Words In Our Pockets* (Bootlegger: San Francisco), The Feminist Writer's Guild Handbook.
2. Cherríe L. Moraga, poem "It's the Poverty," in *Loving In The War Years*. Boston: South End Press, 2000.
3. Alice Walker, ed. "What White Publishers Won't Print," *I Love Myself When I am Laughing - A Zora Neal Hurston Reader*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 169.
4. Moraga, *Ibid.*
5. Cherríe L. Moraga's essay, see "La Güera," in this volume.
6. Naomi Littlebear Morena. *The Dark of the Moon*, (Portland: Olive Press, 1977), 36.
7. Nellie Wong, "Flows from the Dark of Monsters and Demons: Notes on Writing," in *Radical Women Pamphlet*, (San Francisco, 1979).
8. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *MS*, May 1974, 60.
9. Letter from Kathy Kendall, March 10, 1980, concerning a writer's workshop given by Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Meridel LeSeur.
10. Nellie Wong, *Ibid.*

# **who told you anybody wants to hear from you? you ain't nothing but a black woman!**

*hattie gossett*

first of all let me say that it is really a drag to have to write the introduction to your own book.<sup>1</sup>

i mean! after i went through everything i had to go through to write this whole book (and believe me i had to go through a lot) now thats not enough. i have to do more. what more can i do? what more can i say? i have said it all (for the time being, anyway) in this book which i hope you are getting ready to read. now the editors are telling me that i have to tell you more. well. sigh. if i have to. sigh, sigh. but i just want you to know from the beginning that i dont like this part of the deal at all. what i really want to be doing now is the rewriting (4 poems) the editing (2 interviews and 1 article) and the other fine tuning things that need to be done so that I can bring this phase of my journey to a close and get onto the next one.

but the main thing i want to be doing now is getting through this nervous breakdown of the crisis of confidence variety. you know when you are almost finished with something you have been working on a long time (the first piece in this book was written in 1966 and i have been editing this book since march 1980 and it is now september 1980) that is real important to you cuz its your first big visible step in a direction you have been trying to go in for a long time and now you are finally about to get there and then suddenly you start doubting yourself and saying things to yourself like who the fuck do you think you are to be writing a book? i mean who do you think you are? and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay money for it during these days of inflation and cutbacks and firings and unemployment and books costing at least \$15 in hardcover and \$5 in paperback? plus theres a national literacy crisis and a major portion of your audience not only cant read but seems to think readin is a waste of time? plus books like this arent sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports? on top of that you aint nothing but a black woman! who told you anybody wanted to hear from you? this aint the 60s you know. it's the 80s. dont nobody care nothing about black folks these days. we is

definitely not in vogue. this season we are not the rage. aint nobody even seriously courting our vote during this presidential election year. and you know what happens when a black woman opens her mouth to say anything other than do it to me! do it to me! do it to me daddy do! dont you? havent you had enough of that? or are you a masochist? or a fool?

see? that's why i would rather be somewhere getting my nervous breakdown over with so i can move on. cuz you know that i know that all this doubting is a trap laid out in the patripower days of long ago to keep me/us from doing what we know got to be done. but it sure would be nice that while i was finishing with the nervous breakdown someone else was writing the introduction. it would be a sensitive loving understanding piece of writing that would tell you what you need to know about me and about the stuff in this book so that you can get the most out of it. but no i cant even do that. i got to sit here and write this introduction myself and tell you that i was born into this life the child of houseniggahs and that i been struggling trying to get home ever since.

september 9, 1980

## Notes

1. "my soul looks back in wonder/wild wimmin don't get no blues"  
©1980 by hattie gossett. *Presenting...Sister Noblues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).

## **In Search of the Self As Hero**

*Confetti of Voices on New Year's Night  
A Letter to Myself*

*Nellie Wong*

You want to run away and hide now, become a breeze beneath a willow tree, a breath from the dragon's mouth, a blade of grass struggling skyward to shoot above the ground, not to be squashed like an ant, not to be forgotten perhaps like an Asian prostitute. These past few days now, that have become years of memories and dreams, of work and struggle, of becoming and living, you shiver in the fleece of your inkblue robe, wondering why you tiptoe down the stairs to write, to face your typewriter like a long, lost friend, welcoming her this New Year's Night.

You don't question the urgency to write, to express yourselves, your innocence and naivete, your conflicts and passions, your doubts and beliefs as a woman, a writer, a feminist, a poet, an Asian American, a secretary, a thlee yip nui, a wife, trying to learn the business of life: the act of loving. You have come away from a weekend of workshops at the Modern Language Association conference, absorbed the words and thoughts of writers like yourselves, provoked by the hate and love directed at a book by Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts* – for you a book of brilliance, of love and anger, becoming an art form, a testimony and vision of one Chinese American woman's world.

Ah, but you ask, *who determines Chinese American culture, Asian American sensibility?* These opponents to the art of Maxine Hong Kingston, or to the confetti of voices fluttering from the past, voices still yet to be heard, to be written down?

Who are you who has written a book of poems, who has stored away over ten years of fiction, poems and prose? Who are you who describes herself as an Asian American Feminist, who works and writes toward that identity, that affinity, that necessary self-affirming love? And you ask yourselves if you must retreat, scared rabbits, into the forests of your own imagination, your own prisons and clearings, your entanglements of words versus concepts, of dreams versus reality, of expression versus interpretation, of language versus life, knowing in all your

sensibilities as a woman writer that you face the struggles head on. You know there is no retreat now, no avoiding the confrontations, the debates and disagreements between what is art and what is not art which for you also means: what is Asian American feminist art and politics?

If you sing too often of woe, yours or your sisters', you may be charged with being "too personal," "too autobiographical," too much a woman who cries out, who acknowledges openly, shamelessly, the pain of living and the joy of becoming free. You believe, almost too simply, that you are establishing your own traditions, becoming your own role model, becoming your own best friend, your own accessible hero. In so doing you do not deny human relationships, but acknowledge them, want them and fight for them. And you are angered by the arrogance of some articles that would tell you that Virginia Woolf is your spiritual mother, your possible role model, for the work you have to do: to write. And why are you angered except for the fact that she was white and privileged, yet so ill that she walked into the sea.

And now you have discovered Ding Ling, China's most prolific woman writer, a feminist, a communist, a loving, fighting woman, whose stories gleam, bright lights in the dark of China's past. Ding Ling, imprisoned for expressing her anguish, her love and compassion for China's women, for recording the conditions of their lives. Ding Ling, attacked for her feminism, supposedly bourgeois, individualistic, impeding the movement of communism in her native land. Now there is information trickling out that she is writing again, silenced for so many years. Now you want to search for more of her work, jewels you want to hold in your own hands. Now you want to share her work, to discover the links between the women of China and the women of Chinese America, to find the grandmothers you wish to adopt.

In your search you do not deny the writings of Hisaye Yamamoto, or Wakako Yamauchi, Jade Snow Wong or Maxine Hong Kingston, Jessica Hagedorn or Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge. However, you deny these women as role models because your experiences are not theirs. Their experiences are not yours though you assimilate them because the range of human experience tickles your solitariness, your desire to become pluralistic, a free spirit soaring into the north and south poles of



everywoman's existence. You respect these writers, your contemporaries, and yet you do not only hear their voices simply because you must carve out your own destiny: a woman hero, an adventurer, a doer, a singer, an actor, fearless with the length of your own body, the depth of your dark seeing eyes, the sounds of your typewriter keys. And you ask: *where have you gone and what have you done?* You don't have the time to count the poems, the stories, the outpourings of grief and joy, but they are there in your file cabinet, they are there in your mind, and they are there flowing through your bloodstream. They are there as surely as you awaken each morning and shower and shower, happy as a hummingbird, content to let the water fall over your body, splash it and splash it, while you soap your ears and underarms, while you shampoo your hair, while you have a few moments alone to let the thoughts and impulses pour into song, rhythm, poems, life.

Could you have become a recluse, simply an observer of life, content to roam by the sea, thinking and dreaming and stopping to eat only when you had to? Could you have become a hobo, an alcoholic, a sleeping princess, content to live through the deeds and accomplishments of others? And what is this adventure, this hunger, that roars in you now, as a woman, a writer, an Asian American, a feminist? And why? And what is this satisfaction, this self-assuredness, of individuality, or spirit, of aloneness? And finally, what is this thrust toward community, toward interaction with women and men, this arrow toward creativity, toward freedom?

You have the support of friends and sister writers. You have the love of your husband and your siblings, and yet you turn from them, run with this force, this necessity, this light toward art, toward politics and writing. In the doing and expressing, in the organizing, cutting and filing, in the hours you spend in your study on a bright Sunday afternoon, you wonder why it seems simple to remove yourselves from other people. You think you could have become a minister or a nun, judging and commenting on philosophy, on morality, on the complexities of human life, on the injustice of human beings oppressing other human beings. You have no answers. You have questions and more questions about violence against women, against children, against ethnic minorities, against gays. You only understand that

you must try to answer your questions. You think at times you can answer them alone, but that is impossible because you live and work as a social being in this material, physical and economic world.

If you desire freedom, total freedom, you ask, does it mean that you must die? You are unafraid, but you think of the dead, of the dying. Of women like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, writers who killed themselves, poets you've admired; of two Asian American teenaged sisters who committed suicide because their father opposed their dating Hispanic boys. You think of your cousin who hung himself in Las Vegas, his hearing gone, his son alienated from him. You think of your father who died of cirrhosis of the liver, who brought your mother and three sisters to America. You think of your mother who died of stomach cancer, who desired her own fur coat, her own grandson; and of Bok Gung, a cook, a gentle old man, a pioneer, a grandfather, who died at home in his rented room above Hamburger Joe's in Oakland's Chinatown. And is the question that of mortality and how you desire to become immortal, and not be a fool, a real human being? You a mortal, you a woman, who does not want to be small in any sense of the word. You a poet, you a feminist, who seeks beauty in and beyond the ordinariness of the everyday world.

You talk of children and yet you have none. You talk of writing and leaving a part of yourselves to daughters and sons, their daughters and sons, so they will discover for themselves the heart and minds of Asian Americans, particularly the women who are struggling in this fight for freedom. You don't understand why you have this vision, of leaving work, signs and clues, knowledge and art, stones, however rough or polished, for people you will never know. You realize you will be gone when the questions of the future arise like wildflowers on the plains of this earth. You want to be a part of a legacy and so you write and write, questioning and exploring, not knowing if what you write will become a part of America's freedom song, not knowing if there is a rainbow.

You believed once in your own passivity, your own powerlessness, your own spiritual malaise. You are now awakening in the beginnings of a new birth. Not born again, but born for the first time, triumphant and resolute, out of

experience and struggle, out of a flowing, living memory, out of consciousness and will, facing, confronting, challenging head-on the contradictions of your lives and the lives of people around you. You believe now in the necessity and beauty of struggle: that feminism for you means working for the equality and humanity of women and men, for children, for the love that is possible.

You rub your legs in this cold room. You shiver when you recall your own self-pity when you had no date on New Year's Eve, when you regretted the family gathering because it reminded you that you stood out, a woman without a man, a woman without children. Now you are strengthened, encouraged by the range of your own experiences as a writer, a feminist, an organizer, a secretary. Now you are fired by your own needs, by the needs of your sisters and brothers in the social world, by your journey toward solidarity against tyranny in the workplace, on the streets, in our literature and in our homes. You are fueled by the clarity of your own sight, heated by your own energy to assert yourselves as a human being, a writer, a woman, an Asian American, a feminist, a clerical worker, a student, a teacher, not in loneliness and isolation, but in a community of freedom fighters. Your poems and stories will do some of the work for you, but poems and stories alone aren't enough. Nothing for you is ever enough and so you challenge yourselves, again and again, to try something new, to help build a movement, to organize for the rights of working people, to write a novel, a play, to create a living theater that will embody your dreams and vision, energy in print, on stage, at work that will assert the will of an independent, freedom-loving woman, that will reflect a sensibility of Asian America, of feminism, of sharing food and wealth with all the people, with all your kin.

And you will not stop working and writing because you care, because you refuse to give up, because you won't submit to the forces that will silence you, a cheong hay poa, a long steam woman, a talker, a dancer who moves with lightning. And you are propelled by your sense of fair play, by your respect for the dead and the living, by your thlee yip American laughter and language, by your desire to help order the chaotic world that you

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**live in, knowing as the stars sparkle on this New Year's night that you will not survive the work that still needs to be done in the streets of Gold Mountain.**

## **Chicana's Feminist Literature**

### *A Re-vision Through Malintzin /or Malintzin Putting Flesh Back on the Object*

*Norma Alarcón*

Malintzin (or La Malinche) was an Aztec noble woman who was presented to Cortés upon landing in Veracruz in 1519. She subsequently served Cortés as lover, translator and tactical advisor. She is a controversial figure in the Conquest of Mexico. Her name is often called forth to reenact, symbolically, the Conquest or any conquest. Part of this drama, analogically so, is now being played out also in Aztlán.

Malintzin's history, her legend and subsequent mythic dimensions as evil goddess and creator of a new race – the mestizo race, embroils her in a family quarrel, where many male members often prefer to see her as the mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion; and where female members attempt to restore balance in ways that are sometimes painfully ambivalent, and at other times attempt to topple the traditional patriarchal mythology through revision and re-vision.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will explore the traditional image of Malintzin in Chicano culture and will provide examples of the ways contemporary Chicana feminist writers have reacted to and used this image in their work.

In our patriarchal mythological pantheon, there exists even now a woman who was once real. Her historicity, her experience, her true flesh and blood were discarded. A Kantian, dualistic male consciousness stole her and placed her on the throne of evil, like Dante's upside down frozen Judas, doomed to moan and bemoan. The woman is interchangeably called by three names: Malintzin, Malinche, Marina. Malintzin's excruciating life in bondage was of no account, and continues to be of no account. Her almost half century of mythic existence, until recent times mostly in the oral traditions, had turned her into a handy reference point not only for controlling, interpreting or visualizing women, but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Eve whose primeval reality is not historically documentable and who supposedly existed in some past edenic time, Malintzin's betrayal of our supposed pre-Columbian paradise is recent and hence almost palpable. This almost-within-reach past heightens romantic nostalgia and as a consequence hatred for Malintzin and women becomes as vitriolic as the American Puritans' loathing of witches-women.

The focus of the betrayal is not a lofty challenge to a "god" who subsequently unleashed evil upon the world as punishment. Disobedience to a "god" might place the discussion at times on an ideal plane and relieve tension momentarily as one switches from an intense dialogue about one's body to a "rarified" field at least in terms of the vocabulary used. However, the male myth of Malintzin is made to see betrayal first of all in her very sexuality, which makes it nearly impossible at any given moment to go beyond the vagina as the supreme site of evil until proven innocent by way of virginity or virtue, the most pawnable commodities around.<sup>3</sup>

Because the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred. All we see is hatred of women. We must hate her too since love seems only possible through extreme virtue whose definition is at best slippery.

The poet Alma Villanueva must have realized, understood the insidiousness of the hate syndrome. Her whole book *Bloodroots* is a song to the rejection of self-loathing. The poem "I sing to myself" states:

I could weep and rage  
 against the man who never  
 stroked my fine child hair  
 who never felt the pride of  
 my femininity...<sup>4</sup>

It is not just the father that is a source of pain; a mother figure appears also. The mother is impotent to help the daughter. All

of her energies seem directed, spent in her desire and need for man, a factor that repulses and attracts the daughter. Love for mother is an ambivalence rooted in the daughter's sense of abandonment by her mother and her apparently enormous and irrational need:

Never finding a breast to rest  
and warm myself ...<sup>5</sup>

As the daughter proceeds to repeat her mother's experience, she ironically discovers and affirms a "mounting self/love" as a combative force against the repetition of the mother's abnegation, and irrational need of and dependency on men. Self-love as a tool of survival, however, leads the male lover to reject her. Her conclusion leaves no doubt as to what woman may be forced to do:

I/woman give birth:  
and this time to  
myself <sup>6</sup>

The sexual abuse experienced leaves the daughter no choice but to be her own mother, to provide her own supportive, nurturing base for the physical and psychic survival. To escape the cycle of loathing and self-loathing, Villanueva's woman has no alternative, even though she would have wanted more options, but to first love the self and then proceed to regenerate and nurture it by becoming her own mother. She is forced to transform the self into both mother and daughter and rejects the male flesh which at this point in time "is putrid and bitter." He must be transfigured.

The end effect could be seen as narcissistic, a perennial accusation directed at woman's literature. Yet, if it be narcissistic, never has a motive force for it been revealed so tellingly and clearly, never have the possible roots been exposed so well: starvation for self-reflection in the other: man or woman.

The male myth of Malintzin, in its ambivalent distaste and fear of the so-called "enigmatic feminine," echoes in this poem as it does in many Mexican/Chicana's poems, even when her name is not mentioned. The pervasiveness of the myth is

unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness.

The myth contains the following sexual possibilities: woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it be seduction or rape. The possible use is double-edged: That is, the use of her as pawn may be intracultural, "amongst us guys," or intercultural, which means if we are not using her then "they" must be using her. Since woman is seen as highly pawnable, nothing she does is perceived as a choice. Because Malintzin aided Cortés in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman's sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation. Indeed, as long as we continue to be seen in that way we are earmarked to be abusable matter, not just by men of another culture, but all cultures including the one that breeds us.

Lorna Dee Cervantes addresses herself to the latter point in her poem "Baby you cramp my style." In the poem Malintzin is mentioned by her other name: Malinche. The poet is asked to bestow her sexual favors; the lover's tone implies that her body/self is as available as the mythic Malinche is thought to be by male consciousness:

You cramp my style, baby  
when you roll on top of me  
shouting, "Viva La Raza!"  
at the top of your prick.

...

Come on Malinche  
Gimme some more!<sup>7</sup>

He cramps her style; she refuses sexual exploitation for herself and her daughters yet to come, in a way Malintzin could not do because of the constraints of the slave society into which she was born.

The Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos reminds us in "Malinche"<sup>8</sup> that Malintzin was sold into slavery by complicitous parents to enhance her brother's inheritance. The mother eager to please her new husband agrees to sell her daughter, and therefore enchains her destiny. Castellanos speculates, in the poem, that this is the result of the mother's own self-loathing. A



mother who cannot bear to see herself reflected in her daughter's mirror/sexuality prefers to shatter the image/mirror, negate the daughter and thereby perpetuate rejection and negation.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a brilliant chronicler of the Conquest with a great eye for detail, reveals to us that when Malintzin re-encounters her mother and brother years later and during the very process of the Conquest, she is merely polite. It seems that Malintzin, instead of offering them protection within the folds of the victorious, leaves them to their own devices for survival in an embattled country. In a way she condemns them to servitude just as she had been condemned. Why is there no forgiveness? Within what context can we analyze Malintzin's behavior at this point? We have a reversal, the daughter negates the mother.

Within the complex mother-daughter relationship, the mother keeps bearing quite a bit of the responsibility for the daughter's emotional starvation, abandonment or enslavement and yet paradoxically both are subordinate and subjected to a male culture and tradition. Perhaps our sexual identification with our mothers leads us to expect greater understanding from her as well a psychic/sexual protection. Villanueva tells us it is a false expectation – mothers are powerless, looking to satisfy their own hunger through men, which is agonizing for the daughter: "her pain haunted me for years."<sup>9</sup>

Simone Weil suggests that the conscious slave is much superior, and I would add that a woman who is conscious of being perceived as pawn is much superior. I doubt that the historical Malintzin was a truly conscious slave. In her ambience slavery was a cultural norm, it was not unusual for men or women to be royalty one day and slave, vanquished or sacrificial victim the next. It was a norm within which she had to seek accommodation. It is also quite possible that what is seen as Malintzin's allegiance to Cortés – hence purposeful betrayal of "her people" – may be explained by Weil's perception of the slave-master relationship. She says, "... the thought of being in absolute subjection as somebody's plaything is a thought no human being can sustain: so if a man (I add woman) is left with no means at all of escaping constraint he (she) has no alternative except to persuade himself (herself) that he (she) is doing voluntarily the very things he (she) is forced to do; in other words, he (she) substitutes devotion for obedience ... devotion

of this kind rests upon self-deception, because the reasons for it will not bear inspection."<sup>10</sup>

In our religiously permeated and oriented indo-hispanic minds, it is often the case that devotion is equated with obedience and vice versa, particularly for women and children, so that disobedience is seen as a lack of devout allegiance, and not necessarily as a radical questioning of our forms of life. This factor makes it almost impossible to sense a shift from obedience to devotion; they have been one and the same for hundreds of years. As such, we are a greater unconscious prey to subjugation which we then proceed to call devotion/love. To be obedient/devoted is proof of love, especially for women and children.

Consciously and unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to woman particularly as heterosexual relationships are conceived today and in the past. In an "Open Letter to Carolina... or Relations between Men and Women" the Chicano poet Abelardo Delgado testifies as follows: "Octavio Paz in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* has much to say as to how we as Chicanos see our women... For now let it suffice to say that as far as our wives and mothers we make saints of them but remain always in search of a lover with macho characteristics (*sic* )."<sup>11</sup> Obviously when the wife or would-be-wife, the mother or would-be-mother questions out loud and in print the complex "servitude/devotion/love," she will be quickly seen as false to her "obligation" and duty, hence a traitor. Delgado also points to the creation of a different category of women – macho-lover – who will provide comforts beyond those that fall within the purview of wives and mothers. What is a macho/lover kind of woman?

Delgado goes on to tell Carolina that "All it takes is a simple refusal on the part of women to be abused by us men." However, he cautions about the manner in which it is done, "You must show them all that your mind is on par or above theirs. You must be careful that you do this with some grace, dignity and humility... Men might accept your challenges a few times and let it go but if our ego happens to be wounded, then watch out, Carolina, because what follows is a cold rejection and a new assigned role as a feme-macho."<sup>12</sup> (Will this new role of a

"feme-macho" then provide the macho/lovers that are sought above and beyond the wife and mother?)

It seems that what is wanted here is for all women to be a kind of Sor Juana,<sup>13</sup> which leaves out the majority of us who are not fortunate enough to be a woman of genius. But because we know Sor Juana's dreadful fate as a result of her intellectual endeavors, we also know that genius is hardly enough. Even a genius needs a political base, a constituency. Since many Mexican/Chicana poets' challenges are straightforward, not humble, I shudder to think at our marginalization; how are we being shunned?

When our subjection is manifested through devotion we are saints and escape direct insult. When we are disobedient, hence undevout, we are equated with Malintzin; that is, the *myth* of male consciousness, not the *historical* figure in all her dimensions doomed to live in chains (regardless of which patriarchy might have seemed the best option for survival).

Carmen Tafolla's poem "La Malinche"<sup>14</sup> makes it quite clear that Malintzin as woman is dispossessed of herself by every male ideology with which she was connected. Tafolla would simply like to see Malintzin recognized as a visionary and founder of a people. Yet as I have noted, the realities that this figure encompasses are much too complex to simply replace them with the notion of a matriarch. However, each implicit or explicit poem on Malintzin emphasizes the pervasive preoccupation and influence of the myth and women's need to demythify.

The mythic aspects of disavowal, and the historical ambience of Malintzin merge in Chicanas' literature to bring out the following sexual political themes: 1) to choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all; 2) woman's abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/emotional starvation occur even in the midst of tangible family; 3) woman is a slave, emotionally as well as economically; 4) women are seen not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable; 5) blind devotion is not a feasible human choice (this is further clarified by the telling absence of poems by women to the Virgin of Guadalupe, while poems by men to her are plentiful); 6) when there is love/devotion it is at best deeply ambivalent as exemplified by Rina Rocha in "To the penetrator:"

I hate the love  
I feel for you.<sup>15</sup>

Feminist women agree with Hegel, despite his relentless use of man as universal, that the subject depends on external reality. If she is to be fully at home this external reality must reflect back to her what she actually is or would want to be. When we don't participate in creating our own defined identity and reality as women, when the material and spiritual realities do not reflect us as contributors to the shaping of the world, we may feel as in Judy Lucero's poem "I speak in an illusion:"

I speak but only in an illusion  
For I see and I don't  
It's me and It's not  
I hear and I don't  
These illusions belong to me  
I stole them from another  
Care to spend a day in my House of Death?  
Look at my garden... are U amazed?  
No trees, no flowers, no grass... no gardens...  
I love and I don't  
I hate and I don't  
I sing and I don't  
I live and I don't  
For I'm in a room of clouded smoke  
And a perfumed odor  
Nowhere can I go and break these bonds  
Which have me in an illusion  
But the bonds are real.<sup>16</sup>

Feminism is a way of saying that nothing in patriarchy truly reflects women unless we accept distortions – mythic and historical. However, as Chicanas embrace feminism they are charged with betrayal *a la* Malinche. Often great pains are taken to explain that our feminism assumes a humanistic nuance.

The charge remains as a clear image imprinted on Chicanas (and I believe most Third World women, in this country or outside of it) by men. It continues to urge us to make quantum leaps towards a male ideologized humanism devoid of female consciousness. The lure of an ideal humanism is seductive, especially for spiritual women such as we have often been brought up to be; but without female consciousness and envisioning how as women we would like to exist in the material world, to leap into humanism without repossessing ourselves may be exchanging one male ideology for another.

As women we are and continue to be tokens everywhere at the present moment. Everywhere in a Third World context, women invited to partake in feast of modeling humanism can be counted among few, and those few may be enjoying what Adrienne Rich calls "a false power which masculine society offers to a few women who 'think like men' on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are. This is the meaning of female tokenism: that power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to the few."<sup>17</sup>

Even as we concern ourselves with Third World women's economic exploitation, we have to concern ourselves with psychosexual exploitation and pawnability at the hands of one's brother, father, employer, master, political systems and sometimes, sadly so, powerless mothers. As world politics continues the histrionics of dominance and control attempting to figure out just who indeed will be the better macho in the world map, macho politics' last priority is the quality of our lives as women or the lives of our children.

## Notes

1. Insofar as feminine symbolic figures are concerned, much of the Mexican/Chicano oral tradition as well as the intellectual are dominated by La Malinche/Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The former is a subversive feminine symbol which often is identified with La Llorona, the latter a feminine symbol of transcendence and salvation. The Mexican/Chicano cultural tradition has tended to polarize the lives of women through these national (and nationalistic) symbols thereby exercising almost sole authority over the control, interpretation and visualization of women. Although the material on both figures is vast, the following

- serve as guides to past and present visions and elucidations: Eric Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore*, 71 (1958), 34-39; Américo Paredes, "Mexican Legendry and the Rise of the Mestizo: A Survey," in *American Folk Legend* edited by Wayland D. Hand, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 97-107; Richard M. Dorson's foreword to *Folktales of Mexico*, edited by Américo Paredes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, esp. pp. xvi-xxxvii; and Octavio Paz, "The Songs of La Malinche," in the *The Labrynth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, New York: Grove Press, 1961, 65-88. Paz takes the traditional male perspective of woman as enigma and mystery and then proceeds to disclose the culture's (men's) mentality vis-à-vis these figures. Women in their assigned roles as transmitters of the culture have often adhered to these views, however, they have not created them.
2. Bertrand Russell in *Marriage and Morals* affirms that the conception of female virtues has been built up in order to make the patriarchal family as we have known it possible.
  3. Villanueva, Alma. "I sing to myself," in *Third Chicano Literary Prize: Irvine 1976-77*. Dept. of Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Irvine, 1977, 99-101.
  4. *Ibid.*, 100
  5. *Ibid.*, 101
  6. *El Fuego de Aztlán*, 1, No. 4 (Summer 1977), 39.
  7. *Poesía no eres tú*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 295-297.
  8. Villanueva, op. cit., 99.
  9. Weil, Simone. *First and Last Notebooks*. Translated by Richard Rees. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 41.
  10. See note 1 for my commentary on this text.
  11. *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, VI, no. 2 (primavera 1978), 35.
  12. *Ibid.*, 38.
  13. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a famous poet-nun of the Mexican Colonial Period. A highly creative and intellectual woman, she was forced by the church to abandon her writing after penning a treatise that challenged a prelate's notions on the nature of Love and Christ.
  14. *Canto al Pueblo: An Anthology of Experience*. (San Antonio, Texas: Penca Books, 1978), 38-39.
  15. *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*. III, No.2 (Primavera 1975), 5.
  16. *De Colores*, I, no.1 (Winter 1973), 52.
  17. "On Priviledge, Power and Tokenism." *MS*, September 1979, 43.

# Ceremony for Completing a Poetry Reading

*Chrystos*

This is a give-away poem  
You have come gathering  
You have made a circle with me  
of the places where I have wandered  
I want to give you the first daffodil opening from the earth  
    I have sown  
to give you warm loaves of bread  
baked in soft mounds like breasts  
In this circle I pass each of you a shell from our mother sea  
Hold it in your spirit & hear the stories she will tell you  
I have wrapped your faces around me, a warm robe  
Let me give you ribbonwork leggings, dresses sewn  
    with elk teeth  
moccasins woven with red & sky blue porcupine quills  
I give you blankets woven of flowers & roots  
Come closer  
I have more to give this basket is very large  
I have stitched it of your kind words  
Here is a necklace of feathers & bones  
a sacred meal of choke cherries  
Take this mask of bark which keeps out the evil ones  
This basket is only the beginning  
There is something in my arms for all of you  
I offer you  
this memory of sunrise seen through ice crystals  
Here, an afternoon of looking into the sea from high rocks  
Here, a red-tailed hawk circling over our heads  
One of its feathers drops for your hair  
May I give you this round stone which holds an ancient spirit  
This stone will soothe you  
Within this basket is something you have been looking for  
all of your life  
Come take it  
Take as much as you want  
I give you seeds of a new way

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I give you the moon shining on a fire of singing women  
I give you the sound of our feet dancing  
I give you the sound of our thoughts flying  
I give you the sound of peace  
moving into your faces & sitting down  
Come  
this is a give away poem  
I cannot go home  
until you have taken everything  
and the basket which held it  
  
When my hands are empty  
I will be full





*Art Folio*





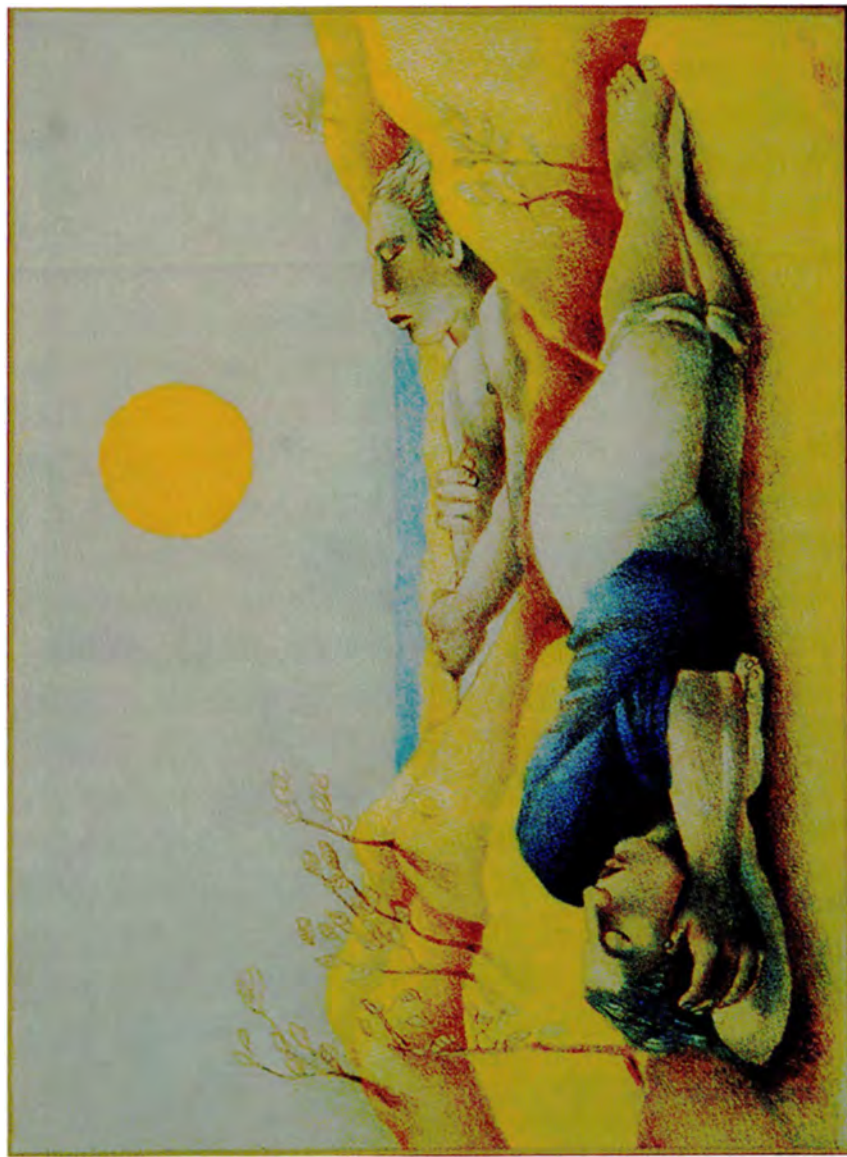
Happy/L.A. Hyder, *New Country Daughter/ Lebanese American*, 1981  
Black and white photograph originally printed from two negatives, 11" x 14"  
Collection of the Artist



Ester Hernández, *Sun Mad*, 1981  
Color screen print, 17" x 22"  
Collection of the Artist



Betty Nobue Kano, *Being II*, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, 9' x 5.5'  
Collection of San Francisco Arts Commission  
Printed with permission from the Artist



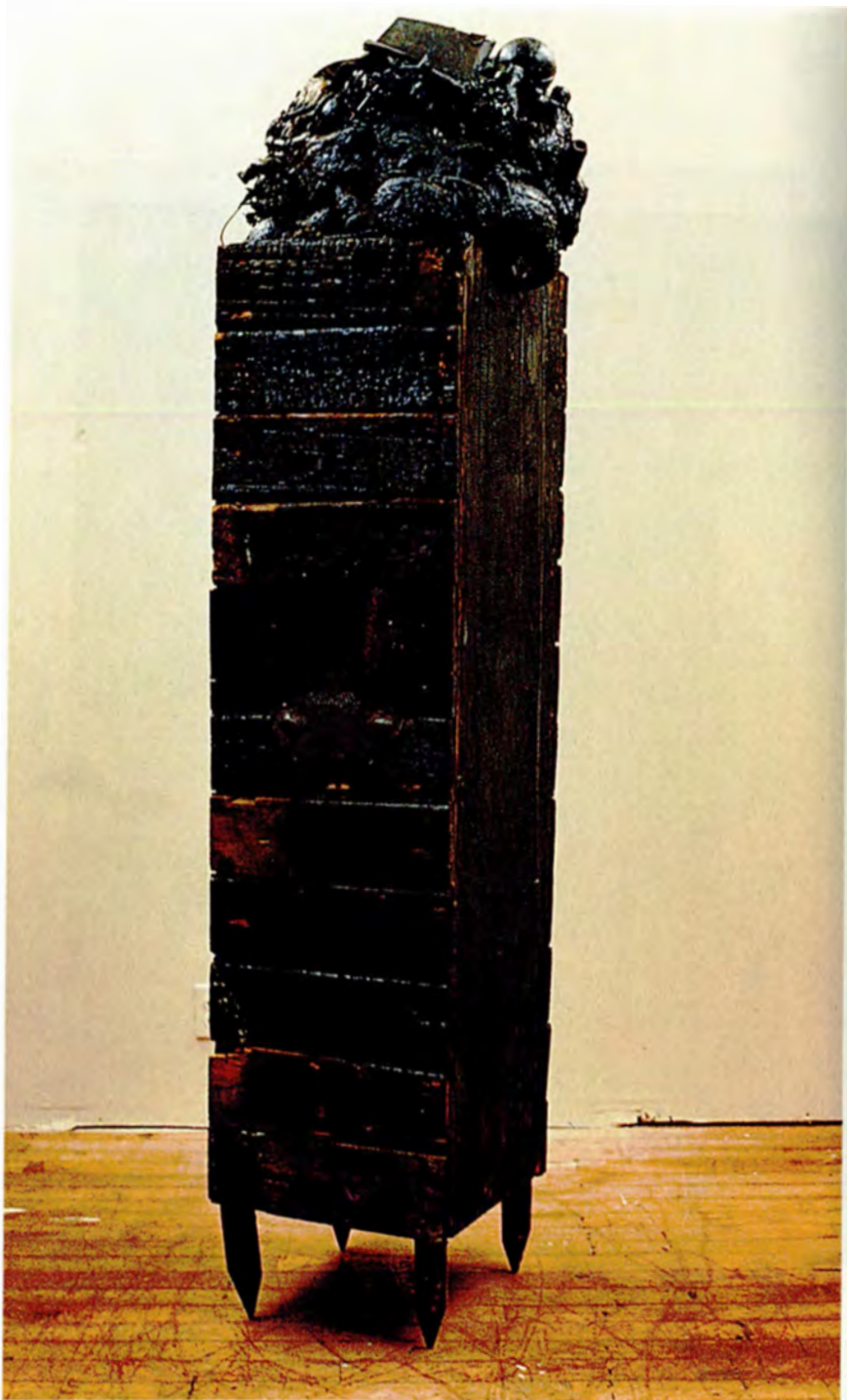
Lailiana Wilson Grez, *Los Desaparecidos en el Cielo (The Disappeared in Heaven)*, 1977  
Pencil on paper, 16" x 12"  
Collection of the Artist



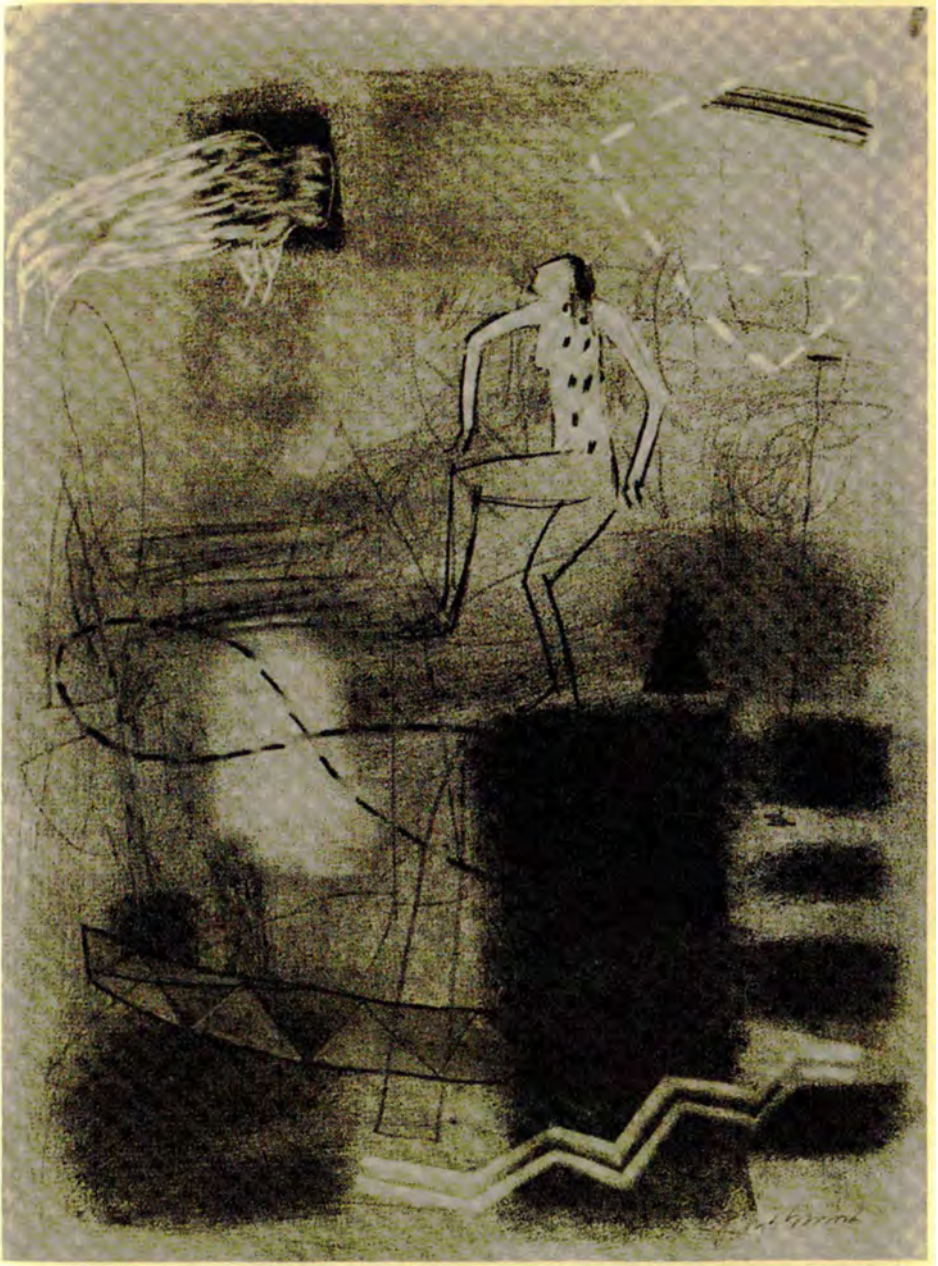


Nereida García-Ferraz, *La Vigilia*, 1989  
Oil and wax on stonehenge paper, 32" x 40"  
Collection of the Artist





Fan L. Warren, *Negro House*, 1988  
Mixed media sculpture, 80" x 16" x 19"  
Collection of the Artist



Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, *My Ghost Dance*, 1981  
Pastel (from Ghost Dance Series), dimensions unknown  
From *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 15 (1982)  
Printed with permission of the Artist





Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy: Chapter One*, 1993  
Part of a larger piece of mixed media installation  
Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris  
Photo by George Hirose

*El Mundo Zurdo*  
*The Vision*



Jean Weisinger, *Audre Lorde*, 1990  
Black & White photograph, 5.25" x 5.25"  
Collection of the Artist

# El Mundo Zurdo

## *The Vision*

*Coming into spirituality the way I did changed the christian myth that there is nothing we can do – we are totally powerless. I found out that when there was trouble, my people did not say “o.k., we can’t fight, we just have to let god handle it.” They went and made sacrifices, they evoked their gods and goddesses, they became possessed, and they went out there and they fought. You learn to take power when there is a presence behind you.*

– Luisah Teish

We, the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. We reach a spirituality that has been hidden in the hearts of oppressed people under layers of centuries of traditional god-worship. It emerges from under the veils of La Virgen de Guadalupe and unrolls from Yemaya’s ocean waves whenever we need to be uplifted from or need the courage to face the tribulations of a racist patriarchal world where there is no relief. Our spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the “small still voice” (*Teish*) within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world.

The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to “transcend” our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But, our vulnerability *can* be the source of our power – **if we use it.**

As Third World women, we are especially vulnerable to the many-headed demon of oppression. We are the women on the bottom. Few oppressions pass over us. To work towards the freedom of our own skin and souls would, as Combahee states, “...mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of *all* systems of oppression.” The love we have for our common maligned bodies and souls must burgeon out in *lucha*, in struggle. As Teish points

out, we must work toward diminishing the possibility of being locked up in a padded cell, of being battered or raped. Our feelings of craziness and powerlessness that Combahee speaks of are induced by the shit society dumps on us rather than stemming from being born ugly or evil as the patriarchal shrinks would have us believe. We must not believe the story *they* tell about us. We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves – even in our most private unspoken moments.

The vision of radical Third World Feminism necessitates our willingness to work with those people who would feel at home in *El Mundo Zurdo, the left-handed world*: the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged. From our blood and spirit connections with these groups, we women on the bottom throughout the world can form an international feminism. For separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution. *Autonomy*, however, is *not* separatism. We recognize the right and necessity of colonized peoples throughout the world, including Third World women in the US, forming independent movements toward self-government. But ultimately, we must struggle together. *Together* we form a vision which spans from the self-love of our colored skins, to the respect of our foremothers who kept the embers of revolution burning, to our reverence for the trees – the final reminder of our rightful place on this planet.

The change evoked on these pages is material as well as psychic. Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and the myth-maker.

Hand in Hand, we brew and forge a revolution.

## Give Me Back

*Chrystos*

that anger bone mal mama  
that rattle painted red, painted fresh blood, slaughtered enemy  
hung with strong feathers, guts of vipers  
I'll knock down this old long house this weary war horse  
these dry rituals called  
how are you

I want that brown thigh bone  
carved with eagle beak  
that club     dig it out of the dirt

mal mama spirit stole my bones     put them in her burying jug  
sealed me up in wax & ashes

I crack out  
arrange my bones in their naming places  
I take what I want  
shaking my sacred hair     dancing out taboo  
I mark out the space I am  
with knives



# La Prieta

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

When I was born, Mamágrande Locha inspected my buttocks looking for the dark blotch, the sign of indio, or worse, of mulatto blood. My grandmother (Spanish, part German, the hint of royalty lying just beneath the surface of her fair skin, blue eyes and the coils of her once blond hair) would brag that her family was one of the first to settle in the range country of south Texas.

Too bad mihijita was *morena*, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children. But she loved mihijita anyway. What I lacked in whiteness, I had in smartness. But it *was* too bad I was dark like an Indian.

"Don't go out in the sun," my mother would tell me when I wanted to play outside. "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirt on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican." It never dawned on her that, though sixth-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian. I passed my adolescence combatting her incessant orders to bathe my body, scrub the floors and cupboards, clean the windows and the walls.

And as we'd get into the back of the "patron's" truck that would take us to the fields, she'd ask, "Where's your gorra (sunbonnet)?" La gorra – rim held firm by slats of cardboard, neck flounce flowing over my shoulders – made me feel like a horse with blinders, a member of the French Foreign Legion, or a nun bowed down by her wimple.

One day in the middle of the cotton field, I threw the gorra away and donned a sombrero. Though it didn't keep out the Texas 110° sun as well as the bonnet, I could now see in all directions, feel the breeze, dry the sweat on my neck.

When I began writing this essay, nearly two years ago, the wind I was accustomed to suddenly turned into a hurricane. It opened the door to the old images that haunt me, the old ghosts and all the old wounds. Each image a sword that cuts through me, each word a test. Terrified, I shelved the rough draft of this essay for a year.

I was terrified because in this writing I must be hard on people of color who are the oppressed victims. I am still afraid

because I will have to call us on a lot of shit like our own racism, our fear of women and sexuality. One of my biggest fears is that of betraying myself, of consuming myself with self-castigation, of not being able to unseat the guilt that has ridden on my back for years.

These my two hands  
 quick to slap my face  
 before others could slap it'

But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me?

With terror as my companion, I dip into my life and begin work on myself. Where did it begin, the pain, the images that haunt me?

## **Images That Haunt Me**

When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper. "She's a throwback to the Eskimo," the doctor told my mother. "Eskimo girl children get their periods early." At seven I had budding breasts. My mother would wrap them in tight cotton girdles so the kids at school would not think them strange beside their own flat brown mole nipples. My mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. "Keep your legs shut, Prieta." This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. And when she got mad at me she would yell, "He batallado más contigo que con todos los demas y no lo agradeces!" (I've taken more care with you than I have with all the others and you're not even grateful.) My sister started suspecting our secret – that there was something "wrong" with me. How much can you hide from a sister you've slept with in the same bed since infancy?

What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me. Mixed with this power struggle

was her guilt at having borne a child who was marked "con la seña," thinking she had made me a victim of her sin. In her eyes and in the eyes of others I saw myself reflected as "strange," "abnormal," "QUEER." I saw no other reflection. Helpless to change that image, I retreated into books and solitude and kept away from others.

The whole time growing up I felt that I was not of this earth. An alien from another planet - I'd been dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?

One day when I was about seven or eight, my father dropped on my lap a 25¢ pocket western, the only type of book he could pick up at a drugstore. The act of reading forever changed me. In the westerns I read, the house servants, the villains and the cantineras (prostitutes) were all Mexicans. But I knew that the first cowboys (vaqueros) were Mexicans, that in Texas we outnumbered the Anglos, that my grandmother's ranch lands had been ripped off by the greedy Anglo. Yet in the pages of these books, the Mexican and Indian were vermin. The racism I would later recognize in my school teachers and never be able to ignore again I found in that first western I read.

My father dying, his aorta bursting while he was driving, the truck turning over, his body thrown out, the truck falling on his face. Blood on the pavement. His death occurred just as I entered puberty. It irrevocably shattered the myth that there existed a male figure to look after me. How could my strong, good, beautiful godlike father be killed? How stupid and careless of God. What if chance and circumstance and accident ruled? I lost my father, God, and my innocence all in one bloody blow.

Every 24 days, raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing periods accompanied cramps, tonsillitis and 105° fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. "It's all in your head," they would say. "When you get older and get married and have children the pain will stop." A monotonous litany from the men in white all through my teens.

The bloodshed on the highway had robbed my adolescence from me like the blood on my diaper had robbed childhood from me. And into my hands unknowingly I took the transformation of my own being.

Nobody's going to save you.  
No one's going to cut you down  
cut the thorns around you.  
No one's going to storm  
the castle walls nor  
kiss awake your birth,  
climb down your hair,  
nor mount you  
onto the white steed.

There is no one who  
will feed the yearning.  
Face it. You will have  
to do, do it yourself.<sup>2</sup>

My father dead, my mother and I turned to each other.  
Hadn't we grown together? We were like sisters – she was 16  
when she gave birth to me.

Though she loved me she would only show it covertly – in the  
tone of her voice, in a look. Not so with my brothers – there it  
was visible for all the world to see. They were male and  
surrogate husbands, legitimate receivers of her power. Her  
allegiance was and is to her male children, not to the female.

Seeing my mother turn to my brothers for protection, for  
guidance – a mock act. She and I both knew she wouldn't be  
getting any from them. Like most men they didn't have it to  
give, instead needed to get it from women. I resented the fact  
that it was OK for my brothers to touch and kiss and flirt with  
her, but not for my sister and me. Resenting the fact that  
physical intimacy between women was taboo, dirty.

Yet she could not discount me. "Machona – india ladina"  
(masculine – wild Indian), she would call me because I did not  
act like a nice little Chicanita is supposed to act: later, in the  
same breath she would praise and blame me, often for the same  
thing – being a tomboy and wearing boots, being unafraid of  
snakes or knives, showing my contempt for women's roles,  
leaving home to go to college, not settling down and getting  
married, being a política, siding with the Farmworkers. Yet,  
while she would try to correct my more aggressive moods, my  
mother was secretly proud of my "waywardness." (Something

she will never admit.) Proud that I'd worked myself through school. Secretly proud of my paintings, of my writing, though all the while complaining because I made no money out of it.

### **Verguenza (Shame)**

. . . being afraid that my friends would see my momma, would know that she was loud – her voice penetrated every corner. Always when we came into a room everyone looked up. I didn't want my friends to hear her brag about her children. I was afraid she would blurt out some secret, would criticize me in public. She always embarrassed me by telling everyone that I liked to lie in bed reading and wouldn't help her with the housework.

. . . eating at school out of sacks, hiding our "lonches" *papas con chorizo* behind cupped hands and bowed heads, gobbling them up before the other kids could see. Guilt lay folded in the tortilla. The Anglo kids laughing—calling us "tortilleros," the Mexican kids taking up the word and using it as a club with which to hit each other. My brothers, sister and I started bringing white bread sandwiches to school. After a while we stopped taking our lunch altogether.

There is no beauty in poverty, in my mother being able to give only one of her children lunch money. (We all agreed it should go to Nune, he was growing fast and was always hungry.) It was not very romantic for my sister and me to wear the dresses and panties my mother made us out of flour sacks because she couldn't afford store-bought ones like the other mothers.

Well, I'm not ashamed of you anymore, Momma.  
My heart, once bent and cracked, once  
ashamed of your China ways.  
Ma, hear me now, tell me your story  
again and again.

– Nellie Wong, "From a Heart of Rice Straw,"  
*Dreams of Harrison Railroad Park*

It was not my mother's fault that we were poor and yet so much of my pain and shame has been with our both betraying each other. But my mother has always been there for me in spite of our differences and emotional gulfs. She has never stopped

fighting; she is a survivor. Even now I can hear her arguing with my father over how to raise us, insisting that all decisions be made by both of them. I can hear her crying over the body of my dead father. She was 28, had had little schooling, was unskilled, yet her strength was greater than most men's, raising us single-handed.

After my father died, I worked in the fields every weekend and every summer, even when I was a student in college. (We only migrated once when I was seven, journeyed in the back of my father's red truck with two other families to the cotton fields of west Texas. When I missed a few weeks of school, my father decided this should not happen again.)

... the planes swooping down on us, the fifty or a hundred of us falling onto the ground, the cloud of insecticide lacerating our eyes, clogging our nostrils. Nor did the corporate farm owners care that there were no toilets in the wide open fields, no bushes to hide behind.

Over the years, the confines of farm and ranch life began to chafe. The traditional role of *la mujer* was a saddle I did not want to wear. The concepts "passive" and "dutiful" raked my skin like spurs and "marriage" and "children" set me to bucking faster than rattlesnakes or coyotes. I took to wearing boots and men's jeans and walking about with my head full of visions, hungry for more words and more words. Slowly I unbowed my head, refused my estate and began to challenge the way things were. But it's taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown – something that some people of color *never* will unlearn. And it is only now that the hatred of myself, which I spent the greater part of my adolescence cultivating, is turning to love.

## La Muerte, the Frozen Snow Queen

*I dig a grave, bury my first love, a German Shepherd. Bury the second, third, and fourth dog. The last one retching in the backyard, going into convulsions from insecticide poisoning. I buried him beside the others, five mounds in a row crowned with crosses I'd fashioned from twigs.*

*No more pets, no more loves – I court death now.*

. . . Two years ago on a fine November day in Yosemite Park, I fall on the floor with cramps, severe chills and shaking that go into spasms and near convulsions, then fevers so high my eyes feel like eggs frying. Twelve hours of this. I tell everyone, "It's nothing, don't worry, I'm alright." The first four gynecologists advise a hysterectomy. The fifth, a woman, says wait.

. . . Last March my fibroids conspired with an intestinal tract infection and spawned watermelons in my uterus. The doctor played with his knife. La Chingada ripped open, raped with the white man's wand. My soul in one corner of the hospital ceiling, getting thinner and thinner telling me to clean up my shit, to release the fears and garbage from the past that are hanging me up. So I take La Muerte's scythe and cut away my arrogance and pride, the emotional depressions I indulge in, the head trips I do on myself and other people. With her scythe I cut the umbilical cord shackling me to the past and to friends and attitudes that drag me down. Strip away – all the way to the bone. Make myself utterly vulnerable.

. . . I can't sleep nights. The mugger said he would come and get me. There was a break in the county jail and I *just* know he is broken out and is coming to get me because I picked up a big rock and chased him, because I got help and caught him. How *dare* he drag me over rocks and twigs, the skin on my knees peeling, how *dare* he lay his hands on my throat, how *dare* he try to choke me to death, how *dare* he try to push me off the bridge to splatter my blood and bones on the rocks 20 feet below. His breath on my face, our eyes only inches apart, our bodies rolling on the ground in an embrace so intimate we could have been mistaken for lovers.

That night terror found me curled up in my bed. I couldn't stop trembling. For months terror came to me at night and never left me. And even now, seven years later, when I'm out in the street after dark and I hear running footsteps behind me, terror finds me again and again.

*No more pets, no more loves.*

. . . one of my lovers saying I was frigid when he couldn't bring me to orgasm.

. . . bringing home my Peruvian boyfriend and my mother saying she did not want her "Prieta" to have a "mojado" (wetback) for a lover.

... my mother and brothers calling me puta when I told them I had lost my virginity and that I'd done it on purpose. My mother and brothers calling me jota (queer) when I told them my friends were gay men and lesbians.

. . . Randy saying, "It's time you stopped being a nun, an ice queen afraid of living." But I did not want to be a snow queen regal with icy smiles and fingernails that ripped her prey ruthlessly. And yet, I knew my being distant, remote, a mountain sleeping under the snow, is what attracted him.

A woman lies buried under me,  
interred for centuries, presumed dead.

A woman lies buried under me.  
I hear her soft whisper  
the rasp of her parchment skin  
fighting the folds of her shroud.  
Her eyes are pierced by needles  
her eyelids, two fluttering moths.<sup>3</sup>

I am always surprised by the image that my white and non-Chicano friends have of me, surprised at how much they *do not* know me, at how I do not allow them to know me. They have substituted the negative picture the white culture has painted of my race with a highly romanticized, idealized image. "You're strong," my friends said, "a mountain of strength."

Though the power may be real, the mythic qualities attached to it keep others from dealing with me as a person and rob me of my being able to act out my other selves. Having this "power" doesn't exempt me from being prey in the streets nor does it make my scrambling to survive, to feed myself, easier. To cope with hurt and control my fears, I grew a thick skin. Oh, the many names of power – pride, arrogance, control. I am not the frozen snow queen but a flesh and blood woman with perhaps too loving a heart, one easily hurt.

*I'm not invincible, I tell you. My skin's as fragile as a baby's I'm brittle bones and human, I tell you. I'm a broken arm.*



*You're a razor's edge, you tell me. Shock them shitless. Be the holocaust. Be the black Kali. Spit in their eye and never cry. Oh broken angel, throw away your cast, mend your wing. Be not a rock but a razor's edge and burn with falling.* – Journal Entry, Summer Solstice, 1978.

## Who Are My People

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. "Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement," say the members of my race. "Your allegiance is to the Third World," say my Black and Asian friends. "Your allegiance is to your gender, to women," say the feminists. Then there's my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there's my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings.* They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Years ago, a roommate of mine fighting for gay rights told MAYO, a Chicano organization, that she and the president were gay. They were ostracized. When they left, MAYO fell apart. They too, being forced to choose between the priorities of race, sexual preference, or gender.

In the streets of this gay mecca, San Francisco, a Black man at a bus stop yells, "Hey Faggots, come suck my cock." Randy yells back, "You goddamn nigger, I worked in the Civil Rights movement ten years so you could call me names." Guilt gagging in his throat with the word, nigger. . . a white woman waiting for the J-Church streetcar sees Randy and David kissing and says, "You should be ashamed of yourselves. Two grown men – disgusting."

. . . Randy and David running into the house. The hair on the back of my neck rises, something in their voices triggers fear in me. Three Latino men in a car had chased them as they were walking home from work. "Gay boys, faggots," they yelled throwing a beer bottle. Getting out of their car, knife blades reflect the full moon...Randy and David hitting each other in the hall. Thuds on the wall – the heavy animal sounds.

. . . Randy pounding on my door one corner of his mouth bleeding, his glasses broken, blind without them, he crying "I'm going to kill him, I'm going to kill the son of a bitch."

*The violence against us, the violence within us*, aroused like a rabid dog. Adrenaline-filled bodies, we bring home the anger and the violence we meet on the street and turn it against each other. We sic the rabid dog on each other and on ourselves. The black moods of alienation descend, the bridges we've extended out to each other crumble. We put the walls back up between us.

Once again it's faggot-hunting and queer-baiting time in the city. "And on your first anniversary of loving each other," I say to Randy, "and they had to be Latinos," feeling guilt when I look at David. Who is my brother's keeper, I wonder – knowing I have to be, we all have to be. We are all responsible. But who exactly *are* my people?

*I identify as a woman. Whatever insults women insults me.*

*I identify as gay. Whoever insults gays insults me.*

*I identify as feminist. Whoever slurs feminism slurs me.*

That which is insulted I take as part of me, but there is something too simple about this kind of thinking. Part of the dialectic is missing. What about what I do not identify as?

I have been terrified of writing this essay because I will have to own up to the fact that I do not exclude whites from the list of people I love, two of them happen to be gay males. For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound. There is an enormous contradiction in being a bridge.

## **Dance To the Beat of Radical Colored Chic**

This task – to be a bridge, to be a fucking crossroads for goddess' sake.

During my stint in the Feminist Writers' Guild many white members would ask me why Third World women do not come to FWG meetings and readings. I should have answered, "Because their skins are not as thick as mine, because their fear of encountering racism is greater than mine. They don't enjoy being put down, ignored, not engaged in equal dialogue, being tokens. And, neither do I." Oh, I know, women of color are hot right now and hip. Our afro-rhythms and latin salsas, the beat of our drums is in. White women flock to our parties, dance to the beat of radical colored chic. They come to our readings, take up our cause. I have no objections to this. What I mind is the pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women's burden. Like the monkey in the Sufi story, who upon seeing a fish in the water rushes to rescue it from drowning by carrying it up into the branches of a tree. She takes a missionary role. She attempts to talk *for* us – what a presumption! This act is a rape of our tongue and our acquiescence is a complicity to that rape. We women of color have to stop being modern medusas – throats cut, silenced into a mere hissing.

### **Where Do We Hang The Blame**

*The pull between what is and what should be.*

Does the root of the sickness lie within ourselves or within our patriarchal institutions? Did our institutions birth and propagate themselves and are we merely their pawns? Do ideas originate in human minds or do they exist in a "no-osphere," a limbo space where ideas originate without our help? Where do we hang the blame for the sickness we see around us – around our own heads or around the throat of "capitalism," "socialism," "men," "white culture?"

If we do not create these institutions, we certainly perpetuate them through our inadvertent support. What lessons do we learn from the mugger?

Certainly racism is not just a white phenomenon. Whites are the top dogs and they shit on the rest of us every day of our lives. But casting stones is not the solution. Do we hand the oppressors/thug the rocks he throws at us? How often do we people of color place our necks on the chopping block? What are the ways we hold out our wrists to be shackled? Do we gag

our own mouths with our "dios lo manda" resignation? How many times before the cock crows do we deny ourselves, shake off our dreams, and trample them into the sand? How many times do we fail to help one another up from the bottom of the stairs? How many times have we let someone else carry our crosses? How still do we stand to be crucified?

It is difficult for me to break free of the Chicano cultural bias into which I was born and raised, and the cultural bias of the Anglo culture that I was brainwashed into adopting. It is easier to repeat the racial patterns and attitudes, especially those of fear and prejudice, that we have inherited than to resist them.

Like a favorite old shoe that no longer fits we do not let go of our comfortable old selves so that the new self can be worn. We fear our power, fear our feminine selves, fear the strong woman within, especially the black Kali aspect, dark and awesome. Thus we pay homage not to the power inside us but to the power outside us, masculine power, external power.

I see Third World peoples and women not as oppressors but as accomplices to oppression by our unwittingly passing on to our children and our friends the oppressor's ideologies. I cannot discount the role I play as accomplice, that we all play as accomplices, for we are not screaming loud enough in protest.

The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society. And just as the use of gloves, masks, and disinfectants fails to kill this disease, government grants, equal rights opportunity programs, welfare, and foodstamps fail to uproot racism, sexism, and homophobia. And tokenism is not the answer. Sharing the pie is not going to work. I had a bite of it once and it almost poisoned me. With mutations of the virus such as these, one cannot isolate the virus and treat it. The whole organism is poisoned.

I stand behind whatever threatens our oppression. I stand behind whatever breaks us out of our bonds, short of killing and maiming. I stand with whatever and whoever breaks us out of our limited views and awakens our atrophied potentials.

How to turn away from the hellish journey that the disease has put me through, the alchemical nights of the soul. Torn limb from limb, knifed, mugged, beaten. My tongue (Spanish) ripped from my mouth, left voiceless. My name stolen from me. My

bowels fucked with a surgeon's knife, uterus and ovaries pitched into the trash. Castrated. Set apart from my own kind, isolated. My life-blood sucked out of me by my role as woman nurturer - the last form of cannibalism.

### **El Mundo Zurdo (the Left-handed World)<sup>4</sup>**

*The pull between what is and what should be.* I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement – a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. And yet, I am confused as to how to accomplish this.

I can't discount the fact of the thousands that go to bed hungry every night. The thousands that do numbing shitwork eight hours a day each day of their lives. The thousands that get beaten and killed every day. The millions of women who have been burned at the stake, the millions who have been raped. Where is the justice to this?

I can't reconcile the sight of a battered child with the belief that we choose what happens to us, that we create our own world. *I cannot resolve this in myself.* I don't know. I can only speculate, try to integrate the experiences that I've had or have been witness to and try to make some sense of why we do violence to each other. In short, I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be.

*"Growing up I felt that I was an alien from another planet dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?"*

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people.

I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses. Blindfolded in the blue air. The sword between my thighs, the blade warm with my flesh. I walk the rope – an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act.

The rational, the patriarchal, and the heterosexual have held sway and legal tender for too long. Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors are banding and bonding together to right that balance. Only *together* can we be a force. I see us as a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family.

We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In *El Mundo Zurdo* I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.

### Notes

1. From my poem, "The Woman Who Lived Forever." All subsequent unacknowledged poems will be from my own writings.
2. From "Letting Go."
3. From "A Woman Lies Buried Under Me."
4. This section consists of notes "Towards a Construction of *El Mundo Zurdo*," an essay in progress.

# **A Black Feminist Statement**

*Combahee River Collective<sup>1</sup>*

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974.<sup>2</sup> During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

## **1. The Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism**

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists – some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W.

Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973 Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (civil rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual



abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

## **2. What We Believe**

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage

in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist

revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly", i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers are comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people,

particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se – *i.e.*, their biological maleness – that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it is so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

### **3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists**

During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's movement continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women." We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In "A Black

Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determinant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female voices were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970's:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser. . . . After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the house because he is able to defend and protect the development of his home... Women cannot do the same things as men – they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men are not equal to other men, i.e. ability, experience or even understanding. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver – they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life.<sup>3</sup>

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives cannot risk struggling against them both.

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hard-working allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly-felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and started doing an intense variety of consciousness-raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in Lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women's International Women's Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer, when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possibility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need

for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements which were first conceptualized as a Lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

#### **4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects**

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex and class are

simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes:

I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.



As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

### Notes

1. The Combahee River Collective is a Black feminist group in Boston whose name comes from the guerilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman.
2. This statement is dated April, 1977.
3. Michele Wallace. "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," *The Village Voice*, (28 July 1975): 6-7.
4. Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwanamke Mwananchi (The Nationalist Woman), Newark, NJ, 1971, 4-5. From *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah Eisenstein. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978.

# The Welder

*Cherríe L. Moraga*

I am a welder.  
Not an alchemist.  
I am interested in the blend  
of common elements to make  
à common thing.

No magic here.  
Only the heat of my desire to fuse  
what I already know  
exists. Is possible.

We plead to each other,  
*we all come from the same rock*  
*we all come from the same rock*  
ignoring the fact that we bend  
at different temperatures  
that each of us is malleable  
up to a point.

Yes, fusion *is* possible  
but only if things get hot enough –  
all else is temporary adhesion,  
patching up.

It is the intimacy of steel melting  
into steel, the fire of our individual  
passion to take hold of ourselves  
that makes sculpture of our lives,  
builds buildings.

And I am not talking about skyscrapers,  
merely structures that can support us  
without fear  
of trembling.

For too long a time  
the heat of my heavy hands  
has been smoldering

in the pockets of other  
people's business –  
they need oxygen to make fire.

I am now  
coming up for air.  
Yes, I *am*  
picking up the torch.

I am the welder.  
I understand the capacity of heat  
to change the shape of things.  
I am suited to work  
within the realm of sparks  
out of control.

I am the welder.  
I am taking the power  
into my own hands.

# **O.K. Momma, Who the Hell Am I?**

*an Interview with Luisah Teish*

*Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

## **Part One: "There was this rumbling in the background..."**

*G: Teish, in Numerology you can derive what your mission or life path is by adding the day of your birth, the month and the year and reducing it to a single digit number. The number corresponds with a Tarot card. According to this system you are a 19-10 and 1, the "genius." What do you see as your task in this life and how did you find that out?*

**T:** I've had a series of experiences that point the way. It's as if I was given a road map, and started traveling at different points. There is a travel consultant that meets me and says okay, now you go this way. The big vision, which I call my reformation, happened in the Fall 1974. I was in a terrible situation. I was coming out of having been deeply steeped in the Black Power movement. I had spent since 1970 quite a bit of time trying to ignore feminist teachings. There was this rumbling in the background saying that women ought to consider the position of women. I'm here screaming at the top of my lungs that Black people have to be free, you see. And over here I'm hearing people saying women have to be free too; there's a certain kind of oppression women suffer. But because it was primarily white women in the movement and white women who were vocalizing at the time, for a while I went along with the idea that, well, what they're talking about is only relevant to white women. At the same time, in my personal life I was being mistreated by people who claim to be about the fight for freedom. That contradiction was staring me in my face. My inner self was telling me, "You have marched, you have demonstrated, and you have fought for freedom, and Malcolm said 'freedom by any means necessary.'"

And yet I'm taking certain kinds of crap off of my brothers, you know. Why doesn't this apply clean across the board? And it put me in a position where I felt literally crippled. I felt like I had nowhere to turn and nothing really to do. Other things that had happened in my life – I was broke, underemployed, pregnant. I had had a child that died, went through a whole

number of things and came to the position that if I didn't have the right to fight to create a world that I could live in, if I could not have the right to fight absolutely everybody for the kind of world that I could live in – then I wouldn't live. I wouldn't live in a world where I would have to pretend to be inferior so that some man would look superior. I wouldn't live where somebody got a better break than me only because their skin was lighter.

But at the same time I didn't feel that I had enough power to really fight it. So I became suicidal. At the time I was taking Valium at the suggestion of a gynecologist who had a terrible reputation. You go in with a vaginal infection and they give you Valium, you know what I mean? And I'm on these Valiums and I'm saying I'm not going to live this kind of life, and I look around and I decided that I'm going to leave here. I lay down to die and my soul raised up out of my chest and sits up on the ceiling. She has a long debate with me about why am I trying to check out of here. And I tell her why I'm trying to check out and she says "no, no, no, no, you are going to live and you are going to fight, and I'm going to show you what you are going to do."

I lay there and here comes this parade of visions. Sometimes it was pictures, sometimes it was words – bold white letters traced in black. And she was telling me to go fight. Essentially, she was telling me to fight for my right to be a free woman. She was telling me to fight for my right to create beauty in the way that I see it. You know, when you're in the theatre there's always a struggle with people's art being junk and Hollywood and Broadway being the place to get to. She made it clear for me that my work had to have substance. There's no sense in me trying to play Miss Cupie Doll; I'm not one of the June Taylor dancers. I am the person who is going to work with the folk movement. Part of my assignment is legitimizing, bringing to life, the value of folk knowledge. And so I see myself using my art for the rest of my life, using my art to illuminate the culture of the common people.

Just about everything that I have done since 1973 has been the outgrowth of this spiritual prompting. Once I accepted my role – that I am an important person with a purpose – I have listened to that still small voice and she says things to me. You must always confront that which you fear. You gain strength by that, you see. And there's a bit of magic here.

I went through a period of time when I seriously thought I was going to lose my mind. That was because I was accepting, not what my goddess said my role was, but what other people said my role ought to be. Putting on false clothes. She said take them off. And there I was naked and I said "O.K., Momma, who the hell am I?" You know? And she says "you're a person who has been afraid of going crazy. You should do something about that." So the natural thing you must do is that anything you want to be spared of, you must work toward diminishing the possibility of it happening to you. And if it can happen to somebody else, it can happen to you, you know. So I can't afford to just walk around worried that I individually am going to be locked up for no reason. I have to make sure that nobody can be locked up for no reason. You have to eliminate the fear not only in yourself but the real basis for that fear.

So consequently, my work with the battered women shelters and my work with rape are basically an attempt to protect myself. It's about my own survival instinct and understanding that my destiny is infinitely tied with that of everybody else. You know there's a reason why we're here together on this same planet at this point in time.

**Part Two: "I see the reemergence of the women's movement as the manifestations of the desires of the goddess energy."**

**T:** The thing that I'm feeling very intuitively about is that something important is going on at this point in time, not only in my life but in the lives of women in general and in the life of writing. There are times when I look at what human history has been and I say Oh, OK there have always been people like us who get a momentum started and then it dies down and nothing becomes of it. And it's a hundred years or so before those thoughts are resurrected. But there's a little voice in my ears that insists that I continue. It insists that something really important is happening here, something that is going to have an effect here for years. Something that is going to make a significant change in the world.

**G:** *Sí, I see it in terms of the left handed world coming into being. For centuries now, ever since the industrial age or maybe even before, it has*

*always been a world of the intellect, reasoning, the machine. Here women were stuck with having tremendous powers of intuition experiencing other levels of reality and other realities yet they had to sit on it because men would say, well, you're crazy. All of a sudden there's a reemergence of the intuitive energies – and they are very powerful. And if you apply them in your life on the personal and political plane then that gives you a tremendous amount of energy – it's almost like a volcano erupting. We have yet to learn how to control that power. And we're scared of it.*

**T:** I think too that it's part of the balance that always goes on in nature. It's like technology, which is purely masculine, material, and all about aggressive-conquering power, has taken itself to the point of sleeping on the self-destruct button and now it's as if the mother goddess is coming in and saying, "Wait a minute son, hold it boy. Now there are other things; there is life. I've allowed you to play with your death machines long enough. Now be quiet, cool down, I have to clean the situation up." And I definitely see the reemergence of the women's movement as the manifestations of the desires of the goddess energy.

**G:** *What part does feminist spirituality have in taking back our own power?*

**T:** It is slowly doing a lot. Feminist spirituality had a real problem because most revolutionary circles have considered spirituality a no-no area. Because the male god and the institutionalized church has been so counter-revolutionary, there has been the temptation to say that there is nothing but the material world, and this is all we should deal with. Okay? So slowly but surely the people who are in tune with both the need for revolution and understanding of the spiritual world are beginning to say, "Hey, these worlds are not diametrically opposed to each other. Look, these two can work together." But now we are tapping our powers in self-defense. We are using our power in self-defense. For example if you look in Z. Budapest's book, *The Book of Lights and Shadows* you will see a charm for how to combat a racist. We use our spiritual power now to understand that this man does not have the right to overpower me, and because I know that this is right, I'm calling on that

force to stand up to him. When we reclaim women's blood we increase our power.

Every time a sister learns that she is not born to live in a world of fear, to be dominated, every time a sister sits down with a glass of water in front of her and understands that she is intimately tied to water and that all life is tied to water she is gradually building an inner strength that gives her armour to go out and fight the world.

For centuries we heard woman is no good, we have been beat down, we have been made lethal, we have had to recycle our strength in other ways. But now, because we have a spiritual understanding that this myth is bull, we have the nerve to test our strength. In testing it we will find out what it is, how much of it we have, and how much we can do with it. See, we're coming out of the shadow.

We have to use our strength to break the chain. And there are concrete, very very concrete things we can do. Like I teach a lot of wealth charms because a lot of women who come to my workshops are working class women who have no money, you know. So yes, we do a lot of charms to pull money out of the rich and have it rechanneled into our hands. We do a lot of healing on each other so I can keep my sister out of the hands of that nice happy man over there. It's very small, but we have to recapture what is going to keep us alive. Because we have to keep alive.

If you take medicine for example, the man is always putting down herbal remedies because they're too available to everybody. Because if you find out you can heal yourself on your own, without him, he's out of the job. So you've got to come to him to give him a chance to run his Frankenstein experiments on you, you see. It's like that Indian proverb that if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach the man to fish he eats forever. They're into "Here, here little momma, big daddy's gonna do this for you, take a crumb here (snap), take a crumb there." And I'm saying, I'm the one that baked the bread, baby. You can't do that no more.

*G: You have spoken many times about the different charms you use for healing. Would you give an example of each one of those?*



**T:** Sure. It's really good that you asked because right now I'm putting together notes for a book that I want to do on women's spirituality<sup>1</sup> that would be a combination of my own personal experiences and certain historical information, but mostly a book of charms. When I came into this I would not give anybody a charm that I had not experimented with myself. That's something you don't get from your local doctor. He uses a rat and then transposes it to a human.

Two charms that I think are especially important to women are those involving water and those involving earth. Fire and light are important, but water and earth charms seem to work very very fast. It's interesting that most of my charms require cooperation from one other person.

Let us say that we have a situation where we have two women who find themselves in dire, dire poverty, you know. We can put the principle of water to work in a charm called "pouring the money." That is, you know that you are going to run out of money soon, you know what's coming. Each day, for seven days, you come into your house and you take whatever small change you have, and you put it into a bowl. Preferably you should have two bowls, a white bowl and a green bowl. And then with the new moon, especially a new moon in an earth sign or a water sign is best, you sit down with the money you've saved, you sit down with a candle, green or white, and you take something that is the symbol of wealth for you. Sometimes I use one of the cards from the Tarot deck, other times I will use a dollar bill, other times I will use a picture of the thing I want to buy. If it's groceries I put pictures of food there, if it's clothes I use pictures of the pair of shoes I'd like to buy. You put water in the bowl with the money, and you pour the water and the money into one bowl and you state what you need. The other woman pours the money into the other bowl and she states what she needs. You continue to do this, you see, for some time depending on how much you need.

One night I did it with a sister in LA from sunset to sunrise, when the moon was no longer visible. And in the period of time between the new moon and the full moon several very interesting things happened. She got a check from these people she used to work for. She hadn't worked for them in a year, their bookkeeper looked on the books and decided that they hadn't

sent her some back pay. They sent it to her, right? I was a waitress at a health food restaurant at the time, and the other waitress decided that she wanted some vacation so I got to work her hours – the tips increased, right? And that was a small amount of money to take us out of the starving stage and put us back on our feet. That's a small one. It depends on how much energy you put into it and what you need it for. It's important that you know what you need it for because *the spirit deals in need*.

But we live in a world where you think I gotta have so many things, dollars in my hand and that is just not true, you know. The energy that is out there that created the universe gave us everything we need. If we treated the earth properly there would be enough for everybody to eat. You know that bullshit about over-population is a crock. A misdistribution, you know.

Another earth charm that I really like is paralleling your growth with that of a plant. If I'm getting ready to write a book, the first day that I lay the first page out, I go out to get either a seedling or a baby plant. I put it near that place where I'm working with the water. I feed the plant and I work page two. I clip the plant today and I work page three. I spray the plant today and I work page four. So that there is a direct relationship between my growth and the growth of that plant.

**G:** *But that's scary because what if the plant starts dying?*

**T:** If the plant starts dying then you have to reconsider the way you're operating, you see. And we do a lot of stuff around fear. In reality the two basic emotions are fear and love and everything else is an aspect of one of those. Fear has been *drummed* into us. Fear has been drummed into us like nothing else. If you don't go ask this expert then you're supposed to be afraid. Once you go see the infallible expert nothing can go wrong anymore. A lot of times messages are coming through to us and we receive them with fear because we've been trained to be fearful and that fear is the thing that ruins the charm. My plant dying would be for me the sign that I've come to a point of stagnation, you know. I've got to go back to the root of the problem. I've got to take the plant out of its pot, look at it, see what is not being done. I've got to lay that book down and read what is missing. And you can set things up that way so that it is

parallel. Overcoming certain fears is so easy. It amazed me when I found out how to do it.

It's really interesting that right now I'm speaking with a woman who is in her early thirties and is having her first sexual experience. And some of the things that she worries about I forgot that I used to worry about because I've gone through enough of a process of cleaning myself – out of old guilt and false responsibility and false senses of oppression. Speaking with her I find that I am going to have to put her through the same thing that I've been through.

You are a woman, you are human, you have the right to be sexual, you have the right to be sexual with whoever you see fit to be sexual with. You know, the false sense of morality has been designed, if you look at it, to keeping women's power in check. That comes through real clear on the psychic level. Look at all the taboos around women's blood. Women's blood contains the seed of new life. That is the power of the creator. Yet you travel from circle to circle and they tell you women's blood is this evil thing. Then life itself has to be an evil thing. And I just feel that patriarchy has made the god concept so lopsided, that man is all positive and woman is all negative and that is bullshit, you know. Day cannot be day without night.

**G:** *What do you think men hold against women most?*

**T:** Well, specifically, the question of women's blood. It's the one thing we have that they don't. Now, the uterus, the vaginal blood, the power of creation, the nurturing power that we have, the sustaining power that we have is something that *they* don't have. And when I look into the folklore of Louisiana, when I look into the charms and the spells I find that the charms involving women's blood are the charms designed to overpower men. That's how women's blood was used.

**G:** *Even the love potions?*

**T:** Yeah, it's for bending his will. You use women's blood to bend man's will. Of course there is a great taboo against it. As long as they (men) are involved. That's like Superman outlawing Kryptonite; of course he will.

**G:** *Teish, I always felt when I was growing up that women had the*

*power, that women were strong, that women were the nurturers, and they pretended that they didn't have it, that the men did; it was a conspiracy. Men don't have it. So here is a woman using rituals and charms to bend men's power, when actually she could be straightening up her own.*

**T:** We have now become *victims of our own benevolence*. We see certain weaknesses. We are accustomed to mothering, raising, nurturing, looking for potential, speeding the imagination with children. We have seen the child in men and nurtured it in the same way. So now you have the son growing up thinking that he can slap the mother who nursed him. I see that happen a number of times. Before I liberated myself it was part of my culture. You go out to dinner and the man didn't have enough money you slip it under the table so it looks like he paid for it. You learn how to suggest subtly that this or that be done and then when he follows your advice and it works you praise him for having such a wonderful idea. Bull. Bull. The whole hog. I'm not doing that anymore. The goddess is not doing that anymore. The trial is coming to an end. The grace period is slowly drawing to a close. The queen is about to move on the chess board.

**G:** *It's about time.*

**T:** Now I'm saying that the period where the goddess allows the little boy, allows her son to go rampaging through the universe, is coming to a close. She's saying, "Johnny, you've misbehaved long enough. Now mother's going to whip you."

**G:** *Another thing I want to ask you is what kind of world do you want to live in and when do you see this kind of world existing on the physical plane?*

**T:** Well, it's not in my lifetime. I know that. That's the sad thing about it. It is not in my lifetime. I'm into a world where people are judged by the wealth of their soul, not their pockets. You know what I mean? I want each person to have what they've earned *by right of consciousness*, you see. The basis of it is what you can conceive mentally – the infinite power will give you the substance to create it, you see. There has been entirely too much rip off for me. There have been too many people who have tilled

the soil and not eaten the fruit. There have been too many people that have written the poems and not gotten the praise. There have been too many people that have created the invention and then been used by the machine. That has to stop.

I am shooting for a world where everybody eats, where everybody has decent housing, where everybody has their basic necessities and the freedom to be who they are. The freedom to express the spirit that is inside of them. What is all this bowing and scraping to these various two-legged authorities, you know? The only person I'm willing to bow to is the spirit. And in my faith you don't scrape in front of them, see.

Our fates *are* tied. We have this strange notion on this planet that our fates are *not* tied. If it were not so we would not be here together. It's that simple. But there's this refusal to understand, so we create these false classes. I'm richer than she is. I'm a different color than that one. I'm taller than that one. That's all bull. We all eat and shit in the same manner. And until I meet someone with green blood who eats food and has no wastes coming out of him, who never cries, who never has to sleep – when I meet somebody like that, I may consider them superior. At first I'll consider them different. I'll have to test it to see if they are in fact superior. That's all I'm after – *is everybody's right to express the spirit that lives in them.*

**G:** *That would be a beautiful world. I kind of think that we will see that kind of world in our lifetime. Or at least its beginnings. Otherwise it's going to be the end of us because we're poisoning ourselves and our world pretty fast.*

**T:** Yeah. That's another job that women spiritualists are taking over. We seem to realize, because of our intimate connection with earth, that she is sending us the message. She's not going to tolerate any more of that. I don't know what the geologists think, they may have their theories of air getting trapped under the earth and that's why St. Helens was blowing. The woman is blowing to tell you that *she is mad* and it's that simple.

**G:** *According to the Mayan calendar we are in El Quinto Sol (The Fifth World Sun) and that this world will end by earthquake and fire on Dec. 24, 2011. I guess it parallels the end of the Piscean Age and the beginning of the Aquarian. The sixth sun, which the Mayans call*

*Consciousness, will follow the fifth one.*

**T:** I believe it. It's really, really obvious when the water is messed up and the air is messed up and the mountain begins to rumble, that is a real indication: "Johnny, put your toy down; pay attention to your health; momma's about to explode." But they won't listen because they're blinded by greed. They are blinded by this grabby, grabby...

**G:** *And they're very insecure, peeny little beings, they're very scared they're going to lose their power.*

**T:** Exactly. And they ignore the one who is power. Where would their power be if earth decides she's had it?

### **Part Three: Smashing the Myth**

**G:** *What are the particular barriers or struggles involved in Third World Women's spirituality?*

**T:** You have to understand that first and foremost, the greater part of our problem as Third World people is that for a long time we internalized a lot that *we are nobody with nothing*. You know, God is white therefore the all-powerful is on the side of the one who is in power.

I remember quite some years ago when I was in St. Louis I was doing a lot of demonstrating and stuff. There was this old Black woman I was talking to and trying to get her to go to a demonstration with me, you know. It was down by the old courthouse by the St. Louis arch and she said to me, she said, "You know, there's a chopping block in there where they used to sell niggers." She said, "Now if you go down there and take a look you will see that the blood is still on that chopping block. It's stained in the wood, you know. You can't be going down and telling these white folks what to do." I said, "Oh yes, I can. I have some power, they have to hear me. I'm not going to just lay down and die, dada dadada." And she said to me, "Chile, don't you know god suffered the Indians to die so that the white men could have this land." And I blew my stack. Because there it was right there, you know.

**G:** *Believing in the white man's conditioning, in their shit.*

T: *My gods tell me that things are not that absolute, that there is always a struggle of power going on and that I must struggle for this power.*

The basic problem that we have had was believing somebody else's story about us – *what we can and cannot do, who we can and cannot be*. As Third World people we needed it more than anybody because we have been kept down for so long and this is the thing that's so hard for people to accept. Most Third World people on the surface seem to have accepted the rigidity of Christianity, yet certain true things still survive. And what we've got to do is *feed that which has survived*, build on that which has survived till our gods and goddesses speak. "Oh, yes, my children are strong now, they are ready now. Given them a total green light. Let's go, ya'll." You know the baby goes from crawling to walking. We've come out of an infancy of oppression into our own power because there's enough archeological evidence that everybody at one point or another had a great civilization. Every people alive had a great civilization until this man came along whose environment tricked him, you know. It was the snow, I feel, that was responsible for the unusual aggression of the Europeans and their chance encounter with gunpowder, you see, from the East. Put those two things together and here comes this big conquering hero.

G: *And also fear I think, fear had a great deal to do with it, fear of not surviving made him more aggressive. Made him take up weapons for defense, become cold, reasoning.*

*When you said that that which has survived through the ages comes from women's power and spirituality, I was thinking of La Virgen de Guadalupe that my Mamágrande Ramona had on her altar. When the Spaniards took over Mexico they instituted Catholicism, but a lot of my people kept some of the old gods and goddesses by integrating them into the Christian ones. So now La Virgen de Guadalupe contains within her Tonatin, the Aztec creation goddess. Mexicans attach more power to her than they do to the patriarchal god and his long-suffering son.*

T: Yeah. I came into religion in the sixties. We were looking for the history. We were looking for the rhyme and reason behind our struggle. How did things get turned around? How can we reclaim our blackness? And so when you look at what

has come down we immediately see the militant aspect, we see this is something that has survived through the threat of death. The whole Black power movement was a very sexist movement, you know, here the main theme was reinstating the Black man, OK. The problem with the Black men, the reason that they couldn't get jobs, and this is another piece of bullshit, was because Black women were too strong. That she was the castrator and that that was what was wrong with us.

G: *What was wrong with you was that you were too strong?*

T: I was too strong. I was not a woman, dada dada da. So I came into the movement, trying to be the perfect African woman. In the process I find out there used to be a cult of women in Africa who were warriors, you know, who cut a man's penis and stuck it in his mouth as a mark that they had done this. I find out that the major god was an androgyne. I learn that the lightning bolt originally belonged to a female deity. I start learning things that whisper of very strong women, you know. I was very confused by it all for awhile, until I accepted a personal message from her. She was telling me that the sexism I was experiencing in the movement religion should not be tolerated anymore and she was laying the responsibility on me to put an end to it. So from there, I had to confront, finally, the "men's room." When I talk about the "men's room," I mean a room in this collective spiritual household where women were not allowed to go, because according to the males we would be struck by lightning if we went in there. So one day I just on my own decided I'm going to walk in there and disprove this myth. I was somewhat scared that hey I *would* get struck by lightning until I had a dream that said, you know, *go. I want you to go, go, go, go.* And finally, *if you don't go you'll be sorry.* So very nervously I said, "OK momma, this is what you told me to do. I'm a good child. Please stop the thunder god from hitting me. Please, please momma, I'm depending on you" and I walk on in there and *smash a myth.*

## Notes

1. The book in progress is *Working the Mother.*



# **Brownness<sup>1</sup>**

*Andrea Canaan*

I am brown and I have experienced life as a brown person. Outwardly I have traversed with ease the salons of the white rich, the bayous and lakes of cajun South Louisiana, the hot-white racism of Shreveport, the folksy back-slapping, peculiar institutions of Natchez, the friendly invisible oppression of Bay St. Louis and Ocean Springs, the humid, lazy apathy of New Orleans. With soul intact, identity sure, sense of humanness unchained by myth and ignorance, I have lived my years inside brown skin that didn't show the bruises, the wounds, to anyone.

Since before I can remember, brownness was always compared to whiteness in terms that were ultimately degrading for brownness. Lazy, shiftless, poor, nonhuman, dirty, abusive, ignorant, uncultured, uneducated, were used to convey conscious and unconscious messages that brown was not a good thing to be and the ultimate model of things right and good was white. Yes, white people called me nigger, forced me to drink from separate fountains, would not allow me to sit in the front of the bus. This message, however, was first and most transmitted by brown. There was an all powerful and real knowledge, like the pungent smell of chitterlings cooking on a rainy winter day, that no matter how good, how clean, how pious the brown, they could not equal or reflect the ultimate good and right-white.

Now understand, no brown person acknowledged feeling this way or accepted responsibility for conveying the message. Everyone joked, laughed, and put down white. We put up and revered brown. For all the up brown and down white a black comedy twisted and reversed the jokes, the laughs, and the put downs back into brown. We welcomed this black comedy routine. We made its scenes our rituals. We claimed the right of self-defacement. We remained degraded inside ourselves and we continued to empower others to control us.

Don't mistake me, brown is not The Oppressor but the victim. But part of our victimization is self-oppression. Our adaptations were creative, the end goal, survival. This peculiar system of degrading self so that outsiders won't hurt us so much has its base in remembered servitude, helplessness and powerlessness

combined with the pride and hope that comes from surviving, mixed with the shame of surviving, the humiliation of servitude, and the rage of being considered nonhuman. The system's apex is the reality that while adapting to white language, dress, worship, thought and social interaction we had not gained social acceptance. Further, while sacrificing, working, praying, singing, fighting, and dying for and with white, we had not gained equality, economic security, or freedom. What we had gained was an insidious terrifying, self-negating desire – even need – to be white.

By the time I was a woman, I had all the necessary external survival skills needed, supposedly, to protect me from the rejection and humiliation projected onto me by white media, government, church, and social institutions. I had unending strength, evergrowing intellect, a heart as big as the heavens and earth, a soul more forgiving than gods themselves, and I accepted total responsibility for myself, my own oppressed state, the oppression of the brown man, and the sin of being both brown and woman. This superwoman veneer protected me from the external world much of the time. This superwoman veneer also warded off internal self-reflection needed to assess if indeed I was strong enough to carry such heavy burdens. The evergrowing intellect was an additional burden because the ability to think allows me to look at, if not truly see, options and truth. The open heart and forgiving soul stifled my rightful indignation, gagged my rage, and forced my fears, my needs, my rage, my joys, my accomplishments, inward. The acceptance of total responsibility, real, concrete, or abstract, for myself and others became my ultimate strait jacket, the last and strongest barrier to self. The guilt alone associated with such responsibility should have broken the backs of brown women long ago. The isolation is deafening and support is non-existent. The inherent conflicts of interests of parents, children, husbands, lovers, church, state, and self cry out like sound and fury and we think ourselves crazed because there is a constant buzz in our ears. In this state I began to see, as through a lifting mist, the enemies of self.

Racial memory coursed through my veins. Memories of being snatched away by friend and stranger, stuffed into vessels that traversed vast spaces of water, chained, whipped, branded,

hunted and sold by overlapping generational systems of degradation that were supported by male gods, male governments, male-controlled social institutions across the globe, across the centuries. I was sure that the ultimate evil was the white male, and I became afraid of him. It was a survival fear of being fooled by bright promises, hope-laden movement songs, loopholed constitutional amendments and proclamations. Afraid of being enslaved again, afraid of being annihilated this time.

My brown woman community counted our most dangerous enemy as the white woman. Didn't she seduce brown men and cry rape? Didn't her status forever decree our children born out of forced rape by her brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers illegitimate and create a caste system within brown that made light brown better than dark brown and her delicate white, best? Doesn't the hand that rocks the cradle rule the world? Is she not responsible for the actions and sins of her men? Did not her essential evil cause the downfall of her men? Is she not cloaked in sexual mystery so that our brown men cannot resist her? Does she not compete with us for brown men, the centers of our lives, as well as white men, our benevolent, if somewhat distracted and crabby, fathers? Does she not force us to use our bodies as a commodity in the white marketplace in order to feed our babies in order to feed our men?

The mist began to clear. I could no longer justify viewing the white woman as the personification of the evil done to us, the dangerous enemy. I began to look at the things brown women faced with a watchful eye for a power base. What is rape but power? What is racism but power? What is poverty but power? What is sexism but power? What is oppression but power? What is deception but power? What is fear but power? I began to see the enemy as those forces within me that allowed others to control me and those who empowered or sought to empower themselves to control me.

I could see my enemy as my brownness, my community, my mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. This is logical, given my patterns of self oppression. I could isolate myself from the brown community, claiming my right to be me without concern for our growth and development as a whole. I would, however, be cutting off an essential part of my development to nurture

another. I would simply be acknowledging the oppression of my brownness and not that of my femaleness. They are both essential and important, however. The fact is I am brown and female, and my growth and development are tied to the entire community. I must nurture and develop brown self, woman, man, and child. I must address the issues of my own oppression and survival. When I separate them, isolate them, and ignore them, I separate, isolate, and ignore myself. I am a unit. A part of brownness. My health, energy, intellect, and talent are resources of my community. When I fall ill my community is weakened. When my community is invaded by disease I am affected, even killed. I must work both as an individual and as a part of my community in order to survive in order for my community to survive.

It would be very easy to identify white women as my enemy. As long as I do, however, I accept my devalued, oppressed, unliberated woman state. We do not trust her because she is white. We do not seek to know her because we would be betraying our brownness, collaborating with the enemy, whiteness. We do not embrace her because she is woman. And women, we remain believing, are evil beings who started this entire mess in the garden of eden. The problem here is that as we remain isolated and unknowing of woman, any woman, we continue to accept the basis for a part of our oppression. As we trade distrust and irresponsibility we trade off our liberation. It's as if we think liberation a fixed quantity, that there is only so much to go around. That an individual or community is liberated at the expense of another. *When we view liberation as a scarce resource, something only a precious few of us can have, we stifle our potential, our creativity, our genius for living, learning and growing.*

It is hardest to see my enemy as brown men yet in order to see myself clearly I must face the closest threat to my survival for it is he who most rapes me, batters me, devalues my strength, will not allow my weakness. He is closest to me for he is my father, my brother, my son, my man, my lover. I love him, I glory in his maleness and agonize in his degradation. I must refuse to allow him to oppress me while I must be concerned for his survival. This major conflict of interest is basic to brown oppression. Divide and conquer. Choose who is more worthy of liberation. I refuse to play this diabolical self destructive game. I refuse to

play out the superwoman image as I refuse to believe the powerless, weak, politically ineffective, superstud image of the brown man. We are both strong and weak, oppressed and oppressor of each, as well as by the white super culture. Our individual and collective development as men and women will not jeopardize but enhance our liberation. The brown man is not my enemy. Nor I his, but we must recognize that we both contribute to each other's oppression.

It would be easiest of all to see the white male as the enemy. He has the giant share of power. He controls our governments, resources, social institutions, language, education. Essentially he controls the world. To see him as the evil all-powerful enemy, however, forces me to accept little responsibility for my own oppression. It negates my power to change my status. When I accept white male power as inevitable and not within my control, I accept my impotence to acquire power and control for myself, through and for my brown community, through and for my world community. To give to brown, white, men, women, etc., the status of all-powerful is to cloak them in mystery and power. We must focus on those things within us that allow others to control us, know those who would empower themselves to control us and understand that the forces can be brown male or female, white male or female, as well as our selves. We must demystify and know more in depth the world around and in us in order to distinguish friend from foe rather than accepting prefabricated enemies.

The enemy is brownness and whiteness, maleness and femaleness. The enemy is our urgent need to stereotype and close off people, places, and events into isolated categories. Hatred, distrust, irresponsibility, unloving, classism, sexism, and racism, in their myriad forms, cloud our vision and isolate us. This closed and limited view blocks women embracing women, brown women embracing brown women, brown women embracing brown men, brown women embracing white women and women embracing men. We close off avenues of communication and vision so that individual and communal trust, responsibility, loving, and knowing are impossible.

In facing myself, while eliminating my self oppression, I stumble into a terrifying and isolated place. If I reject and question concepts, mores, and values of my brown community,

where is my support, where is my family, what becomes of my sense of community ... peoplehood? While becoming myself, will I become so different, so threatening, that they too will reject me?

I am facing that terror and isolation as are brown women across the globe. When we question ourselves, seek to create harmonious, supportive, nurturing, liberating environments for ourselves, we find the white and brown super cultures ready to wage battle together in order to make us reform, in order to decrease their stress and difficulty in visualizing difference and self-hood as revolution and revolution as positive and necessary for cohabitation on this planet.

The white super culture has not yet erased my brown presence, but it continually seeks to erase my individual freedom to be different, to make decisions and choices for myself. The brown community feels the awful terrifying pressure and transmits urgent messages to me to blend, hide, retreat, in order to survive even at the expense of self. Survive by any means necessary, including self defacement, self negation, and the allowance of powerlessness.

I hold arm raised, fist clenched to the white super culture. I embrace the brown community with respect and deep loving but with firm insistence that being myself, being different, even radically different from my mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, is my right, my duty, my way of living a whole and sane existence, accepting responsibility and consequences of being true to myself in order to be true to my humanness in order to be true to my community.

I send a warning to you white woman. The women's movement the feminist movement is not a middle class clique. It is not an elitist class of white women hiding from men. It is a positive ever growing movement of women who believe in the equality of all people. Women who are not willing to settle for token change but insist that the economic and political resources and power of this nation this world be distributed equally. It is women being concerned about women and being willing to place women's needs and their development first. It is a battle for economic, political, and social freedom and not a battle of sexes. It is not white. It is not racist. It is not classist. It is not closed. Understand that although we are of the same gender we

must cross over miles of mistrust and cross victimization in order to meet, in order to learn and grow and work together. Understand that sexism is not the ultimate evil but a place of unification, a place of commonality, a place from which to become a political force for women, for humanness.

I challenge you brown woman. You, who will not interface the women's movement. You, who say the movement is separatist, white, lesbian, without glamour. Further, you say you are too liberated and want to be dependent, protected, shackled to the pedestal. "Ain't you a woman?" Look at yourself, your community, your country, your world and ask yourself, who has the least to lose and the most to gain from economic security, equality, freedom? Who has waited longest, deferred most, worked hardest, lived poorest, nurtured, encouraged, loved more while asking the least in return. Who I ask you? Yes, you are correct. You yourself. Yet who is most oppressed in this land today? No! Don't put on your visor. It is not the brown man or the third world man. It is the brown woman, the third world woman. Understand, the people who are most oppressed in a society have the most investment in that society's change. It is when that bottom layer becomes a political force for itself that change will occur. Changes will not only occur for that layer but will move outward and upward throughout that society. Remember the civil rights movement? It has reverberated around the world to become a human rights movement. We are the bottom of the heap brown women. We have the most to gain and least to lose. Straight and lesbian among us we must fight, learn and grow with, and for, ourselves, our mothers, daughters, and sisters across this nation across this globe and yes brown women we must fight, learn, grow with, and for our fathers, brothers, sons, and men.

The buck stops here as it did with a brown woman in Montgomery, Alabama. *The women's movement is ours.*

## Notes

1. While I know and identify black, my first knowing of myself before I knew much about skin color and its effects was as a brown baby girl looking in the mirror of my mother's face. Brown is my color, the very shade of which colors my existence both inside the black community and outside of it.

## **Revolution**

### *It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick*

*Pat Parker*

*The following speech was given at the BASTA conference in Oakland, California, in August 1980. It represented three organizations: The Black Women's Revolutionary Council, the Eleventh Hour Battalion, and the Feminist Women's Health Center in Oakland.*

I have been to many conferences: People's Constitutional convention in Washington, D.C., Women's Conference on Violence in San Francisco, Lesbian Conference in Los Angeles, International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Belgium. I've been to more conferences than I can name and to many I would like to forget, but I have never come to a conference with as much anticipation and feeling of urgency.

We are in a critical time. Imperialist forces in the world are finding themselves backed against the wall; no longer able to control the world with the threat of force. And they are getting desperate. And they should be desperate. What we do here this weekend and what we take from this conference can be the difference, the deciding factor as to whether a group of women will ever again be able to meet not only in this country, but the entire world. We are facing the most critical time in the history of the world. The superpowers cannot afford for us to join forces and work to rid this earth of them, and we cannot afford not to.

In order to leave here prepared to be a strong force in the fight against imperialism we must have a clear understanding of what imperialism is and how it manifests itself in our lives. It is perhaps easier for us to understand the nature of imperialism when we look at how this country deals with other countries. It doesn't take a great amount of political sophistication to see how the interest of oil companies played a role in our relationship with the Shah's Iran. The people of Iran were exploited in order for Americans to drive gas guzzling monsters. And that is perhaps the difficult part of imperialism for us to understand.

The rest of the world is being exploited in order to maintain our standard of living. We who are 5 percent of the world's population use 40 percent of the world's oil.



As anti-imperialists we must be prepared to destroy all imperialist governments; and we must realize that by doing this we will drastically alter the standard of living that we now enjoy. We cannot talk on one hand about making revolution in this country, yet be unwilling to give up our videotape records and recreational vehicles. An anti-imperialist understands the exploitation of the working class, understands that in order for capitalism to function, there must be a certain percentage that is unemployed. We must also define our friends and enemies based on their stand on imperialism.

At this time, the super powers are in a state of decline. The Iranians rose up and said no to US imperialism; the Afghans and Eritreans are saying no to Soviet-social imperialism. The situation has become critical and the only resource left is world war between the US and the Soviet Union. We are daily being given warning that war is imminent. To some people, this is no significant change, just escalation. The Blacks, poor whites, Chicanos, and other oppressed people of this country already know we're at war.

And the rest of the country's people are being prepared. The media is bombarding us with patriotic declarations about "our" hostages and "our" embassy in Iran. This government is constantly reminding us of our commitment to our allies in Israel. Ads inviting us to become the few, the chosen, the marine or fly with the air force, etc. are filling our television screens.

And it doesn't stop there. This system is insidious in its machinations. It's no coincidence that the "right wing" of this country is being mobilized. Media sources are bombarding us with the news of KKK and Nazi party activity. But we who were involved in the civil rights movement are very familiar with these tactics. We remember the revelations of FBI agents, not only infiltrating the Klan but participating in and leading their activities. And we are not for one moment fooled by these manipulations.

The Klan and the Nazis are our enemies and must be stopped, but to simply mobilize around stopping them is not enough. They are functionaries, tools of this governmental system. They serve in the same way as our armed forces and police. To end Klan or Nazi activity doesn't end imperialism. It doesn't end institutional racism; it doesn't end sexism; it does

not bring this monster down, and we must not forget what our goals are and who our enemies are. To simply label these people as lunatic fringes and not accurately assess their roles as a part of this system is a dangerous error. These people do the dirty work. They are the arms and legs of the congressmen, the businessmen, the Tri-lateral Commission.

And the message they bring is coming clear. Be a good American – Support registration for the draft. The equation is being laid out in front of us. Good American equals Support Imperialism and war. To this, I must declare – I am not a good American. I do not wish to have the world colonized, bombarded and plundered in order to eat steak.

Each time a national liberation victory is won I applaud and support it. It means we are one step closer to ending the madness that we live under. It means we weaken the chains that are binding the world.

Yet to support national liberation struggles alone is not enough. We must actively fight within the confines of this country to bring it down. I am not prepared to let other nationalities do my dirty work for me. I want the people of Iran to be free. I want the people of Puerto Rico to be free, but I am a revolutionary feminist because I want me to be free. And it is critically important to me that you who are here, that your commitment to revolution is based on the fact that you want revolution for yourself.

In order for revolution to be possible, and revolution *is* possible, it must be led by the poor and working class people of this country. Our interest does not lie with being a part of this system, and our tendencies to be co-opted and diverted are lessened by the realization of our oppression. We know and understand that our oppression is not simply a question of nationality but that poor and working class people are oppressed throughout the world by the imperialist powers.

We as women face a particular oppression, not in a vacuum but as a part of this corrupt system. The issues of women are the issues of the working class as well. By not having this understanding, the women's movement has allowed itself to be co-opted and misdirected.

It is unthinkable to me as a revolutionary feminist that some women's liberationist would entertain the notion that women should be drafted in exchange for passage of the ERA. This is a clear example of not understanding imperialism and not basing one's political line on its destruction. If the passage of the ERA means that I am going to become an equal participant in the exploitation of the world; that I am going to bear arms against other Third World people who are fighting to reclaim what is rightfully theirs – then I say Fuck the ERA.

One of the difficult questions for us to understand is just "what is revolution?" Perhaps we have had too many years of media madness with "revolutionary eye makeup and revolutionary tampons." Perhaps we have had too many years of Hollywood fantasy where the revolutionary man kills his enemies and walks off into the sunset with his revolutionary woman who has been waiting for his return. And that's the end of the tale.

The reality is that revolution is not a one step process: you fight – you win – it's over. It takes years. Long after the smoke of the last gun has faded away the struggle to build a society that is classless, that has no traces of sexism and racism in it, will still be going on. We have many examples of societies in our life time that have had successful armed revolution. And we have no examples of any country that has completed the revolutionary process. Is Russia now the society that Marx and Lenin dreamed? Is China the society that Mao dreamed? Before and after armed revolution there must be education, and analysis, and struggle. If not, and even if so, one will be faced with coups, counterrevolution and revision.

The other illusion is that revolution is neat. It's not neat or pretty or quick. It is a long dirty process. We will be faced with decisions that are not easy. We will have to consider the deaths of friends and family. We will be faced with the decisions of killing members of our own race.

Another illusion that we suffer under in this country is that a single facet of the population can make revolution. Black people alone cannot make a revolution in this country. Native American people alone cannot make revolution in this country. Chicanos alone cannot make revolution in this country. Asians alone cannot make revolution in this country. White people

alone cannot make revolution in this country. Women alone cannot make revolution in this country. Gay people alone cannot make revolution in this country. And anyone who tries it will not be successful.

Yet it is critically important for women to take a leadership role in this struggle. And I do not mean leading the way to the coffee machine.

A part of the task charged to us this weekend is deciding the direction we must take. First I say let us reclaim our movement. For too long I have watched the white middle class be represented as my leaders in the women's movement. I have often heard that the women's movement is a white middle class movement.

I am a feminist. I am neither white nor middle class. And the women that I've worked with were like me. Yet I am told that we don't exist, and that we didn't exist. Now I understand that the racism and classism of some women in the movement prevented them from seeing me and people like me. But I also understand that with the aid of the media many middle class women were made more visible. And this gave them an opportunity to use their skills gained through their privilege to lead the movement into at first reformist and now counterrevolutionary bullshit.

These women allowed themselves to be red-baited and dyke-baited into isolating and ignoring the progressive elements of the women's movement. And I, for one, am no longer willing to watch a group of self-serving reformist idiots continue to abort the demands of revolutionary thinking women. You and I are the women's movement. It's leadership and direction should come from us.

We are charged with the task of rebuilding and revitalizing the dreams of the 60's and turning it into the reality of the 80's. And it will not be easy. At the same time that we must weed reformist elements out of our movement we will have to fight tooth and nail with our brothers and sisters of the left. For in reality, we are "all products of a decadent capitalist society."

At the same time that we must understand and support the men and women of national liberation struggles – the left must give up its undying loyalty to the nuclear family. In the same way it is difficult for upper and middle class women to give up

their commitment to the nuclear family, but the nuclear family is the basic unit of capitalism and in order for us to move to revolution it has to be destroyed. And I mean destroyed. The male left has duped too many women with cries of genocide into believing it is revolutionary to be bound to babies. As to the question of abortion, I am appalled at the presumptions of men. The question is whether or not we have control of our bodies which in turn means control of our community and its growth. I believe that Black women are as intelligent as white women and we know when to have babies or not. And I want no man regardless of color to tell me when and where to bear children. As long as women are bound by the nuclear family structure we cannot effectively move toward revolution. And if women don't move, it will not happen.

We do not have an easy task before us. At this conference we will disagree; we will get angry; we will fight. This is good and should be welcomed. Here is where we should air our differences but here is also where we should build. In order to survive in this world we must make a commitment to change it; not reform it – revolutionize it. Here is where we begin to build a new women's movement, not one easily coopted and misdirected by media pigs and agents of this insidious imperialist system. Here is where we begin to build a revolutionary force of women. Judy Grahn in the "She Who" poem says, "When she who moves, the earth will turn over." You and I are the she who and if we dare to struggle, dare to win, this earth will turn over.

# No Rock Scorns Me as Whore

*Chrystos*

5:32 am – May

The water doesn't breathe No rowdy boats disturb her serenity I dream of days when she was this way each moment Days when no one went anywhere full of loud pompousness self-importance Days when dinosaurs were not being rudely dug up for their remains Days when order dignity & respect were possible Days when the proportions of things were sacred O the moon in a dawn sky is good enough

*Where are the people who cry "I am I am" as the gulls do?* They rope themselves off with labels They stand inside a box called their job, their clothes, their political & social opinions, the movies or books they read I've never believed those items which is why I was considered crazy I want to know the truth I glimpse under that malarkey called "civilization" Maybe people have become so stupid as a result of having too many machines The company we keep

It is clear to me that the use of nuclear power is dangerous – as is almost every other aspect of the dominant culture Including the manufacture of the paper on which this is written No produce from Vashon Island can be sold because the earth there is poisonous from the chemicals Tacoma's paper plant produces My life is a part of the poisoning & cars Alternate energy sources cannot fuel what "America" has become I know this way of living will not last much longer I accept it I will be glad if we destroy ourselves We have made a much bigger mess than the dinosaurs Other ways will follow Perhaps not It is none of our business I draw because I can't think what else to do until the end Maybe it will take longer than I think I'm not willing at the moment to give up the electric blanket I am under & I do not notice too many radicals giving up their stereos, hot showers, cars & blenders Energy to run those machines must come from somewhere No protest march will alter the head-on collision *Nothing short of completely altering the whole culture will stop it* I don't think that all of the people here could be supported on an alternative culture Well if they manage to make a revolution they'll kill

lots of people Most could not survive adjustment to simpler life  
& so they will unknowingly fight it even the radicals Another  
case of lecturing vegetarians in leather shoes

Although it is heresy to admit it, many Indian people could  
not survive either It takes a lot of power to manufacture a can  
of Budweiser We have become as poisoned as the eagle's  
eggshell We have fought We still fight Most of us have  
died fighting Some of us walk around dead inside a bottle I  
am ashamed I am heartbroken I still fight to survive I  
mourn I get up I live a middle class life Sometimes

We have lost touch with the sacred To survive we must  
begin to know sacredness The pace which most of us live  
prevents this I begin only now to understand faint glimpses of  
the proper relationships of time, of beings I don't dig for  
clams because that is the main food of many birds here I have  
an abundance of other food available to me Too many humans  
clam this beach already A stronger & stronger sense  
that I want to grow food ourselves Probably that is not  
possible I'm not thrilled about the idea of slaughter & I am  
not a vegetarian We'll see Gradually, I am taught how to  
behave by new teachers By leaves, by flowers, by fruits &  
rhythms of rain My mother & father were not good teachers  
They are too deeply damaged by this culture which is one of  
obliteration I don't know why I see differently than they do  
My blessing and burden

The depth that I seek here only comes when I remove the  
ears in my mind Ears discourage my honesty & because I am  
so isolated here honesty is absolutely essential to my survival  
There is no way to "be nice" to a tree or politely endure a  
thunderstorm I am stripped of pretensions as I was at nine by  
the wild gentle beauty of California before everybody came with  
stucco track houses & turquoise plastic couches I am a child  
again here A child frightened by the idea of progress, new  
housing, more strangers I begin to love these lines of dark  
trees as I loved the hills to which I belonged as a girl Those  
hills hold nothing now Mostly leveled Without deer,  
without puma, without pheasant, without blue-bellied lizards,  
without quail, without ancient oaks Lawns instead Deeply  
disgusted by lawns Stupid flat green crew cuts Nothing for  
anybody to eat

I am still in love with the mystery of shadows, wind, bird song  
The reason that I continue despite many clumsy mistakes, is love  
My love for humans, or rather my continuous attempts to love,  
have been misdirected I am not wise However there is no  
shame when one is foolish with a tree No bird ever called me  
crazy No rock scorns me as a whore The earth means  
exactly what it says The wind is without flattery or lust  
Greed is balanced by the hunger of all So I embrace anew, as  
my childhood spirit did, the whispers of a world without words

I realized one day after another nuclear protest, another  
proposed bill to make a nuclear waste disposal here, that I had  
no power with those My power rests with a greater being, a  
silence which goes on behind the uproar I decided that in a  
nuclear holocaust, for certainly they will be stupid enough to  
cause one if their history is any example, that I wanted to be  
planting corn & squash After there will be other beings of  
some kind They'll still need to eat Aren't the people who  
come to take clams like those who lobby at the airport for  
nuclear power? Who is not guilty of being a thief? Who  
among us gives back as much as we take? Who among us has  
enough respect? Does anyone know the proper proportions?  
My distant ancestors knew some things that are lost to me & I  
would not have the insidious luxury of this electric heat, this  
journal & pen without the concurrent problems of nuclear waste  
storage When we are gone, someone else will come  
Dinosaur eggs might hatch in the intense heat of nuclear  
explosions I will be sad to see the trees & birds on fire  
Surely they are innocent as none of us has been

With their songs, they know the sacred I am in a circle  
with that soft, enduring word In it is the wisdom of all peoples  
Without a deep, deep understanding of the sacredness of life, the  
fragility of each breath, we are lost The holocaust has already  
occurred What follows is only the burning brush How my  
heart aches & cries to write these words I am not as calmly  
indifferent as I sound I will be screaming no no no more  
destruction in that last blinding light





Twenty Years Later



Celia Herrera Rodriguez, *Altar a Las Tres Hermanas*,  
*Antes-de-Colón, Colonialismo, Despues-de-Colón*, 1994

Installation, 8' x 10' x 6'

Institute of American Indian Art Museum, Santa Fe, NM

Photo Courtesy of the Artist

# A Sacred Thing That Takes Us Home

## *Curatorial Statement*

*Celia Herrera Rodríguez*

*This Bridge Called My Back* has come to symbolize the coming together of women of color. It represents the vanguard of a movement that has given voice to truths spoken by many, but heard by few outside of our third world in our america, prior to *Bridge's* printing. It has allowed us, women of color, to speak to each other and to reflect on our common experience of struggle against the oppressions that threaten to overwhelm us at every juncture on this road toward home.

In the old time, before the Invasion, some of the Nations had what we now call "books." They were kept as sacred tools or bundles used to 'read' the time and the circumstance, to understand the 'what to do'. Image was word that had life and purpose in the collective body. The artist/scribe (image maker) did not work alone, neither in the making or the reading. Books were not read by individuals but by an elected collective in a ceremonial manner: the makers of symbols, the readers, the interpreters, the historians, the advisors. The book functioned as the doorway to the history of that community and provided the context for understanding those assembled facts. It was in the 'reading' – the process by which the images were identified, interpreted and discussed – that meaning and/or purpose was established. Reading was part of a sacred manner of knowing and a way of keeping record of our human journey through time. It is difficult to speak of these things, with certitude, because our 'books' have been destroyed, and our knowledge is now only an assemblage of the fragments. But what holds true is what is also most evident about *This Bridge*. Like the ancient books, its importance lies in the alchemy of the collected word (by women of color).

What had been missing in *Bridge* for me, as a visual artist, was the image, constructed in a similar spirit of resistance, opposition and outright revolt as the collection of writings. I was so excited when Cherríe Moraga and publisher, Norma Alarcón, asked me to assemble the images for *Bridge*, that I forgot (briefly) to be terrified by the daunting task of sifting through the significant

production of visual art by "radical women of color," during the period marked by *Bridge* (the late 1970's through mid- 1980's). The majority of these images cannot be found in art history books, they are absent from the classroom, library, and museum. Some images have become icons, a part of the political popular culture, such as the work of Yolanda M. López (*The Artist as the Virgen de Guadalupe*) and Ester Hernández (*Sun Mad*). These images can be found on T-shirts, flyers, posters, on banners at demonstrations; however, often they are devoid of the artist's name and any reference to the work's original context and meaning. Some of the work has been printed widely as representative of the work of women of color, while still being viewed within the mainstream eurocentric framework. So while you may find the work of Betye Saar, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, or Amalia Mesa-Bains in a mainstream exhibition or publication, very rarely do you find them together and representative of a historical period discussed as a feminist of color movement. Even more rare is a collection, exhibition, or arts publication generated by women of color that is also multigenerational, feminist, and/or cross-cultural. Although some of us read the books written by women of color in rooms covered with images produced by women of color, our words and images, have been distanced from each other conceptually and historically.

In my personal experience as visual artist, I could not have survived and continued to work without the insightful critical observations and direct vision of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, not only in *Bridge* but in their subsequent writings as well. Their images drawn in words reflected my deepest fears and forced me to stand fast in the face of my own uncertainty. In the metaphor of prayer, both Cherríe and Gloria, have called us forth together in the spirit of all those before us who have waged a war of remembering. Their words bring us back to our whole selves, to an embodied nation, demanding a full accounting of grievances, a total justice, a complete story.

In a different "language," but with equal commitment, the art works selected here have accomplished what Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of in her foreword to the second edition. They move us to "leave behind the defeated image" and "the posture as victims." The images, like the poems and essays contained in *Bridge*, have both challenged preconceived notions about

ourselves and provided new ways of seeing our purpose in this world. The artists, like the writers, consciously developed this work within and for the collective body, el pueblo. The work has not always been accepted or valued. Issues of gender, sexism, race, religion, identity, ways in which the multiple oppressions have wounded us, have not been popular subject matter.

Colonialism's legacy has been the divided house, the fragmented and stunned silence of the mind, the unwillingness of the colonized to move beyond the accepted boundaries established by the experts/colonizers. I have chosen these images for this new edition of *Bridge* precisely because at the time of their inception, they called for critical interpretation and discussion, because they broke through the silences and forced us to see back and then forward. These works opened the door to our collective history, which required collective examination, allowing us as women of color, to make connections, learn from one another, and shape our consciousness in the process.

There is a lot of work and artists missing from these pages, not because one artist was less worthy than another is, but only due to space and financial constraints. In selecting the work, I tried, with a few exceptions, to stay within the historical period that the original *Bridge* encompassed: the mid-70's through the early 80's. My younger brother and fellow feminist, Ricardo Bracho, suggested Ana Mendieta's work for the front cover. As he told me, "It was time to reclaim Ana back into the ranks of early women of color warriors." I chose *Body Tracks* (1974), bloodied hand and arm tracks descending toward the ground, as a reminder that this path is dangerous and that many have fallen. Three sisters-artists in this collection have passed on to the world of our ancestors: Ana Mendieta, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Marsha Gómez. None of their passing was by "natural causes" (our mother's hand), two of them were proven murders. (While Ana's and Theresa's work is being widely critiqued and exhibited, I cannot but cynically wonder if the circumstances of their death have influenced this interest. After all america seems to love its dead women of color, while it scorns or ignores us alive.)

Yet there is a root, and the seed contained within us, which gives us the power to return again and again, to emerge triumphant, as Mendieta's "body tracks" rise up from the ground

like stalks of corn, like the image of Audre Lorde, captured by Jean Weisinger, arms splayed above her head urging us onward. Jaune Quick-To-See Smith's drawing, *My Ghost Dance* gives testimony to this renewal. Together the buffalo and dancer remember the pulse and movement toward home. Face to face remembering, as in the Ghost Dance, they bring back, alive and whole, the ancestors who have perished through US invasion. Marsha A. Gómez's sculpture-installation, *La Madre del Mundo* (1988), uses the altar as an assemblage point of prayer and resistance. In the form of a slightly larger than life-size figure, a woman holds the earth in her lap. This is not an anonymous body, but a consciously Indigenous female body. *La Madre* sits in bold witness to, and in direct confrontation with, the US occupation and nuclear destruction of native Shoshone lands.

In a similar act of resistance, *Sun Mad* by Ester Hernández (1982) and *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* by Betye Saar (1972) reappropriate icons created by racist America and reconfigure them for us anew. *Sun Mad* is not the "Indian Maid" looking back at us in artificial pose, nor the pleasant peasant girl offering us her bounty. She is La Muerte, that intimate and bitter relative whom farm workers have come to know through pesticide poisoning in the fields of the central valley of California. Equally fierce is Betye Saar's rendering of the *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. She takes the passive, always smiling domestic worker and inserts a gun and a raised fist into the typical racist caricature, thereby giving her the weapons to resist. Saar does, however, leave the broom in the other hand, (it is not thrown down in rebeldía), while superimposing, within the interior frame, the clenched fist of the Black Liberation onto the image of the Black woman holding the white squalling baby. Saar makes it clear that Auntie must fight for her liberation while she continues to labor in the "big house," raising the children of privilege. She may have choice, but choice limited by the fact of Black womanhood in America. She appears alone, possibly the sole support of her family, responsible both for her own children, the children of others, and an extended family. Rebellion for women of color is in fact an act of generations, our grandmothers laboring so that our children and we might be free of such labor.

With a distinct approach from Saar, Fan L. Warren also meditates on the subject of African-originated peoples in

america's cultural history. In *Negro House* (1988) from the series "Middle Passage" the slaveship is turned on its end to stand upright and form the structure we know contemporarily as "projects." Warren's work depicts floor upon floor of impoverished, disenfranchised people, crammed so tightly that they have literally exploded out of the confined space. Warren works with found, charred wood, and discarded bits of domestic objects. Her art is composed from the rubble and refuse of the faceless, nameless pueblo, who have labored for countless generations to build the "big house" we know as "America." Her structures have no "windows" (you cannot see inside), nor can you find a point of entry. The work only provides the hard edge, where blurred, barely recognizable figures live in the outskirts of American Bounty, in their own third world.

The politics of location, where we reside, physically and psychically, as people of color in the US marks virtually all the work presented here in *Bridge*. In *Venus Envy* (1993), Amalia Mesa-Bains takes us MeXicanas into the interior of our psyche, questioning our construction of identity as women of colonized/mixed ancestry. She exposes the hidden self, as Coatlicue, pre-Colombian goddess of the earth, emanating from the luxurious French style vanity, surrounded by the trappings of Euro-influenced femininity (white satin and rose petals) and statues of domesticized saints. What looks back at us from the mirror, at the heart of the vanity, is the ancient horror, the decapitated mother-goddess, dark and alien, our almost unrecognizable self. How do we love that? How do we reach past what we have been educated to fear? How do we re-enter our ancient mother form?

In the formal language of paint, Betty Kano's abstract black and white painting, *Being II* (1993), accomplishes in form what Mesa-Bains achieves symbolically. Like the figure of Coatlicue, Kano inserts a dark shape within the white frame. A positive mark in a negative space, bigger than a human body (9ft x 5ft), Kano's painting lays claim to the territory the artist stands on, in a resolute statement of assertion. The form projects an insistent spirit rising. The small flecks of red paint, like blood, indicate life in the sea of whiteness and counters eurocentric perception, which renders women of color invisible.



The "we" of us has always been the void, the negative space. "We" occupy the "nepantla," that space in between, the old time and now. It is a space also occupied by the exiled, the women of Cuba, Chile, and Argentina, Korea, Vietnam – political and cultural exiles, joining the ranks of women of color in the US, surviving the absences, the distances between home and survival. Cuban painter, Nereida Garcia-Ferraz's *La Vigilia* (1988) and Chilena, Liliana Wilson Grez's *Los Desaparecidos en el Cielo* (1977) depict the homesickness and tragic losses, which became part of the political landscape in the 1970s and 80s. For the Cuban in the US, the ocean is the site of separation; for the Chilean, the mountains take on the shape of the disappeared.

In *New Country Daughter/Lebanese American* (1981) by Lebanese photographer and cultural activist, Happy/L.A. Hyder, "America," is viewed from the vantage point of the young outsider, the 'hopeful immigrant' to the "American Dream." In the self-portrait, Hyder stands in the doorway of our america, not yet colored. The shadow of "Liberty" beckons welcome, yet there is a pause, hands in pockets, as the Daughter looks back at us.

Poet, performance and visual artist, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha came to the United States as a child from worn-torn Korea, leaving all that was familiar to her. In her performance piece *Aveugle Voix* ("Speaking in Silence" or "Blind Voice," 1975), Cha responds to the same sort of stunned silence articulated by many Latin American sister-artists who, through political circumstance, were forced to immigrate to the United States. The muted mouth and the blind fold appear as bandages across the wounded sites of self-expression. Of such brutal dislocations of self, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes:

From another epic another history. From the missing narrative.  
From the multitude of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles.  
For another telling for other recitations. Our destination is fixed  
on the perpetual motion of search.<sup>1</sup>

In Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie's photograph, *Mattie Looks for Steven Biko* (1985), the indigenous girl-child subject is portrayed in that "perpetual motion of search." But here, she is literally "on the road," riding in the backseat of a car. In a traditional ribbon dress, the child travels in present time and politic, while we see

beyond her, through the window, to the figure of Steven Biko with his family. As an indigenous man of South Africa (not america), as a warrior in resistance, Steven Biko represents that rupture of the colonial mindset that separates native from native, intended to secure our political "naiveté" and distance from one another.

*Las Tres Marias*, (1976/1991) by Judith F. Baca, also reflects a break in the protocol of cultural identification. By placing herself at the center of the "bad girls" (those young "cholas" and "pachucas" – dissidents – whose most accessible form of resistance is in the style and manner of their dress), Baca makes her alliance clear. The result is an amplified view of the women we can be: women willing to take on america's and our own cultural conventions; and journey into that "vast unknown territory" (Anzaldúa) toward a de-colonized view of self and our site of origin.

The journey back to our origins (as Tsinhnahjinnie's little "Mattie" directs us from the back seat of the sedan) is achieved, in part, by removing the layers of constraint imposed upon us through false tradition. Few works approach this subject with the sense of play and freedom as Yolanda M. López's *Portrait of the Artist as La Virgen de Guadalupe* (1978). In it Yolanda herself emerges from la Virgen's halo running in tennis shoes, veil thrown over her shoulder, snake (the MeXicana mother-goddess) taken firmly in hand. Much criticism has been directed at the callous manner in which the little "angel" is tossed aside and it appears that la Virgen is actually running over him. Yolanda paints his wings and gown in red, white, and blue, an obvious reference to the US. In conversations with Yolanda López regarding the portrait, she commented that she was responding to the manner in which la Virgen has been consistently painted: extra yards of cloth bounding her legs and obstructing her path, with the "angel" holding it all together. So, in her own self-portrait, when la Virgen was ready to move, she hitched up the dress and the angel just got caught under her feet in the momentum (red, white, and blue). Yolanda López's *Portrait of the Artist as La Virgen de Guadalupe* brings into being a new version of the mother-goddess, free from cultural constraints, who has (in spite of patriarchy and colonialism) protected us for infinite generations. Through the image, López has connected us, as

women of color artists and writers, to the mother force, and has allowed us to fully embody that force.

After much thought and discussion, I chose to close the gallery of images in *Bridge* with Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie's photograph, *Mattie Rides a Bit Too Far* (1985). I couldn't help but think here of the old romantic paintings made by white male artists throughout the 19th and 20th centuries of the "Indian at the end of the trail," at the end of time. He is a tired figure, dressed in traditional clothing, slumped over his horse, sun setting into the horizon. He is America's portrait of Indigenous people as relics from the past. He is not the living "Mattie" of Tsinhnahjinnie's photographs. In *Mattie Rides a Bit Too Far*, Mattie is no longer a passenger in the back seat. She is mounted on a bicycle and has paused to contemplate the configurations of the stars. She retains her traditional dress and is in full control of her journey. Where she goes is up to her?

My work is finished here, my attempt to unite the impulse of these images to that of the written text. One does not mean the other. These images are not meant to illustrate or decorate any part of the text. They are more "words" (in pictures) to be deciphered by the readers. The images join the vision of the text in imagining and remembering our purpose in this world. They are meant to be seen collectively and discussed: their appearance and historical significance, their truth about the time in which they were created and their purpose now. If they have life in the collective conversation, in the individual imagination, it is because they find light in the viewer, who illuminates the meaning of these images, in this context, in this time.

Aquí llegamos, stones tossed onto the road, kicked and pitched still further from home, embedded in the soil, or piled one on top of the other to form a wall. What relationship we have to one another has been formed on the long road toward home. Twenty years ago, I take up a stone at the river up north in Paradise, California. It fits into my hand, and I find that it has a place where my thumb fits perfectly. It works in my hand. I take it home. Somehow it has remained with me through countless moves across this nation, from Sacramento, to Chicago and back. It lives on my altar, now that I recognize its use. My grandmother kept stones that she used for various household

tasks, from scrubbing my child dirt-encrusted knees to pounding nuts and dried meat in the kitchen.

Stones and paper, paper (fibers soaked and pounded on rock with rock, fibers separated by stone and merged together in stone vats, paper colored in pigments made of ground rock). The meaning is not big, not 'deep,' just kind of normal. I feel it in my self, like lying down on sun-warmed rock at water's edge. What matters to me is the way in which we keep coming back, like stones, like paper, we keep coming back like water. The task, as artists, is to recognize the sacred as familiar, as fitting into the hand. A sacred thing that takes one home.

### Notes

1. Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Dictée*. (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1995), 81.

## **Bibliography, 2001 – 20 Years Later: Selected Writings by Women of Color (1981-2001)**

Compiled by Mattie Udora Richardson with the assistance of Yolanda Venegas, Karina Cespedes, and Letizia Rossi.<sup>1</sup>

The following bibliography includes selected works published by women of color since the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* from 1981 to 2001.<sup>2</sup> It is organized in six sections: Anthologies, Non-Fiction and Autobiographical Writing, Fiction, Poetry and Theater, Chapters in Books, Journal Articles, and Independent Film and Video. Given the explosion of works by and about women of color globally since the publication of *This Bridge*, this bibliography is not meant to be a comprehensive compilation of all creative and scholarly work published by women of color over the last 20 years. Also, some writers have published many books, however, we do not list their complete works. In keeping with the original spirit of *Bridge*, these bibliographic references are based in the context of US women of color feminist scholarship and drawn from sources across disciplines, although primarily within the social sciences and humanities.

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## Notes

1. Part of this bibliography was taken from a Latina lesbian bibliography by Tatiana de la Tierra, "Latina Lesbian Literary Herstory: From Sor Juana to Days of Awe." In *The Power of Language: Selected Papers from the 2nd REFORMA National Conference*. Lillian Castillo-Speed, ed. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, (2002): 199-212.
  2. With the exception of a few major texts published before 1981 not included in the original bibliography.
- \* Works published by these authors prior to 1981 are listed in the original bibliography.

## Biographies of Contributors

### *Writers*

**Norma Alarcón** is Professor of Ethnic Studies and Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the founder of Third Woman Press (1979-present). She has published a book on the Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos and a book on Chicana/o writers and culture, entitled *The Inscription of Chicanas* (forthcoming Duke University Press). She has co-edited a book entitled *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms and the State* (Duke University Press, 1999).

**Gloria E. Anzaldúa** is a Chicana Tejana (Texan), patlache (Nahuátl word for dyke) feminist writer. Her most recent book is *Entrevistas/Interviews with Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) was selected as one of the 100 best books of the century both by the *Hungry Mind Review* and *Utne Reader*. She is also the author of two bilingual children's picture books: *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado* and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y la Llorona*. She edited *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, winner of the Lambda Lesbian Small Book Press Award. She received a NEA Fiction Award, the Lesbian Rights Award in 1991 and the Sappho Award of Distinction in 1992. She was profiled in *Ms Magazine* and presented in *Utne Reader* as one of its 1996 visionaries.

**Toni Cade Bambara** (1939 - 1995) was born in New York City where she was educated as well as in Italy and Paris. Early in her career she worked as an investigator for the New York State Department of Social Welfare but later devoted herself for many years to teaching and writing. An African American writer who emerged in the 1960s, Bambara was a consistent civil rights activist. Much of her writing focuses on African American women. She authored several collections of short stories and also edited a groundbreaking collection of African American women's writing, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970). She also authored *Gorilla, My Love* (1972); *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*



(1977); *The Salt Eaters* (1981); and *These Bones are Not My Child* (1999).

**Barbara M. Cameron**

**Andrea R. Canaan** is a Black woman, mother and daughter, born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1950. Director of Women and Employment which develops and places women on non-traditional jobs. Therapist and counselor to battered women, rape victims, and families in stress. She is a speaker, reader, and community organizer.

**Jo Carrillo** is a Professor of Law at the University of California, Hastings, College of the Law, where she teaches topics related to indigenous rights, and property.

**Karina L. Cespedes** was born in Havana, Cuba and moved to the United States while still a child. She is executive publisher at Third Woman Press and is completing her dissertation in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Chrystos** was born in 1946 to a Menominee father and a Lithuanian/Alsace-Lorraine mother. She is a poet and an activist heavily involved in supporting Native Rights and prisoners' causes. She is a self-educated writer and artist. Her work forthrightly speaks of her experiences and concerns as Native American lesbian. Her work is both political and erotic. Her poetry collections include *Not Vanishing*, *Dream On*, *In Her I Am*, *Fugitive Colors*, and *Fire Power*. Among her many awards and honors Chrystos received a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1990, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship in 1991, and the Sappho Award from Aestrea Foundation in 1995.

**Cheryl Clarke**, an African-American lesbian feminist poet, is the Director of the Office of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian-Gay Concerns at Rutgers University. She has published four books of poetry: *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women*, *Living as a Lesbian*, *Humid Pitch*, and *experimental love* (a Lambda Literary Award finalist).

**Gabrielle Daniels** has written reviews and essays for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Women's Review of Books*, and *American Book Review*. She has taught black women's literature at Stanford University and writing at the University of California, Irvine. Her stories have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, and *Sisterfire*

edited by Charlotte Watson Sherman. She has published a novel, *Sugar Wars*. She was writer-in-residence at numerous places and currently resides in San Francisco, California.

**doris davenport** is a poet. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Southern California and has published essays in many black and/or feminist publications. She is the author of a poetry collection, *Voodoo Chile/Slight Return*, 1991.

**hattie gossett** is a writer, performance poet, and educator. From her rent-controlled perch at the New York City intersection where the Republic of Harlem coincides with the Dominican Republic, under the influence of jazz, merengue, and the hilariously obscene ironies of post-Cold War Daily life, gossett creates poetry, essays, performance pieces, plays, and lyrics for the printed page, theatre, dance and film. She is the author of the prose-poetry collection *Presenting Sister No Blues*. Currently she is a contributing writer to *Essence* magazine.

**mary hope whitehead lee** currently lives, works, and attends school in Portland, Oregon. Most recently, her work has been published in *Feminist Studies*, *Hedgebrook Journal*, *Sonoma Country Women's Voices*, *convolvulus*, *Chick-Lit*, and in the web-based journal *Switched-on-Gutenberg*. Her poems about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo were awarded a Grand Prize and two First Prizes at the 5th Annual Dancing Poetry Festival.

**Aurora Levins Morales** is a writer, historian and activist. Her most recent books are *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas*, a prose poetry history of Caribbean women and our kin, and *Medicine Stories*, a collection of essays on culture, history and activism. With her mother Rosario Morales she co-wrote *Getting Home Alive*. Her anti-war poem "Shema" has been widely circulated since September 11. She is project historian for the Oakland Museum of California's Latina@History Project, which trains youth to collect oral histories and photographs. She directs Remedios Center for People's History and is the co-director of the California Puerto Rican Historical Society. She is currently working on a historical murder mystery, set in late 19th-century Puerto Rico.

**Genny Lim** lives in San Francisco with her two daughters, Colette and Danielle. She is the author of the play, *Paper Angels*, a bilingual children's book, *Wings of Lai Ho*, and co-author of *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*. Her

work has also been published in the following anthologies: *Unbroken Thread: Anthology of Plays by Asian American Women*, *The Politics of Experience: Four Plays by Asian American Women*. She has received numerous awards, including Bay Guardian Goldie, Creative Work Fund and Rockefeller Foundation as well as the James Wong Howe Award for *Paper Angels* (Premiered July 2000 at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Playhouse). She teaches at New College of California and Naropa Institute at Oakland.

**Naomi Littlebear Morena** has published *Survivors: A Lesbian Rock Opera* and in *Lesbians Only: A Separatist Anthology*. (This is the bit of information we found on Naomi, if someone can help us locate her we would appreciate it very much.)

**Audre Lorde** (1934-1992), leader among women of color, was a well-known essayist and poet who described herself as black, lesbian, feminist, poet, mother, and warrior. Through her writing and activism, she fought for African-American and Lesbian/Women's rights. Her work is lyrical and socially aware, infused with lesbian consciousness. Her writing on the topic of poetry challenges that it should not be a sterile word play, but a "revelatory distillation of experience." She produced ten volumes of poetry, five books of prose. Among them are *The Black Unicorn*, *The Cancer Journals*, *The Collected poems of Audre Lorde*, *Our Dead Behind Us*, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. She was the New York State Poet Laureate from 1991-1993 and co-founder of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Audre Lorde died after battling cancer for 14 years.

**Cherríe L. Moraga** is the author of the now classic, *Loving in the War Years*, which was reissued in a revised expanded edition in 2000. She has produced numerous plays including *Shadow of a Man*, and *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here* (both won the Fund for New American Plays Award in 1991 and 1995, respectively) and *Heroes and Saints* which earned the Pen West Award for Drama in 1992. Her two most recent books include a collection of poems and essays entitled *The Last Generation*, and a memoir, *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*. In 2001, she published a new volume of plays entitled, *The Hungry Woman*.

**Rosario Morales** is a New York Puerto Rican living in Massachusetts. She is a feminist independentist and communist since 1949. Twenty years ago she broke a lifetime silence with

her work in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. With her daughter Aurora Levins Morales she co-authored *Getting Home Alive*.

**Judit Moschkovich** has not yet been located; perhaps she or her friends can contact us. See Appendix for biography as listed 20 years ago.

**Barbara Noda** has not yet been located; perhaps she or her friends can contact us. See Appendix for biography as listed 20 years ago.

**Pat Parker** (1944-1989) was born in Houston, Texas. She moved to Oakland, California in the early 70s to pursue work, writing, and activism. Working from 1978 to 1987 as medical coordinator at the Oakland Feminist Women's Health Center, which grew from one clinic to six during her tenure. Parker also participated in political activism ranging from early involvement with the Black Panther Party and Black Women's Revolutionary Council to formation of the Women's Press Collective. She was engaged in gay and lesbian organizations and held positions of national leadership regarding women's health issues, and domestic and sexual violence. She published several poetry collections including *Child of Myself*, *Pit Stop*, *Womanslaughter*, *Movement in Black*, *Jonestown and Other Madness*. Her work is included in many anthologies.

**Mirtha Quintanales** is a cultural anthropologist and former coordinator of the Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies Program at New Jersey City University, Jersey City, where she has been a member of the faculty since 1988. She lives in New York City.

**Mattie Udora Richardson** is a writer and activist. In addition to various journals and magazines, her fiction and essays have been anthologized in *Sisterfire: Black Womanist Fiction and Poetry*, *Every Woman I've Ever Loved: Lesbian Writers on their Mothers*, *Does Your Mama Know: Black Lesbian Coming Out Stories*, *This is What Lesbian Looks Like: Dyke Activists Take on the 21st Century*. She is the former Associate Publisher of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*. Mattie is currently a Ph.D. candidate in African Diaspora Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Kate Rushin** is an award-winning poet, author of *Black Back-Ups*. Her poems capture the faces, voices and stories of African American women, family and history. Within this Black context,

Rushin speaks about lesbian life. Her dramatic readings bring a unique perspective to the primary difficulties, possibilities and necessities of communicating among people across differences.

**Barbara Smith** has edited three major collections about Black women: *Conditions: Five*, *The Black Women's Issue* (with Lorraine Bethel), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. She is also the co-author with Elly Bulkin and Minnie Bruce Pratt of *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*. Her recent books are *The Reader's Companion to U.S. Women's History*, co-edited with Wilma Mankiller, Gwendolyn Mink, Marysa Navarro, and Gloria Steinem, and a collection of her own essays, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. She co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and served as publisher until 1995. She lives in Albany, New York.

### **Beverly Smith**

**Ms. Luisa Teish** is a writer, performer and ritual arts consultant. She is the author of *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*, *Carnival of the Spirit: Seasonal Celebrations and Rites of Passage*, and *Jump Up: Good Times Throughout the Season with Celebrations Around the World*. She performs African, Caribbean and African American folklore and feminist myths. She designs and conducts workshops, rituals and tours in Europe, Egypt, South America and New Zealand. She is a member of the National Writer's Union, the International Women's Writing Guild, and serves as vice president of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology. She is a woman chief in the Ifa/Orisha tradition of Southwest Nigeria and the founder of the School of Ancient Mysteries and Sacred Arts Center.

**Yolanda Venegas** is associate publisher at Third Woman Press and a cultural critic completing her dissertation in the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work on this republication of *Bridge* is a tribute to the first generation of women of color feminists who inspire and continue to illuminate her path.

**Max Wolf Valerio** is a transman, and an American Indian (Blackfoot)/Latino poet, performer, and writer. He has appeared in a number of documentaries, including *You Don't Know Dick*,

*Female Misbehavior and Gendernauts*. His writing has recently been published in *Male Lust: Pleasure, Power and Transformation*. His books, *The Joker is Wild!*, *Changing Sex and Other Crimes of Passion*, and *The Testosterone Files*, will be out as soon as he finds a new publisher who will allow him to be as dangerous as is necessary.

**Nellie Wong** is a poet and human rights activist. She was born and raised in Oakland, California's Chinatown during the 1940s. Since she began writing in the 1970s, she has spoken out against the oppression of all people, in particular workers, women, minorities, and immigrants. She is the author of three poetry volumes, most recently, *Stolen Moments*. She is co-editor of the anthology of political essays, *Voices of Color*. The recipient of a Woman of Words Award from the Women's Foundation of San Francisco, Nellie has taught creative writing at several colleges in the Bay Area.

### **Merle Woo**

**Mitsuye Yamada** is founder and coordinator of Multicultural Women Writers. Shaped by her wartime concentration camp experiences during World War II, her activities as writer, educator and political activist are interrelated with each other by human rights, peace and gender issues. She is author of *Camp Notes and Other Writings*, a combined edition of her first two books of poems and short stories (Rutgers University Press, 1998). She was formerly board member of Amnesty International USA and serves on the Committee of International Development, which promotes and funds development of human rights work in Third World countries. She is a board member of Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience, an organization that works to support and free political prisoners in the US. She is Adjunct Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at UC Irvine.

## *Artists*

**Judith Francisca Baca** teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is founder and Artistic Director of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). She is the Artistic Director/Initiator of *Neighborhood Pride: Great Walls Unlimited Mural Project*. As director and muralist for the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, she included over 400 youth, 100 scholars, and 100 artistic assistants in a half-mile long mural on the ethnic histories of the United States. Her ongoing works include the Durango Mural Project: *La Memoria De Nuestra Tierra*, and the *World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear*.

**Theresa Hak Kyung Cha** (1951-1982) was born in Pusan, South Korea. Her family emigrated to the US in 1962 and settled in Hawaii. In 1964, they moved to San Francisco, and the Bay Area became Theresa's home. Theresa Cha studied film, French film theory, and performance and conceptual art during her ten-year studies at the University of California at Berkeley. She made her first return trip to Korea in 1979, and returned there again in 1981 to begin shooting the unfinished film, *White Dust From Magnolia*. In 1980, she moved to New York City where she worked as an editor and writer for Tanam Press. She produced *Dictée* and *Apparatus*. On November 5, 1982, Cha was murdered in New York City.

**Nereida García-Ferraz** is a painter, photographer, and video artist. She was born in Havana, Cuba in 1954. After many years in the San Francisco Bay Area she now lives in Miami. Nereida served as the Director of the Photography Program at MACLA-San José Center for Latino Art. She was a member of the Chicago Cultural Affairs Advisory Board for six years and was also a founding member of the Chicago Caribbean Art Association and a panelist for NEA in Boston, Chicago, and New York. Nereida is currently preparing a book about images of her many returns to Cuba during the 1980s.

**Marsha A. Gómez** (Choctaw/Mestiza; 1951-1998) was a nationally renowned sculptor who also worked as a community organizer, human and earth rights advocate, and cultural arts educator for over twenty years. She was a founding mother and board member of the Indigenous Women's Network, and the Executive Director of Alma de Mujer Center for Social Change in Austin, Texas. In 1997, Gómez received the esteemed

National Bannerman Fellowship for work as a cultural activist. The life-sized *La Madre del Mundo* represented in this volume was first installed on Western Shoshone Land, across from the Nevada Missile Test Site, as a protest of the desacralization of Sacred Mother Earth. Marsha will be remembered always for the impassioned indigenism expressed in her art and her activism.

**Ester Hernández** is a San Francisco artist and graduate of UC Berkeley. She is best known for her pastels and prints which reflect political, social, ecological and spiritual themes. She has had numerous solo and group shows throughout the US and internationally. Her work is included, among others, in the permanent collections of the National Museum of American Art-Smithsonian, Library of Congress, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Frida Kahlo Studio Museum, Mexico. For the past thirteen years she has been teaching at Creativity Explored of San Francisco, a visual art center for developmentally disabled adults.

**Celia Herrera Rodríguez** (MeXicana/Tepehuan) is a painter, performer, storyteller and installation artist whose work reflects a full generation of dialogue with Chicano, Native American, Pre-Columbian, and Mexican thought. Herrera Rodríguez received her MFA in painting from the University of Illinois. She currently teaches Chicano Art History, Theory and Criticism in the Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley. Her paintings, drawings and installation work have been shown at various museums and galleries across the US.

**Happy/L.A. Hyder** fine artist/photographer, assemblage artist, performer, and writer, is founder and Executive Director of LVA: Lesbians in the Visual Arts, a San Francisco-based international advocacy and networking organization. Wielding her camera as a painter would her brush, Happy's goal is for her viewers to see with a different eye. *New Country Daughter/Lebanese American* was an exploration of seeing herself as a woman of color. Finding that identity gave her a great sense of freedom.

**Betty Nobue Kano** is a visual artist, art curator, and art instructor. She has widely exhibited her work across the US as well as in Japan and Mexico over the past twenty years. Kano is currently the program director of ProArts, an artist-based non-profit organization located in Oakland, California that is



dedicated to presenting the visual arts of the entire East Bay in a challenging and nurturing way.

**Yolanda M. López** emerged from the Chicano Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s. Yolanda López in the decade of the 1970s reconsidered the images of women in popular Chicano culture. As a Chicana artist, feminist, and critical thinker, her work often tinged with mild satire, proposes a critique of our visual environment. She sees Chicano culture as fluid and negotiable. "Chicano culture will be brought with us on our way to social, political, and economic justice; it is one of the gifts we bear as we travel this very focused path. And, it is our job to shape it as we go."

**Ana Mendieta** (1948-1985) was born in Cuba. She came to the US in the early 1960s. She was a feminist minimalist and performance artist who used her body, earth, water, fire, sand and blood in her art. Elements of Santería were also transformed and integrated into her art. Ana Mendieta stated in the documentary *Fuego de Tierra*, "I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature)." She died in 1985 after a tragic and suspicious fall from her husband's 34th-floor apartment window.

**Amalia Mesa-Bains** states "development of my work has been rooted in the practice and consciousness of my community. Through the traditions of the home altar and the celebrations of the Day of the Dead I have created a hybrid form of ephemeral installation. Both of these traditions of popular culture represent aspects of a redemptive and resilient struggle to maintain family history and cultural continuity in the face of colonial domination. My work has been inspired by these popular practices and directed by the Chicano Movement in a persistent process of critical intervention. In my own work a feminine Rasquachismo or Domesticana, as I call it, is a driving force in creating a critical space that is simultaneously contestatory and passionately affirming of our histories as women and our situation of struggle."

**Jaune Quick-To-See Smith.** A painter of Salish, French, Cree, and Shoshone heritage, Smith was born in St. Ignatius, Montana, and raised on the Flathead Reservation. Deeply connected to her heritage, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's work addresses the myths of ancestors in the context of current issues and problems

facing Native Americans. She works in paint, collage, and mixed media, using a combination of representational and abstract images to confront such subjects as the destruction of the environment, governmental oppression of Native American cultures, and the pervasive myths of American cultural identity.

**Betye Saar** was born in Pasadena, California in 1926. Her diverse background includes African-American, Irish, Native American, Creole, German and Scottish heritage. She calls her works assemblages: three-dimensional, freestanding wall hangings made from natural or constructed objects. Saar reclaims African-American history by restoring derogatory or stigmatized images and enshrining them. Her goal is to show cultural differences and universal similarities. Her interests in art and the context of her work draw from personal experiences, historical events, and politics.

**Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie** was born into the Bear and Raccoon clans; her mother is Minnie McGirt of the Seminole and Muskogee Nations. Her father Andrew V. Tsinhnahjinnie is of the Diné Nation. Tsinhnahjinnie's formative years were influenced by some of the finest Native artists: her father Andrew Tsinhnahjinnie, Fred Beaver, and Pablita Velarde. A strong indigenous artistic base, fused with her mother's commitment to community, created the catalyst for an artist of political conviction. Exhibited nationally and internationally, Tsinhnahjinnie claims photography as her primary language. Creating fluent images of Native thought, Tsinhnahjinnie's emphasis is art for indigenous communities.

**Fan Lee Warren** has been exhibiting nationally and internationally for seventeen years. She received her MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA from Illinois State University. Her work makes social commentary about colonization, living in the African Diaspora, assimilation and disenfranchisement in the Americas. Warren states: "I began making large-scale sculptures in 1986 that challenged viewers. *The Negro House* (in this volume) is part of this series. *The Negro House* was built from materials salvaged from a burnt house (that was in my neighborhood) and an old sign from a neighborhood grocery/liquor store. The piece is topped with found objects from the community that I tarred and feathered." Currently she teaches art history at Laney College in Oakland, CA.

**Jean Weisinger** is a self-taught African American photographer based in Oakland, CA. She has traveled to Africa, Cuba, India, Mexico, Jamaica, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and throughout the United States. She has exhibited in one person and selected group exhibitions in the United States, Cuba, Africa and India. Her photographs have been published in numerous films, books, and a wide range of publications as well as posters, post cards, and calendars.

**Liliana Wilson Grez** was born in Valparaíso, Chile. She studied at the Instituto de Bellas Artes de Viña del Mar and also obtained a degree in law at the Catholic University of Valparaíso. In 1977 she traveled to the United States and settled in Austin, Texas. The drawing that appears in this volume, *Los Desaparecidos en el Cielo* or *The Disappeared in Heaven*, represents the bodies of two men who washed ashore in 1975 after they were tortured and thrown overboard from a ship called *Lebu*. The military used *Lebu* as a place to torture men and women after the overthrow of Salvador Allende's government. The two men drowned but their appearance on a beach became proof of the atrocities of the military.



Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, *Mattie Rides A Bit Too Far*, 1985  
Photocollage, 22" x 24"  
Collection of the Artist



# Appendix

# Refugees Of A World On Fire

*Foreword to the Second Edition, 1983*

Three years later, I try to imagine the newcomer to *Bridge*. What do you need to know? I have heard from people through letters and travel that the book has helped change some minds (and hopefully hearts as well), but it has changed no one more than the women who contributed to its existence. It has changed my life so fundamentally that today I feel almost the worst person to introduce you to *Bridge*, to see it through fresh eyes. Rather your introduction or even reintroduction should come from the voices of the women of color who first discovered the book:

The women writers seemed to be speaking to me, and they actually understood what I was going through. Many of you put into words feelings I have had that I had no way of expressing...The writings justified some of my thoughts telling me I had a right to feel as I did. It is remarkable to me that one book could have such an impact. So many feelings were brought alive inside me.<sup>1</sup>

For the new reader, as well as for the people who may be looking at *Bridge* for the second or third time, I feel the need to speak to what I think of the book some three years later. Today I leaf through the pages of *Bridge* and imagine all the things so many of us would say differently or better – watching my own life and the lives of these writers/activists grow in commitment to whatever it is we term “our work.” We are getting older, as is our movement.

I think that were *Bridge* to have been conceived of in 1983, as opposed to 1979, it would speak much more directly now to the relations between women and men of color, both gay and heterosexual. In response to a proliferation of writings by women of color up until 1980 which in the name of feminism focused almost exclusively on heterosexual relations - either by apologizing for or condemning the sexism of Third World men - *Bridge* intended to make a clean break from that phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we created a book which concentrated on relationships between women.

Once this right has been established, however, once a movement has provided some basic consciousness so that heterosexism and sexism are not considered the normal course

of events, we are in a much stronger position to analyze our relations with the men of our families and communities from a position of power rather than compromise. A *Bridge* of 1983 could do this. (I am particularly encouraged by the organizing potential between Third World lesbians and gay men in our communities of color.)

The second major difference a 1983 version of *Bridge* would provide is that it would be much more international in perspective. Although the heart of *Bridge* remains the same, the impetus to forge links with women of color from every region grows more and more urgent as the number of recently-immigrated people of color in the US grows in enormous proportions, as we begin to see ourselves all as refugees of a world on fire:

The US is training troops in Honduras to overthrow the Nicaraguan people's government.

Human rights violations are occurring on a massive scale in Guatemala and El Salvador (and as in this country those most hard-hit are often the indigenous peoples of those lands).

Pinochet escalates political repression in Chile.

The US invades Grenada.

Apartheid continues to bleed South Africa.

Thousands of unarmed people are slaughtered in Beirut by Christian militiamen and Israeli soldiers.

Aquino is assassinated by the Philippine government.

And in the US? The Reagan administration daily drains us of nearly every political gain made by the feminist, Third World, and anti-war work of the late 60's and early 70's.

The question and challenge for Third World feminism remains: what are the particular conditions of oppression suffered by women of color in each of these situations? How have the special circumstances of her pain been overlooked by Third World movements, solidarity groups, "international feminists?" How have the children suffered? How do we organize ourselves to survive this war? To keep our families, our bodies, our spirits intact?

Sometimes in the face of my own/our own limitations, in the face of such world-wide suffering, I doubt even the significance of books. Surely this is the same predicament so many people



who have tried to use words as weapons have found themselves in – *¿Cara a cara con el enemigo de qué valen mis palabras?*<sup>3</sup> This is especially true for Third World women writers, who know full well our writings seldom *directly* reach the people we grew up with. Sometimes knowing this makes you feel like you're dumping your words into a very deep and very dark hole. But we continue to write. To the literate of our people and the people they touch. We even write to those classes of people for whom books have been as common to their lives as bread. For finally, we write to anyone who will listen with their ears open (even if only a crack) to the currents of change around them.

The political writer, then, is the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives. A privatism which keeps us back and away from each other, which renders us politically useless.

I must confess that at the time of this writing, however, I am feeling more defeated than optimistic. The dream of a unified Third World feminist movement in this country, as we conceived of it when we first embarked on the project of this book, seemed more possible somehow, because as yet, less tried. It was still waiting in the ranks begging to take form and hold. In the last three years I have learned that Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of color are running to in droves. The *idea* of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women. Today the dream feels more remote, but this is precisely when the real work begins.

Recently, I have seen Third World women activists tear ourselves apart over the fact that we live in the nation of the greatest imperialism and as educated people we *are* relatively privileged here (regardless of the oppression we suffer and the *very* minimal status next to the population at large). Certainly among women of color we are some of the most privileged on the globe. (As a light-skinned woman, I must say this unreservedly.) The painful recognition of this fact is, I believe, the source of much confusion and strife among us as feminists and activists.

I worry about a tendency in the movement where Third World feminism becomes confused with Marxist-line party

politics with a “focus on women.” I worry when the most essential element of feminism, “the personal is political,” begins to fade fast from our dealings with each other. Because when that happens, and history has proven this, the first to go is the right to our sexuality and with that goes lesbian rights.

Because one would not go into a Salvadoreño refugee camp espousing her lesbianism, does this mean that homophobia is not a problem in the Left, among heterosexual feminists, among Third World men, on the street? Does this mean that homophobia is not a deterrent to successful coalition-building in the US? Because families are being torn apart by apartheid in South Africa, does this mean that a Black woman should not bring up over the dinner table or in the political meeting that she has felt humiliated or mistreated by her husband, lover, or comrade? If we are interested in building a movement that will not constantly be subverted from the inside at every turn, then we build from the inside out, not the other way around. Coming to terms with the suffering of others has never meant looking away from our own.

And yet, it is true that our oppression is *not* the be-all and end-all. I worry about the tendency in the movement where women of color activists seem to be enamored with our own oppression. Where class and the actual material conditions of our lives are not taken into account even in examining the very politics we do. Who are we reaching? I worry about the tendency of racial/cultural separatism amongst us where we dig in our heels against working with groups outside our own particular race/ethnicity. This is what we have accused white people of, basically sticking to their own kind – only working politically where they feel “safe” and “at home.” But the making of a political movement has never been about safety or feeling “at home.” (Not in the long run, anyway.) Cultural identity – our right to it – is a legitimate and basic concern for all women of color. As Judit Moschkovich writes, “Without it I would be an empty shell . . .” But to stop there only results in the most limiting of identity politics: “If I suffer it, it’s real. I don’t feel it, it doesn’t exist.” If politics is about feeling – which feminism has rightfully politicized – then we need to expand our capacity to feel clear through and out of our own experience as well.

If my major concerns (or worries) seem in opposition to each other, they remain so only from the most superficial perspectives. What threatens our movement in each of these situations is our refusal to acknowledge that to change the world, we have to change ourselves – even sometimes our most cherished, block-hard convictions. I must confess I hate the thought of this. Change don't come easy. For anyone. But this state of war we live in, this world on fire, provides us with no other choice.

If the image of the bridge can still bind us together, I think it does so most powerfully in the words of Kate Rushin, when she states:

“stretch...or die.”

Cherrie L. Moraga

### Notes

1. Alma Ayala, a nineteen year old Puerto Rican, from a letter to Gloria Anzaldúa.
2. *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue* edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith in (1979) was a major exception.
3. Face to face with the enemy, what good are my words?

## Foreword to the Second Edition, 1983

¿Qué hacer de aquí y cómo?  
(*What to do from here and how?*)

Perhaps like me you are tired of suffering and talking about suffering, estás hasta el pescuezo de sufrimiento, de contar las lluvias de sangre pero no has lluvias de flores (*up to your neck with suffering, of counting the rains of blood but not the rains of flowers*). Like me you may be tired of making a tragedy of our lives. A abandonar ese autocannibalismo: coraje, tristeza, miedo (*let's abandon this autocannibalism: rage, sadness, fear*). Basta de gritar contra el viento – toda palabra es ruido si no está acompañada de acción (*enough of shouting against the wind – all words are noise if not accompanied with action*). Dejemos de hablar hasta que hagamos la palabra luminosa y activa (*let's work not talk, let's say nothing until we've made the world luminous and active*). Basta de pasividad y de pasatiempo mientras esperamos al novio, a la novia, a la Diosa, o a la Revolución (*enough of passivity and passing time while waiting for the boy friend, the girl friend, the Goddess, or the Revolution*). No nos podemos quedar paradas con los brazos cruzados en medio del puente (*we can't afford to stop in the middle of the bridge with arms crossed*).

And yet to act is not enough. Many of us are learning to sit perfectly still, to sense the presence of the Soul and commune with Her. We are beginning to realize that we are not wholly at the mercy of circumstance, nor are our lives completely out of our hands. That if we posture as victims we *will* be victims, that hopelessness is suicide, that self-attacks stops us in our tracks. We are slowly moving past the resistance within, leaving behind the defeated images. We have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles nor separate nor autonomous but that we – white black straight queer female male – are connected and interdependent. We are each accountable for what is happening down the street, south of the border or across the sea. And those of us who have more of anything: brains, physical strength, political power, spiritual energies, are learning to share them with those that don't have. We are learning to depend more and more on our own sources for survival, learning not to let the

weight of this burden, the bridge, break our backs. Haven't we always borne jugs of water, children, poverty? Why not learn to bear baskets of hope, love, self-nourishment and to step lightly? With *This Bridge*... hemos comenzado a salir de las sombras; hemos comenzado a reventar rutina y costumbres opresivas y a aventar los tabues; hemos comenzado a acarrear con orgullo la tarea de deshelar corazones y cambiar conciencias (*we have begun to come out of the shadows; we have begun to break with routines and oppressive customs and to discard taboos; we have commenced to carry with pride the task of thawing hearts and changing consciousness*). Mujeres, a no dejar que el peligro del viaje y la inmensidad del territorio nos asuste – a mirar hacia adelante y a abrir paso en el monte (*Women, let's not let the danger of the journey and the vastness of the territory scare us – let's look forward and open paths in these woods*). Caminante, no hay puentes, se hacen puentes al andar (*Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks*).

Contigo,  
Gloria E. Anzaldúa

# **Third World Women in the United States – By and About Us A Selected Bibliography<sup>1</sup>**

*By Cherrie L. Moraga*

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*Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. Box 766 Canal St. Station, New York, NY 10013.  
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Casa Editorial, San Francisco/Berkeley, CA

Diana Press, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608

Diseños Literarios, Menlo Park, CA

El Fuego de Aztlán, 3408 Dwinelle Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720

Editorial Pocho-Che, P.O. Box 1959, San Francisco, CA 94101

February 3rd Press, 306 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11238

The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568

Greenfield Review Press, P.O. Box 80, Greenfield Center, NY 12833

Isthmus, San Francisco, CA

Kelsey St., 2824 Kelsey St., Berkeley, CA 94705

Lighthouse, San Francisco, CA

Liwanag Publications, San Francisco, CA

Momo's Press, Box 14061, San Francisco, CA 94114

Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302

New Star Books, 2504 York Ave., Vancouver, BC VGH 1E3 Canada

Out and Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, NY 11215

Persephone Press, Inc., P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172

Puerto Del Sol, Las Cruces, NM

Red Earth Press, P.O. Box 26641, Albuquerque, NM 87125

Reed and Cannon, 2140 Shattuck #311, Berkeley, CA 94704

Scarecrow Press, P.O. Box 656, Metuchen, NJ 08840

Scorpion Press, Tucson, AZ

Shameless Hussy, P.O. Box 424, San Lorenzo, CA 94580

Spinsters INK, RD 1, Argyle, NY 12809

Strawberry Press, P.O. Box 451, Bowling Green Station, NY 10004

Sunbury Press, Box 274, Jerome Ave. Station, Bronx, NY 10468

Third World Communications, San Francisco, CA

Thorp Springs Press, 3414 Robinson Ave., Austin, TX 78722

Tonatiuh International, 2150 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704

Western Lore Press, Los Angeles, CA

New Star Books, 2504 York Ave., Vancouver, BC VGH 1E3 Canada

### Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge the following people for sharing their own bibliographies with me toward the completion of this one: Nellie Wong, Mitsuye Yamada, Merle Woo, Barbara Smith, Mirtha Quintanales, Gloria Anzálúa, and Doreen Drury.
2. For an extensive bibliography of Asian/Pacific Women Writers, write Nellie Wong c/o Radical Women, 2661 21st St., San Francisco, CA 94110. \$1.75 for xeroxing, postage, and handling.
3. Most of the works cited in this section appear in English, in whole or part. For an extensive bibliography on Women Writers in "Spanish America" or "Hispanic Women Writers of the Caribbean," write to: D. Marting, Spanish Program, Livingston College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903.

## **Biographies of the Original Contributors, 1981**

**Norma Alarcón** was born in Monclova, Coahuila, Mexico and raised in Chicago. Will receive Ph.D. in Hispanic Literatures in 1981 from Indiana University where she is presently employed as Visiting Lecturer in Chicano-Riqueño Studies.

**Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa.** I'm a Tejana Chicana poet, hija de Amalia, Hecate y Yemaya. I am a Libra (Virgo cusp) with VI - The Lovers destiny. One day I will walk through walls, grow wings and fly, but for now I want to play Hermit and write my novel, Andrea. In my spare time I teach, read the Tarot, and doodle in my journal.

**Barbara M. Cameron.** Lakota patriot, Humkpapa, politically non-promiscuous, born with a caul. Will not forget Buffalo Manhattan Hat and Mani. Love Matri, Maxine, Leonie and my family. Still beading a belt for Pat. In love with Robin. Will someday raise chickens in New Mexico.

**Andrea R. Canaan** was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1950. Black woman, mother and daughter. Director of Women and Employment which develops and places women in non-traditional jobs. Therapist and counselor to battered women, rape victims, and families in stress. Poetry is major writing expression. Speaker, reader, and community organizer. Black feminist writer.

**Jo Carrillo.** Died and born 6000 feet above the sea in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Have never left; will never leave. But for now, I'm living in San Francisco. I'm loving and believing in the land, my extended family (which includes Angie, Mame and B.B. Yawn) and my sisters. Would never consider owning a souvenir chunk of uranium. Plan to raise sheep, learn to weave rugs and blankets, and write in New Mexico.

**Chrystos.** Last year I moved to Bainbridge Island. I am living in a house overlooking the water. I have chickens and a big vegetable garden. Prior, I lived in the San Francisco Bay area, with the last four years in the Mission barrio. I will be 34 this November (double Scorpio, Moon in Aries). I've been writing since I was 9 and this is the first time I've been paid.

**Cheryl Clarke.** A lesbian-feminist writer who lives in Highland Park, N.J. She has published poetry in *Lady Unique Inclination of the Night*, Second Cycle (1977), a feminist journal of the goddess. She has published reviews in *Conditions V: The Black Women's Issue* (1979) and *Conditions VI* (1980). Her poetry also appears in *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* (Persephone Press, Inc., 1981).

**Gabrielle Daniels** was born in New Orleans, LA, but has lived most of her life in California. She doesn't miss gumbo as she used to, but "cooks" as a member of the Women Writers Union of the Bay Area.

**doris juanita davenport** is a writer who lives in los angeles. she is a lesbian and feminist, a devotee of yemaye and a believer in tequila. she was born in cornelia, georgia; has a ph.d. (black literature) at the university of southern california. moreover, she is obsessed with truth. period.

**hattie gossett** born: central new jersey factory town lives: northern harlem enjoys: thinking conversating reading jazzing and opposing patripower work herstory: mother's helper maid cook wife barmaid waitress forthcoming book: *my soul looks back in wonder/wild wimmin don't git no blues.*

**mary hope lee** i am/at heart/a gypsy recluse/who for the moment/is a poet and a blues lyricist/i was born and raised in san diego california/the last big town before the mexican border.

**Aurora Levins Morales.** I was born in Indiera Baja, Puerto Rico in 1954 of a Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother, both communists. I have lived in the US since I was thirteen & in the Bay Area for five years, where I work as a teacher's aide for pay & as a writer and performer at La Peña Cultural Center for sanity and solidarity.

**Genny Lim** is co-author of *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940*, published by Hoc-Doi, July 1980. She is the author of *Paper Angels*, a full length play produced by the Asian American Theater company of San Francisco in September 1980. She has been a contributing editor to *Bridge* magazine, a national Asian American quarterly, and a contributor to *East/West* newspaper. Her writing has been published in *California Living*, *Y'Bird*, *American Born and Foreign* (Anthology by Sunbury Press), *We Won't Move* (International Hotel Anthology by Kearny St. Workshop), *Networks* (Anthology

of Bay Area Women Poets by Vortex), *Beatitude*, *Women Talking*, *Women Listening*, and *Plexus*, among others.

**Naomi Littlebear.** This has been no fairy tale. I hated gang fights, street life, stumbling on dope, actin' tuff, being poor, wearin' second hand inferiority complexes, smart-mouthed cholos and their Gabacho counterparts. I rebuild my broken dreams in Portland, Oregon.

**Audre Lorde.** "I was born in the middle of NYC of West Indian parents & raised to know that America was not my home." Most recent work: *The Cancer Journals* published by Spinsters Ink. She is also the author of *The Black Unicorn*, a book of poems published in 1978 by Norton, along with many other works of poetry and prose.

**Cherríe Moraga.** I am a very a tired Chicana/half-breed/feminist/lesbian/writer/ teacher/talker/waitress. And, I am not alone in this. I am the first in my family to ever be published in a book. Of this, I am proud for all for us. Los Angeles born and raised, I recently moved to Boston after three hardworking and transformative years in the San Francisco Bay Area. (Gloria convinced me to further note that I am a libra/virgo cusp with the #6 [the lovers] destiny, just like her.

**Rosario Morales.** I am a New York Puerto Rican living in Cambridge, Massachusetts - a feminist independentist & communist since 1949. I married, farmed in Puerto Rico, studied science and anthropology and raised three children. I now break a lifetime "silence" to write

**Judit Moschkovich.** I was born and raised in Argentina. My grandparents were jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland. My parents and I immigrated to the United States when I was fourteen. My greatest struggle has been to be all of who I am when confronted with pressure either to pass for American or to choose between being Latina or Jewish. I have been a feminist for as long as I can remember.

**Barbara Noda.** A writer of Japanese ancestry. Born in Stockton, raised in Salinas Valley. First book of poetry is *Strawberries*, published by Shameless Hussy Press. Wrote a play called *Aw Shucks (Shikata Ga Nai)*. Writing a novel. Likes to climb mountains.

**Pat Parker** is a "revolutionary feminist because (she) wants to be free." A Black Lesbian Poet, her writing spans over fifteen years of involvement in liberation struggles: The Civil Rights Movement, The Black Liberation Movement, Feminism and Gay Liberation. She is the author of four books of poetry, including *Movement in Black* (Diana Press) which contains her collected works. Pat lives and works in Oakland, CA.

**Mirtha Quintanales.** I immigrated to the United States on April 2, 1962 when I was thirteen years old, a Cuban refugee. Eighteen years later I'm still struggling with the after-effects of this great upheaval in my life, always wondering where is home. As a latina lesbian feminist, I am one with all those whose existence is only possible through revolt.

**Donna Kate Rushin** lives in Boston, Massachusetts and works as a Poet-in-the-Schools through the Artists' Foundation. Her work has appeared in *Conditions 5*, *Small Moon*, and *Shankpainter*. She believes that the fight is the struggle to be whole.

**Barbara Smith.** I am a Black feminist and Lesbian, a writer, and an activist. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1946 and was raised by a family of Black women. I have been a member of the Combahee River Collective since its founding in 1974. My writing has appeared in many Black and feminist publications. I co-edited *Conditions V: The Black Women's Issue* with Lorraine Bethel and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (The Feminist Press) with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott. I am now dreaming of making a film about Third World feminism.

**Beverly Smith.** I am a 33-year-old Black lesbian. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio in a family which included my twin sister Barbara, my mother, grandmother, aunt, and great-aunts. Sometimes I get sick and tired of trying to be a grown-up lesbian feminist which is why I still maintain cordial relationships with my teddy-bears.

**Ms. Luisah Teish** is a writer, lecturer, teacher, performer and political activist. Her most recent work is a collection of poems, *Don't Kill Is Fattening*. She is presently teaching Afro-Cuban Ritual Dance and Culture in the Bay Area and working on a book on Women's Spirituality. She is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana.

**Anita Valerio** is a Poet. One woman attempting Reality in an increasingly static delineated environment & the continuous bulwark of privilege, etc. I don't really believe in the goddess. Born Heidelberg, Germany, 1957 – my father was in the military so we lived all over the country. I grew with a mish mash of rich cultures – very confusing. I am now learning to celebrate the discontinuity of it all. Most pressing current concern: saving the earth from nuclear & other destructions.

**Nellie Wong** is poet/writer/socialist/feminist/cheong hay poa born Oakland Chinatown, thlee yip/American style year-of-the-dog-woman whose feminism grows out of *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Parks*/1st Organizer/Women's Writer Union founding member/ Unbound Feet/ secretary to the spirit of her long time Californ' forebears.

**Merle Woo** is a writer of drama and fiction, is a humanities lecturer in Ethnic Studies/Asian American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She is a feminist and the mother of Paul, 13, and Emily Wo Yamasake, 17. Her work has been published in *Bridge, An Asian American Perspective*, and *Hanai*, an anthology of Asian American writers.

**Mitsuye Yamada** is a second generation Japanese American teacher and poet whose book of poems *Camp Notes And Other Poems* was published by the Shameless Hussy Press in 1976. This collection includes poems written during the World War II years in a concentration camp in Idaho, but her later writings deal with issues concerning the Asian Pacific woman in the US. She is a member of the Asian Pacific Women's Network and is currently teaching Creative Writing and Children's Literature at Cypress College in Orange County, CA.

*This Bridge Called My Back... has served as a significant rallying call for women of color for a generation, and this new edition keeps that call alive at a time when divisions prove ever more stubborn and dangerous. A much-cited text, its influence has been visible and broad both in academia and among activists. We owe much of the sound of our present voices to the brave scholars and feminists whose ideas and ideals crowd its pages.*

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim  
UC Santa Barbara

*This Bridge Called My Back... dispels all doubt about the power of a single text to radically transform the terrain of our theory and practice. Twenty years after its publication, we can now see how it helped to untether the production of knowledge from its disciplinary anchors—and not only in the field of women's studies. This Bridge has allowed us to define the promise of research on race, gender, class and sexuality as profoundly linked to collaboration and coalition-building. And perhaps most important, it has offered us strategies for transformative political practice that are as valid today as they were two decades ago.*

—Angela Davis  
UC Santa Cruz

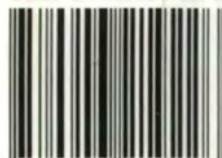
*This book is a manifesto—the 1981 declaration of a new politics "U.S. Third World Feminism." No great de-colonial writer, from Fanon, Shaarawi, Blackhawk, or Sartre, to Mountain Wolf Woman, de Beauvoir, Saussure, or Newton could have alone proclaimed this "politic born of necessity." This politic denies no truths: its luminosities drive into and through our bodies. Writers and readers alike become shape-shifters, are invited to enter the shaman/witness state, to invoke power differently. "U.S. Third World Feminism" requires a re-peopling: the creation of planetary citizen-warriors. This book is a guide that directs citizenry shadowed in hate, terror, suffering, disconnection, and pain toward the light of social justice, gender and erotic liberation, peace, and revolutionary love. This Bridge... transits our dreams, and brings them to the real.*

—Chela Sandoval  
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