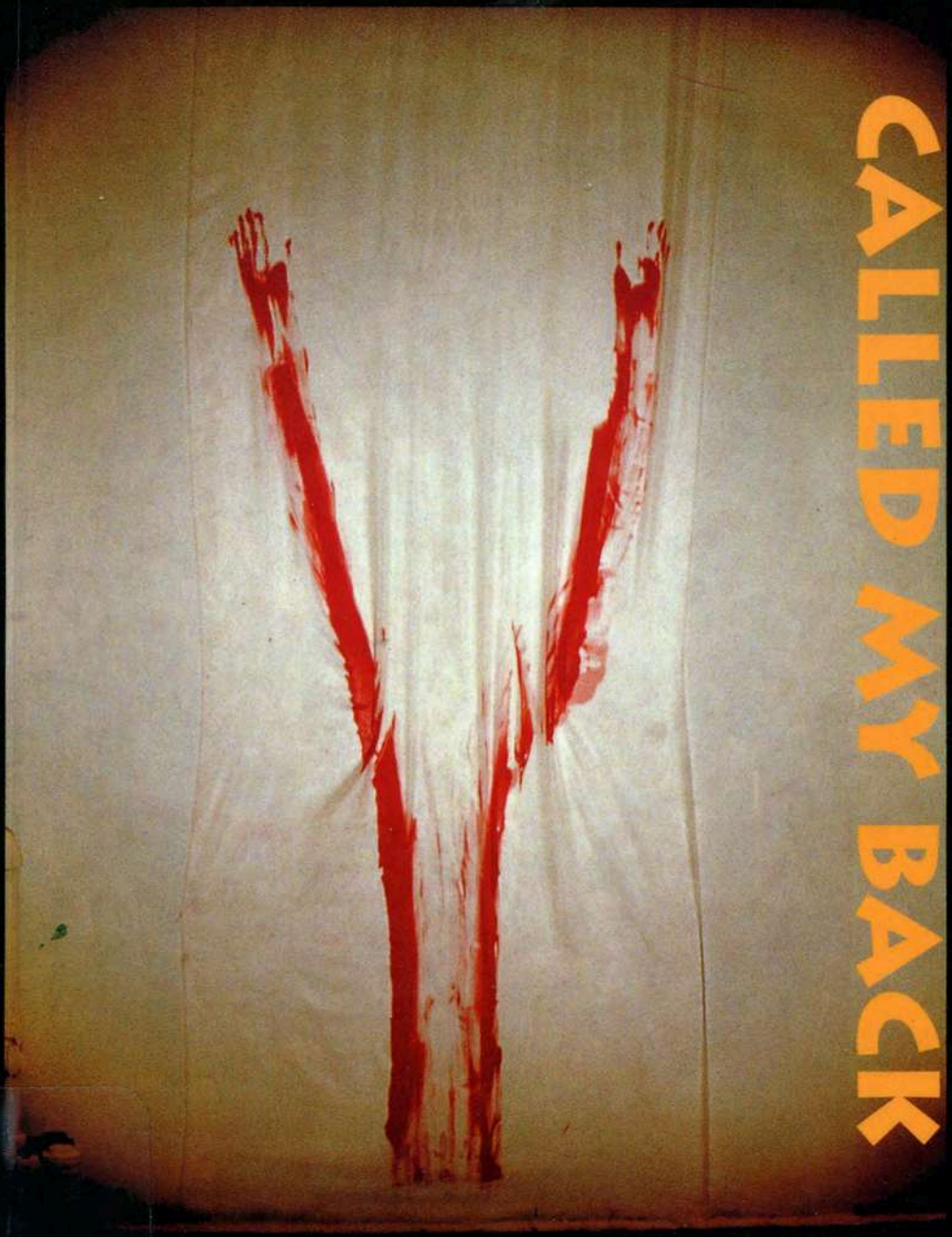
THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK



WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR

EDITED BY CHERRÍE L. MORAGA AND GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA

FOREWORD BY TONI CADE BAMBARA

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 Beauvior, 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
UC Santa Barbara

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This Bridge Called My Back

writings by radical women of color

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Cherríe L. Moraga

and

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Berkeley

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 desacralization 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

Table of Contents

Children Passing in the Streets
The Roots of Our Radicalism

Entering the Lives of Others
Theory in the Flesh

And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You
Racism in the Women's Movement

Between the Lines

On Culture, Class, and Homophobia

Speaking in Tongues
The Third World Woman Writer

El Mundo Zurdo
The Vision

Twenty Years Later

Appendix

Artwork

Art Folio

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,"[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] Lamentably, the only lesson that Amerika,[4] 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 Amerikan 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 skyscrapers.

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."[5] 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,[6] 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."[7] Is there any better way to describe our shared resistance mission as writers and activistas 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.[8] 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?"[9]

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-indígenas 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"[10] 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."[11]

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 works, 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."[12] But survive we must and survive we will. The planet depends on it.

Cherríe 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 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 Cherríe 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.[1] 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 Yipsilanti, 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 Puertoriqueña reservation Chicana campañera 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 interfacings 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 Yamassee 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" – gossett). 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! [1]

Notes

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

Preface, 1981

Cherríe 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 door, 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[1].... 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[2] 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, Cherríe. 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."[3] 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."[4] 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,"[5] 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.

Sí, 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 Cherríe, 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.

Cherríe 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

Cherríe 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 wrought 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, Cherríe 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 Cherríe'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 Cherríe 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

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[1]

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."[2] 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 invisible 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[1]

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/hinkty
        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

Cherríe 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

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

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

Cherríe 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[1]

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, "Cherríe, 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

on 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[2]

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 *Aiiieeeee*! 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;[1] 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[2] 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[3] 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 newspersons, 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[1] 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 Makwyiapi 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. Makwyiapi, "Wolf Old Man" his english was broken and he always spoke Blackfoot. He had a sweat[2] 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[1] 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 stingingly 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