

denial of you, your worth. I have always supported you, and as the years pass, I think I begin to understand you more and more.

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American Woman. We have such a proud heritage, such a courageous tradition. I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out in the schools. And the full awareness of being a woman makes me want to sing. And I do sing with other Asian Americans and women, Ma, anyone who will sing with me.

I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle. In loving ourselves for who we are –American women of color – we can make a vision for the future where we are free to fulfill our human potential. This new framework will not support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation, but will be a human and beautiful framework, created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.

Ma, today, you are as beautiful and pure to me as the picture I have of you, as a little girl, under my dresser-glass.

I love you,  
Merle

## Notes

1. *AIIEEEEE! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, editors Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974).

## I Come with No Illusions

*Mirtha Quintanales*

Columbus, Ohio  
December 27, 1979

Querida Chabela (Isabel Yrigoyen),

...Woman love. Never knew it would be so hard to leave anyone. Even though it means everything to me to move on, to finally embark on this self-healing journey. Torn by guilt. My lover. Working-class "white" woman from a small town. She has no more privileges than I do. As alone as I am. She is not my enemy. World upside down.

...What lies ahead? A mystery. Do not dare even consider the possibility of a love relationship with a Latina, a Cuban woman, even to dream that I could find such partnership...family. Work. It is my life. It is all I have. It is what now ultimately propels me to make this move. You, my friends, will sweeten my life. I know that. But I come to you with no illusions. I join you because I must. Give of myself to those who can give to me of themselves. Sisters. Sharing. I look for, expect nothing more. Is there really something more?

Setting myself up? Closing up, putting up barriers? Perhaps. Perhaps just trying to be "my own woman." Perhaps just trying to be one, not one-half. Can I find happiness "alone?" Americans tell me that I should strive for this blessed state of self-contentment as "one" if I intend to survive. Yet often I have doubts. Is this the kind of world I want to live in? A world where ultimately only the "I" matters? Millions of people living in self-constructed little boxes, Incommunicado.

I ponder over the meaning and possible repercussions of the choices I am about to make. What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? What are the implications of separating myself from American women and creating a separate community with women I identify as my counterparts?

It means, for one thing, that I am admitting failure. Failure to adjust, adapt, change, transcend cultural differences. Yet this is not only a personal failure. It is one which I share with millions. The reality of ethnic minority enclaves throughout the world tells

me a great deal about the process I am going through. It is neither unique nor new. And ultimately it may have a lot more to do with "success" than with failure. It is after all, a survival strategy – particularly in the context of a power imbalance between "natives" and "foreigners" – where the latter are in a better bargaining position as a *group* than as scattered individuals fighting their own personal battles.

For myself – as a Latina lesbian/feminist, it also means a real narrowing of options and privileges. I have extremely limited resources. No money, no access to power, no legitimacy. If there are many like me I do not know. Nor is it going to be easy for me to connect with them if I should learn that there are. Their resources are likely to be as limited as mine. This is a socio-economic, political reality that acts as a barrier to the formation of a strong and visible community. Not only the "social goodies" (money, power, fame, and other minor privileges) but life's necessities (a job, a roof over my head...) depend on my ties, my interactions with American men and women. To say "I do not like the nature of this tie with the powerful" is dangerous; for the implications are that I may strive to break free from it and in doing so reduce my chances of making it in this society.

But what of human feeling? It is after all, great personal need, not political analysis that drives me to take this stand, to turn away from my American sisters and put all my energies into creating a community with my Latina sisters. What is the nature and significance of this need? Is it true that love knows no boundaries? Or that being "human" somehow means being ultimately undifferentiated – "all alike?" Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that in fact "human nature," bound as it is to "culture," implies variability and difference. Yes, we all need to eat and sleep, keep ourselves warm, protect ourselves from harm, be nurtured into maturity; touch and be touched, etc. But, how we choose to meet these needs varies and changes from time to time, place to place and is dependent both on history and the particular set of environmental circumstances contextual to our lives. What both puzzles me and distresses me is the degree to which we seem to be "culture bound." As if "setting the cultural mold" implied never quite being able to break free from it. At least not completely. This seems to be

particularly true in the most private activities of our lives – how we express and share feeling in the context of our intimate interpersonal relationships. The wonder of it! And the pain...

Con mucho cariño, tu amiga  
Mirtha

# I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance

Mirtha Quintanales

Columbus, Ohio

January, 1980

Dear Barbara (Smith),

Thanks for your letter. I can appreciate your taking the time to write. It can get *so* difficult for busy people to keep up with correspondence... I only hope that you have taken some time to rest, gather your energies. I'm just beginning to emerge from a several-week period of semi-hermitdom myself. I, too, was exhausted. Too much work too many responsibilities - often the worry of not moving fast enough, or too fast to have any kind of an impact. After a brief peaceful interlude, the pressures are beginning to build again, Oh well...

I wanted to tell you about my visit to San Francisco, about coming together with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters. The joy and the pain of finding each other, of realizing how long we've "*done without*," of how difficult it's going to be to heal ourselves, to find our voices... But how perfectly wonderful to finally have a family, a community. Yet I find that there is too much to tell. Cannot easily compress it all in a letter. How I wish that we could meet and talk! So much of the Black lesbian/feminist experience speaks to our own... I passed around all the literature you'd handed out at conferences - including *Conditions 5*. And the Latina sisters were amazed. Lorraine Bethel's "*What Chou Mean We White Girl?*" was especially telling... Many of our feelings given form, meaning. Please let her know that her work has been very helpful to us - particularly in sorting out what we want and don't want in our relationships with white, mainstream American feminists. Yes, there is a lot we can learn from each other.

But Barbara, I am worried. At the moment I am in the process of organizing a roundtable for the NWSA<sup>1</sup> conference, on the topic of racial and ethnic minority lesbians in the US. There are two other women involved - a Greek friend of mine from Berkeley, and a Black woman from San Francisco. And I feel the tension building. The Greek woman's many attempts to

"connect" with Third World lesbians and "Women of Color" (most poignantly at last year's conference) have been met with outright rejection. Unfortunately, being loud, aggressive and very Greek-identified, she has found a great deal of rejection in white, mainstream lesbian/feminist circles as well. Clearly she does not fit there either.

The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing (always a very tenuous situation - since acknowledgement of ethnic ties is inevitably accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice and various kinds of discrimination - the problem is not just personal, but "systemic," "political" - one more reality of American "life.") How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies:" race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of class and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.

Not all Third World women are "women of color" - if by this concept we mean exclusively "non-white." I am only one example. And not all women of color are really Third World - if this term is only used in reference to underdeveloped or developing societies (especially those not allied with any superpower). Clearly then it would be difficult to justify referring to Japanese women, who are women of color, as Third World women. Yet, if we extend the concept of Third World to include internally "colonized" racial and ethnic minority groups in this country, so many different kinds of groups could be conceivably included, that the crucial issue of social and institutional racism and its historic tie to slavery in the US could get diluted, lost in the shuffle. The same thing would likely happen if we extended the meaning of "women of color" to include all those women in this country who are victims of prejudice and discrimination (in many respects), but who nevertheless hold racial privileges and may even be racists.

I don't know what to think anymore. Things begin to get even more complicated when I begin to consider that many of us who identify as "Third World" or "Women of Color", have grown up as or are fast becoming "middle-class" and highly educated, and therefore more privileged than many of our white, poor and working-class sisters. Sometimes I get angry at my lover because she does not seem to relate to my being a "Cuban" lesbian. And yet, can I really relate to the fact that she grew up in a very small town, in a working-class family – with little money, few other resources, little encouragement to get an education, etc.? Yes... and no. There have been times in my life when my family had little money or food. There have been times in my life when I lived from day to day not knowing if I would be alive "tomorrow" – not knowing really how it felt to plan for "next month," or "next year."

Yet, even though I grew up having to heat my bathwater and sleep in a very lumpy bed, even though I grew up often being ashamed of bringing my friends home because our furniture was old and dilapidated, I went to private schools, spent summers at the beach, traveled, had plenty of toys and books to read; took music and dancing lessons, went horseback riding – my parents being very conscious of, and being very *able* to give us the best (if not always in terms of material comforts) that their middle-class resources gave them access to – including the services of a long string of nurse-maids (my mother worked, and in Cuba often the maids had maids – even if it meant putting little girls to work as servants and baby-tenders – economic exploitation galore!).

Yes, I have suffered in this country. I have been the victim of blatant prejudice and institutional discrimination. As an ethnic minority woman and a lesbian I have lived in the margins, in fear, isolated, disconnected, silent and in pain. Nevertheless, those early years of relatively "blissful" middle-class childhood (although I have to say that after age 7 it was *hell* – political violence and death always lurking) in my own country where I was simply part of the "mainstream" if not a little better off because of my father's professional status, have served me as a "cushion" throughout my life. Even in the United States, as an essentially middle-class (and white-skinned) woman, I have had "opportunities" (or have known how to make them for myself), that my very white, working-class American lover has never had.



Having managed to graduate from college (one out of three in her graduating high school class who managed to make it to college) against tremendous odds, she is still struggling with the fact that she may never really learn the ropes of surviving well in mainstream, middle-class American society. And need I add that mainstream white, middle-class American feminism is as insensitive to her needs as it is to mine?

I realize that I cannot fight everybody's battles. But need I create false enemies in order to wage my own? I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the "white woman" – especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges – regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American "White Trash" and destitute.

But I am also a bit concerned when a Black sister generalizes about/dismisses all non-black women, or all women who are not strictly "women of color" or strictly "Third World." If you are not WASP in this country, if you or your family have known the immigrant experience or ghetto life, you are likely to be very much acquainted with the social, economic political reality of internal colonization. Yes, racism is a BIG MONSTER we all need to contend with – regardless of our skin color and ethnic affiliation. But I think we need to keep in mind that in this country, in this world, racism is used both to create false differences among us and to mask very very significant ones – cultural economic, political... And yes, those who have been racially oppressed must create separatist spaces to explore the meaning of their experiences – to heal themselves, to gather their energies, their strength, to develop their own voices, to build their armies. And yes, those of us who have not been victims of racial oppression must come to terms with our own racism, our own complicity with this system that discriminates and oppresses on the basis of skin color and body features. And of course it would be irresponsible liberal folly to propose that social and institutional racism could be eliminated by simply "becoming"



personally non-racist, by becoming "integrated" in our private lives... How ridiculous for white folk to think that a long history of slavery and every other kind of oppression, that an *ongoing* and *insidious* reality of social, economic, political exploitation could be magically transcended through a few individual choices... And even if everybody's skin should suddenly turn black, it would be quite impossible to truly know what it means to have grown up - generation after generation - Black and female in America. Of course our skin is not likely to "turn," and so regardless of how "conscious" we claim to be of the "Black experience" in America, we shall always be limited by our own history and the reality of our white skin and the privileges it automatically confers on us.

Ironically, when a Black American sister (or anyone for that matter) puts me, or other ethnic women of this society in the same category with the socially dominant White American Woman on the basis of lighter-than-black skin color, she is in fact denying my history, my culture, my identity, my very being, my pain and my struggle. She, too, is being *personally* racist. When she fails to recognize that the "social privileges" of lighter-than-black ethnic-minority lesbians in this society are almost totally dependent on our denial of who we are, on our *ethnic death*, she also falls prey to the racist mythology that color differences are the end-all indications of social inequality. That those who happen to have the "right" skin color are not only all alike but all hold the same social privileges. Yes, lighter-than-black skin color *may* confer on some ethnic minority women the option of becoming "assimilated", "integrated" in mainstream American society. But is this really a privilege when it always means having to become invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated? The perils of "passing" as white American are perils indeed. It should be easy enough at least for *lesbians* to understand the meaning of being and yet not being, of "merging" and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society.

And while it is true that a lesbian/feminist community and culture have emerged, while it is true that Black, Latina and other Third World/lesbians "of color" have begun to speak up, it is not true that we have yet engaged in a truly un-biased, un-prejudiced *dialogue*. We are still measuring each other by the yardstick of the White, Capitalist, Imperialist, Racist American

Patriarch. We are still seeing radical differences when they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical. And most disastrously, we are failing to recognize much of what we *share*. Is it not possible for us to recognize, respect and settle our differences; to validate our various groups' struggles and need for separate spaces, and yet to open our eyes to the fact that divided we are only likely to succeed at defeat?

It is pure folly to think that a small group of Latina or Black or Chinese American lesbians can, on its own, create a feminist revolution. It is pure folly to think that middle-class wasp feminists can do so...

Barbara, I ache to live with and love with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters – to speak "Spanglish," to eat arroz con frijoles, to dance to the salsa to openly talk sex and flirt with one another; to secretly pray to Yemayá, Chango, Oshun, and the Virgen de Guadalupe. I run to them for refuge, for dear life!

But when I meet you and other Black lesbian sisters – and am moved by what we seem to share, I ache for you also. I spend time with Stacy (Anastasia) and other Southern European/North African/Mediterranean lesbian sisters – and am stirred by what we seem to have in common, I feel deep yearning for them... I read the words of other ethnic American lesbian sisters and I find that I understand them and want to share in these women's lives. And I live, love and work with working-class sisters. Have lived, loved and worked in the poor urban ghettos of Chicago and Boston. Have spent some time in the poor, rural, isolated mountains of New Mexico. Have traveled to Latin American countries, to India, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong-Kong, Japan – feeling the pain of my poor and hard-working sisters – struggling against all odds to stay alive, to live with dignity. I cannot sleep sometimes – haunted by the memories of such all-encompassing poverty – the kind of poverty that even poor Americans could not begin to conceive. India. India was the unraveling. How insignificant our troubles seem in the United States... How ridiculously small my own struggles... I don't feel guilt or shame, but this nausea... To find us squabbling over who may or may not be called a feminist, who may or may not join or take part in this or that particular political group, etc., etc. The privilege of having feminist "groups" – most women in the world just eat shit.

And lesbians – who really knows the fate of most lesbians in the world, especially the Third World?

Is it not possible for all of us here in America to turn *right now* to *all* the sisters of the world – to form a common, human-woman-lesbian bond?

I have lost some sleep lately pondering over this race/culture/class problem... We've got to do *something!* Many of us Latinas are non-white – as a matter of fact, most of us are racially mixed to various degrees. Ask a Black or "mulatto" Puerto Rican woman what her identity is, though, and most likely she will tell you "*Puerto Rican.*" All Chinese American women are non-white. But ask any of them what her identity is. She will not tell you "yellow," she will tell you Chinese, or Chinese American. Many African peoples are "Black," but ask a Nigerian, an Ethiopian, etc. what her identity is, and she will tell you "Nigerian," or "Ethiopian," or whatever... Obviously "Black Culture" is an American phenomenon. Many of us don't really understand this. I know I didn't for a long time. When I first came to this country I just assumed that Black people were simply American (for that matter I just assumed *all* Americans shared the same kind of "American Culture"). I grew up with people of all kinds of skin-color – but we were all *Cuban* and understood each other, even though we *could* recognize the most minute "color differences," even though we *could* recognize class differences. How was I supposed to know – given the propaganda – that there was no such thing as a "melting pot"? How was I supposed to know that racism was so widespread and so deeply ingrained in American society? I was *shocked* in my sophomore year in college when several Black women implied that I was a racist when I said I could not figure out what was different about being Black or Yellow, or White, or Red in the United States. I could understand not knowing about a "culture", but not knowing about a "race"? Was "race" per se so important? Was it really linked to a "culture"? This was a weird notion to me indeed!

Well I paid very hard for my immigrant ignorance. I'm still paying – even though I have learned a great deal since then about American sub-cultures and about American racism. Many of my Latina sisters have had similar experiences, and the big question is always there – Will we ever really be accepted by our

Black American sisters? I cannot really convey the pain – especially in those of us who *are* Afro-Hispanic-American but light skinned – of seeing so much of ourselves in, of being so drawn to African-American women, and yet feeling that we are very likely to be denied a connection, to be rejected. The fucking irony of it! Racism. It has so thoroughly poisoned Americans of all colors that many of us can simply not see beyond it. I'm sorry about this long letter Barbara – especially this last part. But I have not been able to get over this pain. I used to have this recurrent dream (for years) that I would alternately become black and white and black and white over and over and over again... It felt really good. But I've never quite figured out all of what it meant... Well, take care Barbara.

In sisterhood,  
Mirtha

### Notes

1. National Women's Studies Association.

## Earth-Lover, Survivor, Musician

Naomi Littlebear Morena

The following is an excerpt from a letter in response to Cherríe's request that Naomi write an essay on "language & oppression" as a Chicana.

January, 1980

Cherríe,

I have a clear image in my mind about the things we talked about, your anger about language, identification – given the brief acquaintance, I personally could relate to a lot of what you were saying – i realize that those feelings had a lot to do with why i wrote the book i'm sending you<sup>1</sup> - that was a very important time in my life. However I realize now that it wasn't for me exactly the most balanced part of my life. It was only a time in which i hurt so bad i had to shake off the dust of one too many insults in order to carry on. Nonetheless, my criticism, analysis, etc. did not come from a natural place in me. It was not the "voice of my mothers" nor did it completely reflect the way i was brought up to be. I wrote that book as a brown woman's retort to white *people*, white middle class leftists who were trying to redirect my spirit. I was *supposed* to be the angry chicana speaking her vengeance against whites, against the capitalist system.

*I am a sad chicana lesbian woman who is woman-identified earth lover, survivor, musician – music and beauty are my tools against my aches and pains – striving to bring peace into an otherwise tumultuous past.*

I am not the scholar analyst you are – which I totally respect. I'm clear about why i am and how i am - *i cannot extricate the lesbian from my soul no more than i could the chicana – i have always been both.*

The woman I am right now is not struggling with language – this time – i am closest and clearest right now about violence – i am haunted by dreams from my childhood and not-too-distant past. I could not adequately write about language unless i was right there with the problem, as you seem to be – you are fairly bursting with reasons and important thoughts, insights into our mutual experience with the degradation and denial that came with our language loss (abduction?).

Imagine the process you would have to go thru if I asked you to write me a paper on violence in the barrios and how that affected your personal life? *I need to feel control of my own life - violence has on some deep level rendered me helpless and given me a deep fear of being powerless* - our language being stripped from us creates similar fears. I need to figure out what is closest to me. I have done some work in exorcising the demons of communication - my current observation is that i feel comfortable with words again, except when i try to make scientific discoveries - that is me reacting to male energy that says women are stupid & emotional.

My emotions & intuitions are there for a purpose. They are honest perceptions. I don't have to try to be grassroots. I do have to try to relate my straight feminist politics.

Wanting to be loving and have a family is my connection with my culture. I am doing that. Going to meetings is not part of my ethnic background.

I got real turned around when i got involved with leftist politics. I am now trying to piece my life together, discard the violence & humiliations, accept that i am a complete person with nothing lacking. My mind and heart are capable of deciding what's best for me.

For once in my life i have to let my self deserve a home, food on the table, and a handful of loving friends - this is a time of healing and taking the blame of the rapes and attempted rapes, the child beatings i received, taking all that pain off my shoulders and giving it back to who it belongs.

I want you to accept me as i accept you. Be an amiga, not a comrade to me. I will send you more words if you like but right now the hurt's all around me and i feel like flying away. I will fight back with music, but don't ask me to fight with words. Trust my instincts, my knowledge - i am not a sheltered little wetback - i've been through so much pain that i've popped out the other side. *We* have been thru so much pain that now we have no place to put that pain but to leave it out of our lives - because the pain was given to do its worst damage by festering in our soul, by growing comfortable in our flesh that we more often hurt each other 'tho infested by the same disease.



I have no solution but to go on. I will not carry the stigma that so many have tried to burden me with. These words are mine because this now is *my* language – 13 years of English, 13 years of Spanish – that’s when I flipped out – the day of my two “children’s” anniversary. I was prompted by devils – clinical radicals who instructed me in self-autopsy. Please applaud my victory over those fuckers – it is *your* victory as well – remember they think we’re all related. We’re not at all where they expected us to be – we just slipped through – because we knew damn well it was a lie.

I refuse to be separated from your life by these words. I read you loud & clear: the story-telling, my crazy aunts, the laughter, deep-hearted joy, celebrating *anything* with a six-pack of beer.<sup>2</sup>

I remember. And as long as i know you too were once there – it is something that can warm us both this winter.

Because i haven’t seen my cousins in years.

That is what i miss, that is what i’m looking for.

March 23, 1980

Now that the ice has melted and the flowers begin to bloom i welcome the season of growing. Thank you for sharing with me. I do believe we have in common – the cultural rip off, the anger, the wisdom, the fullness of life.

... I have started this letter many times, wanting to send you these stories. I appreciated your letter very much. It’s still on my desk reminding me how hard we are working to be visible.

We are touring again, maybe we’ll meet.

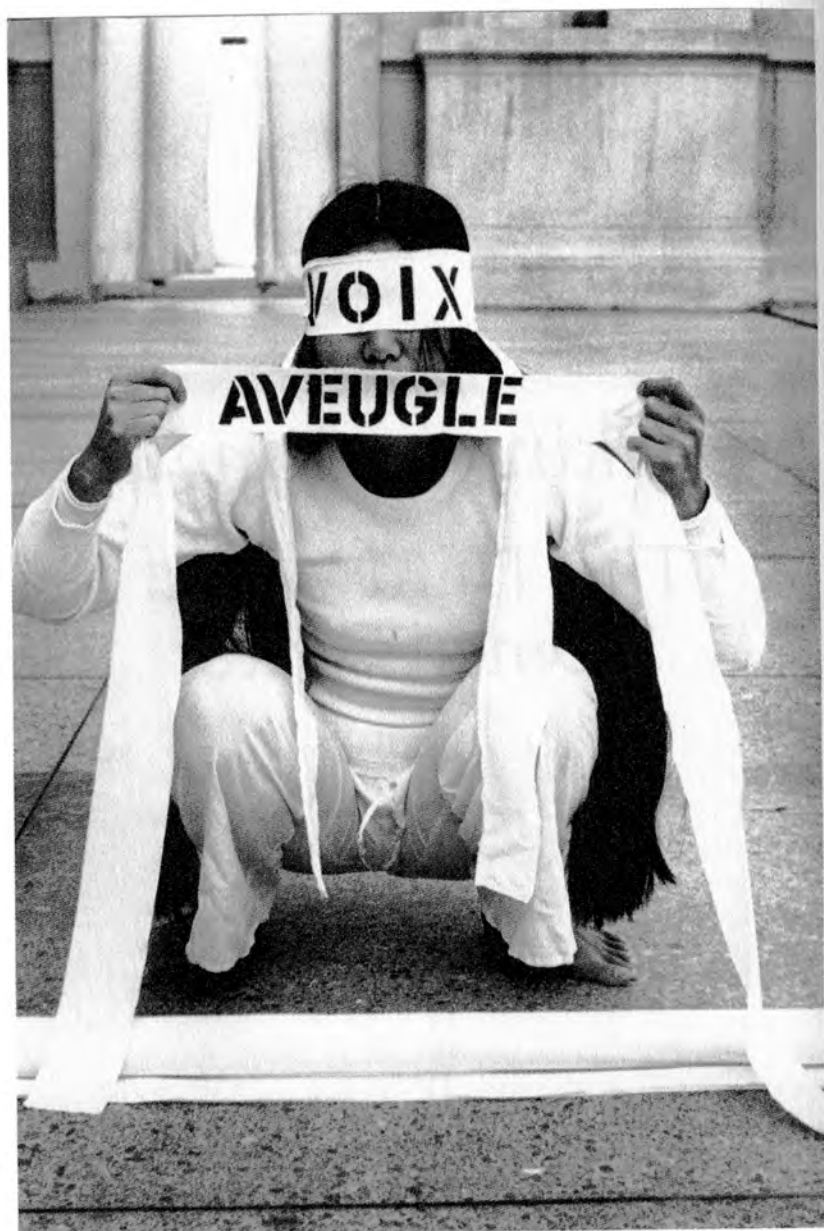
## Notes

1. *The Dark Side of the Moon*. (Portland: Olive Press, n.d.). Book of essays & poetry on life in the barrio, and the topics of the Church, Family, Education & the Left.
2. Here Naomi is referring to experiences Cherrie describes in her essay, “La Güera,” (see essay in this volume).



# Speaking in Tongues

The Third World  
Woman Writer



Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Aveugle Voix (Blind Voice)*, 1975  
Black & white photograph, image #3, 9.75" x 6.5"  
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum  
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archives

## Speaking in Tongues

### *The Third World Woman Writer*

*who told you anybody wants to hear from you, you aint  
nothing but a black woman.*

– hattie gossett

*Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could  
write.*

– Gloria E. Anzaldúa

As first generation writers, we defy the myth that the color of our skins prevents us from using the pen to create. hattie gossett's piece, the introduction to her first book, is presented here in recognition of that act of defiance. But it is not enough to have our books published. We must also actively engage in establishing the criteria and the standards by which our work can be viewed. As Barbara Smith laid the groundwork in developing literary criticism for Black women in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,"<sup>1</sup> here Norma Alarcón plants the seed which germinates a feminist criticism involving the history, mythology, and writings of La Chicana. This article represents the kind of literary criticism that is beginning to appear in every segment of the Third World women's community.

We are Third World women writers, so similar yet so different, similar in the issues we confront, different in approach and style. What we have in common is our love of writing and a love of the literature of women of color. In our common struggle and in our writing we reclaim our tongues. We wield a pen as a tool, a weapon, a means of survival, a magic wand that will attract power, that will draw self-love into our bodies.

And though often we may feel ambivalent about our devotion to the female self, we continue to swim *fearless with the length of our own bodies (Wong)* in a sea of words. We continue to swim toward that raft and lifeline which is *ourselves – ourselves as mother, ourselves as hero*. What we choose finally is to *cultivate our colored skins*.

a teacher taught me  
more than she knew  
patting me on the head  
putting words in my hand  
- "pretty little Indian girl!"  
saving them -  
going to give them  
back to her one day . . .<sup>2</sup>

*A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared . In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.*

### Notes

1. *Conditions 2*. NY: Brooklyn, 1977.
2. Anne Lee Walters, Dexter Fisher, ed. *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers in the US*. (Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 109.



## Speaking In Tongues

*A Letter To Third World Women Writers<sup>1</sup>*

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

21 mayo 80

Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing -

I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you. Black woman huddles over a desk on the fifth floor of some New York tenement. Sitting on a porch in south Texas, a Chicana fanning away mosquitos and the hot air, trying to arouse the smoldering embers of writing. Indian woman walking to school or work lamenting the lack of time to weave writing into your life. Asian American, lesbian, single mother, tugged in all directions by children, lover or ex-husband, and the writing.

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing.

How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course.

My dear *hermanas*, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose - we never had any privileges. I wanted to call the dangers "obstacles" but that would be a kind of lying. We can't *transcend* the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance.

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The *lesbian* of color is not only invisible, she doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skills for writing nor the confidence that we were

correct in using our class and ethnic languages. I, for one, became adept at, and majored in English to spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty. And Spanish was not taught in grade school. And Spanish was not required in High School. And though now I write my poems in Spanish as well as English I feel the rip-off of my native tongue.

I *lack imagination* you say

No . I lack language.  
The language to clarify  
my resistance to the literate.  
Words are a war to me.  
They threaten my family.

To gain the word  
to describe the loss  
I risk losing everything.  
I may create a monster  
the word's length and body  
swelling up colorful and thrilling  
looming over my *mother*, characterized.  
Her voice in the distance  
*unintelligible illiterate*.  
These are the monster's words.<sup>2</sup>

– Cherríe L. Moraga

Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me? I'll do anything to postpone it – empty the trash, answer the telephone. The voice recurs in me: *Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?* How dare I even consider becoming a writer as I stooped over the tomato fields bending, bending under the hot sun, hands broadened and calloused, not fit to hold the quill, numbed into an animal stupor by the heat.

How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less feel and believe that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does

not our class, our culture as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us?

The white man speaks: *Perhaps if you scrape the dark off of your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don't cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world.*

Man, like all the other animals, fears and is repelled by that which he does not understand, and mere difference is apt to connote something malign.<sup>3</sup>

I think, yes, perhaps if we go to the university. Perhaps if we become male-women or as middle-class as we can. Perhaps if we give up loving women, we will be worthy of having something to say worth saying. They convince us that we must cultivate art for art's sake. Bow down to the sacred bull, form. Put frames and metaframes around the writing. Achieve distance in order to win the coveted title "literary writer" or "professional writer." Above all do not be simple, direct, nor immediate.

Why do they fight us? Because they think we are dangerous beasts? Why *are* we dangerous beasts? Because we shake and often break the white's comfortable stereotypic images they have of us: the Black domestic, the lumbering nanny with twelve babies sucking her tits, the slant-eyed Chinese with her expert hand - "They know how to treat a man in bed," - the flat-faced Chicana or Indian, passively lying on her back, being fucked by the Man a la La Chingada.

The Third World woman revolts: *We revoke, we erase your white male imprint. When you come knocking on our doors with your rubber stamps to brand our faces with DUMB, HYSTERICAL, PASSIVE PUTA, PERVERT, when you come with your branding irons to burn MY PROPERTY on our buttocks, we will vomit the guilt, self-denial and race-hatred you have force-fed into us right back into your mouth. We are done being cushions for your projected fears. We are tired of being your sacrificial lambs and scapegoats.*

I can write this and yet I realize that many of us women of color who have strung degrees, credentials and published books around our necks like pearls that we hang onto for dear life are in danger of contributing to the invisibility of our sister-writers. "La Vendida," the sell-out.

*The danger of selling out one's own ideologies.* For the Third World woman, who has, at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment. Its followers are notorious for "adopting" women of color as their "cause" while still expecting us to adapt to *their* expectations and *their* language.

How dare we get out of our colored faces. How dare we reveal the human flesh underneath and bleed red blood like the white folks. It takes tremendous energy and courage not to acquiesce, not to capitulate to a definition of feminism that still renders most of us invisible. Even as I write this I am disturbed that I am the only Third World woman writer in this handbook. Over and over I have found myself to be the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings.

*We cannot allow ourselves to be tokenized. We must make our own writing and that of Third World women the first priority.* We cannot educate white women and take them by the hand. Most of us are willing to help but we can't do the white woman's homework for her. That's an energy drain. More times than she cares to remember, Nellie Wong, Asian American feminist writer, has been called by white women wanting a list of Asian American women who can give readings or workshops. We are in danger of being reduced to purveyors of resource lists.

*Coming face to face with one's limitations. There are only so many things I can do in one day.* Luisah Teish addressing a group of predominantly white feminist writers had this to say of Third World women's experience:

If you are not caught in the maze that (we) are in, it's very difficult to explain to you the hours in the day we do not have. And the hours that we do not have are hours that are translated into survival skills and money. And when one of those hours is taken away it means an hour that we don't have to lie back and stare at the ceiling or an hour that we don't have to talk to a friend. For me it's a loaf of bread.

Understand.

My family is poor.

Poor. I can't afford

a new ribbon. The risk

of this one is enough  
 to keep me moving  
 through it, accountable.  
 The repetition like my mother's  
 stories retold, *each* time  
 reveals more particulars  
 gains more familiarity.

You can't get me in your car so fast.<sup>4</sup>

- *Cherrie L. Moraga*

Complacency is a far more dangerous attitude than outrage.<sup>5</sup>

- *Naomi Littlebear Morena*

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

*Why should I try to justify why I write? Do I need to justify being Chicana, being woman? You might as well ask me to try to justify why I'm alive.*

The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as "other" - the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We

knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered "normal," white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. And those that don't survive? The waste of ourselves: so much meat thrown at the feet of madness or fate or the state.

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It is dark and damp and has been raining all day. I love days like this. As I lie in bed I am able to delve inward. Perhaps today I will write from that deep core. As I grope for words and a voice to speak of writing, I stare at my brown hand clenching the pen and think of you thousands of miles away clutching your pen. You are not alone.

Pen, I feel right at home in your ink doing a pirouette, stirring the cobwebs, leaving my signature on the window panes. Pen, how could I ever have feared you. You're quite house-broken but it's your wildness I am in love with. I'll have to get rid of you when you start being predictable, when you stop chasing dustdevils. The more you outwit me the more I love you. It's when I'm tired or have had too much caffeine or wine that you get past my defenses and you say more than what I had intended. You surprise me, shock me into knowing some part of me I'd kept secret even from myself.

- Journal entry

In the kitchen Maria and Cherríe's voices falling on these pages. I can see Cherríe going about in her terry cloth wrap, barefoot, washing the dishes, shaking out the tablecloth, vacuuming. Deriving a certain pleasure watching her perform those simple tasks, I am thinking *they lied, there is no separation between life and writing.*

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates



us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing. *No topic is too trivial.* The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment.

The problem is to focus, to concentrate. The body distracts, sabotages with a hundred ruses, a cup of coffee, pencils to sharpen. The solution is to anchor the body to a cigarette or some other ritual. And who has time or energy to write after nurturing husband or lover, children and often an outside job? The problems seem insurmountable and they are, but they cease being insurmountable once we make up our mind that whether married or childreared or working outside jobs we are going to make time for the writing.

Forget the room of one's own - write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron - you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write.

*Distractions* all - that I spring on myself when I'm so deep into the writing when I'm almost at that place, that dark cellar where some "thing" is liable to jump up and pounce on me. The ways I subvert the writing are many. The way I don't tap the well nor learn how to make the windmill turn.

Eating is my main distraction. Getting up to eat an apple danish. That I've been off sugar for three years is not a deterrent nor that I have to put on a coat, find the keys and go out into the San Francisco fog to get it. Getting up to light incense, to put a record on, to go for a walk - anything just to put off the writing.

Returning after I've stuffed myself. Writing paragraphs on pieces of paper, adding to the puzzle on the floor, to the confusion on my desk making completion far away and perfection impossible.

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Dear mujeres de color, I feel heavy and tired and there is a buzz in my head – too many beers last night. But I must finish this letter. My bribe: to take myself out to pizza.

So I cut and paste and line the floor with my bits of paper. My life strewn on the floor in bits and pieces and I try to make some order out of it working against time, psyching myself up with decaffeinated coffee, trying to fill in the gaps.

Leslie, my housemate, comes in gets on hands and knees to read my fragments on the floor and says "It's good, Gloria." And I think: *I don't have to go back to Texas, to my family of land, mesquites, cactus, rattlesnakes and roadrunners. My family, this community of writers. How could I have lived and survived so long without it. And I remember the isolation, re-live the pain again.*

"To assess the damage is a dangerous act,"<sup>6</sup> writes Cherríe Moraga. To stop there is even more dangerous.

It's too easy, blaming it all on the white man or white feminists or society or on our parents. What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us, so let us own our responsibility, place it in our own hands and carry it with dignity and strength. No one's going to do my shitwork, I pick up after myself.

It makes perfect sense to me now how I resisted the act of writing, the commitment to writing. To write is to confront one's demons, look them in the face and live to write about them. Fear acts like a magnet; it draws the demons out of the closet and into the ink in our pens.

The tiger riding our backs (writing) never lets us alone. *Why aren't you riding, writing, writing?* It asks constantly till we begin to feel we're vampires sucking the blood out of too fresh an experience; that we are sucking life's blood to feed the pen. Writing is the most daring thing that I have ever done and the most dangerous. Nellie Wong calls writing "the three-eyed demon shrieking the truth."<sup>7</sup>

Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.<sup>8</sup>

– Alice Walker

I have never seen so much power in the ability to move and transform others as from that of the writing of women of color.

In the San Francisco area, where I now live, none can stir the audience with their craft and truthsaying as do Cherríe Moraga (Chicana), Genny Lim (Asian American), and Luisah Teish (Black). With women like these, the loneliness of writing and the sense of powerlessness can be dispelled. We can walk among each other talking of our writing, reading to each other. And more and more when I'm alone, though still in communion with each other, the writing possesses me and propels me to leap into a timeless, spaceless no-place where I forget myself and feel I am the universe. *This* is power.

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue – *organic writing* I call it. A poem works for me *not* when it say what I want it to say and *not* when it evokes what I want it to. It works when the subject I started out with metamorphoses alchemically into a different one, one that has been discovered, or uncovered, by the poem. It works when it surprises me, when it says something I have repressed or pretended not to know. The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much *I* put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve.

Audre said we need to speak up. Speak loud, speak unsettling things and be dangerous and just fuck, hell, let it out and let everybody hear whether they want to or not.<sup>9</sup>

– Kathy Kendall

I say *mujer mágica*, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same. Stop the chatter inside their heads.

Your skin must be sensitive enough for the lightest kiss and thick enough to ward off the sneers. If you are going to spit in the eye of the world, make sure your back is to the wind. Write of what most links us with life, the sensation of the body, the

images seen by the eye, the expansion of the psyche in tranquility: moments of high intensity, its movement, sounds, thoughts. *Even though we go hungry we are not impoverished of experiences.*

I think many of us have been fooled by the mass media, by society's conditioning that our lives must be lived in great explosions, by "falling in love," by being "swept off our feet," and by the sorcery of magic genies that will fulfill our every wish, our every childhood longing. Wishes, dreams, and fantasies are important parts of our creative lives. They are the steps a writer integrates into her craft. They are the spectrum of resources to reach the truth, the heart of things, the immediacy and the impact of human conflict.<sup>10</sup>

– Nellie Wong

Many have a way with words. They label themselves seers but they will not see. Many have the gift of tongue but nothing to say. Do not listen to them. Many who have words and tongue have no ear, they cannot listen and they will not hear.

There is no need for words to fester in our minds. They germinate in the open mouth of the barefoot child in the midst of restive crowds. They wither in ivory towers and in college classrooms.

Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked – not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.

*Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper.*

We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled.

Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up. Do not fake it, try to sell it for a handclap or your name in print.

Love,  
Gloria

## Notes

1. Originally written for *Words In Our Pockets* (Bootlegger: San Francisco), The Feminist Writer's Guild Handbook.
2. Cherríe L. Moraga, poem "It's the Poverty," in *Loving In The War Years*. Boston: South End Press, 2000.
3. Alice Walker, ed. "What White Publishers Won't Print," *I Love Myself When I am Laughing - A Zora Neal Hurston Reader*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), 169.
4. Moraga, *Ibid.*
5. Cherríe L. Moraga's essay, see "La Güera," in this volume.
6. Naomi Littlebear Morena. *The Dark of the Moon*, (Portland: Olive Press, 1977), 36.
7. Nellie Wong, "Flows from the Dark of Monsters and Demons: Notes on Writing," in *Radical Women Pamphlet*, (San Francisco, 1979).
8. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *MS*, May 1974, 60.
9. Letter from Kathy Kendall, March 10, 1980, concerning a writer's workshop given by Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Meridel LeSeur.
10. Nellie Wong, *Ibid.*

## **who told you anybody wants to hear from you? you ain't nothing but a black woman!**

*hattie gossett*

first of all let me say that it is really a drag to have to write the introduction to your own book.<sup>1</sup>

i mean! after i went through everything i had to go through to write this whole book (and believe me i had to go through a lot) now thats not enough. i have to do more. what more can i do? what more can i say? i have said it all (for the time being, anyway) in this book which i hope you are getting ready to read. now the editors are telling me that i have to tell you more. well. sigh. if i have to. sigh, sigh. but i just want you to know from the beginning that i dont like this part of the deal at all. what i really want to be doing now is the rewriting (4 poems) the editing (2 interviews and 1 article) and the other fine tuning things that need to be done so that I can bring this phase of my journey to a close and get onto the next one.

but the main thing i want to be doing now is getting through this nervous breakdown of the crisis of confidence variety. you know when you are almost finished with something you have been working on a long time (the first piece in this book was written in 1966 and i have been editing this book since march 1980 and it is now september 1980) that is real important to you cuz its your first big visible step in a direction you have been trying to go in for a long time and now you are finally about to get there and then suddenly you start doubting yourself and saying things to yourself like who the fuck do you think you are to be writing a book? i mean who do you think you are? and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay money for it during these days of inflation and cutbacks and firings and unemployment and books costing at least \$15 in hardcover and \$5 in paperback? plus theres a national literacy crisis and a major portion of your audience not only cant read but seems to think readin is a waste of time? plus books like this arent sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports? on top of that you aint nothing but a black woman! who told you anybody wanted to hear from you? this aint the 60s you know. it's the 80s. dont nobody care nothing about black folks these days. we is



definitely not in vogue. this season we are not the rage. aint nobody even seriously courting our vote during this presidential election year. and you know what happens when a black woman opens her mouth to say anything other than do it to me! do it to me! do it to me daddy do! dont you? havent you had enough of that? or are you a masochist? or a fool?

see? that's why i would rather be somewhere getting my nervous breakdown over with so i can move on. cuz you know that i know that all this doubting is a trap laid out in the patripower days of long ago to keep me/us from doing what we know got to be done. but it sure would be nice that while i was finishing with the nervous breakdown someone else was writing the introduction. it would be a sensitive loving understanding piece of writing that would tell you what you need to know about me and about the stuff in this book so that you can get the most out of it. but no i cant even do that. i got to sit here and write this introduction myself and tell you that i was born into this life the child of houseniggahs and that i been struggling trying to get home ever since.

september 9, 1980

### Notes

1. "my soul looks back in wonder/wild wimmin don't get no blues"  
©1980 by hattie gossett. *Presenting...Sister Noblues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).

## In Search of the Self As Hero

*Confetti of Voices on New Year's Night*

*A Letter to Myself*

Nellie Wong

You want to run away and hide now, become a breeze beneath a willow tree, a breath from the dragon's mouth, a blade of grass struggling skyward to shoot above the ground, not to be squashed like an ant, not to be forgotten perhaps like an Asian prostitute. These past few days now, that have become years of memories and dreams, of work and struggle, of becoming and living, you shiver in the fleece of your inkblue robe, wondering why you tiptoe down the stairs to write, to face your typewriter like a long, lost friend, welcoming her this New Year's Night.

You don't question the urgency to write, to express yourselves, your innocence and naivete, your conflicts and passions, your doubts and beliefs as a woman, a writer, a feminist, a poet, an Asian American, a secretary, a thlee yip nui, a wife, trying to learn the business of life: the act of loving. You have come away from a weekend of workshops at the Modern Language Association conference, absorbed the words and thoughts of writers like yourselves, provoked by the hate and love directed at a book by Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts* – for you a book of brilliance, of love and anger, becoming an art form, a testimony and vision of one Chinese American woman's world.

Ah, but you ask, *who determines Chinese American culture, Asian American sensibility?* These opponents to the art of Maxine Hong Kingston, or to the confetti of voices fluttering from the past, voices still yet to be heard, to be written down?

Who are you who has written a book of poems, who has stored away over ten years of fiction, poems and prose? Who are you who describes herself as an Asian American Feminist, who works and writes toward that identity, that affinity, that necessary self-affirming love? And you ask yourselves if you must retreat, scared rabbits, into the forests of your own imagination, your own prisons and clearings, your entanglements of words versus concepts, of dreams versus reality, of expression versus interpretation, of language versus life, knowing in all your

sensibilities as a woman writer that you face the struggles head on. You know there is no retreat now, no avoiding the confrontations, the debates and disagreements between what is art and what is not art which for you also means: what is Asian American feminist art and politics?

If you sing too often of woe, yours or your sisters', you may be charged with being "too personal," "too autobiographical," too much a woman who cries out, who acknowledges openly, shamelessly, the pain of living and the joy of becoming free. You believe, almost too simply, that you are establishing your own traditions, becoming your own role model, becoming your own best friend, your own accessible hero. In so doing you do not deny human relationships, but acknowledge them, want them and fight for them. And you are angered by the arrogance of some articles that would tell you that Virginia Woolf is your spiritual mother, your possible role model, for the work you have to do: to write. And why are you angered except for the fact that she was white and privileged, yet so ill that she walked into the sea.

And now you have discovered Ding Ling, China's most prolific woman writer, a feminist, a communist, a loving, fighting woman, whose stories gleam, bright lights in the dark of China's past. Ding Ling, imprisoned for expressing her anguish, her love and compassion for China's women, for recording the conditions of their lives. Ding Ling, attacked for her feminism, supposedly bourgeois, individualistic, impeding the movement of communism in her native land. Now there is information trickling out that she is writing again, silenced for so many years. Now you want to search for more of her work, jewels you want to hold in your own hands. Now you want to share her work, to discover the links between the women of China and the women of Chinese America, to find the grandmothers you wish to adopt.

In your search you do not deny the writings of Hisaye Yamamoto, or Wakako Yamauchi, Jade Snow Wong or Maxine Hong Kingston, Jessica Hagedorn or Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge. However, you deny these women as role models because your experiences are not theirs. Their experiences are not yours though you assimilate them because the range of human experience tickles your solitariness, your desire to become pluralistic, a free spirit soaring into the north and south poles of

everywoman's existence. You respect these writers, your contemporaries, and yet you do not only hear their voices simply because you must carve out your own destiny: a woman hero, an adventurer, a doer, a singer, an actor, fearless with the length of your own body, the depth of your dark seeing eyes, the sounds of your typewriter keys. And you ask: *where have you gone and what have you done?* You don't have the time to count the poems, the stories, the outpourings of grief and joy, but they are there in your file cabinet, they are there in your mind, and they are there flowing through your bloodstream. They are there as surely as you awaken each morning and shower and shower, happy as a hummingbird, content to let the water fall over your body, splash it and splash it, while you soap your ears and underarms, while you shampoo your hair, while you have a few moments alone to let the thoughts and impulses pour into song, rhythm, poems, life.

Could you have become a recluse, simply an observer of life, content to roam by the sea, thinking and dreaming and stopping to eat only when you had to? Could you have become a hobo, an alcoholic, a sleeping princess, content to live through the deeds and accomplishments of others? And what is this adventure, this hunger, that roars in you now, as a woman, a writer, an Asian American, a feminist? And why? And what is this satisfaction, this self-assuredness, of individuality, or spirit, of aloneness? And finally, what is this thrust toward community, toward interaction with women and men, this arrow toward creativity, toward freedom?

You have the support of friends and sister writers. You have the love of your husband and your siblings, and yet you turn from them, run with this force, this necessity, this light toward art, toward politics and writing. In the doing and expressing, in the organizing, cutting and filing, in the hours you spend in your study on a bright Sunday afternoon, you wonder why it seems simple to remove yourselves from other people. You think you could have become a minister or a nun, judging and commenting on philosophy, on morality, on the complexities of human life, on the injustice of human beings oppressing other human beings. You have no answers. You have questions and more questions about violence against women, against children, against ethnic minorities, against gays. You only understand that

you must try to answer your questions. You think at times you can answer them alone, but that is impossible because you live and work as a social being in this material, physical and economic world.

If you desire freedom, total freedom, you ask, does it mean that you must die? You are unafraid, but you think of the dead, of the dying. Of women like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, writers who killed themselves, poets you've admired; of two Asian American teenaged sisters who committed suicide because their father opposed their dating Hispanic boys. You think of your cousin who hung himself in Las Vegas, his hearing gone, his son alienated from him. You think of your father who died of cirrhosis of the liver, who brought your mother and three sisters to America. You think of your mother who died of stomach cancer, who desired her own fur coat, her own grandson; and of Bok Gung, a cook, a gentle old man, a pioneer, a grandfather, who died at home in his rented room above Hamburger Joe's in Oakland's Chinatown. And is the question that of mortality and how you desire to become immortal, and not be a fool, a real human being? You a mortal, you a woman, who does not want to be small in any sense of the word. You a poet, you a feminist, who seeks beauty in and beyond the ordinariness of the everyday world.

You talk of children and yet you have none. You talk of writing and leaving a part of yourselves to daughters and sons, their daughters and sons, so they will discover for themselves the heart and minds of Asian Americans, particularly the women who are struggling in this fight for freedom. You don't understand why you have this vision, of leaving work, signs and clues, knowledge and art, stones, however rough or polished, for people you will never know. You realize you will be gone when the questions of the future arise like wildflowers on the plains of this earth. You want to be a part of a legacy and so you write and write, questioning and exploring, not knowing if what you write will become a part of America's freedom song, not knowing if there is a rainbow.

You believed once in your own passivity, your own powerlessness, your own spiritual malaise. You are now awakening in the beginnings of a new birth. Not born again, but born for the first time, triumphant and resolute, out of

experience and struggle, out of a flowing, living memory, out of consciousness and will, facing, confronting, challenging head-on the contradictions of your lives and the lives of people around you. You believe now in the necessity and beauty of struggle: that feminism for you means working for the equality and humanity of women and men, for children, for the love that is possible.

You rub your legs in this cold room. You shiver when you recall your own self-pity when you had no date on New Year's Eve, when you regretted the family gathering because it reminded you that you stood out, a woman without a man, a woman without children. Now you are strengthened, encouraged by the range of your own experiences as a writer, a feminist, an organizer, a secretary. Now you are fired by your own needs, by the needs of your sisters and brothers in the social world, by your journey toward solidarity against tyranny in the workplace, on the streets, in our literature and in our homes. You are fueled by the clarity of your own sight, heated by your own energy to assert yourselves as a human being, a writer, a woman, an Asian American, a feminist, a clerical worker, a student, a teacher, not in loneliness and isolation, but in a community of freedom fighters. Your poems and stories will do some of the work for you, but poems and stories alone aren't enough. Nothing for you is ever enough and so you challenge yourselves, again and again, to try something new, to help build a movement, to organize for the rights of working people, to write a novel, a play, to create a living theater that will embody your dreams and vision, energy in print, on stage, at work that will assert the will of an independent, freedom-loving woman, that will reflect a sensibility of Asian America, of feminism, of sharing food and wealth with all the people, with all your kin.

And you will not stop working and writing because you care, because you refuse to give up, because you won't submit to the forces that will silence you, a cheong hay poa, a long steam woman, a talker, a dancer who moves with lightning. And you are propelled by your sense of fair play, by your respect for the dead and the living, by your thlee yip American laughter and language, by your desire to help order the chaotic world that you

live in, knowing as the stars sparkle on this New Year's night that you will not survive the work that still needs to be done in the streets of Gold Mountain.



## Chicana's Feminist Literature

### *A Re-vision Through Malintzin /or Malintzin Putting Flesh Back on the Object*

Norma Alarcón

Malintzin (or La Malinche) was an Aztec noble woman who was presented to Cortés upon landing in Veracruz in 1519. She subsequently served Cortés as lover, translator and tactical advisor. She is a controversial figure in the Conquest of Mexico. Her name is often called forth to reenact, symbolically, the Conquest or any conquest. Part of this drama, analogically so, is now being played out also in Aztlán.

Malintzin's history, her legend and subsequent mythic dimensions as evil goddess and creator of a new race – the mestizo race, embroils her in a family quarrel, where many male members often prefer to see her as the mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion; and where female members attempt to restore balance in ways that are sometimes painfully ambivalent, and at other times attempt to topple the traditional patriarchal mythology through revision and re-vision.<sup>1</sup>

This essay will explore the traditional image of Malintzin in Chicano culture and will provide examples of the ways contemporary Chicana feminist writers have reacted to and used this image in their work.

In our patriarchal mythological pantheon, there exists even now a woman who was once real. Her historicity, her experience, her true flesh and blood were discarded. A Kantian, dualistic male consciousness stole her and placed her on the throne of evil, like Dante's upside down frozen Judas, doomed to moan and bemoan. The woman is interchangeably called by three names: Malintzin, Malinche, Marina. Malintzin's excruciating life in bondage was of no account, and continues to be of no account. Her almost half century of mythic existence, until recent times mostly in the oral traditions, had turned her into a handy reference point not only for controlling, interpreting or visualizing women, but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Eve whose primeval reality is not historically documentable and who supposedly existed in some past edenic time, Malintzin's betrayal of our supposed pre-Columbian paradise is recent and hence almost palpable. This almost-within-reach past heightens romantic nostalgia and as a consequence hatred for Malintzin and women becomes as vitriolic as the American Puritans' loathing of witches-women.

The focus of the betrayal is not a lofty challenge to a "god" who subsequently unleashed evil upon the world as punishment. Disobedience to a "god" might place the discussion at times on an ideal plane and relieve tension momentarily as one switches from an intense dialogue about one's body to a "rarified" field at least in terms of the vocabulary used. However, the male myth of Malintzin is made to see betrayal first of all in her very sexuality, which makes it nearly impossible at any given moment to go beyond the vagina as the supreme site of evil until proven innocent by way of virginity or virtue, the most pawnable commodities around.<sup>3</sup>

Because the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred. All we see is hatred of women. We must hate her too since love seems only possible through extreme virtue whose definition is at best slippery.

The poet Alma Villanueva must have realized, understood the insidiousness of the hate syndrome. Her whole book *Bloodroots* is a song to the rejection of self-loathing. The poem "I sing to myself" states:

I could weep and rage  
 against the man who never  
 stroked my fine child hair  
 who never felt the pride of  
 my femininity...<sup>4</sup>

It is not just the father that is a source of pain; a mother figure appears also. The mother is impotent to help the daughter. All

of her energies seem directed, spent in her desire and need for man, a factor that repulses and attracts the daughter. Love for mother is an ambivalence rooted in the daughter's sense of abandonment by her mother and her apparently enormous and irrational need:

Never finding a breast to rest  
and warm myself ...<sup>5</sup>

As the daughter proceeds to repeat her mother's experience, she ironically discovers and affirms a "mounting self/love" as a combative force against the repetition of the mother's abnegation, and irrational need of and dependency on men. Self-love as a tool of survival, however, leads the male lover to reject her. Her conclusion leaves no doubt as to what woman may be forced to do:

I/woman give birth:  
and this time to  
myself <sup>6</sup>

The sexual abuse experienced leaves the daughter no choice but to be her own mother, to provide her own supportive, nurturing base for the physical and psychic survival. To escape the cycle of loathing and self-loathing, Villanueva's woman has no alternative, even though she would have wanted more options, but to first love the self and then proceed to regenerate and nurture it by becoming her own mother. She is forced to transform the self into both mother and daughter and rejects the male flesh which at this point in time "is putrid and bitter." He must be transfigured.

The end effect could be seen as narcissistic, a perennial accusation directed at woman's literature. Yet, if it be narcissistic, never has a motive force for it been revealed so tellingly and clearly, never have the possible roots been exposed so well: starvation for self-reflection in the other: man or woman.

The male myth of Malintzin, in its ambivalent distaste and fear of the so-called "enigmatic feminine," echoes in this poem as it does in many Mexican/Chicana's poems, even when her name is not mentioned. The pervasiveness of the myth is

unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness.

The myth contains the following sexual possibilities: woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it be seduction or rape. The possible use is double-edged: That is, the use of her as pawn may be intracultural, "amongst us guys," or intercultural, which means if we are not using her then "they" must be using her. Since woman is seen as highly pawnable, nothing she does is perceived as a choice. Because Malintzin aided Cortés in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman's sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation. Indeed, as long as we continue to be seen in that way we are earmarked to be abusable matter, not just by men of another culture, but all cultures including the one that breeds us.

Lorna Dee Cervantes addresses herself to the latter point in her poem "Baby you cramp my style." In the poem Malintzin is mentioned by her other name: Malinche. The poet is asked to bestow her sexual favors; the lover's tone implies that her body/self is as available as the mythic Malinche is thought to be by male consciousness:

You cramp my style, baby  
when you roll on top of me  
shouting, "Viva La Raza!"  
at the top of your prick.

...

Come on Malinche  
Gimme some more!<sup>7</sup>

He cramps her style; she refuses sexual exploitation for herself and her daughters yet to come, in a way Malintzin could not do because of the constraints of the slave society into which she was born.

The Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos reminds us in "Malinche"<sup>8</sup> that Malintzin was sold into slavery by complicitous parents to enhance her brother's inheritance. The mother eager to please her new husband agrees to sell her daughter, and therefore enchains her destiny. Castellanos speculates, in the poem, that this is the result of the mother's own self-loathing. A

mother who cannot bear to see herself reflected in her daughter's mirror/sexuality prefers to shatter the image/mirror, negate the daughter and thereby perpetuate rejection and negation.

Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a brilliant chronicler of the Conquest with a great eye for detail, reveals to us that when Malintzin re-encounters her mother and brother years later and during the very process of the Conquest, she is merely polite. It seems that Malintzin, instead of offering them protection within the folds of the victorious, leaves them to their own devices for survival in an embattled country. In a way she condemns them to servitude just as she had been condemned. Why is there no forgiveness? Within what context can we analyze Malintzin's behavior at this point? We have a reversal, the daughter negates the mother.

Within the complex mother-daughter relationship, the mother keeps bearing quite a bit of the responsibility for the daughter's emotional starvation, abandonment or enslavement and yet paradoxically both are subordinate and subjected to a male culture and tradition. Perhaps our sexual identification with our mothers leads us to expect greater understanding from her as well a psychic/sexual protection. Villanueva tells us it is a false expectation – mothers are powerless, looking to satisfy their own hunger through men, which is agonizing for the daughter: "her pain haunted me for years."<sup>9</sup>

Simone Weil suggests that the conscious slave is much superior, and I would add that a woman who is conscious of being perceived as pawn is much superior. I doubt that the historical Malintzin was a truly conscious slave. In her ambience slavery was a cultural norm, it was not unusual for men or women to be royalty one day and slave, vanquished or sacrificial victim the next. It was a norm within which she had to seek accommodation. It is also quite possible that what is seen as Malintzin's allegiance to Cortés – hence purposeful betrayal of "her people" – may be explained by Weil's perception of the slave-master relationship. She says, "... the thought of being in absolute subjection as somebody's plaything is a thought no human being can sustain: so if a man (I add woman) is left with no means at all of escaping constraint he (she) has no alternative except to persuade himself (herself) that he (she) is doing voluntarily the very things he (she) is forced to do; in other words, he (she) substitutes devotion for obedience ... devotion

of this kind rests upon self-deception, because the reasons for it will not bear inspection."<sup>10</sup>

In our religiously permeated and oriented indo-hispanic minds, it is often the case that devotion is equated with obedience and vice versa, particularly for women and children, so that disobedience is seen as a lack of devout allegiance, and not necessarily as a radical questioning of our forms of life. This factor makes it almost impossible to sense a shift from obedience to devotion; they have been one and the same for hundreds of years. As such, we are a greater unconscious prey to subjugation which we then proceed to call devotion/love. To be obedient/devoted is proof of love, especially for women and children.

Consciously and unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to woman particularly as heterosexual relationships are conceived today and in the past. In an "Open Letter to Carolina... or Relations between Men and Women" the Chicano poet Abelardo Delgado testifies as follows: "Octavio Paz in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* has much to say as to how we as Chicanos see our women... For now let it suffice to say that as far as our wives and mothers we make saints of them but remain always in search of a lover with macho characteristics (*sic*)." <sup>11</sup> Obviously when the wife or would-be-wife, the mother or would-be-mother questions out loud and in print the complex "servitude/devotion/love," she will be quickly seen as false to her "obligation" and duty, hence a traitor. Delgado also points to the creation of a different category of women – macho-lover – who will provide comforts beyond those that fall within the purview of wives and mothers. What is a macho/lover kind of woman?

Delgado goes on to tell Carolina that "All it takes is a simple refusal on the part of women to be abused by us men." However, he cautions about the manner in which it is done, "You must show them all that your mind is on par or above theirs. You must be careful that you do this with some grace, dignity and humility... Men might accept your challenges a few times and let it go but if our ego happens to be wounded, then watch out, Carolina, because what follows is a cold rejection and a new assigned role as a feme-macho."<sup>12</sup> (Will this new role of a



"feme-macho" then provide the macho/lovers that are sought above and beyond the wife and mother?)

It seems that what is wanted here is for all women to be a kind of Sor Juana,<sup>13</sup> which leaves out the majority of us who are not fortunate enough to be a woman of genius. But because we know Sor Juana's dreadful fate as a result of her intellectual endeavors, we also know that genius is hardly enough. Even a genius needs a political base, a constituency. Since many Mexican/Chicana poets' challenges are straightforward, not humble, I shudder to think at our marginalization; how are we being shunned?

When our subjection is manifested through devotion we are saints and escape direct insult. When we are disobedient, hence undevout, we are equated with Malintzin; that is, the *myth* of male consciousness, not the *historical* figure in all her dimensions doomed to live in chains (regardless of which patriarchy might have seemed the best option for survival).

Carmen Tafolla's poem "La Malinche"<sup>14</sup> makes it quite clear that Malintzin as woman is dispossessed of herself by every male ideology with which she was connected. Tafolla would simply like to see Malintzin recognized as a visionary and founder of a people. Yet as I have noted, the realities that this figure encompasses are much too complex to simply replace them with the notion of a matriarch. However, each implicit or explicit poem on Malintzin emphasizes the pervasive preoccupation and influence of the myth and women's need to demythify.

The mythic aspects of disavowal, and the historical ambiance of Malintzin merge in Chicanas' literature to bring out the following sexual political themes: 1) to choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all; 2) woman's abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/emotional starvation occur even in the midst of tangible family; 3) woman is a slave, emotionally as well as economically; 4) women are seen not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable; 5) blind devotion is not a feasible human choice (this is further clarified by the telling absence of poems by women to the Virgin of Guadalupe, while poems by men to her are plentiful); 6) when there is love/devotion it is at best deeply ambivalent as exemplified by Rina Rocha in "To the penetrator:"



I hate the love  
I feel for you.<sup>15</sup>

Feminist women agree with Hegel, despite his relentless use of man as universal, that the subject depends on external reality. If she is to be fully at home this external reality must reflect back to her what she actually is or would want to be. When we don't participate in creating our own defined identity and reality as women, when the material and spiritual realities do not reflect us as contributors to the shaping of the world, we may feel as in Judy Lucero's poem "I speak in an illusion:"

I speak but only in an illusion  
For I see and I don't  
It's me and It's not  
I hear and I don't  
These illusions belong to me  
I stole them from another  
Care to spend a day in my House of Death?  
Look at my garden... are U amazed?  
No trees, no flowers, no grass... no gardens...  
I love and I don't  
I hate and I don't  
I sing and I don't  
I live and I don't  
For I'm in a room of clouded smoke  
And a perfumed odor  
Nowhere can I go and break these bonds  
Which have me in an illusion  
But the bonds are real.<sup>16</sup>

Feminism is a way of saying that nothing in patriarchy truly reflects women unless we accept distortions – mythic and historical. However, as Chicanas embrace feminism they are charged with betrayal *a la* Malinche. Often great pains are taken to explain that our feminism assumes a humanistic nuance.

The charge remains as a clear image imprinted on Chicanas (and I believe most Third World women, in this country or outside of it) by men. It continues to urge us to make quantum leaps towards a male ideologized humanism devoid of female consciousness. The lure of an ideal humanism is seductive, especially for spiritual women such as we have often been brought up to be; but without female consciousness and envisioning how as women we would like to exist in the material world, to leap into humanism without repossessing ourselves may be exchanging one male ideology for another.

As women we are and continue to be tokens everywhere at the present moment. Everywhere in a Third World context, women invited to partake in feast of modeling humanism can be counted among few, and those few may be enjoying what Adrienne Rich calls "a false power which masculine society offers to a few women who 'think like men' on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are. This is the meaning of female tokenism: that power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to the few."<sup>17</sup>

Even as we concern ourselves with Third World women's economic exploitation, we have to concern ourselves with psychosexual exploitation and pawnability at the hands of one's brother, father, employer, master, political systems and sometimes, sadly so, powerless mothers. As world politics continues the histrionics of dominance and control attempting to figure out just who indeed will be the better macho in the world map, macho politics' last priority is the quality of our lives as women or the lives of our children.

## Notes

1. Insofar as feminine symbolic figures are concerned, much of the Mexican/Chicano oral tradition as well as the intellectual are dominated by La Malinche/Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The former is a subversive feminine symbol which often is identified with La Llorona, the latter a feminine symbol of transcendence and salvation. The Mexican/Chicano cultural tradition has tended to polarize the lives of women through these national (and nationalistic) symbols thereby exercising almost sole authority over the control, interpretation and visualization of women. Although the material on both figures is vast, the following

- serve as guides to past and present visions and elucidations: Eric Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore*, 71 (1958), 34-39; Américo Paredes, "Mexican Legendry and the Rise of the Mestizo: A Survey," in *American Folk Legend* edited by Wayland D. Hand, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 97-107; Richard M. Dorson's foreword to *Folktales of Mexico*, edited by Américo Paredes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, esp. pp. xvi-xxxvii; and Octavio Paz, "The Songs of La Malinche," in the *The Labrynth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, New York: Grove Press, 1961, 65-88. Paz takes the traditional male perspective of woman as enigma and mystery and then proceeds to disclose the culture's (men's) mentality vis-à-vis these figures. Women in their assigned roles as transmitters of the culture have often adhered to these views, however, they have not created them.
2. Bertrand Russell in *Marriage and Morals* affirms that the conception of female virtues has been built up in order to make the patriarchal family as we have known it possible.
  3. Villanueva, Alma. "I sing to myself," in *Third Chicano Literary Prize: Irvine 1976-77*. Dept. of Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Irvine, 1977, 99-101.
  4. *Ibid.*, 100
  5. *Ibid.*, 101
  6. *El Fuego de Aztlán*, 1, No. 4 (Summer 1977), 39.
  7. *Poesía no eres tú*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 295-297.
  8. Villanueva, op. cit., 99.
  9. Weil, Simone. *First and Last Notebooks*. Translated by Richard Rees. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 41.
  10. See note 1 for my commentary on this text.
  11. *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, VI, no. 2 (primavera 1978), 35.
  12. *Ibid.*, 38.
  13. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a famous poet-nun of the Mexican Colonial Period. A highly creative and intellectual woman, she was forced by the church to abandon her writing after penning a treatise that challenged a prelate's notions on the nature of Love and Christ.
  14. *Canto al Pueblo: An Anthology of Experience*. (San Antonio, Texas: Penca Books, 1978), 38-39.
  15. *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*. III, No.2 (Primavera 1975), 5.
  16. *De Colores*, I, no.1 (Winter 1973), 52.
  17. "On Priviledge, Power and Tokenism." *MS*, September 1979, 43.

## Ceremony for Completing a Poetry Reading

*Chrystos*

This is a give-away poem  
You have come gathering  
You have made a circle with me  
of the places where I have wandered  
I want to give you the first daffodil opening from the earth  
    I have sown  
to give you warm loaves of bread  
baked in soft mounds like breasts  
In this circle I pass each of you a shell from our mother sea  
Hold it in your spirit & hear the stories she will tell you  
I have wrapped your faces around me, a warm robe  
Let me give you ribbonwork leggings, dresses sewn  
    with elk teeth  
moccasins woven with red & sky blue porcupine quills  
I give you blankets woven of flowers & roots  
Come closer  
I have more to give this basket is very large  
I have stitched it of your kind words  
Here is a necklace of feathers & bones  
a sacred meal of choke cherries  
Take this mask of bark which keeps out the evil ones  
This basket is only the beginning  
There is something in my arms for all of you  
I offer you  
this memory of sunrise seen through ice crystals  
Here, an afternoon of looking into the sea from high rocks  
Here, a red-tailed hawk circling over our heads  
One of its feathers drops for your hair  
May I give you this round stone which holds an ancient spirit  
This stone will soothe you  
Within this basket is something you have been looking for  
all of your life  
Come take it  
Take as much as you want  
I give you seeds of a new way

I give you the moon shining on a fire of singing women  
I give you the sound of our feet dancing  
I give you the sound of our thoughts flying  
I give you the sound of peace  
moving into your faces & sitting down

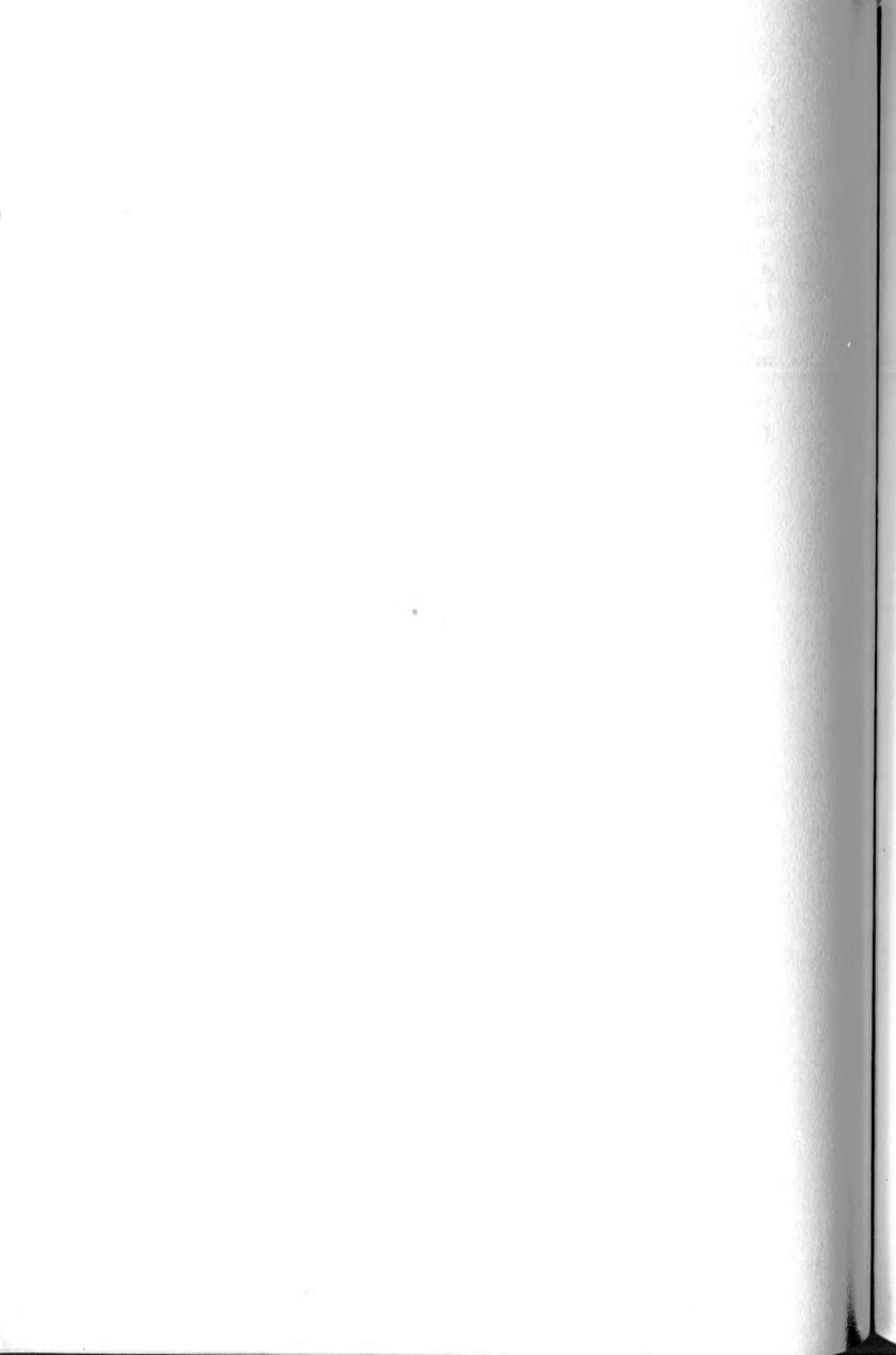
Come

this is a give away poem

I cannot go home  
until you have taken everything  
and the basket which held it

When my hands are empty

I will be full



# Art Folio







Happy/L.A. Hyder, *New Country Daughter/ Lebanese American*, 1981  
Black and white photograph originally printed from two negatives, 11" x 14"  
Collection of the Artist



# SUN MAD RAISINS

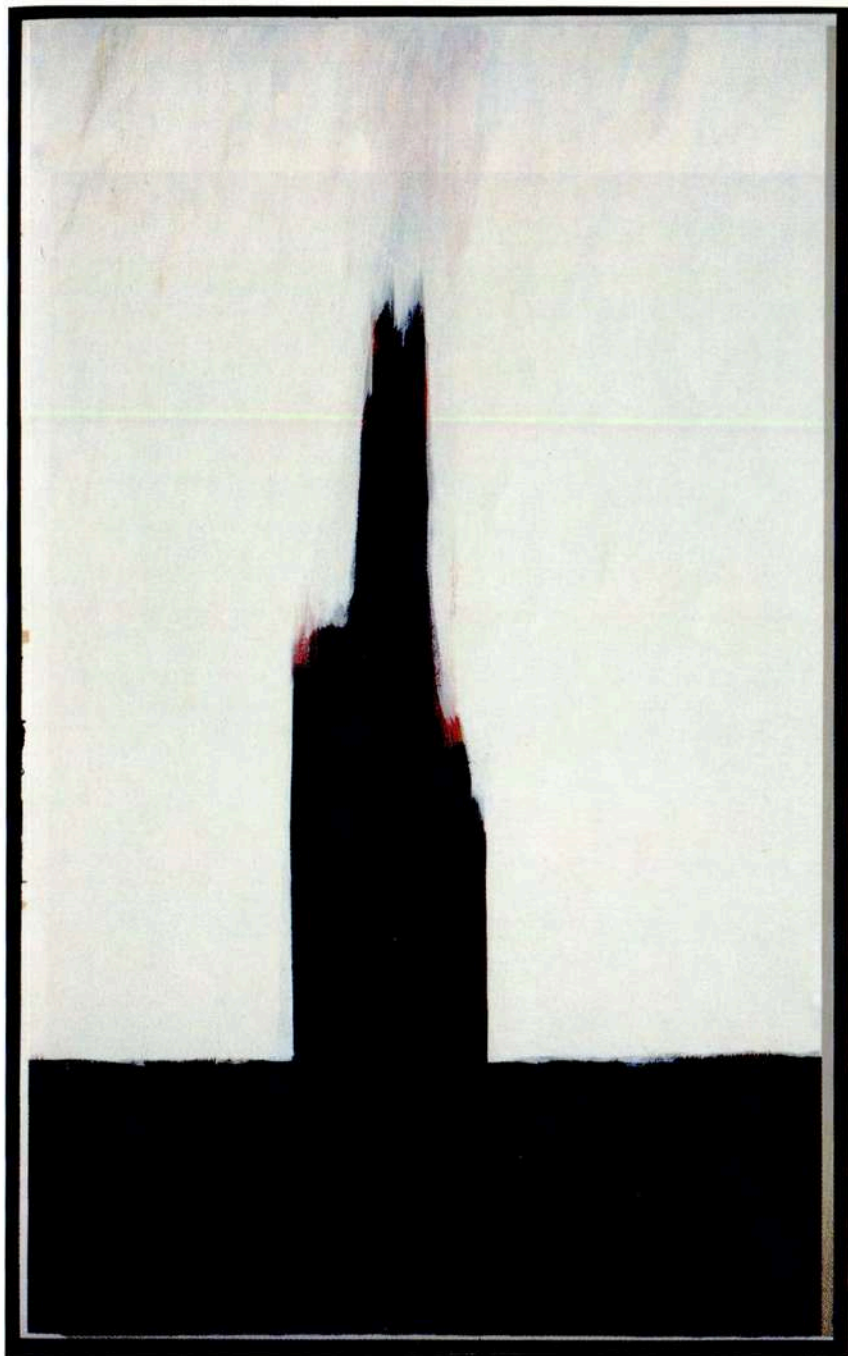
UNNATURALLY GROWN WITH

INSECTICIDES - MITICIDES - HERBICIDES - FUNGICIDES

Ester Hernández, *Sun Mad*, 1981

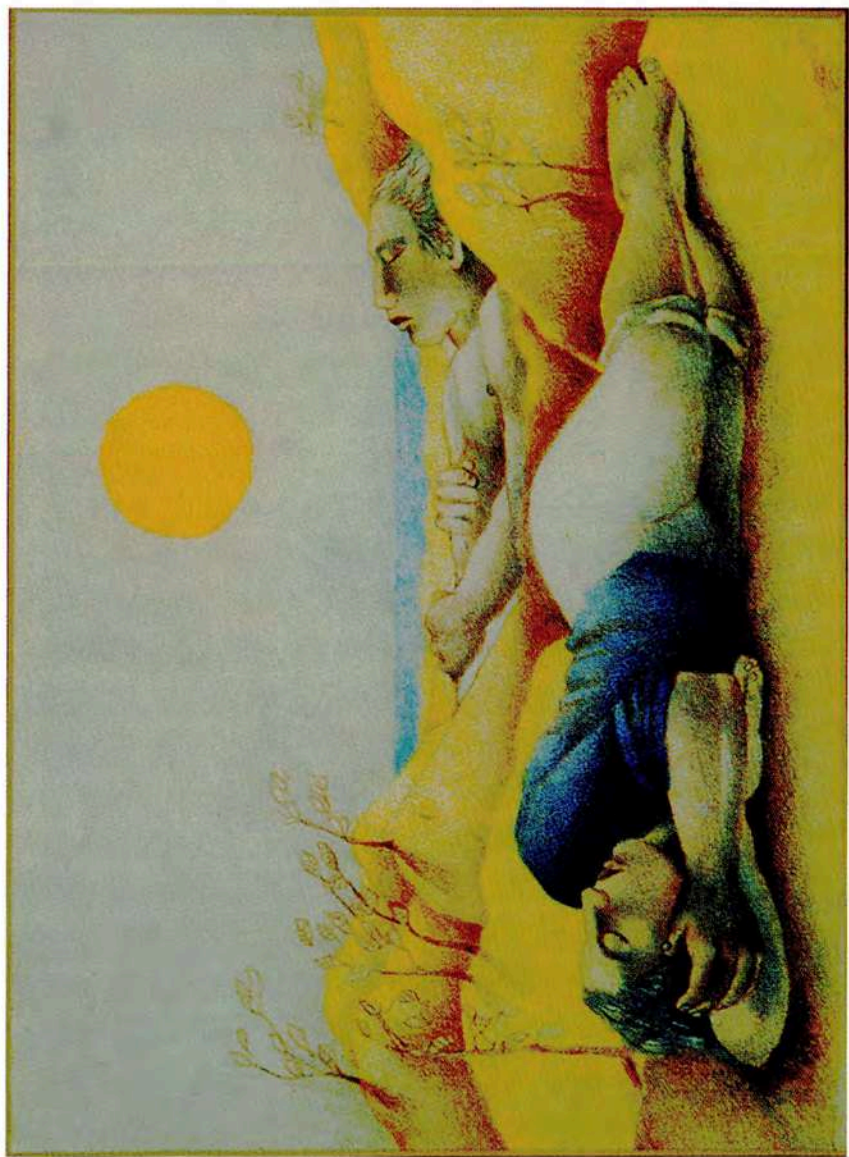
Color screen print, 17" x 22"

Collection of the Artist



Betty Nobue Kano, *Being II*, 1983  
Acrylic on canvas, 9' x 5.5'  
Collection of San Francisco Arts Commission  
Printed with permission from the Artist



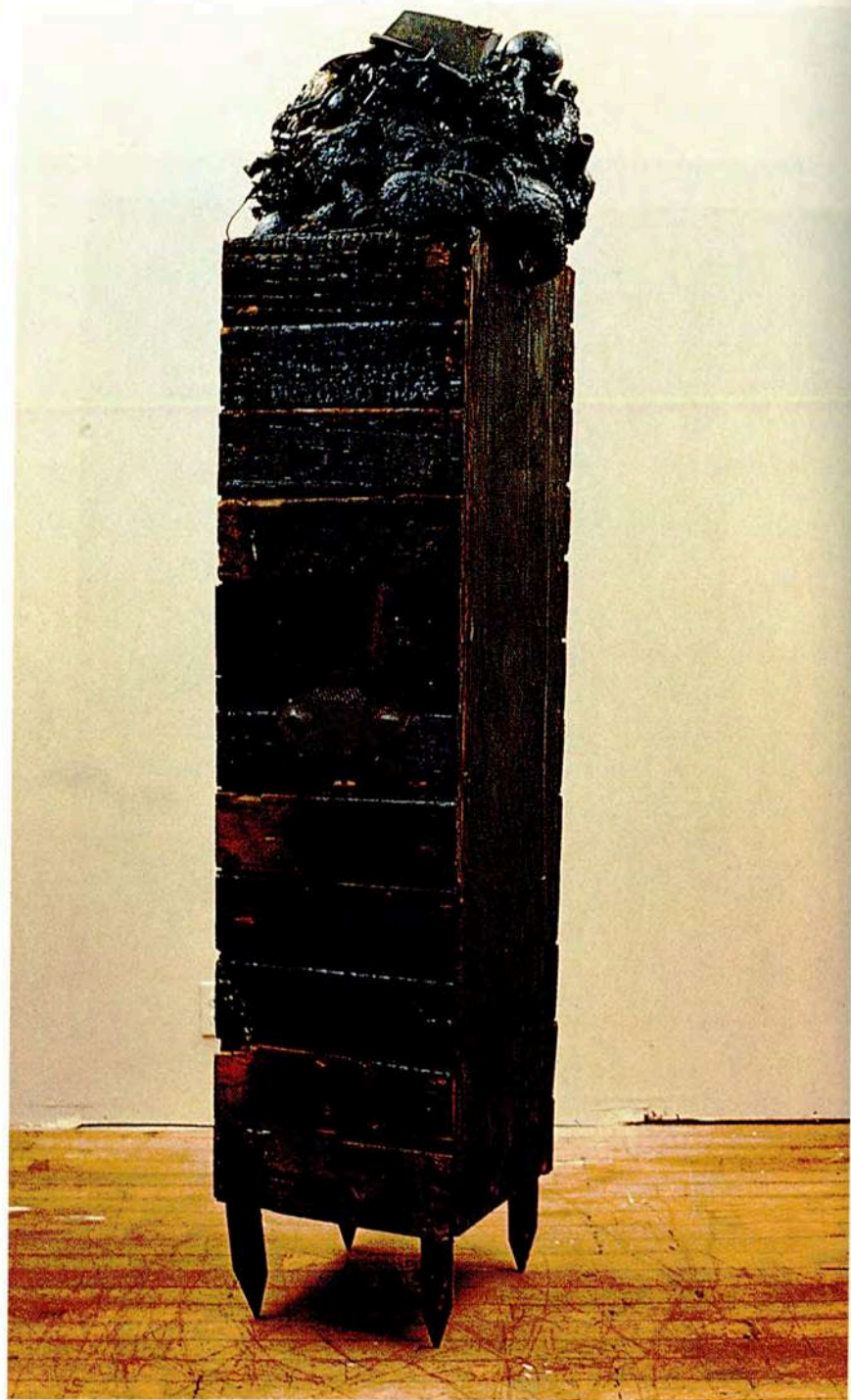


Liliana Wilson Grez, *Los Desaparecidos en el Cielo (The Disappeared in Heaven)*, 1977  
Pencil on paper, 16" x 12"  
Collection of the Artist



Nereida García-Ferraz, *La Vigilia*, 1989  
Oil and wax on stonehenge paper, 32" x 40"  
Collection of the Artist





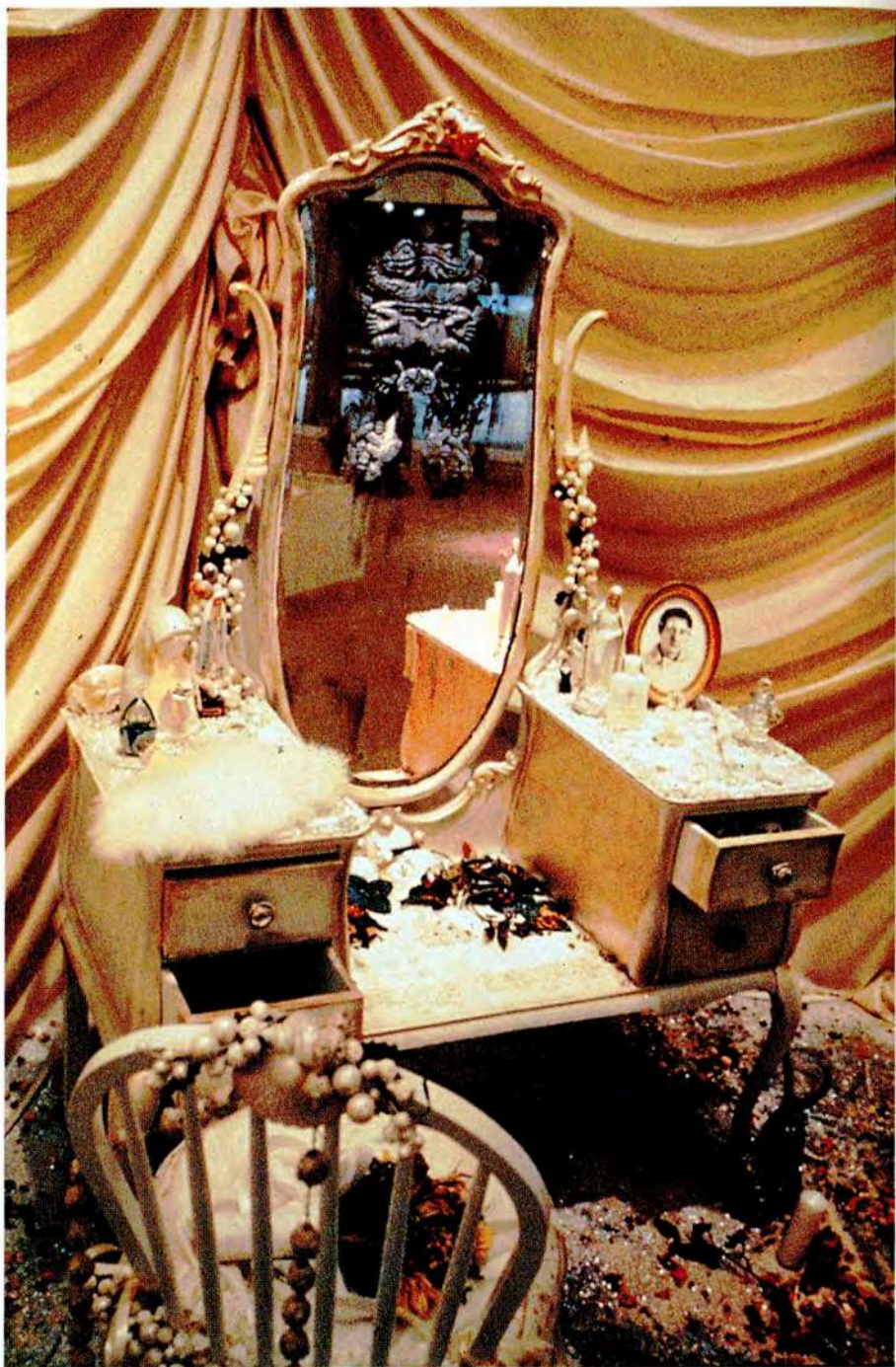
Fan L. Warren, *Negro House*, 1988  
Mixed media sculpture, 80" x 16" x 19"  
Collection of the Artist





Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, *My Ghost Dance*, 1981  
Pastel (from Ghost Dance Series), dimensions unknown  
From *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 15 (1982)  
Printed with permission of the Artist





Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Venus Envy: Chapter One*, 1993  
Part of a larger piece of mixed media installation  
Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris  
Photo by George Hirose

*El Mundo Zurdo*  
*The Vision*



Jean Weisinger, *Audre Lorde*, 1990  
Black & White photograph, 5.25" x 5.25"  
Collection of the Artist

## El Mundo Zurdo

### *The Vision*

*Coming into spirituality the way I did changed the christian myth that there is nothing we can do – we are totally powerless. I found out that when there was trouble, my people did not say “o.k., we can’t fight, we just have to let god handle it.” They went and made sacrifices, they evoked their gods and goddesses, they became possessed, and they went out there and they fought. You learn to take power when there is a presence behind you.*

– Luisah Teish

We, the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. We reach a spirituality that has been hidden in the hearts of oppressed people under layers of centuries of traditional god-worship. It emerges from under the veils of La Virgen de Guadalupe and unrolls from Yemaya’s ocean waves whenever we need to be uplifted from or need the courage to face the tribulations of a racist patriarchal world where there is no relief. Our spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the “small still voice” (*Teish*) within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world.

The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to “transcend” our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But, our vulnerability *can* be the source of our power – **if we use it.**

As Third World women, we are especially vulnerable to the many-headed demon of oppression. We are the women on the bottom. Few oppressions pass over us. To work towards the freedom of our own skin and souls would, as Combahee states, “...mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of *all* systems of oppression.” The love we have for our common maligned bodies and souls must burgeon out in *lucha*, in struggle. As Teish points



out, we must work toward diminishing the possibility of being locked up in a padded cell, of being battered or raped. Our feelings of craziness and powerlessness that Combahee speaks of are induced by the shit society dumps on us rather than stemming from being born ugly or evil as the patriarchal shrinks would have us believe. We must not believe the story *they* tell about us. We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves – even in our most private unspoken moments.

The vision of radical Third World Feminism necessitates our willingness to work with those people who would feel at home in *El Mundo Zurdo, the left-handed world*: the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged. From our blood and spirit connections with these groups, we women on the bottom throughout the world can form an international feminism. For separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution. *Autonomy*, however, is *not* separatism. We recognize the right and necessity of colonized peoples throughout the world, including Third World women in the US, forming independent movements toward self-government. But ultimately, we must struggle together. *Together* we form a vision which spans from the self-love of our colored skins, to the respect of our foremothers who kept the embers of revolution burning, to our reverence for the trees – the final reminder of our rightful place on this planet.

The change evoked on these pages is material as well as psychic. Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and the myth-maker.

Hand in Hand, we brew and forge a revolution.

## Give Me Back

*Chrystos*

that anger bone mal mama  
that rattle painted red, painted fresh blood, slaughtered enemy  
hung with strong feathers, guts of vipers  
I'll knock down this old long house this weary war horse  
these dry rituals called  
how are you  
I want that brown thigh bone  
carved with eagle beak  
that club      dig it out of the dirt

mal mama spirit stole my bones      put them in her burying jug  
sealed me up in wax & ashes  
I crack out  
arrange my bones in their naming places  
I take what I want  
shaking my sacred hair      dancing out taboo  
I mark out the space I am  
with knives



## La Prieta

Gloria E. Anzaldúa

When I was born, Mamágrande Locha inspected my buttocks looking for the dark blotch, the sign of indio, or worse, of mulatto blood. My grandmother (Spanish, part German, the hint of royalty lying just beneath the surface of her fair skin, blue eyes and the coils of her once blond hair) would brag that her family was one of the first to settle in the range country of south Texas.

Too bad mihijita was morena, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children. But she loved mihijita anyway. What I lacked in whiteness, I had in smartness. But it was too bad I was dark like an Indian.

"Don't go out in the sun," my mother would tell me when I wanted to play outside. "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirt on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican." It never dawned on her that, though sixth-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian. I passed my adolescence combatting her incessant orders to bathe my body, scrub the floors and cupboards, clean the windows and the walls.

And as we'd get into the back of the "patron's" truck that would take us to the fields, she'd ask, "Where's your gorra (sunbonnet)?" La gorra - rim held firm by slats of cardboard, neck flounce flowing over my shoulders - made me feel like a horse with blinders, a member of the French Foreign Legion, or a nun bowed down by her wimple.

One day in the middle of the cotton field, I threw the gorra away and donned a sombrero. Though it didn't keep out the Texas 110° sun as well as the bonnet, I could now see in all directions, feel the breeze, dry the sweat on my neck.

When I began writing this essay, nearly two years ago, the wind I was accustomed to suddenly turned into a hurricane. It opened the door to the old images that haunt me, the old ghosts and all the old wounds. Each image a sword that cuts through me, each word a test. Terrified, I shelved the rough draft of this essay for a year.

I was terrified because in this writing I must be hard on people of color who are the oppressed victims. I am still afraid

because I will have to call us on a lot of shit like our own racism, our fear of women and sexuality. One of my biggest fears is that of betraying myself, of consuming myself with self-castigation, of not being able to unseat the guilt that has ridden on my back for years.

These my two hands  
 quick to slap my face  
 before others could slap it<sup>1</sup>

But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me?

With terror as my companion, I dip into my life and begin work on myself. Where did it begin, the pain, the images that haunt me?

### **Images That Haunt Me**

When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper. "She's a throwback to the Eskimo," the doctor told my mother. "Eskimo girl children get their periods early." At seven I had budding breasts. My mother would wrap them in tight cotton girdles so the kids at school would not think them strange beside their own flat brown mole nipples. My mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. "Keep your legs shut, Prieta." This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. And when she got mad at me she would yell, "He batallado más contigo que con todos los demas y no lo agradeces!" (I've taken more care with you than I have with all the others and you're not even grateful.) My sister started suspecting our secret – that there was something "wrong" with me. How much can you hide from a sister you've slept with in the same bed since infancy?

What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me. Mixed with this power struggle

was her guilt at having borne a child who was marked "con la seña," thinking she had made me a victim of her sin. In her eyes and in the eyes of others I saw myself reflected as "strange," "abnormal," "QUEER." I saw no other reflection. Helpless to change that image, I retreated into books and solitude and kept away from others.

The whole time growing up I felt that I was not of this earth. An alien from another planet – I'd been dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?

One day when I was about seven or eight, my father dropped on my lap a 25¢ pocket western, the only type of book he could pick up at a drugstore. The act of reading forever changed me. In the westerns I read, the house servants, the villains and the cantineras (prostitutes) were all Mexicans. But I knew that the first cowboys (vaqueros) were Mexicans, that in Texas we outnumbered the Anglos, that my grandmother's ranch lands had been ripped off by the greedy Anglo. Yet in the pages of these books, the Mexican and Indian were vermin. The racism I would later recognize in my school teachers and never be able to ignore again I found in that first western I read.

My father dying, his aorta bursting while he was driving, the truck turning over, his body thrown out, the truck falling on his face. Blood on the pavement. His death occurred just as I entered puberty. It irrevocably shattered the myth that there existed a male figure to look after me. How could my strong, good, beautiful godlike father be killed? How stupid and careless of God. What if chance and circumstance and accident ruled? I lost my father, God, and my innocence all in one bloody blow.

Every 24 days, raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing periods accompanied cramps, tonsillitis and 105° fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. "It's all in your head," they would say. "When you get older and get married and have children the pain will stop." A monotonous litany from the men in white all through my teens.

The bloodshed on the highway had robbed my adolescence from me like the blood on my diaper had robbed childhood from me. And into my hands unknowingly I took the transformation of my own being.

Nobody's going to save you.  
 No one's going to cut you down  
 cut the thorns around you.  
 No one's going to storm  
 the castle walls nor  
 kiss awake your birth,  
 climb down your hair,  
 nor mount you  
 onto the white steed.

There is no one who  
 will feed the yearning.  
 Face it. You will have  
 to do, do it yourself.<sup>2</sup>

My father dead, my mother and I turned to each other. Hadn't we grown together? We were like sisters – she was 16 when she gave birth to me.

Though she loved me she would only show it covertly – in the tone of her voice, in a look. Not so with my brothers – there it was visible for all the world to see. They were male and surrogate husbands, legitimate receivers of her power. Her allegiance was and is to her male children, not to the female.

Seeing my mother turn to my brothers for protection, for guidance – a mock act. She and I both knew she wouldn't be getting any from them. Like most men they didn't have it to give, instead needed to get it from women. I resented the fact that it was OK for my brothers to touch and kiss and flirt with her, but not for my sister and me. Resenting the fact that physical intimacy between women was taboo, dirty.

Yet she could not discount me. "Machona – india ladina" (masculine – wild Indian), she would call me because I did not act like a nice little Chicanita is supposed to act: later, in the same breath she would praise and blame me, often for the same thing – being a tomboy and wearing boots, being unafraid of snakes or knives, showing my contempt for women's roles, leaving home to go to college, not settling down and getting married, being a política, siding with the Farmworkers. Yet, while she would try to correct my more aggressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my "waywardness." (Something

she will never admit.) Proud that I'd worked myself through school. Secretly proud of my paintings, of my writing, though all the while complaining because I made no money out of it.

### Verguenza (Shame)

. . . being afraid that my friends would see my momma, would know that she was loud – her voice penetrated every corner. Always when we came into a room everyone looked up. I didn't want my friends to hear her brag about her children. I was afraid she would blurt out some secret, would criticize me in public. She always embarrassed me by telling everyone that I liked to lie in bed reading and wouldn't help her with the housework.

. . . eating at school out of sacks, hiding our "lonches" *papas con chorizo* behind cupped hands and bowed heads, gobbling them up before the other kids could see. Guilt lay folded in the tortilla. The Anglo kids laughing—calling us "tortilleros," the Mexican kids taking up the word and using it as a club with which to hit each other. My brothers, sister and I started bringing white bread sandwiches to school. After a while we stopped taking our lunch altogether.

There is no beauty in poverty, in my mother being able to give only one of her children lunch money. (We all agreed it should go to Nune, he was growing fast and was always hungry.) It was not very romantic for my sister and me to wear the dresses and panties my mother made us out of flour sacks because she couldn't afford store-bought ones like the other mothers.

Well, I'm not ashamed of you anymore, Momma.  
 My heart, once bent and cracked, once  
 ashamed of your China ways.  
 Ma, hear me now, tell me your story  
 again and again.

– Nellie Wong, "From a Heart of Rice Straw,"  
*Dreams of Harrison Railroad Park*

It was not my mother's fault that we were poor and yet so much of my pain and shame has been with our both betraying each other. But my mother has always been there for me in spite of our differences and emotional gulfs. She has never stopped

fighting; she is a survivor. Even now I can hear her arguing with my father over how to raise us, insisting that all decisions be made by both of them. I can hear her crying over the body of my dead father. She was 28, had had little schooling, was unskilled, yet her strength was greater than most men's, raising us single-handed.

After my father died, I worked in the fields every weekend and every summer, even when I was a student in college. (We only migrated once when I was seven, journeyed in the back of my father's red truck with two other families to the cotton fields of west Texas. When I missed a few weeks of school, my father decided this should not happen again.)

... the planes swooping down on us, the fifty or a hundred of us falling onto the ground, the cloud of insecticide lacerating our eyes, clogging our nostrils. Nor did the corporate farm owners care that there were no toilets in the wide open fields, no bushes to hide behind.

Over the years, the confines of farm and ranch life began to chafe. The traditional role of *la mujer* was a saddle I did not want to wear. The concepts "passive" and "dutiful" raked my skin like spurs and "marriage" and "children" set me to bucking faster than rattlesnakes or coyotes. I took to wearing boots and men's jeans and walking about with my head full of visions, hungry for more words and more words. Slowly I unbowed my head, refused my estate and began to challenge the way things were. But it's taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown - something that some people of color *never* will unlearn. And it is only now that the hatred of myself, which I spent the greater part of my adolescence cultivating, is turning to love.

### **La Muerte, the Frozen Snow Queen**

*I dig a grave, bury my first love, a German Shepherd. Bury the second, third, and fourth dog. The last one retching in the backyard, going into convulsions from insecticide poisoning. I buried him beside the others, five mounds in a row crowned with crosses I'd fashioned from twigs.*

*No more pets, no more loves - I court death now.*



. . . Two years ago on a fine November day in Yosemite Park, I fall on the floor with cramps, severe chills and shaking that go into spasms and near convulsions, then fevers so high my eyes feel like eggs frying. Twelve hours of this. I tell everyone, "It's nothing, don't worry, I'm alright." The first four gynecologists advise a hysterectomy. The fifth, a woman, says wait.

. . . Last March my fibroids conspired with an intestinal tract infection and spawned watermelons in my uterus. The doctor played with his knife. La Chingada ripped open, raped with the white man's wand. My soul in one corner of the hospital ceiling, getting thinner and thinner telling me to clean up my shit, to release the fears and garbage from the past that are hanging me up. So I take La Muerte's scythe and cut away my arrogance and pride, the emotional depressions I indulge in, the head trips I do on myself and other people. With her scythe I cut the umbilical cord shackling me to the past and to friends and attitudes that drag me down. Strip away - all the way to the bone. Make myself utterly vulnerable.

. . . I can't sleep nights. The mugger said he would come and get me. There was a break in the county jail and I *just* know he is broken out and is coming to get me because I picked up a big rock and chased him, because I got help and caught him. How *dare* he drag me over rocks and twigs, the skin on my knees peeling, how *dare* he lay his hands on my throat, how *dare* he try to choke me to death, how *dare* he try to push me off the bridge to splatter my blood and bones on the rocks 20 feet below. His breath on my face, our eyes only inches apart, our bodies rolling on the ground in an embrace so intimate we could have been mistaken for lovers.

That night terror found me curled up in my bed. I couldn't stop trembling. For months terror came to me at night and never left me. And even now, seven years later, when I'm out in the street after dark and I hear running footsteps behind me, terror finds me again and again.

*No more pets, no more loves.*

. . . one of my lovers saying I was frigid when he couldn't bring me to orgasm.



... bringing home my Peruvian boyfriend and my mother saying she did not want her "Prieta" to have a "mojado" (wetback) for a lover.

... my mother and brothers calling me puta when I told them I had lost my virginity and that I'd done it on purpose. My mother and brothers calling me jota (queer) when I told them my friends were gay men and lesbians.

... Randy saying, "It's time you stopped being a nun, an ice queen afraid of living." But I did not want to be a snow queen regal with icy smiles and fingernails that ripped her prey ruthlessly. And yet, I knew my being distant, remote, a mountain sleeping under the snow, is what attracted him.

A woman lies buried under me,  
interred for centuries, presumed dead.

A woman lies buried under me.  
I hear her soft whisper  
the rasp of her parchment skin  
fighting the folds of her shroud.  
Her eyes are pierced by needles  
her eyelids, two fluttering moths.<sup>3</sup>

I am always surprised by the image that my white and non-Chicano friends have of me, surprised at how much they *do not* know me, at how I do not allow them to know me. They have substituted the negative picture the white culture has painted of my race with a highly romanticized, idealized image. "You're strong," my friends said, "a mountain of strength."

Though the power may be real, the mythic qualities attached to it keep others from dealing with me as a person and rob me of my being able to act out my other selves. Having this "power" doesn't exempt me from being prey in the streets nor does it make my scrambling to survive, to feed myself, easier. To cope with hurt and control my fears, I grew a thick skin. Oh, the many names of power – pride, arrogance, control. I am not the frozen snow queen but a flesh and blood woman with perhaps too loving a heart, one easily hurt.

*I'm not invincible, I tell you. My skin's as fragile as a baby's I'm brittle bones and human, I tell you. I'm a broken arm.*

*You're a razor's edge, you tell me. Shock them shitless. Be the holocaust. Be the black Kali. Spit in their eye and never cry. Oh broken angel, throw away your cast, mend your wing. Be not a rock but a razor's edge and burn with falling.* – Journal Entry, Summer Solstice, 1978.

## Who Are My People

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. "Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement," say the members of my race. "Your allegiance is to the Third World," say my Black and Asian friends. "Your allegiance is to your gender, to women," say the feminists. Then there's my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there's my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings.* They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Years ago, a roommate of mine fighting for gay rights told MAYO, a Chicano organization, that she and the president were gay. They were ostracized. When they left, MAYO fell apart. They too, being forced to choose between the priorities of race, sexual preference, or gender.

In the streets of this gay mecca, San Francisco, a Black man at a bus stop yells, "Hey Faggots, come suck my cock." Randy yells back, "You goddamn nigger, I worked in the Civil Rights movement ten years so you could call me names." Guilt gagging in his throat with the word, nigger. . . a white woman waiting for the J-Church streetcar sees Randy and David kissing and says, "You should be ashamed of yourselves. Two grown men – disgusting."

. . . Randy and David running into the house. The hair on the back of my neck rises, something in their voices triggers fear in me. Three Latino men in a car had chased them as they were walking home from work. "Gay boys, faggots," they yelled throwing a beer bottle. Getting out of their car, knife blades reflect the full moon. . . Randy and David hitting each other in the hall. Thuds on the wall – the heavy animal sounds.

. . . Randy pounding on my door one corner of his mouth bleeding, his glasses broken, blind without them, he crying "I'm going to kill him, I'm going to kill the son of a bitch."

*The violence against us, the violence within us*, aroused like a rabid dog. Adrenaline-filled bodies, we bring home the anger and the violence we meet on the street and turn it against each other. We sic the rabid dog on each other and on ourselves. The black moods of alienation descend, the bridges we've extended out to each other crumble. We put the walls back up between us.

Once again it's faggot-hunting and queer-baiting time in the city. "And on your first anniversary of loving each other," I say to Randy, "and they had to be Latinos," feeling guilt when I look at David. Who is my brother's keeper, I wonder – knowing I have to be, we all have to be. We are all responsible. But who exactly *are* my people?

*I identify as a woman. Whatever insults women insults me.*

*I identify as gay. Whoever insults gays insults me.*

*I identify as feminist. Whoever slurs feminism slurs me.*

That which is insulted I take as part of me, but there is something too simple about this kind of thinking. Part of the dialectic is missing. What about what I do not identify as?

I have been terrified of writing this essay because I will have to own up to the fact that I do not exclude whites from the list of people I love, two of them happen to be gay males. For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound. There is an enormous contradiction in being a bridge.

## **Dance To the Beat of Radical Colored Chic**

This task – to be a bridge, to be a fucking crossroads for goddess' sake.

During my stint in the Feminist Writers' Guild many white members would ask me why Third World women do not come to FWG meetings and readings. I should have answered, "Because their skins are not as thick as mine, because their fear of encountering racism is greater than mine. They don't enjoy being put down, ignored, not engaged in equal dialogue, being tokens. And, neither do I." Oh, I know, women of color are hot right now and hip. Our afro-rhythms and latin salsas, the beat of our drums is in. White women flock to our parties, dance to the beat of radical colored chic. They come to our readings, take up our cause. I have no objections to this. What I mind is the pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women's burden. Like the monkey in the Sufi story, who upon seeing a fish in the water rushes to rescue it from drowning by carrying it up into the branches of a tree. She takes a missionary role. She attempts to talk *for* us – what a presumption! This act is a rape of our tongue and our acquiescence is a complicity to that rape. We women of color have to stop being modern medusas – throats cut, silenced into a mere hissing.

### **Where Do We Hang The Blame**

*The pull between what is and what should be.*

Does the root of the sickness lie within ourselves or within our patriarchal institutions? Did our institutions birth and propagate themselves and are we merely their pawns? Do ideas originate in human minds or do they exist in a "no-osphere," a limbo space where ideas originate without our help? Where do we hang the blame for the sickness we see around us – around our own heads or around the throat of "capitalism," "socialism," "men," "white culture?"

If we do not create these institutions, we certainly perpetuate them through our inadvertent support. What lessons do we learn from the mugger?

Certainly racism is not just a white phenomenon. Whites are the top dogs and they shit on the rest of us every day of our lives. But casting stones is not the solution. Do we hand the oppressors/thug the rocks he throws at us? How often do we people of color place our necks on the chopping block? What are the ways we hold out our wrists to be shackled? Do we gag

our own mouths with our "dios lo manda" resignation? How many times before the cock crows do we deny ourselves, shake off our dreams, and trample them into the sand? How many times do we fail to help one another up from the bottom of the stairs? How many times have we let someone else carry our crosses? How still do we stand to be crucified?

It is difficult for me to break free of the Chicano cultural bias into which I was born and raised, and the cultural bias of the Anglo culture that I was brainwashed into adopting. It is easier to repeat the racial patterns and attitudes, especially those of fear and prejudice, that we have inherited than to resist them.

Like a favorite old shoe that no longer fits we do not let go of our comfortable old selves so that the new self can be worn. We fear our power, fear our feminine selves, fear the strong woman within, especially the black Kali aspect, dark and awesome. Thus we pay homage not to the power inside us but to the power outside us, masculine power, external power.

I see Third World peoples and women not as oppressors but as accomplices to oppression by our unwittingly passing on to our children and our friends the oppressor's ideologies. I cannot discount the role I play as accomplice, that we all play as accomplices, for we are not screaming loud enough in protest.

The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society. And just as the use of gloves, masks, and disinfectants fails to kill this disease, government grants, equal rights opportunity programs, welfare, and foodstamps fail to uproot racism, sexism, and homophobia. And tokenism is not the answer. Sharing the pie is not going to work. I had a bite of it once and it almost poisoned me. With mutations of the virus such as these, one cannot isolate the virus and treat it. The whole organism is poisoned.

I stand behind whatever threatens our oppression. I stand behind whatever breaks us out of our bonds, short of killing and maiming. I stand with whatever and whoever breaks us out of our limited views and awakens our atrophied potentials.

How to turn away from the hellish journey that the disease has put me through, the alchemical nights of the soul. Torn limb from limb, knifed, mugged, beaten. My tongue (Spanish) ripped from my mouth, left voiceless. My name stolen from me. My



bowels fucked with a surgeon's knife, uterus and ovaries pitched into the trash. Castrated. Set apart from my own kind, isolated. My life-blood sucked out of me by my role as woman nurturer - the last form of cannibalism.

### **El Mundo Zurdo (the Left-handed World)<sup>4</sup>**

*The pull between what is and what should be.* I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement - a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. And yet, I am confused as to how to accomplish this.

I can't discount the fact of the thousands that go to bed hungry every night. The thousands that do numbing shitwork eight hours a day each day of their lives. The thousands that get beaten and killed every day. The millions of women who have been burned at the stake, the millions who have been raped. Where is the justice to this?

I can't reconcile the sight of a battered child with the belief that we choose what happens to us, that we create our own world. *I cannot resolve* this in myself. I don't know. I can only speculate, try to integrate the experiences that I've had or have been witness to and try to make some sense of why we do violence to each other. In short, I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be.

*"Growing up I felt that I was an alien from another planet dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?"*

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people.

I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses. Blindfolded in the blue air. The sword between my thighs, the blade warm with my flesh. I walk the rope - an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act.

The rational, the patriarchal, and the heterosexual have held sway and legal tender for too long. Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors are banding and bonding together to right that balance. Only *together* can we be a force. I see us as a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family.

We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In *El Mundo Zurdo I* with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.

### Notes

1. From my poem, "The Woman Who Lived Forever." All subsequent unacknowledged poems will be from my own writings.
2. From "Letting Go."
3. From "A Woman Lies Buried Under Me."
4. This section consists of notes "Towards a Construction of *El Mundo Zurdo*," an essay in progress.



# **A Black Feminist Statement**

*Combahee River Collective*<sup>1</sup>

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974.<sup>2</sup> During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

## **1. The Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism**

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists – some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W.

Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973 Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (civil rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual

abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

## **2. What We Believe**

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage

in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist

revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly", i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers are comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people,



particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, *per se* – *i.e.*, their biological maleness – that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it is so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

### 3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists

During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's movement continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women." We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In "A Black



Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determinant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female voices were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970's:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser. . . . After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the house because he is able to defend and protect the development of his home. . . . Women cannot do the same things as men – they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men are not equal to other men, i.e. ability, experience or even understanding. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver – they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life.<sup>3</sup>

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives cannot risk struggling against them both.

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hard-working allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly-felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and started doing an intense variety of consciousness-raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in Lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women's International Women's Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer, when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possibility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need

for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements which were first conceptualized as a Lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

#### **4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects**

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex and class are

simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes:

I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.

As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

### Notes

1. The Combahee River Collective is a Black feminist group in Boston whose name comes from the guerilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman.
2. This statement is dated April, 1977.
3. Michele Wallace. "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," *The Village Voice*, (28 July 1975): 6-7.
4. Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwanamke Mwananchi (The Nationalist Woman), Newark, NJ, 1971, 4-5. From *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah Eisenstein. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978.

## The Welder

Cherríe L. Moraga

I am a welder.  
Not an alchemist.  
I am interested in the blend  
of common elements to make  
a common thing.

No magic here.  
Only the heat of my desire to fuse  
what I already know  
exists. Is possible.

We plead to each other,  
*we all come from the same rock*  
*we all come from the same rock*  
ignoring the fact that we bend  
at different temperatures  
that each of us is malleable  
up to a point.

Yes, fusion *is* possible  
but only if things get hot enough –  
all else is temporary adhesion,  
patching up.

It is the intimacy of steel melting  
into steel, the fire of our individual  
passion to take hold of ourselves  
that makes sculpture of our lives,  
builds buildings.

And I am not talking about skyscrapers,  
merely structures that can support us  
without fear  
of trembling.

For too long a time  
the heat of my heavy hands  
has been smoldering



in the pockets of other  
people's business –  
they need oxygen to make fire.

I am now  
coming up for air.  
Yes, I *am*  
picking up the torch.

I am the welder.  
I understand the capacity of heat  
to change the shape of things.  
I am suited to work  
within the realm of sparks  
out of control.

I am the welder.  
I am taking the power  
into my own hands.

## O.K. Momma, Who the Hell Am I?

*an Interview with Luisah Teish*

*Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

### **Part One: "There was this rumbling in the background..."**

*G: Teish, in Numerology you can derive what your mission or life path is by adding the day of your birth, the month and the year and reducing it to a single digit number. The number corresponds with a Tarot card. According to this system you are a 19-10 and 1, the "genius." What do you see as your task in this life and how did you find that out?*

**T:** I've had a series of experiences that point the way. It's as if I was given a road map, and started traveling at different points. There is a travel consultant that meets me and says okay, now you go this way. The big vision, which I call my reformation, happened in the Fall 1974. I was in a terrible situation. I was coming out of having been deeply steeped in the Black Power movement. I had spent since 1970 quite a bit of time trying to ignore feminist teachings. There was this rumbling in the background saying that women ought to consider the position of women. I'm here screaming at the top of my lungs that Black people have to be free, you see. And over here I'm hearing people saying women have to be free too; there's a certain kind of oppression women suffer. But because it was primarily white women in the movement and white women who were vocalizing at the time, for a while I went along with the idea that, well, what they're talking about is only relevant to white women. At the same time, in my personal life I was being mistreated by people who claim to be about the fight for freedom. That contradiction was staring me in my face. My inner self was telling me, "You have marched, you have demonstrated, and you have fought for freedom, and Malcolm said 'freedom by any means necessary.'"

And yet I'm taking certain kinds of crap off of my brothers, you know. Why doesn't this apply clean across the board? And it put me in a position where I felt literally crippled. I felt like I had nowhere to turn and nothing really to do. Other things that had happened in my life — I was broke, underemployed, pregnant. I had had a child that died, went through a whole

number of things and came to the position that if I didn't have the right to fight to create a world that I could live in, if I could not have the right to fight absolutely everybody for the kind of world that I could live in – then I wouldn't live. I wouldn't live in a world where I would have to pretend to be inferior so that some man would look superior. I wouldn't live where somebody got a better break than me only because their skin was lighter.

But at the same time I didn't feel that I had enough power to really fight it. So I became suicidal. At the time I was taking Valium at the suggestion of a gynecologist who had a terrible reputation. You go in with a vaginal infection and they give you Valium, you know what I mean? And I'm on these Valiums and I'm saying I'm not going to live this kind of life, and I look around and I decided that I'm going to leave here. I lay down to die and my soul raised up out of my chest and sits up on the ceiling. She has a long debate with me about why am I trying to check out of here. And I tell her why I'm trying to check out and she says "no, no, no, no, you are going to live and you are going to fight, and I'm going to show you what you are going to do."

I lay there and here comes this parade of visions. Sometimes it was pictures, sometimes it was words – bold white letters traced in black. And she was telling me to go fight. Essentially, she was telling me to fight for my right to be a free woman. She was telling me to fight for my right to create beauty in the way that I see it. You know, when you're in the theatre there's always a struggle with people's art being junk and Hollywood and Broadway being the place to get to. She made it clear for me that my work had to have substance. There's no sense in me trying to play Miss Cupie Doll; I'm not one of the June Taylor dancers. I am the person who is going to work with the folk movement. Part of my assignment is legitimizing, bringing to life, the value of folk knowledge. And so I see myself using my art for the rest of my life, using my art to illuminate the culture of the common people.

Just about everything that I have done since 1973 has been the outgrowth of this spiritual prompting. Once I accepted my role – that I am an important person with a purpose – I have listened to that still small voice and she says things to me. You must always confront that which you fear. You gain strength by that, you see. And there's a bit of magic here.

I went through a period of time when I seriously thought I was going to lose my mind. That was because I was accepting, not what my goddess said my role was, but what other people said my role ought to be. Putting on false clothes. She said take them off. And there I was naked and I said "O.K., Momma, who the hell am I?" You know? And she says "you're a person who has been afraid of going crazy. You should do something about that." So the natural thing you must do is that anything you want to be spared of, you must work toward diminishing the possibility of it happening to you. And if it can happen to somebody else, it can happen to you, you know. So I can't afford to just walk around worried that I individually am going to be locked up for no reason. I have to make sure that nobody can be locked up for no reason. You have to eliminate the fear not only in yourself but the real basis for that fear.

So consequently, my work with the battered women shelters and my work with rape are basically an attempt to protect myself. It's about my own survival instinct and understanding that my destiny is infinitely tied with that of everybody else. You know there's a reason why we're here together on this same planet at this point in time.

**Part Two: "I see the reemergence of the women's movement as the manifestations of the desires of the goddess energy."**

**T:** The thing that I'm feeling very intuitively about is that something important is going on at this point in time, not only in my life but in the lives of women in general and in the life of writing. There are times when I look at what human history has been and I say Oh, OK there have always been people like us who get a momentum started and then it dies down and nothing becomes of it. And it's a hundred years or so before those thoughts are resurrected. But there's a little voice in my ears that insists that I continue. It insists that something really important is happening here, something that is going to have an effect here for years. Something that is going to make a significant change in the world.

**G:** *Si, I see it in terms of the left handed world coming into being. For centuries now, ever since the industrial age or maybe even before, it has*

*always been a world of the intellect, reasoning, the machine. Here women were stuck with having tremendous powers of intuition experiencing other levels of reality and other realities yet they had to sit on it because men would say, well, you're crazy. All of a sudden there's a reemergence of the intuitive energies – and they are very powerful. And if you apply them in your life on the personal and political plane then that gives you a tremendous amount of energy – it's almost like a volcano erupting. We have yet to learn how to control that power. And we're scared of it.*

**T:** I think too that it's part of the balance that always goes on in nature. It's like technology, which is purely masculine, material, and all about aggressive-conquering power, has taken itself to the point of sleeping on the self-destruct button and now it's as if the mother goddess is coming in and saying, "Wait a minute son, hold it boy. Now there are other things; there is life. I've allowed you to play with your death machines long enough. Now be quiet, cool down, I have to clean the situation up." And I definitely see the reemergence of the women's movement as the manifestations of the desires of the goddess energy.

**G:** *What part does feminist spirituality have in taking back our own power?*

**T:** It is slowly doing a lot. Feminist spirituality had a real problem because most revolutionary circles have considered spirituality a no-no area. Because the male god and the institutionalized church has been so counter-revolutionary, there has been the temptation to say that there is nothing but the material world, and this is all we should deal with. Okay? So slowly but surely the people who are in tune with both the need for revolution and understanding of the spiritual world are beginning to say, "Hey, these worlds are not diametrically opposed to each other. Look, these two can work together." But now we are tapping our powers in self-defense. We are using our power in self-defense. For example if you look in Z. Budapest's book, *The Book of Lights and Shadows* you will see a charm for how to combat a racist. We use our spiritual power now to understand that this man does not have the right to overpower me, and because I know that this is right, I'm calling on that

force to stand up to him. When we reclaim women's blood we increase our power.

Every time a sister learns that she is not born to live in a world of fear, to be dominated, every time a sister sits down with a glass of water in front of her and understands that she is intimately tied to water and that all life is tied to water she is gradually building an inner strength that gives her armour to go out and fight the world.

For centuries we heard woman is no good, we have been beat down, we have been made lethal, we have had to recycle our strength in other ways. But now, because we have a spiritual understanding that this myth is bull, we have the nerve to test our strength. In testing it we will find out what it is, how much of it we have, and how much we can do with it. See, we're coming out of the shadow.

We have to use our strength to break the chain. And there are concrete, very very concrete things we can do. Like I teach a lot of wealth charms because a lot of women who come to my workshops are working class women who have no money, you know. So yes, we do a lot of charms to pull money out of the rich and have it rechanneled into our hands. We do a lot of healing on each other so I can keep my sister out of the hands of that nice happy man over there. It's very small, but we have to recapture what is going to keep us alive. Because we have to keep alive.

If you take medicine for example, the man is always putting down herbal remedies because they're too available to everybody. Because if you find out you can heal yourself on your own, without him, he's out of the job. So you've got to come to him to give him a chance to run his Frankenstein experiments on you, you see. It's like that Indian proverb that if you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach the man to fish he eats forever. They're into "Here, here little momma, big daddy's gonna do this for you, take a crumb here (snap), take a crumb there." And I'm saying, I'm the one that baked the bread, baby. You can't do that no more.

**G:** *You have spoken many times about the different charms you use for healing. Would you give an example of each one of those?*



T: Sure. It's really good that you asked because right now I'm putting together notes for a book that I want to do on women's spirituality<sup>1</sup> that would be a combination of my own personal experiences and certain historical information, but mostly a book of charms. When I came into this I would not give anybody a charm that I had not experimented with myself. That's something you don't get from your local doctor. He uses a rat and then transposes it to a human.

Two charms that I think are especially important to women are those involving water and those involving earth. Fire and light are important, but water and earth charms seem to work very very fast. It's interesting that most of my charms require cooperation from one other person.

Let us say that we have a situation where we have two women who find themselves in dire, dire poverty, you know. We can put the principle of water to work in a charm called "pouring the money." That is, you know that you are going to run out of money soon, you know what's coming. Each day, for seven days, you come into your house and you take whatever small change you have, and you put it into a bowl. Preferably you should have two bowls, a white bowl and a green bowl. And then with the new moon, especially a new moon in an earth sign or a water sign is best, you sit down with the money you've saved, you sit down with a candle, green or white, and you take something that is the symbol of wealth for you. Sometimes I use one of the cards from the Tarot deck, other times I will use a dollar bill, other times I will use a picture of the thing I want to buy. If it's groceries I put pictures of food there, if it's clothes I use pictures of the pair of shoes I'd like to buy. You put water in the bowl with the money, and you pour the water and the money into one bowl and you state what you need. The other woman pours the money into the other bowl and she states what she needs. You continue to do this, you see, for some time depending on how much you need.

One night I did it with a sister in LA from sunset to sunrise, when the moon was no longer visible. And in the period of time between the new moon and the full moon several very interesting things happened. She got a check from these people she used to work for. She hadn't worked for them in a year, their bookkeeper looked on the books and decided that they hadn't

sent her some back pay. They sent it to her, right? I was a waitress at a health food restaurant at the time, and the other waitress decided that she wanted some vacation so I got to work her hours – the tips increased, right? And that was a small amount of money to take us out of the starving stage and put us back on our feet. That's a small one. It depends on how much energy you put into it and what you need it for. It's important that you know what you need it for because *the spirit deals in need*.

But we live in a world where you think I gotta have so many things, dollars in my hand and that is just not true, you know. The energy that is out there that created the universe gave us everything we need. If we treated the earth properly there would be enough for everybody to eat. You know that bullshit about over-population is a crock. A misdistribution, you know.

Another earth charm that I really like is paralleling your growth with that of a plant. If I'm getting ready to write a book, the first day that I lay the first page out, I go out to get either a seedling or a baby plant. I put it near that place where I'm working with the water. I feed the plant and I work page two. I clip the plant today and I work page three. I spray the plant today and I work page four. So that there is a direct relationship between my growth and the growth of that plant.

**G:** *But that's scary because what if the plant starts dying?*

**T:** If the plant starts dying then you have to reconsider the way you're operating, you see. And we do a lot of stuff around fear. In reality the two basic emotions are fear and love and everything else is an aspect of one of those. Fear has been *drummed* into us. Fear has been drummed into us like nothing else. If you don't go ask this expert then you're supposed to be afraid. Once you go see the infallible expert nothing can go wrong anymore. A lot of times messages are coming through to us and we receive them with fear because we've been trained to be fearful and that fear is the thing that ruins the charm. My plant dying would be for me the sign that I've come to a point of stagnation, you know. I've got to go back to the root of the problem. I've got to take the plant out of its pot, look at it, see what is not being done. I've got to lay that book down and read what is missing. And you can set things up that way so that it is

parallel. Overcoming certain fears is so easy. It amazed me when I found out how to do it.

It's really interesting that right now I'm speaking with a woman who is in her early thirties and is having her first sexual experience. And some of the things that she worries about I forgot that I used to worry about because I've gone through enough of a process of cleaning myself – out of old guilt and false responsibility and false senses of oppression. Speaking with her I find that I am going to have to put her through the same thing that I've been through.

You are a woman, you are human, you have the right to be sexual, you have the right to be sexual with whoever you see fit to be sexual with. You know, the false sense of morality has been designed, if you look at it, to keeping women's power in check. That comes through real clear on the psychic level. Look at all the taboos around women's blood. Women's blood contains the seed of new life. That is the power of the creator. Yet you travel from circle to circle and they tell you women's blood is this evil thing. Then life itself has to be an evil thing. And I just feel that patriarchy has made the god concept so lopsided, that man is all positive and woman is all negative and that is bullshit, you know. Day cannot be day without night.

*G: What do you think men hold against women most?*

*T:* Well, specifically, the question of women's blood. It's the one thing we have that they don't. Now, the uterus, the vaginal blood, the power of creation, the nurturing power that we have, the sustaining power that we have is something that *they* don't have. And when I look into the folklore of Louisiana, when I look into the charms and the spells I find that the charms involving women's blood are the charms designed to overpower men. That's how women's blood was used.

*G: Even the love potions?*

*T:* Yeah, it's for bending his will. You use women's blood to bend man's will. Of course there is a great taboo against it. As long as they (men) are involved. That's like Superman outlawing Kryptonite; of course he will.

*G: Teish, I always felt when I was growing up that women had the*

*power, that women were strong, that women were the nurturers, and they pretended that they didn't have it, that the men did; it was a conspiracy. Men don't have it. So here is a woman using rituals and charms to bend men's power, when actually she could be straightening up her own.*

**T:** We have now become *victims of our own benevolence*. We see certain weaknesses. We are accustomed to mothering, raising, nurturing, looking for potential, speeding the imagination with children. We have seen the child in men and nurtured it in the same way. So now you have the son growing up thinking that he can slap the mother who nursed him. I see that happen a number of times. Before I liberated myself it was part of my culture. You go out to dinner and the man didn't have enough money you slip it under the table so it looks like he paid for it. You learn how to suggest subtly that this or that be done and then when he follows your advice and it works you praise him for having such a wonderful idea. Bull. Bull. The whole hog. I'm not doing that anymore. The goddess is not doing that anymore. The trial is coming to an end. The grace period is slowly drawing to a close. The queen is about to move on the chess board.

**G:** *It's about time.*

**T:** Now I'm saying that the period where the goddess allows the little boy, allows her son to go rampaging through the universe, is coming to a close. She's saying, "Johnny, you've misbehaved long enough. Now mother's going to whip you."

**G:** *Another thing I want to ask you is what kind of world do you want to live in and when do you see this kind of world existing on the physical plane?*

**T:** Well, it's not in my lifetime. I know that. That's the sad thing about it. It is not in my lifetime. I'm into a world where people are judged by the wealth of their soul, not their pockets. You know what I mean? I want each person to have what they've earned *by right of consciousness*, you see. The basis of it is what you can conceive mentally – the infinite power will give you the substance to create it, you see. There has been entirely too much rip off for me. There have been too many people who have tilled

the soil and not eaten the fruit. There have been too many people that have written the poems and not gotten the praise. There have been too many people that have created the invention and then been used by the machine. That has to stop.

I am shooting for a world where everybody eats, where everybody has decent housing, where everybody has their basic necessities and the freedom to be who they are. The freedom to express the spirit that is inside of them. What is all this bowing and scraping to these various two-legged authorities, you know? The only person I'm willing to bow to is the spirit. And in my faith you don't scrape in front of them, see.

Our fates *are* tied. We have this strange notion on this planet that our fates are *not* tied. If it were not so we would not be here together. It's that simple. But there's this refusal to understand, so we create these false classes. I'm richer than she is. I'm a different color than that one. I'm taller than that one. That's all bull. We all eat and shit in the same manner. And until I meet someone with green blood who eats food and has no wastes coming out of him, who never cries, who never has to sleep — when I meet somebody like that, I may consider them superior. At first I'll consider them different. I'll have to test it to see if they are in fact superior. That's all I'm after — *is everybody's right to express the spirit that lives in them.*

**G:** *That would be a beautiful world. I kind of think that we will see that kind of world in our lifetime. Or at least its beginnings. Otherwise it's going to be the end of us because we're poisoning ourselves and our world pretty fast.*

**T:** Yeah. That's another job that women spiritualists are taking over. We seem to realize, because of our intimate connection with earth, that she is sending us the message. She's not going to tolerate any more of that. I don't know what the geologists think, they may have their theories of air getting trapped under the earth and that's why St. Helens was blowing. The woman is blowing to tell you that *she is mad* and it's that simple.

**G:** *According to the Mayan calendar we are in El Quinto Sol (The Fifth World Sun) and that this world will end by earthquake and fire on Dec. 24, 2011. I guess it parallels the end of the Piscean Age and the beginning of the Aquarian. The sixth sun, which the Mayans call*



*Consciousness, will follow the fifth one.*

T: I believe it. It's really, really obvious when the water is messed up and the air is messed up and the mountain begins to rumble, that is a real indication: "Johnny, put your toy down; pay attention to your health; momma's about to explode." But they won't listen because they're blinded by greed. They are blinded by this grabby, grabby...

G: *And they're very insecure, peeny little beings, they're very scared they're going to lose their power.*

T: Exactly. And they ignore the one who is power. Where would their power be if earth decides she's had it?

### **Part Three: Smashing the Myth**

G: *What are the particular barriers or struggles involved in Third World Women's spirituality?*

T: You have to understand that first and foremost, the greater part of our problem as Third World people is that for a long time we internalized a lot that *we are nobody with nothing*. You know, God is white therefore the all-powerful is on the side of the one who is in power.

I remember quite some years ago when I was in St. Louis I was doing a lot of demonstrating and stuff. There was this old Black woman I was talking to and trying to get her to go to a demonstration with me, you know. It was down by the old courthouse by the St. Louis arch and she said to me, she said, "You know, there's a chopping block in there where they used to sell niggers." She said, "Now if you go down there and take a look you will see that the blood is still on that chopping block. It's stained in the wood, you know. You can't be going down and telling these white folks what to do." I said, "Oh yes, I can. I have some power, they have to hear me. I'm not going to just lay down and die, dada dadada." And she said to me, "Chile, don't you know god suffered the Indians to die so that the white men could have this land." And I blew my stack. Because there it was right there, you know.

G: *Believing in the white man's conditioning, in their shit.*



T: *My gods tell me that things are not that absolute, that there is always a struggle of power going on and that I must struggle for this power.*

The basic problem that we have had was believing somebody else's story about us – *what we can and cannot do, who we can and cannot be*. As Third World people we needed it more than anybody because we have been kept down for so long and this is the thing that's so hard for people to accept. Most Third World people on the surface seem to have accepted the rigidity of Christianity, yet certain true things still survive. And what we've got to do is *feed that which has survived*, build on that which has survived till our gods and goddesses speak. "Oh, yes, my children are strong now, they are ready now. Given them a total green light. Let's go, ya'll." You know the baby goes from crawling to walking. We've come out of an infancy of oppression into our own power because there's enough archeological evidence that everybody at one point or another had a great civilization. Every people alive had a great civilization until this man came along whose environment tricked him, you know. It was the snow, I feel, that was responsible for the unusual aggression of the Europeans and their chance encounter with gunpowder, you see, from the East. Put those two things together and here comes this big conquering hero.

G: *And also fear I think, fear had a great deal to do with it, fear of not surviving made him more aggressive. Made him take up weapons for defense, become cold, reasoning.*

*When you said that that which has survived through the ages comes from women's power and spirituality, I was thinking of La Virgen de Guadalupe that my Mamágrande Ramona had on her altar. When the Spaniards took over Mexico they instituted Catholicism, but a lot of my people kept some of the old gods and goddesses by integrating them into the Christian ones. So now La Virgen de Guadalupe contains within her Tonatin, the Aztec creation goddess. Mexicans attach more power to her than they do to the patriarchal god and his long-suffering son.*

T: Yeah. I came into religion in the sixties. We were looking for the history. We were looking for the rhyme and reason behind our struggle. How did things get turned around? How can we reclaim our blackness? And so when you look at what

has come down we immediately see the militant aspect, we see this is something that has survived through the threat of death. The whole Black power movement was a very sexist movement, you know, here the main theme was reinstating the Black man, OK. The problem with the Black men, the reason that they couldn't get jobs, and this is another piece of bullshit, was because Black women were too strong. That she was the castrator and that that was what was wrong with us.

G: *What was wrong with you was that you were too strong?*

T: I was too strong. I was not a woman, dada dada da. So I came into the movement, trying to be the perfect African woman. In the process I find out there used to be a cult of women in Africa who were warriors, you know, who cut a man's penis and stuck it in his mouth as a mark that they had done this. I find out that the major god was an androgyne. I learn that the lightning bolt originally belonged to a female deity. I start learning things that whisper of very strong women, you know. I was very confused by it all for awhile, until I accepted a personal message from her. She was telling me that the sexism I was experiencing in the movement religion should not be tolerated anymore and she was laying the responsibility on me to put an end to it. So from there, I had to confront, finally, the "men's room." When I talk about the "men's room," I mean a room in this collective spiritual household where women were not allowed to go, because according to the males we would be struck by lightning if we went in there. So one day I just on my own decided I'm going to walk in there and disprove this myth. I was somewhat scared that hey I *would* get struck by lightning until I had a dream that said, you know, *go. I want you to go, go, go, go.* And finally, *if you don't go you'll be sorry.* So very nervously I said, "OK momma, this is what you told me to do. I'm a good chile. Please stop the thunder god from hitting me. Please, please momma, I'm depending on you" and I walk on in there and *smash a myth.*

## Notes

1. The book in progress is *Working the Mother.*

## **Brownness<sup>1</sup>**

*Andrea Canaan*

I am brown and I have experienced life as a brown person. Outwardly I have traversed with ease the salons of the white rich, the bayous and lakes of cajun South Louisiana, the hot-white racism of Shreveport, the folksy back-slapping, peculiar institutions of Natchez, the friendly invisible oppression of Bay St. Louis and Ocean Springs, the humid, lazy apathy of New Orleans. With soul intact, identity sure, sense of humanness unchained by myth and ignorance, I have lived my years inside brown skin that didn't show the bruises, the wounds, to anyone.

Since before I can remember, brownness was always compared to whiteness in terms that were ultimately degrading for brownness. Lazy, shiftless, poor, nonhuman, dirty, abusive, ignorant, uncultured, uneducated, were used to convey conscious and unconscious messages that brown was not a good thing to be and the ultimate model of things right and good was white. Yes, white people called me nigger, forced me to drink from separate fountains, would not allow me to sit in the front of the bus. This message, however, was first and most transmitted by brown. There was an all powerful and real knowledge, like the pungent smell of chitterlings cooking on a rainy winter day, that no matter how good, how clean, how pious the brown, they could not equal or reflect the ultimate good and right-white.

Now understand, no brown person acknowledged feeling this way or accepted responsibility for conveying the message. Everyone joked, laughed, and put down white. We put up and revered brown. For all the up brown and down white a black comedy twisted and reversed the jokes, the laughs, and the put downs back into brown. We welcomed this black comedy routine. We made its scenes our rituals. We claimed the right of self-defacement. We remained degraded inside ourselves and we continued to empower others to control us.

Don't mistake me, brown is not The Oppressor but the victim. But part of our victimization is self-oppression. Our adaptations were creative, the end goal, survival. This peculiar system of degrading self so that outsiders won't hurt us so much has its base in remembered servitude, helplessness and powerlessness

combined with the pride and hope that comes from surviving, mixed with the shame of surviving, the humiliation of servitude, and the rage of being considered nonhuman. The system's apex is the reality that while adapting to white language, dress, worship, thought and social interaction we had not gained social acceptance. Further, while sacrificing, working, praying, singing, fighting, and dying for and with white, we had not gained equality, economic security, or freedom. What we had gained was an insidious terrifying, self-negating desire – even need – to be white.

By the time I was a woman, I had all the necessary external survival skills needed, supposedly, to protect me from the rejection and humiliation projected onto me by white media, government, church, and social institutions. I had unending strength, evergrowing intellect, a heart as big as the heavens and earth, a soul more forgiving than gods themselves, and I accepted total responsibility for myself, my own oppressed state, the oppression of the brown man, and the sin of being both brown and woman. This superwoman veneer protected me from the external world much of the time. This superwoman veneer also warded off internal self-reflection needed to assess if indeed I was strong enough to carry such heavy burdens. The evergrowing intellect was an additional burden because the ability to think allows me to look at, if not truly see, options and truth. The open heart and forgiving soul stifled my rightful indignation, gagged my rage, and forced my fears, my needs, my rage, my joys, my accomplishments, inward. The acceptance of total responsibility, real, concrete, or abstract, for myself and others became my ultimate strait jacket, the last and strongest barrier to self. The guilt alone associated with such responsibility should have broken the backs of brown women long ago. The isolation is deafening and support is non-existent. The inherent conflicts of interests of parents, children, husbands, lovers, church, state, and self cry out like sound and fury and we think ourselves crazed because there is a constant buzz in our ears. In this state I began to see, as through a lifting mist, the enemies of self.

Racial memory coursed through my veins. Memories of being snatched away by friend and stranger, stuffed into vessels that traversed vast spaces of water, chained, whipped, branded,

hunted and sold by overlapping generational systems of degradation that were supported by male gods, male governments, male-controlled social institutions across the globe, across the centuries. I was sure that the ultimate evil was the white male, and I became afraid of him. It was a survival fear of being fooled by bright promises, hope-laden movement songs, loopholed constitutional amendments and proclamations. Afraid of being enslaved again, afraid of being annihilated this time.

My brown woman community counted our most dangerous enemy as the white woman. Didn't she seduce brown men and cry rape? Didn't her status forever decree our children born out of forced rape by her brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers illegitimate and create a caste system within brown that made light brown better than dark brown and her delicate white, best? Doesn't the hand that rocks the cradle rule the world? Is she not responsible for the actions and sins of her men? Did not her essential evil cause the downfall of her men? Is she not cloaked in sexual mystery so that our brown men cannot resist her? Does she not compete with us for brown men, the centers of our lives, as well as white men, our benevolent, if somewhat distracted and crabby, fathers? Does she not force us to use our bodies as a commodity in the white marketplace in order to feed our babies in order to feed our men?

The mist began to clear. I could no longer justify viewing the white woman as the personification of the evil done to us, the dangerous enemy. I began to look at the things brown women faced with a watchful eye for a power base. What is rape but power? What is racism but power? What is poverty but power? What is sexism but power? What is oppression but power? What is deception but power? What is fear but power? I began to see the enemy as those forces within me that allowed others to control me and those who empowered or sought to empower themselves to control me.

I could see my enemy as my brownness, my community, my mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. This is logical, given my patterns of self oppression. I could isolate myself from the brown community, claiming my right to be me without concern for our growth and development as a whole. I would, however, be cutting off an essential part of my development to nurture



another. I would simply be acknowledging the oppression of my brownness and not that of my femaleness. They are both essential and important, however. The fact is I am brown and female, and my growth and development are tied to the entire community. I must nurture and develop brown self, woman, man, and child. I must address the issues of my own oppression and survival. When I separate them, isolate them, and ignore them, I separate, isolate, and ignore myself. I am a unit. A part of brownness. My health, energy, intellect, and talent are resources of my community. When I fall ill my community is weakened. When my community is invaded by disease I am affected, even killed. I must work both as an individual and as a part of my community in order to survive in order for my community to survive.

It would be very easy to identify white women as my enemy. As long as I do, however, I accept my devalued, oppressed, unliberated woman state. We do not trust her because she is white. We do not seek to know her because we would be betraying our brownness, collaborating with the enemy, whiteness. We do not embrace her because she is woman. And women, we remain believing, are evil beings who started this entire mess in the garden of eden. The problem here is that as we remain isolated and unknowing of woman, any woman, we continue to accept the basis for a part of our oppression. As we trade distrust and irresponsibility we trade off our liberation. It's as if we think liberation a fixed quantity, that there is only so much to go around. That an individual or community is liberated at the expense of another. *When we view liberation as a scarce resource, something only a precious few of us can have, we stifle our potential, our creativity, our genius for living, learning and growing.*

It is hardest to see my enemy as brown men yet in order to see myself clearly I must face the closest threat to my survival for it is he who most rapes me, batters me, devalues my strength, will not allow my weakness. He is closest to me for he is my father, my brother, my son, my man, my lover. I love him, I glory in his maleness and agonize in his degradation. I must refuse to allow him to oppress me while I must be concerned for his survival. This major conflict of interest is basic to brown oppression. Divide and conquer. Choose who is more worthy of liberation. I refuse to play this diabolical self destructive game. I refuse to