

**LOVING
IN THE
WAR YEARS**

**PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION OF
LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS**

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Moraga boldly examines the meaning of being Chicana and lesbian in the United States today.

—WOMEN'S REVIEW OF BOOKS

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—HOLLY SMITH, *500 GREAT BOOKS BY WOMEN*

**LOVING
IN THE
WAR YEARS**

Cherríe L. Moraga

LO QUE NUNCA PASÓ POR SUS LABIOS

Expanded Edition
South End Press Classics Series
SOUTH END PRESS
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LOOKING BACK

FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

As my Beloved starts the ceremonial fire, we turn in the moon's direction to watch its near-fullness crest over the darkening hills. In the Aztec tradition, the moon is a warrior-sister dismembered by the male god of war and exiled into the darkness of the night. Is this not you, hermanaguerrera, la Coyolxauhqui returned, that woman of the earth, broken into pieces, that moon-diosa rising up from behind those juniper-blue tejano hills?

*Written at the memorial of artist-activist
Marsha Gómez (1951-1998).*

In 1977 when I wrote the first poems of what later would become part of *Loving in the War Years*, I had never heard of Coyolxauhqui, severed into pieces in the war against her brother, but I knew her brokenness.* I had felt the breast of my lesbian desire amputated from the warrior loins of my cultura. What I had imagined would protect me—the armored helmet of my feminism—provided no shield against the neogringo theft of tongue and tierra. She, like me, was a woman betrayed by her brother. She was an ancient Xicanawarrior deported into darkness. I, a young Xicanadyke, writing in exile.

Without knowing, I looked for Coyolxauhqui in these dark wartime writings of twenty years ago, the dim reflection of my own pale moon-face lighting my way. *I am not the first*, I kept telling myself, *I am not the only one to walk this road*. But it felt so at the time, the danger of putting the words “lesbian” and “Chicana” together on the same page, within the same line. The danger of walking in the body of she who put them together. The month that *Loving* was to be released, I escaped to the

*The icon of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui is a huge stone disk, which contains the figure of a mutilated warrior-woman wearing traditional Aztec regalia. The circular figure seems to be in motion, her parts rolling around and about, one on top of the other, as described in the Aztec myth. Accordingly, Coyolxauhqui was cut into pieces by her brother (the sun god, Huitzilopochtli) and her body parts huddled down the mountainside of Coatepec, where the battle between the moon and sun took place. For further discussion on the myth, see “Looking for the Insatiable Woman” in this volume.

anonymity of México, somehow thinking the distance would shield me from a more profound banishment waiting to happen. Still, I thought only of return, someday, to my Califas, where I could be all my fragmented parts at once: the re-membered Coyolxauhqui taking up permanent residence in Aztlán.

Twenty years later, I can say . . . I am returned. Neither Aztec goddess nor completely whole, but well accustomed to the darkness. In looking back at the writer I was a generation ago, I am not ashamed. Of the voice. Of the writing. I see this same young poet in the writings of my daughter-students, how they forge the shape of their coloredwomanhood through the bodies of their mothers and their mothers' histories: the deaths, the suicides, the betrayals, the silences. Twenty years ago, my intimate reflections on my mother served as the focal point of my meditations on "familia," which have gradually evolved, through the 90s, into broader reflections on Xicanos and Xicanas as "tribe" and "nation." The final section of this new edition, "A Flor de labios" speaks to this evolution, drawing from seedling ideas I first germinated in *Loving in the War Years*.

[T]he foundation [of our families] is the earth beneath the floorboards of our homes. We must split wood, dig bare-fisted into the packed dirt to find out what we really have to hold in our hands as ground.

—A Long Line of Vendidas

Earth. Dirt. Ground. Land.

And what are these essays, these stories and poems, other than just shovel, hoe and pickax "digging up the dirt" in an attempt to uncover a buried Xicana/o history, both personal and political. I am ever-grateful to feminism for teaching me this, that political oppression is always experienced personally by someone. This feminist tenet, *the personal is political*, has provided me the poet's permission to use my own life as evidence of what I believe to be true about *us* and *them*. Us and them: that binary that binds us in its ever-shifting shapes of body and thought.

So, I begin here again: a new introduction to writings which are both old and new, once or twice read and never read. I begin again in a new

* *The Last Generation* examines these themes at length; published by South End Press ten years after *Loving in the War Years*.

millennium, which means little to me except that I know my life is significantly more than half over. As a child, I had anticipated this "coming of age," regularly counting the years ahead to configure how old I'd be at the turn of the century. Now I barely believe in *their* calendar, how they count backward to invent a history in Christ's birth, and Columbus, and Cortéz's arrival into the translucent turquoise waters of a misnomered América. How they count forward to invent a "nation" since the declaration of independence of whitesons from whitefathers.

So, some things have changed. An evolution of thought, I'd like to believe. I'd like to believe that the voice of a forty-seven-year-old veterana Chicana lesbian writer, recorded in this foreword and in the final section of this book, juxtaposed with an emerging Chicana writer twenty years earlier, might provide some insights for each of us about our own evolving history and política. Yes, some things have changed. Between the first and second edition of *Loving*, the USSR was dissolved, the Sandinista Revolution was dismantled, AIDS was "discovered" and took on pandemic proportions. Audre Lorde died; Cesar Chávez died; Toni Cade Bambara died, my abuelita passed on to the spirit world and mis queridos padres grow to fear disability and death in their weakening bodies and advancing years. Affirmative action and bilingual education were outlawed in California, and cancer has clustered throughout the central agricultural valley of California and along the poisoned perimeter (the border) of Aztlán.

When I compiled the first edition of *Loving in the War Years*, I did so without the aid of a computer; twenty years later, the computer has invaded the lives of most middleclass citizens of "developed" countries. Thanks to a global internet, the computer is the fastest-growing site of amerikan investment of time and money. It is where Amerika shops, dates, reads, writes, makes pornography, and makes profit. It is where middleclasswhitekids can be college dropouts and become millionaires overnight. The computer is also where getting this book to press took about a quarter of the time it would have twenty years ago. It is where I have found innumerable resources on prison rights, human rights abuse, Chicanaindígena organizing, public protests against latino-loathing legislation, y mas y mas y mas información, at times more than one small being can handle.

Twenty years. A litany of change, political and personal. Twenty years ago, I was not a mother, only a daughter. Still, I can state, unequivocally, as I did in the first edition of *Loving*, "It is the daughters who are my audience." And any son who will listen. Now, in fact, I have a son of seven-years, who I hope is listening. I also have a whole family of queer and blood relations I couldn't have dreamed possible at twenty-seven. (Is this the road to Coyolxauhqui's re-memberment?)

Since the first publication of *Loving*, I have also become a playwright, my transition into dramatic writing, the direct result of *Loving's* completion. I tell my writing students who fear they will always be confined to autobiography, "When *Loving* was done and out of my hands, I felt an enormous emotional burden being lifted from me. I had finally told my own story, for better or for worse, and felt free of it, free for other voices, other stories to enter me." I have been writing drama professionally for over fifteen years now. It is my fictionalized voice made possible through the autobiographical musings of my nonfiction writings. Theater has also become, for me, a new and oftentimes embattled forum for cultural criticism. In the meantime, I have made a living mostly as a teacher and lecturer, traveling to conferences and colleges around the country, where I have witnessed in just one generation the deradicalization of many ethnic and feminist studies programs.

Twenty years later and this a bit of the biography of my life, my times.

.....

When they discovered El Templo Mayor beneath the walls of this city, they had not realized that it was She who discovered them. Nothing remains buried forever. Not even memory, especially not memory.

—*Giving Up the Ghost*

Maybe what I like best about writing is that it always knows better than you where you're going, if you let it. This is what also makes writing so dangerous, that it can reveal to you what you didn't know you knew. I wrote the lines above, a year after *Loving in the War Years'* publication. I was

w/CHERRIE L. MORAGA

describing how Mexican workers, repairing underground electrical lines in the central Zócalo in Mexico City, had inadvertently unearthed what would later be revealed as the ruins of El Templo Mayor, the last of the major Aztec temples. Without thinking, I referred to the temple as "She." What I learned later is that the first evidence of the Templo that workers "discovered" under the "walls of (that) city" was the giant, 3.25 meters in diameter, stone disk sculpture of Coyolxauhqui, the dismembered moon goddess. From her, all the rest of the Templo would be eventually unearthed, where it stands resurrected today.

I had called the templo "She." And without my knowing it, *She*, Coyolxauhqui, was speaking to me. Me, her distant mixed-blood pocha relative, living in the northern land of her ancestors. Maybe these are just delusions of my own self-importance. But another thing I learned from feminism is that such self-indulgence is critical to the writing process. Because without indulging our fears, our fantasies, our fury, how then are we to land upon truth? And, from that time forward, I decided maybe I could remember (know) more than what the small biography of my life determined. Maybe I could re-member Coyolxauhqui at least in this writing, this teaching, this praying, this home.

So, that gives me hope. That as artists we might have something to contribute between and beyond what we are allowed to live here in this americanprison of forgetfulness, durante los años de guerra.

oakaztlán, califas,
8 de junio 2000

INTRODUCCIÓN TO THE FIRST EDITION

SUEÑO

My lover and I are in a prison camp together.

We are in love in wartime.

A young soldier working as a guard has befriended us.

We ask him honestly—the truth—“are we going to die?”

He answers, “yes, it’s almost certain.” I contemplate escaping. Ask him to help us. He blanches. “That is impossible,” he says. I regret asking him, fearing recriminations.

I see the forest through the fence on my right. I think, the place between the trees, I could burrow through there, toward freedom? Two of us would surely be spotted. One of us has a slim chance. I think of leaving my lover, imprisoned. But immediately I understand that we must, at all costs, remain with each other. Even unto death. That it is our being together that makes the pain, even our dying, human.

Loving in the war years.

1

Este libro covers a span of seven years of writing. The first poems were written in 1976 when I was still in Los Angeles, living out my lesbianism as a lie on my job and a secret to my family. The two main essays of the book, “La Güera” and “A Long Line of Vendidas,” were completed in 1979 and 1983, respectively.* Now I write the final introduction here in Brooklyn, New York, “out-to-the-world” it feels to me to be in print.

Tonight the summer heat takes on the flavor it had when I first moved into this room, makes me tired by the thought of all this moving and working. How slow and hard change is to come. How although this book has taken me from Los Angeles, north to Berkeley, across the Bay to San Francisco, across the country to Boston and Brooklyn, south to México and back again to Califas, *sigo siendo la hija de mi mamá. My mother’s daughter.*

*The selections are not arranged chronologically by dates written; rather, I have tried to create an emotional/political chronology.

My mother’s daughter who at ten years old knew she was queer. Queer to believe that God cared so much about me, he intended to see me burn in hell; that unlike other children, I was not to get by with a clean slate. I was born into this world with complications. I had been chosen, marked to prove my salvation. *Todavía soy bien católica—filled with guilt, passion and incense and the inherent Mexican faith that there is meaning to nuestro sufrimiento en el mundo.*

The first time I went to the Mexican basilica where el retrato de La Virgen de Guadalupe hovers over a gilded altar, I was shocked to see that below it ran a moving escalator. The escalator was not one that brought people up to the image that we might reverently kiss her feet; but rather it moved people along from side to side and through as quickly as possible. A moving sidewalk built to keep the traffic going. In spite of the irreverence imposed by such technology, the most devout of the Mexican women—*las pobres*, few much older than I—clung to the ends of the handrailing of the moving floor, crossing themselves, gesturing *besos al retrato*, their hips banging up against the railing over and over again as it tried to force them off and away. They stayed. In spite of the machine. They had come to spend their time with La Virgen.

I left the church in tears, knowing how for so many years I had closed my heart to the passionate pull of such faith that promised no end to the pain. I grew white. Fought to free myself from my culture’s claim on me. It seemed I had to step outside my familia to see what we as a people were doing suffering. This is my politics. This is my writing. For as much as the two have eventually brought me back to my familia, there is no fooling myself that it is my education, my “consciousness” that separated me from them, that forced me to leave home. This is what has made me the outsider so many Chicanos, very near to me in circumstance, fear.

I am a child. I watch my mamá, mis tías en una procesión cada día llegando a la puerta de mi abuela. Needing her, never doing enough for her. I remember lying on my bed midday. The sun streaming through the long window, thin sheer curtains. Next door I can hear them all. *Se están peleando. Mi abuela giving the cold shoulder, not giving in. Each daughter*

ving for a place with her. The cruel gossip. Las mentiras. My mother trying to hold onto the truth, her version of the story, su integridad.

I put my head back on the pillow and count the years this has been going on. The competition for her favor. My grandmother's control of them. I count my mother's steps as I hear her click high-heeled angry down the gravel driveway, through the fence, up the back steps. She's coming in. Estará llorando. Otra vez. I tell my sister reading a book next to me, "How many years, JoAnn? It can't be this way for us too when we grow up."

Mi abuelita se muere muy lentamente. Están cerrados los ojos, y su boca está callada. El hospital le da comida por las venas. No habla ella. No canta como cantaba. She does not squeeze my mother's hand tight in her fight against la sombra de su propia muerte. She does not squeeze the life out of her. Ya no. Está durmiendo mi abuela, esperando a La Muerte.

And what goes with her? My claim to an internal dialogue where el gringo does not penetrate? Su memoria de noventa y seis años going back to a time where "nuestra cultura" was not the subject of debate. *I write this book because we are losing ourselves to the gavacho. I mourn my brother in this.*

SUEÑO: 5 DE ENERO 1983

My grandmother appears outside la iglesia. Standing in front as she used to do after la misa. I am so surprised that she is well enough to go out again, be dressed, be in the world. I am elated to see her, to know I get to have the feel of her again in my life. She is, however, in great pain. She shows me her leg, which has been operated on. The wound is like a huge crater in her calf—crusted, open, a gaping hole. I feel her pain so critically.

SUEÑO: 7 DE ENERO 1983

En el sueño trataba de sacar yo una foto de mi abuela y de mi mamá. Mientras una mujer me esperaba en la cama. The pull and tug present themselves en mis sueños. Deseo para las mujeres, anhelo para la familia. I want to take the photo of my grandmother because I know she is dying. I want one last picture. The woman keeps calling me to her bed. She wants me. I keep postponing her.

Después soñé con mi hermano. El ha regresado a la familia, not begging forgiveness, but acknowledging his transgressions against la familia. Somos unidos.

x/CHERRÍE L. MORAGA

2

Can you go home? Do your parents know? Have they read your work? These are the questions I am most often asked by Chicanos, especially students. It's as if they are hungry to know if it's possible to have both—your own life and the life of the familia. I explain to them that sadly, this is a book my family will never see. And yet, how I wish I could share this book with them. How I wish I could show them how much I have taken them to heart, even my father's silence. What he didn't say working inside me as passionately as my mother wept it.

It is difficult for me to separate in my mind whether it is my writing or my lesbianism which has made me an outsider to my family. The obvious answer is both. For my lesbianism first brought me into writing. My first poems were love poems. That's the source—el amor, el deseo—that brought me into politics, that taught me my first major lesson about writing: it is the measure of my life. I cannot write what I am not willing to live up to. Is it for this reason I so often fear my own writing, fear that it will jump up and push me off some precipice?

Women daily change my work. How can it be that I have always hungered for, and feared, falling in love as much as I do writing from my heart? Each changes you forever. For me, sex has always been part of the question of freedom, the freedom to want passionately. To live it out in the body of the poem, in the body of the flesh. So that when I feel the stirrings of creativity, it is a fresh inhale of new life, life I want to breathe back into my work, into my woman. And I long to be a lover like youth.

I watch my changes in the women I love.

JOURNAL ENTRY: 2 DE JULIO 1982

It takes the greatest of effort even to put pen to paper—so much weighing on me. It's as if I am bankrupt of feeling, but that's not really so. My lover comes into my room, sees me face flat on the bed, gathers me into her arms. I say I am depressed and she reminds me of how I tell her so often how depression is not a feeling. Depression covers a feeling that doesn't have a chance to come out. Keeping it down. Keeping the writing back.

So often throughout my work on this book I felt I could not write because I have a movement on my shoulder, a lover on my shoulder, a fam-

ily over my shoulder. On some level you have to be willing to lose it all to write—to risk telling the truth that no one may want to hear, even you. Not that, in fact, you must lose, only que el riesgo siempre radica en el acto de escribir, amenazándote. In relation to my family, I realize now that even as my writing functioned to separate me from them (I cannot share my work with them), it has freed me to love them from places in myself that had before been mired in unexpressed pain. Writing has ultimately brought me back to them. They don't need this book. They have me.

The issue of being a "movement writer" is altogether different. Sometimes I feel my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others. A friend told me once how it was no wonder I had called the first book I co-edited (with Gloria Anzaldúa) *This Bridge Called My Back. You have chronic back trouble*, she says. Funny, I had never considered this most obvious connection, all along my back giving me constant pain. And the spot that hurts the most is the muscle that controls the movement of my fingers and hands while typing. I feel it now straining at my desk.

Riding on the train with another friend, I ramble on about the difficulty of finishing this book, feeling like I am being asked by all sides to be a "representative" of the race, the sex, the sexuality—or at all costs to avoid that. "You don't speak for me! For the community!" My friend smiles kindly, almost amused, at me across the aisle among the sea of grey suits and ties. We are on the commuter train and no one would give up their single seat for us to sit together. We speak in secret code. Nos hablamos español.

"Ah, Chavalita," she says to me. "Tú necesitas viajar para que veas lo que en verdad es la comunidad. There's really no such thing as community among políticos. Community is simply the way people live a life together. And they're doing it all over the world. The only way to write for la comunidad is to write so completely from your heart what is your own personal truth. This is what touches people."

Some days I feel my writing wants to break itself open. Speak in a language that maybe no "readership" can follow. What does it mean that the Chicana writer, if she truly follows her own voice, may depict a world so specific, so privately ours, so full of "foreign" language to the anglo reader, there will be no publisher for it. The people who can understand it,

don't/won't/can't read it. How can I be a writer in this? I have been translating my experience out of fear of an aloneness too great to bear. I have learned analysis as a mode to communicate what I feel the experience itself already speaks for. The combining of poetry and essays in this book is the compromise I make in the effort to be understood. In Spanish, "compromiso" means obligation or commitment. And I guess, in fact, I write as I do because I am committed to communicating with both sides of myself.

I am the daughter of a Chicana and an anglo. I think most days I am an embarrassment to both groups. I sometimes hate the white in me so viciously that I long to forget the obligation my skin has imposed upon my life. To speak two tongues, one of privilege, one of oppression. I must. But I will not double-talk and I refuse to let *anybody's* movement determine for me what is safe and fair to say.

3

The completion of this book finds me in the heart of change. So there is no definitive statement to make here in this introduction that will prepare you for the ever-evolving story of my life. For that is all this collection really is/can be—my story of change. But for whom have I tried so steadfastly to communicate? Whom have I worried over in this writing? Who is my audience?

Todavía soy la hija de mi mamá. Keep thinking, *it's the daughters*. It's the daughters who remain loyal to the mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated. To be free means on some level to release that painful devotion when it begins to punish us. Stop the chain of events. La procesión de mujeres, sufriendo. Dolores my grandmother, Dolores her daughter, Dolores her daughter's daughter. Free the daughter to love her own daughter. It is the daughters who are my audience.

I write this on the deathbed of my abuela. We have made one last procession to her: my mother, my sister, her daughter and I. My grandmother's eyes are open today. I hold the bone of her skull in the palm of my hand. It is a light bird-weight.

I whisper into her better ear. "¿Abuelita? ¿Me reconoce? Soy Cherríe, grandma. Acabo de llegar de Nueva York."

"¡Ay, Chorizo!" She recognizes me. "Mi'jita!" Pulling my head into the deep bowl of her thin neck, she kisses me. "Mi chorizito! Tengo hambre! ¡Quiero Chorizo! ¡Tengo tanta hambre!" She kids as she used to and as always I give her the fleshy part of my arm for her to mimick taking a bite from it.

"¿Dónde está tu mamá?" she wants to know.

"Aquí estoy, mamá." My mother grabs her hand.

"Elvira. ¿Y La JoAnn, está aquí también?"

"Sí, grandma, aquí stoy y Erin," my sister says lifting her daughter up to give my abuela a kiss.

"Hi, little grandma," Erin says softly.

"¡Ay, mi chulita!" She wraps her thin veined hands around Erin's cheeks, then gnashes her teeth together, shaking her head, pretending like she wants to eat her up. It seems to me that my abuelita has never been so full of life.

I am holding the moment. La línea de las mujeres, la raíz de nuestra familia. Mi mamá tiene tanto orgullo en este momento. She has taught us well to value these simple signs of love.

I write this on the deathbed of mi abuela. On the table of a new life spread out for us to eat from.

La muerte de mi abuela. Y yo nunca le hablé en la lengua que entendiera.

Brooklyn, New York,
1983

THE VOICES OF THE FALLERS

Because Jay Freeman was imprisoned at the age of nineteen for more than twenty years because she murdered the son of her lesbian lover by throwing him off a cliff. And, because, at the age of nineteen, my high school friend Charlotte, also a lesbian, fell from a cliff and died.

for M.

You were born queer with the dream
of flying
from an attic with a trap
door opening
to a girl who could
handle a white horse
with wings riding her
away opening
to a girl who could
save a woman
on a white horse
riding her
away.

I was born queer with the dream
of falling
the small sack of my body
dropping
off a ledge
suddenly.

Listen.

Can you hear my mouth crack
open the sound
of my lips bending
back against the force
of the fall?

*A Mexican sausage. The nickname my grandmother has for me.

LA GÜERA

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

—Emma Goldman¹

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

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

The stories continue through the war years and on: walnut-cracking factories, the Voit Rubber factory, and then the electronics boom. I remember my mother doing piecework for the plant in our neighborhood. In the late evening, she would sit in front of the TV set, wrapping copper wires into the backs of circuit boards, talking about

"keeping up with the younger girls." By that time she was already in her mid-fifties.

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

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

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

From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because, as Goldman suggests, these stories my mother told me crept under my "güera" skin. I

had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. *I had no choice.* I took her life into my heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual.

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

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

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

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

oppressed groups can take place. When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? Her very presence violates the ranking and abstraction of oppression. Do we merely live hand to mouth? Do we merely struggle with the "ism" that's sitting on top of our heads? The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression—will only insulate, rather than radicalize us.

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

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

Within the women's movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word "oppression" has lost its power. We need a new lan-

guage, better words that can more closely describe women's fear of, and resistance to, one another, words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.

What prompted me in the first place to work on an anthology by radical women of color² was a deep sense that I had a valuable insight to contribute, by virtue of my birthright and my background. And yet, I don't really understand first-hand what it feels like being shitted on for being brown. I understand much more about the joys of it. Being Chicana and having family are synonymous for me. What I know about loving, singing, crying, telling stories, speaking with my heart and hands, even having a sense of my own soul comes from the love of my mother, aunts, cousins . . .

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

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

er if their lives depended on it; and precisely because their lives didn't depend on it; they couldn't be bothered. But I knew nothing about "privilege" then. White was right. Period. I could pass. If I got educated enough, there would never be no telling.

Three years after that, I had a similar revelation. In a letter to Black feminist, Barbara Smith (whom I had not yet met), I wrote:

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

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

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

The reading had forced me to remember that I knew things from my roots. But to remember puts me up against what I don't know. Shange's reading agitated me because she spoke with power about a world that is both alien and common to me: "the capacity to enter into the lives of others." But you can't just take the goods and run. I knew that then, sit-

ting in the Oakland auditorium (as I know in my poetry), that the only thing worth writing about is what seems to be unknown and, therefore, fearful.

The "unknown" is often depicted in racist literature as the "darkness" within a person. Similarly, sexist writers will refer to fear in the form of the vagina, calling it "the orifice of death." In contrast, it is a pleasure to read works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, where fear and alienation are depicted as "the white ghosts." And yet, the bulk of literature in this country reinforces the myth that what is dark and female is evil. Consequently, each of us—whether dark, female, or both—has in some way *internalized* this oppressive imagery. What the oppressor often succeeds in doing is simply *externalizing* his fears, projecting them into the bodies of women, Asians, gays, disabled folks, whoever seems most "other."

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

—Audre Lorde³

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

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

To assess the damage is a dangerous act. I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite "caught up" with my "woman-identified" politics. I have been afraid to criticize lesbian writers who choose to "skip over" these issues in the name of feminism. In 1979, we talk of "old gay" and "butch and femme" roles as if they were ancient history. We toss them aside as merely patriarchal notions. And yet, the truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society's fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt "not woman enough" for her. I have sometimes felt "not man enough." For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions. Similarly, in a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in someone we least expect to rub up against. When we do rub up against this person, *there* then is the challenge. *There* then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us. But we usually shrink from such a challenge.

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

The other side of the story is that women of color and white working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women. It is much easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy than to take responsibility for changing our own lives. We have failed to

demand that white women, particularly those who claim to be speaking for all women, be accountable for their racism.

The dialogue has simply not gone deep enough.

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

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

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

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

As Lorde suggests in the passage I cited earlier, it is looking to the nightmare that the dream is found. There, the survivor emerges to insist

on a future, a vision, yes, born out of what is dark and female. The feminist movement must be a movement of such survivors, a movement with a future.

Berkeley, California,
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