

A LONG LINE OF VENDIDAS

para Gloria Anzaldúa, in gratitude

SUEÑO: 15 DE JULIO 1982

During the long difficult night that sent my lover and I to separate beds, I dreamed of church and chocha. I put it this way because that is how it came to me. The suffering and the thick musty mysticism of the catholic church fused with the sensation of entering the vagina—like that of a colored woman's—dark, rica, full-bodied. The heavy sensation of complexity. A journey I must unravel, work out for myself.

I long to enter you like a temple.

MY BROTHER'S SEX WAS WHITE. MINE, BROWN

If somebody would have asked me when I was a teenager what it means to be Chicana, I would probably have listed the grievances done me. When my sister and I were fifteen and fourteen, respectively, and my brother a few years older, we were still waiting on him. . . . I write "were" as if now, nearly two decades later, it were over. But that would be a lie. To this day in my mother's home, my brother and father are waited on by the women, including me. I do this now out of respect for my mother and her wishes. In those early years, however, it was mainly in relation to my brother that I resented providing such service. For unlike my father, who sometimes worked as much as seventy hours a week to feed my face every day, the only thing that earned by brother my servitude was his maleness.

It was Saturday afternoon. My brother, then seventeen years old, came into the house with a pile of friends. I remember Fernie, the two Steves and Roberto. They were hot, sweaty and exhausted from an afternoon's

basketball and plopped themselves down in the front room, my brother demanding, "Girls, bring us something to drink."

"Get it yourself, pig," I thought, but held those words from ever forming inside my mouth. My brother had the disgusting habit on these occasions of collapsing my sister JoAnn's and my name when referring to us as a unit: his sisters. "Cher'ann," he would say, "we're really thirsty." I'm sure it took everything in his power *not* to snap his fingers. But my mother was out in the yard working and to refuse him would have brought her into the house with a scene before these boys' eyes that would have made it impossible for us to show our faces at school the following Monday. We had been through that before.

When my mother had been our age, more than forty years earlier, she had waited on her brothers and their friends. And it was no mere lemonade. They'd come in from work or a day's drinking. And *las mujeres*, often just in from the fields themselves, would already be in the kitchen making tortillas, warming frijoles or pigs' feet, *albóndigas* soup, *what-have-you*. And the men would get a clean white tablecloth and a spread of food laid out before their eyes and not a word of resentment from the women.

The men watched the women—my aunts and mother moving with the grace and speed of girls who were cooking before they could barely see over the top of the stove. Elvira, my mother, knew she was being watched by the men and loved it. Her slim hips moved patiently beneath the apron. Her deep thick-lidded eyes never caught theirs as she was swept back into the kitchen by my abuelita's call of "Elvirita," her brown hands deepening in color as they dropped back into the pan of flour.

I suppose my mother imagined that Joe's friends watched us like that, too. But we knew different. We were not blonde or particularly long-legged or "available" because we were "Joe's sisters." This meant no boy could "make" us, which meant no boy would bother asking us out. Roberto, the Guatemalan, was the only one among my brother's friends who seemed at all sensitive to how awkward JoAnn and I felt in our role. He would smile at us nervously, taking the lemonade, feeling embarrassed being waited on by people he considered peers. He knew the anglo girls they visited would never have succumbed to such a task. Roberto was the only recompense.

As I stopped to satisfy their yearning throats, “jock itch” was all that came to my mind. Their cocks became animated in my head, for that was all that seemed to arbitrarily set us apart from each other and put me in the position of the servant and they, the served. I wanted to machine-gun them all down, but swallowed that fantasy as I swallowed making the boy’s bed every day, cleaning his room each week, shining his shoes and ironing his shirts before dates with girls, some of whom *I* had crushes on. I would “lend” him the money I had earned house-cleaning for twelve hours so he could blow it on one night with a girl because he seldom had enough money because he seldom had a job because there was always some kind of ball practice to go to. And as I pressed the bills into his hand, the car honking outside in the driveway, his double-date waiting, I knew I would never see that money again.

Years later, after I began to make political the fact of my being Chicana, I remember my brother saying to me, “I’ve never felt ‘culturally deprived,’” which I guess is the term “white” people use to describe people of color being denied access to *their culture*. At the time, I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant, but I remember in re-telling the story to my sister, she responded, “Of course, he didn’t. He grew up male in our house. He got the best of both worlds.” And yes, I can see that truth now. *Male in a man’s world. Light-skinned in a white world. Why change?*

The pull to identify with the oppressor was never as great in me as it was in my brother. For unlike him, I could never have *become* the white man, only the white man’s *woman*.

The first time I began to recognize clearly my alliances on the basis of race and sex was when my mother was in the hospital, extremely ill. I was eight years old. During my mother’s stay in the hospital, my tía Eva took my sister and me into her care; my brother stayed with my abuela; and my father stayed by himself in our home. During this time, my father came to visit me and my sister only once. (I don’t know if he ever visited my brother.) The strange thing was, I didn’t really miss his visits, although I sometimes fantasized some imaginary father, dark and benevolent, who might come and remind us that we still *were* a family.

I have always had a talent for seeing things I don’t particularly want to see and the one day my father did come to visit us with his wife/our

mother physically dying in a hospital some ten miles away, I saw that he couldn't love us—not in the way we so desperately needed. I saw that he didn't know how and he came into my tía's house like a large lumbering child—awkward and embarrassed out of his league—trying to *play* a parent when he needed our mother back as much as we did just to keep him eating and protected. I hated and pitied him that day. I knew how he was letting us all down, visiting my mother daily, like a dead man, unable to say, "The children, honey, I held them. They love you. They think of you," giving my mother *something*.

Years later, my mother spoke of his visits to the hospital. How from behind the bars of her bed and through the tubes in her nose, she watched this timid man come and go daily, going through the motions of being a husband. "I knew I had to live," she told us. "I knew he could never take care of you children."

In contrast to the seeming lack of feeling I held for my father, my longings for my mother and fear of her dying were the most passionate feelings that had ever lived inside my young heart.

We are riding the elevator. My sister and I pressed up against one wall, holding hands. After months of separation, we are going to visit mi mamá in the hospital. My tía tells me, "Whatever you do, no llores, Cherríe. It's too hard on your mother when you cry." I nod, taking long deep breaths, trying to control my quivering lip.

As we travel up floor by floor, all I can think about is not crying, breathing, holding my breath. "¿Me prometes?" she asks. I nod again, afraid to speak fearing my voice will crack into tears. My sister's nervous hand around mine, sweating too. We are going to see my mami, mamá, after so long. She didn't die after all. She didn't die.

The elevator doors open. We walk down the corridor, my heart pounding. My eyes are darting in and out of each room as we pass them, fearing/anticipating my mami's face. Then as we turn around the corner into a kind of lobby, I hear my tía say to an older woman, just skin and bones—an Indian, I think—straight black-and-grey hair pulled back, I hear my tía say, "Elvira."

I don't recognize her. This is not the woman I knew, so round and made-up with her hair always a wavy jet black! I stay back until she opens her arms to me—this strange and familiar woman—her voice hoarse, "¡Ay mi'jita!" Instinctively, I run into her arms, still holding back my insides. "Don't cry. Don't cry," I remember. "Whatever you do, no

llores." But my tía had not warned me about the smell, the unmistakable smell of the woman, mi mamá, el olor de aceite y jabón and comfort and home. "Mi mamá." And when I catch the smell I am lost in tears, deep long tears that come when you have held your breath for centuries.

There was something I knew at that eight-year-old moment that I vowed never to forget—the smell of a woman who is life and home to me at once. The woman in whose arms I am uplifted, sustained. Since then, it is as if I have spent the rest of my years driven by this scent toward la mujer.

*when her india makes love
it is with the greatest reverence
to color, texture, smell*

*by now she knew the scent of earth
could call it up
even between the cracks
in sidewalks
steaming dry
from midday summer
rain*

With this knowledge so deeply emblazed upon my heart, how then was I supposed to turn away from La Madre, La Chicana? If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as a Chicana I had to embrace, no white man. Maybe this ultimately was the cutting difference between my brother and me. To be a woman fully necessitated my claiming the race of my mother. My brother's sex was white. Mine, brown.

LIKE A WHITE SHEEP I FOLLOWED

SUEÑO: 3 DE JULIO

I am having my face made up, especially my eyes, by a very beautiful Chicana. The make-up artist changes me entirely for only five dollars. I think this is a very low price for how deep and dark she makes me look.

When I was growing up, I looked forward to the days when my skin would toast to match my cousins', their skin turning pure black in the creases. I never could quite catch up, but my skin did turn smooth like theirs, oily brown—like my mamá's, holding depth, density, the possibility of infinite provision. Mi abuela raised the darkest cousins herself, she never loving us the way she molded and managed them.

To write as a Chicana feminist lesbian, I am afraid of being mistaken, of being made an outsider again, having to fight the kids at school to get them to believe Teresita and I were cousins. "You don't *look* like cousins!" I feel at times I am trying to bulldoze my way back into a people who forced me to leave them in the first place, who taught me to take my whiteness and run with it. Run with it. Who want nothing to do with me, the likes of me, the white of me—in them.

When was I forced to choose? When Vivian Molina after two years of the deepest, richest friendship, two years of me helping her through "new math," helping her not flunk once more—once was enough—and her so big already, fat and dark-skinned. When Vivian left me flat, I didn't know what happened, except I knew she was beginning to smell like a woman and once, just before our split-up, the neighbor-kid talked of Vivian growing hair "down there." I didn't get it, except I knew that none of these changes were settling right in Vivian. And I was small and thin, still, and light-skinned and I loved Vivian which didn't seem to matter in the way teachers were wondering if Vivian was going to make it through the year. So, one day that year Vivian came to school and never spoke to me again. Nothing happened between us. I swear nothing happened.

I would call her and plead, "Vivian, what did I do?" "Vivian, ¿por qué?" I would have asked in Spanish had I been taught. "¿Qué pasó? No

entiendo ¿Qué pasó?" But she never let on, except once when she nearly started to cry near the water fountain in the school corridor when I asked her for the last time and her eyes met mine finally and she said, I think or I'd like to remember, "I'm sorry." And even if she didn't say that, exactly, I know she said something that told me we were in different leagues now. And it couldn't be helped. It was out of our control. Something she, a year and a half older and much darker, knew before I knew, and like a white sheep I followed the path paved for me.

Rocky Hernández was brilliant and tough. Got mostly A's in school, like Carmen Luna, who was her second cousin in the same grade. They were both wizards, but Rocky was sharper and mean in her sharpness. "Antagonistic," the nuns would say, and she'd prove it in her handwriting which slanted way off to the left which I admired greatly, which the nuns found "incurable." When it came time for the Catholic high school entrance exams, we learned in May what track we would be in for the coming freshman year. To my amazement, I got into the "A" group—college prep. To my equal amazement, Rocky and her cousin were tracked into the "C" group—business and general education, where they teach you home economics and typing. Rocky could talk and write and compute circles around me, which didn't seem to compute on our entrance exams. After we got into high school, the Irish and Italian girls became my friends. And Rocky and I seldom, if ever, spoke.

The bitter irony is that my Mexican mother, not my anglo father, fixed me on the singular idea of getting an education, while my grade school and high school years continued to persuade me, and my Mexican classmates, that academic learning was the privilege of gringos in this country. "Without an education, you're nothing," my mother would say. "Look at me. If only I could write better, I could get a different kind of job, I wouldn't have to do the kind of work I do." She was constantly criticizing this or that younger aunt or uncle or in-law who had what she did not—basic reading and writing skills—who still worked factory. It never occurred to her, or if it did, she never let on to us children, that race was any factor in reducing one's chances for success.

And in terms of rearing her three light-skinned chestnut-haired children, we in fact did not have to fear, like my cousins, racial discrimination. On the surface of things we could pass as long as we made no point of our Mexican heritage. As long as we moved my father's English surname through our lives like a badge of membership to the white open-door policy club.

In fact, I had never fully realized until this year, when I went back to California and the words tumbled out of my mouth to my sister, that color had anything to do with the reason my sister and brother and I were *the* success stories of the family. We have received the most education and work in recognized professions. I had acknowledged this inequity between myself and my mother's generation, but not within my own.

I remember my friend Tavo's words only two years ago, "You get to choose." He told me he didn't trust güeros, that we had to prove ourselves to him in some way. And I felt that challenge for proof laid flat on the table between us.

So, I said, "Well, I understand that because it's awfully hard to be in this position under suspicion from so many." This constant self-scrutiny, digging deeper, digging deeper.

Then Tavo said to me, "You see, at any time, if they [meaning me] decide to use their light skin privilege, they can. You can decide you're suddenly not Chicana."

That I can't say, but once my light skin and good English saved me and my lover from arrest. And I'd use it again. I'd use it to the hilt over and over to save our skins.

"You get to choose." Now I want to shove those words right back into his face. You call this a choice! To constantly push up against a wall of resistance from your own people or to fall away nameless into the mainstream of this country, running with our common spilled blood?

But I *have* betrayed my people.

Rita Villareal and I used to go to the roller rink together. I never noticed how dark she was until my mother pointed this out to me, warning me against her. How her jet-black straight hair and coffee bean skin

marked her as a different grade of mexicana. *Una india, de clase baja*. It was the first fight about race I ever had with my mother. When I protested, she said to me, "It isn't her color and I never tell you about your friends, but this girl is going to get you in trouble. She's no good for you." Our friendship soon broke off, me keeping a distance from Rita. Later, she got into boys and booze. *Was my mother right?*

Maybe this was what my best friend Vivian had feared/expected in me, my turning my back on her, like I had on that Wizard Rocky.

Many years later, when I was already in college, I had come home for the weekend and went on a short run to the neighborhood supermarket for my mom. There, for the first time in at least three years, I ran into Rocky. She was pushing a shopping cart, and inside it was one of the most beautiful baby boys I had ever laid eyes on, jabbering and wide-eyed.

Rocky and I talked. It was clear we both still felt some affection for each other from those early grade-school days. I touched the kid's cheek, complimenting her on him. When she turned to enter the checkout line, I wanted to stop her, invite her to dinner, not let her out of my sight again. But I hesitated, wondering what more we would have to say to each other after so many years. I let her go.

Driving home, I remembered that there had been rumors that Rocky had been pregnant at graduation.

TRAITOR BEGETS TRAITOR

What looks like betrayal between women on the basis of race originates, I believe, in sexism/heterosexism. Chicanas begin to turn our backs on each other either to gain male approval or to avoid being sexually stigmatized by men under the name of *puta*, *vendida*, *jota*. This phenomenon is as old as the day is long, and first learned in the schoolyard, long before it is played out with a vengeance within political communities.

In the seventh grade, I fell in love with Manuel Poblano. A small-boned boy, hair always perfectly combed and oiled. His uniform shirt pressed neatly over shoulder blades jutting out. At twelve, Manuel was growing in his identity—sexually, racially—and Patsy Juárez, my one-time fifth-grade friend, wanted him too. Manuel was pals with Leticia and Connie. I

remember how they flaunted a school picture of his in front of my face, proving how *they* could get one from him, although I had asked first. The two girls were conspiring to get him to “go” with Patsy, which in the end, he finally did. I, knowing all along I didn’t have a chance. Not brown enough. And the wrong last name.

At puberty, it seemed identity alliances were already beginning to be made along rigid and immovable lines of race, as it combined with sex. And everyone—boy, girl, anglo and Chicano—fell into place. Where did *I* stand?

I did not move away from other Chicanos because I did not love my people. I gradually became anglocized because I thought it was the only option available to me toward gaining autonomy as a person without being sexually stigmatized. I can’t say that I was conscious of all this at the time, only that at each juncture in my development, I instinctively made choices which I thought would allow me greater freedom of movement in the future. This primarily meant resisting sex roles as much as I could safely manage, and this was far easier in an anglo context than in a Chicano one. That is not to say that anglo culture does not stigmatize its women for “gender-transgressions,” only that its stigmatizing did not hold the personal power over me that Chicano culture did.

Chicanas’ negative perceptions of ourselves as sexual persons and our consequential betrayal of each other finds its roots in a four-hundred-year-long Mexican history and mythology. It is further entrenched by a system of anglo imperialism which long ago put mexicanos and Chicanos in a defensive posture against the dominant culture.

The sexual legacy passed down to the mexicana/Chicana is the legacy of betrayal, pivoting around the historical/mythical female figure of Malintzín Tenepal. As a Native woman and translator, strategic adviser and mistress to the Spanish conqueror of México, Hernán Cortéz, Malintzín is considered the mother of the mestizo people. But unlike La Virgen de Guadalupe, she is not revered as La Madre Sagrada, but rather slandered as La Chingada, meaning the “fucked one,” or La Vendida, sell-out to the white race.¹

Upon her shoulders rests the full blame for the “bastardization” of the indigenous people of México. To put it in its most base terms: Malintzín, also called Malinche, fucked the white man who conquered the Indian

peoples of México and nearly obliterated their cultures. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this historical/sexual "transgression."

As a Chicana and a feminist, I must, like other Chicanas before me, examine the effects this myth has on my/our racial/sexual identity and my relationship with other Chicanas. There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under Malinche's name, even if she never hears directly of the one-time Aztec princess.

The Aztecs had recorded that Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god, would return from the east to redeem his people in the year One Reed, according to the Aztec calendar. Destiny would have it that on this very day, April 21, 1519 (as translated to the Western calendar), Cortéz and his men, fitting the description of Quetzalcoatl, light-haired and bearded, landed in Vera Cruz.²

At the time of Cortéz's arrival in México, the Aztecs had subjugated much of the Indian population, including the Mayans and Tabascans, who were much less powerful militarily. War was a religious requirement for the Aztecs in order to take prisoners to be used for sacrificial offerings to the sun-god, Huitzilopochtli. As slaves and potential sacrificial victims to the Aztecs, then, many other Indian nations, after their own negotiations and sometimes bloody exchanges with the Spanish, were eager to join forces with the Spanish to overthrow the Aztec empire. The Aztecs, through their systematic subjugation of much of the Mexican Indian population, decreed their own self-destruction.³

Chicana feminist theorist, Aleida Del Castillo, contends that as a woman of deep spiritual commitment, Malinche aided Cortéz because she understood him to be Quetzalcoatl returned in a different form to save the peoples of México from total extinction. She writes, "The destruction of the Aztec empire, the conquest of México and as such, the termination of her indigenous world" was, in Malinche's eyes, "inevitable" in order to make way for the new spiritual age that was imminent.⁴

Del Castillo and other Chicana feminists who are researching and re-interpreting Malinche's role in the conquest of México are not trying to justify the imperialism of the Spanish. Rather, they are attempting to cre-

ate a more realistic context for, and therefore a more sympathetic view of, Malinche's actions.

The root of the fear of betrayal by a woman is not at all specific to the Mexican or Chicano. The resemblance between Malinche and the story of Eve is all too obvious. In chronicling the conquest of México and founding the Catholic Church there, the Spanish passed on to the mestizo people as legacy their own European-Catholic interpretation of Mexican events. Much of this early interpretation originated from Bernal Díaz del Castillo's eye-witness account of the conquest. As the primary source of much contemporary analysis as well, the picture we have of Mexican Indian civilization during that period often contains a strong Catholic and Spanish bias.

In his writings, Bernal Díaz del Castillo notes that upon the death of Malinche's father, the young Aztec princess was in line to inherit his estate. Malinche's mother wanted her son from her second marriage to inherit the wealth instead. She therefore sold her own daughter into slavery. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, there are writings in México to refute this account, but it was nevertheless recorded—or commonly believed—that Malinche was betrayed by her own mother.⁵ This myth of the inherent unreliability of women, our natural propensity for treachery, has been carved into the very bone of Mexican/Chicano collective psychology.

Traitor begets traitor.

Little is made of this early betrayal, whether or not it actually occurred, probably because no man was immediately affected. In a way, Malinche's mother would only have been doing her Mexican wifely duty: *putting the male first.*

There is none so beautiful as the Mexican male. I have never met any kind of mexicano who, although he may have claimed his family was very woman-dominated ("mi mamá made all the real decisions"), did not subscribe to the basic belief that men are better. It is so ordinary a statement as to sound simplistic and I am nearly embarrassed to write it, but that's the truth in its kernel.

Ask, for example, any Chicana mother about her children and she is quick to tell you she loves them all the same, but she doesn't. *The boys are*

different. Sometimes I sense that she feels this way because she wants to believe that through her mothering, she can develop the kind of man she would have liked to have married, or even have been. That through her son she can get a small taste of male privilege, since without race or class privilege that's all there is to be had. The daughter can never offer the mother such hope, straddled by the same forces that confine the mother. As a result, the daughter must constantly earn the mother's love, prove her fidelity to her. The son—he gets her love for free.

After ten years of feminist consciousness and activism, why does this seem so significant to me—to write of the Mexican mother favoring the son? I think because I had never quite gone back to the source. Never said in my own tongue, *the boys, they are men, they can do what they want . . . after all, he's a man.*

JOURNAL ENTRY: APRIL 1980

Three days ago, my mother called me long distance full of tears, loving me, wanting me back in her life after such a long period of separation. My mother's tears succeed in getting me to break down the edge in my voice, the protective distance. My mother's pleading "mi'jita, I love you, I hate to feel so far away from you" succeeds in opening my heart again to her.

I don't remember exactly why my heart had been shut, only that it had been very necessary to keep my distance, that in a way we had agreed to that. But, it only took her crying to pry my heart open again.

I feel myself unriveting. The feelings begin to flood my chest. Yes, this is why I love women. This woman is my mother. There is no love as strong as this, refusing my separation, never settling for a secret that would split us off, always at the last minute, like now, pushing me to brink of revelation, speaking the truth.

I am as big as a mountain! I want to say, "Watch out, Mamá! I love you and I am as big as a mountain!" And it is on the brink of this precipice where I feel my body descending into the places where we have not spoken, the times I did not fight back. I am descending, ready to speak the truth, finally.

And then suddenly, over the phone, I hear another ring. My mother tells me to wait. There is a call on my father's work phone. Moments later, "It is your brother," she says. My knees lock under me, bracing myself for the fall. . . . Her voice lightens up. "Okay, mi'jita. I love you. I'll talk to you later," cutting off the line in the middle of the connection.

I am relieved when I hang up that I did not have the chance to say more. The graceful reminder. This man doesn't have to earn her love. My brother has always come first.

Seduction and betrayal. Since I've grown up, no woman cares for me for free. There is always a price. My love.

What I wanted from my mother was impossible. It would have meant her going against Mexican/Chicano tradition in a very fundamental way. You are a traitor to your race if you do not put the man first. The potential accusation of "traitor" or "vendida" is what hangs above the heads and beats in the hearts of most Chicanas seeking to develop our own autonomous sense of ourselves, particularly through sexuality. Even if a Chicana knew no Mexican history, the concept of betraying one's race through sex and sexual politics is as common as corn. As cultural myths reflect the economics, mores and social structures of a society, every Chicana suffers from their effects. And we project the fear onto each other. We suspect betrayal in one another—first to other men, but ultimately and more insidiously, to the white man.

JOURNAL ENTRY: NOVIEMBRE 1980

. . . this white man coming up over and over again. There's something about him that feels like such a suck to me. And so I ask myself, is it only that my Chicana mother fed my white father all the days of her life? Is it this model I am struck with/stuck with? The white man getting the attention that should go to the Chicana daughters, that should be shared between women?

I don't sense within our culture the same fear of a man betraying our race. It is the woman who is the object of our contempt. We can't ultimately hold onto her, not in the cosmic sense. She who could provide us with the greatest sense of belonging is never truly ours; for she is always potential chattel for the white man. As with so many of our mothers, my mother's relationship with white men made survival for her and her family possible.

It was Mr. Bowman who saved the day. Saved the day in Tijuana. Big white businessman Mr. Bowman. Not very good-looking, but did he need to be? Had money. A very

good dresser, mi mamá would say. The second wife, a mexicana—or was that his mistress? No recuerdo, pero this was a man to be counted on.

Cuando se murió mi abuelo, he gave mamá the bucks for the funeral. Mi abuela never asking where it came from. Mi mamá said to me, "She didn't care how I got it. How did she think I got it? I was only a girl, hija, a girl."

'Bout the time she got to the Foreign Club, they were both older. He was no spring chicken, never, even in the early years, but by now she was close to eighteen and he thought, after all, it's about time.

The chauffeur, a mexicano, put them into the back seat of the big blue sedan and they all began their way down the coast toward Rosarito Beach. Mi mamá praying the entire way, praying "santo niño madre de dios san antonio" . . . you name it, she brought out every saint and holy person she could think of, but focusing, of course, on her patron, San Antonio. Running the rosary beads through her mind, she prayed, "San Antonio, por favor, ayúdame."

She had seen the chauffeur fill the tank with gas. They had all gone to the station together. She remembered that. She had seen him fill it up. But there they were, her praying between snatches of conversation, Big Bowman sitting next to her, pleased with himself, and the car starts sputtering and jerking to a stop. They were out of gas. Smack in the desert.

It was a day's journey back to town.

No gas. No hotel. No Rosarito. No sex with Mr. Bowman.

That time the saints saved her.

"He never laid a hand on me. It wasn't that he didn't want to," she said, "but I was very lucky. If he would of wanted me, what could I do? But I was very lucky."

So little has been documented as to the actual suffering Chicanas have experienced resisting or succumbing to the sexual demands of white men. The ways we have internalized the sexual hatred and exploitation they have displayed against us are probably too numerous and too ingrained to even identify. If the Chicana, like her brother, suspects other women of betrayal, then she must, in the most profound sense, suspect herself. How deep her suspicions run will measure how ardently she defends her commitment, above all, to the Chicano male. As obedient sister/daughter/lover she is the committed heterosexual, the socially acceptable Chicana. Even if she's politically radical, sex remains the bottom line on which she proves her commitment to her raza.

WE FIGHT BACK WITH OUR FAMILIES

Because heterosexism⁶—the Chicana's sexual commitment to the Chicano male—is proof of her fidelity to her people, the Chicana feminist attempting to critique the sexism in the Chicano community is certainly between a personal rock and a political hard place.

Although not called “the sexism debate,” as it has been in the literary sectors of the Black movement, the Chicano discussion of sexism within our community has, like that movement, been largely limited by heterosexual assumption: “How can we get our men right?” The feminist-oriented material which appeared in the late 70s and early 80s for the most part strains in its attempt to stay safely within the boundaries of Chicano—male-defined and often anti-feminist—values.

Over and over again, Chicanas trivialize the women's movement as being merely a white middle-class thing, having little to offer women of color. They cite only the most superficial aspects of the movement. For example, in “From Woman to Woman,” Silvia S. Lizarraga writes:

[C]lass distinction is a major determinant of attitudes toward other subordinated groups. In the U.S. we see this phenomenon operating in the goals expressed in the Women's Liberation Movement. . . . The needs represent a large span of interests—from those of *capitalist women*, women in business and professional careers, to *witches* and *lesbians*. However, the needs of the unemployed and working class women of different ethnic minorities are generally overlooked by this movement.⁷ (*my emphasis*)

This statement typifies the kind of one-sided perspective of the women's movement many Chicanas have given in the name of Chicana liberation. My question is, *whom* are they trying to serve? Certainly not the Chicana who is deprived of some very critical information about a ten-year grassroots feminist movement where women of color, including lesbians of color (certainly in the minority and most assuredly encountering “feminist” racism), have been actively involved in reproductive rights, especially sterilization abuse, battered women's shelters, rape crisis centers, welfare advocacy, Third World women's conferences, cultural events, health clinics and more.

Interestingly, it is perfectly acceptable among Chicano males to use white theoreticians—e.g., Marx and Engels—to develop a theory of Chicano oppression. It is unacceptable, however, for the Chicana to use white feminist sources to develop a theory of Chicana oppression. Even if one subscribes to a solely economic theory of oppression, how can one ignore that over half of the world's workers are female who suffer discrimination not only in the workplace, but also at home and in all the areas of sex-related abuse? How can she afford not to recognize that the wars against imperialism occurring both domestically and internationally are always accompanied by the rape of women of color by both white men and men of color? Without a feminist analysis, what name do we put to these facts? Are these not deterrents to the Chicana developing a sense of "species being"? Are these "women's issues" not also "people's issues"? It is far easier for the Chicana to criticize white women, who on the face of things could never be familia, than to take issue with or complain, as it were, to a brother, uncle, father.

The most valuable aspect of Chicana theory thus far has been its re-evaluation of our history from a woman's perspective by unearthing the stories of Mexican/Chicana female figures that early on exhibited feminist consciousness. The weakness of these works is that many of them are undermined by what I call the "alongside-our-man-knee-jerk-phenomenon."

In speaking of María Hernández, "a feminist and leader in her own right," Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez, the editors of *La Chicana*, offer a typical disclaimer: "[Still] she is always quick to point to the importance of family unity in the movement and to acknowledge the help of her husband. . . ."8 And yet we would think nothing of the Chicano activist never mentioning the many "behind-the-scenes" Chicanas who helped him!

In the same text, the authors fall into the too-common trap of coddling the Chicano male ego (which should be, in and of itself, an insult to Chicanos) in the name of cultural loyalty. Like the Black Superwoman, the Chicana is forced to take on extra-human proportions. She must keep the cultural home-fires burning while going out and making a living. She must fight racism alongside her man, but challenge sexism sin-

gle-handedly, all the while retaining her "femininity" so as not to offend or threaten *her man*. This is what being a Chicana feminist has meant in Chicano-defined terms.

In recent years, however, truly feminist Chicanas are beginning to make the pages of Chicano, feminist and literary publications. This, of course, is only a reflection of a fast-growing Chicana/U.S. Third World feminist movement. I am in debt to the research and writings of Norma Alarcón, Martha Cotera, Gloria Anzaldúa and Aleida Del Castillo, to name a few.* Their work reflects a relentless commitment to putting the female first, even when it means criticizing *el hombre*.⁹

To be critical of one's culture is not to betray that culture. We tend to be very righteous in our criticism and indictment of the dominant culture and we so often suffer from the delusion that, since Chicanos are so maligned from the outside, there is little room to criticize those aspects within our oppressed culture that oppress us.

I am not particularly interested in whether or not people of color learned sexism from the white man. There have been great cases made to prove how happy men and women were together before the white man made tracks in indigenous soil. This reflects the same mentality of white feminists who claim that all races were in harmony when the "Great Mother" ruled us all. In both cases, history tends to prove different. In either case, the strategy for the elimination of racism and sexism cannot occur through the exclusion of one problem or the other. As the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organization, states, women of color experience these oppressions "simultaneously."¹⁰ The only people who can afford not to recognize this are those who do not suffer this multiple oppression.

I remain amazed at how often so-called "Tercermundistas" in the U.S. work to annihilate the concept and existence of white supremacy, but turn their faces away from male supremacy. Perhaps this is because when you

*In acknowledging these few women, I think of so many other Chicanas and other Latina feminists who were the very first in their political activism to bring up the issue of our particular oppression as brown women. Speaking up in isolation, ten and fifteen years ago, without a movement to support them, these women had little opportunity to record their own history of struggle. And yet, it is they who make this writing and the writing of my compañeras possible.

start to talk about sexism, the world becomes increasingly complex. The power no longer breaks down into neat little hierarchical categories, but becomes a series of starts and detours. Since the categories are not easy to arrive at, the enemy is not easy to name. It is all so difficult to unravel. It is true that some men hate women even in their desire for them. And some men oppress the very women they love. But unlike the racist, they allow the object of their contempt to share the table with them. The hatred they feel for women does not translate into separatism. It is more insidiously intra-cultural, like class antagonism. But different, because it lives and breathes in the flesh and blood of our families, even in the name of love.

In Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*, the curandera asks the question, "Can you afford to be whole?"¹¹ This line represents the question that has burned within me for years and years through my growing politicization. *What would a movement bent on the freedom of women of color look like?* In other words, what are the implications of looking not only *outside* of our culture, but *into* our culture and ourselves and from that place beginning to develop a strategy for a movement that could challenge the bedrock of oppressive systems of belief globally?

The one aspect of our identity which has been uniformly ignored by every existing political movement in this country is sexuality, as both a source of oppression and a means of liberation. Although other movements have dealt with this issue, sexual oppression and desire have never been considered specifically in relation to the lives of women of color. Sexuality, race and sex have usually been presented in contradiction to each other, rather than as part and parcel of a complex web of personal and political identity and oppression.

Female sexuality must be controlled, whether it be through the Church or through the State. The institutions of marriage and family, and necessarily, heterosexuality, prevail and thrive under capitalism as well as socialism. Patriarchal systems of whatever ilk must be able to determine how and when women reproduce. For even "after the revolution," babies must be made, and until they find a way of making them without us (which is not that far off into the future), we're here for the duration. In China, for example, married couples are now being mandated by the State to limit their children to one. Abortions are not only available, but women are

sometimes forced by family and friends to undergo an abortion or meet with severe economic recriminations from the State. In the U.S., the New Right's response to a weakening economic system, which they attribute in part to women's changing position in the family, is to institute legislation to ensure governmental control of women's reproductive rights. Unlike China, however, the New Right is "morally" opposed to abortion. The form their misogyny takes is the dissolution of government-assisted abortions for the poor, bills to limit teenage girls' right to birth control, and the advocacy of the Human Rights Amendment, which allows the fetus greater right to life than the mother. These backward political moves hurt all women, but most especially the poor and "colored."

The white man's so-called "benevolent protection" of the family and the role of women within it has never extended to the woman of color. She is most often the victim of forced pregnancy and sterilization. She is always the last to "choose."

Unlike most white people, with the exception of the Jews, Third World people have suffered the threat of genocide to our races since the coming of the first European expansionists. The family, then, becomes all the more ardently protected by oppressed peoples, and the sanctity of this institution is infused like blood into the veins of the Chicano. At all costs, *la familia* must be preserved: for when they kill our boys in their own imperialist wars to gain greater profits for American corporations; when they keep us in ghettos, reservations and barrios which ensure that our own people will be the recipients of our frustrated acts of violence; when they sterilize our women without our consent because we are unable to read the document we sign; when they prevent our families from getting decent housing, adequate child care, sufficient fuel, regular medical care; then we have reason to believe—although they may no longer technically be lynching us in Texas or our sisters and brothers in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi—they intend to see us dead.

So we fight back, we think, with our families—with our women pregnant, and our men, the indisputable heads. We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat. And yet, our refusal to examine *all* the roots of the lovelessness in our families is our weakest link and softest spot.

Our resistance as a people to looking at the relationships within our families—between husband and wife, lovers, sister and brother, father, son and daughter, etc.—leads me to believe that the Chicano male does not hold fast to the family unit merely to safeguard it from the death-dealings of the anglo. Living under Capitalist Patriarchy, what is true for “the man” in terms of misogyny is, to a great extent, true for the Chicano. He, too, like any other man, wants to be able to determine how, when, and with whom his women—mother, wife and daughter—are sexual. For without male-imposed social and legal control of our reproductive function, reinforced by the Catholic Church, and the social institutionalization of our roles as sexual and domestic servants to men, Chicanas might very freely “choose” to do otherwise, including being sexually independent *from* and/or *with* men. In fact, the forced “choice” of the gender of our sexual/love partner seems to precede the forced “choice” of the form (marriage and family) that partnership might take. The control of women begins through the institution of heterosexuality.

Homosexuality does not, in and of itself, pose a great threat to society. Male homosexuality has always been a “tolerated” aspect of Mexican/Chicano society, as long as it remains “fringe.” A case can even be made that male homosexuality stems from our indigenous Aztec roots.¹² But lesbianism, in any form, and male homosexuality which openly avows both the sexual and emotional elements of the bond, challenges the very foundation of *la familia*.*

The question remains. Is the foundation as it stands now sturdy enough to meet the face of the oppressor? I think not. There is a deeper love between and amongst our people that lies buried between the lines of the roles we play with each other. It 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.

Family is *not* by definition the man in a dominant position over women and children. Familia is cross-generational bonding, deep emotional ties between opposite sexes and within our sex. It is sexuality that involves, but is not limited to, intercourse or orgasm. It springs forth

*The “maricón” or “joto” is the object of the Chicano/mexicano’s contempt because he is consciously choosing a role his culture tells him to despise, that of a woman.

from touch, constant and daily. The ritual del beso en la mejilla and the sign of the cross with every coming and going from the home. It is finding familia among friends where blood ties are formed through suffering and celebration shared.

The strength of our families never came from domination. It has only endured in spite of it—like our women.

LA MALINCHISTA

Chicanos' refusal to look at our weaknesses as a people and a movement is, in the most profound sense, an act of self-betrayal. The Chicana lesbian bears the brunt of this betrayal, for it is she, the most visible manifestation of a woman taking control of her own sexual identity and destiny, who so severely challenges the anti-feminist Chicano/a. What other reason is there for the virtual dead silence among Chicanos about lesbianism? When the subject is raised, the word is used pejoratively.

For example, Sonia A. López writes about the anti-feminism in El Movimiento of the late 60s:

The Chicanas who voiced their discontent with the organizations and with male leadership were often labeled "women's libbers," and "lesbians." This served to isolate and discredit them, a method practiced both covertly and overtly.¹³

This statement appears without qualification. López makes no value judgment on the inherent homophobia in such a divisive tactic. Without comment, her statement reinforces the idea that lesbianism is not only a white thing, but an insult to be avoided at all costs.

Such attempts by Chicana feminists to bend over backward to prove that criticism of their people is love (which, in fact, it is) severely undermines the potential radicalism of the ideology they are trying to create. Not quite believing in their love, suspecting their own anger, and fearing ostracism from Chicano males (being symbolically "kicked out of bed" with the threat of "lesbian" hanging over their work), the Chicana's imagination often stops before it has a chance to consider some of the most difficult, and therefore some of the most important, questions.

It is no wonder that the Chicanas I know who *are* asking “taboo” questions are often forced into outsiderhood long before they begin to question *el carnal* in print. Maybe like me they now feel they have little to lose.

It is important to say that fearing recriminations from my father never functioned for me as an obstacle in my political work. Had I been born of a Chicano father, I sometimes think I may never have been able to write a line or participate in a demonstration, having to repress *all* questioning in order to prevent the ultimate question of my sexuality from emerging. Possibly, some of my *compañeras* whose fathers died or left in their early years may never have had the courage to speak out as lesbians of color the way they do now had their fathers been a living part of their daily lives. The Chicana lesbians I know whose fathers *are* very much a part of their daily lives are seldom “out” to their families.*

During the late 60s and early 70s, I was not an active part of *la causa*. I never managed to get myself to walk in the marches in East Los Angeles (I merely watched from the sidelines); I never went to one meeting of MECHA on campus. No *soy tonta*. I would have been murdered in El Movimiento at the time—light-skinned, unable to speak Spanish well enough to hang; miserably attracted to women and fighting it; and constantly questioning all authority, including men’s. I felt I did not belong there. Maybe I had really come to believe that “Chicanos” were “different,” not “like us,” as my mother would say. I fully knew that there was a part of me that was a part of that movement, but it seemed that part would have to go unexpressed until the time I could be a Chicano and the woman I had to be, too.

The woman who defies her role as subservient to her husband, father, brother, or son by taking control of her own sexual destiny is purported to be a “traitor to her race” by contributing to the “genocide” of her people—whether or not she has children. In short, even if the defiant woman is not a lesbian, she is assumed to be one; for, like the lesbian in the Chicano imagination, she is *una Malinchista*. Like the Malinche of Mexican

*I certainly don’t mean to suggest that Euro-American fathers are less patriarchal or homophobic than Chicanos, only that Chicanas’ fear of betraying our own cultura in a white racist America may be more viscerally experienced when the “patriarch” we are confronting is not theoretical, but a flesh-and-blood *mexicano padre*.

history, she is corrupted by foreign influences which threaten to destroy her people. Norma Alarcón elaborates on this theme of sex as a determinant of loyalty when she states:

The myth of Malinche 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 highly pawnable, nothing she does is perceived as choice.¹⁴

Lesbianism can be construed by the race, then, as the Chicana being used by the white man, even if the man never lays a hand on her. *The choice is never seen as her own.* Homosexuality is *his* disease which he sinisterly spreads to Third World people, men and women alike. (Because Malinche is female, Chicano gay men rebelling against their prescribed sex roles, although still considered diseased, do not suffer the same stigma of treason.) Further, the Chicana lesbian who has relationships with white women may feel especially susceptible to such accusations, since the white lesbian is seen as the white man's agent. The fact that the white woman may be challenging the authority of her white father, and thereby could be looked upon as a potential ally, has no bearing on a case closed before it was ever opened.

The first dyke I remember in school was Sally Frankel, whom everyone called "Frank," the way she liked it. She could play the meanest game of four-square of them all—built lean and solid as an eighth-grade boy, and smart too. And very, very clearly white. *Were all lesbians white?* I remember thinking that I had never quite met a girl like Frank before—so bold, somehow freer than the rest of us. She was an "army brat" and so had lived many places, even in Europe. While all my Chicana friends were leaving me high and dry for the guys, this girl—although not particularly interested in me—represented a life beyond the tight group discussions of girls, locked arm-in-arm, where the word "chinga" was dropped like a slug in my

throat. (Even at fourteen, I was still wondering if I could get pregnant slowdancing with a boy, having picked up my knowledge of sex from these cryptic, closed-circled conversations.) The desire I felt for women had nothing and everything to do with the vulgarity of intercourse; had nothing and everything to do with the naked dreams that rocked my bed at night. Somehow Frank connected with all this—as did the “funny couple” I had encountered surreptitiously one hot afternoon a few years before.

At the time we were living in the Kenwood Hotel, a kind of “drifter” hangout, down on Main Street in Huntington Beach, California, long before there was any development there. Just a few bars, a little drugstore, “The Paddock” restaurant, and a surfboard shop. My mom was managing the Kenwood.

One day I was making my way down the long hallway to go play out on the big sundeck when I suddenly stopped short of the screen door. Some “new” people were out there who were not the “regulars.” Hiding behind the screen door, I decided to observe.

One woman looked like a Marilyn Monroe type—50s style. Her hair was brassy blonde and pressed into a kind of permanent wave. Her yellow sundress was very tight around her waist and low-cut. The other person next to her I knew was really a woman, although she looked mostly like a man: white dress shirt with sleeves rolled up, pack of cigs in her front breast pocket, black men’s trousers. She was a big woman, about twice the size of Marilyn, except her head was small—dark haired and greased back.

Marilyn had her dress hiked up above her knees and between her thighs she had put an open jar of Skippy peanut butter. I watched as Marilyn dipped the knife into the jar, pulled out a thick glob of the brown mass, then ran her tongue along it luxuriously like she had all day to eat the stuff. She then gave it to her partner to lick in the same place. All I could think about were the germs that were being passed back and forth.

The next day, I learned that the “funny” women in room six had sneaked out in the middle of the night without paying. They had stolen the alarm clock too. My momma said she had tried to give them the benefit of the doubt, but “never again.” *Were all lesbians white? And decent ladies, Mexican? Who was I in this?*

But it was la mexicana I had loved first.

Sandra García and I used to make out after school. I think we mostly put a pillow between our faces so our lips wouldn't touch, but our bodies would get all enraptured with each other. At eleven, Sandra was already "stacked" and, very innocently, we would take the role of movie stars—she playing Deborah Walley and me, James Darren, lusting after each other. Sandra's young body seemed a miracle of womanhood to me, the bow of her pink brassiere always poking out the opening of her too-small white uniform blouse. I wanted Sandra and as long as she was interested, I'd throw myself on the couch with her and make out until my cheeks were sore.

My cousin Teresa and I made out too; and this was for real. Making up stories about shipwrecks and sailor/saviors of young French women, we would shut ourselves up in our abuelita's bedroom and press our lips long and hard against each other's. One time we touched tongues, which I remember so delighted us that we even demonstrated this to my mom, who happened into the bedroom. "Mira, tía," Teresita said, and we touched tongues tip-to-tip and giggled uproariously. My mother, of course, reprimanded us immediately, and it was only then that I realized that the strange sensation running through me had something to do with "down there." Our games soon came to an end, my feeling guilty for taking advantage of my cousin, who was three years younger than me.

Still, I can see now that these experiences with Sandra and Teresa were brief moments of sexual connection with other Chicanas that were to be systematically denied me for the next twenty years of my life.

The Mexican women in my life, a pain I don't want to get to.

It seems my life has always been a kind of catch-22. For any way you look at it, Chicanas are denied one another's fidelity. If women betray one another through heterosexism, then lesbianism is a kind of visible statement of our faithfulness to one another. But if lesbianism is white, then the women I am faithful to can never be my own. And we are forced to move away from our people. As Gloria Anzaldúa once said to me, "If I stayed in Hargill, I would never have been able to be myself. I had to leave to come out as the person I really was." And if I had stayed in the San Gabriel Valley, I would have been found for dead, at least the walking dead.

I have always known too much. It was too clear to me—too tangible—too alive in the breath of my nose, the pulse between my thighs, the deep sighs that flowed from my chest when I moved into a woman's arms.

JOURNAL ENTRY: PRIMAVERA 1980

I don't know what happened to make me this way. I do fear for my life sometimes. Not that a bullet will hit my brain, but that I will forget to be afraid of the enemy. I dreamed last night of a hostility in me so great that on the job I put a pen through the skull of a white man. I have felt like an outcast on my job lately. The new manager wants to fire me for my "politics." I am a lesbian. I love women to the point of killing for us all.

An old friend came to visit me yesterday. She is leaving her good husband for the wild love of a woman. We were both very sad together. Not for the separation from her husband but for so many years of separation from women.

Some people try to convince me that the secrets I hold about loving women do not put me in a position of threat to my life. You see, you can't see this condition—this posture of mind and heart and body—in the movement of my joints or on the surface of my skin. (And then again, sometimes you can.) But I know they are wrong.

I feel very threatened and very threatening . . .

My mother does not worry about me; she fears me. She fears the power of the life she helped to breathe into me. She fears the lessons she taught me will move into action. She fears I might be willing to die rather than settle for less than the best of loving.

The line of reasoning goes:

Malinche sold out her indio people by acting as courtesan and translator for Cortéz, whose offspring symbolically represent the birth of the bastardized mestizo/mexicano people. My mother then is the modern-day Chicana Malinche marrying a white man, my father, to produce the bastards my sister, my brother and I are. Finally, I—a half-breed Chicana—further betray my race by choosing my sexuality, which excludes all men, and therefore most dangerously, Chicano men.

I come from a long line of Véndidas.

I am a Chicana lesbian. My being a sexual person and a radical stands in direct contradiction to, and in violation of, the woman I was raised to be.

INOCENCIA MEANT DYING RATHER THAN BEING FUCKED

Coming from such a complex and contradictory history of sexual exploitation by white men and from within our own race, it is nearly earth-shaking to begin to try and separate the myths told about us from the truths; and to examine to what extent we have internalized what, in fact, is not true.

Although intellectually I knew different, early on I learned that women were willing collaborators in rape. So over and over again in pictures, books, movies, I experienced rape and pseudo-rape as titillating, sexy, as what sex was all about. Women want it. Real rape was dark, greasy-looking bad men jumping out of alleys and attacking innocent blonde women. Everything short of that was just sex; the way it is: dirty and duty. We spread our legs and bear the brunt of penetration, but we do spread our legs. In my mind, inocencia meant dying rather than being fucked.

I learned these notions about sexuality not only from the society at large, but more specifically and potently from Chicano/mexicano culture, originating from the myth of La Chingada, Malinche. In the very act of intercourse with Cortéz, Malinche is seen as having been violated. She is not, however, an innocent victim, but la culpable—ultimately responsible for her own sexual victimization. Slavery and slander is the price she must pay for the pleasure our culture imagined she enjoyed. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Octavio Paz gives an explanation of the term “chingar,” which provides valuable insights into how Malinche, in being represented as La Chingada, is perceived culturally. He writes:

The idea of breaking, of ripping open. When alluding to a sexual act, violation or deception gives it a particular shading. The man who commits it never does so with the consent of the chingada. . . . Chingar then is to do violence to another, i.e., rape. The verb is masculine, active, cruel: it stings, wounds, gashes, stains. And it provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction. The person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it. The chingón is the macho, the male; he rips open the chingada, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world.¹⁵

If the simple act of sex then—the penetration itself—implies female debasement and non-humanness, it is no wonder Chicanas often divorce ourselves from the conscious recognition of our own sexuality. Even if we enjoy having sex, draw pleasure from feeling fingers, tongue, penis inside us, there is a part of us that must disappear in the act, separate ourselves from realizing what it is we are actually doing. Sit, as it were, on the corner bedpost, watching the degradation and violence some “other” woman is willing to subject herself to, not us. And if we have lesbian feelings—want not only to be penetrated, but to penetrate—what perverse kind of monstrosities we must indeed be! It is through our spirits then that we escape the painful recognition of our “base” sexual selves.

When I was about twelve years old, I had the following dream:

I am in a hospital bed. I look down upon my newly developing body. The breasts are large and ample. And below my stomach, I see my own cock, wildly shooting menstrual blood totally out of control. The image of the hermaphrodite.

In another context, I could have seen this dream as a very sexually potent vision, reflecting a desire for integration of my male and female aspects. But in my child's imagination, I am incapable of handling such information emerging from my unconscious. Up to that point I always knew that I felt the greatest emotional ties with women, but suddenly I was beginning to consciously identify those feelings as sexual. The more potent my dreams and fantasies became and the more I sensed my own exploding sexual power, the more I retreated from my body's messages and into the region of religion. Sexual fantasy and rebellion became “impure thoughts” and “sinful acts.” By giving definition and meaning to my desires, religion became the discipline to control my sexuality.

I was raised within a very strict brand of Mexican, mixed with Irish, Catholicism. This was in many ways typical for Chicano children whose parents are of my mother's generation. We were taught by the Irish nuns to seek the love and forgiveness of the Father. But after confession, I went straight home to my Mexican mother, knelt before her and asked pardon for my sins against her. It seemed the real test was to kneel down on the flesh and bones of your knees, to be relieved by lágrimas, por un besito en la cocina de mi mamá.

The contradiction between what I experienced as a very female-centered living Mexican Catholicism and the lifelessness of the disembodied Euro-American Church plagued me as a young adolescent. I remember once in the sixth grade, the nun was conducting a religion class on “doubting the existence of God.” In fact, I had been doubting for years that there was a god to be touched. Whoever He was, was becoming increasingly remote as the touch of men began to fall hungrily and awkwardly upon my body. The touch of women, however, moved like fire in my veins. God had never actually once forgiven me, but my mother had.

I confess that it was during this class as the nun proceeded to describe the various forms of atheism, that for some unspeakable reason I saw my life in a flash of revelation that filled me with horror. I pictured myself lying flat on my back on a kind of surgery table, and people—like white-uniformed doctors—stood around my body, putting dreams into my head. The dream that made up my life—the people, the sensations, the emotions that gripped my heart: all these things were no more than figures in my imagination, thoughts that formed pictures of bodies that could not actually be touched. Love in this case was impossible. I was crucially and critically alone and powerless.

In retrospect, I see this fantasy as a revelation on one hand, and on the other, the beginning of the way I was to learn to cope with my burgeoning sexuality. The revelation was that, yes, in fact, the Chicana *is* manipulated by a white God-Father, white president-father, under whose jurisdiction she is nearly powerless and alienated from the dominant society. In a way, the fantasy was a foreshadowing of what oppression awaited me as a young Chicana growing into womanhood. The coping mechanism is more difficult to describe, but I see now that in order not to embody the *chingada*, nor a femalized, and therefore perverse, version of the *chingón*, I became pure spirit—bodiless. For what, indeed, must my body look like if I were both the *chingada* and the *chingón*?

In my early adolescence, my fears moved me farther and farther away from the living, breathing woman-in-the-flesh, and closer and closer to the bodiless god. The confessions of box and curtain cloth. The strange comfort that the church would be standing there, just around the turn from the cemetery. That it would be expecting me—grand, square, pre-

dictable as stone. That the end of mass would find a palm placed in my hand. The sure knowledge of the spines of leaf bending into my grip.

The comfort and terror of powerlessness.

La niña chooses this time not to kneel in the pew. Having started for her knees, she breaks the bend, scooting back against the hard-boned wood of the pew bench: "O-my-gaw-i'm-hartly-sorry . . ." No, the child chooses this time not to begin this way. Breaking the line, she says nothing. Waiting, she lets the visions come.

Y los diablos begin to parade before her. As common to her now as the space she'd grown to picture like a circle of flesh the size of communion host inside her ribcage—the place where she thought her soul to sleep. Thinking white, thinking empty, thinking quiet, clean and untouched. It was this spot she protected from the advancing intruders: blood-pumping, wild-eyed things. The parts of men, like animals rearing, ramming into anything that could swallow them. The parts of women, quartered, stripped and shamed.

La niña shook the pictures from her mind, intervening before they could slip below and infect the sacred place inside her chest. She, the caretaker of her soul. The warrior. The watchdog, overburdened, beaten by now.

No resistance. Not this time. Not lifting her eyes, she only looked toward her hands, repeating to herself, "just look at your hands," repeating as the only language she would allow herself until words slipped from her altogether, until she knew only the touch of her red, cold hands against the wool thighs of her uniform skirt, until she knew only her body, without fire, her face dropped between her knees, her arms wrapped 'round her thin calves rocking, rocking, rocking.

Forgive us, Father, for how badly we need tenderness.

How does one describe a world where the mind twists like a rag dry of any real feeling? Only an absent inarticulate terror. A mouth hung open with no voice breaking through?

When I was nineteen, I lost my virginity. It was during those early years of heterosexual activity that the estrangement and anguished alienation I had experienced in puberty revisited me. In awakening to the touch of a man, my sexual longings for women, which I had managed to suppress since puberty, resurfaced. The sheer prospect of being a lesbian was too great to bear, as I fully believed that giving in to such desires would find

me shot-up with bullets or drugs in a gutter somewhere. Further, although I *physically* found sex with men very satisfying, I couldn't quite look at what I was doing, having turned against my Church and my mother in the act. Instead I began to develop fantasies about it. Like the white doctor visions of my childhood, I became in my imagination a dark and sinister priestess, her flowing robes of toads and sequins draped loosely over my naked shoulders. Her menacing laugh fell hungrily from my lips whenever I saddled up upon my boyfriend's lap, riding him.

But not the first time. The first time I felt the feeling, that surge of pure pleasure, coming out from behind my heart and through my open legs, gripping the bone of the boy wanting me, I fell into deep sobbing. I remembered I had felt this somewhere, some time before. I had waited nearly ten years for its return, holding my breath back between my pursed lips, praying, now remembering . . .

. . . when as a child, at first without touching myself, the pain that tugged gently at my ovaries (not maliciously, but only with an alive sense of their existence), the pressure I felt in my bowels, and the heat in my lower back—all commingled into a delicious kind of pleasure.

Today it has a name. At eleven, I only hoped the strange uncontrollable feeling would come back. It was an *accident* of pleasure. I wondered if other girls got this feeling too. If my sister, one year older, ever did. If it was a fact of growing up, like the thick red dirt smudge of blood that I had only months before found on my underpants. I would barely touch myself, except in the beginning when the feeling first occurred, my fingers instinctively moving down to the place where the slightest amount of pressure drew the sensation deep from out of the pit of my stomach and into my vagina in cool streams of relief. If I held my knees together tight enough to feel the lips puffed and throbbing between them, the feeling would sometimes replay itself in echoes of kindly, calling voices—momma voices—growing more and more faint as they departed.

"Mi'jita . . . Chorizito . . . Hijita . . ."

Months later, or was it years, my mother warned after I had spent some time locked in the bathroom that it was not good to push yourself too hard when you were trying to "go." She mentioned "piles," but not knowing what that was, I figured she knew about the pleasure, the pain,

the pushing brought on and it was bad. It was years later before I ever reenacted my private bathroom ritual again.

Only occasionally, through high school, pretending it wasn't quite happening, I would sit with one foot under me, placing the wedge of the sole of my hard oxford school shoe up between my labia. For hours, I would allow myself at least this secret comfort through TV shows and homework late into the night, my sister on the other side of the dining room table.

At what point does the fear become greater than the flesh and the flesh of the fantasy prevail? The more vividly the sinister priestess fantasies appeared to me, the more viciously I would fuck to obliterate them from my mind. I was always wanting sex: in cars, behind the bleachers of the neighborhood ballpark, my boyfriend and I breaking into the park office where he worked to use its floor. Somehow I felt that if I fucked long and hard enough, I might be going to *feel* again.

Occasionally, I would go through days, sometimes a week, of reprieve from these obsessions, but they would never last. Seemingly without my control, I would be in a conversation with someone and begin to feel as though I were being sucked down into a hole in the ground where I could always still *see* the person, but they would be shrinking farther and farther away from my hearing. Their body framed by the lip of the tunnel I had fallen into. Their mouth moving soundlessly. These feelings of outsiderhood became the lens through which I saw most of my waking life, like a thin film between me and the people I longed to touch, to reach to for help.

*we never spoke again, really
after the time I pulled up in front
of our mother's house, hands still
on the wheel
Sister, I need
to talk with you and told her
there was a devil on my tail
riding me.*

*I know she saw it clear as me
I know she'd seen it in my younger years*

*always creeping too close to her, like I was
some crazy infection,*

*and I guess I am, crazy
that catches.*

In my “craziness” I wrote poems describing myself as a centaur: half-animal/half-human, hairy-rumped and cloven-hoofed, como el diablo, the symbols emerging from a deeply Mexican and Catholic place. My recurring sense of myself outside the normal life and touch of human beings was again, in part, a kind of revelation. A foreshadowing of the marginal place, within my culture and in society at large, my sexuality was to eventually take me.

Sometimes a breakdown can be the beginning of a kind of breakthrough, a way of living in advance through a trauma that prepares you for a future of radical transformation. The third time I broke was many years after I had stopped seeing men. I had been out as a lesbian for a while and had examined, I thought, what this made me in the world at large, but I had never actually looked into the eyes of what this made me in the world of my cultural community. Since I was so busy making room simply to live a lesbian life safely—coming out to my family, friends, at school, in print, to my employers, etc., I had never wrestled with the reality of what being a *Chicana* lesbian meant.

All this changed, however, when I thought I saw in a lover, a woman, the chingón that I had so feared to recognize in myself: “the active, aggressive and closed person,” as Paz writes, “who inflicts [the wound].” I had met my match. I was forced to confront how, in all my sexual relationships, I had resisted, at all costs, feeling la chingada—which, in effect, meant that I had resisted fully feeling sex at all. *Nobody wants to be made to feel the turtle with its underside all exposed, just pink and folded flesh.* In the effort to avoid embodying la chingada, I became the chingón. In the effort not to feel fucked, I became the fucker, even with women. In the effort not to feel pain or desire, I grew a callous around my heart and imagined I felt nothing at all.

What I never quite understood until this writing is that to be without a sex—to be bodiless—as I sought to escape the burgeoning sexuality of my adolescence, my confused early days of active heterosexuality, and later my panicked lesbianism, means also to be without a race. I never attributed my removal from physicality to anything to do with race, only sex, only desire for women. And yet, as I grew up sexually, it was my race, along with my sex, that was being denied me at every turn.

I was plagued with sexual contradictions. Lesbianism as a sexual act can never be construed as reproductive sex. It is not work. It is purely about pleasure and intimacy. How this refutes, spits in the face of, the notion of sex as productive, sex as duty! In stepping outside the confines of the institution of heterosexuality, I was indeed *choosing* sex freely. *The lesbian as institutionalized outcast.*

During those years as an active feminist lesbian, I became increasingly aware of the fact that not only had my sexuality made me an outcast from my culture, but if I seriously listened to it, with all its specific cultural nuances, it would further make me an outcast from the women's movement—a movement which I had run to for dear life to avoid the gutter of utter social ostracization I had feared was waiting for me. With no visible Third World feminist movement in sight, it seemed to me to be a Chicana lesbian put me far beyond the hope of salvation.

TIRED OF THESE ACTS OF TRANSLATION

What the white women's movement tried to convince me of is that lesbian sexuality was *naturally* different than heterosexual sexuality. That in lesbianism the desire to penetrate and be penetrated, to fill and be filled, would vanish. That retaining such desires was "reactionary," not "politically correct," "male-identified." And somehow reaching sexual ecstasy with a woman lover would never involve any kind of power struggle. Women were different. We could simply magically "transcend" these "old notions," just by seeking spiritual transcendence in bed.

The fact of the matter was that all these power struggles of "having" and "being had" were being played out in my own bedroom. And in my psyche, they held a particular Mexican twist. White women's feminism did

little to answer my questions. As a Chicana feminist my concerns were different. As I wrote in 1982:

What I need to explore will not be found in the lesbian feminist bedroom, but more likely in the mostly heterosexual bedrooms of South Texas, L.A., or even Sonora, México. Further, I have come to realize that the boundaries white feminists confine themselves to in describing sexuality are based in white-rooted interpretations of dominance, submission, power-exchange, etc. Although they are certainly *part* of the psychosexual lives of women of color, these boundaries would have to be expanded and translated to fit my people, in particular, the women in my family. And I am tired, always, of these acts of translation.¹⁶

Mirtha Quintanales corroborates this position and exposes the necessity for a Third World feminist dialogue on sexuality when she states:

The critical issue for me regarding the politics of sexuality is that as a Latina Lesbian living in the U.S., I do not really have much of an opportunity to examine what constitutes sexual conformity and sexual defiance in my own culture, in my own ethnic community, and how that may affect my own values, attitudes, sexual life and politics. There is virtually no dialogue on the subject anywhere and I, like other Latinas and Third World women, especially Lesbians, am quite in the dark about what we're up against besides negative feminist sexual politics.¹⁷

During the late 70s, the concept of "women's culture" among white lesbians and "cultural feminists" was in full swing; it is still very popular today. "Womon's history," "wommin's music," "womyn's spirituality," "wymyn's language" abounded—all with the "white" modifier implied and unstated. In truth, there was/is a huge amount of denial going on in the name of female separatism. Women do not usually grow up in women-only environments. Culture is sexually mixed. As Bernice Reagon puts it:

[W]e have been organized to have our primary cultural signals come from factors other than that we are women. We are not from our base, acculturated to be women people, capable of crossing our first people boundaries: Black, White, Indian, etc.¹⁸

Unlike Reagon, I believe that there are certain ways we *have* been acculturated to be "women people," and that there is therefore such a thing as "women's culture." This occurs, however, as Reagon points out, *within* a context formed by race, class, geography, religion, ethnicity and language.

I don't mean to imply that women need to have men around to feel at home in our culture, but that the way one understands culture is influenced by men. The fact that some aspects of that culture are indeed oppressive does not imply, as a solution, throwing out the entire business of racial/ethnic culture. To do so would mean risking the loss of some very essential aspects of identity, especially for Third World women.

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New England. Boston to be exact. Pouring summer rain. We are all immigrants to this town—una hermana de Chicago, una de Tejas, una de Puerto Rico, y yo, de California. And the four of us move out into the rain under the beat of the downpour on the roof of the porch. Cooling off from the evening of enchiladas. I make up a little concoction of a summer drink: jugo de naranja, tequila, limón. Tossing in all kinds of ice cubes, "Try this," I say.

Y mis hermanas drink it up. Dos Chicanas y dos puertorriqueñas getting a little high from the food and the rain and the talk, hablando de nuestras madres.

Sitting out on the porch that night, what made me at home and filled me with ease where I forgot about myself in a fine and fluid way was not just that the Spanish sounds wrapped around the English like tortillas steaming in flour sacks, not just that we all had worked hard to get here from hard-working homes, not just that we understood the meaning of familia, but that we were women—somos mujeres. This is what women's culture means to me.

In failing to approach feminism from any kind of materialist base, failing to take race, ethnicity, class into account in determining where women are at sexually, many feminists have created an analysis of sexual oppression (often confused with sexuality itself) which is a political dead-end.

“Radical Feminism,” the ideology which sees men’s oppression of women as the root of, and paradigm for, all other oppressions, allows women to view ourselves as a class and to claim our sexual identity as the *source* of our oppression and men’s sexual identity as the *source* of the world’s evil. But this ideology can never then fully integrate the concept of the “simultaneity of oppression” as Third World feminism is attempting to do. For, if race and class oppress the woman of color as much as her sexual identity, then the Radical Feminist must extend her own “identity” politics to include her “identity” as oppressor as well. (To say nothing of having to acknowledge the fact that there are men who may suffer more than she.) This is something that, for the most part, Radical Feminism as a movement has refused to do.

Radical Feminist theorists have failed to acknowledge how their position in the dominant culture—white, middle-class, often Christian—has influenced every approach they have taken to implement feminist political change—to “give women back their bodies.” It follows then that the anti-pornography movement is the largest organized branch of Radical Feminism. For unlike battered women’s, anti-rape, and reproductive rights workers, the anti-porn “activist” never has to deal with any live woman outside of her own race and class. The tactics of the anti-pornography movement are largely symbolic and theoretical in nature. And the needs of the woman of color are a lot easier to represent on paper than in the flesh. Therefore, her single-issue approach to feminism remains intact. It is not that pornography is not a concern to many women of color; but the anti-materialist approach of this movement makes little sense in the lives of poor and Third World women. Plainly put, it is *our* sisters working in the sex industry.

Many women involved in the anti-porn movement are lesbian separatists. Because the Radical Feminist critique is there to justify it, lesbianism can be viewed as the logical personal response to a misogynist political system. Through this perspective, lesbianism has become an “idea”—a political response to male sexual aggression, rather than a sexual response—a woman’s desire for another woman. In this way, many ostensibly heterosexual women who are not active sexually can call themselves lesbians. Lesbians “from the neck up.” This faction of the movement has

grown into a kind of cult. They have taken whiteness, class privilege and an anglo-american brand of "return-to-the-mother" (which leaps back over a millennium of patriarchal domination), attempted to throw out the man, and called what is left female, while still retaining their own racial and class-biased cultural superiority.

The lesbian separatist retreats from the specific cultural contexts that have shaped her and attempts to build a cultural-political movement based on an imagined oppression-free past. It is understandable that many feminists opt for this kind of asexual separatist/spiritualist solution rather than boldly grappling with the challenge of wresting sexual autonomy from such a sexually exploitative system. Every oppressed group needs to imagine through the help of history and mythology a world where our oppression did not seem the preordained order. Aztlán for Chicanos is another example. The mistake lies in believing in this ideal past or imagined future so thoroughly and single-mindedly that finding solutions to present-day inequities loses priority, or we attempt to create too-easy solutions for the pain we feel today.

Just as culture—our race, class, ethnicity, etc.—influences our sexuality, so too do heterosexism, marriage and men as the primary agents of those institutions. We can work to tumble those institutions so that when the rubble is finally cleared away we can see what we have left to build on sexually; but we can't ask a woman to forget everything she understands about sex in a heterosexual and culturally specific context or tell her what she is allowed to think about it. Should she forget and not use what she knows sexually to untie the knot of her own desire, she may lose any chance of ever discovering her own human (sexual and spiritual) potential.

FEEDING THE PEOPLE IN ALL THEIR HUNGERS

History has taught us that the effectiveness of a movement often depends on its ability to provide what, at least, feels at the time like a spiritual imperative. Spirituality that inspires activism and, similarly, politics that move the spirit—that draw from the deep-seated place of our greatest longings for freedom—give meaning to our lives. Such a vision can hold

and heal us in the worst of times, and is in direct opposition to an apolitical spiritualist view of the world or a totally materialistic perspective.

The Civil Rights Movement is probably the best recent example in this country of a movement that was able to reach masses of people through its spiritually uplifting vision. The power of that vision, however, was based on the fact that in a very profound sense, it was deeply rooted in Black culture, and therefore, of necessity, Black spirituality. Religious fervor was not manufactured for the purposes of social or revolutionary change, but instead grew directly out of Black people's experience, influencing all those who became a part of that movement.

Major missing elements in the Civil Rights Movement, however, were consciousness and activism around specifically female and sexual concerns, as well as an understanding of the entrenchedness of white power and how to move against it. Although the race-related movements that jumped off from the Civil Rights Movement in the late 60s, such as the American Indian Movement, La Raza and Black Power, were thoroughly coming to terms with the extent and depth of white power, the role of women of color was subject for neither debate nor activism except as women functioned as female members of the race.

But times have changed. The women's movement and lesbian and gay liberation movements in the 70s brought both the subject of women's rights and sexuality, respectively, to the political light of day. Furthermore, in the 80s, with the increasing conservatism of the country manifested in the reign of Reagan and the rise of the Moral Majority, U.S. Third World organizations and organizers can no longer safely espouse the heterosexual family and, therefore, homophobia as a strategy of cultural resistance without linking themselves with the most reactionary and, by definition, the most racist political sectors of this country.

The emergence of U.S. Third World feminism, then, seemed imminent. Third World lesbians' disillusionment with the racism and classism of the women's and gay movements and the sexism and homophobia of Third World movements did much to force us to begin to organize ourselves autonomously in the name of Third World feminism.

If any movement, however, could provide a "spiritual" reference point for Third World feminism, it would be the Civil Rights Movement in its

culturally based, anti-separatist and “humanist” (not to be confused with liberal) approach to political change. As Black feminist activist and writer Barbara Smith explains:

I was trying to figure out what the connection was/is for me between the Civil Rights movement and the Black feminist movement. It is among other things, this. That the Civil Rights movement was based upon the concept of love and deep spirituality. It was a movement with a transcendent vision. *A movement whose very goal was to change the impossible, what people thought could not be changed. . . .*

The women’s movement has some of these same qualities, a belief in the human. Actually Black feminism is a kind of divine coalescing of the two because as Blackwomen we have an identity and therefore a politics that requires faith in the humanness of Blackness and femaleness. We are flying in the face of white male conceptions of what humanness is and proving that it is not them, but us.

That’s what the Civil Rights movement was getting to through its divine patience and fortitude—although tactically and strategically it was, at times, flawed—the constant demonstration that we are really the human ones.

Black feminism, lesbian feminism in particular, moves in that direction. . . . We will show you what it means to be human, what it means to really care about humanity.¹⁹

As a Chicana who grew up in a very religious household, I learned early on to respect the terrain of the spirit as the place where some of the most essential aspects of one’s life are enacted. The spirit world—my sleeping dreams, my waking fantasies, my prayers and compulsive preoccupations—was and is very rich for me. A place from which I derive strength and perseverance. A place where much internal torture has taken place.

Women of color have always known, although we have not always wanted to look at it, that our sexuality is not merely a physical response or drive, but holds a crucial relationship to our entire spiritual capacity.

Patriarchal religions—whether brought to us by the colonizer's cross and gun or emerging from our own people—have always known this. Why else would the female body be so associated in Christianity with sin and disobedience? Simply put, if the spirit and sex have been linked in our oppression, then they must also be linked in the strategy toward our liberation.

To date, no liberation movement has been willing to take on the task. To walk a freedom road that is both material and metaphysical. Sexual and spiritual. Third World feminism is about feeding people in all their hungers.

BRINGING THE STRAINS TOGETHER²⁰

Contrary to popular belief among Chicanos, Chicana feminism did not borrow from white feminists to create a movement. If any direct "borrowing" was done, it was from Black feminists.

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective wrote: "The most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity." They go on to say that they "are committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression and see as [their] particular task, the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."²¹

This "Black Feminist Statement" had considerable impact in creating an analysis of U.S. Third World women's oppression. It first appeared in *Capitalist Patriarchy: A Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah Eisenstein, and has been reprinted numerous times in leaflet form and in other feminist publications. When I first discovered it in 1978, there were three things that struck me profoundly: one was the lesbian visibility of its authors; second was their expressed solidarity with other women of color; and third was a concern for what might be considered the *psycho-sexual* oppression of women of color. The statement asserts: "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women."²²

The appearance of these sisters' words *in print*, as lesbians of color, suddenly made it viable for me to put my Chicana *and* lesbian self in the center of a movement. I no longer had to postpone or deny any part of my identity to make revolution easier for somebody else to swallow. I had

heard too many times that my concern about specifically sexual issues was divisive to the "larger struggle" or wasn't really the "primary contradiction" and therefore, not essential for revolution. That to be concerned about the sexuality of women of color was an insult to women in the Third World literally starving to death. But the only hunger I have ever known was the hunger for sex and the hunger for freedom and somehow, in my mind and heart, they were related and certainly not mutually exclusive. If I could not use the source of my hunger as the source of my activism, how then was I to be politically effective? But finally here was a movement, first voiced by U.S. Black women, which promised to deal with the oppression that occurred *under* the skin as well, and by virtue of the fact that that skin was female and colored. For the damage that has been done to us sexually and racially has penetrated our minds as well as our bodies. The existence of rape, the veil, genital mutilation, sterilization abuse and violence against lesbians, has bludgeoned our entire perception of ourselves as female beings. As Barbara Smith writes, "It is Third World feminism that is bringing the strains together."²³

One of the major components of Black feminism is that women of color embody the coalition essential for revolution and that each form of oppression is part and parcel of the larger political strategy of capitalist and racist patriarchy. What women of color suffer in our families and relationships is, in some way, inherently connected to the rape of women in our neighborhoods, the high suicide rate of American Indians on reservations, attacks on Black gays and disabled people in New York City bars, and the war in El Salvador. Whether one death is sexually motivated and the other the result of U.S. imperialism, women of color are always potential victims.

Each movement, then, that tries to combat an aspect of women of color's oppression offers an organized strategy for change that women of color cannot afford to ignore. The difference now is that as we begin to organize and create our own programs and institutions, we are building a political base so that we will no longer have to fall prey to the tokenism and invisibility we have encountered in other movement work. Without the political autonomy of oppressed groups, coalition politics are a bankrupt notion.

But organizing ourselves is no easy task. The homophobia of heterosexual sisters and the racism among us cross-culturally are two major

obstacles toward our being a unified movement. To begin with, we are profoundly ignorant about one another's cultures, traditions, languages, particular histories of oppression and resistance, and the cultural adaptations each people has had to make in the face of total cultural obliteration. But even this would only be a matter of education, if our prejudices against one another had penetrated only our minds, and not also our hearts.

Quite simply, the oppression of women of color, especially as we have internalized it, holds the greatest threat to our organizing successfully together, intraculturally as well as cross-culturally. I think what is hardest for any oppressed people to understand is that *the sources of oppression form not only our radicalism, but also our pain*. Therefore, they are often the places we feel we must protect unexamined at all costs.

Recently, I was strutting down the street in my neighborhood in Brooklyn when, out of the side view of my eye, I caught sight of an old Irish woman with a garbage bag about the same size as her. She was trying to maneuver this huge thing down the ten steps which made up the stoop to her building. "Want some help?" I stop. And she gladly accepts, touching my cheek in thank you, telling God to bless me at least three times until I finally settle the bag there by its fellows at the bottom of the stoop. I move on down the street, feeling like the good child I was raised up to be. Then the thought came and turned the pleasantness of the encounter—the "isn't-it-good-to-be-alive-and-in-new-york" feeling—cold in my chest. I thought, *if you looked as colored as you think, she'd maybe not have let you close enough to help her. The first gesture of the open hand, seen by the woman as a move to attack/you see the fear in her face/your hand closes up/your heart. You soon learn not to volunteer your help.*

Oppression. Let's be clear about this. Oppression does not make for hearts as big as all outdoors. Oppression makes us big and small. Expressive and silent. Deep and Dead.

Even the economic restraints seem to be less of a deterrent to our successful organizing than this more insidious, invisible obstacle. The more desperate the economic times, the greater our incentive is to challenge the system simply to put bread on the table. In do-or-die situations, women of color can be relied upon to throw ourselves down in the face of fire for family. Our instincts are solidly in the right place.

But on a daily basis, have we learned to take the race hatred, the class antagonism, the fear of our fiery sexual passion and not beat ourselves down with it, not maintain our place with it, not keep one another in line with it?

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And we line the women we love along the tips of our fingers, counting five to ten of the most dangerous brave women we know and we want to crawl under a rock, each. You see, to take a stand outside of face-to-face crisis, outside of dying for your children, outside of "Bolt me, landlord, outta my house? Well, cabrón, I'll show you." And she takes a sledgehammer from the neighbor's yard and blows her way back into her home.

"We'll eat beans, but we'll eat! And nobody's throwing us out!"

This stand we understand. The power is plain.

But after our bellies are full, our children well-fed and grown. After we've learned to walk with our face exposed, having beaten off the man who tried to beat it one too many times. After we've learned to stand alone. Known loneliness and borne it as a matter of course. Been nearly convinced not to expect a damn thing better from your people or yourself. Learned these lessons ten and twenty times over and still come up kicking, then what?

"Our survival is our contribution to our struggle," a South African woman freedom fighter once said.

But what of passion? I hunger to ask. There's got to be something more than hand-to-mouth survival.

MORE THAN HAND-TO-MOUTH SURVIVAL

The right to passion expressed in our own cultural tongue and movements is what this essay seems, finally, to be about. I would not be trying to develop some kind of Chicana feminist theory if I did not have strong convictions, urgent hunches and deep racial memory that the Chicana could not betray a sister, a daughter, a compañera in the service of the man and his institutions if somewhere in the chain of historical events and generations, she were allowed to love herself as both female and mestiza.

What might our relationships with one another look like if we did not feel we had to protect ourselves from the violent recriminations of our fathers, brothers, bosses, governors? What might our sexuality look like? Audre Lorde, Black lesbian poet, writes:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.²⁴

The extent to which our sexuality and identity as Chicanas have been distorted both within our culture and by the dominant culture is the measure of how great a source of our potential power it holds. We have not been allowed to express ourselves in specifically female and Latina ways or even to explore what those ways are. As long as that is held in check, so is much of the rest of our potential power.

I cannot stomach the twists sexual repression takes in the Latina. It makes us too-hot-to-handle. Like walking fire hazards, burning bodies in our paths with the singe of our tongues, or the cut of our eyes. Sex turned manipulation, control—which ravages the psyche, rather than satisfies the yearning body and heart.

In the wee hours of the morning my lover and I fight. We fight and cry and move against each other and a torrent of pain. The pain doesn't stop. We do not shout at midnight. We have learned to keep our voices down. In public. In the public ear of the building where we try to build a home. We fight quietly, urgently. The latina who lives below us—who catches sight of us in the hall and turns her pale cheek away from us, whose eyes are the eyes of my enemy—is pounding on the ceiling. Again. A frantic hateful beating below us, under our bed. She knows we are up, up to something. She hates us. And my lover's eyes staring back at me are red like apples from tears. The pounding—more vicious—continues. Our neighbor wants to remind us. She is there with her husband, her children in the next room. Decent people sleep at this hour. My lover says, "We are two women. We have no right to care so much about each other that the pain could keep us up."

"Those women or whatever they are," she describes us to the lady next door the next morning.

If they hurt me, they will hurt me in that place. The place where I open my mouth to kiss and something primordial draws the lips back, causes a woman to defend herself against the love of a woman.

I am everybody's *pesadilla*. Jota. Pata. Dyke. Walking through the rooms of my puertorriqueña friend's house, her grown son says to her, "Don't you let her (meaning me) put her hands on you." He fears his *mami's* eye will turn on him. To me. To me. For once, *mujer*, turn to me. Choose. Choose me. *Cara a cara con el hombre*.

The distortion and repression of our sexuality is so commonplace a fact in our lives that as young Chicanas we learn to accept it as "culturally natural" as we grow into womanhood. In a letter on my thirtieth birthday, my sister wrote to me:

I remember the shock when you slowly began to need a bra. I can see you wearing that T-shirt I brought you from Arizona—two little round mounds sticking out from under the shirt. And mom mentioned that after she had rubbed you down, she had been surprised to find two tiny hairs sprouting. I hated to hear her speak of it. As a painfully growing adolescent, I hoped that you, who always looked like such a child, would be spared the curses I was having to face.

Is it possible to build a movement that grapples with *this* kind of silent suffering, the "damage" the Third World woman suffers, as the Combahee River Collective describes it? The visibility of lesbians of color choosing our sexual partners against the prescribed cultural norms and our examining the political implications of such a choice can provide, I believe, the kind of political space necessary for other women of color to begin to ask themselves some profound and overdue questions about their own psycho-sexual identity. The Third World lesbian brings colored female sexuality with all its raggedy edges and oozing wounds—for better or for worse—into the light of day.

I once had a very painful conversation with my mother—a conversation about moving away from her. I am the only person—male or

female—among my relatives who ever left home for good without getting married first. My mother told me that she felt in some way that I was choosing my “friends” (she meant lesbian lovers) over her. She said, “No one is ever going to love you as much as I do. No one.” We were both crying by then and I responded, “I know that. I know. I know how strong your love is. Why do you think I am a lesbian?”

Dead silence. But I knew, I felt in the air, that it was the silence of an unspeakable recognition. Of understanding, finally, what my being a lesbian meant to me. I had been “out” to my mother for years, but not like this.

I knew at that moment that this kind of thing has happened for generations among Chicanas. It is our tradition to conceive of the bond between mother and daughter as paramount and essential in our lives. It is the daughters that can be relied upon. *Las hijas* who remain faithful *a la madre, a la madre de la madre*.

When we name this bond among Raza women, from this Chicana feminism emerges. For too many years, we have acted as if we held a secret pact with one another never to acknowledge directly our commitment to one another. Never to admit the fact that we count on one another *first*. We were never to recognize this in the face of *el hombre*. But this is what being a Chicana feminist means—making bold and political the love of our women. Possibly the words of one Latina to another will come closer to the cultural/female connection I am trying to describe:

There is something I feel for you or with you or from you that I experience with no one else, that I need and crave, that I never get enough of, that I do not understand, that I am missing at this very moment . . . perhaps it's spiritual openness, two souls touching, love that transcends the boundaries of materiality, ordinary reality and living.²⁵

No one else can or will speak for us. We must be the ones to define the parameters of what it means to be, and love, *la mestiza*.

A political commitment to women does not equate with lesbianism. As a Chicana lesbian, I write of the connection my own feminism has

had with my sexual desire for women. *This is my story.* I can tell no other one than the one I understand. I eagerly await the writings by heterosexual Chicana feminists that can speak of their sexual desire for men and the ways in which their feminism informs that desire. What is true, however, is that a political commitment to women must involve, by definition, a political commitment to lesbians as well. To refuse to allow the Chicana lesbian the right to the free expression of her own sexuality, and her politicization of it, is in the deepest sense to deny one's self the right to the same. I guarantee you, there will be no change among heterosexual men, there will be no change in heterosexual relations, as long as the Chicano community keeps us lesbians and gay men political prisoners among our own people. Any movement built on the fear and loathing of anyone is a failed movement. The Chicano movement is no different.

The secret agenda of denial which has so often turned the relationships between mother and daughter, sister and sister and compañeras into battlegrounds has got to come to an end.

*For you, mamá, I have unclothed myself before a woman
have laid wide the space between my thighs
straining open the strings held there
taut and ready to fight*

*Stretching my legs and imagination so open
to feel my whole body cradled
by the movement of her mouth, the mouth
of her thighs rising and falling, her arms
her kiss, all the parts of her open
like lips moving, talking me into loving.*

*I remember this common skin, mamá
oiled by work and worry.
Hers is a used body like yours
one that carries the same scent
of silence I call it home.*

The first women I loved were the women of my race. Fui muy lejos de mi pueblo en busca del amor por la mujer, pero ahora . . . ahora.

Regreso a mi pueblo . . . a la mujer mestiza.

EPILOGUE: LA MUJER SALIENDO DE LA BOCA

*There resides in her, as in me, a woman far greater
than our bodies
can inhabit.
So I stay
and take what I can
in thick drops
like oil that leaks
from the cave of anger
wrestling between her legs.*

Women agitate my consciousness. What I am willing to work out on paper/in life has always been prompted by women: la mujer en mi alma, mis sueños—dark, latina, lover, mother. Tengo miedo.

In conclusion, quiero decir que these changes scare me. Returning to la mujer scares me, re-learning Spanish scares me. I have not spoken much of la lengua here, possibly because my mutedness in Spanish still shames me. In returning to the love of my raza, I must confront the fact that not only has the mother been taken from me, but her tongue, my mother-tongue. I yearn for the language, feel my own tongue rise to the occasion of feeling at home, in common with other latinas . . . and then suddenly it escapes me. The traitor-voice within me chastises, “¡Quítate de aquí! You don’t belong!”

JOURNAL ENTRY: I DE SEPTIEMBRE 1981

I called up Berlitz today. The Latino who answered refused to quote me prices over the phone. “Come down and talk to Mr. Bictner,” he says. I want to know how much it’s going to cost before I do any train riding into Manhattan. “Send me a brochure,” I say, regretting the call.

Paying for culture. When I was born between the legs of the best teacher I could have had.

Quiero decir que I know on the surface of things, this may not make any sense. I spoke English at home. On the surface of things I am not supposed to feel that my language has been stripped from me. I am "born American," college English educated, but there is something else, deep and behind my heart that I want to hold hot and bold in the hands of my writing, in the circle of my mouth, and it will not come out sounding like English. Te prometo. No es inglés. And I have to wonder, is it so that I have felt "too much," "too emotional," "too sensitive" because I was trying to translate my feelings into English cadences?

Mi amiga says to me, she could never go back to not fucking in Spanish. And I think about this. Yo recuerdo a Carmela—su mano trazando los círculos de mis senos around and around bringing her square small hands down, moving my legs apart, opening my lips hovering, holding me there, her light breath on my thighs. No me lame, pero espera, mirándome, diciendo, "¡Qué rica! ¡Ay mujer, qué rica tú eres!" And I can't quite believe my ears, she is talking about the taste of me *before* su boca lo sabe. She knows *before* hand and mouth make it possible. She tells me my name, my taste, in Spanish. She fucks me in Spanish. And I am changed. It is a different kind of passion . . . something remembered. I think, *soy mujer en español*. No macha, pero mujer. Soy Chicana—open to all kinds of assaults.

In recent months, I have had a recurring dream that my mouth is too big to close; that is, the *outside* of my mouth, my lips, cannot contain the inside—teeth, tongue, gums, throat. I am coming out of my mouth, so to speak. The mouth is red like blood; and the teeth, white like bones, the skeleton of my feelings clattering for attention.

Returning from the Latin American Women Writer's Conference, I say to my friends as I drive down 91 South, "The mouth is like a chocha." La boca spreads its lips open to talk, open to attack. I remember Malinche, that ancestor-woman of words and sex. "I am a lesbian. And I am a Chicana," I say to the men and women at the conference. I watch their faces twist up on me. "These are two inseparable facts of my life. I can't talk or write about one without the other."

My mouth cannot be controlled. It will flap in the wind like legs in sex, not driven by the mind. It's as if la boca had lodged itself en el centro del corazón, not in the head at all. The same place where the vagina beats.

And there is a woman coming out of her mouth.

Hay una mujer saliendo de la boca.

Brooklyn, New York,
March 1983

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