

I HEAR YOU SISTER: Women of Color Speak (to Each Other)

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Racism, thick and oppressive, slapped me on the face from the first moment I set foot in the United States. From the streets of New York through Long Beach, Los Angeles, and finally Chicago, it continued to shock me every time I heard it or felt it. It still does. I arrived in the United States in 1970 and settled in Chicago's Southwest Side. Having come of age in the sixties, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I experienced, mostly through television, those stormy and radical years of demonstrations, hippies, and revolutionary changes in our everyday life. My classmates and I marched on the streets of Buenos Aires in solidarity with the Civil Rights marchers, the anti-Vietnam War demonstrators. We shared their struggles as well as their triumphs, albeit from afar. However, and paradoxically, nothing had prepared me for what I found in the U.S. and came to learn in the years following my arrival.

It has been a long road but my journey continues. My own, personal struggle to bring justice to an unjust world, to dismantle racism and sexism, to break down myths and stereotypes about Latinas and African-American women continues. These days my activism centers on the classroom and the printed page. Through my teaching of literature, I instruct my students to look beyond the surfaces, to question what they know and see and hear. More importantly, I teach them that literature must be useful to their lives.

I first read the collection *This Bridge Called My Back*¹ in 1981 for a class I took on feminist philosophy. At that time, I let it wash over me, I let it enter me. It was one of several texts we had to read for the class. But soon, it became the only book that mattered. I read it, then discussed it in class and, when school was over, took it with me on a long journey through Europe. It became my friend and confidante during lonely nights in strange cities. I identified with the women and their writing; they became my *compañeras* who said the things I had been thinking of for years but had not been able to articulate. They showed me that what I had been and was feeling and thinking was not strange, unusual, crazy. They spoke for me and with me. Years later, in graduate school, I picked up *This Bridge* once again. It was for a class on African-American women writers and dialogics. And, when the professor spoke about Mae Henderson's essay

¹ Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back*, 2nd ed. (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983).

"*Speaking in Tongues*,"² the proverbial light bulb flashed in my head. Anzaldua's "*Speaking in Tongues*"³ came rushing out, flooding my mind with the connections between Latinas and African-American women, so obvious that I hadn't seen them until then, so obvious to me now that I don't understand why more work on this is not done.

Gloria Anzaldua's "*Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers*," one of the essays in the collection, was written over a period of five days. The first section serves as an introduction to the problems that Third-World women writers face in the United States. The second section intersects Anzaldua's privileged position as writer/teacher/publisher with her daily struggle against racism, sexism, and the Anglo-male-mainstream efforts to silence her. The third and final section offers readers a clear picture of the tasks at hand, the alternatives for the future.

This essay is a conversation between Anzaldua's essay and the words of African-American women writers and scholars speaking through my elaborations and annotations. And, although dated, it is still relevant. Racism and sexism still live among us, still affect our daily lives. It is obviously a hypothetical conversation that needs to become a reality. For too long women of color in the United States have stayed in their communities, fought the same battles separately, and suffered similar casualties on their own. Yet, it is so transparently clear to me that we have much more in common than not. We are sisters in the struggle and must share the triumphs. Witness Anzaldua's opening line: *A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers: 21 mayo 80 — Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing....*

The epistolary form is always a dialogue, albeit one carried out in silence. It presumes a reader—or more than one. The use of the epistolary form by women of color, such as Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, is explored in Mae Henderson's essay "*The Color Purple: Revisions and Redefinitions*."⁴ Henderson posits this use as a subversion of the form created by men to write about women and, in the process, inscribe male control over literary images of women, a form later appropriated by white women writers as well. By choosing the epistolary style, Third-World women writers are "able to draw on a form which places [their] work in a tradition associated with women, allows a feminine narrative voice, and establishes a bond and intimacy between women." Furthermore, Henderson

² Mae Henderson, "*Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition*," *Changing Our Own Words*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

³ Gloria Anzaldua, "*Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers*," *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Mae Henderson, "*The Color Purple: Revisions and Redefinitions*," *Modern Critical Voices: Alice Walker*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1989)

theorizes that "Walker's use of the vernacular ... has invested an old and somewhat rigid form with new life."⁵ Similarly, Anzaldua's use of Spanish functions as a vernacular: to breathe new life into an old body, subverting a traditional form with original and culturally specific forms, namely, the linguistic code switch between English and Spanish common in the Latino community.

And Anzaldua continues: ... *I sit here naked in the sun typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you....* "What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'other(s),' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity," writes Mae Henderson in her own "*Speaking in Tongues*."⁶ She envisions black women's writing as, in the words of Bakhtin, "a unique collaboration with oneself," claiming a dialogue with an imaginary other outside the self as well as with the varied aspects within herself. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldua imagines her companions while she writes: the Black woman who huddles over a desk in New York, the Chicana sitting on a porch in South Texas, the Indian woman walking to school, the Asian-American tugged in all directions by children and husband. These women are at once external to Anzaldua because of their racial, social, historical, and cultural variations and internal to her, representing "a dialectic of identity [of] those aspects of self shared with others."⁷

This "simultaneity of discourse,"⁸ as posited by Henderson, becomes a literal simultaneity when Anzaldua visualizes the women sitting down, attempting to write as if they were in the same room with her, sharing her struggle, almost becoming her. And then Anzaldua says: *It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold.... How to begin. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course....*

The African-American scholar Joyce Ann Joyce compares Black poststructuralist critics to their white counterparts in their adoption of an alienating discourse that speaks only "to a small, isolated audience," calling their language "pseudoscientific."⁹ Anzaldua and Joyce agree when they characterize as pseudointellectual the language Anzaldua learned in school, a language she claims unable to unlearn yet. In counterpoint to her need for "intimacy" and "immediacy," Joyce calls academic discourse "distant" and "sterile." Furthermore, Anzaldua's "wooden" and "cold" find correspondence in Joyce's

⁵ Henderson, "*The Color Purple*" 68.

⁶ Henderson, "*Speaking in Tongues*" 18.

⁷ Henderson, "*Speaking in Tongues*" 19.

⁸ Henderson, "*Speaking in Tongues*" 20.

⁹ Joyce Ann Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 18.2 (Winter 1987) 339.

claims that the Black male critics deny “most, if not all, the senses,” in the process “dulling themselves to the realities of the sensual, communicative function of language.”¹⁰ This need to communicate directly and deeply drives Anzaldua to the epistolary form, privileging it over other genres and styles. Later Anzaldua writes: ... *My dear hermanas, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common.... We can't transcend the dangers, can't rise above them....*

In describing the struggle of the Black creative writer, Joyce points out her need to “establish a connection between the self and many people outside that self”¹¹ through language, sharing experiences that bond the women with the strongest possible ties. Anzaldua’s greeting as *hermanas* (sisters) declares one of the strongest bonds between women, second only to the bond between mothers and daughters. United by the dangers we face every day and unable to avoid them, we struggle together, creating alliances, useful in future struggles. Drawing the battle lines clearly, Anzaldua’s positioning allows all women writers of color to enter the conversation and, in the process, become visible.

She writes: ... *Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning writer woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women’s feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The lesbian of color is not only invisible, she doesn’t even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible.* She calls this speech “speaking in tongues” and prefigures Henderson’s trope for the simultaneous “plurality of voices” and “multiplicity of discourses” present in the writings of African-American women.¹² Then Anzaldua adds: *We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane....* Although her attribution of this speech to the outcast and insane appears to deprivilege it, her own use of the language in her writing contradicts the superficially negative characterization. When her attention turns to white women, her position seems more ambivalent since they enjoy certain privileges in racial and ethnic terms yet struggle because of their gender. In the paragraphs that follow, Anzaldua addresses her teachers who did not allow her to speak her Spanish language, much less teach it, the language that reflects “our culture, our spirit.” When Alice Walker speaks of the creativity of black women in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” she offers the examples of numerous mothers and grandmothers, women who were not allowed to express their creativity in traditional forms and had to resort to gardening, cooking, sewing, in order to allow the creative spark to flourish. Anzaldua’s indictment of the status quo continues in a poem that functions as a dialogue on three different levels: on a superficial level, the poem is addressed to the mainstream’s preconceived ideas about Third-World women based on their use of a different language; on a genre level, its inclusion in the essay becomes a

¹⁰ Joyce 340.

¹¹ Joyce 341.

¹² Henderson, “*Speaking in Tongues*” 22–23.

dialogue between creative writing and nonfiction writing; and finally, on a textual level, the figure of the “mother” in the poem, whose voice in the distance she cannot understand, connects her to Walker’s mother and grandmothers who “knew what we / must know / without knowing a page / of it / themselves”¹³

Anzaldua continues, by questioning her right to choose to become a writer, to believe she has something to contribute when everything and everyone around her seems to deny that. Her response: *...I think, yes, perhaps if we go to the university.... They convince us that we must cultivate art for art’s sake.... Achieve in order to win the coveted title “literary writer” ... above all do not be simple, direct, nor immediate....*

In her essay “The Race for Theory,” African-American scholar Barbara Christian presents her critique of what she calls the “academic hegemony” and its language, which she describes as alienating, unnecessarily complicated, and just plain ugly.¹⁴ Anzaldua prefigures Christian’s position, stating that this type of abstract theoretical language only serves to isolate the writer/scholar from the masses. Simultaneously, however, Christian observes that theoretical and creative writing can serve as a political tool if they are rooted in practice, avoiding the pitfalls of elitism and exclusivity. By problematizing feminist theories that “do not take into account ... that women are of many races and ethnic backgrounds,” theories that collapse all women of color into one single, monolithic category, ignoring distinctions,¹⁵ Christian parallels Anzaldua’s stereotypical images of passive Black, Chinese, Chicana, and Indian women who know how to treat a man.

Yet these women revolt: *... When you come knocking on our doors with your rubber stamps to brand our faces ... when you come with your branding irons to burn MY PROPERTY on our buttocks, we will vomit the guilt ... we are tired of being your scapegoats....* Anzaldua’s image here mirrors Shirley Williams’s protagonist Dessa Rose; those identifying Rs branded on her thigh and hip by the slave owner constitute an act of discursive domination over Dessa’s body and relegate her to the status of object. Struggling to gain her subjectivity, Anzaldua questions her compelling need to write. Her answer: *... Because the writing saves me Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive....*

In another mirroring effect, Barbara Christian declares, “what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life.”¹⁶ The need to exist and to

¹³ Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” *Ms. Magazine*, May 1974, 105. Rpt. in *Alice Walker: “Everyday Use,”* ed. Barbara T. Christian (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) vi: 39–49.

¹⁴ Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Making Face, Making Soul: Hacienda Caras*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990) 339.

¹⁵ Christian 342.

¹⁶ Christian 343.

affirm that existence drives both women to write. Furthermore, Anzaldua insists on being the one to write her own stories; *to make myself* (169), she adds, just like Sula does in Toni Morrison's eponymous novel, who declares her need to make herself and not anyone else when confronted with the issue of marriage. Sula's characteristic outspokenness and disregard for the objections of the community about her behavior complement Anzaldua's need to *write about the unmentionables* (169), disregarding the outrage of censors and audience alike. Writing represents an act of resistance in Anzaldua's life. Imposed definitions must be fought. The need to survive is stronger than the fear of surrendering: *I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing* (169), she proclaims in one line, yet in the next she questions herself on her merits, her qualifications. Her answer: ... *The act of writing is the act of making soul.... It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as other — the dark, the feminine ... we knew we were different, set apart, exiled...* (169).

Anzaldua's use of the metaphor of making soul not only echoes the by now familiar use of this image by African-American people but also foreshadows the next collection edited by Gloria Anzaldua, titled *Making Face, Making Soul*. Elaborating on this act of making soul, Anzaldua offers the images of "other," "quest for self," and "exile," also by now familiar tropes in the writings of African-American women. Characters such as Sula, Janie, Celie, and others exemplify this quest for acceptance by the world outside and the world inside. Their own communities, where they often return in search of solace and acceptance, are not always welcoming. Writing seems to be the answer for Anzaldua as well as for many of the Black women writers who, through their protagonists and in a dialectical fashion, attempt to uncover and discover the sites of oppression and repression while, simultaneously, creating a safe space for themselves.

A few days later, in the section that follows, Gloria Anzaldua exhorts the women of color to write no matter what the difficulties may be. Situating herself in a relatively privileged position where she can "lie in bed" and write all day, her attention turns to those who should write while riding the bus or waiting in the welfare line, during meals or before going to sleep. "While you wash the floor ... listen to the words chanting in your body" (170), she suggests, because writing is essential to survival. Finally, the concluding letter addresses the tasks at hand and places responsibility squarely on the women's shoulders. Quoting Alice Walker's words from "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Anzaldua questions the fate of all the women who throughout history were not allowed to express their creativity, speculating that if they had been, they would have achieved the power required to defeat oppression.

The multivocality or "heteroglossia" posited by Mae Henderson, and inspired by Bakhtin's theories, surfaces again in a passage where Anzaldua quotes from a letter by Kathy Kendall who, in turn, has quoted Audre Lorde to

express the urgent need to continue with the struggle, a struggle characterized at once by its universality and its diversity. Writing that brings on change in the lives of poor children, women, people of color; writing that is born from real human beings and returns to them liberatory and useful: this is Anzaldua's solution for what she and Barbara Christian and Joyce Ann Joyce see as the problem with detached, objective writing. In the last few lines, Anzaldua introduces the trope of the howl, "a form of speaking in tongues and a linguistic disruption that serves as the precondition for Sula's entry into language" (33). This sound allows Sula's expression of her subjectivity as a Black female, just as Anzaldua demands that women of color appropriate that howl and transform it into words, into a language that will free us materially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Gloria Anzaldua speaks to numerous interlocutors, on a multitude of levels, in several tongues. The African-American women respond—through my reading of their words—on a number of levels. Letters, poems, and journal entries included in the epistolary essay constitute a dialogue between genres. English is not the only tongue of choice; Spanish takes its rightful place in the writing. In this way, genres and languages meet and speak to each other as the women speak to each other, with each other. And they listen. We listen. We meet at a crossroad—in this case called *academia*—as Third-World women writers and critics; we meet at a wider space and open ourselves up and interact with one another freely. Their task, our task, is to unravel, explain, and transform our work into meaningful, useful, and empowering tools for our lives. *This Bridge Called My Back* has been one of these tools, a markedly important one in the trajectory of Third-World women writers.

This conversation ends here. But it must continue in real life. And it will.