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THE COLORS AND SHADOWS OF MY WORD(S)

BY

LYDIA A. SARAVIA

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN

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Abstract

If I find my voice, I will find my identity. Voice gives identity meaning. The acquisition of language (voice) means an acquisition of *subjectivity* (identity). A search for an identity is a search for voice. But formation of identity is difficult when multiple layers of subjectivity are to be considered: the layer of dual culture, in this case Guatemala and the United States, the layer of an urban environment, the layer of a working-class status, the layer of being female, which are all major players in the development of voice. To make sense of, and find a voice for, a fragmented identity is difficult. Where is the voice of the individual among multiple voices?

"The Colors and Shadows of my Word(s)" is the search for the voice within and among voices. It is a study of a young girl growing up in a household where the mother speaks Spanish and the father speaks English, a look at the young girl attending a dual-language elementary school and making the transition into an English-speaking high school, and ultimately college. Such a search for identity and voice requires an analysis of gender, of being a girl, and of sexuality, as well as of the travels of the young girl in and out of the worlds which make up her voice of resistance. Ultimately, what she resists are the negative connotations of the multiple layers of her identity. She resists being pigeon-holed in perfect categories. She resists definitions.

Acknowledgments

To those who believed in me

To my mother for her stories

las historias de su vida, de su Guatemala, de su juventud

for her support and love

for her sacrifice

for being a mother, a woman

To my father for his silence

for his language which allows me to understand the gaps in history

for the strong personality

for the guts to leave

for giving me the power to live

for being a father, a man

To my brothers: Gordo y Danny

for their support

for their companion

for their friendship

for their brotherhood with me

To my friends for their support

for their love

for their kind words of encouragement

for being there when I needed them

To Inter-American Magnet School for encouraging education as it should
be

To Chicago for the many voices I am able to hear

for the many lives shared with me

for the train rides which allow me to enter and depart every
neighborhood and every culture

For the Guatemala of my parents

Muchas Gracias por la fuerza, el espíritu y el poder

Especially to those who did not want this possible:

I think I can, I think I can...well...

I did!

And I always will!

To those before me

Thank You for paving the way

Thank You for your sacrifice

Thank You for opening the avenue

To those with me

Be strong!

To those to come

You are strong

You can

You can

You can

And You Will

To all those I have come in contact with and to all those I will come in
contact with, thank you for forming my voice.

Fragmentation no longer with negative connotation

Fragmentation is a beautiful way to have multiple voices in one!

Thank You

Preface

I have the same kind of problems with the label "lesbian writer" that I do with the label "Chicana writer." *Sí, soy Chicana*, and therefore a Chicana writer. But when critics label me thus, they're looking not at the person but at the writing, as though the writing is Chicana writing instead of the writer being Chicana. By forcing the label on the writing they marginalize it.¹

--Gloria Anzaldúa

As I have entered the world of academia, I have begun to realize that I am not academically inclined. I have written my thesis, but now I have to prove that I understand the scholarship my narrative follows, and the scholarship it resists. Why must I explain myself? Because I've been told? This is exactly why I dislike academia. As Anzaldúa says, "Why should I try to justify," ("Speaking in Tongues" 169). Scholars always want to validate words in relation to already established and accepted scholars, authors, writers, and theorists. Frankly, the idea scares me. The idea that I must recall and give credit to the areas in which I write, scares me. It's like having this black bird over my shoulders weighing me down to the point that I cannot write about "the scholarship." I'm not a scholar, I'm a writer. And I resist the idea of placing my thesis within some sort of "scholarly" context.

The truth is I am influenced every day by events and words, and these events and words do not always come from scholarly texts. My voice resists, as if a natural instinct, as if a survival method. I resist out of lack of choice.

Resistance is not a choice. I do not resist to rebel or to be difficult. I, my cultural background, my ethnicity, my class position,

my gender, are all symbols of resistance. Teresa Córdova writes, "Women of color writers speak loudly about a pain we cannot ignore. We do a lot of damage to one another because of the colonized pain that we feel inside: the pain that constantly drives us to seek approval from those that hurt us the most" (39). In order to value who I am, in order to have self-esteem in a society, in an environment which marginalizes Latinas and the working-class, I indulge and immerse myself in resistance. I not only symbolize resistance, but I resist the values of the dominant. Therefore, I resist the limits and rules and roles society claims I must follow. So I look for and yearn for literature of empowerment. I search for literature by women of color, theory by women of color (primarily Chicana authors), music by urban poets, and I search for the voice the dominant silences. The reason is because I believe, that the "more we can do to strengthen ourselves, the more we can resist the colonizers' definition of us" (Córdova 39), I search for my power, I attempt to live empowered, and I write about self-empowerment. I want to be able to define myself and to be able to define my work. So, I resist the negative images and perceptions society has of those of a Latino background and of those of an urban and working class background. I resist the stereotypes put on me and my work.

I will prove that I understand the scholarship in which my thesis may share similar characteristics, but I will not validate my work and my words. And note, I resist that my thesis be categorized in any specific group. As the epigraph states, "[b]y forcing the label on the writing they marginalize it."

Las Influencias

I once went to a lecture at DePaul University. It was a lecture on lesbian identity. That night there were two speakers: a professor from DePaul University whose name I cannot remember, and Cherrié Moraga. The professor spoke first. She had a projector and slides of her family. She grew up in a small town, in an all white town, in a religious family, Protestant. She showed pictures of her parents, her partner and her two daughters (both adopted from a Latin American country). She talked about her family and her career. I cannot remember the exact detail of her speech for I have a bad memory. But I remember her saying that she has been called "the model lesbian." She is very polite and quiet, soft-spoken even. She does not make her sexuality a central issue. In other words, if you ask she'd tell you, if you don't then she won't. She ended her speech with the phrase, "I am the model lesbian." It was a very proper speech with appropriate and clean language, no bad words.

Then up to the podium walked Cherrié Moraga. The first thing she said was, "I am not the model lesbian, and I don't want to be." Moraga discussed issues and themes in her work, primarily her plays, and the hardships she has had to endure as a Chicana lesbian playwright. She had no props, no projector and no slides, it was just she and her voice. And she must have said the words "brown pussy" about one hundred times. Granted I tend to exaggerate, but her speech was in a language I understood. "Model lesbian" meant nothing to me. No denotation and connotation, just words coming from the mouth of the woman at the podium, but "brown pussy" is a term I understood and knew. "Brown pussy" made me realize that I, as a Latina, symbolize *otherness*. I am not the

majority nor am I accepted as the norm. Each word having negative connotations. Each word symbolizing the presumed identity of many Latinas. And Cherrie Moraga simply took the words no one likes to hear and gave them a meaning: you may think of her as "brown pussy," pero visible es la mujer Latina.

"Brown pussy" may be derogatory, and in fact it is rather vulgar. But the existence of a lesbian Latina is perceived as vulgar. The lesbian Latina is seen by her culture and the American culture as vulgar and as deviant. First, she is deviant for having a sexual life, and second, for having a sexual life with another women. There is nothing normal or model-like about being a lesbian Latina. As Gloria Anzaldúa points out in her text *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior" (19). The phrase "brown pussy" therefore brings to the surface the negative connotations that being a lesbian Latina holds. In the Latino culture, there is no such thing as a model lesbian. She is a symbol of resistance. She resists the roles of gender. While she may have been born a lesbian, the culture prohibits an understanding and acceptance of any sexuality other than heterosexuality.

When I went to see Cherrie Moraga speak, "brown pussy" spoke to me. "Brown pussy" brings to the surface the negative connotations that being a Latina, in general, holds. "Brown pussy" is how I am perceived by many in our society. This is the term that men and women associate with me. The Latina in our society is often sexualized. Take Rosie Perez and Jennifer Lopez as examples. Their bodies are sexualized every time

they appear on screen. In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, the two important scenes Rosie Perez is in concentrate on her body. The first scene is the beginning, the rolling of the credits. The audience sees Rosie Perez in tight clothing dancing in a sexually suggestive manner. The next big scene in which Rosie Perez partakes is one in which Lee rubs ice all over her body. The only thing on the screen at that point is Lee's hand rubbing ice on Rosie Perez' naked body. And as for Jennifer Lopez, the media always concentrates on her body (by media I mean magazines and talk shows). At the 1999 MTV Music Awards, for example, Chris Rock, the host, said, "Jennifer Lopez is the Commodores, and her ass is Smokie." These are the images our present society has of Latinas: tits and ass. So, "brown pussy" made me realize that that was what I am reduced to.

The various essays written by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrié Moraga help me understand what *otherness* and *resistance* really look like. *Otherness* is color, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and gender. *Otherness* is anything that is not the accepted, the norm. And so, even though my sexuality is the norm, to talk about sex and sexuality in my culture is to walk hand in hand in the lines of *otherness*. *Resistance* is rejecting the negative connotations *otherness* possesses. Yet, both Moraga and Anzaldua put *otherness* into words. Both of these women find their voices, their voices of resistance. Their writing gives them voice in a world that does not accept Chicanas, lesbian Chicanas, working-class lesbian Chicanas. Their writing gives those of us, who have never seen ourselves on a page, a reflection of who we are, an identity, a voice. And their writing has helped me see why I must write.

I write for the same reasons Anzaldúa in "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers" claims to write:

I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispell the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. (169)

I write because I need to see that my existence is worthy to be written on a page. I write because I need to see that my *otherness*, my Latina, urban, working-class identity is worthy of the words I speak. I write because I must. I write to resist the identity of the American literature I have been told is worthy of my study. I write to create my voice. I write.

Entering college, I knew that I loved to read. I loved reading all sorts of texts. I especially was fond of Edgar Allan Poe and his mysterious choice of topics. I was (and still am) attracted to the darkness prevalent in his work. Also, entering college I wanted to be a Beat Generation specialist. I wanted to read and write about Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. I wanted to write about the politics in their work, and I wanted to write about the idea of a lack of identity and the

constant search for an identity. I wanted to be a Beatnik. And then I was introduced to Chicana Writers. My life changed. My life began to have a new perspective. And for the first time I felt empowered by a text. For the first time I took pride in who I am!

I was drawn to Chicana writers because they wrote in a language I understood, *Spanglish*. Many of the theoretical essays, the fictional novels and the personal narratives pertaining to Chicano Studies deal with the search for identity via language. The work of Chicana writers illustrates that they are still in search of their voice, but *Spanglish* is the voice, the language, which best represents what it means to be Chicana/o, as a cultural and as a political group.

Growing up I never used *Spanglish* in every day use. I either just spoke in Spanish or just in English, but I didn't intermix the languages. I think part of this has to do in part because I went to a dual-language grammar school where I had Spanish classes and English classes. I had little opportunity to mix both. In my head I had an idea that in every day speech, the two mixed together just did not belong. But as I continued my education, my thoughts became penetrated with images of the two languages coming together in fusion. And as I began to write poetry, I saw and realized that most of my poetry was written in *Spanglish*. *Spanglish* became my writer's voice, and Chicana/o literature helped me realize why. *Spanglish* is a voice which resists cultural and political limitations.

Language is a writer's tool. A writer uses language to convey a message, in order to communicate with her or his readers; furthermore, language provides agency to the writer. A subject acquires language and

then s/he becomes a producer of language. For Chicanas/os this process becomes problematic. Chicanas/os live within two worlds: one of English and one of Spanish. Despite this, both languages are denied as their own. Chicanas/os and other Americans of Latin American descent are neither Mexican nor are they American. Thus, English is not theirs as Spanish is not theirs. It becomes difficult because many Spanish speaking individuals, generally speaking, feel that Chicanas/os do not speak Spanish accurately, and English speaking individuals also feel that Chicanas/os do not speak English accurately; however, Chicanas/os usually grow up speaking both. Chicanas/os are stuck in two worlds; these two worlds (the United States and Mexico or English and Spanish) do not seem to want to co-exist.

Many Chicana/o writers in their work tell stories of attending elementary school. Teachers would make them speak "English Only." This was not my case, but it is true for many Latinos. Richard Rodriguez in his book, *In the Hunger of Memory*, writes a personal account of how he was forced to speak English. And as a result, for him, Spanish became a foreign language. Interestingly, when his father uttered English, it was painful and embarrassing to hear. English was something Rodriguez acquired; he was made to learn it. Spanish is not his language, rather it is the language of his parents. Rodriguez opts to speak and write in English (he even changes his name from Ricardo to Richard), but many Chicana/o authors refuse to assimilate into English. Chicana/o authors feel that to accept English is to refuse, resist and silence an important part of their identity. Therefore, the authors choose to write in a bilingual style, *Spanglish*.

Many Chicana/o writers choose to write in the dialect s/he grew up speaking with her/his friends. *Spanglish* is an every day way of communicating. English and Spanish are combined to form ideas. Some things are better said in Spanish, and others are better expressed in English. This combination of languages is common among hyphenated people. The question remaining is, why? To answer this question, I will concentrate on the Chicana Movement as a cultural and political movement, one which departs from and resists the limits and roles of the Feminist Movement (as a white movement) and the Chicano Movement (as a male dominated movement).

The Chicana Feminist Movement began in the 1970s. One of the goals Chicanas had, and still have, was to establish subjectivity. Chicanas--I refer to them in the present tense because what was true in the 1970s is still relevant today--do not want to remain objects of the Anglo woman and the Chicano male. The Chicana writer is in search of a discourse that best expresses who she is in relation to the discourses that deny her subjectivity (most male discourses). English, however, as a language, does not best describe the Chicana experience, nor does Spanish. The Chicana, therefore, is faced with a problem: the search for a language that best expresses her subjectivity, and for a language that best fits into her political ideologies. *Spanglish*, therefore, is the language which best expresses the Chicana subjectivity. Thus, the Chicana writer puts into writing a pre-existing oral language.

As mentioned, English is a problematic language to use in expressing subjectivity. One of the reasons for this is that English is a tool used against Chicanas/os. The U.S. (as exemplified by laws

propositioned in California) has implemented propositions stating that the country should be an "English Only" speaking society; therefore, Spanish or any variation of English is considered an unacceptable way of communicating. To speak English is to assimilate into the Anglo culture, and to accept the oppression the English speaking colonizer, or in present day, the English speaking politician, for example, has exercised on the Mexican and Mexican-American community. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, argues that "To speak means to...assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17-18). Chicana Feminists, radical Chicanas that is, refuse, resist the language of the dominant.

I would contend that for the reasons stated above, Chicana Feminists refused to join the (white) Feminist Movement of the 70s. Norma Alarcón in "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo American Feminism" suggests that although Anglo-American Feminists offered, in the 1970s, a new discourse in which to engage conversation on gender issues, which the Chicano Movement denied to consider, Anglo-American women did not question at all the inherent view of consciousness (white). "As a result," argues Alarcón, "some Anglo-Feminist subjects of consciousness have tended to become a parody of the masculine subject of consciousness, thus revealing ethnocentric liberal underpinnings" (29-30). The language used to create Feminist theory is English. For Chicana Feminists, English is part of a racist ideology that keeps Chicanas/os as *Other*, or as subjects not taking part in the dominant discourse.

Sonia Saldívar-Hill, for example, examines in her essay, "Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics," the various

problems within White Feminism. She argues that Anglo-Feminism and European Feminists "tend to erase the existence of Chicana...feminism" (204). She states that because Anglo-American Feminism is rooted in US cultural imperialism, Chicana Feminists have not been able to accept and live within the Anglo-American Feminist theory. Saldívar-Hill claims that:

As Chicanas making our works public--publishing in marginalized journals and small, underfinanced presses and taking part in conferences and workshops--we realize that the "sisterhood" called feminism professes an ideology that at times comes dangerously close to phallogocentric ideologies of the white male power structures. (204)

However, it is important to note that while rejecting or resisting an Anglo-American ideology because of its racism, and in turn rejecting and resisting the language (English), Chicanas were having the same issues with Spanish. Spanish is the language of the conquistador. Spanish is associated with the genocide of Aztecs and other indigenous groups. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Spanish is the language of home and of Mother (but still not fully belonging to the Chicana/o).

English represents an ethnocentric ideology. Early in American history, when the U.S. took over Texas (the Southwest), Mexicans, who in actuality were Americans, were considered foreign. Signs that read "Whites Only" and "No Mexicans Allowed" were indicators of the presumed inferiority of the Mexican-American community in the US. In the study of Semiotics, language is made up of signs (signifiers and signifieds). Signs, or semiotics, create signification, or denotation; however,

Roland Barthes argues that denotative signs create connotative signs. The connotation generated by signs operates within an ideology or a myth (Silverman 27). Kaja Silverman argues that for Barthes, "ideology or myth consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and surreptitiously justifying the dominant values of a given historical period" (27). The "No Mexicans Allowed" signs throughout Texas illustrate how "Mexicans" were unwanted people in the U.S. This, however, is just one example of many. Today, "English Only" laws further express the values of the dominant culture (white).

Chicanas further resist accepting the ideology of Anglo-American Feminists and their language because Chicanas do not identify with white middle-class women. For Chicanas to use English in their Feminist discourse means to accept the values of the middle-class. Most Chicanas are of the working-class. When Gloria Anzaldúa, in her essay "To(o) Queer the Writer--Loca, escritora y chicana," explains that she does not accept the term "lesbian" in front of her name, she argues that the reason is because "lesbian" would mean identifying with white middle-class women. In other words, Anzaldúa as a member of the working-class cannot identify with middle class women. The following extensive quotation that describes the problem in accepting the term "lesbian":

For me the term lesbian *es problemón*. As a working-class Chicana, mestiza--a composite being, *amalgama de culturas y de lenguas*--a woman who loves women, "lesbian" is a cerebral word, white and middle class representing an English-only dominant culture, derived from the Greek word *lesbos*. I

think of lesbians as predominantly white and middle-class women and a segment of women of color who acquire the term though osmosis...When a "lesbian" names me the same as her, she subsumes me under her category. I am of her group but not as an equal, not as a whole person--my color erased, my class ignored..."Lesbian" doesn't name anything in my homeland. (263)

For Chicanas, and Chicanos, to take and accept English as their language is to deny their culture. To acquire English as the dominant language in their Feminist discourse is to create a false subjectivity--one that ultimately kills the native and accepts the colonizer or dominant. To accept English, Fanon would argue, is for the writer to become whiter as s/he renounces, in this case, brownness (18).

The above passage illustrates how for Anzaldúa, the sound of "lesbian" cannot be divided from thought. The sound "lesbian" evokes for Anzaldúa the thought and the image of a white middle-class woman. The same could be said of Spanish. "Lesbiana" still derives from the Greek word *lesbos*. "Lesbiana" is a Spanish term, and Spanish is the native tongue, but still one of the colonizer. Although Spanish symbolizes home (the language spoken at home), it does not best represent Chicanas/os. It's not their language.

Chicanas/os, therefore, have decided to write in a language that best represents them as a cultural group, radically different from the Anglo-American culture, and somewhat different from the Mexican culture. Chicanas/os have decided to use *Spanglish*. The bilingual style is the closest mode of communication in which Chicanas/os could represent their

culture. *Spanglish* is the best way to assert subjectivity. Silverman contends that semiotics involves signification, "but signification cannot be isolated from the subject who uses it and is defined by means of it, or from the cultural system which generates it" (3). English and Spanish do not define Chicanas/os; rather English and Spanish alienate and confine Chicanas/os to "ethnic" categories (an example would be censors' use of the term "Hispanic"). Chicanas/os use *Spanglish*, define themselves through *Spanglish*, and *Spanglish* is the Chicana/o culture. To use *Spanglish* is to create signification for Chicanas/os. In using *Spanglish* as the language of the Chicana/o discourse, Chicanas/os find their cultural identity. Emile Benveniste claims that "without language there would be no subjectivity...[he] insists that the individual finds his or her cultural identity only within the discourse" (Silverman 45). Chicanas/os find themselves within their discourse which is written in a language that best represents them as a cultural group. Chicana/o writers use *Spanglish* in their texts because it's the "language" that best represents not only their culture, but the language they speak on an every day basis.

Spanglish is the language of resistance. The dominant societies, the English speaking and the Spanish speaking communities, refuse to accept *Spanglish* as language, and prefer to see it as speech. This is an example of how the dominant denies Chicanas/os signification. Ethnocentric ideologies refuse the Chicana/o ideology. The dominant refuses to give Chicanas/os agency. Since this is denied, Chicanas/os are denied participation within, for example, what Jacques Lacan calls,

the symbolic order. Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* makes a powerful claim for her use of *Spanglish* in her writing. Anzaldua writes:

So if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity--I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (59)

Anzaldua is clearly stating that to have language is to have signification or to acquire identity. Denying *Spanglish* as language is to deny Chicanas/os their identity.

The use of *Spanglish* by Chicana authors is a way to establish identity and subjectivity. Therefore, this style of writing speaks to me. I understand it and I feel it. My identity, my subjectivity enforced. Chicana discourse helped me find a voice through which I could express myself and my cultural identity. And although I am not Mexican-American, I am Chicana. I have found a means through which I could express my cultural identity, *Spanglish*. *Spanglish* resists the language of the dominant by combining Spanish and English into one.

I search for my voice every day. Before I realized I could

write in *Spanglish*, before I realized that I did not need to reconcile the two cultures, the two languages which influence me, I felt much like Julia Alvarez' character Yolanda García in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. Yolanda, Dominican born, comes to the U.S. at a very young age. She grows up to be a reader and a writer who longs to find her voice in a strange place. English fighting to over-power Spanish. And she goes in and out of both, wanting to hear her name. I, too, long to hear my name: Lydia Alejandra Saravia con el acento merecido. When Yolanda longs to hear her name rhymed with cielo, I began to think, what does my name rhyme with? This may sound funny, but most people like to crack jokes and call me "Lydia Chlamydia," but my name rhymes with dia and sabiduria. I see myself in Yolanda García. I feel her pain and struggle.

And although Latina writers, mostly Chicanas, helped me find a language and a voice, I have another voice in me that lives and beats every day: my urban voice. I remember reading Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* and being excited that I was reading a Latina novel with Chicago as the setting. I somehow felt that I could relate to the novel more because the setting was my home. Cisneros made me see that I could and can write about living in Chicago. The neighborhoods and people of Chicago worthy of literature. She made me realize that I could preserve my Chicagoan identity through writing. I can write about living on Wellington and Sheffield before it became a "yuppie" neighborhood. About the Cuban grocery store my mom and I used to go to called "Cubanacan." I can write about how Masonic Hospital used to be one building; now it's the entire neighborhood. I can write about moving to Hermitage and

Irving Park. I can write how we used to go eat at the KFC at the corner. I can write about going with my mom and aunt to buy lottery tickets at the small diner which smelled like old cigarette butts. I can write about the neighborhood that I've been living in for over ten years (Kedzie and Addison). I can write about the White Castle burgers at three o'clock in the morning. I can write about the 24-hour 711. I can write about the four bars on one block. I can give my neighborhoods a voice. I also learned from Sandra Cisneros that I can give my child-voice a voice in literature. My perceptions and views as a child worthy of literature.

Unlike Cisneros, though, Chicago is not just a setting. I take on the identity of Chicago. I write in a language that helps me recreate the urban flavor, the urban aroma. I write to preserve the identity of all those who have influenced me. Primarily the individuals of Chicago, my urban environment. While, yes, my family is important, their names and faces I will always know, but I will never be able to remember the names or faces of the many individuals in the street whose voices I can hear. I write for all those people academia has never heard of. Who are my urban influences? You wouldn't know them. I don't know them. They are the men and women of my urban existence.

When I was thirteen, my mother gave me this book she bought at a thrift store titled, *Sometimes God Has a Kid's Face* by Father Bruce Ritter. The book details how Father Bruce helped give homeless and run-away kids a place to go. But most important, Father Bruce gives us the stories and realities of these young teenage kids. The kids who were forced into prostitution and drugs. The kids who walked and lived on the

streets of New York. At thirteen, I wanted to be Father Bruce. I wanted to build a home for run-away teens. And although that is still a dream of mine, a goal of mine, I settle for giving the homeless and the urban population a voice. I settle for telling you their stories. For them I write. To tell you about all I have seen in the streets of my home, my city, my Chicago. To tell you about the voice of the saxophone playing on Michigan Avenue every Christmas. "White Christmas" playing all night to the bells of the Salvation Army person collecting money. To tell you about the image of these two people standing in forty-below weather in front of Lord & Taylor. The image of these two people standing in forty-below weather while tourists take pictures and women with fur coats pass by kicking snow at their buckets of money. To tell you about the image of their faces, and the voices these images evoke in me.

The streets are alive with resistance. Robin Kelley in *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* writes, "The 'ghetto' continues to be viewed as the Achilles' heel in American society, the repository of bad values and economic failure, or the source of a vibrant culture of resistance" (9). I want to tell you about this "vibrant culture." I want to give you, the reader, a glimpse of the truth and reality of the homeless and the urban. The voices of the homeless who live in the streets. The voices of those who resist being categorized as the evil and corruption of our American, capitalist system. The voice of their laughter, because, yes, they do laugh. The voice of their conversation, because, yes, they do talk. The voice of their silence, because, yes, they do think.

While I was taking a course at the University of Rhode Island, "English 601: Nonfiction Workshop," I heard people writing stories on

trips to France, on growing up feeling neglected by mothers, on the death of loved ones, and so on. I tried to write images of my mom and my dad. And then during the same semester, I went on a trip to New York. I went to an Art Museum/Gallery in Spanish Harlem. The Art Museum/Gallery held works by neighborhood artists. The small museum held a photo display. One photo captured my eyes. It was a photo of a homeless man sleeping on the cold pavement in front of an electronics store. The caption read, "Estoy viviendo bajo un árbol sin ojos, pregúntale al astrólogo místico hasta cuando tendría que sufrir."² I was moved by the image I was seeing. And I was moved by the images I have seen in Chicago. I took out my notebook and began to write:

He lies across the cold dirty pavement. He lies under the L-tracks in front of a thrift store. Asleep he is. In dreams. Far away into a surreal world. A world of Dali. Shadows and Light. Mountains and Rivers. Death and Life. Skeletons and Flowers. Dreaming...Dreaming of a home. Dreaming of a meal. Dreaming of warmth. Dirty old jeans. Levis. Dirty old shoes, once Doc Martens. Dirty old blue sweater. Ripped hoodie...Fifteen degrees. Clear sky. No stars. It's the city. Waiting to be born. Death is all he knows. Asleep he is living in a surreal existence. Dreaming...Hoping never to wake up. Asleep in a world closer to God. He is sleeping under a tree with no leaves. When will he stop suffering?

And I notice that the security guy was reading over my shoulder. "Are you a writer?" he asked. "Not yet," I replied. And then he introduced himself, Carlos. He began to tell me that he once was that man on the pavement. He was addicted to cocaine and heroine. Drugs,

Carlos said, made him lose his youth. He has been sober for a while, he confided. He was trying. And he was successful, I could tell. And when I got on the URI bus, I began to wonder, why was Carlos telling me about himself? And then it dawned on me: He thought I was a writer. He thought and knew that I could preserve his story, his voice on a page. And for him I write. And at the expense of sounding repetitive, I want to give the homeless and the poor a voice. I want the reader to see and hear what the media and academia do not always show.

I remember reading *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. I was amazed at what Ginsberg set out to do, and what he does in *Howl*. We, the reader, see his generation in every reality of the United States. He begins his poem by saying, "I saw," and with each word that follows, the reader sees as well. Our minds open to what he witnesses. His words re-create the images he sees and saw, the voices he hears and heard. He re-calls his generation. Reading *Howl* I began to see what Truth looks like, what re-calling and re-creating looks like.

Like Allen Ginsberg, I too have witnessed life and hardship. I have seen, I have heard and I have felt. I walk the streets and they talk to me, and they hear me. The images I have seen and the voices I have heard tattoo my urban existence. I have this urge and need to re-call and re-create and tell the Truth of what I have seen as I walk the streets of my Chicago:

It's Lower Wacker Drive. Underneath Michigan Avenue. Underneath all the stores of all the rich people. Underneath all the fur, the diamond rings, the gold and the money, lies reality. It may be a dry 100 degrees night or a windy 40 below night, reality is always there. These

are not "Street Wise" vendors. They don't stand in corners selling newspapers for a dollar. These are not petty thieves. They don't survive on a little old lady's necklace. These are not basement Church goers. They do not eat a hot meal. These are proud men and women who once lived above reality.

Lying over a cardboard, and covered with old newspapers, they have made their home. "Daley Re-Elected" in big, bold letters helps cover their face from the wind. "Anthony Porter Speaks at Loyola University" helps keep their feet warm. "The Chicago Tribune" makes a good comforter. No complaints. "The Tribune" is better than "The Sun Times." "The Sun Times" makes a better pillow, though. It's nighttime and the beds are ready. They tuck themselves in and begin their dreams...

In my thesis, to illustrate the voice of the urban, my urban voice along with my Latina/female voice and my working-class voice. All of these important in my identity. The language, *Spanglish*, now I just needed the genre. And I believe the term narrative works best, or the term story-telling. But narrative is story-telling. A narrative is an account of Truth, especially when associated with Slave Narratives. "I was born" to symbolize that, yes, I do exist. A narrative, an account of what I, the author, have been through. A narrative, an account that I, the author, have survived and continue to survive.

Memoir does not hold, connote, the feelings and emotions I associate with home. In "The Color and Shadows of My Word(s)" I re-create scenes and experiences of my life as best I can. I re-create the truth of each aspect, I re-call my life, and the term "memoir" makes me feel alienated and separated from the stories I try to re-call,

re-tell. When I first read Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, I was surprised that to the title she would add: "Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts." It seems to me that what she does in *Woman Warrior* is not work within the rules of a memoir, but she goes beyond to incorporate her Chinese cultural background. Hong Kingston recalls in her text images of her mother and the stories of women. In *Woman Warrior*, she brings in a term which best describes the stories: "talk story."

Woman Warrior is a "talk story" of a girlhood among ghosts. What *Woman Warrior* does is re-create stories, just as her mom does, to inform the reader on her (Maxine Hong Kingston) identity as a Chinese-American author. Barbara Frey Waxman argues that *Woman Warrior* "is a story of a story about language" (215). Waxman further goes on to argue, "This talk story, the beginning of which the narrator's mother had told her and the end of which she has created, is a perfect negotiation...of Hong Kingston's American auctorial identity" (214). Hong Kingston talk story in order to dispel myths and false perceptions. Talk story to include the silenced, the voiceless, the marginalized women, ancestral and present. So, although Maxine Hong Kingston's text is one which has taught me what a "memoir" might look like, has provided me with a model, I don't consider it a "memoir." Her conversation of talk story leads me to believe that while the genre itself may be called "memoir," what Hong Kingston truly does is not necessarily provide the reader with a "memoir," but with story telling, talk story.

I talk story. Each aspect of my life I write in segments, as if they are stories on their own. And I do not want each story to blend in well with the others. I do not want the voices to have a theme in

common. I just want to illustrate the various aspects of my identity. I just want to tell the stories of my life. So, although I like talk story, I prefer narrative. And in the tradition of Latinas, narrative works. Like Asian cultures, Latino culture is embedded in story-telling. Morals are taught to children in stories. Story-telling is the way our culture is passed down from generation to generation.

I also like narrative because Hip Hop is often referred to as the urban poetry or the urban narrative. While in *Life on the Hyphen* Gustavo Perez-Firmat makes the claim that the mambo is reflective of the Cuban one-and-a-half'er's identity, I would argue that Hip Hop is reflective of the urban kid's identity. Hip Hop artists such as Common Sense, Black Star and The Roots all tell stories of an urban reality, of a black urban reality. Hip Hop is a story; it is a narrative. As Rage Against the Machine says, "I be walkin' god like a dog/ My narrative fearless/ My word war returns to burn."³ So my thesis is a fearless narrative whose word burns, burns, burns.

I'm not a Hip Hop artist. I try to re-create flow. Spittin' out the lyrics with a style you can't hold down. Manipulatin' words and tryin' to re-create the feelin' of the urban poet. Just like Langston Hughes tries in some of his poems to create the sense of the blues, I try to create the sense of Hip Hop. I try to re-create the feel:

Chicago's in the house
Comin' at you loud
Playin' the game
That you try to maim
Comin' to you with all types of power

I'll drop you in the shower
Of words
And rhymes
And crazy lines
Cause I sit at my table
Dishin' out labels
Puttin' together
A poetry lever
I'm not an MC
I don't claim to be
I'm just a lover of words
When it comes to rhymes
Flowin' from my mind
To let you know
That
My name is Lydia
My last name Saravia
And I'm versatile
Turnin' turnstiles
In my direction
Payin' attention?

Hughes has got the "Weary Blues," and I have got the Burning Hip Hop.

As I've mentioned, I am not a Hip Hop artist. I wish I were. I have the same concerns many Hip Hop artists have. I have the same experiences. I have had friends killed by bullets. I have had friends die of drugs. I have had friends lost to the streets. Friends in jail.

Friends pregnant at thirteen. Friends lost. I have had friends fallen victim to the cruel system of poverty. I listen to Hip Hop because Hip Hop puts my life and experiences into perspective (please note: there is a difference between Hip Hop and Rap; Hip Hop does not glorify killing, doing drugs or materialism such as wearing Armani). Hip Hop questions the power structures. Rage Against the Machine, RATM, is a Hip Hop/Rock group whose lyrics are of protest. RATM is one of the few groups which bring its the listeners an awareness of social and political injustices. RATM, for example, protest against the death penalty sentence of Mumia Abu Jamal, they protest against the present school curriculums, and they protest against child labor in third world countries. They, like many Hip Hop artists, claim:

With this mic device

I spit nonfiction

Who got tha power

This be my question⁴

But, my device is not a mic. I cannot rhyme, and I cannot flow. I don't free style. And I don't beat box. But I write. I spit the non-fiction on tha page asking tha same questions MC's ask: Who got the power? But like RATM, I too claim:

It's the beats and lyrics they fear

The Rage is relentless

We need a movement with a quickness

You are the witness of change

And to counteract

We gotta take the power back⁵

And with each word I use to write my narrative, with each word I use to recreate my voice(s), I begin to take my power back.

I like the term narrative for my thesis. It extends from my Latina identity to my urban identity. But I also like narrative because I've always wanted to be the narrator. When I was younger, in grammar school, and we had to perform plays, there was always a narrator. I never was chosen narrator, actually it was always a boy, but I always wanted to be narrator. I wanted to tell the story, to give a descriptive account of the images. That's who I wanted to be. And that's who I want to be. I want to narrate the stories of the voiceless. I want to tell the readers about my family, about my neighbors, about those on the train, about those on the streets, about those who have died. I want to describe them. My thesis is a story of my account with these several voices. Therefore, "The Color(s) and Shadows of my Word(s)" is a personal narrative. I am narrating my story and theirs.

I narrate to you, the reader, my fragmented identity. The stories which help create my reality. But note: fragmentation is not a negative concept. It's not a disorder. It's not some type of multiple personality disorder. To have a fragmented identity is to be influenced by many people, things, events and environments. To be fragmented is to live in resistance.

I, a fragmented identity, have influences of Guatemala, the United States, an urban environment (Chicago), a working class background, a female gender and brown skin. All of these come together to create my way of thinking today. That's not to say that if I put all the parts together I create a perfect puzzle with a happy and content Lydia. I am

not a finished puzzle, and I doubt I ever will be. What it does mean is that all these parts of my being do not have to be sacrificed. I do not have to pick, for example, Guatemala over the United States, or vice versa. Every single aspect of my identity co-existing. None of it connecting or making sense, but what does? In life there are no smooth transitions. Unlike paragraphs which need to link, in life the days do not always link. Life need not make sense. It just is. And so a fragmented identity need not make sense. It just is.

I call my voice one of resistance because I represent all that is other. I am urban, Latina, woman, and working-class. I am not the accepted, the norm, the canon. I resist the ideals of the rich white man. I resist the negative image of Latinas. I resist the sexual images of Latinas in the media. I refuse to be just a body and nothing else. I refuse being polite (which is why I like writing so much; in writing I do not have to be polite). I refuse to smile and accept insults. I refuse the thought that being urban and poor is negative and wrong. I wear my urban and my working-class identity as pride. The hardships I have endured are due to the capitalist hierarchy, but I take pride in who I am. I take pride in my hardships. I would rather take urban hardships than the hardships in academia anytime. At least in the urban setting I know how to defend myself. I am left wounded in academia. In academia I am left lost in words I do not understand.

Words are extremely important. Each word needs to be carefully picked in order to re-create as best possible the experience, the feeling, the moment, the place. In a statement about the poem *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams claims that a poem was "to speak for us in a

language we can understand" (xiii). While I cannot say that I have fully understood the poem, I am intrigued as I read it over and over again because the language Williams uses is complex. It's a language of the Falls he is trying to describe. And this is what writing is: manipulating language and words to describe the event or place. Language, as limited as it may be, has the ability to re-create.

I am fascinated by *Paterson* and the job it attempts to fulfill. William Carlos Williams continues in the statement by stating the following:

The noise of the Falls seemed to me to be a language which we were and are seeking and my search, as I looked about, became to struggle to interpret and use this language. This is the substance of the poem. But the poem is also the search of the poet for his language, his own language which I, quite apart from the material theme had to use to write at all. I had to write in a certain way to gain a verisimilitude with the object I had in mind. (xiv)

"The Colors and Shadows of My Word(s)" became for me what *Paterson* was for William Carlos Williams. Each aspect of my life has a language. These language, voices, I try to interpret in order to find my language, my voice. In doing so it became very important to write each moment as closely as I could remember.

Each story is a stop. The narrative is a train ride taking you in and out of the different aspects of my fragmented reality/identity. I want to give you a glimpse like a train ride. Poetry in motion. Just like the train stop when the doors open and close, and people, talking,

yelling, laughing, go in and out. Then the noise made out of the friction of metal against metal, and in the background, horns, sirens and music help complete the fusion that makes up the urban poem, the urban narrative. Poetry in motion. Narrative in motion. I see it, and so...I am the "L" and "The Colors and Shadows of My Word(s)" is my city. Welcome to the "Lydia line," your next stop...

NOTES.

¹Gloria Anzaldúa's essay "To(o) Queer the Writer--Loca, escritora y chicana" from the text *Living Chicana Theory*.

²The author and photographer was Pedro Abreu,

³Rage Against the Machine. "Calm Like a Bomb." The Battle of Los Angeles. Epic, 1999.

⁴Rage Against the Machine. "Mic Check." The Battle of Los Angeles. Epic, 1999.

⁵Rage Against the Machine. "Take the Power Back." Rage Against the Machine. BMI, 1992.

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The Colors and Shadows of my Word(s)

Aroma of tortillas

Burning on the brick grill

Carne asada on the

Charcoal fumes which penetrate the chimney

Days are warm and

Evenings are cool in my yard

Fragments

Glued together

Heaven and Hell

Isolate the

Jail-like environment which sometimes

Kills the hope and the

Love of the days and evenings in my yard

LLamas!

Men fighting and

Nothing ever at peace

Out-there, outside my door

Pero en mi casa el

Quetzal begins to

Roam free

RR...interruption of the actual
State and processes of my being

Torn between
U.S. and Guate
Visual images in my mind of
Winds flashing the city by and
Xylophones playing la marimba
Y nada pausa because it all just keeps
Zooming by:

The colors and shadows of my word(s).

HOME-SCHOOLING.

Surreal existence.

There are nights when I dream. And when I wake up, I can't remember the language. Was it in English? Was it in Spanish? I can't remember. But I remember that I dream. Maybe in dreams, it just doesn't matter. Universal. Surreal. Coming together like a Dali painting. English within Spanish. A picture of shadows and lights. Of death and life. Of hell and heaven. And in my dreams, of English and Spanish...in dreams all goes...todo va.

Mi Ma & My Pops.

It always amazes me that my mother and father met here in the US. It also amazes me that they ended up together. They speak a different language. My father a free spirit. He loved, and still does, Rock and

Roll. The loud guitars and screams demanding freedom from society's oppression to my mom's delicate guitar strums and melodic and harmonious voices of love and nostalgia. My father long haired, pierced ear, bell-bottoms and sandals...my mother short haired, shiny tank-tops with mini-skirts and knee high boots. One loves Janis Joplin and the other one Juan Gabriel. What do they have in common?

I have racked my brain over and over again trying to figure out my parents. It's nearly impossible, and this I know now. But when people say that I look like my mom but have my pops' personality, I wonder about who they are, beyond being "my parents." And when I think of where home is, I wonder about who they are, beyond "my parents." When I think of how I formulate my language and my thinking, I think of who they are, beyond "my parents." "Parents." "Padres." Labels which take away who they are. "This is my father." "This is my mother." Each introduction slowly erasing their identity. "Meet Rina y Julio." Who are they?

Mi Mama: Rina.

My mother is a vivid woman of color as bright as the colors of summer. Her green, her red, her blue, her yellow, her orange, exist only in textiles of Latin America. Her ocean blue, her sand black. Her trees big, her trunks thick, her leaves green, her sky blue, and her clouds white as cotton. Her past is no secret. Details increase with every day she speaks. Memories in Spanish of her childhood, of working, of school, of friends, of boyfriends. Her old neighborhood I see and feel. Each corner I have walked...y a la vuelta vivía...and I see...I am there. Her laughter as she played with her cousins, I hear. I laugh with each practical joke. Her pain as she realized she had to sacrifice her

education for her family, I feel. Her hatred towards the father who never was there, I know. In Spanish I know exactly what she looked like, what she looks like and how she will look. Her past a present...en español.

And the voices tell me of yesterday

Visions of me in a past of her

I see myself in another world

in another life

in another place

in another sky

I feel myself growing tall as the ceibas

I feel myself flying as the quetzal

In colors of green

In a sky of blue

My background full of solid shadows with colors

I see my past

I see my history

I see yesterday

Y lo veo

Y lo siento

Y lo sé

De memoria--

My mother is no secret. Spanish speaks. Spanish allows the past. Spanish teaches through stories. Myths, truths, fables, life...she tells. Every boyfriend she's ever had, I know. Every friend she ever

made, I know. Every dance she went to, I know. Every street she walked through, I know. La 4ta calle, as the street she grew up on is called, as she remembers it to be is vivid in my mind. When she falls into nostalgia, her words flow easily onto the air, arriving through my ears and forming images in the eyes of my mind. I can see her house. La casa grande de árboles con frutas y un patio grande donde todos los primos jugaban. I imagine a huge yard circled by every tree God created. The garden of Eden where the cousins climbed trees, where the cousins told each other secrets, where the sisters fought. I see the trees embracing, branch over branch to create the shadow which yielded the cousins from the sun but embraced the gentle breeze. I see the yard of laughter and joy and youth. Her words form the nostalgic feeling of youth and vitality. The sun always bright and the nights always warm. Each day of her tales comes alive at the dinner table, at the kitchen table, on the couch, in the yard, on the steps, in the basement, and in my room. Each tale feeling like my experience of life in Guatemala. I don't have to live there, and I didn't have to be there, her words transport me to la 4ta calle of her past. Y todos los días un episodio más de la vida en la 4ta calle en la ciudad de Guatemala.

And I crave these stories. I need them. I need to know what life might have been like if I were to have been born in Guatemala, if my parents had met in Guatemala. I need to know. The Guatemala I envision is the Guatemala of my mother's past, and I see myself there...I think...

I often wonder why my mother stayed in the U.S. Her mission was always to help her mother financially, but her intentions were never to stay. She always says she one day wants to return *home*. She dreams of

buying a little house or ranch and going there to live. I can see that for her home is Guatemala. When she says these words, when she shares these desires with me, I get mad and jealous. How can here, with me, with my father, with my brothers not be home for her? And she has no answer. She just knows that home is where she one day hopes to be. "Ustedes me pueden venir a visitar." And I suppose she wants to have something she calls her own. Something no one will deny her. Maybe that's why she talks and tells stories. These memories and this past, the words she molds to re-create her youth...are all completely hers.

Her sleep allows me to visualize her peace. She often dreams of people she once knew, of the house she grew up in, and of her mother. When her eyes are closed I see her happiness. Her past visits her. And it is then that I don't see. Her peace, her happiness, alone hers. Her stories are taken away from me. They leave far away to the place where they no longer make sense to me. Not mine...and the words begin to fail me. Spanish a language of dreams. Spanish a language of dreams? These foreign memories, my mother's past, become a reality I long for, a reality I want and crave, but they fade and fade into her dreams. I am left with shadows.

Mi Guatemala

Me arde el alma por mi Guatemala

desconocida y lejana

(a veces) siento que me llama...

Mis sueños llenos de playas negras

sofisticada y culturada arena

(a veces) me da cuerda
 y reconozco lo alienated
 of my situation
 en un lugar tan mío y tan extraño
 soñando y queriendo conocer
 el lugar
 not mine but so familiar as only
 el sol de mi alma puede ser.

My Pops: Julio.

My mom's world es español. She dreams en español. She laughs en español. She cries en español. She makes love en español. My father is a little more difficult to decipher, to analyze, to scrutinize. My father's life begins at nineteen, when he moved to the States. I don't recall him ever telling stories of his life in Guatemala, before nineteen. He did not exist. His early youth is a wave of darkness, while my ma's past is full of color, bright and bold, full of names with faces, wrinkles, smiles, tears and laughter.

My father always spoke to us (my brothers and me) in English. And I've often wondered in what language he dreams. In what language does he think? In what language does he laugh? In what language does he cry? In what language does he live? What is the language of his world?

The eagle rises over his bed.

Distilled over mind and body.

Paralyzed in trance.

Overlooking the ground of grass, green feathers...

north, bringing to the surface the grey pyramid of the jaguares...

at each corner, ceibas growing, spurting for the sun, the eagle eclipses...

south, the quetzal stares at the feet of his body.

Trapped in the bed of fall's ivy.

The eagle rises over his head.

Distilled over the birth of yesterday.

Eyes shut.

Tight.

Vision blocked.

Locked in the darkness of surreal dreams.

He speaks...

Silence.

"So, bye, bye, Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levy, but the levy was dry. And good ole boys were drinking whiskey and rye, singing, this will be the day that I die. This will be the day that I die."

-- Don McLean

I have often stared at my father trying to make sense of him, trying to make sense of me. I look nothing like him. His long nose, his white skin, his blue eyes. I, brown and dark. And yet, people say I am him. I "act like him," family says. His silence tells me little of our resemblance. Is silence the language we speak?

While sippin' his Becks. His white hands, pale...the blue rivers flow from his fingers to his wrists. Oil and dirt fermented on his skin,

breeding in his nails. His right hand, which holds the long, smooth green neck of the bottle, rests on the kitchen table, while his left hand holds a Marlboro Red cigarette between his middle and index fingers. Half of his cigarette burned to dangling ashes holding on to the body to which it once belonged. His cigarette hand rests over his right knee which is gently crossed over his left leg. He stares at the football game: Bears vs. Packers. His grey eyes, invaded by red, veiled with haunting shadows, intently gaze at the interception. "And Kramer throws another interception," screams the announcer. As he stares in silence.

I think of rules. I think of my parents. My mother's reality more accessible to me than my father's. What rules govern my father? Why is his past in Guatemala such a mystery? Why does he not turn back and embrace his family: father, mother, brothers? Why does he never dive into the past and swim with the memories of home? Home. Why has home become the United States for him? What has America offered him that Guatemala has not?

My speculation, of course, is that my father bought into the American freedom rhetoric. He bought into the pains of Rock and Roll, and the anger by many American Rock artists. His heroes sang his life...strumming his life, sort of speak. He needed to be in the land that allowed such pain transmitted in music that filled his soul with the nourishment, the vitamins to survive. I speculate...

*I'm buried alive, oh yeah, in the blues.
I'm buried alive, someday help me, in the blues.
I beg for mercy, I pray for rain,
I can't be the one to accept this blame,*

*Something here trying to pollute my brain,
I'm buried alive, oh yeah, in the blues.*

--Nick Graveniles
Sang by Janis Joplin

My parents restricted me. My parents limited me. They wouldn't let me explore and celebrate my individuality, my freedom as a free soul. They would've been happy had I become a banker, and had I married one of their friend's good-girl daughters. My mom always nagging at me, "Julio, en vez de andar con todas esas cualquieraas, casate con una muchacha buena, decente, de dinero." I didn't want to ruin my life by the same rules that confine them to their house. My parents. Man, life is out there, experimenting and exploring your body, your soul, your world. I didn't want to confine myself to the space created by them, by their parents for me. I didn't want to fall into the cycle. No. What do my parents enjoy? Nothing. Their false, perfect home of closed door fights, insults and hatred. It was slowly entering me and taking over my spirit. Killing it little by little with every hypocrite word and smile they gave themselves and me. The marriage of good-face, the home of good-image...a false truth to the world, and a true lie to the soul. Nineteen years of being the product of falsehood was slowing down my heart. I did not want to become the perfect puppet to materialism and money. Objects were not going to create my subject.

*Well, I ain't got mother to love me,
Ain't got no father to care.
Lord, I ain't got mother to love me,
Ain't got no father to care.
Lord, I ain't got no reason to go on,
Give me no cause to stay home.
I got these blues, I gotta know why.*

--Janis Joplin

And see, when I first came to the U.S., as I told myself, I just wanted to see as many Rock and Roll concerts as possible for that one summer. I had no plan. I thought

I'd go back home. Home? Hmmm... Anyway, I didn't tell my parents this plan of mine. I just told them that I was leaving for the U.S. Nothing more and nothing less.

My father drove me to the airport. He transported me to my new home, in the direction of my home. He must've known I was going, finally, home. He said to me at the airport before I boarded for the U.S., "Julio, cuando se le termine el dinero, va a regresar." Funny. He was right because I intended to go back to Guatemala. He made me see that I was like him, like my mother, like their friends. As much as I hated their ritual of glorifying materialistic bull-shit, I had been living that life. I had been consuming that ideology. I had been living and breathing off of their power and money rhetoric. A new motorcycle, new car, new clothes, women, schools, all of that, them. The maid washing my clothes, cooking my food, kissing my ass, all of that, them. I was taking it in, and living in it. So, I took my father's words as a warning. I know now, he knew. He let me escape. He let me come home.

As soon as I came to the U.S., I mailed my father all the money I had and my return ticket. I no longer needed any of that. No longer needed his safety net. I was home. I was where I belonged. I was in the world that would allow me to start fresh. I was out of the on-going process of reproduction. I was out of the on-going machinery that had killed the spirit within my father and within my mother, and slowly infiltrating my brothers. I was home. I am no longer suspect of lies and false image. I was free.

**Freedom, give it to me
That's what I want now
Freedom, that's what I need now
Freedom to live
Freedom, so I can give**

--Jimi Hendrix

I imagine my father's life. I almost have to. He won't tell me, so I have to tell myself. I'm afraid to let him become a hazy image in my

memory. I'm afraid of becoming a dark image myself. I'm afraid of living in silence. But...I do...

My father is a shadow. English becomes a language of everyday communication, but does not transmit feelings nor the past. Spanish is colors. Spanish becomes the language of dreams and emotions, of stories and the past. I use English. I can reach English. I sometimes dream in English. I am afraid of using Spanish. I am afraid of the stories it might tell.

Surreal Existence II.

*My thoughts allow me to recognize my surreal existence of being
trapped in today with a yesterday looming above and a tomorrow
remote in silence.*

The moon shines bright.

Round in shape.

Round in a perfect sphere.

Round it looks.

White it reflects.

Sadness it transmits.

She knows my thoughts.

She follows my steps.

She lights the dark alley.

She lets me see his face.

A stranger dressed in grey.
Shades of grey surround me.
Blue jeans that don't reflect themselves.
Years of color diminished by the night.
Limbo through the chipped cement.

Silence is what I hear
And life reflects herself.

I stumble...
a rock...
grey and pale...
dead and motionless...
I pick it up...
Small in my hands...
I throw it against an empty beer bottle...
Brown glass shatters on the grey and green...

Lamp pole flickers
On and off
On and off
On and off

Sirens ring far away

Away

Away

Away

OFF.

And I can't remember.

THE THINKING PROCESS.

Can you explain?

Too specific.

I used to write long sentences. I used to over-use commas, semi-colons, colons and all other grammatical devices. My essays were always turned back bleeding in red ink, "too detailed," "be specific." I was told to just "come out and say" what I wanted to say. "No need to explain every detail." *How can I not?* I would think. I used to feel that I needed to explain everything in order for the reader to see what I was trying to say. "You probably think in Spanish," my World Literature professor once told me. "Hmmm..." I said. But I disagreed. Let's face it, I wasn't translating my words when I wrote. My thoughts were in English, my words were in English, and I never thought in Spanish. Hmmm...

Since, I've become "too vague." I've mistaken "be specific" for not saying enough. The instructors' blood now reads, "what do you mean?" and "can you explain?" or "elaborate." But, where's the balance between "be specific" and "can you explain?"

My sentences have become choppy. Simple. I've come to realize that I once did think in Spanish. Yes, my World Literature professor was right, I thought en español. My writing process was en español. Sure my thoughts and words were in English, but the act of writing, of telling, of explaining was purely en español. Completamente en el idioma de mi

Mama. My father--English--silent. One word answers. Get to the point looks. Mi Mama, elaborate and flowery with imagery and metaphors. Each detail said carefully, because each detail was important. It's important to tell and retell stories exactly as they were, exactly as they happened. Every single aspect, minor or big, as an intricate part of story-telling because the past needs to remain unchanged and present-tense. The past needs to stay in-tact, as memory will allow. To forget the smallest of detail is for the past to fade into the shadows of yesterday. The past too far away, too far removed to not be remembered. *I have left, but I remain with every memory remembered and retold.* Alive en el presente. This was my thinking process, the only one I had, the only model available to me. Español governed my house; inglés was silent...Yes, español was all I had.

Growing up it was easy for me to develop an espanol story-telling process. It was at home, and it was in school. I attended Inter American Magnet School, IAMS. My grammar school is a bi-cultural, dual language institution. Mi español reasoning was allowed and celebrated. Español no era solamente para mí y los otros Latinos. No. Español was demanded of everyone. All students, from pre-school to eighth grade, spoke Español. Three days out of the week were en español. We had all the regular courses: math, history, English, reading, science, gym, art, music, library, etc. Added to this "normal" curriculum was "Spanish class." (Not to mention that some classes, at times, during a "Spanish day," were taught primarily in Spanish).

I remember that going into high school I felt that I knew more about Latin American history than I did about U.S. history. I knew about Trujillo, Padilla, Pinochet, Franco and Castro. But I did not know who

the second president of the U.S. was. At IAMS we analyzed Picasso, Miro, Goya, Kahlo, Rivera in regards to political movements. We read Lope de Vega and Miguel de Cervantes, to name a few, and we recited Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and Pablo Neruda. The life of los Aztecas, Incas and Mayas were taught to us via artifacts and archeological arguments.

Assemblies were always packed with parents taking pictures of their young ones dancing a traditional Bolivian dance or a modern Merengue interpretation or reciting a poem or singing a song...

Qué bonita bandera

Qué bonita bandera

Qué bonita bandera la bandera puertorriquena

Waving blue, red and white flags to the beat of the song. Parents clapping three and three and three to provide a percussion background to our third grade voices. We sang loud and waved proud...*Qué bonita bandera...*

And we continued to sing and sing...

Yo soy un hombre sincero

De donde crecen las palmas

Yo soy un hombre sincero

De donde crecen las palmas

Y antes de morirme quiero

Echar mis versos del alma

Guantanamera

Guajira Guantanamera

Guantanamera

Guajira Guantanamera

Mi verso es de un verde claro

Y de un carmin encendido

Mi verso es de un verde claro

Y de un carmin encendido

Mi verso es de un ciervo herido

Que busca en el monte amparo

Guantanamera

Guajira Guantanamera

Guantanamera

Guajira Guantanamera

(Jose Martí)

And our third grade voices would help transport the exiles into the land of palmas y monte verde of their past. The far away distance coming closer in colors of green and red, white, con el tinte del mar azul. Our voices singing together to the claps of the parents reinventing el Cuba de ayer with the words of Jose Martí. We sang.

IAMS is a public school, but a special public school. Like all magnet schools, IAMS provides its students with a radically different

curriculum. But because it is considered a public school, it has to abide by some rules. And because we had to:

Yo juro fidelidad

A la bandera de los Estados Unidos de América

Y a la república que representa

Una nación bajo Dios...

Patriotism in "my" language. Todo en español.

From first grade up until my very last day of eighth grade, my Latina existence was celebrated. My identity as a gold medal within the walls of 909 W. Barry. Guatemala. The blue and white flag with the quetzal en el centro was not a foreign flag. Painted proud in the mural, the Guatemalan flag hugged other Latin American flags. Embracing the culturas of our past, our present and our future. Guatemala was present. Her history and her story of Truth. Her struggle for liberation. Guatemala was present. Guatemala became heard. No one mistook Guatemala for Mexico. No one asked, "where is that?" And I...I was not "philipina," "Brazilian," "Indian," "Mexican." Guatemalteca! And everyone knew and no one had a problem with that. I carried the Guatemalan flag and I represented her...The process was en español.

But wait...

I once wrote a poem, and it went a little something like this:

Roses are red.

Violets are blue.

Guatemala or the US?

Which one do I choose?

But I shall not get off the subject just yet. Getting back to IAMS, it allowed me to be as detailed as I wanted to be. As a matter of fact, it asked me to be detailed. It asked me to explore el proceso en español. Think español. My teachers' process was en español. Most of them Cuban and Puerto Rican, their thinking process too was en español. Think español...and so I did.

**Choppy sentences like my thoughts:
The English invasion.**

My thinking process has changed. I've been invaded by choppy sentences. Spanish no longer the dominant. English took over after age thirteen. In high school, I took one Spanish course, Spanish AP. But after this class my sophomore year, I was quickly invaded by English. In college, I double majored in English and Spanish. But my process had already been conquered by English.

I liked my Spanish courses. I liked the environment. I liked the conversations. English folk were/are cold, not friendly, and too competitive. I never really knew any of my "English" classmates. They were foreigners to me. Their names I never knew, and their faces I soon forgot. I knew the names of those in my Spanish classes. I still remember their faces. And yet, I felt weird, for lack of an appropriate descriptive word, about speaking espanol. I always participated, but it

never failed, I would forget words. "Uh, uh, uh...she embodies...";
 "¿Cómo se dice to scrutinize?" And when I sat down to write, I thought in
 English. Everything I wanted to say was in English. I had to translate
 my thoughts and ideas. Español slipping from me. I slowly became choppy.
 Silent? I tell my students, "Be specific."

Home hadn't changed, but I had. Once college started, I spent less
 time at home. I tried to work as much as I could because I needed to pay
 my full time tuition at DePaul University. So, a typical day would be:
 get up, go to school, go to work, go home to study, or get up, go to
 work, go to class, go back to work, and finally go back home to study.
 And then I'd go to sleep only to begin the cycle again. Silence. Choppy
 sentences. Specific thoughts. Only important details. There's no time
 for anything else. Quick days began to govern my days. English had no
 room for detail. Life is too hurried and busy. "Get to the point. I have
 no time." Español as I knew it, silenced.

I enter and reenter the center of my mind.

Pa' dentro.

Pa' dentro,

To the place of signs.

To the place where thoughts are formed.

The images come quicker than the letter,

Than the word.

I think and I think,

Pensamientos puros,

Tongue-twisted into...

Silence...

Sh...

Tongue-twisted into the very existence of...

Not knowing the very letters I have learned.

A-B-C-...

And I'm stuck.

What follows?

Is it D or is it CH?

What comes next?

E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-...

I'm stuck again.

LL?

M?

N-...

Again!

N or O?

A-B-C,

A-B-C,

A-B-C,

A-B-C

ABC?

This had been my life between eight and nineteen, the transition from Spanish to English, and I never once noticed. Blind like my thoughts. Naive like my thoughts. Ignorant like my thoughts.

I woke up one day. My eyes adjusting to the new light with which I was being faced. Consciousness rushed my veins. Breathless, my heart began to race at an unheard but all too familiar song. I was scared, I

was comforted, I was sad, I was happy, I felt awkward, I felt at home.
It was home. It was me being reflected.

I look in the mirror.
Change after change.
Almost like a snake.
Taking my skin off.
Inch by inch.
In the slowest motion.
Feeling the pain.
Hidden by years.
Peeling off all of yesterday.
Little by little.
Becoming numb at tomorrow.
And today...
Today is pain...
Today is joy...
Today is new...
My skin peeling off.
I stare at the written mirror.
My skin peeling off.
And it shows me...

I had never sat down and read a book without blinking. Gloria Anzaldúa's words grabbing me, shaking me, entangling me. I was in trance. I was in trance. I was in trans. *Borderlands/La Frontera* taking my every memory and speaking to me, *open up your eyes, and look around.*

Life began to have a whole new meaning. That one night became the night every little detail of my life, every little event, and every little word came together in question, in affirmation, in me. No reconciliation, no compromise. Nothing. I had been forced, without me realizing, to see. There in black and white I began to question and affirm. I began...

So don't give me your tenants and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures--white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my own space, making a new culture--una cultura mestiza--with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

--Gloria Anzaldúa

And this whole time I have been denied my own home, my own space, my own place. I have been denied the right, the freedom to chisel my own face. I have been denied by the two languages, the two cultures that govern me. They fight on top of me. They claim their territory. And where am I? Blind. Processes and transitions, from Spanish to English and back, and I...where am I? I am the shadow that looms within and throughout the two. I am the shadow that fades in every word, con cada palabra menos y menos sé quien soy.

I try...

to chisel my face...
to view life of my own...
through the eyes of new...
to retell my story...
I chisel my face...
through the mouth of the silenced past...
through the mouth of the blind past...
through the mouth of the past untouched...

I try...
for a people of untold rhetoric...
to dispel empty diction...
to recreate my world...
to make my life...
to pave my road...
to step on my soil...
to cultivate my ground...
with new seeds...
I chisel my face.

And I finally realize. Spanish to English. The transition. I can finally see. And I want to go back and forth between the two because I need to. And I finally realize that I can. "Can you explain?" "Too vague." No and Yes, pero a sí es y a sí sera.

**Diferente I am:
Encountering América.**

I liked college. I liked college a lot. Mainly because I introduced myself in every class. "Hi! I'm Lydia Saravia. I'm an English major and thinking of double-majoring...Spanish. I'm from the north-side of Chicago, and both of my parents are Guatemalan." I was no longer just Lydia. No longer was I *Julio's older sister* or *Danny's big sister*. I was no longer *Lourdes' friend* or *Alexandra's friend*. I was beyond sister and friend and girlfriend and daughter and even cousin. All of my duties de familia put aside. I was me. Yo. Yo. I was I. Away from all the relationships, I didn't have to say more than, "hi, I'm Lydia." And if I wanted to, all I had to do was stare. I loved the anonymous identity.

There's a saying, "you find yourself in college." Cliché? Yes. But for me it was a true cliché. I found who I was in college. I introduced myself and created and recreated identity. But ultimately I was faced with myself. I found who I hated in college. All at a superficial level, of course. I later found out that no experience could lead me to see who I was until I got to the University of Rhode Island for my Master's degree.

As I've mentioned before, the first time I read Gloria Anzaldua for a course in my undergraduate years, I went through a metamorphosis, forced to look into a mirror. There I saw myself, face to face with me, and my eyes widened and my skin darkened. But my skin did not become thick until I took my senior seminar at DePaul University. As part of the Honors Curriculum, I was to take a senior seminar, along with the other Honors' students, that was to embody my four years at DePaul, or so I thought. For the first time I noticed how all my classmates, and

most of them English majors, had been white, suburban, middle-class Americans. It had never bothered me before. But, after a few multi-ethnic lit courses, African-American history courses and Chicana Women writer courses, I had finally opened my eyes to realize how truly different my life and interests and experiences were from many of my classmates and professors. I was the minority. The course was entitled "Encountering America," and boy did I. Everything was white: the professor, the students, the material we read, and the words in which we spoke. And for the first time, what I had to say had no value or meaning for anyone except me. For the first time no one cared what I had to say. "Yeah, Lydia. Um, John, what were you going to say?" Or sometimes I would just get a smile followed by awkward silence. And for the first time, no one understood. And for the first time, I realized I was different in the paradigm, in the vision and in the encounter with their America. It was *I* versus *them*.

Encountering America

"Encountering America" was the class, and what did I find?

A land, a people full of foreign-ness

I tuned off at every little word coming from this

White man,

White bearded, and

White haired professor.

I tuned off at everything projected and scrutinized by middle class

whites.

Every Tuesday and Thursday for ten weeks,

For an hour and a half each day.

My mind was not all there.

I did not live nor commune with twenty other individuals.

Talks.

Empty with words to me.

A language I don't understand.

A language I don't understand.

A language I don't understand.

An English language

I speak,

But a language I don't understand.

I've shut myself off.

Or had they?

I speak about my not caring, and it goes unforeseen.

I want to drop the class,

but I can't.

To graduate

I must stay.

A senior seminar that should embody my college career.

And instead it has helped to alienate me.

I am foreign.

I am foreign.

My language,

They don't understand.

My language,

They don't understand.

My language,

They don't understand.

Encounter America I have.

Alienation.

I am foreign.

I don't understand.

I have tuned off.

Alienation.

Separation.

Alienation.

Alone.

I am foreign.

Two American English languages.

I speak one,

And they another.

I don't understand.

They don't understand.

Alienation.

Alone.

I am foreign America.

America.

Oh beautiful for them.

America.

Amérika.

America.

Does it exist?

Not mine.

I am foreign.

Tip for next year's seminar:

Encounter foreign America.

America.

America.

Amérika.

I pledge allegiance to my flags

Of the separated states of the amé'ricas

And to the republics for which I stand

Two nations under gods

Invisible with alienation

And solitude for all.

America.

Amérika.

Amé'ricas.

I have encountered.

The funny part is that *they* never encountered my America. It's easy for *them* to close *their* ears to what *others* have to say. *They* are privileged that way. *They'll* never know the pain I went through sitting in that class, listening to *their* words and drinking *their* life (note:

we drank Guinness one day). Everyday walking in through that class room door was walking into the world that rejected me and my family and all other people of color. I took in the baggage of my people. It was up to me to defend the experiences of the America of color. And never did they pay attention. "That's nice." No one cared. They are the privileged folk who do not need to listen, see or hear. They are privileged enough to live in and within *their* existence of white, suburban, middle-class America.

I sat in silence, not out of choice. Even when I spoke, my words became transparent. Never once were the sound waves strong enough to communicate to them how I felt. Never once were the sound waves strong enough to communicate to them my encounter with America. Never once were the visual waves strong enough to communicate my uncomfortable situation in an America that refuses to hear me, my voice, my words. English, Spanish, silenced because the sound waves are not that powerful for me. English, Spanish, it does not matter. I spoke in English, but my words too *acentuados para ellos*. Must've been *un ingles con acento* porque ellos nunca entendieron.

My thoughts have still been penetrated by English. I use Spanish, and unless I've been fully immersed in home, English still dominates. It's just what the outside has molded me into, whether or not I agree...forces pick me up and throw me into a pool of unwanted rules...

**No tengo las palabras:
Words created by them.**

I lived at home for the first twenty-one years of my life. I lived at home for my undergraduate years. I commuted back and forth. I could

not afford to leave. One, I did not have the money, and two, I could not leave my family (my decision). So, the first time I left home was to attend the University of Rhode Island to receive a Masters Degree. Needless to say, I was very homesick. I called home every time I could. I called home if I was sad, if I was happy, if I was bored, or if I was by the phone. I called home for everything. I reported to my family every chance I could. To hear their voice was important to me. I had withdrawal symptoms if two hours went by and I had not heard my mother, my father, or my brothers' voices. I craved to hear home.

Mostly I called home to talk to my mom. We have a very close relationship, maybe a mother-daughter bond, or maybe a woman bond (since we're the only women in the household), or maybe it's because she's the only one who does not get tired of my voice. Whatever it is, it is her I call. So as I go through experiences in life, my first inclination is to call my mom and tell her everything, to cry on her shoulder or to laugh and make her laugh. Pero a veces, I can't find the words to explain to my mom... I can't fully spell out to her how it feels to be the "diversity" representative in an all-white department. I can't fully spell out how it feels to be seen as the "diversity" student, how it feels to be treated as the "diversity" student. Somehow these issues only exist in English. Created by *them* against *us*.

I search my mind for las palabras to describe the consuming hatred, pain and sadness that resides in my heart. In the shadows of the night, of my room, I stare at the four walls, and each corner represents the feelings that consume me and change my face into years of struggle. Changing my face into an unrecognizable negative image. Eyes shot by evil, mouth silenced, ears clogged with blood...within me, within me,

within me, I bottle up the feelings of imperialism, colonialism, racism...the repercussions...bottled up waiting...the four white walls shake me...and wait. And I search my mind for las palabras. "Y es que me llaman y me ven como el diversity student. Me están haciendo de menos. Me están tratando diferente." And she asks me if *they* have done anything to me. No. And that's what I can't transmit to her. No, they haven't done anything, physically, to me, but it's in their voices, in their looks, in the words they use. That's the thing about these types of occurrences (racism), they occur in subtle ways. "You are the diversity student" I have been told, I have been called. But to my mom, the word "diversity" has no meaning.

I don't even know how to say "diversity" in Spanish. I'm sure there has to be a proper translation. But I, in my life, in my *dealings* with espanol, have never had the need to use the word, never had the need to translate such a term. Never. And lucky for my mom she doesn't know the meaning of the word. But in my desperate attempt to be consoled, I can't transmit to my mom in Spanish, the humiliation and pain and disgust I feel. No puedo. *Olvidate...no sé cómo explicarte. ¿Qué hiciste hoy?*

**Urban Poor to Working Class:
I don't speak that high-talk trash.**

I think of the career I have chosen. I went into college knowing I wanted to major in English, and I entered graduate school knowing that I wanted to receive a higher degree in English. I like analyzing. I have always analyzed. My life depends on how I analyze situations and people.

But to analyze myself? To think of creating and molding my identity and putting it on paper?

He's very proud of me. He tells me so all the time. He doesn't say, but I imagine that my father would probably disagree with my life choice. "What for?" he would ask. And throughout my higher education I have asked myself "what for?" thousands of times. What for? How the hell does this educational journey of theorizing compare to my father's life of factory work? How does this "exploration" compare to my father's five-to-five greasy, dirty, sweaty days of hard labor? It all seems meaningless and pointless. And I stop to think, *how dare I live my life in this type of world, this type of community?* Is the intellectual world, as higher education is often called, worth my *labor*?

These are some of the thoughts that have crept slowly in my mind as I sat in Critical Theory courses. Blah, blah, blah... Individuals of a privileged background talking about society controlling "the people," society over-looking and limiting actions, morals infringing on independence. Is there such a thing as independence? Individuals of a privileged background talking about religion and government as restrictive institutions. Individuals of a privileged background talking about sexism, racism, homophobia and capitalism as evils walking our neighborhoods and sitting in our classrooms. And AGH! My head explodes into little pieces too little for me to pick up and put back together. It explodes over and over again as I look around the room to Freudian terms and Althusserian words being thrown out into my ears by white mouths, upper-class mouths wearing Banana Republic, Gap and Old Navy, and maybe a thrift store, glasses wearing, blue nail polish chick. And I think, they don't know what it is like to live at the low end of

capitalism, what it is like to be the victim of racism. They don't understand what it is like to be controlled by cultural morals. Theoretical terms and theoretical words, but how do they live their life? Visits to Cape Cod on the weekends? Buying a new car because it is essential? Watching "Dawson's Creek" because Pacey is having a crisis? (And yes, graduate students reserve their Wednesday nights to watch Dawson's Creek!) Who are they? Certainly not the people who work with my dad. Certainly not the men who sit at five o'clock in the morning at Dunkin Donuts discussing how their kids have "fucked up again." Certainly not the people living on Lower Wacker Drive's pavement. Certainly not the Asian girl afraid to tell her dad that she is a lesbian. Certainly not the black girl looking in the mirror hating her dark skin. Certainly not the Latino boy who wants to join the neighborhood gang to feel wanted and respected. Certainly not the Latina afraid of sex and boys. Certainly not the people who sleep on their kitchen floors for safety precautions due to drive-bys. Certainly not the man sitting on death row because he fits the description, black male. And certainly not the man shot forty times by the NYPD because he looked suspicious, black male. And I'm sitting here with them, talking their terms, talking their language. With them. How dare I? How can I?

When I hear my classmates, my colleagues, talk, I am left in silence. Images of childhood, images of my neighborhood, images of my hyphenated, urban life enter my mind. Almost as if a reminder of who I am. Almost as if a reminder that I do not fit in. Almost as if a reminder of my otherness. Shadows enter.

These privileged mouths begin to discuss the limits the various institutions governing our society impose on "us" as individuals.

Institutions. Institutions. Institutions. And the limits of insecurity? The limits English imposes on me? The limits English imposes on my mother? In this land that refuses to accept new immigrants. In this land that refuses to accept difference. In this land that loves "us" as entertainment. As the ass shaking across the stage. As the breasts bouncing on the screen. As the song that sounds good. In this land that once made me ashamed and embarrassed of my mother and her language. In this land that once made me ashamed and embarrassed of my cultural background. I have lived the limits of institution(s).

Growing up, as a child, there were very few to little "hablamos espanol" signs. Instead, parents used their children for translation. Many times I accompanied my mother to the bank to ask questions and get answers. My father could not go because he had to work, so it was my responsibility to accompany my mom.

So I would bitch and moan and complain. "Solo deciles, can I get my balance," I would tell my mom. Hoping that my mother could remember and say "balance" without pronouncing the "e." She would get so mad and yell and demand that I go with her. Angry with her, and angry with my dad for having to work, I would enter the bank.

My throat swelling up. Knots filling my throat. I just know I can't speak. My hands sweating. Wet and shaking they reached for the door handle. "Push" it reads. I pulled. Shit, I would think. My head beginning to spin. My head feeling heavy. My head rushing with blood. The bank is always hot. Shit, I would think. "Next," the teller would say. And up I would walk with my mom.

"Um...she needs her balance from like a month ago until like today."

"Her monthly statement?"

"Um...yeah, I guess."

"She should have gotten her monthly statement in the mail."

I'm so pissed with my mom. She loses everything.

"Te tenía que llegar el statement en el mail."

My mom tells me to ask the teller if she can give us a statement copy, she has mis-placed hers.

"Can she get a copy."

"You need to go over there and speak to a personal banker for that."

Bitch. She could've told me that a long time ago. Everyone has to fuckin' find out my mom doesn't have her statement; that she can't balance her check book; and that she can't speak English.

I have to go through the whole thing again. "Tell your mother it will be five dollars, hun."

I would get so mad. I would give my mother dirty looks for making me go through, as I perceived it as a child, humiliation. It wasn't fair. I would go home and slam the door to my room and put on the radio really loud.

To ask for a balance was easy. Sometimes I had to ask the teller things I did not know the terms for, and sometimes I had to tell my mom things the teller had said that I did not fully understand. And my mind would race with every possible Spanish word I knew. And I would become embarrassed because I had no clue what to do. How could I tell my mom that I did not know?

Did these Critical Theory classmates of mine know what that feels like? They talk about their mother being the perfect Mrs. Brady. How

their religious home was a burden. Did they know what it felt like to be a fourth grader translating for her mom? Did they know the embarrassment that caused me? Did they know what it was like to be embarrassed and not know why? Did they know the hatred and confusion in my head as I look back in retrospect to that embarrassment? None of it making sense. Why would I feel embarrassed? Embarrassed of my mom? None of it makes sense, and do these people know what this feels like? These privileged individuals carefully analyzing texts written by mostly white European men will never know nor understand what it is like to feel and be at the lower end.

**WHO AM I?
THE VOICES OF THE STREETS.**

L Stops.

It's an urban life I live.

I dance to the clic-dat-clic-dat

of the "L"

Rush hour...getting pushed

to and fro

Doors closing on my face

Missing my train

Missing word play

Down in Hyde Park

Guess I'll head Up-Town

Bob my head to some mellow flow

of jazz tunes

Sax swoons

Trumpet hurts
Piano pains
Cello cries
A story of Urban Life
Then I'll head to Lincoln Park
And hear some blues at its best
Standing in a packed crowd
Friends among strangers
All night at Kingston Mines
Breathing soul
About this oh so sweet urban life
Underground hip hop
At underground joints
At an underground hour
Jungle beats
At a Warehouse rave
Skaters, Bladers, Bikers
grinding after hours
hitting rail towers
Leavin' their marks
Graffiti artists on the "l" tracks
Under viaducts
On roof tops
Crawlin' at night
Claimin'
Rome
Lern

Term

Foren

and sometimes Syko

All steppin' in the city streets

Late at night

Livin' this life

In Urban Light

Chicago

Chicago

My kind of town

Chicago is--

Street Talk.

When I go home and walk my neighborhood, the street where I grew up... My neighbors sitting outside on the steps on a hot one hundred degree night. Their shirts off, their baggy shorts hanging below the line of their boxers. Beers in their hand and empty bottles thrown on the ground. Cigarette butts make a collage on the grey cement. Chillin'. 711 open all night long. Drug deals by the pay phones. A girl is getting hit by her boyfriend in a parked car. In the alley, a garage is set on fire. A young boy, about sixteen, is hitting every window of an old Buick. Breaking each window with a wooden bat like Sammy Sosa hits the baseballs out of Wrigley Field onto Waveland Avenue. Cars pumpin' Dr. Dre's new CD. Cars pumpin' the new techno mix. Hydraulics. Neon lights. And I walk up and down with my Foucaultian, Marxist, feminist thoughts. Who am I?

I enter my house. Elvis Crespo plays loud on the speakers. Merengue dancers circle me. *Ring around the rosie. Pocket full of posie. Ashes, ashes we all fall down.* The table on the corner has tamales and bread. The fridge downstairs is full of beers. Empty beer bottles decorate my entire house. Dancers are laughing loudly. *Suavemente bésame. Quiero sentir tus labios besándome otra vez.* Everyone's favorite song. People cheer. And I stand in the middle of my living room with my Foucaultian, Marxist, feminist thoughts. Who am I?

To be urban.

And the city becomes a shadow over the people. A shadow creating the different colors. As the colors blend together, with each other, fight against each other, the result is a black shadow. And the urban shadow enters the eyes, the mouths, the ears, penetrating the soul. The creation and recreation of the urban-self. Urbanity. Urban-ness. To be urban.

The urban setting I grew up in is an important influence in my identity. It's another layer to the complex hyphenated identity. The different voices which make up a city environment have played and re-played loudly in my head. The homeless man mumbling to himself the evils which reside in him, the evils which have consumed his being. The man who walks the streets dressed like Jesus, carrying a huge wooden cross up and down Belmont and Clark reciting passages of the Bible. The driver who has been in traffic for over an hour honking his horn and yelling obscenities to the row of cars in front of his. The prostitute calling at a parked car, "twenty bucks for a good fuck." The news

replaying the video of firemen making racist jokes and comments. The screams of an aching mother whose four-year-old daughter was victim to a drive-by. The voices of the police yelling, "freeze." The different voices which compete to be heard. Yells, screams, screeches competing against sirens, horns, gun shots. All competing to be the voice of the city.

My language, my voice walks on cement, on asphalt, on concrete. My language, my voice talks to bricks, stones and metals. My language my voice lit by lamp-poles, traffic lights, neon signs. My language, my voice is geared by horns, sirens, yells and loud music. My language, my voice runs among the avenues and two-way streets. My language, my voice knows no stars and is governed by a moon too far for comfort. My language, my voice is witness to rapes, murders, molestation, violence. My language, my voice lives within the homeless, the projects, the crack-house, the whorehouse, the poor. My language, my voice urban as its surroundings, talks city-talk. My language, my voice poor as its surroundings, talks poverty-talk.

Breathing within the walls of a working-class, urban cell. The existence of my language, my voice goes beyond the limits, beyond the confines of whether or not it is in Spanish or English that I speak. My language extends to concrete, pardon the pun, realities. What I know...What I've heard...What I've seen...What I've experienced...Grey with fast lights of loud magnitude. I can hear the city breathing. And I can, and I feel her calling me. For I do not belong in the woods, in the country, in the small town, in the suburb...I left my heart in?

The City.

I can hear the city breathing. She talks. She cries. She hurts. Her face is grey. Her children are orphans of the night. A prison. A cell. No green. No blue. Tall buildings. Dark brown. Perfect squares. Broken windows. Broken doors. Bars in every corner. Three liquor stores per neighborhood. No flower shops. No coffee shops. No art stores. Dirt on the floor. Old papers, old food, old cans, old bottles, old everything in the gutter. The projects I see is where it begins and where it ends.

An invisible wall. DO NOT CROSS THE LINE. DO NOT ENTER. DO NOT TRESSPASS. You are not allowed past their premises. There are us and there are them. DO NOT INTERACT. They belong there, and we belong here. Prisoners of parameters. They are the problem. They belong there. They belong there.

Buildings. Perfect tall buildings. Perfect squares. One next to another, next to another, next to another. Built to create a circle. Cities within cities. Grandmother, mother, daughter and child. Four generations. Same building. They belong there. They belong there. The projects: a prison, a cell. A city within a city.

I can hear the city breathing. I hear her cry. She hurts. She's in pain. Her children prisoners. Her children orphans of the night. Prisoners of the night without stars. I can hear the city breathing.

And the city is the voice I use. I am urban. I am the streets. I am the broken-down neighborhoods. I am the ghetto. I am the poor. I am poor. Quick, fast, witty, sarcastic, cynical...surviving the street, surviving the city. My language made up of "gang-way", "riots", "gangs",

"hip-hop", "break-dance", "L", "brown line", "red line", "blue line", "green line", "north side", "south side", "west side"...I know numbers and numbers and over-population. I know the words for "too many people on the train," and I know the words, "I've never seen my neighbor"...these phrases among others have molded my language. Offspring to place. The space I occupy in the place in which I was born. Confined among the freedoms of the city limits. I talk the urban vernacular. I talk street-talk. Talk the streets. I talk to the streets. The streets talk to me. I can hear the city breathing.

GENDER: THE FEMALE ROLE.

I'm not a "girl".

"You throw ball like a girl."

"Stop standing around doing nothing like a girl, and help put this dry-wall up."

"What, are you going to cry like a little girl?"

No. I'm not a little girl and I do not act like a girl!

I grew up in a household where the males out-numbered the females 3 to 2. Being a "girl" was not a bad thing, but acting like a "girl" was just not tolerated. I was not allowed to be sensitive, as girls are assumed to be. Let's lay out the myths: girls are supposed to be sensitive, emotional; girls are not supposed to know how to throw a ball properly, or know how to put up dry wall; a girl is supposed to wear

dresses, be quiet, wear make-up, know how to cook; a girl is supposed to do the chores around the house.

In many Latino families, if stereotypical, the daughter is supposed to know how to do things around the house, and maybe even serve her brothers. She is not supposed to have authority over her brothers, and her brothers are to govern her life: i.e.. make sure her reputation is not defaced in any way, and make sure that she is acting proper at all times. I have some Latino male friends who will beat up any guy who even dares look at their sisters. This, however, was not the case in my house.

I was not forced to ever learn how to cook. I was not forced, ever, to do a chore around the house. I have never served my father nor my brothers. As a matter of fact, they have served me on many occasions. I hardly ever wear dresses. It used to be that dresses got in the way of wrestling with my brothers, and now I just feel uncomfortable in a dress. I was not allowed to wear make-up until I turned seventeen. By then I had no interest in make-up. Around the house, I'm not quiet. I take on the role of the eldest child very seriously. I'm bossy and demand respect. And lucky for me, I get it.

My brothers played baseball, and my mother loves the game of baseball. So what was I supposed to do? I learned how to throw a ball and catch a ball. I was not going to be left on the sidelines to be the cheerleader. It's not my style, and I did not want to be called a "girl." The term "girl" in my household became the biggest insult any of the siblings could give one another. I was born a girl, so I had to double prove myself that I did not act like a girl. So it's of no big surprise that I try hard not to be too emotional. I hate crying. I have

a hard time saying the "L" word, even to my own parents. Cynicism and Sarcasm is a way to survive in my household.

My father never treated me in any special way because I was a girl. When he built his garage, I, along with my brothers and male cousins, had to help build it. I was to put up dry wall, but the biggest task my father gave me that summer was to help my brother chip and take off the old cement foundation. I did not want to do this job, so I told my dad that I did not think I could chip cement because the wedge hammer was too heavy. He turned to me and said, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. What are you, a girl?" At that very moment I wanted to say, yes! But instead I looked at him and decided that he was right: I was not some delicate little flower that needed to be locked up in the house with the air conditioning on. NO. I could do it! And so my brother and I did.

On another occasion, I had just gotten my driver's license and was driving my parents' mini-van. Both of my parents were in the van when I drove into a pot hole and got a flat tire. I pulled over so that my father would drive the van home, and he merely looked at me and said, "Drive it home. You got the flat, you're gonna deal with it." And dealt with it I did. That day I learned to change a tire by myself. It took me forever, and it was hard, but I did it. And while I was struggling to take the nuggets off the tire, my father said, "You need to learn because or else how are you gonna know how to change a tire if you get a flat and I'm not around. What, you gonna wait on some guy?"

The term "girl" carried negative connotations in my household. To act like a girl is not a good thing. To giggle in front of a cute boy is not a good thing. To cry over love stories is not a good thing. To say I

can't is not a good thing. Both of my parents urged one thing of me, an education. Everything else could wait. That's all I had to do for my parents, get an education. Whether or not I wore dresses, whether or not I looked like a lady, whether or not I ever learned how to cook tamales was not on my parents' agenda. My mother stressed this, but my father pushed it. I was not to be a slave to my gender. Gender roles, non-existent for me in my household. I was a girl, but that was not to stop me from doing everything my brothers did, and I was actually expected to be better than my brothers. The term "girl" was slowly changing...

Lesbian.

What does she have that I love?

She has a bright smile. No smile compares to hers in the morning.

She knows herself.

She knows her faults.

She knows her good parts.

vices

virtues

She knows herself.

She's able to talk about herself in the third person.

She's able to argue, fight and scream her way through.

She's able to cry at a sad thought.

She's able to maintain herself calm during tragedies of life.

She can see a moment of reality,

and enhance it into a lifetime.

She can dream while awake.

She can read a word over and over again,

and still not be satisfied with the meaning.
 She can sit down and think.
 She thinks--

What do I love about her?
 I love her every facet as a woman.
 I love all her dimensions.
 I love her every mood.
 I love her being.
 I love her essence.
 I love her purity that radiates
 through her brown eyes,
 the soul she transmits
 when she sighs...
 I love the complexity of her voice.
 I love the colors of her walk.
 I love the shadows of her dreams.

She realizes her levels.
 She acts on what she feels she should.
 She changes her leaves.
 She creates air.
 She forms water.
 She lays on fire.
 I love all that makes her.

1,2,3

2,1,3

3,1,2

from A to Z

from D to A to F to T to V to Y to B to I to C to A to A to Z to Y to Y
and back to Z.

Straight arrow

Crooked arrow.

Left to right.

Right to left.

However she was made...

However she exists...

However she lives...

However she is...

However she happened...

However she happens...

However she was made...

I love all of her.

It is she I love.

She.

What does she have that I love?

She's able to talk about herself
in the third person.

In a sense, I've been lucky. I have not been restricted by my family for being a woman. I was not trapped in "femininity" roles. I was allowed to run on the dirt and to play with the guys. So in that sense I was lucky. That would not have been the case, however, had I been a

lesbian. I would not have been supported had I said to my parents that I was a lesbian. My wonderful parents restricted by their heterosexual existence. Homophobia, and they cannot explain why.

I am riding the train. It's about noon, and I am on my way to school. I only have one class today: Art, Audience and Artist: Drama. The ride is about fifteen to twenty minutes long. It can seem like an eternity when I stare out the window at the buildings I have memorized. Each tag name is the same, each cartoon character spray painted is the same, each window the same. Every day, it's all the same. And since I worked the night before, this train ride is an opportunity to read the play I was supposed to read for today's class: "Hannah Free" by Claudia Allen. A local playwright. And so far, an amazing playwright. The characters coming alive in my mind; the love between the two female characters and the pain of their silent relationship, I visualize. Their first kiss as children, to their last kiss as aging adults. I feel their love, and I feel the pain of forbidden love, of forbidden identity. Each woman prisoner to the gender and sexual roles society imposes on women. Women are to marry and have children; a lesbian is not allowed. As I read on my way to Fullerton Ave., I am engrossed by the play. And I cannot wait to see it on stage at Victory Gardens, and I cannot wait to meet Claudia Allen herself.

I arrive at DePaul. I am an hour early. I like to be early. I like to sit in the lobby of McGaw Hall and catch up on my reading, or chit chat with the folks I see and know. And I'm sitting in McGaw, and I see a friend approaching me. He comes to say hello and I put the play down. And I notice for the first time the bright neon green letters: LESBIAN

PLAY. And I think, "Oh my God, what if someone saw me? What if someone my mom knows saw me?" And at this very moment I hate myself for my reaction. Who cares? My mom...

Both of my parents say that they have nothing against homosexuals. "Let them do what they want." But, they become very nervous when they begin to doubt their children's sexuality. They get worried that I read lesbian theory, lesbian plays, that I read texts with the word "lesbian" written all over it. "¿Por qué estás leyendo eso?" And my mother doesn't understand the liberation I receive from reading texts of women loving women. I too love women. I love their walk, I love their smiles, I love their laughter, I love their smells. I love her. I admire women. To read of a woman in love with the body of another woman. Breasts and vaginas...women loving the smell of women making love...Breasts and vaginas. And as the women make love to one another, caressing each breast...a woman's hand over the other woman's hand...lips on lips...women making love, celebrating their identity through love making...women making love...hands over the forbidden, exploring the mountains and forests they are not supposed to...women making love...And I look at my naked body in the mirror, and I see my naked body in the full length mirror, and I look at my naked body in the mirror, and I no longer am ashamed of my breasts and vagina. I am woman. Women making love make me love me. The brown women who sink into the oceans of other brown women make me love my brown naked body. I am no longer ashamed of me. Brown woman. I can openly indulge in my own sexuality. As I read Lesbian Latina Theorists, I can see that I can celebrate my own sexuality. I can have a sexuality. I do not have to be trapped in la

niña buena role. I can be sexual. I am no longer ashamed of my Latina woman body. I take pride. And I cannot explain to my mother that a heterosexual reader can learn so much from a lesbian writer. She does not want to hear. She does not want to see. She does not want to understand. It may be difficult for her. She is trapped in her heterosexual, homophobic, cultural existence. She has been taught that women need to be "buenas niñas." But mom, you at least must have had sex three times? But she does not want to hear, see, or understand. *Dejá de hablar tonterías.* But it isn't.

WRITING.

*For Children to come
For ancestors passed
For life lived on earth
I strike the page
With mighty blows
Fighting with a pen
Allowing anger to roar
Sadness to flow
And my being to exist
I write*

I need the power.

Writing is powerful. Another cliché? Yes it is, but it's a true cliché. With each word I write I feel empowered. Breathing restored in the days of anxiety. Tears calmed. Anger given an outlet. It gives me power and keeps me sane. I write and write and write without anything

making much sense, and I ramble and ramble en idioma con idioma y contra idioma todas las palabras that come to my mind. I pick the pen up (I'm still old school, I write things out), strike it against the page in anger or make love to the page in euphoria or hug the page in sadness. I move the pen from left to right, and put together--create--lines and circles that *transmit* a message back to me, and, ultimately, to you (whoever that may be).

Writing is liberation. Through writing I can run free over the ocean waves and through the clouds and smile. Me libera...if and only if I follow no rules and no conditions. My journals know no limits--except those of vocabulary. But I am allowed to say anything I want and feel and think. At times, I write what I should not say. Shhh...Callate...

I write.

Mi(s) cultura(s) restrict me. Censored. I cannot come out and freely ask my mom, "¿cómo se siente el sexo?" No. *Respetá, respetá, respetá*. But, *respetá* qué? It's just a question. And I cannot come out and freely say, "rich white people have made this country oppressive and corrupt." No. If this is said, I become the whining minority who wants to live off of taxpayers' money. But, isn't it true? Of course, not that I have not asked the question or made the comment, I have. And I know the responses and repercussions. But none of that matters.

Now I realize I will be told to *respetá* and to quit whining, especially if my words are in writing. Once printed, I can't go back. Set in stone. But to this I say, at least my words cannot be denied, my questions cannot be ignored. I said it, I wrote it, it's there, deal with it. And that's what is so liberating: writing allows me to tell

others to deal with it. Tables are turned. No one is telling me to deal with it; I'm telling them. Ah! and I can breathe...sigh with a smile.

The best part of writing is that I do not have to accommodate anyone. I learned this that one night of complete vision. And I saw:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity--I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

--Gloria Anzaldúa

My writing has no rules. I can switch back and forth if I desire. As the words begin to flow, I write. Lo que sea. Part of this beauty is that I think not of the reader. Who is my reader? No me importa. I am selfish. I write not for you. This is not for you. I write for me. I write porque el deseo existe entre mí de escribir todo pensamiento. There's a need in me to write. It's my medicine. It keeps me, as I've said, sane. To write and rewrite and write and write and rewrite helps me heal. The pains I have felt...The pains I continue to feel...The pains I will surely feel...Healed by la palabra. Each word, Spanish or English, makes me, molds me...I re-create and create and portray myself

through writing. Each word, urban and working-class, makes me, molds me. I write me. I tattoo myself on the page to remain in the present. Tengo el silencio de mi papa. No hablo sobre mis problemas tan facilmente, but I describe like my mother. Each inch of myself carefully preserved in my journals.

***I'm mad at my desk
And I'm writing all curse words
Expressing my aggressions
Through my schizophrenic verse words.***

--Beastie Boys

In the creative process of inventing I do not allow the reader to infringe on my freedom to chisel my own face. I have multiple languages, multiple voices, all of which alive beat in black on white, ink or laser...alive it bleeds in black on white.

*For the times I cannot breathe,
when my heart extracts,
when my mouth gasps for air,
without cause,
I know I must beat.
I pick up the pen,
a piece of paper,
and I write, and I write, and I write...
then my heart begins to slowly beat,
to beat,
to beat,
to beat, to beat, to beat, to beat...*

*The blood begins to flow,
begins to rush through my veins,
like a river mad in a windy day,
currents of red traveling at a violent speed through my legs,
filtering in my heart,
and to my finger tips.
Hard from left to right,
hard from left to right,
striking the page.
Each blow creating new images.
Breathing at the pace of my hand movement.
From left to right...
From left to right...
From left to right...
In and out...
In and out...
In and out...
Inhale and exhale...
Inhale and exhale...
Inhale and exhale...
From left to right.
I breathe.*

Transition.

*Las palabras ride up and down the tracks of mi memoria. Every day
and every night, searching for the right adjectives. To re-create the
past, to define the present, to imagine the future. Palabras flying*

through the clouds of shadows. Palabras painting on the canvas of my shadows. Shadows of el ayer que tanto añoro recordar, but restricted by the words, the very sentences which created el ayer. Y trato, y trato, y trato..."Next stop..."

**BROWN-NESS:
THE COLOR AMONG COLORS.**

My World of Brown

I am proud

Nothing can bring me down

I'm gonna yell loud

"Move out and make room for all that is brown"

My world I will create

With all the colors

That only I want to take

Only color

Allowed through my door

Color Colorful Color

De colores

Bright and strong

Decorating this pale life

Make room for brown

We're coming at this world loud

Because I will create

My coalition today

Made up of me
And shades of bean
With accents of café
Molido y preparado
Con azucar y sin leche
Aroma suave
Seres clandestinos
We will create today
Close your eyes
Hold your breath
Cover your ears
Brown we are
Olor de café
Con acento en la e
"Café con leche
Se quieren casar"
Nah! Hold the milk
Give me hot cocoa instead
Only color in my being
Colores naturales
Colores de la tierra
So step, step, step
"Oh no brown looks upset"
Hell yeah!
And I'm moving in
I'm coloring in and out
Of lines

Color

Color

Colorful

Colors

De colores

Of shades of brown

I am here

You got no choice

But to deal with me

And my shades

Of coffee bean--

In college I learned that I was a woman of color. I learned that my brown skin defined who I was. Some hate my skin color. I am brown. They look at my skin and assume that I speak no English. They look at my skin and assume that I have little education. People look at my skin and assume. Because of my brown skin people deny me my identity. Quiera que no, americana soy. I was born in the US. I cannot help that. I am American. When I go to Guatemala, they say, "allí va la americana." Por que? Porque naci en the United States. Let's face it, despite my parents being Guatemalan, what do I know about being Guatemalan? I was not born there. I have not lived there, and because of my family's limited funds, I have not been able to visit as often as I should. But, many "white" Americans, and some "non-whites," think I am not American. "Where are you from?" they ask. And when I respond, "Chicago," they become unhappy with my answer. "No really, where are you from?" As if I had lied. They

want to hear that I am not American. They want to hear that I am foreign. Well, I am not.

I am extremely proud of my skin color. I take pride en el color cafe de mi mama. My skin represents power, endurance, resistance. I have my mother's skin. I have the skin of struggle and survival. I have the skin of history. La historia de mi mama, de mi abuela, de mis tias, de las mujeres que no conozco pero sé. I have the skin of stories.

I take pride in my skin color. They see me as a person of color, and I say yes I am. Brown, dark, brown, dark, brown, dark! Y qué bonito mi color. El color de la gente que lucha. El color de la gente que nunca para de existir. El color de la gente fuerte.

I take pride in my skin color because it is the one part of my identity that cannot be denied. When people see me, they may not guess what my cultural background is or what my nationality may be or what my ethnicity is, but they can see that my skin is brown. My skin cannot be denied. A birth mark to remind me of who I am. I may have been born in this country, I may be American. My parents may be Guatemalan, I may be Guatemalan. But my skin reminds me of who I am. Call me what you will: Guatemalan, American, Guatemalan-American. But you cannot deny me the fact that a woman of color I am. I am brown. My skin brown. My eyes brown. The world I see through brown. I am brown.

American I may be, but my América has brown in it!

The ancestors call me.

Early on I mentioned that in my grammar school, I learned about the Aztecas, Incas and Mayans. "Lydia, these are your ancestors," the

teachers would say as we learned about the Mayan civilization. And we learned that the Mayans were a strong and powerful civilization. We learned that they were intelligent and hard working. I learned that that's what I had to be. En la tradición de mi gente, I would think.

My family and I once, during grammar school, went to Guatemala. We visited Tikal. We walked through the pyramids and temples in the middle of the Guatemalan jungle. I think I was in fourth grade. And as I climbed the pyramids, I felt that that's where I must have been a long, long time ago. I must have been a Mayan. Tikal felt like home. At that very moment, language meant nothing. Nothing could describe the feeling of comfort I had. The sun patted me on the back, consoling me and telling me, "You are strong." And I remember this because I go back to those two days in Tikal. Climbing the pyramids and looking down on mi Guatemala, looking down on my world, I felt power. And that feeling, no institution, no person, no ideology, no language can take away from me because it goes beyond meanings. That feeling flowed into the air. It's all around me. And this, too, cannot be denied!

Mayan Goddess

I may be five feet small

But I stand tall

because I am a woman--

Not just any woman

I am a brown Latina woman.

I have the power of my ancestors.

Llevo el jaguar por dentro--

Son Diosas Mayas que me guían--

They tell me,

"Stand tall and proud

porque la lucha acaba de empezar.

Mujer levanta' la cabeza

que el camino es largo.

The sun is just an alcanze away.

Grab it

Embrace it

con la derecha

Y con la izquierda

grab the moon.

The world is yours--

Camina'

y pisá la tierra tuya.

Pisá the soil that's yours.

Se fuerte.

Sos mujer.

Sos Diosa.

Y el mundo es tuyo.

Levanta' la cabeza,

Y con tu voz fuerte,

Con la voz del fuego,

Dragón que sos,

Gritá:

'I am here

I am strong

I am woman

Latina de corazón.'

And although home is far,

La familia la llevás en el corazón--

They flow through streams of red--

They move your body to an eternal beat--

Drums bang

The volcano erupts

El cielo nublado

The war has begun.

Fight,

Luchá' mujer

que lo tuyo ya viene.

Mujer fuerte sos,

lo llevás en la sangre:

Violada sos--

Martirizada eres--

Dolor llevás,

pero abrí los ojos

ya viene lo tuyo.

La lucha has begun!

Mirá a tu sol

Resale a tu luna

Usá la tierra

Mujer fuerte sos

Diosa del mundo--

Y gritale al mundo:

'step aside

this is my time

Mujer Latina coming by!' "

The voice of resistance.

I once knew a dragon who lived near my house.

He tried really hard to bring me down.

He'd tell me and tell me

all these nice tales.

He'd offer me candy and flowers of glory

to help him write down his various own stories.

I wasn't too sure on how to respond.

Should I be grateful

Or should I pout?

So I said, "thank you sir, I think I'll pass..."

I need to go home and write my own past."

So I grabbed the candy, and I grabbed the flowers.

And I told the dragon, "See ya tomorrow."

Spanish, English, urban, working class, brown, woman. I am other. Every facet of my existence rejects the norm, the dominant. Minority in every sense of the word, but empowered by my voice. I fight to not be silenced. I will not be silenced. And for the times when those in power do not want to hear me, I write. I write the words of my voice. My voice penetrating the page. And I reject, and I resist the dominant. Anzaldua

says, "don't give me your tenants and your laws." I say, I'll give you mine. Don't test me.

I haven't figured it all out yet. I probably never will, but one thing is for sure: I will write my voice, my words, my language. The colors and shadows of my existence will be written down. So I resist. So I reject. And I will write because I owe it to myself. I owe it to those before me. I owe it to those after me. And I will not be denied anymore!

I am

*Barriers of words and myths
applied to me as gender and color*

brown skin

brown eyes

brown heart

WOMAN

I bleed the history of denial

of turmoil

of hatred

of violence

of rape

of ignorance--

I am the product of manifest destiny

product of colonialists

I am the product--

object

subject
body
tamed
to mean
to bear
to signify
your thoughts

I am
I am
I am
what you say I am

defying no ideals
perfect puppet of capitalism

I am
I am
I am

A carriage horse
carrying your burden
carrying your baggage

I, blind, follow
the blind
A perfect row

military style
saluting the flag
bowing my head down
accepting my place
in your home (town)
foreigner to supremacy
foreigner of these lands
I lower my head to you
Your majesty
White
Majestic
White
Heroic
White
Supreme
White
Law
White--

I bow down to you
my dark hair
my brown eyes
my brown skin

I am your keyboard to control
I am what keeps you rich and powerful
I am your puppet

White:

Smart

Law

Rich

White--

keep me consuming

keep me ignorant

keep me killing--

Brown:

Ignorant

Criminal

Poor

Brown--

keep me consuming

keep me ignorant

keep me killing--

I smile when you walk by

"Hello sir"

"Yes ma'am"

And happy I maintain you

But...

In my room I read

In my room I write

In my room I read

In my room I write

Like the Invisible Man

Playing in the Dark

With a Pistol in My Hand

Fronteras

of

Power and Knowledge

Beloved

Ceremony

On the Road

understanding

Black Skin/White Masks

With this Bridge Called My Back

Killing the subject you've created for me about me

Killing the object of my body

Creating my self

Creating my story

I rise

My fist so high up in the sky you can't see

*My mind spinning in motions of circular, linear, circular, linear,
circular, linear, circular motion*

I walk my broken down streets

I walk my run-down neighborhood

I walk in the shadows of the masses

I'm creeping through the cold rooms

I'm whispering

I'm softly whispering

I'm gently whispering

I'm whispering

the words you loved so much in 1776

for yourself

the words you fear I might know

now

I'm whispering

I'm softly whispering

I'm gently whispering

I'm whispering

*with a crooked smile that you've mistaken for satisfaction,
happiness and contentment*

I'm whispering an angry, heart felt

REVOLUTION

FREEDOM

LIBERTY

REVOLUTION

REVOLUTION

REVOLUTION

RESISTANCE

I will rise

I will rise

I will rise

Deconstructing all you have constructed

Reclaiming what is mine

Reaffirming my place, my space

I will rise

I will rise

I will rise

I am breaking down barriers

Kicking down the walls

With the words in my mouth

With the myths on my hands

With the stories in my blood

I'm cutting down the strings

I'm taking off my blinds

I reemerge

I emerge

I reemerge

I emerge

I reemerge

With nothing to lose

I fight

your politicians

your law enforcement

your ideals

your thoughts

I will fight

Softly in my room

I read I read I read

I write I write I write

My veins slicing apart

My blood flowing through my room, penetrating my carpet

Coming together

Filtration

Softly in my room

While I read

While I write

The brown of me

The dark of me

The color in me

The sex in me

The gender in me

The culture in me

With a fist so high up in the sky you can't see

I am

I am

I am

all that you never wanted for me to be

I am

Defying

Creating

Defying

Creating

Defying

Creating

I am

Revolutionary

Revolutionizing the ideals of me

through RESISTANCE

I AM

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