TIGER LILY

JOURNAL BY WOMEN OF COLOUR

Women and Empowerment

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Women and Empowerment

TIGER LILY JOURNAL

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Journal by Women of Colour

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DEDICATION

GLENDA SIMMS, Ph.D.

PRESIDENT

CANADIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

FOR THE MATCH INTERNATIONAL VIGIL

THE KENYAN HIGH COMMISSION

OTTAWA, ONTARIO

JULY 25, 1991

I am pleased to see all of you here today. I wish I could say that I was happy to be here, but the reasons for our presence here this afternoon are cause for solemnity and for solidarity with our sisters in Kenya who, on July 14, were the victims of this senseless and violent tragedy.

Yesterday, I sent a letter to the President of Kenya, His Excellency Mr. Daniel T. arap Moi, which expressed our profound sadness and shock at this incident. While we are encouraged by the President's promot response to the events in Meru, we have also suggested that he direct his investigative committee to do a gender analysis of the continuing violence in the nairobi school system. Indeed, just a few months ago, in a school in the same region, five young women were sexually assaulted and their school burned by fellow male students.

When I speak of solemnity, I do not mean silence. For we are here to break the silence which surrounds the issue of hatred and violence against women — not only as it occurred at the school in Kenya, but as it occurs every hour of every day around the world. Press reports tell us that Kenyan officials blame this tragedy on the "roots of indiscipline in the school system," "suspect teaching and management capabilities" or "drinking and drug taking by the boys." No matter how faulty the education system, the alarming fact remains: at such a young age these young men are already perpetrators of violent acts against women. It cannot be ignored that the roots of the hatred and violence lie within the socialization of the boys themselves.

We live in a society where violence against women should be intolerable, yet incidents such as this confront us with the undeniable reality that violent

acts committed against women, simply because of their gender, are a fact of life for women around the world. As long as society turns a blind eye to the existence and the causes of violence against women, it will continue to produce young men such as these who feel that their female counterparts are expendable.

Violence against women is a women's issue, a men's issue and society's issue. Further, it must be clearly stated that it is the ugliest and most extreme manifestation of the inequality, lack of fairness and injustice which women face every day.

Having recognized the all-pervasive nature of this issue, we must continue to look for ways to ensure that it is eradicated. Women have a right to be included in a society which sees them as equal and involved partners, and where their feelings are respected and validated. Women want the opportunity to create their own futures. Women want fair and just treatment by people in the justice, health and social service sectors, and women want honest, realistic and complete information about the violence which affects them. Women demand that men and all governments, recognize that violence against women is unacceptable.

As of June 1, 1990, Kenya was one of 102 countries who had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This convention establishes not only an international bill of rights for women, but also an agenda for action by countries to guarantee those rights. Canada also ratified this convention. It is my hope that such actions are not only empty gestures, and that the deaths of these women in Kenya, like those of our sisters in Montreal, will continue to remind us that the issue of violence against women is one which must remain on the public agenda. The battle is far from over.

Thank you very much.

FROM THE PUBLISHER'S DESK

When I was a young child the women in my family always cautioned to 'never let anyone put words in my mouth, for they think they can own you'. It was another way of saying let no one take power away you — stand up for your rights. Women who make up more than half of the world's population throughout the world are beginning to voice their displeasure at having people speak for them and taking away their rights — they are, in fact, asserting their womanhood.

Our foresisters were mother goddesses, queens, amazons, warriors, administrators, writers, doctors, scientists, saints and sinners. They were protectors of the forest and guardians of law and had to be the fiercest fighters for the survival of their families which they still are doing today.

In her speech to the Roman lawyer, Lucius Apuleius, the Goddess Isis spoke to him in a vision:

I am nature, the universal mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, Queen of the dead...
Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.

That was the power of women — once held in reverent awe by men. She lost her power when the male species realized that he, too, was part of the procreation process — no longer was he in awe — he chose to dominate, to enslave. The goddesses were no longer a part of our lives. Our demise had begun.

In this issue of *Tiger Lily*, women from across the globe are empowering themselves: to take control of their lives and their words. In *Speaking Up, Speaking Out* by Rozena Maart, she challenges white feminists on the question of their racism; Jeannette Armstrong's *The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing* speaks of what happened to her people when their choices were taken away from them; *Gender and Power in the Teachers' Union of Mexico* by Regina Cortina offers deep insight into the struggle of Mexican women teachers and their fight for equality and Monica Riutort's essay, *My Wedding Rings*, speaks eloquently the many choices women continue to make.

The only words to describe the remarkable Glenda Simms is that of multifaceted, talented, courageous: prerequisites for a warrior woman. She breaks all stereotypes; she's sensitive, honest and fair-minded. In a profile of her by Nonqaba Msimang, this hard-working woman never shirks from the many uphill battles which she is confronted with daily. In fiction — stories by Tina Young, Marie Annharte Baker and Eira Patnaik set in Canada, Jamaica and India all share a common thread. All the women bound by tradition have decided to take control of their broken lives and rise up from their knees. They no longer will subject themselves to lives of servitude. And last but not least, the poem *Geste* by Anne Marie Alonzo is shaped by the joy and pain of real life.

We hope you enjoy this issue because we at *Tiger Lily* know that there is still so much more to be done for and by women. We support and hope that you, our readers, will support the many women shelters in this country, work to eradicate illiteracy, demand better day-care for our children, and fight for a saner and safer world for all. This universe is our home. The earth is our mother and to destroy her is to destroy ourselves. We have come too far to allow this to happen to us again.

Tiger Lily wishes to thank our faithful subscribers, our friends and families for their continued support.

"I must walk this road alone...
Let me help myself.
Let me rise up and sustain.
Let my strength alone impel me
No one should be able to lift me
higher than my breast
lest my blood flee my pores."

This Road, Mirta Aguirre

Ann Wallace

Speaking Up, Speaking Out

by Rozena Maart

They stare with mouths gaped open wide. "She's so arrogant," I hear them whisper under their feeble breaths and refined tones. "She's soooo loud," another mentions in disgust, her white head swaying from side to side. The last word of my keynote address is "revolution" and I feel a sense of relief. The applause follows soon after, and so they pay their respects to the conference organizers and to one another, not to me. With my dignity intact and with many of the racist relations mentioned, I now have the brief satisfaction of seeing it in battle all over the room. It fills the air with a pleasant aroma for me. A task done. A task without retaliation. "It will come later," I say to myself. As I move I feel my own voice, the echo of it still in the hall, the echo in my heart. As I walk towards my chair I make eye contact with the hundreds sitting in the hall. Most have their eyes fixed on the wooden floor. Others politely smile, and for a split second I sense fear. I sit down and now I can feel fear. It is fear. It is the fear of the Black voice. The fear of the power of the Black voice. The voice of a Black, African woman who refuses to condescend to the white western conception of voice, of voice tone, of voice sound, of voice content. I am because I speak and I speak because I am.

The chair does not even welcome me. It is cold with rejection. I feel like sitting on the floor, closer to the earth. Reluctantly I place myself in it and Maghboeba, a friend who has accompanied me to the conference, breathes heavily in my ear. "You're really something," she says. We exchange glances and facial gestures of agreement, a body language of the dominated all of which seem foreign to those around us. I draw circles on my paper as I prepare for the next keynote speaker, a white woman. My circles become larger and I usually fill them with words which come to mind. Words which give voice. Words which speak to me. DOMINATION... COLONIALISM... DISMANTLING... MAINTENANCE OF WHITE SUPREMACY...

CONSCIENTIZE... REVOLUTIONIZE... BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS... DECOLONIZE... RELATIONS OF RACISM... ANXIETY... UNEASINESS... GOOSEBUMPS... FEAR... no eye contact did I get, yet they certainly seem to agree with what this white woman is saying. I group my circles and I connect them into one large one. I giggle softly to myself as I attach the word "WHITE SUPREMACY" to it. I remember the dialogue with an editor of a journal who told me that an article I wrote on African women living in Canada was "far too confrontational" because it had the words "white supremacy," in it and how that really applies to South Africa and not to North America. Of course I had to educate her, do the usual servicing, and inform her of the racist relations which she had just then exercised and by and through which white supremacy is perpetuated and maintained. She was horrified at my voice, that I "spoke so loud and was so aggressive," to which I replied that white supremacy has also taught her to name the experiences of the dominated and thwart the rebellion potential of Black women, and therefore, although a small attempt on her part, she was just trying to do her job as an agent of white supremacy. I am reminded of her fear and the telephone conversation the following day, when she rang me and apologized. I told her that she did not owe me one but owed her limited consciousness the right to explore the racism that her actions continue to perpetuate. She became silent, sighed and said, "I really need time to think about what you are saying." Maghboeba now points out that a white woman sitting behind us was making sobbing noises when I spoke. My eyes are narrowed and I start to pout in my usual revolutionary way. I refrain from making eye contact with this woman since I know what white women's tears can do—it means that I have to deal with their racism again. After the second keynote speaker, a First Nations woman takes to the podium. There is a sense of joy as she starts to speak in her language, her tongue, her basis for communication. The audience, shifting their chairs around, patiently awaits the start of the English language. Their smiling faces also suggest that they are entertained; entertained by difference and ethnicity, the Canadian way—the land where euphemisms for the big "R" word are in such abundance. Maghboeba and I talk with our eyes, our noses and the rest of our face. We both agree that it was a good idea not to wear African-print dresses. How wonderfully ethnic I would have looked—just like the pictures these white women have on their walls; how when the African woman in the picture steps out they cannot deal with her. Now, their tense bodies are looser and a lot more relaxed. The woman behind me whispers about how popular *this* keynote speaker is. The rest of the conversation is faint and I can't hear a word. I am angered and wish that the women behind me were Black so that I could be informed by a heritage of loudness. Now I am left uninformed without knowing the details, or even vaguely anything about their conversation with reference to the speaker. The First Nations woman

continues. She discusses the way First Nations people are depicted and points out how the media continually portrays First Nations people as lesser beings. She apologizes at times and the softness of her voice draws white women into her web of concerns. They become sympathetic, concerned. In true liberal fashion they nod as the First Nations woman points out that she doesn't mean to be taking up so much time. She continues with more apologies throughout her talk. It's very different from the usual keynotes but certainly very needed. Yet I feel a sense of betrayal. I feel let down by the apologies yet aware of the colonialism of voice. Of having to speak to be heard—heard by white women who have become the determinants of our identities, our worth. I think about how colonialism occupies every aspect of our beings as colonized, dominated subjects. I feel betrayed by my comrade because I feel that we have to speak in a way that embraces our livelihood. The way that makes us feel comfortable—the way that embraces our Indigenous identity as African people, and as Americans: the true inhabitants of the continent that is, not settler colonials. An applause follows. My comrade takes her leave from the podium and we exchange glances. Despite our different approaches to voice, to the verbal challenge of colonialism, we share a commonality. I am a product of a policy of apartheid created by her colonizers. We are both products of apartheid and racism, colonialism and imperialism, thievery, thuggery and brutality. We are both involved in the process of decolonizing. Our difference in verbalizing our struggles depicts our histories and respective journeys. The final keynote speaker takes to the podium, she's a white woman. She speaks and connects issues of racism against the Black community in Toronto and in New York, then proceeds by drawing similarities between the First Nations people and the Black population in South Africa. The last word is spoken and one of the organizers takes to the podium, drawing the four keynote speakers' words together. It is a white woman and it's clear that is an effort but she does it anyway. As we disperse, white women hover around the First Nations woman; white women hover around the second white woman speaker; white women who I know have been involved in socialist-feminist politics seek out the last speaker, and me, I'm left alone accompanied by Maghboeba and the knowledge that my voice has sliced layers upon layers of racist relations. We walk briskly toward the food tables some meters away. Everything on the table is yellow, or slightly off-white. The pieces of parsley seem like oak trees flowing on wide open cotton fields. The speckled areas on some of the cheeses are also visible at the backdrop of their whiteness. We chat about the political significance of food choices and what they mean. We laugh and talk, sit down and laugh and talk. The conversation is satisfying, flippant but enjoyable, laughable and eases the tension that both Maghboeba and I are feeling. Maghboeba jokes about the filthy looks white women are giving me. We walk around with cheese and biscuits looking for some together sauce

or maybe some mango pickle. I search through the contents of my bag with the hope that soon something exciting will rear its head. Pity! We chew away and realize how difficult a time our palates are having. We joke about the resistance. Looking around in the room becomes laborious. There are no familiar food smells and no familiar Black faces.

The following day I facilitate a workshop and more than the expected amount of women attend. I am cautious, wary of their presence since not only are they equipped with whiteness but they also have pencils in their hand, waiting to take my words. To write it down. Take it away from me. Make it theirs. Make it meaningful to them. Make it undiscussionable, sensible and tucked away within the pages of their many notebooks on racism. As I speak many keep their pencils still. It's the shock and horror of the Black voice again. It's heard so seldom that it causes for a pause—a pause with a strain. After the workshop I am circled by a few white women all of whom are concerned about the significance of my words and how they pertain to feminist theory—white feminist theory it later becomes apparent. They ask about Althusser, Marx, Gramsci, Mary Daly, Foucault, Robin Morgan and lots of white feminist names (most of which I do not want to mention since they have been given far too much credit, for their whiteness that is), expecting me to be silent. I draw their attention to the fact that here they are again wanting me to define my theory at the backdrop of their white experience. I also point out that they were obviously not listening to what I had said about the dearth of knowledge that form *my* perceptions and conceptual framework of a feminist agenda. Mine being Steve Biko, Francis Baard, Walter Rodney, Fanny Lou Hammer, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Angela Davis and others who have expressed political and theoretical praxis by looking at the Black, African experience. Here, again I am asked to dialogue at the backdrop of white theorists, ideologues and scholars. I am careful in my choice of words and aware of how they react when I "ghettoize" post-modernism—i.e., I speak of it in a Black, loud, non-academized tone. The same voice tone with which I ask for a roti and curry. Nothing is tainted about my speech. Nothing is toned up or down for the purposes of the learned tongue—the one we are taught to adopt when discussing the bastions of white dominated education. Their eyes shift from my mouth to my clothes. They are busy de-Africanizing me. Plucking away at their stereotypes. Redrawing the woman who is working in the field with the baby on her back in the little picture on their wall. Their pencils hang loosely at their sides. They are defeated—maybe only for a little while.

After the lunch break, a few friends and I gather around. We are predominantly Black women. Each of us talks about our experiences in the various workshops. I speak with a Black woman from Quebec. She speaks in

French and her daughter translates. During our conversation we make reference to language and when we as Black women speak colonial languages with Blackness and/or Indigenousness, what that means. The two women share experiences about speaking French and how they are told, especially when they are addressing racism, that their tones and pitch are not French. She speaks of being tolerated and not accepted; that the so-called language politics of Quebec does not address racism—how when she speaks French or English or any other colonial language, her position in any community is still determined by her Blackness. We share the knowledge of what that means to each of us as Black, African women born in different parts of the diaspora.* Now, sitting together, we are all laughing at the horror that awaits us. Listening to each and everyone, I am reminded of the pathology of racism, the systematic oppression of our voices, our tongues; our verbal rebellion, our expected accommodation; our assimilation and our resistance.

Reluctantly we all move along to the anti-racist workshop. Halfway to the workshop we meet a few white women who express concerns about this very workshop we are all heading towards. They have just had a break and hope to proceed with more people. We enter the room and there is a definite silence. The speaker continues. She is not a white woman and at this stage I am not clear as to how she has identified or defined herself. She welcomes newcomers to the second part of the workshop and proceeds by virtually talking down at us. I cannot describe the discomfort to myself, yet very much aware of her subordinate tone. I remove my shoes, each foot assisting the other. I gently pat them on the wooden floor, against the rhythm of my racing pulse. The wooden floor beneath me is soft upon them. My reluctance to be patient when nothing about racism as it pertains to me as a recipient and white women as agents is mentioned, is growing stronger. The vagueness is like a fan, soothing but not sufficient, not detailed or precise. She does not address the issue of racism at all. I raise my hand and ask whether there is going to be any discussion and the reply is a disapproving "later." I notice how both the speaker and facilitator are passing glances

* *"Diaspora" is used here to express the forced removal of African people from the continent, and the subsequent scattering and dispersal. It is also used to express the horror and savagery of the Holocaust of 100 million Africans. The term "diaspora" is not a holistic term to describe the nature or extent to which the continent and its inhabitants were physically and psychologically dismantled.*

to one another, and staring at me as if to suggest, "Be quiet." I raise my hand again, this time stating that according to information handed out about workshops, there was supposed to be periods of discussion, not monologue. The chairperson, a white woman asks that we "respect one another and not become hostile." There is an outcry from Black women. Several hands are raised. The facilitator is hesitant to answer and a white woman speaks through the equally uncomfortable chairperson and addresses herself to me. She mentions how angry she was last night listening to me speak to her "like that," and how I should give white women a chance to speak. There is an uproar from my sisters in the room. Adonica stops a white woman in her tracks and this woman insists that Adonica allow her to finish. Adonica stands up and replies that allowing the white woman to finish her sentence about how careful Black women should be and how hostile we are and should not be, means that she is legitimizing this woman's racism. Several white women move around in their chairs looking rather uncomfortable. Some of us Black women say that we are tired of waiting, tired of coming later and want some dialogue about what white women are going to *do* about their racism, right now. A white woman starts to speak and uses the term "minority women." Some of us Black women ask that she define her use of the term. There is a lot of noise about us being undiplomatic. The white woman is angry, says that she's being attacked. She proceeds by telling us how she was a minority in Washington because everywhere she walked in the streets, she was the only white person. There is a helluva lot of cussing from all the Black women in the room. I am standing up telling this white woman that Black people are in the *streets* of Washington because they happen to *live* there; Adonica asks her what she thinks a "minority" means: who has the power in the United States, which system is dominant, etc. There is a helluva lot of talk, a few white women are wiping their tears, telling us just how confrontational we are. A few louder white voices complain about our attitude, our loudness and how we cannot be civil to them. Another white woman speaks about when she was a little girl she insisted, against the wishes of her parents, to hold a Black man's hand. No! We did not allow her to finish. We challenged her and the rest of the meeting who seemed to want to perpetuate testimonies of white female racism, disguised as an emotional catharsis. As I stop the continuation of her racist rhetoric, she angrily tells me how my poem, "Not Your Feminist White World," had upset her the previous night. I am sickened by the whole event. Some of us are still talking while others just want to leave the room. And so, we upset a hundred white women, who all really "care about racism but it's just the way you all speak and your anger," we are told. Pity! If only we would speak softer. If only I did not raise my voice, speak in such a disturbing tone. My voice pitch, it's so scary, I am told a great many things, none of which convinces me of the need to accommodate for white women's racism.

Another workshop on "Immigrant Women" later the day: A white woman is sitting on the floor recording the contents of our small discussion group. I ask both women beside me whether this woman had asked the meeting whether she could record. Nobody wants to tell her that they find her actions unacceptable. I then proceed by asking this woman whether she could ask the meeting for permission to record. Instantaneously she turns the recorder off and leaves the room. During the coffee break she approaches me. "You know, you really have a way of putting people off," she says. I reply that she knew full well that recording was only allowed for the public keynotes and that using her whiteness as a deterrent against people challenging her about recording in a meeting room with non-white women is really pushing her luck. She is angered. She tells me that I have no right to speak to her "like that." Imagine that! Me, a Black "girl" challenging the Master's sister or wife. "I am offended by your voice. You speak so piercingly. You should hear yourself... the way you speak... you're so loud." Yes, I did tell her where to get off. I also gave her my speech on speaking: that I am not interested in being heard by ears which selectively accept words only when presented in colonial form—a form which does not challenge her obvious limitations in understanding *my* experiences of *her* racism. Her eyes start to sag. Her mouth is still open. I continue. "You think that you have the right to label my voice as offensive andy ability to challenge you as confrontational. Well, I think of you and your voice as feeble and pathetic... and speaking as *you* do, with your whiteness and all will never stop me." She moves away and says disappointingly, "I had some respect for you but it has all gone Mmmmpf! right down." This time my stare says it all. I want to raise my right hand like a snake in motion and put a curse on her. I refrain from doing so. She's uncomfortable and starts to walk away more afraid than before. "You can run but you can't hide. I'm going to live to be a hundred so you better get used to my loudness," I say. She sobs and puts her hand to her face and scurries away.

A meeting situation, soon after in Toronto: I arrive a few minutes late. Turtle necks, rednecks, white faces, they all stare with fear. The full 180 degrees. There is sadness in their eyes. I have spoiled their potential to have a bit of white fun. White fun at Black expense. "She's here," I hear several voices say. I make eye contact with a few of the Black women present. We smile at the knowledge of our presence but also gesture facially about how we are here to talk. To talk and not to be silent. To be verbal. To speak up, speak out. The speaker is Black South African. At the end of the speaker's words I raise my hand to ask a question—the colonial way of voicing your opinion, asking for permission, waiting for it to be given usually by someone who is not Black, and then not speaking in dialogue *with* one another in true

African style but *at* one another. I say what I have to say and the turtlenecks to the 360 on me. They end where they started. Some of their mouths are still gaped open wide. "Who is this woman?" I hear a few white feeble voices say. "She's African, South African I think," a noble white voice echoes some rows ahead of me. I am standing, like I usually do. If I sit I feel so different. I feel composed, Moulded. I cannot relate to the limited space around me that being seated offers. There are limits to how and where my voice can go. All these thoughts pass through my mind as I am faced with how white folks, being in the majority in this room, relate to voice and meeting procedure. When I am done and all the faces now turned towards the speaker, I continue thinking about method, about structure, about the political significance of speaking the way that we as Africans do. Being heard the way that we are. When I was a child my family used to ask me to sing in the backyard while they were enjoying the warm evening outside, some couple of meters away. It was not a form of punishment. It was an affirmation of how strong my voice was, and in particular my singing voice. How strong I was for being able to be heard by the neighbours and them being able to hear my voice wherever they were and with whatever they were occupied with at the time. It was an indication of how visible I was as one of many children growing up in a household where sisters and brothers lived together with their children, their spouses if any, their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and other aunts and uncles.

During the course of the meeting a few people leave the room. Most of them are fanning their faces and mention going outside for fresh air. Two white men come to speak to me. "You know we were also part of organizing this meeting and we don't appreciate you speaking like this." "How?" I ask. "Well, you speak in a way that silences people here," they both reply, each in their own way trying to convince me of my wrong. I tell them about how few Black people there are in the meeting and how many white people asked questions that reflect their whiteness-questions which relate to how white South Africans perceive the situation; how white South Africans feel; resources available for white South Africans, none of which describes the horror of living under an apartheid regime. I talk to both of them about how my silence would mean that I accept my preordained role, decided upon by white domination, as a Black woman attending a meeting organized by white folks (as well as Black, so I am told) with a Black speaker, and allowing the white audience and organizers to determine my agenda. They are both silent. When I raise my hand to make my second contribution I am told to wait until others have also spoken. I am infuriated by this white liberalism. I swear openly and start cussing. They can hear me and they are annoyed. I comment about how I really don't care how annoyed they are. A few sisters vocalize their disgust and a brother shouts for them to give Black women a chance to speak. The woman who is chairing the meeting is not white, and

at this stage I refrain from thinking how she identifies or defines herself. It is her presence as part of the dominated and her willingness to acquiesce to the white protestant ethic of liberalism, morality, democracy—which we know cannot exist in a society where Black women do not get a platform to speak—that I am concerned about. In trying to address this, she as chair silences me. I think about ways in which to address method and procedure and how to approach colonized individuals who have bought into whiteness so much that they cannot distinguish between themselves as the dominated, adopting the methodologies of the dominant. I revert to my own conscious contradictory method. When in doubt with white folks or others perpetuating their dominance, revert to theory. I remember a few marxist thoughts about morality. They relate to class and class consciousness. As someone who places racism on every agenda I begin to trace my thoughts about the issue. I know that what is required is no academic piece about the contradictions of democracy, morality, voice and the vocalizing of it as it pertains to me and Blackness. I look ahead of me and give up on it. I try appeasing myself with what Biko said. It was he who, in *I Write What I Like*, challenged the white supremacist notion of consent when scrutinizing the anatomy of consent as they apply to Black South Africans and the white settler-colonials. Biko was critical of democracy when drafted at the backdrop of the white experience. I remember Steve Biko's words, "If we ever get together around the table to eat, let's not take up the white man's habits but let them eat the way we do." This Biko said in response to questions about sharing power with white settler-colonials in South Africa. He made himself quite clear about how we are not to acquiesce to white folk's conception of method and to remember that they stole our land and that we want it back our way, not theirs. The experience of speaking up, speaking out is part of that political objective: speaking and relating my way; at the backdrop of my experience; in words and prose which enhances my identify.

Conferences and meetings can be debilitating sometimes. One's presence can be demeaned and when contributing at these events, it is assumed that we do so at the backdrop of the white experience; dialogue with pretexts; make apologies for talking about racism, and all the accommodation and assimilation which racism breeds, all of which I refuse to do.

This collection is part of my contribution to accentuating the African verbal tradition; to remember and rely upon its richness in our times of passion and turmoil; to utilize our defiant spirits through speech; and to pour through our mouths verbalness which expresses and embraces all of our day to day experiences.

Rozena Maart is a South African activist, feminist and writer who now lives in Toronto. Reprinted from Talk About It! Published by Williams-Wallace Publishers.

The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples And Empowerment Through Their Writing

by Jeannette Armstrong

Paper prepared for
Saskatchewan Writer's Guild
1990 Annual Conference
PANEL DISCUSSION:
"EMPOWERING ABORIGINAL WRITERS"

In order to address the specifics of Native people's writing and empowerment, I must first present my view on the disempowerment of first North American Nations.

Without recounting various historical versions of *how* it happened, I would like to refer only to *what* happened here.

Indigenous peoples in North America were rendered powerless and subjugated to totalitarian domination by foreign peoples after they were welcomed as guests and their numbers were allowed to grow to the point of domination through aggression.

Once total subjective control was achieved over my peoples through various coercive measures and the direct removal of political, social and religious freedoms accomplished, the colonization process began.

In North America this has been to systemically enforce manifest destiny or the so-called "White Man's burden" to civilize. In the 498 years of contact in The Americas, the thrust of this bloody sword has been to hack out the spirit of all the beautiful cultures encountered, leaving in its' wake a death toll unrivalled in recorded history. This is what happened and what continues to happen.

There is no word other than totalitarianism which adequately describes the methods used to achieve the condition of my people today. Our people were not given choices. Our children, for generations, were seized from our communities and homes and placed in indoctrination camps until our language, our religions, our customs, our values and our societal structures almost disappeared. This was the residential school experience.

Arising out of the seige conditions of this nightmare time, what is commonly referred to as the "social problems" of Native peoples emerged. Homes and communities, without children had nothing to work for, or live for. Children returned to communities and families as adults, without the necessary skills for parenting, for Native life style or self-sufficiency on their land base, deteriorated into despair. With the loss of cohesive cultural relevance with their own peoples and a distorted view of the non-native culture from the clergy who ran the residential schools, an almost total disorientation and loss of identity occurred. The disintegration of family and community and nation was inevitable, originating with the individual's internalized pain. Increasing death statistics from suicide, violence, alcohol and drug abuse and other poverty-centred physical diseases, can leave no doubt about the question of totalitarianism and genocide.

You writers from the dominating culture have the freedom of imagination. You keep reminding us of this. Is there anyone here who dares to imagine what those children suffered at the hands of their so called

"guardians" in those schools. You are writers, imagine it on yourselves and your children. Imagine you and your children and imagine how they would be treated by those who abhorred and detested you, all, as savages without any rights.

Imagine at what cost to you psychologically, to acquiesce and attempt to speak, dress, eat and worship, like your oppressors, simply out of a need to be treated humanly. Imagine attempting to assimilate so that your children will not suffer what you have, and imagine finding that assimilationist measures are not meant to include you but to destroy all remnants of your culture. Imagine finding that even when you emulate every cultural process from customs to values you are still excluded, despised and ridiculed because you are Native.

Imagine finding out that the dominating culture will not tolerate any real cultural participation and that cultural supremacy forms the basis of the government process and that systemic racism is a tool to maintain their kind of totalitarianism. And all the while, imagine that this is presented under the guise of "equal rights" and under the banner of banishing bigotry on an individual basis through law.

Imagine yourselves in this condition and imagine the writer of that dominating culture berating you for speaking out about appropriation of cultural voice and using the words "freedom of speech" to condone further systemic violence, in the form of entertainment literature about *your* culture and *your* values and all the while, yourself being disempowered and rendered voiceless through such "freedoms".

Imagine how you as writers from the dominant society might turn over some of the rocks in your own garden for examination. Imagine in your literature courageously questioning and examining the values that allows the dehumanizing of peoples through domination and the dispassionate nature of the racism inherent in perpetuating such practises. Imagine writing in honesty, free of the romantic bias about the courageous "pioneering spirit" of colonialist practise and imperialist process. Imagine interpreting for us *your own peoples* thinking toward us, instead of interpreting for us, our thinking, our lives and our stories. We wish to know, and you need to understand, why it is that you want to own our stories, our art, our beautiful crafts, our ceremonies, but you do not appreciate or wish to recognize that these things of beauty arise out of the beauty of our people.

Imagine these realities on yourselves in honesty and let me know how you imagine that you might approach empowerment of yourselves in such a situation. Better yet, do not dare speak to me of "Freedom Of Voice", "Equal Rights", "Democracy", or "Human Rights" until this totalitarianistic approach has been changed by yourselves as writers and shapers of philosophical direction. Imagine a world where domination is not possible because all cultures are valued.

To the Native writers here, my words are meant as empowerment to you. In my quest for empowerment of my people through writing, there are two things of which I must steadfastly remind myself.

The first is that the reality I see is the reality for the majority of Native people and that although severe and sometimes irreparable damage has been wrought, healing can take place through cultural affirmation. I have found immense strength and beauty in my people.

The dispelling of lies and the telling of what really happened until *everyone*, including our own people understands that this condition did not happen through choice or some cultural defect on our part, is important. Equally important is the affirmation of the true beauty of our people whose fundamental co-operative values resonated pacifism and predisposed our cultures as vulnerable to the reprehensible value systems which promote domination and aggression.

The second thing I must remind myself of, is that the dominating culture's reality is that it seeks to affirm itself continuously and must be taught that *numbers* are not the basis of democracy, *people* are, *each one* being important. It must be pushed, in Canada, to understand and accept that this country is multi-racial and multi-cultural now, and the meaning of that. I must remind myself constantly of the complacency that makes these conditions possible, and that if I am to bridge into that complacency that I will be met with hostility from the majority, but, that those whose thoughts I have provoked, may become our greatest allies in speaking to their own. It is this promotion of an ideal which will produce the courage to shake off centuries of imperialist thought and make possible the relearning of co-operation and sharing, in place of domination.

Our task as Native writers is twofold. To examine the past and culturally affirm toward a new vision for all our people in the future, arising out of the powerful and positive support structures that are inherent in the principles of co-operation.

We, as Native people, through continuously resisting cultural imperialism and seeking means toward teaching co-operative relationships, provide an integral mechanism for solutions currently needed in this country.

We must see ourselves as undefeatably pro-active in a positive sense and realize that negative activism actually serves the purpose of the cultural imperialism practised on our people. Lies need clarification, truth needs to be stated and resistance to oppression needs to be stated, without furthering division and participation in the same racist measures. This is the challenge that we rise to. Do not make the commonly-made error that it is a people that we abhor, be clear that it is systems and processors which we must attack. Be clear that change to those systems will be promoted by people who can perceive intelligent and non-threatening alternatives. Understand that these alternatives will be presented only through discourse and dialogue

flowing outward from us, for now, because we are the stakeholders. We need the system to change. Those in the system can and will remain complacent until moved to think, and to understand how critical, change is needed at this time for us all. Many already know and are willing to listen.

The responsibility of the Native writer is tremendous in light of these times in which the world over, solutions are being sought to address the failed assimilationist measures originating out of conquest, oppression and exploitation, whether under the socialist or capitalist banner. We as writers can show how for Lithuanian independence and support for South African Black equality becomes farcical in the glare of the Constitutional position to First Nations here in Canada, who seek nothing more than co-operative sovereign relationships guaranteed in the principles of treaty making. No one will desire or choose to hear these truths unless they are voiced clearly to people who have no way to know that there are good alternatives and that instead of losing control we can all grow powerful together.

Finally, I believe in the basic goodness of the majority of people. I *rely* on the common human desire to be guilt free and fulfilled, to triumph, towards attainment of our full potential as wonderful, thinking beings at the forward edge of the Creator's expression of beauty.

I believe in the strength and rightness in the values of my people and know that those principles of peace and co-operation, in practise, are natural and survival driven mechanisms which transcend violence and aggression. I see the destructive paths that have led us to this time in history, when all life on this planet is in peril and know that there *must* be change. I believe that the principles of co-operation are a sacred trust and the plan and the intent of the Creator and therefore shall endure.

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Gender and Power in the Teachers' Union of Mexico

by Regina Cortina

Part 1

To understand women's work in Mexican education, it is necessary to grasp the political and institutional realities that shape their lives as professional educators. The control of Mexican public education is highly centralized at the national level. Two institutions set policy and direct the daily activities of education across the entire nation: the Secretaria de Educación Pública (SEP) and the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE). The latter, the national teachers' union, is the largest and one of the most powerful unions within the Mexican political system. Comprising mainly teachers but also other employees within SEP, it has become a dominant influence on the training, working conditions and professional advancement of teachers.

Since their creation at the end of the Second World War, unions in Mexico have been instrumental to the maintenance of political control at the state and party levels. In their early days, unions were useful for integrating national and regional power blocs, but as decades have gone by there has been little change in their basic relationship with the state, and they have become a conservative force against present state aims of modernization and democratization. In the case of SNTE, the union carries out grass-roots and organizational work for the dominant political party, Partido Revolucionario

Institucional (PRI). The membership of SNTE, estimated in 645,000 members, of which women are the majority, represents 40 percent of all public employees in Mexico.[1]

The size and national character of SNTE makes it an excellent case for studying the culture of the union to learn how women experience it, how the participation of women and men within the union differs, and how gender relations are constructed in union life. In the extensive literature on unions and the labour movement in Latin America, only a few studies have looked closely at the participation of women in the organized labour movement.[2] To explore the participation of women in union life, this chapter considers women in the teachers' union, analyzing the stance of the leadership toward women and how the culture of the union influences women's participation or non-participation in union life.

TEACHING AND THE QUEST FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

For women, teaching and political mobilization have a long-standing association in Mexican history after the Revolution. The teaching profession has been central to the quest of Mexican women for equal rights and better treatment as workers. As far back as the First Feminist Congress of Yucatán in 1916, when Mexican women came together to discuss their social and political rights, a large proportion of the participants were teachers. Among the issues discussed in the congress were the rights of women to education and their right to work. Female teachers also stood out in the movement during the 1930s to obtain full citizenship and the right to vote for women. More than 50,000 women participated in the Frente Unico Pro Derechos de la Mujer (United Front for Women's Rights) between 1935 and 1938.[3] As a consequence of the social programs of that period under President Lázaro Cárdenas, female teachers today have all the social benefits provided by law, such as maternity leaves, free day-care, retirement after thirty years of service, social security, paid vacations, low interest loans and equal pay as unionized state employees.

The work done by different feminist organizations led directly to the incorporation of women into the institutionalized interest groups within PRI. Through the activities of women's organizations in the 1930s, a women's section was founded in the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), the precursor of PRI. This was accomplished after Cárdenas promised in his first presidential address in 1935 to help with the political organization of women, even though women did not yet have political rights.[4] A women's section exists today in PRI and in most Mexican unions. As in the case of unions and other organizations attached to the dominant party, the women's section has conveyed the votes of women members to elections in exchange for elective and administrative positions in very small numbers. Much as is

true for the leaders of SNTE, female leaders from the women's section of PRI are advanced to elective or administrative positions. Women are represented through a separate category within the party structure, however, as peasant and workers are. It is through this mechanism that a few women have had access to political power, generally sitting on the committee that represents women's interests. By thus isolating female leaders structurally, the party circumscribes women in the political structure and defuses demands from the rank-and-file.

Despite the creation of a women's section in the dominant political party, women were not enfranchised until 1953. The denial of the right to vote for women in the 1930s resulted from the political crisis that marked the end of the Cárdenas administration and the intensification of Mexican industrialization at the outset of the Second World War. At that time the PRM, Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana, the ruling party that preceded and in 1946 was transformed into PRI, reversed the proposal, developed by the Cárdenas administration, to legislate expanded political rights for women. A plausible hypothesis for this abandonment, Luis Javier Garrido has argued in his account of the transformation of the PRM at that time, is that since its beginning the United Front for the Rights of Women was linked to the Communist Party. With the policy of Unidad Nacional, the national consolidation, which also entailed the exclusion of communists from the party ranks, the work of the women's section was restricted, and women thereafter were pictured routinely as conservatives.[5]

Due largely to the social programs of the Cárdenas period and the mobilization of women at that time, women teachers have become a relatively privileged group among women workers in Mexico. As state employees, they receive salaries equal to those of men for the same years of experience and education. Most importantly, women gained legal equality in public employment during those momentous years of state-building a half century ago. Yet, they were still limited in the profession, not so much by overt legal discrimination as by the more subtle political and institutional constraints over which they had, and to this day still have, little control.

WOMEN IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The structure of opportunity in Mexican education is highly formal and institutionalized nationally. Most teachers in Mexican public education start as preschool or elementary school teachers. With time and experience they can slowly advance, becoming school principals at the lower levels, then teachers in the junior high schools, and then principals at this level. After that, if they advance further, they become supervisor for a school in an area.

From there they might continue to advance to administrative positions in SEP or follow a political career within the union.[6]

The careers of most union leaders begin at the school level. They are elected by their co-workers at school; then they become union representatives at the delegation level. The delegations, the smallest units of the union, are organized by school zone or work place. After a successful career at the school and delegation levels, union representatives are selected by the section for active participation within it. The sections comprise delegations in each state of the nation or in the Federal District. Within the section there are four levels of participation. First, the executive committee is formed by the general secretary of the section and more than twenty other secretaries. Second, each secretary has assistants and negotiators who go to solve teachers' problems in the different government offices. The positions of assistants and negotiators are used as a training ground for the future secretaries. Third, the coordinators are teachers directly involved in the schools, acting as a link between the schools and the executive committees at the delegation level within the union. The identification of leaders with the rank-and-file comes from their having advanced from within the system — they know the feeling of being teachers. It takes many years of investing one's time and energies to achieve these positions of leadership.

The avenues to power and social mobility within the union are shaped by union politics. Since its creation, the union has been controlled by two factions closely allied with PRI. The dominant faction from 1949 to 1972 was a group led by Jesús Robles Martinez; from 1972 it has been a group led by Carlos Jongitud Barrios, called Vanguardia Revolucionaria. SNTE is controlled from the top by the national executive committee, and in all its decisions the union has a steeply pyramidal structure of control.

Although most leaders of SNTE are members of PRI as well, union leadership is more complex and plural than is commonly believed. Various political groups maintain positions of their own and have representatives on SNTE's executive committee at both the national and section levels. Among these is the Movimiento Revolucionario del Magisterio, which emerged from the Ninth Section in Mexico City and has been a significant presence in union politics for more than 30 years. Another group is the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, which emerged in the late 1970s. These two groups have been the best organized of the dissident movements in the history of the teachers' union.[7]

In the sections that follow I will characterize the participation of women in union life, first by focussing on women members of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the power bloc that controls SNTE, and second by exploring the participation of women within the dissident movements.

WOMEN AND UNION LEADERSHIP

SNTE is the professional organization representing teachers in Mexico. The organizational structure of the teachers' union reflects the structure of the profession, its levels and types of control. In the 1977-78 school year, union statistics showed that it had 548,356 members, 52 percent of whom were women.[8] Its membership consists of preschool and elementary school teachers, secondary school teachers, normal school teachers and administrative personnel. The union includes employees of the federal government, state, municipal and private schools. Its members are distributed in 55 sections divided by location and type of control. Each section, in turn, is divided into delegations, the smallest units of the union, and these are organized by school zone or work place. Members of delegations and sections choose representatives for executive committees that represent them in the governance of the union. In Mexico City there are three sections of federal employees. One is the Ninth Section, for preschool and elementary school teachers. Another is the Tenth Section, for secondary education. There is also a section for administrative personnel. The two sections that represent teachers in Mexico City are the most important sections in SNTE and ones with the most members.

To examine the participation of women in the leadership of the union, we now delve into the Ninth Section of SNTE, consisting of preschool and elementary school teachers in Mexico City. Union statistics show that in 1977-78 the Ninth Section had 42,918 members, 74 percent of whom were women. During the six-year period from 1976 to 1982, two women served in the first triennium and only one woman in the second triennium as elected members on SNTE's national executive committee, out of 25 members. In the Ninth Section, five women were on the sections' executive committee in both trienniums, out of 28 members.

The interview data upon which the following interpretation is based are from preschool and elementary school teachers in Mexico City, specifically twenty-two women and twenty-one men in comparable positions; thus, the total number of Mexican educators who were interviewed for the study was forty-three.

The teachers' union is generally seen as a man's world in Mexico. Very few women ever become part of the leadership of the union. A woman who has been teaching since 1929 and has been a supervisor for the last twenty years expressed the general consensus on the lack of female participation in the union leadership with the following words: "Men act in other spheres where women cannot go — because women have not lost all their decorum, and they cannot go to meet with men in the cantina to deal with certain

problems, or they cannot be in many other places. There has always been a fence that hinders women from taking part.

Referring to the participation of women in the leadership of the union from the male leaders' point of view, a former general secretary of the union asserted that, "they do not want, or did not want, to be elected into the leadership of the union." At the same time, a school principal suggested, "women are the ones who have given men the political power within the union. All male leaders have been launched by women, and they know that."

A woman who worked in SEP clarified what the school principal was saying by recalling her days as an elementary school teacher during the early 1970s, in one of the northern states. Most women, she observed, were interested in their own school and in the children they taught, and they were not so concerned with power relations in the profession. For women the union "was something remote, a group of male teachers who were fighting each other and every two or three years, I don't remember, we had a free day and we had to go vote. . . I was never interested." One of her memories was of a time when someone had to be elected as representative for the union delegation:

> *We chose a male professor of the school across from us. We chose him because we — I and all the other women who taught in our school — did not want to do it. No one was attracted by the position of union representative. It was an annoyance because you had to go to the union and pay attention to teachers' problems, all of which meant extra work. We proposed the man instead. He was very happy, and we elected him.*

But as a female leader of the union pointed out, women have also been *blocked* from positions of responsibility by the male leaders, and only inferior positions, never the decision-making positions such as secretary in the executives committees at the sectional and national level, have been open to them. Nevertheless, using her own experience as an example, the leader thought that the participation of women in union activities had changed, since before "our only role was to listen."

Most of the power within the union has been concentrated in the hands of men, even though women constitute a majority of the teachers. For this reason, and because they are uncomfortable with the ways that men use their power as union leaders, women have not felt welcome in the union. In the interviews they tended to agree that union leaders were all too ready to exchange sexual favours for services. A young woman working as an assistant in the union recounted that older female teachers were constantly telling her that "in the union we only suffer disrespect." She added that things have

changed for women in the union. Many young women will go today to the union offices on professional business, although some of them still go accompanied by their father or brother.

Repeatedly, leaders mentioned a difference between elementary and preschool teachers in their union participation. Preschool teachers are mostly women from a slightly higher social background than elementary school teachers, and among preschool teachers there has not been a tradition of union participation. Preschool teachers in the past tended to see their work as temporary, and they usually remained teachers only until they were married or became mothers. In the case of elementary school teaching there is a lifelong pattern of participation within the teaching profession. A preschool teacher and leader of the union said, "Preschool teachers are not politically conscious because they come from more privileged groups and they do not have a working-class consciousness." She added, "I left the normal school without knowing that there was a union." These differences can be explained by distribution of the preschool and elementary normal schools, since the normal schools for preschool teachers have always been concentrated in the urban areas and women who attend them are from middle-class backgrounds for the most part. In the view of both labour leaders and officials from SEP, this pattern has changed rapidly over the last few years as public education has expanded and the social class differences between preschool and elementary school teachers have decreased.

In 1972, Vanguardia Revolucionaria took control of the leadership and became the dominant faction within the union. As is the case with PRI, Vanguardia Revolucionaria generally presents itself as embodying the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. Since the leaders of Vanguardia Revolucionaria took power, the union has lost some of the pluralism that used to characterize it, for the members of this group have tended to recirculate themselves in the higher positions of union leadership. Moreover, the leaders have been attempting to improve the image that the rank-and-file has of them by increasing the participation of women within the life of the union, changing the women's view of the union, and making women feel at ease when they go to the union to conduct their professional business. A female leader in the union said that for Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, the president of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the participation of women in the union is deeply important. He said to her that the "time has arrived for women to assume strength to defend the position of women, of union women, of political women. This does not conflict with their functions as mother and teacher, nor with their femininity. . . Women can struggle side by side with men without losing their femininity."

Describing the rise of women to the leadership of the union, a schoo principal said, "Women arrive through the same channels that men do, and with the same alliances." What this means is that female leaders as well as male leaders form part of Vanguardia Revolucionaria. As is true of the male leaders, the same women have tended to rotate in the positions of leadership within the union and the section. Three of the women who were on the executive committee of the Ninth Section when interviewed had been secretaries in the same section during the previous triennium. The other two had been assistants and negotiators undergoing training to advance to leadership roles. As in the case of the males, they were chosen by the leadership for these positions; and as with most of the cadres of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, they came from the middle-level positions such as school principals and supervisors. All of them agreed that within the section executive committee, men and women participated equally. Women spoke up and were not relegated to secondary functions. These women leaders, however, were a small minority on the executive committee, which represents a section of the union in which the vast majority of the rank-and-file are women.

In the literature on the political participation of women in Latin America, it has been argued that the marginalization of women from power occurs because of traditional values within the family, which limit behaviour and serve as a barrier to women in public and political institutions. Against this prevailing explanation, it is useful to develop a more elaborate view of the complex realities that women face in professional life. A female leader of the Ninth Section represents the perspective of a woman who had advanced to a position of power:

> *Years ago, when I began going to the organization, the atmosphere was not healthy, although we cannot say that today it is excellent. . . For this reason, in those years I did not want to participate directly. I liked to participate in congresses, academic meetings and sports events organized by the union. . . but not direct participation. I felt that it was not the moment yet for a woman to be there. . . sometimes women were not treated with respect. . . the males as leaders felt very powerful and were domineering and behaved improperly toward women. Things have changed, they have improved, women have increased their participation in the union. The latest general secretary of the union has attempted to erase the image that existed, that within the union there was no respect for women teachers. The affection, good treatment and respect toward women teachers have increased.*

In describing this improved treatment, she also went beyond the theme of traditional values and expressed the limited perspective of the union leadership with its emphasis on domesticity and motherhood. For example, observed the female leader, "a special celebration for those who are mothers is organized by the union on Mother's Day. . . to give women the place they deserve, because if she is not honoured among us, then even less within society at large."

The same leader explained how the structure of opportunity for advancement to leadership positions has changed with the increasing importance of educational credentials. "When I began participating in the leadership of the union," she recalled, "I did it through my academic credentials; I did not advance only through a political career. This was helpful because I was able to get involved without having to put up with the unhealthy environment that existed." As Peter H. Smith and Roderic Camp have found in studying the political elite in Mexico, education is the most important variable for explaining access to the political elite. It is not only educational credentials that matter, of course, for the privileged access to certain institutions and the personal contacts that develop while in those institutions are essential.

The same pattern appears in the case of some women who join the union leadership. But the male political culture that surrounds power in the union has meant that women routinely encounter barriers to that culture which are not barriers for men. A secretary of the Ninth Section of the union remembered how, after several years of participating in union-sponsored events for teachers, she decided to participate more directly in the leadership of the union after the persistence of one of her fellow students in the normal school who at that time was a member of the executive committee of the Ninth Section:

> *An old friend of mine, who was on the executive committee and had know me since we were students, insisted that I participate more and assured me that the men there were going to respect me as a woman. I was having doubts about becoming more deeply involved in the union because I was different. For example, the leaders of the union used to party a lot. . . after the meetings they always got together, drank and stayed until very late at night. I used to stay only for a little while — because you have to do it in order to find your way in. But it is a world of men. . . I could have succumbed to their ways. My goal was to become part of a working team, both as a professional and within the union, without having to give up my image and convictions.*

In contrast to this female leader, many more women have been reluctant even to try, thus limiting their aspirations and careers.

Just when women were beginning in very small numbers to enter the leadership of SNTE, the male-dominated leadership decided in 1977 to break up the women's office of the union. This office has existed in all unions in Mexico, as well as in PRI, since the Cárdenas administration in the 1930s. SNTE is the only union in Mexico that has made this decision, and it is also the union with the largest percentage of women in it. The female leaders within the Ninth Section were not involved in the controversy. The women's office was dissolved, but when interviewed about it later the leaders could not remember when or why. One of them explained why there should not be a women's office within the union: "The organization has set hierarchies in terms of the importance of the struggle for all teachers. That is why I cannot struggle according to my own interests. . . and I cannot work with groups of women only."

The leadership of SNTE dissolved the women's office of the union on the grounds that if most of the rank-and-file are women, they do not need a separate bureau. This ironic proclamation of the equality of men and women in union affairs brings up difficult questions. Do women need separate representation? Does the female rank-and-file benefit from the participation of a few women in the ruling elite? What role do female teachers play within the union? How will women as a subordinated group gain power in existing institutions and within the political structure of Mexico? The interviews with union leaders did not provide evidence that female leaders were concerned with these questions. Meanwhile, at the party level, there is a controversy over the continued existence of the women's office. For some female party leaders the political participation of women cannot come about within separate organizations. For other leaders women are not yet in a condition of equality, and thus they need an organization to support them.

The evidence provided by the interviews showed that there is little communication between the female leaders and the female rank-and-file. Nonetheless, the female leaders are serving a certain function in the attempt of the leadership to improve its image in front of the rank-and-file. One female leader recalled that Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, the president of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, said to her that "the image of the organization will change greatly when women enter and participate with all the honesty and devotion that characterize them." A dissident leader noted, "In the promotion of social trade-unionism and its style of politics, they [Vanguardia Revolucionaria] have women play a central role."

This expedient use of female leadership in a male-dominated institution does not mean that the situation of women has failed to change. The traditional conception of women's political participation within PRI was that

of voluntary public assistance; today, women have access to real opportunities. Still, as one male dissident leader asserted, "It is more a treatment of courtesy than of equality." The entrance of women for the first time into the leadership, a man's world as it is currently set up, has not been without problems, but as one of the interviewed women said, "I have been on several teams in which all were men but me. It is difficult because they want you to follow their ways instead of letting you follow your own, and as a woman you need to search for new ways of participating." She continued by saying that in the Ninth Section there is only one place to be if female leaders wish to gain more power within the executive committee, and that is in the chair of the general secretary. "All of us want that position," she added, but "who knows if the moment has arrived yet for a woman to be there?"

Wary of such aspirations, the leadership has been attempting to construct a carefully limited sphere for increasing the participation of women in the union. Most of the efforts of the union are designed to attract the participation of women through social rituals such as the celebration of Mother's Day and other get-togethers. There is also a tendency towards using the union as a centre for innocuous social activities, reflected in an increase in the number of breakfasts and lunches organized by the union. Most female teachers can attend these without any constraints, but such participation is misleading because it has replaced the function of union assemblies bringing together the leadership and the rank-and-file to discuss general issues of concern in employment and union politics. The use of the union for social activities has been a way of maintaining the legitimacy of the organization while restricting rank-and-file participation in union decisions and policies. Limiting women's role thus helps to fragment the power of workers in a section of the union where the majority of members are women.

Along similar lines, the number of women who go to the national congress may well have increased in recent years, but it is evident from women's own accounts and by looking at the photographs of such occasions that women are involved in activities different from those of men. In addition to the disproportionately small number of women delegates, many other female teachers participate in the congress, serving coffee, handling the microphones, acting as hostesses — roles that show a constricted view of women's participation in the life of the union, one that maintains traditional functions such as domestic chores that are associated with the home. "The participation of women in the union is decorative," said a young teacher referring to the union congresses. Challenging these practices in the culture of the union, a dissident leader said that the union leadership has a "perverted view" of women's participation in union politics.

More than half of the women interviewed had participated in union activities in one way or another during their careers. Except for the leaders of the Ninth Section, they had participated primarily in union-sponsored events — social reunions, sports competition, cultural activities — or at the delegation level. Others had participated in the dissident movements.

FOOTNOTES

1 The SNTE membership figure is from Manuel Germán Parra, "Historia del movimiento sindical de los trabajadores del estado," México, 1983; quoted in *El Cotidiano* 2, no. 7 (1985).

2 José A. Alonso has written several pieces on the presence of women in the garment workers union, among them "The Domestic Clothing Workers in the Mexican Metropolis and their Relations to Dependent Capitalism," in June Nash and Paria Patricia Fernández-Kelly, eds., *Women, Men and the International Division of Labour* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 161-172; also on garment workers see Teresa Carillo, "Working Women and the '19th of September' Mexican Garment Workers Union: The Significance of Gender," unpublished paper, 1988. On the participation of women in unions in other countries of Latin America, see Elizabeth Jelin, ed., *Ciudadania e identidad: Las mujeres en los movimientos sociales Latino-americanos* (Ginebra, Suiza: Instituto de Investigaciones de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo Social, 1987).

3 On the participation of Mexican teachers in the feminist movement during the first half of the century, see Anna Macias, *Against All Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982); see also Alaide Foppa, "The First Feminist Congress in Mexico, 1916", trans. by Helen F. Aguilar, *Signs* 5, Automn 1979: 192-99.

4 Luis Javier Garrido, *El partido de la revolución institucionalizada: La formación del nuevo regimen (1928-1945)*, México: Sigloveintiuno, 1982, p. 206.

5 Luis Javier Garrido, *El partido de la revolución institucionalizada*, p. 312.

6 In another essay I have reviewed the literature on the participation of women in the teaching profession of Mexico since the turn of the twentieth century, analyzed how the postsecondary educational opportunities for women shape their careers within the teaching profession, and examined to their role as leaders within SEP; see Regina Cortina, "Women as Leaders in Mexican Education", *Comparative Education Review*, forthcoming.

7 For an account of teacher mobilization in the 1950s, see Aurora Loyo Brambila, *El movimiento magisterial de 1958 en México*, México: Era, 1979; on the movement since 1979 see Samuel Salinas Alvarez and Carlos Imaz Gispert, *Maestros y Estado*, México: Editorial Linea, 1984, Vols. I and II>

8 Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación; Secretaria de Estadistica y Planeación, "¿Cuántos Somos?", July 1977.

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New Directions for Canadian Women:

Profile of & Interview with Glenda Simms

by Nonqaba Msimang

History was made in December, 1989 when the Minister responsible for the Status of Women: Mavis Wilson, announced the appointment of Dr. Glenda Simms, President of the Canadian Advisory Council on the status of Women.

Dr. Simms is the first black woman to be appointed president of the 17 year-old Council. Its mandate is "to bring before the government and the

public matters of interest and concern to women." The Council also has an advisory role to the government.

Simms is occupying the seat vacated in September by Sylvia Gold, the Montreal-born educator who was the Council's mouthpiece for five years. She quickly settled into the job, crisscrossing the country speaking about women — a topic dear to her heart. She is no stranger to the women's movement.

Her name commands respect despite the fact that her sister-feminists may or may not share her views on certain strategies. Simms is a passionate advocate for women's views that have languished for years in the basement of the women's movement.

A former President of the Congress of Black Women, Simms is also one of the founding members of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women. She came to Canada in 1966 to take up a teaching post in northern Alberta. Her last teaching post in Jamaica was at the Cornwall College, a boys' grammar school in Montego Bay.

In western Canada, her specialty was Native Education and she soon became a household name in native circles.

She teaches Native Education at Nipissing University College in North Bay. However, she has put Nipissing on hold for three years while she attends to the Council of Women's work in Ottawa. She has been an associate professor in the Education Faculty since 1987.

Simms traces her bond with Native people to her first six years in Canada. Her first address was in Fort Chipewyan Reserve, where residents welcomed her with open arms and taught her how to relate to the Canadian landscape and weather. In Sudbury, Ontario — in one of many functions in her honour organized by Congress of Black Women chapters — she amused guests when she related her first experience with the numbing cold.

Her second teaching post was also among Native people — the Cree, at the Elizabeth Metis Colony. After two years, she moved on to the Bigstone Reserve in the Demaris area in the Slave Lake District in northern Alberta.

> *"I think that it is the best thing that ever happened to me. If I had to re-live this period in Canada, I would want to go back and work amongst Native people. That has offered me a perspective that I could not get from any textbook."*

In 1972, Simms decided to upgrade her education by enroling at the University of Alberta for her Bachelor's Degree in Education. In 1977, she taught at the University of Lethbridge for three years. She also got her Master's Degree and Doctorate in Education at the University of Alberta.

Her Ph.D. thesis was on the twice-president of Jamaica, Michael Manley. Simms juggled her Ph.D. studies with teaching at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and raising her two girls and one boy. She successfully defended her thesis and became Dr. Glenda Simms in 1985.

Her next port of call was the Regina Public School Board, where she served as the supervisor of Intercultural Education and Race and Ethnic Relations. Her extra-curricula activities are numerous. She is currently a member of the Women's Advisory Committee on Employment Equity to the President of the Treasury Board of Canada. She is also a member of the Review Board of the Journal of Indigenous Studies.

* * *

Sudbury, April 20, 1990
Dr. Glenda Simms — Interviewed by Nonqaba Msimang

Nonqaba Msimang has followed Dr. Glenda Simms' career from Alberta to Ontario.

Q: Who do you mean when you say the Canadian woman?

A: When I'm talking about the Canadian woman, I'm talking about all Canadian women. I think reference to the Canadian woman has really been a middle-class white woman.

Q: Who fits this definition now — who wasn't in the definition previously?

A: I believe that we at the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women must broaden our mandate so that we serve those women whose voices have not yet been heard, and I'm paying special attention to aboriginal women, immigrant and visible minority women, disabled, rural, old, Francophone women outside Quebec and poor women.

Q: What has been the women's reaction across the country on your appointment?

A: I think women are very pleased that I have been appointed President of the Council. The appointment cuts across racial groups, class and all interest groups. Women show me in a variety of ways that they are supportive of my appointment.

Q: Do women know about the Council and what it stands for? And how it works in relation to the government of the day?

A: I don't think the majority of Canadian women know much about the Council. I'm trying to make sure that wherever I go, I let them know what the Council does. I think that some women know about the Council but it's a small percentage of the Canadian population that really understands the work of the Council.

Q: What is the work of the Council?

A: The Council's mandate is to advise the government on issues related to women and also to educate the public on these issues.

Q: Is the government in power under any obligation to take the Council's advice?

A: I don't think any government is under any obligation to take any advice that anyone gives them. However, the role of the Council is to give the best advice and hopefully this advice will be taken. But there's no guarantee that whatever they are advised on will be listened to.

Q: What about the issues that divide women, is there any hope for the future?

A: I have a lot of hope for the future. I can see some movement on issues where women are speaking out across these lines. For instance, the recent budget cuts have caused a lot of problems at grassroots level. The kind of response that I get comes from women from a variety of interests and people of different political persuasions. So, I believe that more and more, we are going to see women dealing with issues. They are going to forget all the things that have traditionally divided them. I think there's a new awareness that women are under siege in this country and unless they unite around these issues, we'll never make any progress. We'll be forever gaining two steps and losing ten. The rising incidences of violence against women and the fact that women are afraid to go out in the streets will motivate them to reconsider their position and make sure that they fight on these issues. Because in the final analysis, all women want justice.

Q: What are you bringing to the job?

A: I'm bringing a long experience of work in the women's movement. But I'm also — over and above that — bringing a good understanding of the communities I'm talking about: immigrant and visible minority communities, aboriginal women's communities and an understanding of poor people in this country.

Q: You were in Winnipeg in 1986 when the National Association for Immigrant and Visible Minority Women was formed. What were the lessons learnt in Winnipeg?

A: One of the lessons I learned is that we must not take it for granted that just because people are seen as minorities, they necessarily understand or empathize with each other. And another lesson that I learned is that in spite of these conflicts we can resolve them in very positive ways. I think that conflict management is very important in building an organization of such diverse peoples.

Q: Why was there a need for the Congress of Black Women in the early 1980s?

A: Black women in Canada have always felt the need to organize. However, they were not organized on a national level. I think that by the time the '80s came around, we recognized that black women had to be organized nationally, so that they could have a strong voice to advocate on their behalf. We recognized very early that no one else would advocate for black women. They were the only ones who would be able to advocate for themselves. I think that organization was very important then, it is very important now, and it will be even more important in the future.

Q: How do you counter the accusation that such organizations like the Congress and NAC for example, are mainly middle-class and they do not cater for the woman who is trying to make ends meet on a daily basis?

A: Initially, when any of these women's organizations start out, it has been women who are more articulate, more educated and who have some time on their hands who established the structures. However, they must have the understanding that their mandate is to serve the majority of the women, especially women who need them most. The reason they are not able to go beyond that is because they cannot use their imagination. Secondly, they become so comfortable with themselves. I think the Congress of Black Women of Canada cannot be accused of being solely

a middle-class organization. If you look at the different chapters, they reflect the women in the communities in which they are located. For instance in Sudbury, the chapter certainly reflects the working-class nature of the black community.

I would say in the Toronto region, the chapters reflect the living patterns of black people in Toronto. I don't think we can make a blanket statement about the Congress. I think it is trying its best and it has served to a great extent, a lot of ordinary black women. I think it can do more however, especially in the Toronto region. It has to reach out to some of the most disadvantaged black women, especially the women living in public housing and the homeless, the young girls on the streets, the ones who are being victimized by the system. I think the Congress has to meet their needs. If they don't do that in the next five years then this organization will have to reassess its mandate, and question the reason for its existence.

Q: Do you ever regret that when you first came to this country you found yourself in the Chipewyan Reserve?

A: I think that is the best thing that ever happened to me. If I had to re-live this period in Canada, I would want to go back and work amongst the Native people. It has offered me a perspective that I could not get from any text book. I think many more minorities should take the opportunity to get out of the urban centres and go into the remote areas of this country and live and understand how Native people live. We can learn a lot from them. We learn not only about the richness of their culture, but we also learn about how they survive. It is these strengths that we need to continue surviving. I believe that my experience amongst Native people has been one of the best parts of my experience in Canada.

Q: In Sudbury, they gave you a gift of a medicine wheel. What is the significance?

A: In the medicine wheel and in the particular one that I got, you have the traditional circle and you have the symbol of the four directions: north, south, east and west. But most importantly, I received on the wheel — four eagle feathers. That is one of the highest honours that a non-Native person can get. I think it is the circle, the directions and the strength of Native people that is symbolized in that medicine wheel.

Q: Some women feel that the Council will silence you or make you mellow — now that you are working in a structure that is bureaucratic.

A: There's always a problem that when you work within structures for you to accommodate the structures. I personally have never been the kind of person to accommodate very well to structures. And in this particular point in my life, I have no intention of doing so. I intend to speak out on the issues. I intend to research them and to bring a very well-organized way of dealing with them to both the government and the public.

I believe that some of us must work within the structures. I don't think you can keep outside of the structures and be effective all the time. You must have people inside and outside of the structure to make sure that we make a difference. I think that part of the problem with some of the more progressive thinkers among women is that they are so much against institutions and structures that they forever stay on the outside and consider themselves ideologically and politically pure.

I think the time has come for us to reconsider our position and make sure that we are in key areas so that we can have some change in policies. In the final analysis our lives are controlled and determined by those who make political decisions, therefore, we must find ways of accessing the system, especially minorities. It doesn't mean that we should deny the work of community activists. They are also very important but we must provide a kind of climate in which their activism can have some meaning.

Q: Is Glenda Simms still a feminist although she's working for the Council?

A: Of course. I want to make sure that the Council is a feminist organization. I've always been a feminist, and I will continue to be a feminist. I will not change. For me, feminism is a very important aspect of my development and a very important social process of change in this country and the world. So, why would I want to back down?

Q: The word 'feminist' has negative implications in some quarters.

A: Feminism has taken on a lot of negative connotation over time and some of the people who consider themselves 'feminists' have to take some of the blame for the kind of negative connotation. They have of course, seen a backlash against feminism and it's not entirely the fault

of feminists. I think the structures that we live in are geared to make sure that feminism gets a bad name. I think that women have to reconsider the fact that feminism is a movement for all women and that is what we have to make it.

I think that the fact that feminism was mostly the ideology or discussion around middle-class white women in Canada has caused the movement to gain a bad name, especially among minorities. We need to regain the true intent of the women's movement which was a movement for all women, a movement which came out of the understanding of the unique oppression of minorities, the anti-slavery movement and the civil rights movement. Those are the major movements that gave the impetus to American feminism. Because feminism is a legacy of our struggles we must take it back and make sure that it becomes a tool for all positive change.

Q: At Ryerson, you advised young women that it is possible to follow your dreams and be beautiful at the same time.

A: Definitely. Young women tell me that they don't want to be feminists because they want to be beautiful. I want to be attractive to men they say. I guess I had to demonstrate to them that you can still be beautiful and still be attractive to men and be a feminist.

They have some notion of a feminist as an ugly-looking woman who has lost all attractiveness, who has no love for men, who in fact is a horrible creature. I am not quite sure how society has been so successful in selling this false image. So we have to make sure that women recognize that the very way in which they learnt that feminists are not good, is the same way they learnt that black people are not good, aboriginal people are not good, poor people are not good, lesbian women are evil and that anyone who is different out there is not good. They learn those kind of feelings in the same subtle way in which society can undermine a group of people.

So when you live in a racist and sexist society, you are able to learn negative images even if those images are not true for the majority of people. So once you understand how they learnt about feminists, they will also understand how to change their ideas about feminists. That is how we have to deal with the issue. We need to have them understand the whole process of indoctrination, of stereotyping and the power of political forces that can neutralize people's efforts.

Nonqaba Msimang is a Toronto writer and poet.

Geste

by Anne Marie Alonzo

translated by William Donoghue

Thirst. And a swollen body. Shaven. Black. Here she lies in search of herself. Silent and cold. Let's raise an arm. Riddle. Who owns this pretty arm? Amazement. Who really does?

I feel no I possess no more.

Who owns this finger? Reply please. Hard to say. How to know?

React!

Who tell me does this leg belong to? Get up your nerve. Begin again. Whose arm finger leg is this? Begin again.

Filthy. Scabs on the skull. I bled excuse me. We must clean you wash you. Unbearable.

I'm thirsty!

Lazy. Bemoaning your lot. Ingrate. Shame on you. Get up! Clean up!

Pull those curtains. Up. What good are your arms to you? What good are you without them? Helpless. Useless. Parasite.

Privileged. Spoiled. Dare to complain! Where there's a will there's a way. Make an effort. Muddle through. If you really wanted to. There are those who.

Begin again!

In your place. If I was you if I was you.

Torrid July. Under a mass of blankets I tremble. My teeth are chattering.

Her. Unfailing. At my side. Patient. I hear steps. Don't speak. Listen! These steps. Stinging. Bunched. Closing.

She smiles. Above me. Bends. Slides before my face. To see be seen.

Touch hold me. She says I touch.

everywhere these steps
invisible.
noisy.
insistent.
everywhere these steps.

I carry their imprint on my body. Inside.

On the stomach the back. A measured march. One two. Turn! On the back the stomach. Touch hold me. I held you she says.

I am swelling up. You see. My skin is cracking and falling away. She says sleep a little. The steps I know are slipping inside. The deaf pain. Muffled.

I have a reversible body.

Sleep she says again. I will close my eyes.

there is the whiteness.
the cold.
and these steps.

Her hand settled there. I have forgotten touch. Already.

It is night/day/night. It is white and beige. Pale. It is cold.

I don't sleep. Arm over eyes. On the ceiling a thousand/million small holes. I have counted them. Always the same. Square by square to the next. To the edge of vertigo.

I no longer sleep. Eyes on my arm. Waiting for thousands/millions of holes. That never fail. Always the same. Day after day to the next.

It is night.

Somewhere. Far off. She utters a cry. A long groan. And my head rises. In sections. Whole. Alone.

Each night. Almost at the same moment. Like giving birth. This neverending cry.

And me. Armless. Without hands shields. Pierced.

To shut her up!
Or help me yell too.

Walls enclose her. Echoes. No more. I can't. Every night. Never sleeping. While a thousand/million stains spread slowly over the ceiling of my soul. Dissolving in fiction.

The eyes remain. And thirst.

The end of me. Enormous and hollow. A stranger. The body. To see touch feeling nothing. Slashed by sound. Sliced.

the senses
trampled
flayed

Refusing to hear/see/feel/being immobile.

Stretched out over centuries. Elongated. Bent. Deafened by silence. Alone.

Screaming is prohibited. Pull yourself together! You're not alone here! Behave yourself.

Take it in the neck. Bridled. Collared. Hard and hurting. I only want to move. To turn. My head slightly. A shoulder.

She puts on a record. I don't see (her). Feel her. You must drink. A glass every hour. You must take care of yourself.

It's for your own good.

She prowls. Takes a finger. Scratches. So much scabby scaling. They didn't wash me. I will wash you myself. Scratches. The nail's end. Tapered. To be able to scream. A little.

She holds the finger. Won't release it. I say leave me. Please.

It's for your own good
in your own interest
a finger a day
you'll be clean
we have to look after
you.

I won't scream. Will behave. She says again for your own good. While her nail tears my finger. Twists it. I close my eyes. If I don't see.

I say can we stop. (Please). I say it hurts can't take any more.

The water is black grease. She squeezes the finger rubs pulls.

Abed. How many so far? Three six months. He says at Christmas you will walk.

I'm not moving!

He says Christmas. The rasping collar. Bound fingers. Pink and dimpled. Clean. I think Christmas. Stretched out deaf from silence alone.

Each time the pain
bends (me) I bend.
Fear of breaking.
Feigning death.

Sitting (myself) down. The first time.

Heaved up held up. Put down. And losing consciousness. You cried out. Frozen. Stricken. Mouth open. Terrified.

The slap!

I'm not used to. In bed since. Three six months. Thirty years. This head on the mattress. And on the ceiling a picture-book. Still lives. Lend an ear. Cavernous. Greedy.

I screamed they say a hand on my cheek. You'll get used to it you'll see. Ten minutes today. And tomorrow.
I would rather I'd like to stay in bed.

Sitting (myself) down. Another time.
Heaved up held down. Put back. Passing out.

The daily slap.

Installed. Stuffed. Watched. Old. Re-examining the body. Astonished. The swollen pink and unfamiliar feet.

Nauseous.

I feel see myself slipping. Oozing out. No no you won't fall. Raise your head. Look at us!
Over under me cushions. White cloud. Each arm each foot. The head and the back.
My flesh is slack my fingers soft.

I promised myself.
Strength and silence.

All these hands on me. Feeling nothing. And shrieking with pain. Phantom.

I believe the world turned over.

Anne Marie Alonzo, originally from Egypt, is a poet, publisher and scholar and lives in Montreal. These poems are from her book Geste.

Woman Bath

by Marie Annharte Baker

Friday night at the old rain station was our last communal bath

when a little girl I was slept on a wooden bench waiting for a train to come or go but now even the health club will close down no more reconversions necessary or even possible because it is Main Street that got too scuzzy and dirty but not for tourists

Main Street always a bad parade of all women in relations even Off Main on Austin Street hookers pass right on by me but they don't dare relate to me or my whitewomen buddies who came after the swedish massage not the corroded Saturday night bathtub I get the picture of what it's like to be down Main Street not them

Before we exit the car we chat about non-white hooker found dead in a ditch this morning but we escape the truth of terrible city terrible men who frequent this skidrow street we are hopping on

I assume she was Indian she was disposable did I mean to say it like that because a year later I find she might have been from the next reserve I might have been another stand in auntie

My white friends are right that she was a coloured girl adopted into a white family just the other day a client of theirs she had her one mistake and mine is to believe their story

We bathe together I like the part where we washed off the news together class differences down the drain & naked women are equal even behind our towels I slung my towel on my hips tightly

One Eye Annie used to scavenge the hotel dining room got her lips a bit greasy but was pitched back into the street by those with proper protocol to welcome the Queen of England in the event she ever became the old bag

An Indian woman leaned against a pillar jiggling tiny tits then slunk back to her white lovers who witness her gay pride but she doesn't like me funny how she changed her first name to mine though I don't care for it enough to share

I didn't resist Other circles of white guilts to get out my dirt refused to join up with some women helping clean up your own act I told them but please keep in mind I mind my company dearies '

I washed the shy side under my towel pretended to spy on a camp Nazi women torture on command all the slim girls dancing for them I watch helplessly each seduction because I am afraid to keep diets

Such dirty thoughts for an average non-white me but I scrub harder white part of my pinto hide got a scrub my geed too but I cracked under pressure even that of my own hand

I need to take it easy I am too hard on myself they rush to tell me when I think I am just about to figure it out

Half of me trekked off to the steam room spritzed by spray nozzle one of me doesn't fit in a women crowd often left in complete rage because the white twin belonged better

Women read Tarot Runes for their future plans ask questions about their abundance & working with Indian girls on the streets who need extra rubbers sometime sexual workers give up luxuries prioritize money life men even welfare

The cleansed one found the dirty one reclining on a cot looking superior pure ridiculous unable to be appeased of fury tempted one follow the dirty old thing to a tunnel

Her pride swells investigates the exact places the girl danced for white lovers social workers teachers nurses forget police women when if she gets too

curious I have been discussed as to how my racism prevents treatments deserved by other Indian women tending to trust not disappoint or please others who work for them

I might be vapour molecules spread therefore I am sniffed

Alice saw the Queen of Hearts playing croquet graciously Her majestic Heart is well worn Her shoulders sag from extensive yoga lessons to tolerate my potential quirk to play with Her mallet I will strike when it is actually my turn

Her inquisition face Her red tam One Eye Annie covered Her dead eye She guides young hookers Her own daughter was spared Her rape She tells Indian girls Her past but not Her daughter Her baby won't listen like shy Indian girls she is immune to mom's dangers mama speech patterns don't work because mamas will avoid pain or what is on the agenda or what has to be told to each girl

Say Queen of Hearts or One Eye quit working with my sisters now each one is mine is worth many zeros to fill a blank cheque that won't bounce in my face & make cash flow out of my sweat

I thought only men were the customers & I'll find turquoise colours for each woman who is my sister I want sisters to like me

Dangly hoop earrings don't match or beaded quills are no better & who wears my identify feminist fashion puts more rags on the back of the dead girl

They didn't know her well enough or her race I spotted a non-white person who never told anyone of her future as evident as it was at the time but why bother to wake her up she rests her case & will hear what happened in a roundabout peculiar way I must be scrubbed empty

I found the dead girl in me she wasn't killed by my words

Marie Annharte Baker is a writer, poet and activist. She lives in Regina, Saskatchewan.

Communities

by Marjorie Agosin
translated by Janice Molloy

I am often asked if I have developed a community of friends, acquaintances and contacts in the small, suburban town where I live. For me, there is incongruity in this question, because a community is not something that is planned or searched for — it emerges spontaneously. I often think about daily life in my country and in other Latin American countries, an America as homogeneous in its instability as in its generosity.

In Latin America, the community exists in the streets. It exists in the daily contact among commuters waiting for a bus, in the animated conversation between a street seller and a customer. Community can be found in a conversation that begins in a café and ends over a glass of wine in a bar. It exists in the compassion, the pity and the immense affection one feels for a beggar with injured hands, or for a young person who has just been beaten. When we go out into the streets in Latin America, we are met and battered by the voices of castoffs, fugitives and individuals who have been mutilated. body and soul. This spectrum of humanity forms a community profiled in zones of happiness and pain.

Here in North America, communities are constructed by neighbourhood, the colour of one's skin, by children or sexual preference. Sharp and rigid classifications. In the United States, it is strange and seldom one sees a beautiful, round grandmother arm-in-arm with her twenty-year old granddaughter. For me, this a common and visual reflection of a community in my America.

Community networks in the United States form microcosms of the city in which they exist. For example, women organize friendships according to their husband's clubs and their children's schools. They form bonds of

familiar contact at their churches. When life fails and disintegrates, the North American does not know where to turn, to seek help and support and so, in solitude and terror, searches for answers in thousands of books that begin with, "How to... "

In Latin America, the family is integrated, people of diverse ages, friends of the parents who become friends of the children. This structure provides a certain equilibrium and enrichment, a sense of community that is not imposed but one that is born spontaneously. People are more free to make mistakes, touch each other and greet each other daily with hugs and kisses. The Spanish are wise to kiss on the cheek, not once but twice.

Communities in Latin America are full of women who possess magical knowledge. There are communities of matrons who give advice during childbirth and wakes. There are communities of nannies who rock us to sleep, feed us and enclose us in a universe full of mirrors and explanations for the inexplicable.

There are communities of daily scenes: markets where we contemplate multi-coloured pills, braids of garlic and nets full of fish. There are communities of beauty parlours where we learn the delicious intrigues of our neighbours. While beauticians fuss with our hair, we find out about neighbourhood love affairs, the horrors of the people in the house on the corner, who has been arrested. The fact that the community talks and gossips is healthy and indicates an interest in others, regardless of how far removed they are from one's own circumstances.

Here, Anglo-Saxons choose caution, silence, thousands of masks that deny pain, anger, and forgetfulness. In North American hair salons, there is a strong odour of cleanliness, symmetry of well-groomed hair.

It is obvious that Latin Americans are different and diverse — we have different histories and landscapes. Despite our poverty and inability to pay our international debts, despite our insufficient medical system, we have discovered another type of development — the development of a spirit that trusts others and, is more vulnerable, a spirit more open to hugs, to clandestine encounters, to daily insecurities and to life.

When asked if I have a community in Wellesley, Massachusetts, I would have to say yes, it is my friends, those who speak my language, and no one else. The block I live on is a horizon of mute houses. The suburbs are dull. My community is located in the streets of my childhood, in doorsteps full of old women and birds. That is where I am constantly drawn, for inside myself, I have never left home.

Marjorie Agosin is a professor at Wellesley College. Excerpt from Women of Smoke.

Soul Food Glut

by Tina Young

Boysie squatted awkwardly on the concrete steps of the painted green and white wooden shack. He was clad in a colourful pair of short shorts in red polka dots interspersed with patches in an assortment of shapes and sizes, notably in the buttocks area, said member of which protruded very prominently from the skin-fit garment.

His laid-back position reflected an emphatic aversion to even a minimum of physical activity including lifting his left foot for a closer examination after being bitten by a very noisy mosquito. He was, however, picking his teeth with the frayed end of a match stick, particles of his last meal having deposited themselves between the many crevices ind yawning caverns that occupied each of the molars.

Presently the pungent aroma of soul food penetrated the atmosphere as a large plate borne by Jestine, his live-in mate, made its way into the eagerly outstretched hands.

It was 6 o'clock in the evening and Boysie had been on the concrete steps since 10:00 a.m. where he had assumed a reclining position and had remained more or less immobile except for reaching out for the bickle that arrived every hour on the half-hour from Jestine who was feeling the effects of the heat from the coal stove in the tiny airless kitchen, having spent the last 8 hours engaged in a culinary marathon trying to keep up with her man's gastronomical whimsies.

Every cubic inch of the plate was occupied with grub as Boysie's allergy to unused plate space caused Jestine to mass-produce boiled banana, affu yam, sweet potato, calalu, saltfish, yampie, dumpling and dip and fall back.

The tantalizing aroma soon brought out several hopeful aspirants — children of some of the tenants in the yard. Mesmerized by the once-familiar smells that they too knew sometime ago when saltfish was an affordable commodity, the three children, ages ranging from 10 to 8, stood around Boysie in a semi-circle, hoping to catch the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. However, B was not about to be intimidated by three big-eyed hungry kids whose regular fare was stale crackers and a tin cup of mazzawatta tea.

Thick lips glistening with coconut oil from the dip and fall back, Boysie literally closed his eyes to conscience, pretending he was alone on the stoop enjoying his first meal of the day. Eyes closed, he tried to manoeuvre fork to mouth but soon discovered to his dismay, that "unsighted dexterity" was not one of his attributes and the misguided course of two pieces of yampie and a fleshy portion of saltfish soon found their way into three different mouths, none of which were his. This irrevocable loss did not recur for the rest of the repast as Boysie made certain that not only was mouth agape but eyes as well.

Moments later, a spotless plate was returned to Jestine (to be refuelled sooner than later) and Boysie braced back on the steps, an ugly belch escaping the loose lips. The skin-tight shorts were now causing some discomfort and the thread keeping the oblong patch of red satin on the buttocks soon gave way under the strain. B was not the least concerned with this minor inconvenience but stretched himself to full length on the steps, hands supporting his head as he gazed up at the darkening skies and watched as, one by one, the stars twinkled down upon a twilight world.

Soon the sounds of children's shouts and bickerings mingling with the remonstrating voices of their elders filled the tenement yard. It was time for a respite from the labours of the day.

Joyful shouts greeted the sudden appearance of three newcomers each armed with a musical instrument including mouth organ, banjo and fiddle. No sooner had the trio arrived than the raucous throbbing of "Alleluia!" resounded throughout the hot night air. The tenants were now on their feet, clapping and gyrating to the rhythmic beat of soul. At last Boysie succumbed to the beat and for the first time that day, was actually off his feet and joining in the jump up on the rough dirt ground of the tenement yard.

"Alleluia! Alleluia!" bellowed from 20 throats. The crowd was now one pulsating mass. All the dwellers were doing their thing except Mass Benjie, a wizened octogenarian who sat on his stoop, beating time with his worn-out cucumacca stick.

"Com an' jine the poco Miss Liza!" invited Becky, a woman of 62 addressing her next door neighbour, a spry white-haired damsel of similar vintage who was, at that time, peeping from her doorway.

"Ah comin' man! Ah comin'!" shouted Miss Liza, flinging off her crepe sole and sashaying down the concrete steps, the knobby corns on her big toe glistening from a hefty dose of camphorated oil.

The poco was still in full swing when Jestine hesitatingly peeped out from behind a curtained window. No longer able to resist the call of the wild, she followed Miss Liza's example and, having the advantage of being 10 years less for wear and tear over the latter, made the steps like an habitual steroid-user in a record 1.22 seconds.

The yard was still jumping with young and old when, in the midst of a gutsy "Alleluia!" Boysie caught sight of Jestine swaying and swooning to the fast pace of the beat.

He flew over grasping her arm in a vice-like grip. "Wat yuh tink yuh doin' woman? Yuh doan know is time fe me bickle? G'wan now before ah drop from starvation!"

Jestine, brow-beaten during the 11 years of common-law liaison with Boysie, left the dance meekly and resumed her permanent position in front of the coal stove in the still-sweltering kitchen. She was fuming inside but dared not show her feelings to Boysie, having suffered at his hands innumerable times for even the most trivial "offence". She was fed up with feeding up Boysie and standing over the hot stove 25 hours a day, cooking enough to feed the whole yard and waiting hand and foot on the lazy bugger.

But her hands were tied, she had no independent means and relied solely on Boysie for her keep. She slaved hard enough for the few scraps of food she was able to rescue from the potsful she cooked to shove down that bottomless pit. Despite the meagre returns, she had no alternative but to be completely beholden to him.

On the other hand, Boysie spent a small fortune on his pig-outs but he could afford it since he had planted a few patches of weed amongst the lettuce in the small vegetable garden in the yard shared by the other tenants. Little did they know that cuddling mysteriously under the succulent lettuce leaves was a small deposit from which every now and then a lucrative dividend provided Boysie with the soul food he was used to gorging himself with. It also provided him with a sense of security for, even though unemployed, he could afford to spend hours on end on the concrete steps, lost in day dreaming and nights on his back still on the steps, contemplating the Big Dipper and the Awesome mysteries of the Milky Way.

Back in the kitchen Jestine was depressed.

"Well," she addressed the copper pot, whose contents of black-eyed peas sat bubbling merrily towards its final stage, "Ah won' tek it much longa. The wretch soon fine out fe himself. Yuh wait till Mattie sen' me passage money fe Toronto! She sen' me paypah aready, is only the passage lef' fe sen'. When ah get to Toronto ah will be a somebaddy because dem have equity ovah deh, so Missa Boysie yuh betta nyam all you want now, the pahty ovah!"

She smiled to herself and, putting an extra dash of pork fat on the place, hurried down the steps and handed it to Boysie, a charming smile replacing the usual scowl on her coconut-oil spattered face.

Tina Young is a writer who works and lives in Toronto.

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Broken Bangles

by Eira Patnaik

She hurried after him with a cup of tea, but he bolted out the door, yanking the curtains apart, dragging them, wiping his oily hands on the carefully pleated fabric. She ran to the window, calling solicitously, "What time for *chai* (tea)?" He ignored her question, heaved his weight over a puddle, forcefully discharged a wad of phlegm into the morning air and disappeared round the corner.

Her eyes dropped. Her throat tightened. He was her husband and her lord, but how had she failed to serve him? She reprimanded herself for not boiling the water earlier. Had not her mother risen at 4:00 a.m. every morning to discharge her duties? She moistened a rag to wipe the drops of urine her lord had sprayed over the commode. Then she picked and folded his pajamas, which lay on the floor as he had discarded them, two holes surrounded by crumpled cotton, like two ill-shapened, deflated bellows. They hardly resembled the delicately tailored garment she had produced.

She looked forlornly at the empty space which had once been adorned by her Singer sewing machine. It evoked wistful memories. How proud her family had been as its metal glistened in the sunlight under the mango tree on her wedding day. Her father's greying handlebar moustache had an upward tilt that morning as he fulfilled the traditional obligations of a Hindu father towards his daughter. Her mother's face had shone with satisfaction. A ray of light had caught her *bindi*, making it scintillate as if it were a knot of crushed rubies. Nobody could downgrade her daughter, she thought, if she arrived with a sewing machine. Her brothers had smiled benignly, their raven hair slicked down with fragrant oil. The baby had clapped her chubby fingers, then rubbed her face, smearing the black *kajal* (mascara) over her cheeks. The red thread on her writs to ward off evil spirits had disappeared into the

crease of her chubby wrist. Her half-deaf, half-blind grandmother had grinned toothlessly when someone bellowed in her ear, "*Singer* Sewing Machine!" "*Singer* Sewing Machine!" Her grandfather, bent with age, had plucked a spray of mango blossoms, crushed them with his fingers and cupped his hand over her nose. She was lost in the soft-green fragrance with its perfume of promise, only to be awakened by a flutter of leaves overhead, as a pair of parrots rifled the budding mangoes. Yes, she mused nostalgically, even the cow had rejoiced. It sat there languorously, with dilated pink nostrils, chewing its cud in a regular slow rhythm. The morning had been bathed in sunlight; gold beams scattered their light, engaging shadows in a game of hide and seek.

In her happiness, she had trembled like a creeper, wanting to move indoors to savour the precious moment in silence. But, first, she must join her hands in prayer to the Elephant God, who, if pleased, would remove all obstacles from her way with one swing of his trunk. She touched the rusty bell which pealed just once: the string of mango leaves over the entrance scraped in the wind; she slipped into the house, hugging her joy in the secret of her heart.

That was a long year back, in her village. Now, her beggarly heart sat crouched, shut in a corner of their urban dwelling. The table on which her machine had stood sported a pack of playing cards. She picked them up, examining the parrots on the back of each card. Yes, their bodies were discoloured from use, but their beaks, red and shiny, were ready for fresh blood. These fifty-two parrots did not rifle mango trees; these were urban pillagers, big time racketeers; they had robbed her of her machine.

Her head drooped. She dragged herself to the confined space that was her bedroom. Out the window, a tree burned bare by the hot sun, stared at her spectrally. One lone leaf, hanging precariously from a twig, twisted and turned restlessly, then detaching itself and whirling in a macabre dance of death, it fluttered down into the unknown.

Her hollow eyes stared back at her from the mirror opposite the window. She must adorn herself for her lord, she mused. Memories of a folk pantomime floated before her eyes. The young wife exuberant with love braids fragrant, milky *chamelis* into her hair, fills her hair parting with *sindhur*, the red powder dust that betokens conjugal union, turns her face in an imaginary mirror to screw her diamond nose ring, then, leaning her ear against the door waits expectantly to hear the chariot wheels of her lord on the gravel. Disappointed, she hastens back to the mirror, outlines her eyes into deep, black almond pools, places a *tika* (mark on forehead) on her forehead, knots her *choli* (blouse) under her breasts, winds yards of seamless silk over her supple limbs, then trips to the window, craning her graceful

neck this way and that to see her lord's face on the horizon of her heart. Her *jhumkas* (cup-shaped earrings) swing gently as she trips this way and that, the starry gems in her pendant dance over her breasts, her bangles jingle in amorous restlessness, as she awaits the splendour of his coming. She sees him. Her heart swells and breaks into waves of song as she welcomes him with garlands of sweet chameli.

It was so in her village. But now in the city, her bangles made an indifferent sound, and her gold *jhumkas* — she wiped a tear — the parrots had pillaged those too. She fingered the gold on her red bangles. Why did the spots look like petrified fireflies? Why didn't they shine with a hundred lights? Why didn't the silver bells on her toe rings and anklets make a jingling cacophony of love sounds as did those of the young bride in the mime? Why was hers a music of toneless strings?

The door was shoved open with a thud. She heard her husband's throaty command: — "chai" (tea) and his friend's nasal rejoinder, *"mere leaa bhi"* (for me too). They yanked the table to the centre of the room, scraping its legs across the floor. The fifty-two parrots sprawled where the sewing machine had been. They began to move back and forth screeching at each other, banging their heads, clapping their bodies in violent embrace. Vulgar fingers shuffled them around, dealt them out, slapped them together, over and over again, till the evening melted into the night.

The wife waited, haunted by the poignant expectation of the mime. Rude voices penetrated the bedroom, her husband's throaty obscenities, his friend's nasal jubilations, the vulgarities of one, punctuated by the nasal ejaculations of the other. The fifty-two parrots panted on the table, their labour done. The couch creaked with the weight of a body flung on it. The bedroom door was shoved open and the cot sagged under a man's weight.

"Did *Laksmi* (goddess of wealth) bless you this evening?" asked the wife, half-lost in sleep.

"Yes, grandly, with choicest meats," said a nasal voice, its owner throwing himself on her, yanking her legs apart. The wife struggled. He gripped her narrow wrists, pinned her down with one leg, crushing the bangles, till broken fragments lit by a myriad lights, pierced her skin, staining the sheet with a spurt of blood. A moment later, her hands dropped as she heard the click of a key turn in the lock, and she realized the betrayal.

At the sound, her empty heart sobbed out in the broken music of a hollow reed.

Eira Patnaik is a professor of English at Frostburg State University in Maryland.

My Wedding Rings

by Monica Riutort

Yesterday, my daughter asked me for my wedding rings. Her father and I have been separated for almost a year, and he now lives in another country. In many ways, our separation has been much harder than our marriage. After 20 years of a difficult marriage, one accumulates layers of resentment that finally pour forth after so many years of repression. This was one of those times.

My husband and I had never been that invested in social convention, and the issue of whether or not to wear our wedding rings was a matter of little importance to us. The fact is that we wore them only for a very short period of time after our wedding. Both pairs of rings went to the bottom of the jewellery box and they stayed there, almost forgotten.

I don't recall thinking about our wedding rings very much over the years of our marriage, nor did I think about them much after we separated. But

sometimes when I see a friend of mine wearing her wedding rings on the index finger of her left hand, I ask myself why is she doing that? What does this act symbolize for her?

My mother has always worn her wedding rings. For her, it symbolized the promise she made more than 40 years ago to live with a man, my father, until she died. For my mother, also, wearing wedding rings is a status symbol. My mother is the daughter of an unwed mother and for her, the wedding rings symbolize the pride she feels of having children recognized in a legitimate marital arrangement in "civil society."

When I first decided to stop wearing my wedding rings, I did so for a very practical reason: the rings are very heavy and uncomfortable. The white-gold discoloured my fingers and made my hands perspire. When, later on in life, I became a fervant feminist, the wedding rings became for me a symbol of marital oppression — a symbol of being "owned" by another person. The exchange of rings involves the woman having the name of her husband inscribed on the inside — a gesture which suggested to me that I somehow became part of my husband's general property holdings. In a sense, wearing my wedding rings was, to me, symbolic of asking a slave to voluntarily embrace her chains.

Clearly, the marital institution enslaves both men and women, but not equally. There is no doubt that men lose some of their personal freedom, and some acquire total financial responsibility for support of the entire family. Today, some men even take responsibility for the psychological as well as the financial well-being of the family. Men, too, become slaves to marriage, but in a different way than women.

The matrimonial or marital relationship demands much more of women, however, most particularly because her identity depends upon it. Moreover, the family is one of the most powerful societal structures disempowering and subtly undermining women's rights. Under the guise of "being happily married — being socially legitimate", it is the woman who is chained to a destiny of a form of slavery. It is the woman who becomes a prisoner of a social commitment that is symbolized by the wedding rings. Over her shoulders lies the weight of the family structure. The raising of the children is seen asd women's responsibility, and, most particularly today, the financial security of the family has become a woman's responsibility, as well, Nowadays the financial security of the family often means for a woman, work inside and outside of the house. Moreover, it is often the woman who has to make sure the family budget (over which she has little control) is balanced, as well. In many instances it is the woman who will take on extra work or take on a second job to make ends meet. For woman, the "double-day" has become a classic dilemma. But, above all, it is to her that tdhe full

responsibility of the emotional well-being of the family falls — a well-being over which she has often little control. As the emotional caretaker of the family, she must make her role work often in the face of poverty, often in the face of abuse, and always in the face of a social structure which still privileges male elitism.

For many years I have worked with women who have suffered violence at the hands of the very men on whom they are emotionally and financially dependent. In many instances, these are women who are legally married to the men who hit them, sexually assault them, and belittle them. These men are their husbands. All these women wear their wedding ring on their left hand. Why?

I have to say that, because we live in a society which espouses "gender equality", men wear their wedding rings as an expression of honouring that ideal. But the meaning and symbolism attached to this gesture is quite different for men. When a woman removes her wedding ring, it is seen as a social transgression. She is being less than faithful; she has been "left" by her man; she is a social diviant, in other words. For a woman, removing a wedding ring from her finger means giving up her social identity. Wearing a wedding ring for man, however, connotes a different meaning. The wedding ring signifies ownership not just of the woman but of her services, perhaps even her subservience, to him. When a man removes his wedding ring, he, symbolically, has temporarily divested himself of these services. So, when a man removes his wedding ring, he is not divesting himself of a personal identity, but of a personal service.

For the woman, her destiny belongs to her husband. For the man, his destiny belongs to himself. As Simone de Beauvoir said over 30 years ago when she wrote *The Second Sex*, "Love 'tis for man a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence." Because a man can secure his own destiny, when a marital relationship is broken, the fault is seen as the woman's — she rejected her natural way of being in this world. After all, marriage is her destiny; emotional caretaking her calling. She is the one who stays behind with the children. She is the one supporting the household. She is the one assuming the marital debt. She is the one facing the debt collectors. Divorce challenges the old belief that "women and children come first." In fact, "looking out for number one" seems to be a more accurate description of the man's role in divorce, because, more often than not it is the man who jumps ship first. More often than not, it is the man who leaves his marital obligations behind. Why? Because, in the end, a man follows his own destiny and that is a destiny which does not include children and a home. A man's destiny is the world, and what is left behind is the wife, the children, the debts, and, the wedding rings.

When my older daughter told me that her father asked for the wedding rings because he wanted to sell them to buy a bracelet for his new wife, I had to first ask my daughter to repeat the sentence in full — I couldn't understand. After I listened to her repeat my husband's request, with a breaking voice, I told her NO! When she argued back that her father had the right to the rings because he had purchased them, I did not know what to say. That night I wept with a deep and profound sorrow.

My life, as with the life of many other women, is filled with contradictions. I have never worn my wedding rings. They have always symbolized for me, the oppression of women. I have no reason to keep them. And it is true that my husband bought them and paid for them with his own money. But the wedding rings are mine. I paid for them with my life: 20 years of my life.

There are many ways that women take control of their destiny; the opportunities present themselves often in the most bizarre manner. I, who always thought that wedding rings were like chains for a slave, would empower myself in a small but important way. I decided to keep my wedding rings.

Monica Riutort, is the manager of Regional Women's Health Centre in Toronto. She is an essayist and a short-story writer.

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