A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness

WRITINGS, 2000–2010

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her dreams, in her memories. Our rigid earthbound sense of the chronology of events is ridiculous in the face of the timelessness of what is after and before death. Is this the change I have feared, this living knowledge that we have no control over the hour nor the manner nor the fact of our deaths? Always, I have worried over the loss of control of my body, suffered great anxiety over confinement, cramped quarters, packed elevators, where I am unable to breathe.

I remember as a little girl my brother stuffing the pillow around my face. It was a game he played. He would only lift the pillow once I started to panic.

He would laugh.

As I age these anxieties increase. I wonder of courage, consider what real spiritual warriorship means when the smallest physical threats frighten me. Once as a child of eight, I stood fearless before a great wall of ocean arching high above me, diving auburn-head-first into its massive and luminous belly just before the wave broke. Today I do not venture beyond the wave’s breaking point at shoulder height. I do not venture deeper than I can touch bottom. I do not venture.

Months ago, I finally decided to see a behavioral therapist to help me handle a rising claustrophobia. My anxieties had not accelerated to a state of dysfunction, but I could feel the preoccupation intensify. It seems my fear grew in exact proportion to the requirements of my middle-aged: elder disabled parent, the bruising hearts of my school-aged children, my partner’s adult children taking so long to become adults; intimate deaths sudden and violent and senseless; and, of course, the “terrorism” and fear of terror brought on by this country’s international campaign of warring thievery.

So, I give the therapist a try. A nondescript middle-aged white woman with little emotional affect, she puts me through several weeks of do-it-yourself panic exercises inducing nausea, near-suffocation, and the utter dread of entrapment—all this only to expose myself to emotional responses I have suffered my entire life. The fear seems infinite, ordinary, and deeply, deeply human. I am one of those hundreds jammed into a nightclub in Rhode Island. A fire breaks out. I am scrambling for an open exit, stepping on faces to get there. I am one of the faces stepped on. I am she who momentarily considers a trip to the hardware store for plastic sheets and duct tape. “The Terrorists Are Coming! The Terrorists Are Coming!” I am that average of an American.

And then I stop.

I resist the impulse to react as our corporate leaders, who make foreign policy in their own interest, legislate. I drop the behavioral therapist and return to what I already know cures. I sit at my altar and, plain and simple, I pray for peace of heart, while all along I am forced to look at how deeply frightened I am, as if I were a kind of sponge for the hysteria that surrounds us globally. My fears seem so small and pathetic compared to threats of massive bombings, biological warfare, orphaned children. Still they are my fears and maybe through them I can learn courage.

The therapist was trying to teach me how to control my thoughts against death, but we do, all of us, die. And as I spent hours and hours looking at the small place of mind that conjures fear of death, I saw it as not essential to me, but a useless weapon I wield against that most profound and inevitable moment of change for each of us. The fear is so old in the making that it appears to be sewn attached to muscle. It is not. I endured my “therapy” because there was no spirit life there to catch my free fall of awareness, nothing to sustain the boundless knowing of what we are beyond fear.

How does one learn to live fully with an open-hearted, ever-present knowledge of our impermanence? I cannot pretend that death does not exist and in that knowing, cannot invent purpose beyond the simple daily practice of some kind of ethos of justice. Still, I suffer rage and irritation and regret and intolerance most days. Most days I am always forgeting that mantra: to simply walk awake in this world and to try and shape a life not directed by fear.

THE WARRING INSIDE

Maybe one of the greatest damages white feminism did to women was to convince us of our own victimization without at the same time requiring us to acknowledge our complicity in oppression and the ways in which we, ourselves, oppress. What feminism did teach women, and
what I find of ever-inventive relevance to women of color, is that the personal is political. I have written of this many times elsewhere, not in the effort to exalt some rigid self-referential identity politics, but to acknowledge that our bodies and our experiences are that complex site of conflict through which our political work is mediated.

In speaking from that personal place, and in considering the political questions regarding state-sanctioned death and its dealers—urban poverty and its consequent child abuse; the prison of drugs and apartheid-style education; illegal land occupation and war for profit—I am most concerned about my own inability to control the wanting inside me. My beloved and I speak almost daily about the cost of internal occupation. We witness it from the most mundane to the grandest displays of what the poet Lorna Dee Cervantes calls “that nagging preoccupation of not being good enough.” As Chicanos, I see it in the often timidez and assimilationist politeness of our writings. It is evident in our failure to put a Mexican museum in the heart of the barrio of San Francisco, where we all can afford it, instead of baring ourselves to some upscale downtown project catering to tourism and white folk. I bemoan it in the proliferation of Latino storefront charismatic evangelism instead of storefront political activism, equally charismatic. We are so colonized, Linda reminds me. And in this colony, our anger remains intimate, as it remains a disguise for our fear of loss, death, oblivion. The United States counts on the fact that people-of-color anger turns most violently against itself. We know gang and domestic violence, but struggle to find forms for our anger that result in creative organized action against the intersecting oppressive systems of the nation-state that maim and murder us.

Intersections: that juncture where all the roads of our identity—gender, race, class, and sexuality—converge. That juncture returns us first and always home. I make a right turn down the hallway and run into the sound of my son’s voice outside, fuming over some perceived inequity in the tetherball game he plays with his other nine-year-old compadres. I hear the familial fury in his voice and remember the frightening tone and volatile pitch of Linda’s son’s voice, almost twenty years older, hurled at her in a fit of seething rage. Mateo’s is a boy’s desperate heartache turned to a grown man’s violence: the violence of lost sons who find their way back home to blame and bruise us, their forever-never-enough mothers.

“It isn’t normal,” Mateo shouts, meaning his mother’s lesbianism. “No wonder I’m so f*cked up!” That was on a Monday. On a Friday night, his sister calls, hysterical, “He has a gun! He’s coming over!” And suddenly I have every doubt about the future of my people.

A tetherball fight is a small thing and not a small thing, not in the face of misplaced rage. Later that evening I tuck my son into bed, his head half-buried under the covers. He is the color of leña, an earthflower surfacing among the blanket of leaves (comforter, flannel sheet, pillow). We talk about anger, about needing some hole to dump all that unnameable inherited grief. I worry too soon for him that one day that hole could turn out to be a woman.

“I’m working on my anger,” I tell him. “Will you work on yours too?”

He murmurs a soft “yes.”

But I am desperate to convince him to resist this colonial legacy, passed down from one generation to the next.

He had witnessed this inheritance himself only days before, trapped inside my speeding car as I drove my parents home from a family gathering. Was it the glass of wine consumed by my mother’s fragile seventy-five pounds that allowed her to pull out all the stops, to show the distorted face of her rage even in front of her youngest, most querido nieto? My son sits quietly next to her in the backseat as she hurls her wild wrath against the easiest target, his grandfather. My father, genuinely blameless at that moment, sits shamed and silent in the front passenger seat. “You think you’re a man?” Elvira rages, “You’re not a man!”

At eighty-eight, my mother’s losses are daily and tremendous and humiliating. They are the misplaced glasses, the husband hiding out in his backyard office to avoid her litany of accusation. They are her baby sister, seventy-eight, who, unable to bear my mother’s gradual demise, no longer comes to visit; the younger brother who is physically unable to visit. They are the empty pocketbook because there is no longer any reason to carry anything: makeup, money, credit cards, identification. No one expects anything of her. She knows it.

Violence breeds violence. Anger has always run my life. How do I
teach conscientious nonviolence and whole acts of bravery at the same time?

Our girl-child is fucking up in math. Again. She has forgotten her homework. Again I am in a sudden rage because I am helpless to convince her to care because I know if she refuses to care that she too will repeat some pattern of body resistance: pregnancy, drugs, alcohol—because really and truly we do not believe we deserve better. But my rage cures nothing. I only watch her shrink before the violent volume of my voice, her eyes welling up with tears, and I can’t stop myself because my fear is stronger than my compassion.

How can we speak of violence against women of color without also naming our own violent acts? Psychic and physical. How do we become warriors of peace when we do not stop daily to question our gut, out-of-control reactions; when there is little spiritual discipline to our struggle; when we have forgotten to pray daily, as our foremothers knew, not out of some perverse martyrdom, but from a relentless commitment to compassionate action? I raise Xicana children consciously while I try to love my mate in the best way possible, while my mother closes these last years of her life in fits of fury. Some days it is the most work I can manage.

Inside the sweat lodge, my tears fall effortlessly. All that quiets my raging heart is the press of dirt beneath my palm. City dirt, rocky and brittle dry. This is women’s country. There is location for me here, here in this relationship with the used and broken, here in the unprejudiced world of the darkness and dirt. I pray the litany of our loss, in the effort to unearth what will not be spoken outside the dark womb of this rite. Where are the sons of our dispossessed nation? This question, my lament. How is it that they no longer regard the mother’s burden, the grandmother’s bulto, the sister’s carga of worry? How is it that they no longer know to lift it, if only to the other side of that hill over there, p’ília. That hill of another debted day, another dying elder, another orphaned child, cancer’d comadre, another war, another war. They refuse our lessons, reduce the female to the role of nurturer and render all our other sentiments as perverse, abnormal, taboo.

But the grandmother is righteously angered and tired and even queer. And time is running out, as she requires of her descendants painful, consciented acts of change. Instead her insolent sons respond, “But what does she know? We are discovering this red road, ourselves, for the first time. Her time is over.” Is this what the fathers—those aging, tattooed patriarchs—have taught their Native sons through their absence: a fear of and contempt for women’s knowledges? Hours later, we emerge from the lodge. My young son, having heard my tears in the darkness, asks, “Are you okay, Mom?” I believe he sees me and holds my pain in a simple honest way. “Maybe you should see the feelings doctor.”

Yes. The “feelings doctor” would ask me to tell the story of my fury toward the men of my nation. I would answer, pitifully, that I was required to make my brother’s bed every day since the day I was old enough to do it and even after that day when I found his sheets stiff and spotted wet with his own silent dreamings. I would say I learned early on that I was put on the planet to witness in him the life I would never have. I did not know how to read the stains in his sheets. I only knew they should not be mentioned but were allowed of boys growing into men and muscles and murder. For it was my death pronounced in those sheets. The death of my own desire, which showed itself in dreams more forbidden than anything that could be conjured in the pre-scripted scenarios of sex meted out to the men and women of my familia.

But that was a long time ago; and, again, it is not so long ago if at fifty I can still suffer the panic attacks of that censured girlhood. What truth will I not allow my body to know now, now that my moon begins to recede into a secund emptiness? The women elders have tried to tell us about it, these ways of knowing that can come with age, but this country, and even the men of our nation have told us otherwise; and so, we refuse (again) to listen to the body’s messages. We grow ill. We carry the diseases of our anger, our regret, our grief inside our middle-aged and aging women’s bodies. Our bodies are built to carry life. We imagine we can carry death too without it killing us. We can’t.