OUT OF OUR REVOLUTIONARY MINDS TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF REVOLT

HISTORY
In the beginning was the letter. A conversation between Nat Turner and a slave from the play, *Insurrection: Holding History.*

NAT: [Hammett,] you been studyin' 'em letters?
HAMMET: I been studyin' em.
NAT: let me see one 'em A's then.
(HAMMET moves to NAT's back.
With his Finger he begins Drawing the letter "A").
HAMMET (Slowly): ... arrow
... stick.
NAT: nah do me one 'em B's.
HAMMET (Complaining): ... stick.
... rock. rock.
NAT: do that one again and don't speak it this time. . . .
okay nah befo' we split i'm gon' teach you a new one.
(NAT begins drawing the letter "C" on HAMMET's back.)
moon
this letter "C."
(He point to sky.)
think "see" "moon."
"C."2

And the letter was made flesh. And became the word. And the word was "insurrection" because literacy was forbidden. "If you teach [a slave] how to read," Frederick Douglass's "master" admonished, "[t]hat would forever unfit him to be a slave."3 The slaveholder fears: to use the master's words is to take up the master's tools to destroy the master's house. However, a century and half later, poet Audre Lorde warns: "[B]ut the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."4 Maybe it is more complicated than we ever imagined: this practice of the pen.

For playwright Robert O'Hara, author of *Insurrection,* the bent back of Nat Turner is the metaphor for revolution, where the lash is repulsed and replaced by the letter. More than a hundred years later, literacy was still viewed as the best escape from our enslavement as people of color: that is, until the slaveholder of racist profiteering began to re-channel (and re-chain) youth of color energies into dreams of sudden wealth through professional sports contracts, hip hop and ghettos/barrio drug dealing.

Education was the mantra I heard growing up in the voice of my mother's counsel: "If I'd only had the education, hija . . . nothing could've stopped me." This is the rare gift the undereducated (my mother got no further than the third grade) can offer to the next generation: "ganas." The desire for that which was not their god-given (read: class-secured) right, and so all the more coveted. I, too, learned to covet education, not for the job out of the factory, but for a world wider than the confines of my neighborhood working-class rituals of work and worry. "No one had to make me do my homework," I remind my ten-year-old, slumped begrudgingly over her Oakland City Schools xeroxed handout homework (again).

In my innocence, as a first-generation college student, I imagined books as that stolen inner-world sanctum where one was allowed to contemplate: one's existence, the meaning of one's life, the source of one's suffering, el propósito de estar aqui, here inside what was then a blossoming female body. In the 1970s, I read imaginative literature because it was more complex than psychology, truer than history, and as hungry as any art; and as such, literature and its makers became my teachers. So I fell in love with literature, looked to literature for personal insights into political contradictions, as I also sought to extract from poems, novels and essays the political meaning of my most intimate personal pregnant.

Twenty-five years ago, however, there was little personal "me" to read. That "me," Chicana and lesbian, had not been invented. But race and...

*The truest thing said by Mr. Escalante, through the mouth of Edward James Olmos, in the film *Stand and Deliver*
racism had. Passion and perversion had. And hunger, always hunger. So, I riffled the pages of a 1928 edition of The Well of Loneliness for some remote acknowledgment of what could be defined as lesbian desire in the body of a ruling-class Englishwoman-wannabe-man. Or better, found my own "otherness" reflected in the hunched-backed queer figures of Carson McCullers novels. I did not know at that time, that she, too, was a lesbian. And for colored womanhood . . . I read Black women.

In 1975, with so little "me" to read, I wrote. To fill in the blanks. Hélène Cixous reminds us: "Writing and reading are not separate, reading is a part of writing. A real reader is a writer. A real reader is already on the way to writing." For many of us, that ability to read and write was not passed down as our family herencia. As Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes puts it, "We come from a long line of eloquent illiterates / whose history reveals what words don't say." My generation, coming of age in the 60s and early 70s, the age of affirmative action and bilingual education, may be the first to have suffered en masse the promise of union and threat of separation from our origins proffered by our collective literacy. But the proximity of our literacy to that eloquently illiterate generation that preceded us served as a continual reminder of our questionable and questioning relationship to the groingo world of arts and letters. It kept us humble before the work-worn faces and fingers of our parents and grandparents, but more importantly, critical of the unilateral authority of academic knowledge. Our crianza had proven there were other ways of knowing. "Survival is not an academic skill."  

Significantly, in those early years of Chicana cultural production, that one-generation-working-class proximity served as a kind of barometer to gauge the significance of our work in relation to the people we supposedly represented. If our "letters," i.e., our art and thought, continued to emerge from the flesh, as described in This Bridge Called My Back nearly twenty years ago, then our work would remain grounded in the mechanics/a body (our history, memory, instincts and intuitions) and would hold the promise of servicing the freedom of that body. Ideas will inspire insurrection, as O'Hara suggests.

The academy, then, as a house of ideas, should (theoretically) be able to house the study of insurrection, as thought by the body of the Chicana/o, the African and Asian American, the American Indian. Or so the plan was, thirty years ago. When the Third World Strike took place on the UC Berkeley campus in 1969, students demanded a "Third World College," a relatively autonomous organization within the larger university system. "Ethnic Studies" was the compromise. And compromise it was and continues to be as Ethnic Studies programs are required to adhere to the same set of cultural assumptions and values about knowledge—i.e., what is worth knowing and how one comes to know—as any other academic program on campus.

One does not pass through the university system unchanged. It is the intellectual factory of Corporate America, whose intention is to educate us to be law-abiding consumers-citizens. More insidiously, the university functions to separate us from the people of our origins, which in effect neutralizes whatever potential impact our education might have on them. The university allows a bourgeois liberalism, even a healthy degree of radical transgressive thought, as long as it remains just that: thought translated into the conceptual language of the dominant class to be consumed by academics of the dominant class, and as such rendered useless to the rest of us.

If the study of insurrection must occur within the conceptual framework and economic constraints of the patron-university—e.g., tenure tracking, corporate-funded grants and fellowships, publishing requirements, etc.—insurrection can never be fully conceived and certainly never realized. Lessons and strategies for sedition can be partially garnered from the texts made available at the university, but our most defiant thoughts—those profoundly intuitive insights, those flights of the unrestrained imagination—generated through life's lessons and remembered history can never be fully explored or expressed in their original tongue at the university. By the time we have succeeded in translating "revolution" to adhere to appropriate academic standards, it ceases to be revolutionary. Then where do we find the teachers and students of revolution? Today, Ethnic and Feminist Studies programs across the country are, for the most part, full members of the academy (while still experiencing discrimination), but as such have been required to abandon their radical agendas. Again, Lorde's words resonate here: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."
I know that most of the students of color I teach at the university turned to books for the same reasons I did. Most of them have a love for language and ideas and an innate sense of social responsibility that was, in part, inspired by books that responded in radical ways to the contradictions and inequities in their lives. Kafka writes:

I think we ought to only read the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we are reading doesn’t wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? . . . We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into the forest far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.

A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. My question is, how many of such books are our students still reading? How many of such books are still left unwritten by us, Chican@/Lesbian/Native, when we aren’t supposed to be whole bodies, with our cultural histories intact, doing the reading and writing?

When the Chicana writer sits down to table with tinta or text in hand, she brings the history of “eloquent illiteracy” with her. The body of her literature is not only decoded from those imported black glyphs pressed upon the dead leaves of American trees, it is also experienced spontaneously from the home-grown language of cuentos and canto and a philosophy that resides within the physical body of history. Why should 21st-century radical thought require such separation from its most regenerative source, the body of our history and our arts? And yet, this is precisely the lament of most poets and politicians who have “darkened the doorways” of the academy. Imaginative literature and the arts as expressions of the body, i.e., the whole organism of the Chicana/a, have become, as my friend Alberto Sandoval suspects, merely “a pretext for doing” theoretical work. Further, most artists are habitually banished from the campuses and conferences where the theoretical discussions of our art occurs. We don’t have the teaching credentials.

---

**Body**

At the “Crossing Borders” conference at The City University of New York, that same Alberto Sandoval—poet, Politico, and scholar—referred to his tender battle with AIDS, stating, “Alberto had become a body.” He spoke of the dis-ease ironically, as a kind of ally in his relentless reckoning between his physical self and the life of the mind. AIDS was the rude awakener that put his entire academic life into question. He openly admitted a kind of contempt toward the academy, which is, by definition to him and Webster, “theoretical . . . without practical purpose or intention,” and as such, remains incompatible to the body and its needs.

So, AIDS gave Alberto a body and as such, practical purpose. He states: “I am dying to write. I am not dying to be published. It is a popular misconception that to be published is to achieve immortality. For me, immortality is in the moment of writing, an act that confirms I am alive.”

In Alberto’s daily confrontation with death and in his survival of the assaults the academy has visited upon his eroded body, Alberto has uncovered an enormous amount to teach us. But does the academy want to hear the dying’s lessons, especially if those lessons are coming from an HIV-infected gay man of color?

If the academy, in its very mission, denies the body, except as the object of theoretical disembodied discourse, The Body with a capital “B,” then what is the radically thinking “othered” body (the queer, the colored, the female) doing there? What skills does the academy offer for our survival? Is not the academy the locus of cultural genocide for non-dominant cultures? Ethnic Studies has not ensured the cultural survival of U.S. peoples of color; it has mostly served to produce a cadre of professors of color unwittingly wielding the whiteman’s tools to, as Alfred Arteaga puts it, “define [our] world for the benefit of the colonizer.”

“See how we suffer, patria . . . .” The body has been lost in the language of the academy because Art (as well as the Art of Writing) and the social-political movements it incites—that meeting place of mind and matter—cannot find expression there.
LANGUAGE

I am a writer. Language matters to me. I am acutely aware of those moments when language illuminates, gives body to something which was before vaguely known to me, like a dream that stays, but stays distant, indecipherable. I am grateful when words teach me something I forgot I knew. I am equally aware of the times when language kills, diminishes, truncates the creative impulse and the dream of change. I know when someone uses language to do violence against me. In response, language becomes my form of self-defense, a mechanism of survival.

I am reminded of N. Scott Momaday’s story about the “man made of words,” the Arrowmaker whose survival is utterly dependent upon language. It is late at night. He is alone in his tepee with his wife. A human shadow appears on the other side of the tepee wall. If the shadow understands the arrowmaker’s language, there is nothing to fear. If the shadow doesn’t respond when the Arrowmaker addresses him in his Native tongue, the shadow will receive an arrow into his heart.

Language and survival. Is this not still the metaphor for our own survival, seeking out those whose language we can trust? I put my faith in the stories, that language of the body, where the word is made flesh by the storyteller. “Words are intrinsically powerful,” Momaday writes. “They are magical, by means of words one can bring about physical change in the universe... To be careless in the presence of words... is to violate a fundamental morality.”

I think often of the immoral waste of words in academic life: the so-called “postcolonial” (postmodern) methods of inquiry one must employ to critique the neocolonial; the foreign eurocentric sources that must be cited to substantiate one’s own so-called unauthorized (what may be mutu-

In Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa aptly describes the “border” as a “1,950-mile-long open wound.” She writes: “The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” That was fifteen years ago. Her meditations on the border emerged from her direxperience-living en la frontera. Her metaphorical imaginings of the border genuinely grew out of a kind of poetic prophecy of the world’s citizens in the state of mass migration, where geopolitical boundaries between nation-states define less and less who their inhabitants are ethnically and culturally. This text, visionary in many respects, gave all of us something to think about. And write about. And teach about. And use as titles for conferences. And think and write some more about. Until the academic appropriation of Anzaldúa’s “border” term morphed the concept of “border” and “borderlands” into a kind of 1990s postmodern homeland for all displaced peoples of mixed blood and mixed affinities; a mythologized location, much easier to inhabit, ideologically and much more comfortable politically than that oh-so-70s Nation of Aztlán, the realization of which would mandate armed conflict. In contrast to an appropriated, amorphous borderland, Tejana writer Norma Cantú describes her border home-town of Laredo as a police state, where five kinds of law enforcement agencies patrol the streets: the INS, the border patrol, the Texas rangers, the city police and the state police. This is a real geopolitical “choque” between two worlds, becoming the site of increasing surveillance, human rights abuses and concomitant terror. The border is not the idealized metaphorical site of a new hybridity. Laredo, Nogales, Juarez, Mexicali, Calexico, Tijuana, National City are not figures of speech. They are first and last physical locations of great economic, social and cultural strife. Still, it is all for a purpose: this facile use of language. The “border” as a metaphor poses no threat to the cultural and economic dominance by Euro-America.

Moral words, as Momaday tells us, “can bring about physical change in the universe.” In an unjust society, moral words would bring about justice. In a slave society, moral words would bring about freedom. At least a 21st century abolitionist movement. And this is what the academy must avert, the cultivation of moral, i.e., ethically responsible words. Words that require a radical revisioning of how, why and what we learn and who gets to decide.

In academic life, theoretical language is, as a rule, profane. It is used to obfuscate rather than illuminate. It does not bring about physical change in the universe, except an increased deadening...
ing. My own "unauthorized" opinion, one garnered not through degrees, but through twenty years of non-tenured university work, is that some of the finest "colored" minds in this country are being held captive within the university system. Moral words would free them from their enslavement to Western Thought. Free words would bring about revolutionary change. Free words are sacred. That's why we aren't allowed to say them in a place donde nuestro sagrado is not respected.

"Go home to your Maya grandmother," I tell my Guatemalan-born-U.S.-raised Stanford undergraduate. "She'll teach you what you want to know. You don't have to suffer their words any longer."

Still, we tell ourselves (queers, feminists, colored folk) that we are here at Stanford, at Yale, at Dartmouth, at Duke, at Cal, to engage in radical re-visions of history in the effort to construct a radical agenda for the future, once we get their theory down.

From Intersaction: Holding History, a dialogue between a graduate student and his 189-year-old ex-slave great-great grandfather (the character of Mutha Wit speaks as the voice of Ron's grandfather):

RON: I just gotta finish my thesis.
MUTHA WIT: What's a thesis?
RON: It's a long paper I gotta write.
MUTHA WIT: Then what do you do after you done wrote it?
RON: Then I gotta show it to a bunch of white folks.
MUTHA WIT: Then what?
RON: Hopefully I can get paid like one of them white folks.
MUTHA WIT: Then what?
RON: . . . Gramps . . .
MUTHA WIT: Then what?
RON: Then nuthin. What you mean then what? Then I'm done. I got a job. I live, become fabulously rich and mildly famous.
MUTHA WIT: Then what?
RON: Then I drop dead I guess I don't know.20

**Third Wave?**

Some Chicana and Chicano scholars, in their effort to politically justify their philosophical engagement with the postmodern paradigm, refer to their turn-of-the-century academic inquiries as the "Third Wave" Movement, a movement of scholars. For me, it is impossible to think of the theoretical work being done on campuses today by Chicano/as as the "third wave" of any movement, when it seems so clear that the gains of our "first" movement, if we consider the "movimientos" of the 60s and early 70s as such, were systematically dismantled by the Reaganism of the 80s and brought to a complete halt in California through the anti-Latino legislation of Governor Pete Wilson in the 90s. Further, reforms made during those years of movement activism were just that: reformist gains subject to conservative-era losses, liberal concessions within the context of an unaltered system. So, as far as I can see, the Chicano Movement barely got started. The one public television documentary series on the subject of Chicanos depicts the Movement as beginning in 1965 and ending in 1972. It briefly examines UFW organizing, the school walkouts, Tijerina's Land-Grant movement, Corky Gonzales, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, and provides a few passing shots of Brown Berets. All this reflects the sum total of movement activity. Seven years. That ain't a movement. It's the beginning of a movement that went into a kind a deadening recession, with periodic ruptures of rage rising to the surface, like the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992.21

In the meantime, feminism and gay and lesbian liberation took to the streets. (Was this the second wave?) Although they marched down different neighborhood blocks, there were places of convergence for Chicano/a and queer folk, male and female. This history of raised consciousness and activism will fundamentally impact any viable resurgence of a Chicano Movement.

In the meantime, a few colored folk have made strides within capitalism. So what? There are continued assaults against our Spanish surnamed selves and the future of our youth: anti-affirmative action, anti-bilingual

---

1 These outpourings of collective anger, catalyzed by gross executions of injustice, like the Rodney King verdict, are not the product of a strategic process, i.e., a verifiable political movement, but they do bring public visibility to our collective condition and force a response from the powers that be.
education; violent campaigns against immigrant rights, and most recently against our youth and queer folk in the passage of California Propositions 21 and 22. There is continued systematic collective amnesia about our Indian selves and relatives, the theft of what was once our México and before that and still Tierra Tarahumara, Yaqui, Seri, Pima, O'odham, …

No, I don't believe the movement of young scholars on our university campuses is setting the stage for radical action. (On our more cynical days, my artist friends and I describe the "movement" as no more than shuffling from office to office and conference to conference.) I believe the best of our young academics are struggling to get their Ph.D.s with their original tongue, cultural beliefs and basic humanity intact. At times I wonder how equipped they are for a world of real political confrontation when, at places like Stanford and Cal, they have been separated from the streetlife of their communities. They know the inside of libraries and school classrooms, the honors tracking system has seen to that, where they study the whiteman's culture at the cost of separation from their own. The question is: are they prepared to return home? Is the university system not a kind of "post-modern Indian boarding school for Raza"? This is certainly not the case for all Raza students, students who have squeezed out an intellectual life in spite of a childhood that centered around economic survival and the threat of violence: incest, wife battering, gang-related death, police brutality, la migra and basic poverty. I've seen these students, whose retention in the university is the hardest to secure, because they cannot integrate into their academic discourse the greatest source of their knowledge: life experience.

This alienation from the university is not the exclusive terrain of twenty-year-old undergrads, but affects faculty and middle-aged students as well. I can't help but consider here the two suicides that occurred among the Latina Stanford community in the last two years: Lorea Romera, a Chicana, who died in 1997, followed by Cuban-born Raquel Mendeta, in 1999. Lorea was a "junior" faculty member of the English Department and Raquel, a returning Ph.D. student. Both Latinas. Both queer. Both...
mind. Do not repress. And for that I should be grateful. But the words he says... they have me awake at 3 o'clock in the morning.

The night before, he stands upon a small stool to brush his teeth, dear-warm flannel pajamas draping him, shoulder to cackle. He keeps one ball of feet to the other, barely balancing... a constant fidget. We discuss "race" before going to bed: "I lock down at my hands," he says, "and I was afraid in the beginning that they were going to kick me out." "Who?" I ask. "Where?" He means his private after-school program, mostly white middle-class kids. Three months later and he still remembers the feeling. I remember, too, him refusing to speak Spanish for fear that, too, would distinguish him from the others, "kick him out."

Three times in the same conversation, my son explains his difference from other kids by referring to himself as Black. Because at his public school where he attends kindergarten, not-white means Black. In the meantime, I'm on the phone to the school board, petitioning to get my son transferred out of our neighborhood school, not to separate him from Blackness, but to situate him in Latinidad. Still, better identifying Black than white, I think: for a Chicano kid it is a stronger position of survival, that self-acknowledgement as a "colored" child in this America. I make another mental note: it's the after-school program that's gotta go.

Months later, I do manage to get Rafael transferred to a Latino elementary school within the same Oakland school district. A month after being there, he is still without books, in a classroom with no windows, speaking English with second-graders who do not have first-grade skills. This was the first/second grade combination class I elected to transfer him into after discovering that the Nicaraguan Spanish-speaking first-grade teacher conducted her classroom according to a 200-year-old Mission model of acquiescent obedience. Passing her classroom, I always assumed it empty. How could any one manage to keep 30 six-year-olds that quiet? Needless to say, I removed my son from the school and, without other options, returned him to the public school where he was before. I was humbled by the process, realizing the Chicano school I sought for my son no longer existed, not locally anyway. I was looking for the Revolutionary Escuela of the 70s, where my age-peers had sent their children, kids who managed to get into Cal, Stanford, Harvard, UCLA with their culture and sanity intact. But the 70s was a long time ago, or so it seems.

When my son was to enter preschool two years earlier, I had encountered the same problem in San Francisco. The only Latino preschool available required parents to be in a lower economic bracket than mine. Although I, of course, support culturally specific educational programs for low-income Latino families, why is it middle-class Latinos can't even pay to get their kids a Latino-identified education? Since such programs do not exist, we are usually forced to send our kids and our money to white programs, like the one from which my son felt so alienated. In my search for bilingual/bicultural education for my son, I was reluctantly forced to conclude: the only way you can "stay Latino" in the state of California (at least in the Bay area) is to "stay poor." It appears that class ascendency for the Latino/Chicano requires our hispanization at best and our agringación at worst.

The construction of identity. My baby boy trying to make his way as a Mexican child in a society where Black is divided from white and the rest of us are required to fall inside that great divide. So who's gonna break our fall? What are Chicanos doing to counter the cultural poverty of this system of education? With the continued reduction of bilingual/bicultural education, where are our cultural schools? Schools of philosophical thought?

I fantasize a calenca, a 21st-century Chicano cultural school based on indigenista and xicanafeminista filosofía. A kind of "Sunday school" for Chicanitos as but all week long Asian and African Americans do it. I flip through the pages of those freebie parent newspapers: Japanese schools, Chinese schools, Jewish cultural programs, even some Afro-centric alternative education programs. These communities seem to understand that cultural pride is the key to strong self-esteem and ultimately to success in the United States. I'm not looking for capitalistic-defined success for Razia; but I am looking to eradicate inferiority complexes disguised in macho bravado. I'm looking for an alternative to prison and teenage pregnancy as statements of cultural resistance.
REVOLUTIONARY BODIES
I came of age with images of brave, Brave in the face of scared. Student sit-down strikes, Civil Rights activists bludgeoned by police, Chicanos picketing lettuce fields, Vietnam protests, Black Panthers. So many billy clubs, young faces streaked with blood, burning flags, riot gear and sharp shooters peering off of inner-city and campus rooftops. Images of violent protest; that is, protest which produced a violent response from a violent culture. Martin Luther King was moving from an integrationist nonviolence to a critique of imperialism when they violently murdered him. Because Martin Luther King was not going to be happy with “Negroes” eating from a poisoned pie. A piece of the American Dream was not. The Dream.

Real political struggle always poses the threat of violence, danger real and imagined. The Chicano Moratorium of 1970 (which I witnessed ten miles away on television news reports) was real and highly imagined. Real heads were beaten in, real girls my age were dragged away by helmeted, baton-swinging police. I imagined myself so near and far from them.

There are less dramatic dangers, visible and invisible and many fronts of struggle. But always hard sacrifices are made ... for change:
* Undocumented workers challenge the eviction of a fellow worker. Block the entrance to the factory. Stand face-to-face with police. Danger.
* A woman hangs off a redwood in a protest of protection. Chainsaws buzz in the background. Danger.
* It’s 1968 and he burns a draft card. It’s 1998, she won’t scab in the strawberry fields. She needs a job. Bad.

I think the only real dangerous moves I’ve ever made in my life were out of necessity, so they felt not very dangerous at all. When you have time to think about it, you think better of it, you think yourself out of danger. You don’t move. So sometimes it’s better not to think at all. At times, I ask myself, have I ever really been brave? Words have hurt me. The worst. Words by lovers, brothers, intimates. Words that were hurled at me because I spoke up. First. At all.

Getting arrested in protest against an unconscionable war was not brave. It was performance. A rehearsed act of resistance, as Valdez has written. What wasn’t rehearsed was my claustrophobia. I didn’t know how jammed we’d be in the police van. I hadn’t thought about being restrained, how the plastic of the make-shift handcuffs behind my back would turn my hands swollen and blue and make me want to crawl out of my skin, being confined so. But all that was an accident of courage. And basically not dangerous.

It was brave of me the first time to sit down in a circle of women of color and say “we” without apology, brave each time. Brave to do so without titles of books in my hand. Like proof. Of what? Authenticity? Belonging?
* Brave giving the enemy ammunition to hurt me, my child. I am a lesbian mother and practice both out loud. Brave to leave my lover of eight years.
* Brave to tell my mom I was a lesbian. Brave at 22.
* Brave to refuse to give up my wages to my boss who decided, when his business was failing, he wanted to collectivize all our earnings. Brave at 27 to be the only one.
* Brave to eat medicine when I was afraid and didn’t know nothing.
* Brave to speak Spanish like a fool in front of people who knew plenty. These are pitiful examples.
These are me.

I’m scared all the time and when I am not scared, there is no chance for change. In me. That’s how I teach writing. “Go toward the fear,” I tell my students. “Feel its pulse. Let it speak to you.” Bravest in my writing. But that’s not the same as action, only that writing can sometimes force action in yourself and others. Sometimes. Sometimes you read or write words you got to live up to. Never know what it’s going to dig up. Dig up the dirt of memory, the dirt of land. Make you want some for us. Make you fight to have it.

THE PEDAGOGY OF REVOLT
Revolt: verb. To refuse to acknowledge someone or something as having authority over you.
I have taught professionally for twenty years. I have taught high school, poets-in-the-schools, the Marxist school, myriad youth programs, so-

184/CHERRIE L. MORACA
called “gang-prevention” and “high-risk” programs, theater for queer youth and immigrant women, writing groups for Indigenous and other women of color, and playwrights’ groups. I’ve served as an adjunct instructor (mostly) in Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, Creative Writing, Drama, and in Spanish and English Departments from the “country club” of Stanford University to the innercity campuses of community colleges and state universities on both coasts.

I love teaching and remain in conflict with it. Fundamentally, it takes me away from my primary vocation, which is to write. To make art. I teach well, I believe, and chose teaching over political activism in the fourth decade of my life, because I couldn’t do both and write . . . and be a mama . . . and support an extended family. One could effect political change, I believed, through teaching, while making some semblance of a living. Now, I wonder. Over the successive years of teaching, I have found that the profession, in its increasing corporatization, has moved further and further away from a radical agenda. Since I have been situated primarily in Ethnic Studies or Women’s Studies, I have witnessed academic programs that emerged out of political struggle separate themselves from that struggle, even at a time when assaults against people of color and our right to education have escalated to point of verifiable government-instituted racist paranoia.

A movement doesn’t happen in a book, but it doesn’t happen without books either.27

Through the writing of this essay, I have been conscious of the possibility of my ideas being mis-interpreted as a kind of anti-intellectualism. Bueno, should my words be misconstrued as such I have no one to blame but my poet’s passion to the speak the unspeakable, expose the Academic Emperor in all his nakedness, even at the risk of the generalization which belies the exception and the exceptional. There are exceptional students and exceptional faculty. There are remarkable moments where “critical consciousness,” as described in Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed,28is awakened, where the most visionary and dangerous of faculty inspire thoughts that directly affect the bodies sitting in front of them. The bodies think. They stand up. They are not afraid of freedom. They act.

In recent years, students of color can’t help but be aware of the increase in the state-sanctioned violation of their right to an education and a future. Last winter, with the introduction of yet another assault on the rights of youth (Proposition 21), students took to the streets and filled campus plazas in protest. Most impressive was students’ willingness to connect Props. 21 and 22—and the struggle against racist and homophobic legislation—to basic shared human rights concerns. I attribute this to the coalition-activism initiated by queer students of color. It was their bodies, after all, that provided the living connection between the issues.

The revolutionary body The revolutionary body that reads and writes.

I saw it happen. In April 1999, in recognition of the 30th anniversary of the Third World Strike at UC Berkeley, students occupied Barrows Hall to protest the “state of regression” of Ethnic Studies at the Berkeley campus. Stating that “the systematic decline of [Ethnic Studies] programs [was] causing a slow and steady death” of the Department, protesters demanded a substantial increase in funding and faculty for Ethnic Studies to be implemented immediately and continued over a five-year period. To press their demands, students held daily protests and nightly vigils, suffered mass arrests for civil disobedience, and maintained a 10-day hunger strike until the administration was forced to concede.

The rescue of Ethnic Studies is not, in and of itself, revolutionary. It does not alter the racist system of higher education in this country. It is, however, an impressive act of revolt, requiring a radical consciousness. It challenges the unilateral authority of the university to determine what and how we learn and by whom.29

In the 60s, from the Third World Strike to the school walkouts in East Los Angeles in 1968, education remained the fundamental concern of young Raza. Because education was about the future of a people. And we saw ourselves as such, as a people distinct from mainstream America, requiring culturally specific methods of intellectual inquiry. Questions were raised then that remain unanswered because we have not, as the Marxists mandate, continued to question the question. However, these acts of revolt in the last few years by students of color and their allies have

1 This was especially true for the Native American Studies, which had been reduced to having no full-time faculty.

186/CHERIE L. MORACA

LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS/187
given me renewed hope that possibly the “questions” have not been buried forever beneath the depoliticized rhetoric of postmodernism.

What is worth knowing? Who are our teachers? Where do they reside within our communities? How do we find and support them? How does one acquire knowledge? How does knowing increase within our communities? How do we best learn? And of course, for what purpose, what ends, do we educate ourselves and our children? The system of education in this country from the public elementary school to the private university will not, by definition, permit a culturally autonomous approach to these inquiries. As Freire points out, “It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education.”

When I think of my own Chicana/a people and the state of California’s betrayal of its soon-to-be-majority Latino population, I lose patience with liberal attempts at remedy. I’ve come to believe that the less we see ourselves as a nation of people, the less we will be able to define the intellectual, cultural and educational needs of our community.

EDUCATING A NATION

Today I am writing Nation. It is not a dirty word.

You choose the right word.
Mestizo.
Raza.
Border.
Hybrid.
Nation.
Sovereignty.

You choose the word most difficult to swallow and that’s the one you gotta learn to eat. Eat to learn anything new; that’s the one that holds the most potential for a real education. That’s the one that takes guts, the one that threatens our middle-class-secured positions, the one that puts our lives in danger.

A North American Indian woman is kidnapped and murdered crossing the borders of nation-states. And the nations of people within those borders—Menomine and U’wa, Chicana and Hawaiian—cry out in outrage. “The body of [Ingrid] Washinawatok, 41, and two others were found bound and blindfolded Thursday in a field just across the Arauca River in Venezuela... All the victims were shot multiple times with 9mm weapons.”

My friend Ingrid had “ignored the State Department’s warnings to stay away from rural Colombia.” She went anyway because the U’wa people asked her, in the traditional way, to come. She could not refuse. She had gone to Colombia, according to a family spokesperson, to develop an indigenous-based school curriculum for the tribe. Ingrid, in her many roles as an activist, had instituted models of pedagogy where the cultural integrity of indigenous people is preserved and honored. You have a belief. You dedicate your life to the realization of that belief. That’s brave.

Ingrid believed in sovereignty, complete sovereignty of mind, body, spirit, nation. Sovereignty was her most dangerous word. Months before her death, she wrote: “Europeans relegate sovereignty to only one realm of life and existence: authority, supremacy and domination. In the Indigenous realm, sovereignty encompasses responsibility, reciprocity, the land, life and much more.” Ingrid left her family, a son and a husband, to make good on her beliefs, to assist other Indigenous peoples in creating models of education in accord with their own traditions. It was a dangerous time to make the trip. For several years, the indigenous U’wa have been in protest against oil exploration by Occidental Petroleum Corporation on their ancestral lands in northeast Colombia and have met with US-sanctioned violence from the Colombian government. Ingrid could’ve stayed home, like the “officials” had advised, she could’ve minded her own business. She didn’t. That’s brave.

Nationhood. I stay up nights and wonder. If sovereignty could be realized, just the way Ingrid wrote about it, well, just maybe there’d be an

* Lahi’em’e Gay (Navajo Hawaiian) and Terence Freitas (California).
actual Chicana body to name and some land to claim to share. Ingrid
returned home to her Menominee Nation in a black body bag. No
American flag draped over it. At least that much was true. The United
States of America was not her nation.

"Perhaps the greatest stories," Scott Momaday writes, "are those which
disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our
well-being." This is Ingrid's story. The greatest stories ever told. The
story about a woman who got herself killed by practicing what she
preached. Somebody who put into practice the art of teaching people how
to teach themselves through their own cultural symbols, languages, values.
The U'wa are not a people unconscious of their oppression. The invitation
to Ingrid and her acceptance was a reciprocal gesture between peoples
who viewed their survival as integrally interdependent and who viewed
education from an indigenous perspective as critical to that survival.
To teach is to empower. And to teach the oppressed in their own language
with their own tools is to create (or in the case of the U'wa, sustain) an
insurrectionist. Still the most valorous job I can envision.

Do we have to die to be teachers of race? I want to think not. I want to believe
that our pedagogical and artists' acts of resistance can do some damage to
the cultural hegemony of Euro-America and, in the process, do some
good for the growing consciousness of our nation. So I teach Chicano/a
Nation in my own language.

I am trying to find the words. I am learning to spell revolution.

---

LA DANZANTE

1

I dream red
since our return
from cactus-stone and full white
moon
light I awaken to red
wet between your dusted thighs.

Was it a birthing
or a death
you danced
days
ago;
the measured step, toe
to pebbled earth
knee rising to heaven
down again this time
back to ground
again

we walk.

2

we talk about roads,
the white ards of native seed
has planted the memory
in Indian ink
across the broken-edged blades
of her back
down to butt bone