

hispanic, chicano, chink, oriental, asian, disadvantaged, special inter-
 est group, minority, third world, fourth world, people of color, illegal
 aliens - oh yes about them, will the U.S. government recognize that
 the Founding Fathers (you know George Washington and all those
 guys) are this country's first illegal aliens. **all right!!!!**
We are named by others and we are named by ourselves.

Epilogue...

Following writing most of this, I went to visit my home in South
 Dakota. It was my first visit in eight years. I kept putting off my visit
 year after year because I could not tolerate the white people there and
 the ruralness and poverty of the reservation. And because in the eight
 years since I left home, I came out as a lesbian. My visit home was
 overwhelming. Floods and floods of locked memories broke. I redis-
 covered myself there in the hills, on the prairies, in the sky, on the
 road, in the quiet nights, among the stars, listening to the distant yelps
 of coyotes, walking on Lakota earth, seeing Bear Butte, looking at my
 grandparents' cragged faces, standing under wakiyan, smelling the
 Paha Sapa (Black Hills), and being with my precious circle of relatives.

My sense of time changed, my manner of speaking changed, and a
 certain freedom with myself returned.

I was sad to leave but recognized that a significant part of myself has
 never left and never will. And that part is what gives me strength - the
 strength of my people's enduring history and continuing belief in the
 sovereignty of our lives.

31

"... And Even Fidel Can't Change That!" Aurora Levins Morales

1

Cherrie, you asked me to write about internationalism, and at first it
 made sense... I'm a latin woman in the United States, closely involved
 with Latin American movements in the rest of the continent. I *should*
 write about the connection. But when I tried, all I could think was: No,
 write about the separation.

2

For me the point of terror, the point of denial is the New York Puerto
 Rican. My mother was born in New York in 1930, raised in Spanish Har-
 lem and the Bronx. I represent the generation of return. I was born deep
 in the countryside of Puerto Rico and except for four years when I was
 very young, lived there until I was 13. For my mother, the Barrio is
 safety, warmth. For me, it's the fear of racist violence that clipped her
 tongue of all its open vowels, into crisp, imitation British. She once told
 me her idea of hell was to be a single mother of two children under five
 in the South Bronx. I'm afraid of ever knowing what she meant.

Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with
 the kids who called me "Americanita," but I stayed on the safe side of
 that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom,
 not spic - living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the
 dark, bad city kids in Nueva York.

3

The point of terror, of denial, the point of hatred is the tight dress
 stretched across my grandmother's big breasts, the coquettish, well
 made-up smile: grandmother, aunt and greataunts all decked out in
 sex, talking about how I'm pretty, talking about how men are only
 good for one thing, hating sex and gloating over the hidden filthiness
 in everything, looking me over, in a hurry to find me a boyfriend, and
 in the same breath: "you can't travel alone! You don't know what men
 are like... *they only want one thing...*" Women teaching women our
 bodies are disgusting and dirty, our desires are obscene, men are all
 sick and want only one sickening thing from us. Saying, you've got to
 learn how to hold out on 'em just enough to get what you want. It's the
 only item you can put on the market, so better make it go far, and
 when you have to deliver, lie down and grit your teeth and bear it,
 because there's no escape.

Oh my God!

Shit? why?

How much this is
 all true!

4

And yet, I tell you, I love those women for facing up to the ugliness there. No romance, no roses and moonlight and pure love. You say pure love to one of these women and they snort and ask you what the man has between his legs and is it pure? I love these women for the bitch sessions that pool common knowledge and tell the young wife: "Oh, yes, the first time he cheated on me I tried that, too, but he just beat me. Listen, don't give him the satisfaction. The next time..." These women don't believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond, the inviolable privacy of the husband-wife unit. The cattiness is mixed with the information, tips. The misery is communal.

5

Claustrophobia. A reality I can't make a dent in... because it's the misery that's communal. The resistance is individual and frowned upon. It rocks the boat. How many times has a Latin woman stood up for me in private, then stabbed me in the back when the moment comes for the support that counts. How many times has a Latin woman used me to bitch to and then gone running to men for approval, leaving me in the lurch. The anger is real and deep: You have forced me to turn out of my own culture to find allies worthy of the name; you have forced me into a room full of Anglo women who nod sympathetically and say: "Latin men are soooo much worse than Anglo men... Why the last time I was in Mexico, you couldn't walk down the streets without some guy... It must be so hard for you to be a Latin feminist..." And not to betray you in the face of their racism, I betray myself, and in the end, you, by not saying: It's not the men who exile me... it's the women. I don't trust the women.

6

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. Light skinned, fine, black hair: I'm Italian, she would tell them, keeping the dark-skinned husband, keeping the daughters out of sight. I have pretended that pain, that shame, that anger never touched me, does not stain my skin. She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanness neighborhoods.

7

Piri Thomas' book *Down These Mean Streets* followed me around for years, in the corner of my eye on bus terminal bookracks. Finally, in a gritted teeth desperation I faced the damn thing and said "OK, tell me."

Why can't we see that we do not need a man to make us whole? The whole is made of women?

I sweated my way through it in two nights: Gang fights, knifings, robberies, smack, prison. It's the standard Puerto Rican street story, except he lived. The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English, nothing but my mother marrying into the middle class, between me and that life. *That is right. We cannot deny that we are the junkies, the prostitutes, the welfare mothers - use one all of them.*

The image stays with me of my mother's family fleeing their puertoricanness, the first spics on the block, behind them, the neighborhoods collapsing into slums. There was a war, she told me. The enemy was only a step behind. I borrow the pictures from my other family, the nightmares of my Jewish ancestry, and imagine them fleeing through the streets. My mother never went back to look. This year she saw on television the ruins of the Tiffany Street of her childhood, unrecognizable, bombarded by poverty and urban renewal into an image of some European city: 1945. Like the Jews, like many people, the place she could have returned to has been destroyed.

9

I saw a baby once, the same age as my fat, crowing baby brother, then six months old. I was twelve, and under the influence of our Seventh Day Adventist teacher some of the girls in the seventh grade took up a collection for two poor families in the neighborhood. We bought them each one bag of groceries. This baby was just a little bit of skin stretched over a tiny skeleton. It hardly moved. It didn't even cry. It just lay there. The woman's husband had left her. The oldest boy, he was 13 or 14, worked picking coffee to help out. When we came the younger kids hid in the mother's skirts and she just stood there, crying and crying.

I ran straight home when we left and the first thing I did was to find my brother and hug him very tightly. Then I spent the rest of the afternoon feeding him.

If something had happened to my father, the ghost over my mother's shoulder would have caught up with us. Papi was our middle class passport. I grew up a professor's daughter, on the road to college, speaking good English. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton.

10

Writing this I am browner than I have ever been. Spanish ripples on my tongue and I want the accent. I walk through the Mission drinking in the sounds, I go into La Borinquena and buy *yautia* and *platano* for