

[Marjorie Evasco's Introduction* to **Dreamweavers: Selected Poems 1976-1986**.
Manila: Editorial and Media Resources Corporation, 1987.]

The Other Voice: Reply to Anzaldúa

“What we say and what we do ultimately
comes back to us, so let us own our
responsibility, place it in our own hands,
and carry it with dignity and strength.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa,
**Speaking in Tongues:
A Letter to Third World Women Writers****

Dear Gloria,

Imagine a house on stilts, built not on water but somewhere in the mountain fastness of Maribojoc, on an island called Bohol. In this house one twilight last December, four of my father's elder sisters and I sat around the kitchen table, stripping bare the *malunggay* fronds, dicing the spices and knotting the young lemongrass for the *tinola* we loved so well. Like many women in the countrysides who gather around the fire in the age-old rituals of preparing the food, these women told stories. And I was small again, ears sharp, eyes open, remembering how they used to fill my world with enchanted forest creatures, transforming with their stories the tree which glowed with fireflies at the edge of the yard into the night-maiden-who-watched-with-many-eyes while children slept.

But this time the stories were for waking: *Nanay* Tinay, *Manding* Marintay, *Insi* Lolang, and *Nanay* Isin told me stories of how they grew up during the early decades of this century, weaving the *tikog* and *romblon* mats which sent my father and his elder brother to school. *Nanay* Tinay, the youngest among them and closest to Papa, said she wanted to travel to Cebu and stay there to become a dentist. But young women then were not allowed to travel alone; nor were they sent to school to study anything other than the homemaking arts. What adventure she and her sisters had at all, they had to earn by dutifully bringing to town and later to Cebu, the rice and monthly provisions for their brothers.

“We sent them to school,” she said softly and I felt the fire flicker in her eyes. She had stayed in her mountain home in the past sixty years while my father had gone on to other adventures. In my mind, I saw how my young aunt spent her days cutting the *tikog* leaves into strips, drying them under the sun, boiling the vegetable dyes with which to weave color into the design, and then criss-crossing her wishes and frustrations into the daily patterns of her craft.

That evening, lying down on one of *Nanay* Tinay’s colorful mats unrolled on the molave floor, I wondered what nights like these must have been for her. Did she lie wakeful, the wish to know more, be more, festering like an open wound in her mind? Did she, as I do with words embedded in the night’s silence, imagine the possibilities, rearrange the configurations, dream designs never yet imagined?

Dear Gloria, she must have, because in a world where our lives are circumscribed, when our tongues are tied or cut and we cannot translate our visions and dreams unto the larger world, our hands transform the materials we work with into testaments of how we dream, how we turn our useful arts into covert legacies which will one day reveal to the discerning eye how we made every workday bearable by transforming our ways of living with our ways of creating.

How many verbs are hidden in the interstices of the strands that formed the mats, blankets, and robes they wove? What do the etchings on the claypots and earthenware tell of the hands that swung the machete, tended the fire or the baby in the hammock? What verses and songs (ephemeral daughters!) were birthed in the long days of rain when women shelled the corn, ground the cacao beans, pounded the rice grains, or baked sweet cassava? Who knows what stories *Nanay* Tinay could have combed out of her hair till it turned silver and sparse, if she had been taught that the vowels and consonants of the mouth and heart can pulse like blood down the arms, the writing hand shaping the words on paper?

Gloria, I would like to begin to learn how to see into the underside of the world. I need to understand the symbols of my forbears' language of daily struggle. I want to read with my fingers when I hold pot shards up to the light, explore the inner walls of an earthen water jar, behold the cryptic motifs on tribal blankets and women's tattooed bodies. And I feel the urgency of my need to draw connections between the words and

truths I say out of my life and the subterfuge poetry in the lives of many women before me and in my time.

Born woman in a different time under different circumstances, I had the changes *Nanay* Tinay never had. I grew up in many school which taught me the power of language and the language of power. I was trained too well to look at everything from a distance: how to evoke with words the life in the mountains without holding *Nanay* Tinay's hands and letting her speak; how to judge the pitcher's form without putting into the picture the village woman's bent back straightening ever so briefly at the well before she is bent over again; how to follow the proper rules of language without even asking why I had to invoke the divine or the human only in the masculine.

This language of exclusion cut up my tongue and my dream life into several separate pieces. It is this language that excludes our foremothers from our books, and continues to push us to the periphery of things, render us invisible, separate us from each other, main our bodies and our spirits.

In the long process of awakening to the deepest levels of my creative life's fragmentation, I have recently come to terms with the healing art of "speaking in tongues." I have re-membered our mothers' original language, the metaphors of connectedness. No longer is it enough to know how to manipulate the word-thoughts so that they sound clever, objective, universal. No longer is it possible to believe in my illusion that as a middle-class, college-educated woman, I was different from other

women and therefore exempt from the burdens carried by other women. No longer can I allow the academic hocus-pocus to mythify the writing craft, isolating the hours I spend writing from the ways the rest of womankind lived, suffered, celebrated. In my gut I knew that I had to come to terms with the corpo-reality of my art, my woman's body congruent with my language, my vision, my advocacy. The truest healing has occurred at this level.

Like you, Cherrie Moraga, Grace Monte de Ramos, and many other women of color who choose to write, I have come to claim the inheritance of women passed on from many other women seers and truthsayers. Confronted with conditioned fears and doubts, and the inaccessibility of time, space, and resources, I have learned to affirm the personal responsibility of creating time, space, and resources necessary in the practice and continuity of the craft. And while I do so, I have also learned to confront the forces that continue to exhaust many of our creative women, especially those who are poor, simply because the hours in the day and even the night are continually being used in the exercise of skills narrowly labeled as "non-productive" because they are only cleaning other people's houses, washing other people's clothes, or minding other people's children in order to bring in the meager means with which to buy the rice or salted fish, pay the landlord or the loan shark, or send the younger ones to school.

Our craft survives, grows, and hopefully gives birth to new young women writers, mainly because in our disloyalty and willful treason to the forces that break women up and apart from themselves, each other, and the rest of the world, we have arrived at new

options, rejected the old configurations, awakened to the illusions we once took as truths and re-learned the wisdom of our bodies. In our writing we have unearthed the old secret of listening “to the words chanting in the body” while we cooked, bent over the vegetable garden, bathed a child, washed clothes, or taught young women in schools, churches, factories, community organizations, how to become warriors and healers. In our lives and in our craft, women writers of color have had to forego or forget the room of one’s own, knowing that our heritage includes sharing the small roof of poverty with large and extended families. In its place, we have had to learn the trick of carrying around in the house, the bus, the factory, the classroom, wherever the workplace is, that inviolate space within which to focus the soul for poetry. And despite the kind of criticism that trivializes what we have to say about our daily, ordinary lives, we have learned to love the poetry of the quotidian, writing our very blood on paper, validating our personal as well as our shared humanity.

When I give birth to this book, I shall have traced the journey during which I tracked dreamweavers for ten years. Whenever I found her, she showed me the marks, signs, and symbols she carried on her scarred body and taught me how to recognize kin by these signs. She showed me too the true gestures by which to recognize a man-friend, the only kind we can accept as family.

And I want to let you know, Gloria, that I found the separate pieces of myself whenever I found her. I have come home to my own, contributing to our kind these personal struggles with the dangers we face as women and as women writers of color.

We know these dangers are still there and cannot be sublimated. They can only be lived through, armed with the fiercest hope that our daughters and younger sisters *will not have to repeat the performance.*

Love,

Marj

*This introduction was a paper first presented on February 19, 1987 at the University of the Philippines Faculty Center, as part of the *Living Voice Series: Writers in Conversation*, of the U.P. Creative Writing Center for my appointment as Regional Fellow for Poetry, for schoolyear 1986-1987.

This line used as the epigraph comes from Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana, who wrote the letter-article "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers," published in **Words in Our Pockets (The Feminist Writers Guild Handbook). San Francisco: Bootlegger Press, 1980.