Masks and Interfaces/Caras y máscaras. Among Chicanas/méxicanas, haciendo caras, “making faces,” means to put on a face, express feelings by distorting the face—frowning, grimacing, looking sad, glum or disapproving. For me, haciendo caras has the added connotation of making gestos subversivos, political subversive gestures, the piercing look that questions or challenges, the look that says, “Don’t walk all over me,” the one that says, “Get out of my face.” “Face” is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures, marked with instructions on how to be mujer, macho, working class, Chicana. As mestizas—biologically and/or culturally mixed—we have different surfaces for each aspect of identity, each inscribed by a particular subculture. We are “written” all over, or should I say, carved and tattooed with the sharp needles of experience.

The world knows us by our faces, the most naked, most vulnerable, exposed and significant topography of the body. When our caras do not live up to the “image” that the family or community wants us to wear and when we rebel against the engraving of our bodies, we experience ostracism, alienation, isolation and shame. Since white AngloAmericans’ racist ideology cannot take in our faces, it, too, covers them up, “blanks” them out of its reality. To become less vulnerable to all these oppressors, we have had to “change” faces, hemos tenido que cambiar caras “como el cambio de color en el camaleón—cuando los peligros son muchos y las opciones son pocas.” Some of us are forced to acquire the ability, like a chameleon, to change color when the dangers are many and the options few. Some of us who already “wear many changes/inside of our skin” (Audre Lorde)² have been forced to adopt a face that would pass.

The masks, las máscaras, we are compelled to wear, drive a wedge between our intersubjective personhood and the persona we present to the world. “Over my mask/is your mask of me.” (Mitsuye Yamada) These masking roles exact a toll. “My mask is control/concealment/endurance/my mask is escape/from my/self.” (Mitsuye Yamada) “We are all bleeding, rubbed raw behind our masks.”³ After years of wearing masks we may become just a series of roles, the constellated self limping along with its broken limbs.

In sewing terms, “interfacing” means sewing a piece of material between two pieces of fabric to provide support and stability to collar, cuff, yoke. Between the masks we’ve internalized, one on top of another, are our interfaces. The masks are already steeped with self-hatred and other internalized oppressions. However, it is the place—the interface—be-
tween the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks.

In this anthology and in our daily lives, we women of color strip off the máscaras others have imposed on us, see through the disguises we hide behind and drop our personas so that we may become subjects in our own discourses. We rip out the stitches, expose the multi-layered "inner faces," attempting to confront and oust the internalized oppression embedded in them, and remake anew both inner and outer faces. We begin to displace the white and colored male typographers and become, ourselves, typographers, printing our own words on the surfaces, the plates, of our bodies. We begin to acquire the agency of making our own caras. "Making faces" is my metaphor for constructing one's identity. "[U]sted es el modeador de su carne tanto como el de su alma." You are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul. According to the ancient nahuas, one was put on earth to create one's "face" (body) and "heart" (soul). To them, the soul was a speaker of words and the body a doer of deeds. Soul and body, words and actions are embodied in Moyocoyani, one of the names of the Creator in the Aztec framework, "the one who invents himself/herself...the Builder Kachina himself/herself." In our self-reflectivity and in our active participation with the issues that confront us, whether it be through writing, front-line activism, or individual self-development, we are also uncovering the inter-faces, the very spaces and places where our multiple-surfed, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect. This book aims to make accessible to others our struggle with all our identities, our linkage-making strategies and our healing of broken limbs.

How the Book Was Made and Why

Comienzos/Origins. For years I waited for someone to compile a book that would continue where This Bridge Called My Back left off. A book that would confront the Racism in the white women’s movement in a more thorough, personal, direct, empirical and theoretical way. A book that would deepen the dialogue between all women and that would take on the various issues—hindrances and possibilities—in alliance-building. A book that would explode the neat boundaries of the half dozen categories of marginality that define us and one that would unflinchingly bring us cara a cara with our own historias. A book that would bear unmistakable witness. I got tired of hearing students say that Bridge was required in two or three of their women’s studies courses; tired of being a resource for teachers and students who asked me what texts by women of color they should read or teach and where they could get these writings. I had grown frustrated that the same few women-of-color were asked to read or lecture in universities and classrooms, or to submit work to anthologies and quarterlies. Why weren’t other women-of-color being asked? Repeatedly tokenizing the same half dozen mujeres was stymieing our literary/political movement. Drained of our energy, we few tokens had
little left to deploy into the development of our own literary and political movements.

The urge to anthologize, to bring more voices to the foreground, grew stronger. Then, in the spring of 1988, when I came to Santa Cruz to teach for U.C. Santa Cruz’s Women’s Studies, I realized there were no recent anthologies of women-of-color writings. I stopped waiting. In the midst of my unpacking, I worked around the clock frantically locating, reading, copying, compiling and organizing material for a class reader which I titled *Haciendo caras*. On the last day of this whirlwind task, Chela Sandoval and I sat down on my living room floor and together we looked at my six piles of papers. What was left after discarding and rearranging became a framework for this book.

Section one focuses on the degradations and horrors that Racism inflicts, the various ways we are wounded and scarred by its corrosive legacy. Section two focuses on how we combat Racism and sexism and how we “work through” internalized violence, how we attempt to decolonize ourselves and to find ways to survive personally, culturally and racially. Love, humor and optimism are the feelings that permeate the third section. The silencing strategies of the privileged, the repression of our voices and our painful passage from psychic numbing into utterance and creation of our own paroles—how we learn to (in Kit Quan’s words) metaphorically “sing” our songs—is the gist of section four. Section five focuses on the woman-of-color as writer/artist, intellectual. Section six, on debates about alliances and how we work within our own communities, with other ethnic groups and with marginalized whites. The last section focuses on the intellectual, critic and theorist, and on our critical theories and theories of consciousness as well as the intellectual spaces we are beginning to occupy. It is about other ways, including traditional ethnic modes, of perceiving and knowing.

Originally, I had intended the anthology to consist entirely of previously published historical documents, but as I worked on it, I found myself (as we had with *This Bridge*) wanting to include the unknown, little published or unpublished writers. Because there is little publication support for our writings, I’ve made a special effort to work with women who do not consider themselves writers, or at least not yet. The book provides space for some ethnic mestizas who have been silenced before uttering a word, or, having spoken, have not been heard. A few pieces give fresh, immediate voice to the issues facing women who, in university surroundings, are often thrown into confusion about their ethnic and/or racial identity.

**Montage and fragmented discourse.** Let the reader beware—I here and now issue a caveat perusor: s/he must do the work of piecing this text together. The categories in this work reflect our fragmented and interrupted dialogue which is said to be a discontinued and incomplete discourse. The method of organizing the book was largely that of poetic association, another way of organizing experience, one that reflects our lives and the ways our minds work. As the perspective and focus shift,
as the topics shift, the listener/reader is forced into participating in the making of meaning—she is forced to connect the dots, to connect the fragments.

The anthology is meant to engage the reader’s total person. I do not believe that “distance” and “objectivity” alone help us come to terms with our issues. Distancing cannot be a major strategy—only a temporary breather. Total feeling and emotional immersion, the shocking drench of guilt or anger or frustration, wakes us up to some of our realities. The pieces in this book awaken the emotions—our emotional bodies “take in” and process the whole spectrum of states of consciousness from waking to dreaming. The intellect needs the guts and adrenaline that horrific suffering and anger, evoked by some of the pieces, catapult us into. Only when all the charged feelings are unearthed can we get down to “the work,” *la tarea, nuestro trabajo*—changing culture and all its oppressive interlocking machinations. These pieces are not only *about* survival strategies, they *are* survival strategies—maps, blueprints, guidebooks that we need to exchange in order to feel sane, in order to make sense of our lives.

Besides being a testimonial of survival, I wanted a book which would teach ourselves and whites to read in nonwhite narrative traditions—traditions which, in the very act of writing, we try to recoup and to invent. In addition to the task of writing, or perhaps included in the task of writing, we’ve had to create a readership and teach it how to “read” our work. Like many of the women in this anthology, I am acutely conscious of the politics of address. *Haciendo caras* addresses a feminist readership of all ethnicities and both genders—yes, men too. Contrary to the norm, it does not address itself *primarily* to whites, but invites them to “listen in” to women-of-color talking to each other and, in some instances, to and “against” white people. It attempts to explore our realities and identities (since academic institutions omit, erase, distort and falsify them) and to unbuild and rebuild them. We have always known that our lives and identities are simultaneously mediated, marked and influenced by race, class, gender and vocation. Our writings and scholarship, built on earlier waves of feminism, continue to critique and to directly address dominant culture and white feminism. But that is not all we do; these pieces attest to the fact that more and more we are concentrating on our own projects, our own agendas, our own theories.

**Everything About Racism Evades Direct Confrontation**

I am from an island whose history is steeped in the abuses of Western imperialism, whose people still suffer the deformities caused by Euro-American colonialism, old and new. Unlike many third world liberationists, however, I cannot claim to be a descendent of any particular strain, noble or ignoble. I am, however, “purely bred,” descendent of all the parties involved in that cataclysmic
epoch. I despair, for the various parts of me cry out for retribution at having been brutally uprooted and transplanted to fulfill the profit-cry of "white" righteousness and dominance. My soul moans that part of me that was destroyed by that callous instrument—the gun, the whip, the book. My mind echoes with the screams of disruption, desecration, destruction.

—ROSA VILLAFANE-SISOLAK

Racism, the word nobody likes. Whites who don’t want to confront Racism and who don’t name themselves white recoil in horror from it, shun it like the plague. To mention the word in their company disrupts their comfortable complacency. To call a text or methodology under discussion in a classroom or conference "racist," or to call a white person on her or his Racism, is to let loose a stink bomb. Like a tenacious weed, Racism crops up everywhere—it has a stranglehold on everyone. It is cultivated and produced in families, churches, temples and state institutions. The psychological effects of Racism have been greatly underestimated.

The people who practice Racism—everyone who is white in the U.S.—are victims of their own white ideology and are impoverished by it. But we who are oppressed by Racism internalize its deadly pollen along with the air we breathe. Make no mistake about it, the fruits of this weed are dysfunctional lifestyles which mutilate our physical bodies, stunt our intellects and make emotional wrecks of us. Racism sucks out the life blood from our bodies, our souls. As survivors of Racism, women-of-color suffer chronic stress and continual "post-traumatic stress syndrome" (suffered by survivors of wars). We are at high risk, and not just from AIDS.

Racism is a slippery subject, one which evades confrontation, yet one which overshadows every aspect of our lives. And because so few (white) people are directly and honestly talking about it, we in the book have once again had to take on the task. Making others "uncomfortable" in their Racism is one way of "encouraging" them to take a stance against it.

A Classic Example. Racism is especially rampant in places and people that produce knowledge. I want to describe the dynamics in the U.S. Women-of-Color class I taught at U.C. Santa Cruz because it may help prepare teachers who will use this text in similar courses. Two of the goals I had were for the 120 students to identify and interpret instances of Racism ("internalized dominance") and to both recognize their internalized Racism and oppression and to develop strategies against them. I wanted students-of-color to become aware of, and get out from under, conditioned subservience; I wanted to call attention to the dynamic of avoidance among us, of not acknowledging each other—an act of dehumanizing people like ourselves. Yet another goal was to encourage them to emerge from "blank-outness" and openly combat the
dominant groups’ denial and erasure of ethnic subjectivity by allowing
the students a relatively safe space (there is no completely safe space) to
speak up and “expose” their feelings.

At first, what erupted in class was anger—anger from mujeres-of-
color, anger and guilt from whites, anger, frustration and mixed
feelings by Jewish women who were caught in the middle (being white
but often sympathizing with colored), and anger and frustration on
my part from having to mediate between all these groups. Soon my
body became a vessel for all the tensions and anger, and I dreaded
going to class. Some of my students dreaded going to class. But
gradually the mujeres-de-color became more assertive in confronting
and holding whites accountable for their unaware, “blocked” and
chronically oppressive ways. They “agitated” other students into
actively demanding that the school system address their needs. When
whitewomen or Jewishwomen attempted to subvert the focus from
women-of-color’s feelings to their own feelings of confusion, helpless-
ness, anger, guilt, fear of change and other insecurities, the women-
of-color again and again redirected the focus back to mujeres-de-color.
When several whitewomen stood up in class and either asked politely,
pleaded or passionately demanded (one had tears streaming down her
face) that women-of-color teach them, when whitewomen wanted to
engage women-of-color in time-consuming dialogues, las mujeres-de-
color expressed their hundred years weariness of trying to teach whites
about Racism. They were eloquent in expressing their skepticism about
making alliances with whites when most whitewomen focused exclusively
on their own feelings and needed reassurance, acceptance and
validation from mujeres-de-color.

Many whitewomen did not acknowledge that they were agents of
oppression, while others became more aware of their racial “blank spots,”
stating in class how Racism undermined the integrity of their personhood
and how guilt had a debilitating effect in their lives. Most of the white
Jewishwomen in the class did not want to identify as white (I’m not
referring to the Jewish women-of-color). Some declared they felt they
“belonged” more to the women-of-color group than they did to the white
group. Because they felt isolated and excluded, they felt that their
oppressions were the same or similar to those of women-of-color. Some
mujeres-de-color questioned the concept of “same” oppressions and
claimed that all oppressions were being collapsed into one. The problem
was that whitewomen and white Jewishwomen, while seeming to listen,
were not really “hearing” women-of-color and could not get it into their
heads that this was a space and class on and about women-of-color. As
one student-of-color wrote: “I think the hardest thing for me was having
to understand that the white students in class... [could not] understand
the experiences that we have lived.”8 Though there were important
lessons learned, the inability to listen and hear, along with the confusion,
anger and doubts about ever being able to work together almost tore our
class apart.
“Selective Reality” and “Blank Spots.” Failure to empathize with (empathy may open the door to understanding) another’s experience is due, in part, to what I call “selective reality,” the narrow spectrum of reality that human beings select or choose to perceive and/or what their culture “selects” for them to “see.” Perception is an interpretive process conditioned by education. That which is outside of the range of consensus perception is “blanked out.” Lorna Dee Cervantes’ piece, “Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between Races,” is a perfect example of the young man’s “selective reality.” Racism and internalized oppression result from this “editing” of reality. “You do not see me because you do not see yourself and you do not see yourself because you declare yourself outside of culture,” writes María Lugones. According to Lugones, dis-engagement is a sanctioned ethnocentric racist strategy. Whites not naming themselves white presume their universality; an unmarked race is a sign of Racism unaware of itself, a “blanked-out” Racism.

Diversity and Difference: Tactics to Avoid Confronting Racism

“Diversity” and “difference” are vague, ambiguous terms, defined differently by white feminists and feminists-of-color. Often white feminists want to minimize racial difference by taking comfort in the fact that we are all women and/or lesbians and suffer similar sexual-gender oppressions. They are usually annoyed with the actuality (though not the concept) of “differences,” want to blur racial difference, want to smooth things out—they seem to want a complete, totalizing identity. Yet in their eager attempt to highlight similarities, they create or accentuate “other” differences such as class. These unacknowledged or unarticulated differences further widen the gap between white and colored. In the act of pinpointing and dissecting racial, sexual or class “differences” of women-of-color, whitewomen not only objectify these differences, but also change those differences with their own white, racialized, scrutinizing and alienating gaze. Some white people who take up multicultural and cultural plurality issues mean well, but often they push to the fringes once more the very cultures and ethnic groups about whom they want to disseminate knowledge. For example, the white writing about Native peoples or cultures displaces the Native writer and often appropriates the culture instead of proliferating information about it. The difference between appropriation and proliferation is that the first steals and harms; the second helps heal breaches of knowledge. (The author Lynn Andrews is a prime example of a white woman who “rips off” people of color, examining Native spirituality and myth with a white collector’s mentality. She passes off fiction as fact and distorts the true picture of native peoples in a way they, as writers, would not. Tony Hillerman, on the other hand, is an example of a white man who, through his fiction and reference to works by Native writers, spreads factual information that widens our knowledge of the Hopi and Navajo cultures.)
In June, 1989, I was asked to speak at the Texas Lesbian Conference in Houston, Texas, where “diversity” was stressed. Many different groups belonging to Chicana, Latina, German, Italian and other white ethnic Texan groups attended. There was an assumption that all these groups were in the same boat—after all, all the women were lesbians. But ethnic colored people in this country are not on an equal footing with other ethnic American groups. We’re never just “one of the guys.” The pull to believe we can “belong,” that we can blend in, that we can be accepted like any other “American” can seduce us into putting our energies into the wrong battles and into picking allies who marginalize us further. Dwelling on “diversity” and multiculturalism (a euphemism for the imperializing and now defunct “melting pot”) is a way of avoiding seriously dismantling Racism—by both whitewomen and women-of-color. We want so badly to move beyond Racism to a “postracist” space, a more comfortable space, but we are only prolonging the pain and leaving unfinished a business that could liberate some of our energies.

In Which Voice/With Which Voice

The Silence That Hollows Us. For silence to transform into speech, sounds and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies. For the body to give birth to utterance, the human entity must recognize itself as carnal—skin, muscles, entrails, brain, belly. Because our bodies have been stolen, brutalized or numbed, it is difficult to speak from/through them. No hables de esas cosas, de eso no se habia. No hables, no hables. ¡Cállate! Estate quieta. Seal your lips, woman! When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses. Women-of-color in the U.S. must not only transform silence into our native speech, but as immigrants, Chicanas/Latinas and speakers of Black or different varieties of Asian English as well as other dialects, we must learn a foreign tongue—standard American English, a language laden with alien ideologies which are often in direct opposition to those in our own cultures. To speak English is to think in that language, to adopt the ideology of the people whose language it is and to be “inhabited” by their discourses. Mujeres-de-color speak and write not just against traditional white ways and texts but against a prevailing mode of being, against a white frame of reference. Those of us who are bilingual, or use working-class English and English in dialects, are under constant pressure to speak and write in standard English. Linguistic code-switching, which goes against language laws and norms, is not approved of.

We cross or fall or are shoved into abysses whether we speak or remain silent. And when we do speak from the cracked spaces, it is con voz del fondo del abismo, a voice drowned out by white noise, distance and the distancing by others who don’t want to hear. We are besieged by a “silence that hollows us.” As “present” beings, though ones who have been “blanked out” and whose voices are heard as static, women-of-color have difficulty speaking within a discourse and within a group of speakers
who (be they white or colored) exclude her. And, in the case of Kit Quan, a discourse whose speakers take pleasure in disdaining and belittling her as a triply marginalized woman-of-color and do so in the name of feminist or leftist politics.

A Chicana graduate student talked to me about not knowing how to argue against the professors who were trying to shove their methods and theories down her throat. “I don’t have the language, the vocabulary,” she said, sobbing. Like many mujeres-of-color in graduate school, she felt oppressed and violated by the rhetoric of dominant ideology, a rhetoric disguised as good “scholarship” by teachers who are unaware of its race, class and gender “blank spots.” It is a rhetoric that presents its conjectures as universal truths while concealing its patriarchal privilege and posture. It is a rhetoric riddled with ideologies of Racism which hush our voices so that we cannot articulate our victimization.

While Kit Quan and the Chicana graduate student are not permitted a voice, Lynda Marín’s protagonist in “Her Rites of Passage” cannot speak in first person. She is in that place where there is no language. So thoroughly has she been made to identify with the position of object to someone else’s subject that she seems doomed to silence until her young daughter, struggling against the same silencing forces, evokes in her mother a claim to her own subjecthood. Her “rites of passage” locate her outside the patriarchal system of language, but corporeally in charge of her resistance to that system, her body finally responding to what she could not earlier allow herself to be fully aware of. “Silence. It breaks with all the force of a tidal wave. You may be deafened in the ending of silence. You may be crushed under its power.”

¿En qué voz? When we do acquire a voice, we often become periquitas (parrots), as in Carmen Morones’ poem, imitators, loquacious in a foreign tongue. Untied, our tongues run away from themselves. When we come into possession of a voice, we sometimes have to choose with which voice (the voice of the dyke, the Chicana, the professor, the master), in which voice (first person, third, vernacular, formal) or in which language (Black English, Tex-Mex, Spanish, academese) to speak and write in. When we, the objects, become the subjects, and look at and analyze our own experiences, a danger arises that we may look through the master’s gaze, speak through his tongue, use his methodology—in Audre Lorde’s words, use the “master’s tools.” Some feminist theorists-of-color write jargonistically and abstractly, in a hard-to-access language that blocks communication, makes the general listener/reader feel bewildered and stupid. These theorists often mistakenly divide theory and lived experience and are more off-putting than many of the masters they ape. Operating here may be defense mechanisms that an intellectually colonized person adopts. I too am seduced by academic language, its theoretical babble insinuates itself into my speech and is hard to weed out. At the same time I feel that there is a place for us to use specialized language addressed to a select, professional, vocational or scholarly group—doctors, carpenters and seamstresses use language that only those in their own particular work
can understand. We should not give up these "languages" just because they are not accessible to the general public.

Creativity is a Coping Strategy

A woman-of-color who writes poetry or paints or dances or makes movies knows there is no escape from race or gender when she is writing or painting. She can't take off her color and sex and leave them at the door of her study or studio. Nor can she leave behind her history. Art is about identity, among other things, and her creativity is political.

Remember again the Nahuatl concept: the soul speaks, the body acts. The hand is an extension of our will, it holds the pen, the brush, the lump of clay. It is both a symbol and a vehicle of communication. Without the hand the voice is helpless. "La lengua necesita la mano para dar vida a los pensamientos," writes Margo Glantz. The tongue needs the hand to give thoughts life. "La lengua se monta sobre la mano y produce la escritura." The tongue mounts the hand and produces writing. When tongue and hand work together, they unite art and politics and attack the dominant ideology. For many of us the acts of writing, painting, performing and filming are acts of deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status quo. Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises. We build culture as we inscribe in these various forms.

Inherent in the creative act is a spiritual, psychic component—one of spiritual excavation, of (ad)venturing into the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world. To do this kind of work requires the total person—body, soul, mind and spirit. Ultimately alone with only the hum of the computer, accompanied by all my faces (and often yours as well), the monitor’s screen reflects back the dialogue among "us." I talk to myself. That’s what writers do, we carry on a constant dialogue between language and hands and images, one or another of our identities trying desperately to get in a word, an image, a sound.

But language, fine arts and literature do not belong to women-of-color, and culture and the social system enslave our hands in clerical, factory, field or secretarial work to service it. We are forced to steal a bit of visual, oral or written language, to escape and hide out long enough so that with half a hand we can struggle to rearrange or create "new" patterns that will contribute to building, creating and being an integral part of the molding we are encased in. Art is a struggle between the personal voice and language, with its apparatuses of culture and ideologies, and art mediums with their genre laws—the human voice trying to outshout a roaring waterfall. Art is a sneak attack while the giant sleeps, a sleight of hands when the giant is awake, moving so quick they can do their deed before the giant swats them. Our survival depends on being creative.
Even when our bodies have been battered by life, these artistic “languages,” spoken from the body, by the body, are still laden with aspirations, are still coded in hope and “un desarme ensangrentado,” a bloodied truce. By sending our voices, visuals and visions outward into the world, we alter the walls and make them a framework for new windows and doors. We transform the posos, apertures, barrancas, abismos that we are forced to speak from. Only then can we make a home out of the cracks.

Haciendo teorías

Theory originally meant a mental viewing, an idea or mental plan of the way to do something, and a formulation of apparent relationships or underlying principles of certain observed phenomena which had been verified to some degree. To have theory meant to hold considerable evidence in support of a formulated general principle explaining the operation of certain phenomena. Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow whitemen and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space.

What does being a thinking subject, an intellectual, mean for women-of-color from working-class origins? It means not fulfilling our parents’ expectations, it means often going against their expectations by exceeding them. It means being in alien territory and suspicious of the laws and walls. It means being concerned about the ways knowledges are invented. It means continually challenging institutionalized discourses. It means being suspicious of the dominant culture’s interpretation of “our” experience, of the way they “read” us. It means being what Judy Baca terms “internal exiles.”

What is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color. Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world. Thus we need teorías that will enable us to interpret what happens in the world, that will explain how and why we relate to certain people in specific ways, that will reflect what goes on between inner, outer and peripheral “I”s within a person and between the personal “I”s and the collective “we” of our ethnic communities. Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods. We need theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. We need theories that examine the implications of situations
and look at what’s behind them. And we need to find practical application for those theories. We need to de-academicize theory and to connect the community to the academy. “High” theory does not translate well when one’s intention is to communicate to masses of people made up of different audiences. We need to give up the notion that there is a “correct” way to write theory.

Theorists-of-color are in the process of trying to formulate “marginal” theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many “worlds.” We are articulating new positions in these “in-between,” Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds. In our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in which theory is embedded. In our *mestizaje* theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and “blanked-out” realities while critiquing rational, consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous languages while critiquing the “languages” of the dominant culture. And we simultaneously combat the tokenization and appropriation of our literatures and our writers/artists.

Some of the tasks ahead of us then: to go beyond explaining why women-of-color aren’t writing more theory, why our work isn’t being published or distributed, and, instead, to strategize about ways to get our work out; to change the focus from the topic of whitewomen’s exclusionary practices to address the quality of what has been included and the nature of this inclusion. If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories.

*La tarea que nos queda por delante*

**Left-Handed Guardians.** Looking at how far we’ve come and what we’ve had to endure to maintain what little space we’ve managed to wrest from the dominant culture, I see incredible hard work and amazing results. We are busy beavers (and like them also an endangered species), doers, determined and willing to work at building our arts and our theories and actualizing our dreams. Though we’ve accomplished much, for us it is *never enough*. In the midst of our laboring, we’ve had to watch our backsides, we’ve had to develop very sharp teeth to protect our creations. Because we’ve had to be cautious, we’ve often mistrusted each other. Wherever we are, we make sure there are several entrances and exits, that our homes have alternate escape routes, and we don’t let ourselves get painted into corners. In spite of all this, we have a sense of teamwork and honor and respect for the abilities of other women, and we work hard at building community. In trying to settle our differences, we look for alternative solutions. This makes us visionaries, people with vision, with new things to say and new perspectives to say them from.
Our strength lies in shifting perspectives, in our capacity to shift, in our “seeing through” the membrane of the past superimposed on the present, in looking at our shadows and dealing with them. A medicine story tells of Crow’s fascination with her own shadow. “She kept looking at it, scratching it, pecking at it, until her shadow woke up and became alive. Then Crow’s shadow ate her. Crow is Dead Crow now....” Crow is the Left-Handed Guardian who does not let the past eat us up. Encrucijadas, haunted by voices and images that violated us, bearing the pains of the past, we are slowly acquiring the tools to change the disabling images and memories, to replace them with self-affirming ones, to recreate our pasts and alter them—for the past can be as malleable as the present. So, throwing caution to the wind, rechazamos esas falsas imágenes, we refute those false images, quebramos los falsos espejos para descubrir las desconocidas sombras, we break the false mirrors in order to discover the unfamiliar shadows, the inner faces, las caras por dentro. To make face is to have face—dignity and self-respect.

Among the strengths working for us is the ability to see through our self-sabotaging behaviors. Our inner payasa, clown-face, is always aware of what’s going on and uses humor to volley back the racial slurs. We have the ability to enter other levels, to listen to our gut knowledge and acknowledge that some of us do know where we are in particular stages of our lives. We are cultivating our ability to affirm our knowing. Jauntily we step into new terrains where we make up the guidelines as we go.

We are in the present, with both feet on the ground and one eye to the future. Chela Sandoval wrote: “We had each tasted the shards of ‘difference’ until they had carved up our insides; now we were asking ourselves what shapes our healing would take.” Our healings take many forms: our ability to laugh at ourselves, to see through our own foolishness, our pride, hope, love. We are continuing in the direction of honoring others’ ways, of sharing knowledge and personal power through writing (art) and activism, of injecting into our cultures new ways, feminist ways, mestiza ways. Adaptability, when we forget to stand firm on some issue or when we allow others to choose the terms of our relationships, can be our biggest weakness. But adaptability is also our biggest strength.

We have not one movement but many. Our political, literary and artistic movements are discarding the patriarchal model of the hero/leader leading the rank and file. Ours are individual and small group movidas, unpublicized movimientos—movements not of media stars or popular authors but of small groups or single mujeres, many of whom have not written books or spoken at national conferences. Though unnoticed, right now in small towns women are organizing, attending meetings, setting up retreats or demonstrations. Our movements, like the wind, sweep through the sea of grass in California, cut swaths in Texas, take root in Maine, sway public opinion in North Dakota, stir the dust in New Mexico. Now here, now there, aquí y alla, we and our movimientos are firmly committed to transforming all our cultures.
"Triumph of the Heart" from Judith F. Baca's participatory mural project the WORLD WALL: "A Vision of the Future Without Fear"