



Zaida del Rio, 1989

A Wild Tongue Writes Back: Replying to Gloria Anzaldúa's "Speaking in Tongues"

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Using a combination of transgressive methodologies, auto-historia/auto-ethnography, reflective narrative, prose and poetic transcription, I celebrate the opportunity to write back to Gloria Anzaldúa's *Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers*. In my response to Gloria, I explore a number of personal traumas including my anxiety and struggle to write for an academic audience, my internalization of whiteness as a Cuban immigrant, and my deep desire to find Voice and a community of Women of Color writers.

In solidarity with the #CiteWomenofColor movement, I am intentionally only making references to the Women of Color writers who have influenced my journey to find a voice. My crossing from where I was before, to where I find myself now—a transformation that began during the last two years since I first met Gloria—has been fueled by the dreaming and writings of these women. Throughout my awakening, these women represented an imagined community of Women of Color writers. The italicized words in this text come direct-

ly from Speaking in Tongues. I weave Anzaldúa's words with mine because her words have wrapped me like a shawl and shielded when I needed comfort. I want for my words to bleed into hers, mesh with hers, be with hers—my refuge.

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Querida Gloria,

Gracias por escribirme. Your letter has moved me deeply and inspired a revolution within. I read your words, and no palabras vibrate louder, why does writing seem so unnatural for me? I'll do anything to postpone it—empty the trash, answer the telephone. Getting up to light incense, to put a record on, to go for a walk—anything just to put off the writing.

Amiga. Compañera. The daily struggle to put things on paper strangles my breathing and chokes my words. Unlike the powerful serpents of your writings the creature I continue to confront wraps around my throat and cuts off my signing, even though I have so much to say. At times, when in my mind I rehearse the words I want to carve out, the self-doubter appears from the shadows and says: too subjective, too much poesía y pasión. So I pull myself out from esos sueños and reject the poetry, the long syntax, and the voice that comes most intuitively to me—the *tongues like the outcast and the insane*.

Esta es mi historia abreviada: at the age of thirteen mi hermana and I moved from Cuba to the U.S. to be reunited with our dad after a traumatic separation that lasted a little over three years. My name, spelled R-A-C-H-E-L and pronounced as *Rachelle*, easily crossed over to be appropriated as Rachel, which no English-speaking person has difficulty saying. I have dark hair, brown eyes, and skin light enough to be perceived as white-passing. Despite that my last name—Romero—bleeds non-Anglo heritage and the accent I once tried so hard to camouflage often elicits questions about where I am from, most of my peers and mentors are white Americans and my introduction to Women of Color writers has come late in my professional development. Unlike you, Gloria, I passively adopted *the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing*.

En parte esto pasó because when we moved from Cuba, mi papá—a single dad—was adamant that our family live in Texas, instead of Miami where many of our relatives and friends reside. The reason was simple. In his most loving attempt to secure for us the promised dream, my dad believed that guaranteed success in this country would require full immersion into the “American” culture. As a result, assimilation in our home was received as aspiration, and internalizing whiteness became the model. Y así, in less time than expected, Massiel y yo were already speaking “perfect English,” and dating americanos. This is when I started bleaching my dark hair to blonde; and first began to experience *the rip-off of my native tongue*.

Continué así, en lo que tú llamas nepantla. I, the included/outsider, roaming through books, conversations, theory and academic writing, as me and the stranger, together in one. Then, just a couple of years ago, my sister-in-law Aerial—a Korean-adoptee, scholar, mother and hero, introduced me to your writings. The works of Crenshaw, Davis, and Lorde followed. Reading la obra of radical Women of Color spun the realization, that like chopped-off limbs, my experiences, career, and personal growth will continue to be amputated if I remain without a community of others, who like me, understand our culture's systemic oppression isn't carved for us to express our voices—our loud, poetic, emotion-filled, raw, truth-telling voices, *which we women of color have come to think as other—the dark, the feminine*.

Tu carta/your letter, como un bravo estallo de luz, filled my belly with fire and painted an X to signal, start here. I hold on to your words fiercely: *throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat*.

Y así empecé a poner Coyolxauhqui back together. By (re)membering the first time I raised a closed fist over my head, and screamed Viva la Revolución! was before my life in this new life. By (re)membering that in that prior life, sweat, café y azúcar, come as one. (Re)membering meaning to (re)call, that my favorite painting—

the one I keep in hiding—was created by la pintora Cubana, Zaida del Rio. In the portrait, a group of naked women with cabezas of talking birds dance around a bed. This painting belonged to my parents and was one of the only things the government allowed us to bring from Cuba, when Massiel and I left. Now I (re)embrace the painting as my so-yearned community of women—animal-like and bare, singing, dancing; entresueños. To (re)member, to (re)collect, that I already was a poet in my previous life. Sitting on my mother's lap before I knew how to write dictating to her mis poemas. Con pluma y papel, her sweet hand would transcribe my words between smiles. Tienes toda la razón Gloria, *the danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision.*

Ya comienzo a entender, I begin to understand the paralyzing anxiety and extreme sadness that have kept me company all these years when I sit to write. How can there be no consequences for my poetic-repression all these years? The trauma from the cutting off of my wild tongue. How can there be no effects from internalizing la voz of the other who others me? How can I walk feeling whole, si mi soul, está en pieces? Como dice Lorde, poetry is not a luxury; poetry is a necessity of our existence. Como dices tú, *the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me.*

Esplendor.

Ahora. Aquí. Despierta. Writing feels dangerous. I consider the potential ramifications of this letter. The questions. The judgement. But I cannot continue functioning in two separate halves. I cannot continue the mutilation, the before and the after. The duality of voice—la que siento y la que pienso. Yo soy una, deliberately wandering in the hyphen. Neither here nor there, but everywhere. Querida Gloria, ya no puedo stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed.

Entoces, recivo tu wisdom and commit. To write with my eyes like painters, with my ears like musicians, with my feet like dancers. I am the truthsayer with quill and torch. Writing with my tongues of fire. I cannot let the pen banish me from myself. I cannot let the ink coagulate in my pens, nor let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle my voice. I will put my shit on the paper. I will not fake it, and will try to sell it for a handclap or my name in print.

Love,

Rachel

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