TALKING VISIONS

Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age

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bell hooks

naked without shame: a counter-hegemonic body politic

> My talk will focus on representations of the naked black female body; the issue of how we can construct an affirming body politic within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.
>
> —from the author's original description for the Cross Talk symposium, Saturday, June 5, 1993

preface

"Momma," I can hear them say, my sisters, voices dripping with scorn and hurt, "she stands naked in front of the mirror, just staring, as though she ain't got no shame! Anybody could be looking up and see her through the window."

Naked with shame on auction blocks, Black female slaves watched the world that was our body change. Nakedness that cannot be covered must be forgotten, shrouded in cloaks of modesty, Victorian Puritanism, religion without flesh. Signs that repeatedly say, "This Black female body is *not* on the block, not off the streets, not for sale, not without shame."

Ours is a history of shame. Written on the body we cannot erase. Imagine growing up with five sisters in two large attic bedrooms painted a dusky rose. Rooms with slanted roofs, huge windows from ceiling to floor. Six brown girls living in a private world no man can enter. You might imagine this world would be a place where we would forget all Puritanical notions about the body learned outside, and live in our flesh anew. That was not the way it was. When we climbed the stairs to the sanctuary, we moved all the more deeply into the heart of our repressions. We denied the presence of the body. Nakedness was forbidden. Nakedness hurt the eye like when Adam first looked at Eve. In these two rooms we wanted never to be

caught looking. We refused to see one another's bodies. We worked hard to turn our eyes away, to dress in the dark, in half-light, to change when no [one] was there. To *always, always* wear gown or robe. To *never, never* be without panties, keeping underwear on even during sleep. We denied our bodies, our right to see and feel ourselves, to witness our bodies move gracefully through girlhood and beyond. We made no celebrations to herald budding breasts, moon flow, rounding hips. We lived to forget, to not remember our bodies naked, without shame. We dreaded our female flesh.

The Blackness of our bodies held no deep meanings. The range of shades and colors between us, so common as to be unworthy of note. More than Blackness we shared female being, felt the awesome power and presence of Woman becoming. That presence troubled us. We invented gestures of disregard, habits of being that allowed us to forget our bodies. We created closets where we stripped ourselves of flesh. We pretended to be invisible, that we could never be seen, not by any human eye. To be invisible hurts. To live in our bodies but always away from them was to live always alone in states of fierce and lonely abandonment.

As a Black girl in a house of woman-being I wanted to see myself. I longed to cherish mirrored reflections, to understand naked brown girl flesh becoming itself. At twelve I'm reading the book of *American Negro Poetry*, I learned these words by heart: "She does not know her beauty, she thinks her brown body has no glory." A poem called "No Images." If I understand the title, how can there be images if we insist on remaining invisible, lost to the flesh? In search of glory, I find my body. I search it out standing naked in front of mirrors, watching and giving my body sight—visibility. I'm looking at my Black-girl body, seeing it clearly, learning its trace, leaning to place myself outside history, re-inventing paradise, a garden of nakedness, a place where brown flesh can be known and loved. I search my body out in the dark, hands mapping familiar terrains. My skin is smooth—velvety soft—soft as marshmallows roasted over fire, the color of warm honey. When my tongue licks my arm I taste the sweetness there, warm honey. I fall asleep at night naked from the waist down, hands between my legs warm and wet, holding the memory of orgasm. Mountain peaks I climb alone; solitary, transcendent pleasure. I sleep deeply now, can lose myself in dreams, sure that my brown body is a haven, a home this spirit can come back to.

My sisters pull the covers back, try and capture my secrets. Brown hands between thighs, hands deep in pussy as sweet as warm honey.

"Why you got to use that word?" they say. "Ain't you got no shame?"

Their taunts seduce, fill me with the knowledge that to live as a

brown woman in my flesh, without shame, is pure rebellion. I am learning . . . to let my body speak, to share its naked power. I celebrate freedom in the flesh. They seek to silence.

"Ain't you got no shame?"

I touch lips with my tongue, biting the flesh with my small white teeth, watch the fullness of their swelling blood coloring them earth-red. Naked brown woman without shame. Refusing to keep her body hidden. Refusing history.

* * *

Although black women have fiercely challenged white supremacy throughout our history in this society, we have not focused much attention on the impact of this system of domination on the black female body. Rarely does anyone call attention to the complex and diverse ways the body has been foregrounded as a site of conquest in all efforts of colonization. Criticism of white supremacist patriarchal constructions of black female images usually highlight stereotypes—the fact that from slavery to the present day we are likely to be portrayed as mammies, whores, or sluts. Rarely do we articulate a vision of resistance, of decoloniation that provides strategies for the construction of a liberatory, black female body politics. Black female bodies are almost always framed within a context of patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualization. They are de-aestheticized and de-eroticized. This process began during the colonization of this continent by white Europeans.

The presence of a small minority of free black women who immigrated here of their own accord, or who were born free here, has never been highlighted in anyway that counters the hegemonic representation of enslaved black females, naked on the auction block, raped by white masters and enslaved black men alike. Who among us, when remembering eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of African-American females, can call to mind any visual representation of the body of a free black woman? The totality of our received body image, our inherited body politics is always that of bondage—the body taken over, stripped of its own agency and made to serve the will, desire, and needs of other.

White supremacy is not the only force inscribing negative stereotypes on black female bodies. African-American internalization of sexist thinking, both in response to retentions from an African past wherein gendered hierarchy was often the cultural norm and in response to acculturation in the Americas, created a context of complicity. Racism and sexism combine to make a world wherein black females are socialized to shape our body

politics either via the embodiment of stereotypes or reaction against negative stereotypes. Nineteenth-century black female obsessions with bodily cleanliness, exaggerated displays of modesty, repression of the erotic, denial of sexual presence and desire, were all efforts made to counter notions that black females were inherently licentious, driven by animalistic sexual cravings which could not be controlled.

To justify breeding, the institutionalized sanctioning of ongoing rape of enslaved black females to produce future laborers, white supremacist patriarchs had to position the black female in the cultural imagination as always "sexually suspect." To make the black female body machine, vessel, was an act of dismemberment—a mutilation that ensured this group would always be seen as less than, as not really and truly worthy of desire. Black female bodies were forced to embody the sign of sexual ruin. Against this backdrop of devaluation and denigration black women in slavery and in freedom worked to regain status and value by embodying the norms of femininity set by the white colonizing imagination. White and black men exercised patriarchal privileges in relationship to black female bodies. Both groups could rape those bodies with relative impunity. Both groups could dare to fantasize and/or enact sexual acts deemed degrading with black female bodies since it was impossible to ruin that which was perceived as inherently unworthy, tainted and soiled.

Marked by shame, projected as inherent and therefore precluding any possibility of innocence, the black female body was beyond redemption. It is no wonder, then, that when slavery ended black females usually chose to follow the path of either obsessive representations of themselves as virtuous and therefore worthy of respect, or wantonly represented themselves as loose and licentious. The latter took pride in the racist/sexist stereotype that black females were more sexually free than their white counterparts. Individual black women who may have believed themselves to be always the losers in a world of sexist feminine competition based on beauty could see the realm of the sexual as the place where they triumph over white females. Absorbing the stereotypes, in part so as not to hold white men accountable for their sexual obsessions with black females often acted out in actual rape and sexual harassment, many white females were, and remain, eager to see black women as inherently more sexual.

This stereotypical racist/sexist image of black women as sexually licentious corresponds to that of the black male as rapist. Yet while contemporary black liberation struggles (the Civil Rights movement, the sixties movements for black power) consistently questioned the racist sexual

stereotypes that were imposed on black males, the stereotypes imposed on black females converged with conventional sexist ways of thinking about female sexuality, particularly cultural representations and interpretations of any active female sexual agency. Contemporary movements for sexual liberation often praised black females and other ethnic groups like Latina women for being already "sexually free" so that they did not serve as sites of critical intervention. Since they focused exclusively on the liberation of white females from the confines of a racist/sexist notion of purity that had encouraged sexual repression, sexual liberation movements did not challenge degrading and limiting stereotypes imposed on black women and all women of color. As a consequence, those sexist/racist stereotypes continue to inform representations of black female sexuality in the cultural image as well as the ways many black women see themselves. Despite all the popular literature that suggests white women are more engaged with sexual liberation and more open in many ways about the body than their black female counterparts, many black women continue to believe that they are inherently more sexually desirable, more capable of attaining sexual fulfillment.

Within diverse black communities there is little discussion about the black female body. As popular music attests black males continue to place black females in the binary categories of madonnas or whores. Sexually active black women are most often portrayed in the mass media of the domination culture, and in those aspects of media that are black owned and operated, as inherently less moral. Their bodies are de-aestheticized, that is to say their sexuality [is] often portrayed as raw and uninhibited in vulgar ways. In other words, the naked black female body is made to appear grotesque, ugly—and all the more so if that body is actively sexual. These stereotypical representations were rampant in "black exploitation" films. When I first saw a screening of Melvin Van Peebles's film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in the early seventies I was horrified by the ways black female bodies and our sexuality were portrayed. It was horrifying to me that no one in the audience that night found it problematic that an adult black female was sexually seducing a child. Rather than a violation and transgression, because the child was a young black male, the scene was viewed merely as an act of pleasurable sexual initiation. The black female was portrayed, like she would come to be portrayed in similar films from that time forth, as sexually voracious and out-of-control. De-eroticized as desirable female flesh, she was exoticized as raw meat, hot pussy. The vagina—the pussy—was evoked in black exploitation films (and in the works that came afterwards, which took their cues from these films) as the only way to tell

black females from black males since we were, and still are, usually portrayed as just as mean, tough, strong, and angry as black men. Indeed, in many of these films it was only the possession of a vagina that marked the black adult woman as female, hence the graphic depiction of black female flesh by misogynist and/or sexist imaginations as grotesque and monstrous. The "pussy" in these films is potentially all consuming of male power. Hence it must be raped, violated, and tamed. Most films by black male filmmakers do not challenge in any way racist/sexist constructions of the black female body. Like their white counterparts they usually depict the madonna/whore dichotomy. Whereas black female bodies may be depicted in films by white filmmakers as whores and sluts to emphasize the purity of white female heroines, often black filmmakers rely on a skin color split to create the same binary opposition, with darker skinned women portrayed as more licentious and immoral than their fairer counterparts. Eddie Murphy's film *Boomerang* pitted black actress Robin Givens against bi-racial Halle Berry in a contest that aimed to show which female was more virtuous and worthy. Givens's character is powerful and sexually aggressive. Even though she has the conventional feminine look, the movie insists that this is only a mask, a front to entrap men. In reality, her character is hard, tough, and mean, a castrating bitch in direct contrast to the non-sexually assertive, subordinate, lighter skinned woman. Givens's character is only imitation femininity, Berry's character is the real thing.

Contemporary audiences are socialized to believe racist/sexist representations of the black female body as true and authentic. When a character is depicted in films in ways that challenge this interpretation, audiences resist these images. For example: when the film *Menace II Society* was first shot and shown to audiences, Ronnie, the redemptive young black single mother in the film is not actively sexual even though she is depicted as desirable, sensuous, and erotic. She is concerned with self-development. When viewers screened the film prior to its release they wanted to see this character engaged in sexual intercourse with the male hero. The public demanded that she be sexualized. And the way the film depicts her sexuality is that it is the means by which she is shown to be not as sincere and as devoted to her principles as earlier portrayals of her suggest. Since the way she is sexualized (she has sex in the midst of a party at her house) runs counter to her concern that her child be protected from adult party behavior, this scene is completely incongruent with the character the film has constructed. This righteous, courageous, politically conscious black woman is suddenly portrayed as disloyal to her own values, a representation that is

completely in sync with patriarchal sexist/racist iconography of black women. Everyone who has written about this scene acknowledges that Ronnie's willingness to leave her guests and the care of her little boy to have sex during the party creates a pornographic voyeuristic moment. Everyone at the party knows she is having sex. This break with her character is enacted to fulfill the societal need to contain and control black womanhood and the black female body by always keeping us trapped in the prison-house of white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal representations. Everyone in this culture, including black folks, are so accustomed to seeing black female bodies depicted as licentious, immoral, evil, consumed by hedonistic desire and monstrous longings for power, that there is little or no resistance to these images. Films that do not emphasize heterosexuality often depict black females in the same stereotypical ways. Black women characters in films by white lesbian filmmakers more often than not conform to the stereotype. Filmmakers like Lizzie Borden and Monika Treut are two examples. The black female characters in their films are always more aggressive, tough, and trashy than their white female counterparts.

In Sara Halprin's book *Look at my Ugly Face,* which examines links between appearance obsession in our culture and white supremacy, she analyzes the racism of white women who often "see" black women as more aggressive, as meaner, tougher, stronger. Commenting on her own experiences Halprin asserts: "It did not occur to me that when I went to the movies or watched television at home I never saw images of women or girls who were black like my friend, or Asian, or obviously Jewish." Her continued reflections are worth noting: "When I went to junior high school I had to take two buses from our housing project to get to school. I remember several black girls, older than I was, who rode the bus. Some of them had razors in their back pockets, and I heard them bragging about getting in fights and cutting each other. I was terrified. I did my best to be invisible, and never to get in anyone's way. But my own racism was invisible to me. There must have been tough white girls on that bus too, but I don't remember them. I just assumed that black girls were tougher than white girls, and I didn't look to see if there were any black girls who, like me, were terrified and trying to be invisible. I don't remember noticing that anyone was white, only that people were black. Whiteness was not something I ever noticed. It was easy to ignore. And it was easy to project qualities onto blackness that I didn't acknowledge in myself, for instance, toughness, or the ability to dance, or sexuality." There is a direct correlation between the qualities that groups who hold more power than black women and women of color assign to us and the fictive representations of our identity

that bombard us in mass media. Concurrently, since so many black females have not decolonized their minds in ways that enable them to break with internalized racism and/or sexism, the representations they create may embody stereotypes. Let me give an example from my own experience. When a high powered mainstream fashion magazine did a story on me, I was called and asked for a photo to accompany the article that would be "fierce and aggressive." Were I not decolonized I might not question the desire of this magazine to represent me in this way. When I did, they willingly used another photo. However, the article itself, written by a black female, edited under the supervision of her white superiors, tended to emphasize that I was fierce and provocative but made little mention of the intellectual work that had led them to do the interview. Now in an earlier issue a Jewish white woman peer, another critic, had been featured. She was photographed in front of rows of books with a heading that indicated she was a major feminist thinker. Without in any way diminishing the power of her work, it is worthy of note that I have written many more books, that my work is used in classrooms all over this country in a way that hers [is] not. My point is to emphasize the stereotypes that are self-evident and operative here. It is very difficult for black women to assert more control over the ways we are represented in mainstream media, since so many folks who produce, market, and consume these images have not interrogated how racism and sexism inform the ways that they look at black females, the ways they see us.

Every day of our lives black females are assaulted by images of ourselves constructed by the white racist/sexist imagination. The "shame" that such images evoke in individual black women has yet to be fully named. That shame will never leave us until we begin to engage in collective resistance, which means that we must challenge the ways we are currently represented (that challenge may simply take the form of standing outside a movie with signs stating what we find problematic about the images folks are about to see). We must also decolonize our minds and imaginations in ways that empower us to create subversive and alternative images. To intervene critically in the existing ways our bodies are represented, black females must take the lead in defining a liberatory body politics that embraces us and our reality. The preface to this piece is meant to be just that—an act of critical intervention. Progressive black females who challenge racist and sexist representations are engaged in an ongoing struggle to reclaim our images—our naked black female bodies—so that we can construct an affirming body politic, so that we know our glory and revel in it.

Coco Fusco

We Wear the Mask

During a trip to Europe in 1993, I could not avoid taking note of resurgent hatred directed at foreigners in general, and Muslims in particular. It seemed as if Europeans reserved a special kind of malevolence for the last non-Christian people to have succeeded in conquering parts of their continent. In this climate of animosity, derisive comments about what was perceived as stubborn insistence on maintaining traditional connections between identity and appearance were common. More than a few Europeans reminded me of the legal battle involving the young Muslim girls and their chadors (veils), which the French state had sought to remove while they were in school. In many more conversations, I noted how even progressive Europeans equated "traditional" appearance with "oppressive" culture and minorities resistant to assimilation.

The European feminists I encountered were no exception. I heard too many horror stories about Muslim treatment of women that often began with comments about chadors, and led to assertions that "traditional" men didn't allow their women to be feminists (European style). But in Germany I was also told that the latest craze for middle-class European women trying to "get in touch with their bodies" was belly-dancing classes, which are even more popular than salsa workshops that have sprung up like weeds all over northern Europe. No one spoke of the simultaneous embrace of a culture and rejection of the people who originate it as a contradiction; in fact, some Germans even argued that their interest in Black culture, for example, was simply a by-product of an imperialist American culture industry. Exotic dance classes, herbal medicine and hair care, nose piercing, and world beat clothing, all acts of cross-cultural appropriation and identity displacement, were all among the latest defining markers of the transgressive northern European woman. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to my

recent experiences masquerading as a "primitive" in a cage, Western culture continues to rely on stereotypical notions of otherness and non-Western identity to define itself; and Western feminism, together with other attempts to redefine, transform and broaden contemporary developed societies, also depend on those same reified notions of difference to delimit their transgressiveness.

The history of the Americas is rife with examples of transfers of appearance between privileged and subaltern women. One of my favorite cases is that of the *tapadas* of the sixteenth-century viceroyalty of Peru (and much of South America during the colonial period): libertine *criollas* used their shawls as chador-like veils, covering all but one eye to hide themselves and thus to be freer and less easy to identify in public places. This practice had originated in Spain where, after the expulsion of the Moors in 1492, Islamic veils were banned and Morisca slaves turned to shawls to cover their heads and faces. Catholic women quickly perceived in the use of this body covering the advantage of its allowing them more social mobility (downward) and privacy. They took on the practice with such gusto and success that the Spanish crown outlawed it soon thereafter. In South America in the 1580s, the Council on the Indies saw in *tapadas* potential damage to the empire, noting that their sexual behavior could not be controlled and that even men were using the shawls to engage in "sin and sacrilege." Despite frequent attempts to outlaw it, the practice continued into the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment ideas redirected privileged women's desire for more liberty to cerebral rather than sensual pursuits.

In my imagination, I envision *tapadas* as precursors to both commercialized and avant-garde "bad girls" such as Madonna and the thousands of non-Latin Frida look-alikes who roam the Southwest. They borrow from subaltern female and sex-trade stereotypes (and take belly-dancing and salsa classes), and in doing so miraculously transform signs of oppression into symbols of transgression. In the context of the current celebration of transferable identities, such acts of appropriation are posited as emblematic of the postmodern severing of traditional or natural unions of identity and appearance. Unfortunately, however, this celebratory position tends to depoliticize and equate all forms of identity twisting, reaching the point at times of assuming that women are what they wear. It collapses the historical, political and social influences in the construction of identity and appearance into a superficial reading of identity as appearance, complementing the impulses of a society that uses consumption as its model of cultural assimilation. Thus, the history among women of color of manipulating self-image

to negotiate sexist and racist realities (sometimes known as passing) becomes, at this moment, a kind of beacon for white feminists in the postmodern age in search of a positive relation to style. I take as an indicator of this phenomenon the current feminist film theory fad of teaching and writing about *Imitation of Life* more than just about any other films with African-Americans in them.

It is important to remember, however, that this was not always the mainstream feminist line on style, the body, and appearance. Much feminist art in the 1970s stressed the biological functions of the female body and ancient (or at least pre-capitalist) matriarchal mythologies. In the early 1970s, when white feminism established itself in the academy and within certain sectors of popular culture, "style" and other forms of attention to appearance were often written off, somewhat ethnocentrically, as capitulation to patriarchy. Implicit in this position was a puritanical rejection of adornment as a form of dissimulation. During this period, I recall being looked upon with skepticism by the director of the women's center at my college (always clad, by the way, in grays, brown, and tans), who could not understand how I could be a budding feminist theorist in fishnets, pink mini-skirts, and purple hair. My success strategy at that time at a very WASPy Ivy League university, was to deliver a paper at a conference at the women's center my senior year, dressed as a man, on Lit Crit goddess Virginia Woolf's only funny book, *Orlando*. I ended up winning the prize for the best women's studies thesis on the same subject a few weeks later. (And some people think I just started performing . . .) Two years later, I decided to drop the cultural drag, leave the academy and commit myself to less recherché pursuits.

It wasn't until I left school and tried to enter the work force that I grasped just how much of that past was still present, making the very idea I could escape an identity by altering my appearance patently absurd. While I had spent years nourishing my brain, identities I found reductive, unacceptable, and racist continued to be thrown my way. The best I could hope for in most cases was acknowledgment that my identity might be something different or more complicated than the expectations generated by my appearance. The cultural debates and resurgent racial tensions of recent years have only served to make those expectations more apparent, not to make them disappear. In the midst of this, I felt myself beginning to lose sense of the pleasure I might have found in delving into other cultures without sensing a connection to mine. There is nothing radical for people like me about trying to be somebody else—our problem is how to get others

to see who we are. At some instinctual, or perhaps unconsciously political level of my psyche, I felt that the struggle to transform limiting notions of the self had to come from *within,* from inside the cultures that had socialized me, and began to excavate the language I had first learned to understand myself.

Was I sensitive to the relationship between identity and appearance because I was a feminist? I cannot answer that question without first asking what kind of feminist I am speaking of. Feminism as it was defined by institutions at the time I began to think of myself as an adult woman sent me very mixed signals about both my identity and appearance, and I negotiated those looks by parodying them. That strategy, however, was one I had learned from women who had never participated in a feminist movement, let alone called themselves feminists. They were my mother, my aunts, my maternal grandmother, and family friends, all masterful manipulators of appearance, as their being women of color in the highly stratified societies of the Caribbean had necessitated. Before I reached adolescence, my power to manipulate my appearance had been forcefully communicated to me. I had been taught how to lighten my skin, get rid of my freckles, narrow my nose, straighten my hair, walk like a Parisian, sit like a virgin, speak like a lady, and dress like someone wealthier than I was. I watched them all go in and out of that posing as the situation called for it, saving their feistier selves for private moments. To follow their example meant to look one way and be another—tough, self-reliant, and prepared to face off against a system that would block my success at every turn. When I was younger, I thought they were hypocritical, even silly. I resented their screams when I decided to wear an Afro in the seventies. I now see them as survivors, women who tried to shield me from the suffering that lives in their memories. In their suggestions that I feign weakness to avoid physical labor, I hear the weariness of women who never had the luxury to fight for the right to work, and who have never experienced the claustrophobia of being supported by a man because no man available to them could offer such security. Through their admonishments and masquerades, a past that binds me to them speaks to me.

Meena Alexander

Alphabets of Flesh

I

There is something molten in me. I do not know how else to begin. To begin again, all over again, as if in each attempt something needs to be recast, rekindled, some bond, some compact between flesh, clothing, and words. There is something incendiary in me and it has to do with being female, here, now, in America. And those words, markers, of gender, of time, of site all have an extraordinary valency for me. When they brush up against each other, each of those markers—"female," "here," "now," "America"—there is something quite unstable in the atmosphere they set up. I do not have a steady, taken-for-granted compact with my body. Nor indeed with language. Yet it is only as my body enters into, coasts through, lives in language, that I can make sense.

II

I need to go backwards, to begin. Think of language and shame. As a child I used to hide out to write. This was in Khartoum where I spent many months of each year. My life was divided between that desert land and the tropical green of Kerala on the west coast of India where my mother would return with her children for the summer months. I hid behind the house under a sheltering neem tree, or by a cool wall. Sometimes I would find myself forced into the only room where I could close the door, the toilet. I gradually learned that the toilet was safer, no one would force the door open on me. There I could mind my own business and compose.
I also learned to write in snatches. If someone knocked at the door, I stopped abruptly, hid my papers under my skirts, tucked my pen into the

elastic band of my knickers and got up anxiously. Gradually, this enforced privacy—for I absorbed and perhaps in part even identified with my mother's disapproval of my poetic efforts—added an aura of something illicit, shameful, to my early sense of my scribblings. School work was seen in a totally different light. It was good to excel there, interpreting works that were part of a great literary past. The other writing, in one's own present, was to be tucked away, hidden. No wonder then that my entry into the realm of letters was fraught.

The facts of multilingualism added complexity to this split sense of writing in English. I was born in Allahabad and so Hindi washed over me in my earliest years. I chattered aloud in it to the children around. It was my first spoken language, though Malayalam, my mother tongue, has always been there with it, by its side, indeed alongside any other language I have cared to use: Hindi, English, French, Arabic. Malayalam is speech to me. Tightened, though, into the hold of privacy as I live here, it is closer to dream. Its curving syllables blossom for me in so many scripts: gawky, dazzling letters spray painted in fluorescent shades onto the metal sides of subway cars or the dark walls of inner tunnels, shifting, metamorphic. Sometimes I read letters in another script a man draws out laboriously in chalk on the sidewalks of Manhattan, spelling out the obvious as necessity so often compels: I AM HOMELESS, I NEED FOOD, SHELTER. A smattering of dimes and quarters lie near his bent knees. Those letters I read in the only script I know, make for a ferocious, almost consumptive edge to knowledge in me.

Never learning to read or write in Malayalam, I have turned into a truly postcolonial creature, one who has had to live in English. Though a special sort of English, I must say, for the version of the language I am comfortable with bends and sways to the shores of other territories, other tongues. First in Allahabad there was Hindi; then in my childhood months in Pune, Marathi; then in North Africa, French; and now in New York, there is Spanish. And always there has been Malayalam—that both heightens and undermines the course of my English. And necessarily so. Else, how would I be? Indeed, what would I be?

Yet the price of fluency in many places might well be the loss of the sheer intimacy that one has with "one's own" culture, a speech that holds its own sway, untouched by any other. But perhaps there is a dangerous simplicity here. And indeed how might such a mythic state be maintained at the tail end of the century? And it is a dangerous idea that animates such simplicity; small and bloody wars have been fought for such ideas.

Of course there are difficulties in the way of one who does not know how to read and write her mother tongue. For example, I would love to read the prose of the Lalithambika Antherjanam, the poetry of Balamani-amma and Ayyappa Paniker, rather than have them read to me. I would love to read Mahakavi K. V. Seemon's epic *Vedaviharam* rather than have it recited to me.

Or is there something in me that needs to draw on that old reliance, the voice of another reading, the sheer giveness of speech. After all, if it were just an issue of motherwit, I am sure I would be able to read and write Malayalam by now. Is there perhaps a deliberate dependency, revealing something of my childhood longings and fears, a community held in dream, a treasured orality? For the rhythms of the language first came to me, not just in lullabies or in the chatter of women in the kitchen or by the wellside, but in the measured cadences of oratory and poetry, and nightly recitations from the Bible and the epics.

Is there a fear that learning the script would force me to face the tradition with its hierarchies, the exclusionary nature of canonical language? And how, then, would I be restored to simplicity, freed of the pressures of counter-memory?

Sometimes all that has been forgotten wells up, and I use my English to let it surface. At the end of "Night-Scene, the Garden," is a vision of ancestors dancing free of the earth; allowing for the "ferocious alphabets of flesh."

"Alphabets of Flesh"

My back against barbed wire
snagged and coiled to belly height
on granite posts
glittering to the moon

No man's land
no woman's either

I stand in the middle
of my life.

I cannot see my mother
I cannot see my father
I cannot see my sister
or my brother

Out of earth's soft
and turbulent core
a drum sounds
summoning ancestors

They rise
through puffs of greyish dirt
scabbed skins slit
and drop from them

They dance
atop the broken spurts
of stone

They scuff
the drum skins
with their flighty heels.

Men dressed
in immaculate white
bearing spears, and reams
of peeling leaf

Minute inscriptions
of our blood and race

Stumbling behind
in feverish coils
I watch the women come,
eyes averted from the threads
of smoke that spiral
from my face.

Some prise
their stiffening knuckles
from the iron grip
of pots and pans
and kitchen knives

Bolts of unbleached
cloth, embroidery needles,
glitter and crash in heaps.

*****

Slow accoutrements of habit
and of speech,
the lust of grief
the savagery of waste
flicker and burn
along the hedgerows
by the vine

The lost child lifts her eyes to mine.

*****

Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
splinter and raze my page

That out of the dumb and bleeding part of me

I may claim
my heritage.

The green tree
battened on despair
cast free

The green roots kindled
to cacophony.

III

In my early days in Manhattan when my son was very little, I would take him in a stroller down the subway. It was hard maneuvering down the steps. Kindly folks would help now and then by carrying one end of the stroller. Once it was a Latino man. He smiled at me, spoke to the baby in a warm gush. I thanked him as he turned to me, right by the token booth. I heard the melodious flow of words but did not understand the question. I shook my head. I could tell he was offended. Why wasn't I replying.

Finally, in desperation I said "Indian, Indian!" and he nodded. At my ignorance. He had taken me for a woman who could speak Spanish, a Latina. Other times I have gone down the streets, unaccompanied and been asked, often by South Asians, "Where are you from? Guyana? Trinidad? Fiji?" The jeans, the short hair meant that I might be from that elsewhere, that shifting, diffuse South Asian Diaspora. Of course, when I wear a sari, no one asks such questions. Those who might worry see it as a flag for

"Indianness. . . ." India, that strange land, far away. Land of maharajahs and snake charmers and poverty so desperate it ends in the plague.

"Hindu, they called me Hindu, then threw eggs at me. A group of skinheads in a car. I ran all the way home," one of my students told me. She was from a proud Muslim family, living at the edge of Queens. She was walking home late one night from a movie, this young woman who I shall call Rumana, though that's not her name. Her name does not matter, she might be you or I or she. What she went through matters terribly. Rumana had to figure out how to live her life after that episode, how to walk the streets, how to enter public space.

One is marked by one's body, but how is one marked?

"What wonderful English you speak," a young woman of South Asian origin is told. She is a woman in her twenties, utterly American, I would have thought. "Where are you from?" they ask her next. She wonders how she can speak of that small town outside Detroit she calls home. It is very common for young Asian Americans to be asked for their land of origin, whereas a young man or woman of European origin would never be asked such a question in quite that fashion. He or she would pass, unerringly. Though what such a person from Latvia or Ireland would feel deep down inside is another matter. After all, whatever the color of one's skin memories of dislocation can be deeply othering.

So what might it mean to pass in America? For an Asian-American to pass? For some of us it means making it in economic terms, assimilation translated into doing well, very well, not just making do. But the streets lined with gold are hard to walk and what happens with the heart can give one pause.

Once, in a small writing workshop for students at a prestigious Eastern University, there were twelve of us in a high room. I listened carefully as a young Korean-American student told me of the club his wealthy father took him to, how his father told him to behave impeccably, lifting up knife and fork just so, how coming home the father burst into rage at what he saw as the son's lack of culture. And all the while the student talked, his eyes red with the strain of remembering, I could see how he was so mad at being in the place he was. But what could I do?

Does passing mean being granted free passage? after fifteen years in this country I now have an American passport. It has a color photo of me, clearly different from the black and white I had in my Indian passport, and the background to the image is a honeycomb pattern in sugary pink, blue and navy, quite a surprise. With this passport I can travel across borders,

enter this country without visa or greencard. But what if I don't have the passport on me? And what difference will the passport make to my concern about walking on country roads where no other people of color are to be seen? And what of my fear of coming across men in army camouflage, toting rifles to kill deer, all the xenophobia of America sitting squarely on them, or bikers on Route 23 with big signs posted to their machines: "500 Years After Columbus Keep Out Foreign Scum!"

What does it mean to belong to America? In the city, I live close to Harlem. Sometimes when I walk up 125th Street I feel I am in another country—the shouts and cries, the passing figures, the small shop fronts in the old black neighborhood. I feel quite safe picking out a cap or a pair of overalls. There is no harm here in not being white. But I am not black either. "Indian?" a man in a khaki vest asks me. I nod. He passes me the clump of green plantains I have paid for. He smiles at me. I can pass here. But what does passing mean? For Asian-Americans, multiple ethnic borders are part of the shifting reality we inhabit.

The racial lines of black and white have been complicated by the layers of immigrants who have entered and are remaking this country. And we are part and parcel of a world of complex, often fluid allegiances. Ethnicity in such a world needs to be recast so that our moving selves can be acknowledged. Strolling through the streets of Jackson Heights, the El just behind me, blocking out part of the sky, I may feel quite at home—all the smells and sights of India, in fresh combinations—but I cannot live there either. The enticement of America lies quite precisely in its dazzling multiplicity.

But such shifting borders, particularly when radicalized, can be tormenting. Who am I? When am I? The questions that are asked in the street, of my identity: how do they mould me? Appearing in the flesh, I am cast afresh, a female of color—skin color, hair texture, clothing, speech, all marking me in ways that I could scarcely have conceived of. And there is a febrile edge to this knowledge, something that has always been with me, even in India, the country I "come from," a country where the issue of race never touched me. Years ago, living in Hyderabad, in my very early twenties, I wrote a poem. Somehow the thoughts and feelings return to me: the danger of being seen in the street, the danger of being a writing woman:

"Her Mother's Words"

If you sit in a dark room
no light behind you
no one passing in the street can see
my mother said to me.

I sit in a dark room
a small lamp beside me
how should I write these lines
without a light, how should I see?

I asked myself
not knowing that the street
had such a vision of my woman's soul
as I should scarcely understand.

Now I know
my hands grow cold and sight spills out of me.

Perhaps I should have said "body" instead of soul, I now think, but then I correct myself. It is woman as prisoner of her sex that touched me, a shocked awareness that led me to a study of the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, writer, revolutionary, radical feminist.

But the borders here are different, the edges blurring. What knowledge can one draw on to live? I am Indian here, in a way I never was in the subcontinent, in a way I never needed to be. And my femaleness is complicit in that radicalized awareness. Yet there is also the possibility of passing, of entering if only fitfully into multiple worlds.

But here I think of the darkness on which such a possibility is built: Nella Larsen's world, female selves unraveling in the haste to "pass." Her agile, anguished heroines come to mind: Helga Crane in *Quicksand,* Clare Kendry in *Passing.* Invented almost seventy years ago, these fictional women are torn apart by being African-American in a racist world. Larsen's vision is tragically divided: on the one hand is the crowd, the dark thronging masses, the "hordes," one's own people rendered alien, a source of pollution. On the other hand is a white world that might grant one exotic status. In Denmark one might be a bird of rare plumage, in America a gypsy or an Italian. Multiple imagined ethnicities draw these women forward but blackness, borne deep inside, a fiery implosive, forces them to

their tragic fates. Passing in a racialised world offers no harbor and the self, site of so many invented identities, must perish. Though the tearing apart of the bonds of the past and the family might seem to allow for radical self-invention, Larsen was acutely aware of the quicksand of such an existence.

IV

I grew up in what might loosely be called the postcolonial Third World. I grew up both in India and in the Sudan. Multiple borders were part of my ordinary reality. In Khartoum as a young girl, I could sometimes pass for Sudanese, and this was always a comfort to me. But deep down inside, borne within me like contraband, was the knowledge that I was Indian, that my grandparents lived in Kerala, where both my parents were born and brought up—a land of ancient temples, churches, and paddy fields, quite unlike the stark lines of desert and sandstone that one found in Khartoum. In those heady days of Sudanese democracy my friends were experimenting with the tob. Some decided to wear the traditional covering, others found freedom outside it. Femaleness, then, at least in its external markers, could be negotiated. I understood, too, that what a woman chose to wear could be quite deceptive.

Assia Djebar writes of how the veil can allow women a subversive entry into public space. While Djebar's Algeria is far from this country, one can learn from her analysis of the danger of the moving body. Her vision, forged at the time of the anti-colonial struggles in Algeria, sharpened her sense of the multifarious, covert shapes a female body could take, and what contraband, literally explosive, could be hidden under female coverings. Drawing on her knowledge, one can reflect on a female body crossing the domestic border, entering public space. And indeed such crossings can have a truly communal valency. Here, now, in America we can reflect on such complexities, understanding that even as time and localities shift, there is very little we can take for granted as we etch ourselves into this culture, in complex palimpsests of knowledge and desire. Identity politics, in other words, or what commonly passes under that appellation, gains in power to the extent that it is anchored with multiple tie lines to a common, if shifting, social reality.

Several years ago, I gave a poetry reading at Tufts University with Marilyn Chin. I remember Marilyn reading her poem "The Barbarians Are Coming":

If you call me a horse, I must be a horse.
If you call me a bison, I am equally guilty.

I felt myself grow quiet as she read those lines. Then I read my poem "Ashtamudi Lake":

Arawac or Indian
the names confine
there is nothing for us
in the white man's burden . . .

In our different ways, both Marilyn and I were talking about living in America. Talking? Is that a good word to use for a poet's speech, that heightened, intimate vocalization? Why not? Surely poetry is as much speech as any other form of address. Both poems draw the hard power of naming, and of being named as Other, into the seams of the present.

After the reading, as people milled about, taking tea, helping themselves to sandwiches, a young woman came up to me. She beckoned, drawing me towards the window. When we were safely out of earshot of the others, she pointed at my sari:

"Can you really wear that here?"

"Why not?" Out of the corner of my eye I saw the window pane. Sunlight gleaming on the polished wood, but outside, in glittering heaps, soft as sugar, the snow.

"Not because of the cold, you mean?"

She shook her head. I can see her still, that young woman with her hair cut straight across her face in bangs, her worried eyes. "They told my mother she couldn't."

"Your mother?"

She nodded. In the background a teacup fell to the ground. There were students milling about, sandwiches in hand.

"What does your mother do?"

"She's a doctor in Staten Island, she was told she'd have to wear a dress in the hospital. Can you wear that all the time?" she asked, touching the pallu of my sari.

"All the time I want. I guess I'm lucky where I work."

"The ethnic thing is not a fault?" I felt the sense of shame in her.

"No, no," I murmured, reduced almost to tears. And I put out my hand and touched her wrist. I wanted to draw off the six yards of silk I had

draped over my body, wheaten colored silk, a gift from my mother in India. I wanted to show the young woman the glittering length of the sari, then let the fabric flutter out of the window, as a banner might, signifying some hidden, transient joy passersby could only guess at. Suddenly, the snow seemed ever so close, beautiful, blinding. And I wondered what it would be like to walk through the snow, all borders erased, skin tingling, eyes filled with blue skies of Somerville.

V

But the shining blue that exists in the imagination, a sheer and brilliant nothingness, forces us back onto the fraught compact between body and language in a world crisscrossed by violent borders. Sometimes it seems to me that it is only in the teeth of violence that we can speak the unstable truths of our bodies, our human lives. I think of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, of Jersey City and the racist murders there. In Jersey City an Indian man was beaten to death, Indian women who wore saris or buttus were stoned by skinheads. I think of Hyderabad, Meerut, Delhi, Bhagalpur, and the communal riots and murders in those cities, as well as in the countryside of India. I think of the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. And I feel that the habitations that language provides are always piecemeal, for we are haunted by the radical nature of dislocation, not singular, but multiple, given the world as it comes to us now—not just in the dailiness of our lives, waking up, walking down a winter street, setting down fifty cents for a newspaper—but in the manifold figurations of knowledge, through CNN, faxes, E-mail, the visible buying and selling of multinational corporations, the invisible telephone lines that link New York with Delhi or Tiruvella, which, with their rough oceanic sounds, threaten to obliterate beloved voices that sound a lifetime away.

In public spaces—and I am thinking now of Manhattan, the city where I normally live, walking down a crowded sidewalk, descending the subway—there is always one's body to mark one as Other. Ethnicity, we have learned, can draw violence, here and elsewhere. This, too, is part of the postcolonial terrain, part of the sorrow and knowledge of our senses.

And so the shelters the mind makes up are crisscrossed by borders, weighted down as a tent might be by multiple anchorages, ethnic solidarities, unselvings.

But having said this, I need to ponder a little further how these multiple anchorages of our feminism might work in the light of ethnic extrem-

ism. I am thinking of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India, on December 6, 1992, and the way in which Hindu extremism has coarsened the very fabric of the nation, the way in which tiny ripples from that violent eruption worked into the diasporic community here.

On a cold, damp day, I rode out with a group of other Indians to a small town across the Hudson river. After the choke hold of traffic in downtown Manhattan and the dim half-light of the Holland tunnel came the New Jersey turnpike and acres of industrial marshland, smoke stacks, and bits of old machinery, and the grayness of earth and sky, till suddenly we turned off and stopped in front of a small, low lying motel that housed the Akbar restaurant. The irony of the Bharatiya Janata Party meeting in a restaurant named after the great emperor Akbar, who espoused the idea of religious tolerance, was not lost on us. Inside the restaurant the BJP was hosting a Friends of India fundraiser. In the biting cold outside, protesters lined the muddy banks between road and parking lot, with raised placards reading "Hindu-Muslim Bhai-Bhai," "Rebuild Babri Masjid," and "Stop Funding Massacres in India." In the closed conference room of the restaurant, Sikander Bakht the BJP speaker who had come all the way from India especially for the occasion, spoke warmly of all the virtues of Hindutva, the cultural priority of Hindus, the indissoluble bond between Hindu identity and Indian nationalism. Cries of "Ram Rajya" raised by men, some of whom wore the red armbands of the RSS, echoed in the closed room. The speaker's plea to the listeners, not to forget their Indian identity, had not gone unheeded. Now an Indian identity seemed in that hot, closed room, to rest on the destruction of difference, on the excision of all others who were not Hindu. If the extremists had their way, the secular tradition, the rich, the multiethnic character would be expunged forever.

One of the members of the Mosque Committee told me how he was thrown out of the lobby outside the meeting room and threatened by the local police with handcuffs and the lockup if he resisted. While two carloads of police watched warily, some of the BJP group came out of the motel and the two sets of Indians confronted each other on American soil. The riots in Bombay and Surat were fresh in our minds. The blood letting of Partition was just behind us. Was India to revert to that again? Would mosques, temples, churches, houses, schools have to be destroyed at whim, just because there was a prior claim on the soil? The irony of the BJP speaker, inside the Akbar restaurant, invoking Mahatma Gandhi's name was not lost on us. How long did one have to live somewhere to make it one's home anyway? Was there no protection for minorities any-

where? It seemed quite appropriate to protest, to carry on this line of questioning on the democratic soil of New Jersey. The claims to identity that were made within the closed room of the Akbar restaurant were heard by men and women who in their daily lives were hardly members of a Hindu majority but lived rather as Asian immigrants, a clearly visible minority in America. Why could they not feel the predicament of minorities in their homeland? Why this terrible need to claim one cultural identity, singular and immovable for India?

One of the members of the protest group, shivering in the sudden wind, spoke of the 451 Palestinians expelled by Israel, living in makeshift tents in southern Lebanon. "It's cold there, too," she said, smiling bitterly as the cries of "Down, down BJP" grew louder and the cars, filled with party supporters, eased out of the parking lot. "What rights do we have anywhere?" she asked me. "How will you write this?" she continued. I smiled back at her wryly and stamped my feet, trying as best I could to free myself of the dampness. My toes were frozen and thoughts of writing were far from me.

Like many others, I had grown up at the borders of violent conflict. My mother's parents were Ghandians, believers in *satyagraha,* the way of non-violent resistance. But even as stories of peaceful resistance in the face of *lathi* charges and mass arrests filled my ears as a child, there were also mutterings about the INA, of women who armed themselves—of others, too, like Preetilata Wadekar, who threw bombs at the British. The struggle to decolonize took on a different hue in my years of growing up in Khartoum. There was a civil war raging in the south of the Sudan and university students who came from there would tell tales of torture and mutilation. As I left the Sudan to go to study in Britain I was well aware of the struggles for justice that raged on. In India, at the time there were students my age who joined the Naxalite movement, and many others were sympathizers in the cause of an armed struggle for justice. National independence was clearly only a very small first step and violence, in its multiple forms, would have to be confronted.

The struggle for women's rights flowed side by side with postcolonial struggles for freedom. The girlfriends I grew up with in Khartoum marched with men in the streets, demanding a solution to what was dubbed the "Southern Question"—the bitter civil war that was tearing the country apart. And those very voices, strengthened, were raised against the horrors of cliterodectomy. Then too, personal decisions were being made on how to dress, whether to use the tob or to discard it. In India where I returned

in the early seventies, a powerful feminism that sought to rewrite the nation in terms of a viable existence for women was taking shape. Friends in Delhi organized against bride burning; friends in Hyderabad collected the stories of women who were active in the uprising of the Telengana movement. Within me, too, was the awareness that Gandhi, the apostle of nonviolence, in the course of his experiments in community living, both on Tolstoy Farm in South Africa and in Sabermati Ashram in Ahmedabad, had cut off the hair of young women he suspected of engaging in sexual misconduct. He wanted these young women to bear a mark on their bodies. What place did women have, I wondered, in this new world?

The complexities that underlie female existence need to be set in relation to the constraints of power, both patriarchal and colonial. It is against such constraints that the woman's voice pits itself, translating violence. In his essay "Representative Government" (1861) John Stuart Mill made the case for despotism. The natives of India were on his mind: "a vigorous despotism is in itself the best mode of government . . . to render them capable of higher civilization." The strictures of colonialism and patriarchy fuse in this belief in the necessary exercise of despotic power, an argument that I sometimes heard voiced in the postcolonial world I grew up in, fused though with a sense of the need to keep women in their place, teach them what to do. Although the details of the patriarchal argument were not voiced in the precise modalities of Victorian rationality (in India, after all, the elaboration of female sexuality is complex, woven into the fabric of a hierarchical society), a colonial sense of maintaining power, of keeping order, was critically present. And somewhere in there, as an undertone, was the grim feel of progress, a forward march into the new world. The regurgitation of Victorian rationality sat ill at ease, though, in a world where the bounding lines of behavior for both men and women were rapidly blurring. And there was a curious lack of fit between the corset-like constraints of dead British rule (one thinks of a garment shredded, shrunk, stays torn and visible but still held up to the living, growing body) and the nationalism that paradoxically permitted it to be voiced. Perhaps it is no accident, as Romila Thapar has pointed out, that the version of Indian history British colonialism established—indeed, required—for its legitimation is one that the Hindutva forces have used to build on: Golden Age of Hindu Rule; Barbaric Muslim Rule; Progressive British Rule. In each case, the Woman Question must be marshaled into line.

After the destruction of Babri Masjid and the riots that followed, one thinks: what the more extreme factions want is nothing less than the resto-

ration of a mythic Golden Age, whatever the bloodshed involved. Women then stand in as the mothers of the nation state, or like the fierce female orators, Sadhvis Uma Bharati and Ritambara Devi, whose voices have been copied out onto countless tapes and distributed in households in India, cry out to raise the saffron flag on the Red Fort in Delhi, wipe clean the slate of history, a cry for a cleansing so pure that all the complexities of a multitudinous, multi-religious past are wiped out and history remade in the apocalypse of the mind.

What sense can the fraught reflections of a multicultural feminism offer us? If to be female is already to be Other to the dominant languages of the world, to the canonical rigors of the great classical literatures of Arabic or Sanskrit or Tamil, to be female and face conditions of violent upheaval—whether in an actual war zone or in communal riots—is to force the fragmentation both of the dominant, patriarchal mould and of the marginality of female existence. Indeed, such fragmentation can work powerfully into the knowledge necessary for a diasporic life, for the struggle for a multicultural existence in North America. Indian women's advocacy groups are working quite precisely against both the inherited patriarchal mould and the pressures of racism in the new world in which the immigrants have found themselves. And for feminism it is crucial to embrace the secular multiculturalism that is set at risk by political extremism. But how can the democratic struggles in India work into an understanding of multiculturalism in the United States? In the answer to that question lies part of my new praxis here, part of our exhilarating struggle for the future.

The possibilities, then, for female expressivity become multifarious, even verging on the explosive. My mind moves back to the tattered corset of Victorian rationality evoked earlier. It is as if one picked it up and tried to fit it over a female body, vital, magnificent, with as many arms as the goddess Saraswati, one of the arms, maimed from passage, still bleeding.

And how will our goddess speak?

In many tongues, in babble, too, I think, mimicking the broken words that surround her. Here, now, in America.