ence seared our hearts with an insatiable desire to learn and know, to move further despite our female gendering. For others still, our very female gendering ignited a rebelliousness rooted in the unfulfilled aspirations of our female lineage. We drew quiet lessons from the deafening silences and unshed tears around us that taught us to see the nuances in our social worlds. We learned to be grateful for such small miracles as the joy and inner strength that comes from conquering a fear, the reciprocity of an open-handed sharing of ideas, or the sweet beauty of an unconditional, platonic love. While our hunger for intellectual and social justice still propels the utopian dreams that have nourished us, only the homemade theories we create out of our shared lives really help us to make sense of everything that we are and all that we find to love.

Certified Organic Intellectual

Aurora Leiris Morales

1

I have begun this essay a hundred times in a hundred different ways, and each time I have struggled with the same deadly numbing of my mind. Hashing it out once again with my parents on the phone, this time we go for the food metaphors. When I was a child in rural Puerto Rico, the people around me ate produce grown on local soil, chickens that roamed the neighborhood, bananas cut from the stalk. It was unrefined, unprocessed, full of all those complex nutrients that get left out when the process is too tightly controlled. But during the last few years before we emigrated, advertising finally penetrated into our remote part of the island. Cheeze Whiz on Wonder Bread was sold to country women as a better, more sophisticated, modern, advanced, and healthy breakfast than boiled root vegetables and codfish or rice and beans.

When I call myself an organic intellectual, I mean that the ideas I carry with me were grown on soil. I know, that I can tell you about the mineral balance, the weather, the labor involved in preparing them for use. In the marketplace of ideas, we are pushed toward the supermarket chains that are replacing the tiny rural salmada; told that storebought is better, imported is best, and sold on empty calories in shiny packaging instead of open crates and barrels of produce to which the earth still clings.

The intellectual traditions I come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it. My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. This is the central pro-
cess of consciousness raising, of collective testimonio. This is how homemade theory happens.

I am also the child of two cultures of resistance. I grew up among jibaros, a multilayered name for country people, which is used on the one hand to romanticize the imaginary “simple but honest” noble peasants or coffee workers of yesteryear and on the other is a common put-down implying stupidity and lack of sophistication, like “hick.” But which originally meant, in the language of the Arawak people, “she who runs away to be free,” referring to the mixed-blood settlements of escaped slaves, fugitive Indians, and European peasants who took to the mountains to escape state control. I was raised in one of the oldest of those settlements, a place called Indiera, listening to people talk. I am also the daughter of an urbanized descendant of the impoverished island elite. My mother came from small-town lucumotao fallen on hard times and grew up in the collective-working-class immigrant culture of New York City in the 1930s and 40s with an inheritance of practicality of pride in work well done, of adaptability to the shifting currents of history. She became a communist in the late forties, was a feminist before there was a movement to back her, and when any piece of politics makes her queasy, she trusts her own gut feeling over anyone else’s credentials.

And I grew up as the tropical branch of a tribe of working-class Jewish thinkers who were critiquing the canons of their day from the slums of Eastern Europe, arguing about identity politics and coalitions, assimilation and solidarity way back into the last century. My father’s great-great-grandmother, a rabbi’s wife in 1860s Ukraine, challenged the patriarchal rules of Judaism by standing up in temple and calling out, “Your God is a man!” His grandmother Leah Shevedev, an immigrant to New York at the turn of the century, was an organizer of garment workers and unemployed women and worked as a birth control educator with Margaret Sanger. His father helped found the Communist Youth Movement. In the extended family over which my great-grandmother Leah ruled, my father grew up an internationalist, pro-feminist man and an original, creative thinker who loved intellectual work and was unimpressed by the rituals and self-importance of academic institutions.

So I grew up in a family of activists who were thinking about race and class and gender and the uses of history and literature long before there were college courses to do this in, a mother who was a feminist in the 1950s, a father who told me bedtime stories about African and Chinese history and taught biology as a liberation science. How I think and what I think about grows from my identity as a jibarito shdet intellectual and organizer. I was taught to trust in these traditions, in the reliability of my own intelligence combined with that of others.

In the women’s consciousness-raising groups I belonged to in the early 1970s, we shared personal and very emotional stories of what it had really been like to live as women, examining our experiences with men and with other women in our families, sexual relationships, workplaces and schools, in the health care system and in surviving the general societal contempt and violence toward us. As we told our stories we found validation that our experiences and the reactions to them were common to many of us, that our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings made sense to other women. We then used that shared experience as a source of authority. Where our lives did match official knowledge we trusted our lives, and used the collective and mutually validated body of stories to critique those official versions of reality. This was theory born of an activist need, and the feminist literature we read, from articles like “The Politics of Housework” and “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” to the poetry of Susan Griffin, Marge Piercy, Alta, rose out of the same mass phenomenon of truth telling from personal knowledge.

Of course, in the euphoria of finding validation for what was common to us, what was not soon became glaringly obvious. The powerful differences between us in the way our womanness was shaped by class, “race,” sexuality, age, our cultures, had been artificially smoothed over. Almost immediately, groups of women of color, lesbians, working-class women, Jewish women, disabled women found ourselves undergoing the same process of testimony, fighting once again for our own specific truths. My discovery of a community of womanist of color writers, artists, thinkers was probably the most profound validation I’ve ever received of my right to exist, to know, to name my own reality.

But as academic feminism drifts further and further from its activist roots, as the elite gobbledegook of postmodernist jargon makes it less and less acceptable to speak comprehensibly, I have more and more often found my trust in myself under assault.

I watch my life and my theorizing about it become the raw materials of someone else’s expertise, and I am reminded of the neem tree of India, used for millennia as an insect repellent, now being patented by a multinational pharmaceutical company. Peasant women developed the technology for extracting and preparing the oil for local use, but to multinationals, local use is a waste. The exact same process, done at much higher volume, and packaged for export, is what they have been able to patent.

My intellectual life and that of other organic intellectuals, many of them women of color, is fully sophisticated enough for use. But in order to have value in the marketplace, the entrepreneurs and multinational developers must find a way to process it, to refine the rich multiplicity of our lives and all we have come to understand about them into high theory by the simple act of removing it, abstracting it beyond recognition, taking out the fiber, boiling it
down until the vitality is oxidized away and then marketing it as their own and selling it back to us for more than we can afford.

2

The local *cålma*do of Barrio Rubias, which is just across the road from Barrio Indiera Baja where I was raised, used to sell two kinds of cheese. *Queso holandés*, Dutch cheese, came in great big balls covered with red wax. If it got moldy, it did so from the outside in, so the center remained good, and one could trim the green from the rind. Or you could buy something called “imitation processed cheese food product.” Both began in the mammary glands of cows. But the “processed cheese food product” like its contemporary relatives, Velveeta, or the individually plastic-wrapped Kraft singles, was barely identifiable with any of the processes of their production, and what is more, when it spoiled, it did so thoroughly. All the capacity for resistance of a solid cheese with a rind had been refined away. Nevertheless, it often sold better. The packaging was colorful, mysteriously sealed, difficult to open.

We have been well trained to be consumers of glossy boxes, ziplock bags, childproof bottles, and copious amounts of plastic wrap and cellophane. We are taught to be distrustful of bulk foods and to rely on brand-name recognition. The students I work with have been taught to give books so much more authority than they give their own lives that with the best will to comply they find it extremely challenging to write autobiographical responses to the readings and lectures. What they know best how to do is arrange the published opinions of other people in a logical sequence, restarting one or another school of thought on the topic at hand.

When the package is difficult to penetrate, they rarely ask why the damn thing has to be wrapped up so tight. They assume the problem is with them. When I first reentered higher education, as a middle-aged professional writer with many years of public speaking behind me, even with all the confidence these things gave me, I felt humiliated by the impenetrable language in which academic thinking comes wrapped these days. But I thought it was just a matter of overcoming my awkwardness with jargon. A problem of lack of training. Like recently decolonized countries that embrace all the shiny wonders of nuclear energy, determined to have what the empire has had all along, I thought this slick new arrangement of words just needed to be acquired.

But I no longer think this. The language in which ideas are expressed is never neutral. The language people use reveals important information about who they identify with, what their intentions are, for whom they are writing or speaking. The packaging is the product being sold and does exactly what it was designed for. Unnecessarily specialized language is used to humiliate those who are not supposed to feel entitled. It sells the illusion that only those who can wield it can think.

A frequent response to those who resist exclusive language is that they are intellectually lazy. Like other forms of gatekeeping, the whole point is that we, and not the gatekeepers, are responsible for getting ourselves in. We must stop what we are doing, forget what we came for, and devote our energies to techniques of breaking and entering. We are required to do this just to win the right to join in the argument. If we are uninterested, we are assumed to be incompetent. But my choice to read the readable has to do with a different set of priorities. Language is wedded to content, and the content I seek is theory and intellectual practice that will be of use to me in an activist scholarship whose priorities are, above all, democratizing.

3

At the time that I was first struggling to hold onto my own intellectual integrity within academia, I had little validation in my daily life for these feelings. I struggled to be “good” and do as I was supposed to, felt that I must be missing something when most of what I read seemed shallow or irrelevant to my work, felt that somehow feminist theory should be more exciting to me. Maybe, I thought, it was a lack of academic skill that was the problem. But most of what I read seemed so many levels of abstraction away from activist intentions and lived experience, from the problems I wanted to solve, that it had become an intellectual exercise, academic in that other sense of the word—disconnected from daily use. To fully understand it, to really engage and argue in that place, I would have had to abandon what I had come there for—to learn new things about the liberatory uses of history for Latinas—to devote my time and energy to studying the ideas of those I found least trustworthy or useful, instead of doing my chosen work with and about my own peoples.

Now, looking back, I remember my life in the feminist movement of the early 1980s. At conference after conference I would stand in the hall trying to choose between the workshop or caucus for women of color and the one for Jews. I remember how every doorway I tried to enter required leaving some part of myself behind. In those hallways, I began meeting other women, the complexity of whose lives defied the simplifications of identity politics. In conversation with them I found the only reflections of my full reality. Much of the feminist theory I tried to read in graduate school was written in rooms whose doors were too narrow. They required me to leave myself and my deepest intellectual passions outside.

Like my immigrant ancestors, my intellectual home is constantly being
revised, refined, redecorated. But over the years it has been those same women I met in the hallways, the ones who had survived against all odds, with whom I have made rooms big enough to include all the richly complex and contradictory truths of who I am. This gathering of Latina feminist scholars has been such a room. Because the minute we found a way to gather and talk, we threw away the outside agendas and began making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else.

Each of us brings to the table the nourishment we know everything about, from planting and harvest to the most sophisticated techniques of preparation. It is that wealth of tribal, local, particular, and personal knowledges, individually crafted and set forth on the common table, that feeds me now. It is this process I teach: listen to your hunger, listen to the hunger of others, learn from experienced cooks, taste as you go, use fresh ingredients, know your supplier, and buy organic. ¡Buen provecho!

My Father’s Hands

Trote Gisela Flores-Ortiz

First Memories

Recuerdo las cortinas de encaje francés, acariciadas por la brisa, y el olor salado del Mar Caribe. Recuerdo su voz que me dice “eres mi venas,” y recuerdo sus manos, las manos de mi padre.

Strong, calloused hands, caressing by the breeze and the saltiness, hands of someone who should have played the violin, I can see the world, his world . . . but facing backwards. Empezó la vida mirando para atrás. I can only see where he has been, no pasado, el pasado. Nested in his arms, al lado del Atlántico en Panamá, I can feel Costa Rica and his longing for the land he left behind.

Empezó la vida mirando para atrás; my future would be charted by my father’s longing, and the testimony of dolor, dure and tristesce embedded in my mother. Trigo una vez y no recuerdo la casa de mi madre, pero el sueño colgante. My father’s hands and my mother’s tears provided my foundation. At the core of my being is strength and sorrow.

Migraciones/Migrations

I am the product of multiple migrations, from the French great-grandfather who left the countryside of the south of France (or so the story goes) to help build the Panama Canal in the late nineteenth century, to the Chinese immigrant enslaved in Costa Rican mines in the 1880s, to the two matronas, las lejanías...