
“Windows” and/or “Mirrors” in the Creation of Sexual/Personal Identity through Multicultural Women’s Poetry

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Freud’s statement that “anatomy — translated biology — controls one’s destiny” is one that makes many feminist literary critics cringe. Not only is this idea naïve, but it is basically destructive in promoting understanding between women of all races. Certainly, most feminists would agree that women of all races (barring congenital differences such as being born without a uterus, or societal atrocities such as genital mutilation) usually have uteri, breasts with potentially active mammary glands, ovaries, hormonal and menstrual cycles, genital organs, etc. Because of these body parts and the process of reproduction, women of all races have more permeable boundaries than do men; they are penetrated during heterosexual intercourse, they carry fetuses, and they suckle children. But possession of these body parts and the ensuing permeable boundaries are where the similarities end.

Many psychologists, sociologists and feminists would agree that a woman’s construction of self cannot be accomplished outside the confines of the sociocultural milieu within which she must live. As feminist psychologist Carmen Williams says, “The values, expectations, and norms associated with gender in our society powerfully affect women’s self-perception and behavior” (Wetzel et al. 28). Furthermore, she suggests that in a patriarchal society, both “women and men are socialized to uphold and perpetuate a system that grants white men entitlement to special privileges and to power over others, and that reduces all women to second-class citizenship” (Wetzel et al. 28). Yet women of color, whether African American, Asian American, Chicana, or Native American, are often relegated by the dictates of the dominant culture to yet another class level — that of third class — because of their respective races.

In her 1988 essay “Curriculum as Window & Mirror,” educator Emily Style suggests

that the curriculum [in schools] can be seen as an architectural structure which schools build around students. Often it provides windows out to the experiences of others but few mirrors of the students' own reality and validity. Given better balance, it can provide both mirrors, which reflect and validate students' various identities and multiple ways of making meaning, and windows out into experiences of "others" and into ways of making meaning and being that are not part of a student's own cultural repertoire. A curricular balance of windows and mirrors helps the young [and adults] to participate in society with both assertiveness and respectfulness. (Bassett and Crosier 125-126)

With Style's metaphor, one realizes that poetry and fiction written by women from African American, Asian American, Chicana, European American, and Native American backgrounds can function in one of two ways: as windows into the worldviews of someone from another culture or as mirrors that reflect our own cultures. In reading multicultural women's poetry, in addition to paying attention to setting, narrative point of view, symbols, images, and style, we must also look at racial/ethnic traditions, conventions, worldviews, historical events, and sociological conditions affecting the respective women's writings, as well as our own responses to the writings. In doing so, we can initiate a dialogue about both similarities and differences, striving not for consensus about experiences or worldviews, but rather for appreciation of each culture's advantages and constraints.

Five of the poems here were selected as a result of my response to Helene Cixous, the French feminist critic who in "The Laugh of the Medusa" says:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.... To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; ... [it will] Inscribe the breath of the whole woman. (Hoy et al. 481-485)

The poems of Marian Yee, Esmeralda Bernal, Kathleen Fraser, Carol P. Snow, and Lucile Clifton become the "windows" and the "mirrors" through which each reader may see the lives, feelings, and breath of these "whole women" as they strive to claim their own sexual/personal identities.

Marian Yee, a Chinese American poet who studied at Rutgers University, has published her poetry in several anthologies. Her poem "The Handbook of Sex of the Plain Girl" addresses the issue of how a young Chinese American girl tries to claim her "whole self," including her sexuality. In stanza one of Yee's poem, a young girl wants to learn about her sexuality, but sees herself as ugly:

... Nothing is homelier
 than the floor of my breasts; this house
 of bones. Everything I know of sex
 is large-breasted, blue-eyed, and blonde (154).

Obviously, the ideal of sexuality that is held before her is something which she as a Chinese American woman cannot become. She asks her mother how to please a man, but her mother, wearing her cloak of silence about sex, will not answer her questions. Instead, she gives her daughter a handbook with pictures that cause the narrator to ask, "do men and women really do this?" Yet this poem is about much more than a Western culturally defined ideal of sexuality, the Asian American girl's feelings of not measuring up to it, and the silence surrounding discussions of sex in the Asian American community.

Elaine H. Kim in her essay "Defining Asian American Realities through Literature" writes:

Although we [Asian Americans] are no longer under direct colonial domination, clumsy racial fantasies about Asians continue to flourish in the West.... Familiar representations of Asians — always unalterably alien — as helpless heathens, comical servants, loyal allies and, only in the case of women, exotic sex objects imbued with an innate understanding of how to please, serve, and titillate [a man], extend directly to Asian Americans and exist in all cases to define as their dialectical opposite the Anglo man as heroic, courageous, and physically superior, whether as soldier, missionary, master or lover. (Madison 602)

Yee structures this poem by having the young, plain girl speak in the first, third, and fifth stanzas. In the second, fourth, and sixth stanzas an older, more sexually experienced woman speaks. She says:

Come into my red — let white
 iron burn, reshape and find its form
 in heat. My Master,
 my Emperor. I am yours tonight. (154)

On the surface, this sexually experienced woman seems hardened and angry as she brags about her experience, saying:

... we have much to teach:
 my Master, my child, let me teach you
 about your lips, your thighs,
 your cheeks, the bones
 of your hip. (155)

Feeling sexually superior to men, she says a man knows nothing of sex, but if asked "will show you his penis."

Yet the last stanza of Yee's poem makes the reader ponder the situation more deeply than a surface reading might allow, especially if one knows anything about the history of Chinese American prostitution in America. One historian, Judy Yung, writes about the infamous history of Chinese prostitution as a result of the shortage of Chinese women in America in the 19th century. During that time, many Chinese women were either kidnapped, purchased, or lured into prostitution by procurers in China and then imported to this country. Because they were so isolated and powerless in America, they were forced to sell sex in order to live (Madison 15-16).

When the reader considers this historical information, s/he may come to believe that Yee is deconstructing the Western stereotype of the Chinese prostitute as a sexual exotic who comes by her talents painlessly and naturally. In the last stanza, the voice of the young, innocent girl looking at the handbook seems to merge with the deconstructed, possibly very real feelings of the Chinese woman forced to become a prostitute. The merged voices say:

But what can you teach about the pain
of his entrance, and later, the ache
of his departure? You, who taught
the Emperor to live forever,
teach me what to do with love. (155)

The younger woman and the sexually experienced woman both understand the pain of being forced to learn the act of sex, and being denied the opportunity to learn about love. Thus Yee, for both women in the poem and her readers as well, has effectively provided both a "window" and a "mirror" into the destructiveness of believing the stereotypical myth of the exotic Asian prostitute.

In "My Womb" Esmeralda Bernal notes the images of

my womb
a public domain
erotica a doormat
trampled on by
birthright

my womb a
legislated periphery
no longer mine
but public space

my womb
a palestinian front
fighting for

the right to be
a private space (42)

Much of Esmeralda Bernal's research centers on the lives of "indigenous women and the social construction of gender under colonialism" (Madison 689). This poem certainly fits that mode. Note that the central questions for this Mexican American narrator are "Who controls 'My Womb?'" and "How do I make my womb my space or my own once again?" In the space of three short stanzas, the narrator changes from seeing her womb as "public domain," a "doormat/trampled on by / birthright," a "legislated periphery / no longer mine / but public space," to seeing her womb as a battle ground, "a palestinian front / fighting for / the right to be / a private space" (42). Significantly, the action changes as well from a womb which is passively acted upon in being trampled and legislated, to one that actively fights for "the right to be / a private space."

In "The Dilemma of the Modern Chicana Artist and Critic," Marcela Christine Lucero-Trujillo talks about how in Chicana literature writers often use their writing to tell about their attempts to escape the system of government that colonized them. Lucero-Trujillo says that at the same time these writers also use their writing to serve as outlets "for the frustration of being a woman within the sexist microcosmic Chicano world of machismo" (621). She continues to say that some Chicanas have, in a quest for identity, found refuge in the image of the "Indian mother as Mother Earth; ... [in the] bronze reality in religious themes of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the spiritual mother; ... [or in the] Mexican Eve, the historical mother, La Malinche" (621). Yet in this poem, Esmeralda Bernal seems to be doing something quite different. Her narrator tries, as Lucero-Trujillo suggests other Chicana artists have done, to "survive in a hostile capitalistic environment" (624). In addition, in the patriarchal Catholic culture out of which Bernal's narrator speaks, women must fight for control of their wombs. They must not allow themselves to become merely vessels for babies, but instead see their wombs as extensions of their identity/sexuality from which they may extract pleasure. The image of the narrator's womb as a battlefield is far different from the earlier images, but one that indicates the narrator's intention to fight for her sexuality and her identity. The terse, angry tone of this poem aptly reflects the seriousness of this fight.

European American poet Kathleen Fraser's narrator, in her "Poem in Which My Legs Are Accepted," seems less angry, probably because she suffers only from gender devaluing, not racial devaluing. Alicia Ostriker in her book *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* suggests that as early as the 1960s women poets began "writing about their bodies with decreasing embarrassment and increasing enthusiasm. They write about eating and sitting on the toilet

... about their faces and hands, their arms, their breasts, their wombs, ... about giving birth, giving suck, growing old” (92). Because Fraser’s poem deals primarily with a young woman’s growing acceptance of her female body, not her race, many readers may identify with or see their own lives “mirrored” in the narrator’s acceptance of her body.

Fraser starts each of the first three stanzas with the two words “My Legs!” followed by an exclamation point. Then the narrator tells about how her legs do not fit the “standards of magazines / or official measurements.” They serve her well as she, at age twelve, hangs them “from trapezes” and sits them on “wooden rollers,” but they are always too plump, too “solid, fleshy and / white as when I first noticed you, sitting on the toilet, / spread softly over the wooden seat.” As she enters high school, she worries about them because she is “not able to hide you, / embarrassed at beaches,” and especially embarrassed as the other cheerleaders flash their slim brown legs (109). Yet, she has to admit that even though she has hated her legs, they have never given out on her, but have allowed her to play and to work.

Finally in the last stanza, Fraser does not set off the words “My Legs!” in a separate line, but merges this phrase with her narrator’s growing acceptance of them:

Legs, you are a pillow,
white and plentiful with feathers for his wild head.
You are the endless scenery
behind the tense sinewy elegance of his two dark legs
You welcome him joyfully
and dance.
And you will be the locks in a new canal between continents.
The ship of life will push out of you
and rejoice
in the whiteness
in the first floating and rising of water. (110)

This stanza in which the narrator’s legs become a pillow for her lover’s head documents the enormous change in the narrator’s attitude toward her body. She sees her legs as scenery, capable of dancing, and useful in the end result of physical passion, childbirth.

Carol P. Snow, a native of the Allegheny Indian Reservation in New York, whose tribal affiliation is Seneca, works with endangered and rare species for the United States Bureau of Land Management (Madison 699). Her poem “Metamorphosis” reflects, as does Jo Harjo’s work, her belief in the “inseparability of woman, land and sky. As Native Americans and as women, they know that this continuum and all it encompasses is life; it is breath” (Madison 3). A Native American woman’s identity/sexuality cannot be separated into body or spirit; it must be realized

through union with others or with the earth, air, animals, water, or the wind. Snow writes:

I think I am a dancer,
a singer of songs,
a story-teller.

I fly and swim,
walk on four legs,
slide through the grass on my belly.

I breathe through gills,
through hollow fragile bone,
shake feathers into place on my wings

I roll in the dust,
smooth my fur with raspy tongue,
startle at unexpected sounds.

I walk upright,
two-legged, a woman,
warm and soft, strong and vulnerable.

I walk in silence,
in laughter, with spoken word,
with solitary tears, with open heart. (139-140)

Note the contrast between the dominant culture's Christian myth of God's creation of Eve in the Garden of Eden and the evolution of a woman in Snow's poem. In the Christian myth, God creates Eve out of Adam's rib. Eve then commits the first original sin when she is tempted by the serpent and eats of the tree of knowledge. As a result of her actions in disobeying God's edict, she plunges herself and Adam into the world of original sin where they, previously unaware of their nakedness, become ashamed of their bodies and cover them. In addition, in Genesis, God tells Eve that as a result of her sin, she will suffer in childbirth.

In contrast to being created by God, in this poem, woman, including her identity/sexuality, evolves. First, the narrator in the poem thinks herself into being. She says, "I think I am a dancer, / a singer of songs, / a story-teller." In contrast to the hierarchy in the Christian myth (God, Man, Woman, and then all things that swim, fly, and walk) the narrator in this poem feels an intimate bonding with all the birds that fly, the fish that swim, the serpents that glide through the grass, and the animals who "roll in the dust." Eventually, after going through all these stages, she evolves fully and emerges as a woman, one who is both "warm and soft, strong

and vulnerable,” a balance of characteristics. She walks both in silence and with laughter, she cries alone, and yet has a heart open to all. The tone of this poem is not anger or despair, but a quiet celebration of what it means to be a “whole woman,” with all that that means concerning identity/sexuality.

Finally with regard to women creating and embracing their sexual/personal identity, because the worldview of the narrator is such a positive one and one that ideally women of all races will eventually aspire to and identify with, we turn to Lucile Clifton’s poem “what the mirror said.” Lucile Clifton, an African American poet, creates a strong, assertive, but lovable woman. Even the title indicates Clifton’s confidence in seeing her own identity/sexuality reflected in the mirror. In the poem, the narrator is the image in the mirror, telling the woman standing in front of it:

listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.
you got a geography
of your own.
listen,
somebody need a map
to understand you.
somebody need directions
to move around you.
listen,
woman,
you not a noplac
anonymous
girl;
mister with his hand on you
he got his hands on
some
damn
body! (57-58)

Barbara Christian, in her book *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), writes that “until the 1940s, black women in both Anglo- and Afro-American literature . . . [were] usually assigned stereotyped roles — their images being a context for some other major dilemma or problem the society cannot resolve” (2). They were either typecast as the mammy figure, known for her nurturing, religion, strength, and kindness; the tragic mulatto, a character revealing “the conflict of values that blacks faced as a conquered people”; or the conjure

woman, who is a “reservoir for fears — fears, in this case, of the unknown spiritual world” (2-3).

However, Christian believes that the black woman writer in the 1960s and after herself had to illuminate

her own situation, reflect on her own identity and growth, her relationship to men, children, society, history and philosophy as she had experienced it. And during these explosive years, [the sixties and after] some black women writers began to project the intensity, complexity, and diversity of the experience of black women from their own point of view. (16)

Clifton's narrator actively embraces all of the above. The image reflected back to the woman standing in front of the mirror is bigger than life and shows the woman to be “a wonder” and a “city/of a woman” with a geography of [her] own, one which somebody will “need a map” in order to negotiate. This imagery suggests the problem Christian proposes that women of color all over the world have struggled with: the struggle with what she calls “two colonialisms, the domination of their people by the West, [and] the domination of themselves by their men” (148). In order to win this struggle, Christian says black women writers must “articulate their own lives, to have choice in the tools they use, the work they do, to move from specialized fractions of a whole to a potential completeness ... to have the possibility of becoming free and complete women” (148).

In addition, in this poem, instead of taking directions, the image in the mirror reassures the woman before it that somebody “needs directions / to move around you,” that she is “not a noplac / anonymous / girl;” as black women were during slavery, but she is “some / body!” The image exhorts the woman before the mirror to tell any

mister [black or white] with his hands on you
he got his hands on
some
damn
body! (58)

By writing each word (some, damn, body) on a separate line, Clifton emphasizes, with pride and confidence, the identity/sexuality of her woman character.

It is clear that some of these poems seem to function as either “windows” or as “mirrors” for a multicultural audience. In some of the poems, women of all races can identify with the respective authors on issues related to gender prescriptions that tend to cut across all cultures, such as the need to be beautiful and the feeling that one is not meeting cultural “standards.” However, in each poem by a woman of color, outsiders (those from the white European culture) simply cannot fully

understand the racial experiences of these women unless they can hear about these experiences from the women themselves. If readers really can learn through vicarious experience, perhaps reading the literature of multicultural women may be the key for women to understand each other's worldviews and then to support each other, even if those worldviews are different. That is why I read and that is why I write about such poems. ✨

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