# Violence, Silence, and Anger

## WOMEN'S WRITING AS TRANSGRESSION

EDITED BY DEIRDRE LASHGARI

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For Katherine Causey
mother and friend
who nourished me with her
vision of feminist possibility

# Preface

This book has its roots in the feminist, antiwar, and social justice movements and the collaborative literary projects that have shaped my personal and professional consciousness over the past three decades. Many more people than I could possibly name here have influenced the development of my ideas about silence and anger and the need to speak out against violence. I thank all those I have worked with over the years who have helped me learn the life-affirming value of constructive anger, including the Comparative Literature Women's Caucus at the University of California at Berkeley, my comedics at the Berkeley Free Clinic, all those I worked with in organizing to end the war in Vietnam and protest nuclear weapons development at the U.C.-affiliated Livermore Weapons Laboratory, and my extended circle of family and friends in Iran.

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Maitino, whose collaboration in presenting workshops and forums on constructive conflict and intercultural communication has inspired me intellectually, and whose unwavering support has sustained me in all my creative work—teaching, mentoring, writing, and living. Thanks to the members of our campus Postcolonial Theory Group—especially Victorine Daigre, Liliane Fucaloro, Carola Kaplan, and D. D. Wills—who infuse our readings and discussions with the passion of intellectual discovery. And thanks also to the students in my world literature and women writers classes and in MADILA, the campus multicultural association, whose questions challenge me, whose insights inspire me, and whose courage in exploring beyond familiar territory renews my spirit.

I am particularly grateful to those whose influence has served as a direct catalyst for this book. The conference that Shirley Lim organized at the University of California at Santa Barbara on "Asian American Cultural Transformations" inspired my essay on Mirikitani, which in turn shaped my conception of the book. Ruth Saxton, who is forever pushing me off the cliff into projects I would otherwise be too busy to take on, inspired me to leap into this one as well. Carol Holder encouraged me to present the underlying concepts of this book in Cal Poly's Faculty Research Forums. Andy Moss and Jim Williams provided crucial support that made it possible for me to complete the book during a sabbatical leave.

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# *Violence, Silence, and Anger:*

## WOMEN'S WRITING AS TRANSGRESSION

# Contents

DEIRDRE LASHGARI

# Introduction
# To Speak the Unspeakable: Implications of Gender, "Race," Class, and Culture

> The liberatory voice . . . is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way.
>
> —bell hooks

Since Tillie Olsen's provocative work "Silences" in 1965, feminist writing in the United States has taken seriously the roles of silence and anger in the lives and literary production of women.[1] Little, however, has been written on the specific conjunction of these issues with women's culturally shaped responses to violence. The essays in this volume engage in a cross-cultural exploration of responses to violence in texts by writers from twelve non-Western countries as well as the United States and England.[2]

The contributors' discussions draw from such fields as psychoanalysis, anthropology, political economy, and medicine as well as critical theory, and their voices extend from the formal and academic to the highly personal and autobiographical. The range of texts discussed invites an examination of cultural and class-based differences in the nature of the violence that women have experienced, the costs of breaking cultural taboos against speaking out, and the strategies enabling women to violate societal expectations without forfeiting the chance to be heard.

A writer faces contrary imperatives: to be honest, and to be heard. It can be difficult for the writer herself to look closely into the systems that justify and perpetuate violence, as several of the essays show. Once one has identified the violence, it can be difficult to name it publicly, and difficult to make oneself heard. In the United States, for example, mainstream arbiters of literary quality have often worked from assumptions uncon-

sciously rooted in gender, class, and Eurocentric culture, with a bias toward authorial distance. For a woman writing from the margins, whose work may clash with these assumptions, acceptance by the literary mainstream too often means silencing a part of what she sees and knows.[3] To write honestly may thus mean transgressing, violating the literary boundaries of the expected and accepted. This double bind is particularly strong for women writers of color, especially so if their vision is shaped by a language other than English. What is read by the dominant group as alien, rough-edged, jolting, strident, is more likely to offend when it comes from a woman. If the woman writer's root culture also has strong injunctions against "making noise," the temptation to self-silencing increases, as does the risk and necessity for breaking through. This risk often influences the way a writer shapes her work, its dramatic and narrative strategies, its language and imagery.

In addition to taboos against speaking and publishing what is regarded as unspeakable, the writer faces her audience's resistance to hearing. Paradoxically, the violence permeating the media—television, movies, newspapers—makes it more difficult, rather than easier, for us to hear. Packaged and sanitized, "violence as entertainment" can have an anaesthetizing effect that prevents us from feeling or acting. In different ways, the writers discussed in this anthology provide antidotes to this numbing. Their work calls into question our ways of keeping at arm's length what makes us uncomfortable. At its most powerful, their work often impels us to in-corporate the pain of violation, to take it into our own bodies where it can force us to respond. It implicates us, along with its characters and narrative speakers, in the struggle to give voice to the horror and the determination to end it.

## Metadiscourses, or Talking about Talking Back

The multiplicity of voices talking back to each other within and among the essays in this book shapes the theoretical discourse of the volume as a whole.[4] Underlying this discourse are several concepts crucial to understanding the place of silence, anger, and transgression in women's responses to violence: decentering, heteroglossia, dialogics, and *travesía*.

Decentering, a process essential to postcolonial literary practice, redefines both subject and object of critical attention. When those who are marginal to the dominant power re-place the center, making the margin the new center of their own subjectivity, different perspectives on violence become possible. The monologic discourse of the imperial center tends to rec-

ognize as violence only what it perceives as threatening to itself. Shifting the vantage point of the subject allows one to see forms of violence that had been invisible, or to see in unfamiliar ways. When the gaze is redefined, what it encompasses changes, deconstructing the master narrative.[5]

The need for this shift away from the old center is clear in the work of such writers as Trinh T. Minh-ha and Abdul JanMohamed, who provide valuable ways of understanding and thus disrupting the binary operation of the dominant discourse. Trinh confirms the need for a "certain work of displacement," without which "'speaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition (subject / object; I / It; We / They) on which territorialized knowledge depends."[6] Also implicit in the monologic discourse of the dominant group is what JanMohamed calls its "manichaean economy," a structuring of the world along rigid us / them lines.[7] Such global binary oppositions go beyond simple nonjudgmental distinctions; inherently unstable, they tip easily onto a vertical axis: superior / inferior; better / worse. As long as the dominant hear no voices but their own, their monologic "truth" blinds them.[8] As JanMohamed shows, when the colonizer attempts to know the colonized, he generally sees not the other but only his own reversed reflection, either demonized or idealized.[9] Or, as Mary Louise Pratt shows, he sees nothing at all, only a landscape from which all human presence has been erased, containing only resources for the taking.[10]

Heteroglossia, emerging from the specifics of social context, frees the monologue from its constricting knots. When a multiplicity of voices enters the discourse, when the margins talk back to the imperial or neocolonial center, the binary structure unravels. In Rosario Ferré's novel *Sweet Diamond Dust,* when the family (national) history is retold by the household servant, the orthodox truths dissolve, other truths emerge, the shape of the story shifts, what had been presented as courage and conquest becomes violence, violation.[11]

Dialogics, the constructive discourse of conflict, becomes possible when polyvocal discourse interrupts the dominant monologue. The dialogic process is inherently confrontive, exposing discrepancies, contradictions, rifts. Thus the perceived threat: "Everything was nice and harmonious before. Now you're creating divisions." The divisions and differences were there all along but were simply whitewashed into invisibility. Dialogics allows us to begin to see.[12]

This movement toward understanding is the travesía, or crossing, which is the other side of transgression. Whatever the ground one stands on, whether center or margin, one faces in each moment an/Other ground,

which is the threatening not-known. Only by violating the boundaries of the familiar and proper, risking conflict, can one reach toward connection.[13] The word, as Bakhtin says, calls forth response.[14] Conflict becomes music, or dance, exhilarating as well as dangerous.

Travesía applies not only to the unknown ground of the Other; it also means questioning what had seemed familiar, the very ground under one's own feet. The task for each of us is, as Trinh says, "to listen, to see like a stranger in one's own land; to fare like a foreigner across one's own language."[15] Particularly for readers shaped by a monologic discourse, confrontation with unfamiliar and widely differing texts and perspectives can be disconcerting. For one thing, to realize that the invisible was "not not-there," as Toni Morrison says, can be humbling.[16] It is not simply that the voices of working-class people and people of color have been stifled; they also have been unheard and rendered unhearable, aurally erased. And the dominant group, too, has been damaged in the process, deprived of access to crucial experience and ways of seeing. Polyvocal discourse can render visible the vacant spaces in what one thought was knowledge, making possible the crossing onto new ground.[17]

## The Difference (Cultural) Difference Makes

As Morrison reminds us, "Cultures, whether silenced or monologistic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them."[18] Texts like the ones discussed in this volume, by authors writing out of culturally diverse contexts, question the reader's awareness of their cultural specificities. What sociohistorical conditions made it possible for these women to write at all? What traditions exist in their cultures of women writing? And what oppressive or liberating structures have shaped their responses to violence?

In many cultures and periods, the only women likely to have access to literacy and to a literary tradition, as well as the resources and leisure for writing, were the daughters or wives of rulers or aristocrats, or courtesans, or religious devotees. The early poetry of India, for instance, is rich with the work of women who were Buddhist nuns or, later, followers of Siva. In the Arab world and Iran, women Sufis wrote some of the earliest mystic poetry in that tradition (eighth century in Arabic, eleventh in Farsi). In certain cultures and periods, women across a broader social spectrum were actively involved in literary production. In many oral cultures, from pre-Islamic Bedouin Arabia to the twentieth-century Inuit, each member of the community was considered a potential poet, and women along with

men took part in the poetic competitions and celebrations that constituted the heart of their culture.[19]

Until fairly recently, the vast majority of women in literate cultures worked too hard and were too poor to have the chance to read, much less write. Literacy has been mainly a privilege of the well-to-do, and then only in certain countries and times, and only for the fortunate. Our knowledge of women who did write has been limited by the politics of transmission: works considered important at one period could disappear in the next, in part through patriarchal bias in the institutions responsible for literary publication, distribution, and preservation.[20]

Some of the women whose work is discussed in this volume write with an awareness of a long line of literary foremothers, while others draw from ancient traditions in which "literary" composition by women has been oral rather than written. Middle Eastern women writers such as Etel Adnan and Simin Daneshvar work out of a literary heritage going back more than 4,000 years—to Enheduanna, the poet-priestess of Sumer who composed elaborate hymns to the goddess Inanna around 2300 B.C.E. and is the earliest poet known by name; and to Kubatum, another Sumerian woman, who wrote lyric poetry around 2032 B.C.E.[21]

In some cases, the relations between societies that were at differing stages of literary development created extraordinary space for women's creative work. Japan, which had no indigenous written language until around the seventh century C.E., depended for a long time on China, whose written language was nearly two thousand years older. During the 400 years of the Heian Period (794–1185), "serious" Japanese literature was written in Chinese by Japanese men educated in the foreign Chinese tradition. The young Japanese script, considered inferior and appropriate only for trivial writing, was left to the use of women—who proceeded to invent what were to become the most significant forms of subsequent Japanese literature: the tanka, the haiku, the novel.[22]

In the present century, postcolonial writers have worked in similarly complex cultural and linguistic situations. Senegalese novelists Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, for example, inherit both a written African literary tradition, beginning with the early pharoahs of Egypt, and a rich oral tradition. Each has chosen to write in the language of the French colonizers, which is more widely accessible than their native languages. Laguna Pueblo novelist-poet Leslie Marmon Silko, who draws inspiration both from a long oral heritage and from the ancient Aztec and Maya written traditions, writes in English.[23] This increasingly wide use of English and other European languages by writers from Third World cultures has

expanded the range of those languages, carrying them beyond the imperial singular to an inclusive plural—"englishes," "frenches," "spanishes" capable of embodying cultural differences.[24]

On the other hand, many writers who have chosen not to write in the dominant languages of the West have found themselves outside the West's powerful literary institutions, from publishing houses and distribution systems to the Nobel Prize and other international awards. In this country, the influence of translation on literary production has played a significant role only since the mid-1970s. Even now, widespread access in the United States to literature from lesser-known languages is dependent on the chanciness of the interest of talented translators, political visibility, and sometimes the creation of publishing houses devoted to translating work from particular cultures.[25] Twelve of the texts discussed in this volume come to us out of other languages, six translated from Caribbean, African, and Middle Eastern French, three from Spanish, and one each from Arabic, Farsi, and Afrikaans.

This opening of the doors of mainstream U.S. literature to voices outside the walls has necessarily shifted our understanding of the canon, that never clearly defined but strongly guarded fortress of "indisputable" Great Literature. Tony Morrison, discussing the startling absence of African Americans from the founding works of canonic nineteenth-century American literature, shows how deeply in fact the "presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the languages, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature" (210). Her concept of the "unspeakable things unspoken" and the "invisible things [that] are not necessarily 'not-there'" (210) is crucial to understanding silencings and erasures effected by literary institutions and by the dominant cultural ideologies that shape them.[26]

It is also important to remind ourselves that systems of domination and exclusion exist within "nondominant" cultures as well. As Shirley Lim's essay in this volume shows, societies in the process of throwing off colonial shackles nonetheless—and consequently—have a tendency to silence voices that "don't fit" in the nationalizing discourse. Lim argues that Sybil Kathigasu's memoirs from World War II, for example, have been shut out of the Malaysian national literary canon in part because of her positive treatment of British colonial influence. Similarly, Janet Lim's "Westernized" critique of gender oppression in Singapore in the 1930s and 1940s clashed with the anticolonial nationalist discourse there.

Cultural communities split by language and forced dispersion have found other ways of defining and preserving a common bond. Writers of the African diaspora, marked by widely divergent histories and cultures,