

# *Disobedience (in Language)* *in Texts by Lesbian Native Americans*

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I AM AWARE, as I write, that this is an epistle from the borderlands, that liminal space of the Other, marked by the absence of legitimacy, security, and the known facts of the universe. Neither anthropologist nor tourist, I am a resident of this space. I could describe it to you; yet which margin do I describe, and in which language? I could name the place I occupy as a woman, a lesbian, an Indian, a mixedblood, or some other tag that belongs to me temporarily. But why is it important to hear from me?

I will speak in this paper of my friends, those other lesbian Indian girls with whom I've sometimes shared meals, stories, jokes, and personal revelations of pain and anguish. And I am aware that in speaking about a lesbian American Indian erotics, and even more in speaking about lesbian love, I am being disloyal and disobedient to the patriarchal injunction that demands our silence and invisibility. If we would only stay politely and passively in the closet, and not flaunt our sexuality, we could be as gay and abnormal as we like.

I want to talk a little about my own life as a lesbian mixedblood California Indian. When I was growing up in Berkeley, I had almost no connection with other Indian people outside my family. It was a long time—I was nearly grown up—before I realized and imagined that my own female ancestors ground acorns on large grinding stones like the ones you can climb up and sit on in the Berkeley hills. The women in my family were engaged in this activity not so very long ago, perhaps only two or three generations ago. With the rapid demise and assimilation of California natives, we lost much of our culture, our ways of being in the world, our ways of apprehending reality.

We, whose ancestors lived in the beautiful lands now called California, in the twentieth-century had to sit in ugly classrooms and learn terrible things about ourselves: that our people were lazy and stupid, that we were brought into the missions like sheep, and that ultimately many of us were ungrateful for the gift of civilization the Catholic fathers brought us because we ran away from them, rejecting their efforts to make us productive members of Spanish frontier society. I believed, when I was young, that I was being taught lies. I knew, because my mother told me, that the Maidu, my tribe, were not brought to the missions. But I had no idea how rich and diverse the Indian cultures were, how many tribes, how many languages and life-ways existed in California before the conquerors came. I found this out later.

I found out, for example, that among the Maidu there exists (or at least there existed in former times) a berdache, or as he/she is sometimes called a man/woman. In Southern Maidu the term is *osa'pu*. The *osa'pu* is a biological male who dresses and behaves as a woman, who marries a man, and lives with him as his wife. Gay anthropologist Walter Williams, who researched the berdache culture in his book *The Spirit and the Flesh*, writes:

Among the Southern Maidus, a traditionalist informant in the 1920s explained in a respectful manner about *osa'pu*: "They just grew that way, being half-man and half-woman," and in a similar matter-of-fact way said "he lives with a man. . . . No contempt was shown them." The berdache's sexuality is accepted in the same way as his androgyny; both are seen as reflections of this spirit, his basic nature. (110-11)

Because of the androcentric bias of many anthropologists, most of the research on the berdache has been focussed on the male. But it was a tradition in which some women also participated. We know very little about these women who became culturally male other than that they were able to hunt, participate in warfare, and take a wife. But the tradition of the female berdache, if we may call her that, has still to be fully researched.

At the gay and lesbian writers' conference, *Out/Write* (1991), in San Francisco, a panel of American Indian gays and lesbians talked about the traditional berdache and the ways in which that tradition can inform and intersect with contemporary gay Indian

life. Realizing that gayness can be a spiritual choice, many gay and lesbian American Indians have begun to refer to themselves as two-spirits, that is, as both male and female spirited people.

Many Indian gays and lesbians find in this older tradition surrounding gender and sexuality a positive identity, which allows them to feel they can be significant and powerful participants in their tribal cultures. But like other lesbians and gay men in the larger culture, we are also under attack. It is important to note that queer Indians have been the target of homophobic and racist genocidal campaigns since conquest.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps what has always helped Indians survive are strategic retreats into the realm of the spirits. I am aware, as I write this, that there are borders within borders. The margin itself sometimes dissolves, much as in the desert the wavering mirage of water over a dry lakebed vanishes as one approaches it. This does not mean that the terrain marked off in this liminal space has become definable or accessible to me, but that it has disappeared beneath the facade of my own external perceptions. In other words, the claim I make for this margin, as I understand it, is that it is an illimitable expanse that I may never enter, or which I may one day enter if I approach those limits humbly, in an attitude of self-abnegation. I'm not sure upon whom or what that depends: perhaps only myself. That inviting and invisible lake, surrounded by cat-tails and tamarisk, inhabited by pelicans, herons, sand-hill cranes, and the innumerable small species, exists as surely as I do, though few of us can see it any longer. And if these borderlands are sacred, as I am here suggesting, what do they ask of me, how shall I be responsible to them?

Being taught the meaning of responsibility is a good deal of what Vickie Sears's story "Grace" is about. In this tale about two young foster children, Jodi and Billie Jim, Sears dreams of a kind of healing that will provide a source of strength for the children the rest of their lives. An old Indian woman named Grace, and her husband, Paul, foster the two siblings, taking them from the orphanage to their farm in eastern Washington state. Both the children are sceptical about this arrangement, Jodi in particular because she has been fostered enough times before to be aware that part of what she must sacrifice to be in the care of adults is

her body: she will be either sexually or physically abused, she knows, made to be some adult's plaything or servant. She does not trust Grace who gives every appearance of being kind and respectful. Jodi has seen this all before.

But in fact Grace is kind and respectful, able to apologize to the child when she's made a mistake, able to treat Jodi with immense generosity of spirit even when Jodi finds it impossible to let down her own barrier of self-protection. Both Grace and Paul are truly good people, and whether in this least of all possible worlds such people can be found is not the point. Grace and Paul answer the need of these children to be perfectly nurtured and understood. They are the Indian grandparents some of us have never known. Sears allows them to be nearly ideal, as they teach the children in gentle and loving ways how to plant, how to care for animals, and how to care for one another. The essence of responsibility is in this careful attention to the material world, to experiencing it as rich, potent, and capable of providing healing. This is the lesson the children take with them when they leave. For Grace and Paul are not so ideal that they cannot also be mortal. When Paul dies suddenly, the State steps into the children's lives once more, removing them from Grace's care with the excuse that an older, single woman could not possibly provide adequate care for Jodi and Billie Jim.

There is nothing overtly lesbian in this story about the grace of nurture and acceptance. Jodi is pre-adolescent, and she looks at sexuality as a right possessed by others, by adults. Her own sexuality is necessarily mute and effaced by others more powerful than she. I choose to read a lesbian subtext in this story, partly because I suspect it is at least a little autobiographical. A mixed-blood whose tribal affiliation is Cherokee, Sears herself was a foster child. Like many lesbian writers, she has dealt with the issue of child sexual abuse, the ruptures such abuse causes in the psyche. It is one of the legacies of her own life.

Another subtext to this story is, I think, the fact that many fostered children, particularly Indian children, are abused and neglected, both within the Indian family, which creates the grounds for removal, and in their foster families.<sup>2</sup> Many Indian writers tend to see these phenomena as the heritage of coloniza-

tion, for these children's bodies and souls are surely colonized, taken over, exploited, and the skins and pulp wasted like so much raw material.

Mixedblood Mohawk writer Beth Brant deals with an issue similar to Indian child fosterage, the problem of legal kidnapping of Indian children by Boarding School officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In "The Long Story," in her book *Mohawk Trail*, Brant compares the seizure of Native children with the legally-sanctioned removal of a child from her mother's care because the mother, as a lesbian, is deemed "unfit." Brant moves back and forth between the two stories, illuminating one with the other, collapsing time by suggesting parallels between the two anecdotes. "The Long Story" begins when two children, *She Sees Deer* and *He Catches the Leaves*, are taken away by the Indian agent from their mother, identified only by her English name, Annie. The date is 1890. Annie considers the removal a theft. She remembers what led up to this event:

We signed the papers, the agent said. This gave them rights to take our babies. It is good for them, the agent said. It will make them civilized, the agent said. I do not know *civilized*. (77)

"Civilized" is a pejorative term in this story, loaded with irony, as it is in many stories by American Indian authors. Civilization for American Indians has meant near annihilation, or at least psychic, emotional, and cultural violence as many tribes experienced genocidal policies of removal, assimilation, and acculturation through the erosion and evasion of treaty obligations.

Brant's contemporary story of lesbian motherhood and the judicial sanctions against it parallels Annie's story of child-theft. Annie, the traditional Indian woman, is thought of by her people as mad. She is not crazy, however, unless crazy with grief: her dreams are all of loss, of things that can never be recovered. She has not lost her mind, but her heart. Similarly, Mary, a contemporary Indian woman, is thought of, at least by her ex-husband and the courts, as mad or crazy because she is a lesbian, because she lives with and makes love with another woman. Brant makes it clear that in Mary's case the loss of her child must be read as a punishment for her behaviour, for her wilful choice to be part-

nered with a woman. But this is not an unusual predicament for lesbian mothers, many of whom choose to live secretive or celibate lives if they fear their ex-husbands will threaten to have the courts remove the children from their care and home.

In another story, Brant's female protagonist is locked-down for six weeks in a mental ward in a county hospital to recover from a nervous breakdown. A young mother, Brant's nameless narrator seems to me like a veteran returned from the war, shell-shocked, her identity smashed. It is not the weeks of so-called therapy that heal the woman, but finding a sexual and erotic self beneath the sheets when the lights go out at night. At first, the woman our narrator finds beneath the sheets seems like another person, the body not her own. But as she comes to love herself in the most intimate and erotic way, the narrator begins to claim her own body, the deepest reserves of her own sexuality, and to see that the other woman she loves is herself.

"In touch with the erotic," writes Audre Lorde, "I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (58). Brant's narrator is healed by finding the power of the erotic within her. That power is linked with being a woman who is also a mother. The narrator says of herself and of her internal Other:

My breasts feel everything. In my dreams, I remember my first-born suckling from me. I awake to wet spots on my nightgown. Inside me there is salt. At times it seeps from my eyes, dropping on my hands. Her body is not salted. Inside her is blood, muscle, electric pulses, and rage. Her fingers send currents through mine. Her fingers are long and rough and there are cracks in her nails. My hands are also rough, and my palms are lined.

I am taking the woman home with me. It is our secret. She keeps me alive. (75)

Ultimately, I believe, Brant's narrator knows that this separate self is not a being apart from her own psyche. The split self is a temporary tactic to use in the war against this woman's, and perhaps all women's, bodies and minds. Eventually, the story seems to promise, the strategy of the split self will no longer be necessary. For now, however, "she" is a vital part of the narrator's healing process.

A survivor of poverty, physical and sexual abuse, mixedblood Menominee poet Chrystos names her abuse and calls upon the healing power of the erotic to enable her to survive. This theme is central to many of the poems. Some of the angriest work in *Not Vanishing*, Chrystos's first collection, exposes the continuing legacy for Indians of living in a colonized state. That legacy is one of poverty, hunger, homelessness, drug addiction, alcoholism, poor health, just about every social problem one can think of. In the poem "My Baby Brother," Chrystos writes about heroin addiction:

My baby brother  
 rides a blank face snow pony  
 same one I rode  
 through rat alleys garbage halls crash pads screw johns  
 jack it up  
 3 times he's come to stay with me  
 & kick  
 all 3 my rent went up his arm . . .  
 kills me to see his eyes like marbles his arms a map of war  
 his heart so faint a drum (20)

For Chrystos, as for many other Indian writers, much of the blame for these problems can be laid at the feet of a capitalist system of white dominance, arrogance, and indifference to issues of poverty, racism, classism, and homophobia. I have sometimes thought that Chrystos's work is not better known in academia because much of it is overtly political and propagandistic, a poetry of telling and naming, rather than one of showing. In her poem "No More Metaphors," for example, the poet writes about female prostitution, and the ways prostitutes are victims:

To be a prostitute is to walk cold wet streets  
 in a dangerous night dependent  
 on the hunger of strangers vulnerable to their hatred  
 fists perverse desires diseases  
 To use one's face & body literally  
 to pay the rent the pimp utilities nylons lipstick  
 to wear a bruise where the heart beats (42)

*Not Vanishing* is haunted by images of women who are barely living through the war against them: prostitutes, beggars, drug addicts, poor women. But for every poem of defeat there is a

poem of survival as well. Many of these poems are erotically charged, a sensual poetry that celebrates sexual love between two women. There are great sexy poems in both collections of Chrystos's work. In "Getting Down," a poem in her collection *Dream On*, the poet writes:

Getting down  
 to the bone place where blood is made  
 and every moon's a mother  
 your hands & tongue  
 in me a brush fire I wake up wanting you  
 Shriill cry of a dawn bird between my legs  
 memories of your sweet brown breasts  
 brushing my thighs  
 You go  
 where no one  
 has gone before until I'm weeping laughing  
 as you murmur in my wet ear  
 your husky voice like hot blood *I love you* . . .

You come  
 like the first bird breaking open the night with dawn  
 stars bursting into day sucking you I'm made  
 a moon sweet with light  
 Crying in the bone & blood place where you make me  
 yours (50)

Lesbian Indian writers merge the selves that language splits apart. Sears, Brant, and Chrystos all write to celebrate their own and others' survival and continuance. They do so with love and anger, and also with humour.

Paula Gunn Allen has written that the use of humour in American Indian poetry "makes tolerable what is otherwise unthinkable; it allows a sort of breathing space in which an entire race can take stock of its future. Humour is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding, and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction" (158). Sears, Brant, and Chrystos, for all the "mourning songs" they sing, also provide their readers with jokes and trickster stories.

In a long poem, "Idyll: Four Days," Chrystos celebrates a good time with her lover in a resort cabin on the Oregon coast. For both, the four days are an escape from the demands they're facing back home. "She was supposed to be looking for a job,"



the poet declaims, "and I'm supposed to be writing a play and a novel." Instead the two end up at "the tackiest motel room in the universe":

We laughed so hard when we arrived at the tackiest motel room in the universe, replete with formica/chrome table & two rickety chairs, fake wood paneling & a spectacular view of the parking lot. In the coffin-sized bathroom, only one person could barely turn around. If you used the toilet, your knees were in the shower. If you bent to brush your teeth, your butt was in it. The kitchenette was of similar magnificent design. I needed to lose at least 35 pounds to fit in the narrow slot between the stove & sink. . . . There was a color tv, newer than anything else by 20 years, which we attempted to use as camouflage for our sounds. Not successfully, for the following afternoon, we got dirty looks from the crabby young husband next door. I was afraid we'd be thrown out because we're both so loud when we come. . . . What a relief it is to be with a woman who is louder than I am, to never wonder did she come yet, or still, that awful quivering silence. . . .

I brought sexy nightgowns I never unpacked. We were in bed so much I didn't have to bring any clothes at all. We planned every night to get dressed to go out for a fancy romantic dinner at the place just two doors away but we never made it. . . . Once we limped in around noon for breakfast. (120-22)

And so it goes, four days of raucous sex and never-ending pleasure. The last extraordinary image of the two lovers on the beach is peaceful and sweet: "In the evenings we went for walks when the tide was out, our eyes intently searching for agates, of which we found many" (*Dream On* 123).

Similarly, Beth Brant's coyote story, "Coyote Learns a New Trick," is playfully erotic. In this tale, Coyote Woman decides to play a joke on Fox Woman, a sexy redhead. She finds a man's old suit, stuffs some diapers in the crotch of the pants to create a swell, "a big swell," and goes off to see if she can outwit Fox. Once she has Fox where she wants her, in bed and panting with desire, Coyote plans to reveal her true woman self and make a fool out of Fox. Of course, Fox, an intelligent lesbian animal, sees Coyote's trick coming for about a mile, and she is ready for her. She plays along:

Lying on Fox's pallet, having her body next to hers, Coyote thought maybe she'd wait a bit before playing the trick. Besides, it was fun to be rolling around with a red-haired female. And man oh man, she

really could kiss. That tongue of hers sure knows a trick or two. And boy oh boy, that sure feels good, her paw on my back, rubbing and petting. And wow, I never knew foxes could do such things, moving her legs like that, pulling me down on top of her like that. And she makes such pretty noises, moaning like that. And her paw feels real good, unzipping my pants. And oh oh, she's going to find out the trick, and then what'll I do?

"Coyote! Why don't you take that ridiculous stuffing out of your pants. And take off that undershirt, it smells to high heaven. And let me untie that binder so we can get down to *serious* business." (34)

In the end, Coyote has to admit that Fox is "pretty clever with all the stuff she knows." Getting into bed with Fox for real, Coyote thinks, is "the best trick she ever heard of," and in true Coyote fashion, she only regrets that she hadn't thought of such a marvellous trick herself before Fox did, or anyone else. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde writes,

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength, beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. (58-59)

I have been raised to fear the yes within myself. But I think now that perhaps my life and art, in ways similar to Brant, Sears, and Chrystos, have amounted to a struggle to disobey the injunction against speaking my own truth, against knowing myself as a lesbian and as an American Indian. Disobedience—revealing the fact of my lesbianism, establishing in myself what it means to me to be Indian—led, when I was younger, to my being emotionally and psychically cast out from my family, cast away from the most intimate affectional bonds I knew. Or did I cast myself out in an effort to effect a punishment? Did I slash at those familial ties to assert my own autonomy? I have imagined the art of writing as the art of risk-taking, of leaping into the forbidden territory of the heart and soul, of tasting the fruit of holistic and psychic knowing that is fed, as Lorde eloquently noted, by the erotic.

I try to write about some of the distortions I grew up with, to provide a way of naming a place that is otherwise not recognized in Euroamerican culture. I need to claim the margin as a place fraught with danger, because I want to celebrate my own survival. I'm writing not only as an Indian, but as a lesbian. an act which is, as Joy Harjo has written, "the fantastic and terrible story of all our survival / those who were never meant / to survive" (15). My poem, "When I Lived on the River," begins in the following way:

Fucking queer, he said.  
 I ought to beat the shit out of you.  
 I ought to kill you.  
 We were driving around the back woods  
 in the state of Washington  
 at night.  
 It was winter.

For me, this poem is a description of what it means to be among the marginal, to live precariously in the liminal space of the Other. The speaker is in that place by virtue of being young, poor, lesbian, and Indian. She works in a factory and gets drunk on weekends with her so-called friends, white kids whose only aim is to get as high as possible in as short amount of time as it takes. Alcohol provides an excuse, allowing the violence and hatred that is part of that landscape to erupt, to flash out. And this is Indian drinking, a social pattern of fast and complete intoxication: in this poem, all the young people drink like Indian kids. It's part of what you see growing up, it's part of what you learn. It makes me wonder why the margin looks so appealing to people who live in the so-called centre. Perhaps they imagine that the place the Other occupies is a place of uncontrolled license, a place to break free of their own self-absorption and the constraints of occupying a place of power. In the fantasy of the postmodern mentality, the centre collapses, and a promise is held out for a place in which one, informed by erotic and genuine desire, claims an identity. This is an identity that lurks beneath the surface of the psyche, speaking to one in the ruptured and rupturing voice of the Other. It whispers incredible possibilities of self-knowledge.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. I don't know. But I find so many questions. And I want to end this paper with one: is there not any

place that is sacred, that is safe from violation? Perhaps there are spaces within the psyche that can and must remain beautifully inarticulate and mute. I would like to think there is a vast reserve of silence that can never be colonized, that can never be forced to speak, that can never be taught to speak. I would like to imagine that there is a place of power that never becomes knowledge, a place of knowledge that never becomes power. I would like to believe there are places that cannot be imagined, inviolate places no one can enter, no one can know, that will remain forever sealed off, unexplored, and that no amount of humbling will make available.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Williams writes: "The condemnation of Indian homosexual behaviour was a major factor in proving the virtue of the Spanish conquest, and the conquistadors acted resolutely to suppress it by any means necessary. The priests of course tried to convince the Indians to change voluntarily, but sometimes the military leaders did not even give the natives an opportunity to change. For example, the conquistador Nuno de Guzman recalled that in 1530 the last person taken in battle, who had 'fought most courageously, was a man in the habit of a woman, which confessed that from a child he had gotten his living by that filthiness, for which I caused him to be burned'" (137).
- <sup>2</sup> Arley Sanchez quotes Ron Reid, agency recruitment coordinator for Indian families, as saying, "What we are seeing is that a lot of Indian children are being put up for adoption as a result of abuse and neglect," Reid said, noting that agency statistics show there has been a 25-percent increase annually in the placement of Indian children in foster care during the 1980s."
- Louis Owens, in his recent book on American Indian novel, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, states that "more than 90 percent of Native American children up for adoption are adopted into non-Indian families, an institutional 'mainstreaming' of Indian children into Euramerica that results in widespread loss of cultural identity as well as a feeling by Indian people that their children are being systematically stolen away" (5).

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