RAGE AND REDEMPTION: READING THE LIFE STORY OF A MEXICAN MARKETING WOMAN

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In recent years, the life history, as a cultural text and a form of writing, has come under critical scrutiny from a wide range of psychological, phenomenological, hermeneutic, and feminist perspectives.[1] Widely ranging as these works are, they converge in their view of the field of life history as one of unrealized potential, what James M. Freeman and David L. Krantz have called "the unfulfilled promise of life histories." In the words of Freeman and Krantz, which are the words of many who have examined life histories, the promise of life histories has not been fulfilled because of the tendency "to force life histories into a Procrustean bed of conventional social science principles. . . . If there is a promise, it is in evolving new standards and perspectives in which life histories can be more appropriately interpreted and analyzed on their own terms." Although the task of evolving new standards and perspectives is easier said than done, one key component suggested by Freeman and Krantz must certainly be for life history studies to evenly integrate "an adequate theory with a comprehensive narrative that brings to life the narrator as a person."[2] Following their lead here, I want to explore new ways in which to articulate the interplay between theory and narrative in life history writing, so as to start working on fulfilling the promise of an enterprise that continues to interest, challenge, and trouble so many of us in cultural, literary, and feminist studies.

READING AND WRITING LIFE HISTORIES

The anthropological life history, as an approach that assumes an eventual written product, offers a paradox to the anthropologist as

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author. On the one hand, there is the desire and temptation to leave the account wholly in the native voice, in imitation of the literary autobiography that it is not; on the other hand, there is the anthropological imperative to place the account in a theoretical/cultural context, to provide some sort of background, analysis, commentary, or interpretation, so as to mediate between the reality of a life lived and inscribed elsewhere but wedged between book covers and read here. In performing this delicate act of mediation, the anthropologist is obliged to let the reader know, somewhere, most frequently on the margins of the text in a preface of afterword, just what the micropolitics of the situation was in which the life history was obtained and the ways in which the anthropologist was personally involved in, and even transformed by, the intense one-to-one relationship of telling and listening.

Torn between these voices, the life historian/author usually settles for a segregated, often jarring combination of the three—the native voice, the personal "I was there" voice, and the authoritative voice of the ethnographer. The difficulties inherent in making music out of these three "voices" or "discordant allegorical registers"[3] also pose the key challenge. By mediating between, or counterpointing, different linguistic tropes or registers, the ethnographer can potentially create a text that is as much an account of a person's history as it is an account of how such a history is constituted in and through narrative—the native's life story narrative and the life historian's telling of that narrative. A life history narrative can set the stage for a double telling, in which both the native and the anthropologist, side by side, act as narrators, readers, and commentators.

As a problematic genre, the life history narrative invites critical reflection as part of the current anthropological project to rethink and refashion ethnographic representation.[4] There are two directions in which I think it would be promising to take the genre of life history. The first focuses on the "life" part of the equation, moving toward an elaboration of the concept of the actor as engaged in the meaningful creation of a life world. The second involves looking at the "history" part of the equation, moving toward an elaboration of the relationship between history and its textual representation, and looking at history as story. I call this work a life story rather than a life history to emphasize the fictions of self-

representation, the ways in which a life is made in the telling and "an ordered past imposed by a present personality upon a disordered life."[5]

As Sherry Ortner points out, there has been an overwhelming tendency in anthropological accounts to spotlight the "thingness" or objectivity of social forms once created, in the process displacing the actor's part in worldmaking. Anthropologists need to forge, she suggests, more imaginative tools based in a theory of practice in order not only to reinsert, but centrally place (or re-place), the actor in their accounts of other histories and cultures. "History," in Ortner's words, "is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make."[6] Elsewhere, as a coauthor, she notes the importance of viewing symbols—and gender symbols, in particular—not as inherently meaningful but as invested with meaning by social actors.[7]

An actor-centered practice approach would seem to be an obvious starting point for life history. Rather than looking at social and cultural systems solely as they impinge on a life, shape it, and turn it into an object, a life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor's retrospective reflections on that action. A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account.

Ironically, many life histories, despite the fact that they focus on individual actors, fail to do just this. The problem lies in the nature of the frame that the ethnographer feels called upon to produce to lend weight, meaning, and credence to the native's words. The purpose of such a frame is, too often, to show that, although the account bears the signature of a single actor, it ultimately is representative of, undersigned by, some larger social whole. Thus Marjorie Shostak enlists Nisa, the articulate and highly intelligent !Kung woman who is the subject of her life history, to metonymically represent women in !Kung society and thereby to provide us in the West with a primitive vision of the ideal of sexually liberated womanhood.[8]

Life history writing, as a subgenre of ethnographic writing, falls prey to the same general view of holism as typification, which has been described as "perhaps the most sacred of all the cows of traditional anthropological theorizing and description."[9] One common

problem in life history writing is that the typifying narrative or frame provided by the ethnographer as an authority on the culture often speaks past, rather than to, the native narrative. Oscar Lewis prefaced some of the most moving life history narratives ever collected, in *Children of Sanchez* (and elsewhere), with dubious theoretical generalizations about "the culture of poverty" and its production of "badly damaged human beings"[10] that, in the end, said little about the multiperspectival texts they were meant to introduce—and even, I would say, did violence to them by showing so little regard for what his subjects actually had to say. (I will return to this theme of the violence of representation shortly.) Marjorie Shostak introduced each chapter of Nisa's narrative, which she reorganized into such general categories as economy, gender, and religion, with ethnographic generalizations that preceded Nisa's own words; but rarely is there an analysis of the words themselves or a serious attempt to come to terms with how Nisa constructed her life as a story using indigenous notions of oral performance or even notions of commodity exchange modeled on the long history of Western contact with the !Kung.[11] Shostak's agenda continually acts as a barrier to really hearing what Nisa is saying. Although Nisa speaks in detail of sexual violence and wifebeating, Shostak insists, in her ethnographically authoritative voice, that the !Kung have highly egalitarian gender relations.

This speaking past the text, rather than to the text, is the product of a common misconception about life history texts: namely, that they "speak for themselves," as though transparent, existing outside or beyond a particular reading. As Michael W. Young, criticizing this tendency, remarks: life history texts "are frequently offered as self-evident 'cultural documents' rather than as texts to be interrogated and interpreted."[12] Gelya Frank, who provides an especially cogent critique of the tendency to let life history texts pass untheorized, notes that the assumption behind not analyzing the text is that "every reader already has a sense of how to understand another person." On the one hand, "the common denominator" of life histories is the primary act of readership by which a reader identifies with the subject of the narrative. Yet, on the other hand, "the natural attitude of readers towards biography," like "the social science approach," wrongly assumes that the life history is "a direct representation of the informant's life, something almost equivalent to the informant's life." The text is, in fact, not the per-

son but a version of the self constructed by a subject to present to the anthropologist: "The text falls into the background as a neutral tool or medium for the 'phenomena' (the events of a person's life as experienced) to shine through. Autobiographical texts appear to offer a truer experience of the subject's life, a direct outpouring of consciousness, but here too certain conventions are invoked to structure the narrative."[13] These conventions stem from native traditions of storytelling, but they are also, significantly, unique forms that emerge in discourse with the anthropologist. As Frank suggests, the biographer-ethnographer must gain a clearer sense of the making of the life history text as a text, so as to denaturalize the link between text and person. In this manner, we can begin to read and to write life histories differently, in more imaginative and theoretically rich ways.

What we need to do more of in life history work is basically to read—or think about how to read (and write)—the native text. Neither the presentation of transcripts of the raw dialogues (as in Kevin Dwyer's *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question*) nor edited and recombined pieces made to flow "like a novel" (as in Oscar Lewis's various family autobiographies) are solutions to the dilemma of having to read the text. The life history text is not meaningful in itself; it is constituted in its interpretation, its reading. Reading a life history text, and then writing it, calls for an interpretation of cultural themes as they are creatively constructed by the actor within a particular configuration of social forces and gender and class contexts; and, at the same, a closer analysis of the making of the life history narrative as a narrative, using critical forms of textual analysis and self-reflexive (rather than self-ingratiating) mediation on the relationship between the storyteller and the anthropologist.

Of course, calling a life history a text already reflects a particular analytic move and, in a sense, a particular colonization of the act of telling a life story. With deconstruction we have learned that the border between the "spoken" and the "written" is a fluid one. Thus, it is not orality versus textuality that I call into question here, with the image it conjures up of the ethnographer salvaging the fleeting native experience in the net of the text.[14] The more relevant distinction for me is Walter Benjamin's distinction between storytelling and information. Information, in Benjamin's analysis, is a mode of communication linked to the development of the printing

press and of capitalism; it presents itself as verifiable, it is "shot through with explanation," and it is disposable because it is forgettable. Storytelling, on the other hand, is "always the art of repeating stories," without explanation, combining the extraordinary and the ordinary; most importantly, it is grounded in a community of listeners on whom the story makes a claim to be remembered by virtue of its "chaste compactness," which inspires the listener, in turn, to become the teller of the story.[15] It worries me that one does violence to the life history as a story by turning it into the disposable commodity of information. My, at least partial, solution to this problem has been to focus on the act of life story representation as reading rather than as informing, with its echoes of surveillance and disclosures of truth. And I try to make clear that what I am reading is a story, or set of stories, that have been told to me, so that I, in turn, can tell them again, transforming myself from a listener to a storyteller.

WOMAN READING (AND REPRESENTING) WOMAN

In this paper I explore ways of reading the life story narrative of a Mexican marketing woman, a *marchanta*, as an account of culture making and story making. I borrow the notion of "reading woman" from Mary Jacobus, who uses it to develop a theory of how "woman" is constructed "within a multiplicity of shifting selves . . . endlessly displacing the fixity of gender identity by the play of difference and division which simultaneously creates and uncreates gender, identity, and meaning."[16] The focus on reading places the accent on the constructed quality of woman as subject, whether "reading woman" (that is, women or men—especially in Freudian analysis—constructing woman as different in their texts) or "woman reading woman" (that is, women interpreting as women the texts or self-constructions of other women). I use the notion of reading here to ask anthropological questions about issues of representation and what it means for me as a Western woman to read (and thereby constitute) the life history text of another (Third World/Latin American/Mexican) woman.

Esperanza Hernandez (a self-chosen pseudonym), the subject and coproducer of the narrative, fits all the typologies of lower-class Mexican womanhood—battered child, battered wife, abandoned wife, female head of household, unwed mother, "Indian"

marketing woman, believer in witchcraft. Yet I want to see her not as a type but as she sees herself, as an actor thrust in the world seeking to gain meaning out of the events of her life. Similarly, although such general topics as female/male relations, notions of exchange, healing, witchcraft, women's power, and cosmology can be pulled out of the account, I will view them not as typified objects but as constructs emerging out of Esperanza's experience as presented in her story of how she made herself within the limits of her world. The limits of her world are, indeed, those of the social class and gender to which she was born, but they are limits which she herself reproduces in terms meaningful to her. Culture, gender, and class are simultaneously constructed in Esperanza's life story.

The recent critique of the notion of "place" in anthropology can be expanded to a critique of the place women have been given to inhabit both in writing on Latin American women and, more generally, in life histories of women.[17] In both these literatures, there is a vexed part/whole relation of women to the larger male-dominated society which constrains their possibilities for action and defines the limits of what constitutes culture. In life history writing, accounts by women have often been collected to provide the "women's view" on societies that have already been described from a "holistic" (read male) typifying view or even to supplement previously collected life histories of men, as when Nancy Lurie wrote *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder* (1961) in response to Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of an American Indian* (1926). That "female experience could ever explain the whole culture or even a central aspect of it" is outrightly denied, for "women unlike men are not seen as true representatives of their societies."[18] Even as they occupy the role of central protagonists in their own life history narratives, women tend to be cast as Adamic fragments, part-people and part-societies, with limited and slanted views of their world. Certainly we need to go beyond this view of women's social action as supplementary, as reacting against a male world, rather than as creatively constructing a complete social world.

In work on women in Latin America, the part/whole problem surfaces in another form. There, the incompleteness of women as social actors is shown in the overwhelming emphasis placed on the political and economic aspects of women's experience. Ac-

counts focus on women's economic exploitation and political muting, or they point to the ways in which women gain consciousness and a voice in their society at the cost of great emotional and often physical hardship.[19] Esperanza's narrative suggests that there are other possibilities for seeing Latin American women as actors that expand the categories of women as wives and mothers, workers, doers, and political activists. It suggests that, if looked at from a cultural perspective, Latin American women can emerge as thinkers, cosmologists, creators of worlds.

The challenge of trying to write about Esperanza in this way is that one is constantly forced to come to terms with, and counter, the fact that Mexico – and the Mexican lower-class woman in particular – exists in academic as well as mainstream reporting as a pretheorized reality, an already-fixed representation. Listen, for example, to the half-disgusted, half-pitying description of a Mexican lower-class woman offered by a female folklorist:

> Of all the impressions I received while in Mexico, one stands out sharply from all the rest. Everywhere I went, whether to the market places in the provinces or the elegant Zona Rosa of Mexico City, I saw the very same scene: a very, very young woman, at the most seventeen, holding by the hand a child who looked to be no older than two. In her arms she carried a tiny baby tightly wrapped in a *rebozo*, and always her belly was big with child . . . I spoke to many women about their situation, and always their sadness disturbed me. They were not joyful in their motherhood, they were resigned.[20]

Octovio Paz, speaking of Mexican womanhood from an interest in "Mexicanness," instead romanticizes the image of the Mexican woman as long-suffering victim, calling her "an image of immobility, secretive, passive, an idol, a victim who is hardened and rendered insensitive by her suffering" yet one who "being sinful from birth must be subdued with a stick"[21] (stick being used here, one supposes, in the literal and sexual sense of the word). This image of the long-suffering Mexican woman closely matches Oscar Lewis's depiction of the impoverished "ordinary Mexican" as feminized by a "great capacity for misery and suffering."[22]

We have here a set of classical images which reduce, by means of representational conventions, the marginal Mexican to object status: on the one hand, the fatalistic, yet heroic, poor Mexican caught tight in the grip of the "culture of poverty" by unfortunate "attitudes" and "value systems" (terms used by Lewis). This object status is reinforced by the fact that these people are said to suffer

so much that they are beyond pain, beyond feeling, beyond being. They are not granted subjectivity, agency, and critical consciousness. These images are the representational axis of an analysis that is forged within a context of a First World/Third World balance of power, a balance, which, I must add, exists internally within the "Third World," too, as evidenced in the First World style of theorizing of Octavio Paz. A critical ethnographic narrative—within which I include the reconceptualized life history narrative—should instead seek to destabilize this balance of power and knowledge so that the self-understanding and critical practice of specific actors can come to the fore.

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty remarks with respect to universal images of the "Third World woman" as *"the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife,"* images generated by Western feminist analyses, such images "perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of superiority of the West . . . setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections."[23] By representing, as Mohanty points out, the average Third World woman as leading "a truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)," Western feminists have engaged in implicit, discursive self-representation of themselves as "educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions."[24] Inverting this tendency to view the women they study as passive victims, and perhaps overcompensating, some feminist anthropologists have lately stressed the existence of female cultures of resistance, thereby extending the Western feminist self-representation to their subjects.[25] Clearly, any ethnographic representation—and I include my own, of course—inevitably reflects a self-representation and a certain economy of representation. Even more subtly, the act of representing, as Edward Said points out, "almost always involves violence of some sort to the *subject* of the representation," using as it must some degree of reduction, decontextualization, and miniaturization. "This is one of the unresolvable problems of anthropology," as Said tells us.[26] Yet I think there is hope insofar as we realize that ethnographic critique presents us with the paradox, so well put by Linda Brodkey as "the process by

which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so."[27]

Mohanty's sharp critique of Western feminist representational conventions also takes us in a different direction, toward the recent general critique of ethnographic representations exemplified by the papers in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). Her critique of how Western feminists have un-self-consciously created a cultural other in their images of Third World women points to the way in which feminist ethnography fits within a larger process of cultural colonization of the non-Western world. This critique of feminist representational forms, which poses the same problems about authority and repression as does ethnography, is a crucial step toward answering the challenge posed by James Clifford in his castigating remarks about feminist ethnographers not having "produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such."[28]

Clifford here overlooks one vast terrain of feminist work in which, indeed, unconventional forms of writing and theoretical exploration of ethnographic textuality in the broad sense of the term have figured prominently, radically, and creatively – namely, the terrain of women's autobiography and the complex discussions of women's memory, politics of home, and language use and writing which it has inspired.[29] I think this is a key terrain to which all ethnographers can turn for insights and examples of alternative forms of representation and text making that combine personal experience with poetic, political, and cultural critique.

In her review of women's autobiographies, Domna Stanton found that "autobiographical" had positive connotations when referring to the works of male authors (e.g., Saint Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry Miller), but when the term referred to women's writings, it inevitably became linked to negative ideas about women's incapacity for self-transcendence; their presumed inability to rise above the concrete, the daily, the domestic, and the "personal." Internalizing this negativity, women writers themselves, like Colette, could say that women's writings seem a joke to men because "they can't help being autobiographical." Yet if there is a difference in the way women speak and write, it clearly does not reside in some inherent deficiency or limitation but in the

different experience of women in society and in the specific ways in which the category and idea of the "feminine" is constructed in a given culture. Stanton points out that the purpose of literate women's autobiographies has been not so much to reveal intimate secrets—in fact, they manifest a good deal of concealment and self-censorship—but to conquer identity through writing. These "female autographs" are acts of self-assertion, of giving substance to the female "I" in diverse settings of male domination that render women the inessential other.[30]

This view of women's autobiographies as a vehicle for constituting the female subject might be fruitfully extended to women's orally related life histories in non-Western settings, as well, and beyond to the ways in which women reflect on their experiences, emotions, and self-construction. From this perspective it is worth taking up as a positive feature, rather than a shortcoming, the idea that women's stories about themselves have a concrete, context-specific texture. As Susan Geiger remarks in an important review essay about women's life histories, "feminist scholars have revealed that notions of objectivity themselves are andocentric, and that the higher levels of abstraction assumed to present a 'true' picture of 'reality' often represent neither truth nor reality for women." Life histories, in particular, as subjective documents, have rigor and integrity, because "they do not claim 'ungendered point-of-viewlessness'" while revealing that "consciousness is not simply the act of interpreting but also of constructing the social world."[31]

Taking up the challenge of writing about female consciousness as world making, Emily Martin's recent book, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, focuses on the ways in which Baltimore women talk about their experience of living in female bodies in an industrial society geared to a production rhythm that violates the ebb and flow of women's cyclical biology. Martin's analysis builds on Dell Hymes's critique of Basil Bernstein's distinction between elaborated and restricted codes, in which Hymes questions "whether abstract discourse is necessarily the only or even the best way to achieve general understanding."[32] Martin maintains that powerful and insightful commentaries on the social order are embedded in the concrete, narrative, storytelling form of discourse, and she offers the reader a challenge that I want to offer here as well: "It is up to anyone who listens to a

woman's tale to hear the implicit message, interpret the powerful rage, and watch for ways in which the narrative form gives 'a weighted quality to incident' [a citation from Hymes], extending the meaning of an incident beyond itself."[33] It is precisely the implicit messages and weighted qualities of Esperanza's tale that I want to ask you to listen and watch for, as I try to work out an interpretation of the rage that simultaneously tears at and empowers her.

APPROACHING ESPERANZA'S STORY: SUBJECTIVITY, VOICE, AND TEXT

Esperanza's history is a story about her life that was constructed very consciously by her as a narrative with herself in the role of central protagonist and heroine, and I would like to take it seriously as a text. Even before I thought to tape-record her life history, she had told me, in compressed form, much of her story. She did this, I realized, not for my particular benefit, but because she already had the habit of putting her life in story terms for her children—and especially her two daughters—to hear and learn a lesson from.[34] In telling her story to me, she undoubtedly wanted me to confirm a particular image of herself, and my listening so attentively to her stories did perhaps add moral weight to them, as lessons for her children. But like Youngsu Mother's story, the Korean shaman about whom Laurel Kendall has recently written, Esperanza's story reminds us "that some among our informants are storytellers in their own lives and that the words they provide have not been given to us alone."[35] When I told Esperanza that I thought her life narrative would make a very good book, she completely agreed, and she took a certain pride in thinking that she alone of all the women in the town had a life worth turning into a text, or even, she said, emphasizing her life's supreme textuality, into a history, into a film.

Esperanza views her life as a story, as worthy of making into a story, because of her notion of story, which is based on three intertexts—the Christian narrative as a story of suffering, and particularly of suffering through the body as a vehicle for the release of spirit and divinity; a sense of the melodramatic (a quintessentially female version of the "tragic") as found in photonovels and television, whose soap operas she occasionally watches on a

set that her son has hooked up to a car battery; and cultural myths of women's abilities that attribute to women supernatural powers to harm the men who wrong them. Most important for her is the notion of narrative as inscribing a progression from suffering to rage to redemption. When I told her that I was also asking other women to tell me their stories, she was positively shocked when I mentioned among them a younger, respected schoolteacher in the town. "But she, what has she suffered? I never heard that her husband beat her, that she suffered from rages," Esperanza responded. In her view, the rage brought on by suffering, and redemption through suffering, is what gives a woman the right and the need to become a text. Rage and redemption form the poles of her life as text.

Esperanza lives in the small town of Mexquitic, in the arid highlands of San Luis Potosí in north-central Mexico. She is a *marchanta*, a vendor of flowers she herself produces when in season, and of vegetables that she buys at the market and resells door-to-door to her established clients in the city of San Luis Potosí, just a half-hour away by bus. As a self-employed marketing woman, mediating between the rural and the urban world in the informal economy, she depends on her wits and the charm of her style to make a living. Flowers, which she carries to sell in a pail balanced on her head, symbolically mean a good deal to her and speak both to her preoccupation with the revelation of the cosmic in everyday life and the high value given to motherhood in Mexican culture; she says that the Virgin Mary is never absent in a house where there are children and flowers.

Esperanza is the mother of two sons from her marriage and of two daughters and a son born to her later out of wedlock. For her sixty years of age she has a remarkable vitality, almost a girlishness about her; she has a fine sense of irony and, rather than being bitter about a bitter life—as she herself says—she jokes and laughs a good deal. Her voice is rich and strong and she uses it skillfully in storytelling, imitating the voices of all the characters in her tales and modulating her pitch to suit dramatic purposes. She wears her thick brown hair in two long braids and dresses in the apron and shawl that identify a woman as traditional working class and as Indian. Esperanza's Indianness is, from the dominant society's

perspective, inauthentic and degraded. She neither speaks Nahautl—as her grandparents did—nor makes crafts; she claims Spanish as her language, even as her braids and apron identify her as a woman with an Indian heritage rooted not in ethnicity, but in race/class distinctions. She shares a single house compound with her mother, her married son and his wife and child, and her teenage daughters and younger son; each family group has a bedroom of its own, but the cooking space and courtyard are used in common. Their house is on the outskirts of Mexquitic's town center, set on a hill overlooking the town, where the electric wires do not yet reach and running water, recently installed, flows from a single outdoor faucet.

Before I knew Esperanza's own story, I heard the stories about her that circulate in Mexquitic. Esperanza, I learned from various women, bewitched her husband, Julio, after he left her and returned to town with another woman and their children. Cursing him, according to one story, with the words, "So that you will never again see women," she had caused him to go suddenly and completely blind. No one knew exactly how she had done it, but there was some suspicion that she had thrown special powders at him or gotten a witch to do the work for her in San Luis. She had publicized the rage she felt for Julio, and these rumors seemed to testify to the belief that there was no telling what an enraged woman was capable of doing. Doesn't Ecclesiasticus tell us that "there is no wrath above the wrath of a woman?" I also learned, from various people, that Esperanza was a bad-tempered, combative woman one had to take care not to offend. Her public image was that of a sharp-tongued, aggressive, unsentimental woman, who had gone so far as to throw her eldest son out of the house. For a long time I hesitated to meddle with her.

I finally got to know Esperanza myself when she asked my husband and me, out of the blue, to be godparents of the cake for her daughter's coming-of-age rite (*quinceañera*). Soon after, she came to ask us to be godparents for her Christ child. With this, we became *comadres,* comothers, linked through ties of ritual kinship. On my first acquaintance with Esperanza, I admit that I was put off by her. She was demanding in her requests, rather than deferential as others were. Her two requests for *compadrazgo*, representing significant outlays of money from us, followed quickly upon one another, and I had the distinct sense of being taken advantage of.

These fears quickly abated as I got to know and like Esperanza and realized how much I could learn from her. Certainly, I was better able to separate the myth from the woman but found that she had, in a deep sense, become the myth. However, the fact that I had initially reacted as I had made me realize the extent to which the ethnographic relation is based on power and that, indeed, I felt uncomfortable when an "informant" was assertive and aggressive, rather than passive and cooperative as informants should be. As has often been the case in other relationships between the subject of a life history narrative and the anthropologist,[36] I did not seek out Esperanza, but rather she sought me out. She chose me to hear her story and to take it back across the border, to the mysterious and powerful "other side" from which I came.

Shortly before I was due to leave in 1985, she came to our house for several evenings to tape-record her life history, talking nonstop, late into the night, for three and four hours at a time. She treated her narrative as a string of self-contained stories, segments, or episodes, rather like a soap opera serial. Each night she would ask where we had left off and pick up from there, stringing another story, another bead on her rosary, until she herself thought she had attained some sort of closure. As a performance, her narrative had the quality of a one-woman theater of voices, because she told virtually the entire story in dialogue form. I did not have to "elicit" the account; rather, it was necessary for me to expand my capacities to listen to oral storytelling and performance. On my return trips to Mexquitic in 1987, 1988, and 1989, she has filled in the recent events of her life and taken me to meet the healer/medium in San Luis who aids her in her continuing struggle with evil. She always came to converse with me accompanied by her son or daughter, often with both, and she told her story as much for their edification as for mine.

REPRODUCING THE MOTHER IN THE DAUGHTER

"*Comadre,* what a life, the life I've lived. My life is such a long history. My life has been very sad, very sad. Black, black, like my mother's life." With these words, Esperanza begins her narrative, going on to recall her mother's life as she witnessed it during the early years of her childhood. This mother-daughter mirroring is a key theme in her account; often it seems as though she is collaps-

ing time, and through her life giving birth to her mother's life. In childhood, by witnessing her father's brutal treatment of her mother, Esperanza gains a vivid sense of the violence of patriarchal domination. In her words: "My father hit her for any little thing. . . . He would arrive and say to us, 'Why are you making such a racket, you goddamn children.' My father always spoke to us in curses. 'Why do you make so much noise, you sons of–' [and to her mother] 'You daughter of who knows what, why don't you make them shut up?' Everything offended him." Esperanza recalled how her father would accuse her and her siblings of being "pimps" for their mother, covering up affairs that he was certain she must be having. (Later, when Esperanza married, Julio leveled the same accusation against her, even while keeping her virtually locked up in the house.) If her mother sneaked out of the house and went to grind corn in other houses to earn some tortillas for her family, her father would become furious, accusing her of going to other houses to cry about her troubles. Finally, after a particularly nasty beating, her mother returned home to her mother's house, leaving Esperanza and her siblings behind, uttering the words, "I didn't bring any children with me, and I'm not taking any children with me."

Her mother's escape from this dark, violent, closed, oppressive, male-dominated world is followed by the escape of Esperanza and her siblings, who as small children stole off in the middle of the night with a strip of mutton and a few blankets to rejoin their mother. The escape theme is another key topos in Esperanza's narrative; she too, when her time comes, escapes from the incarceration of marriage (as she herself describes it), rather like the slave, in the slave narrative, made a journey from bondage to freedom through the narrative drive of a text.

After this dark period, Esperanza goes on to describe what she considers to have been the happiest years of her life–the time of her adolescence, when she was independent, working, and self-sufficient. Her mother had sent her sister to work in San Luis as a domestic when she was twelve; Esperanza went to work at the age of ten. The two sisters worked in various houses, and they shared a stint together working in a luncheonette which Esperanza enjoyed because of the easy availability of food. When Esperanza was eighteen, she and her sister returned to Mexquitic for the fiesta of Saint Michael, the patron saint of the town, and it was

then that she was, almost literally in her description, snared by Julio while she was out in the fields collecting maguey juice.

At this point in the narration, Esperanza turned to me and said, "Now that's the good part. What's still to come. That life eternal. I may even start crying. The life I lived. My life is a history. My life is a film. . . . To suffer just like my mother. Here [pointing to the space between her brows], he kicked me twice. Here [pointing to the side of her head] he threw a machete at me. And I suffered the same life as my mother." It was 1949. It was New Year's Eve. She and Julio argued all night – "he wanting to do his things with me," as Esperanza put it, and she refusing. Esperanza finally followed Julio to his mother's house, where he made a vow to marry her.

When her mother found Esperanza in the courtyard of Julio's house the next day, she refused to say anything more to her than, "Get away. Do you have no shame?" Her mother took both Esperanza and Julio to the town court (a frequent pattern when a woman has left the parental house) and said, "Well, if he's such a man and knows how to carry out his word about marrying my daughter, then I want him to go to church right now and make the arrangements." By thus taunting Julio to be a "real man," Esperanza's mother sought to redress the disgrace of her daughter's loss of honor (for she assumed that Esperanza had lost her virginity). Seeking to confer on Esperanza the kind of respectability that she herself had lost leaving her own husband, Esperanza's mother, ironically, pushed her daughter into a marriage that Esperanza had grave doubts about. In the weeks of preparation for the wedding, a townswoman fitted Esperanza for her white wedding dress. Later Esperanza was to recall the prophetic words this woman uttered to her in conversation: "'So you're getting married, young woman?' 'Yes.' 'Good. But be careful,' she says. 'A white wedding dress is very beautiful but also very punishing.'"

In her narrative, Esperanza plays on this image of marriage as incarceration, as the cross and the curse of the white wedding dress, and as a darkness and a bondage from which she was not able to see the light of day until her emergence into freedom sixteen years later. Her story is built on the contrast between her cloistered life during marriage (a constricting female space) and her later life as an independent woman and a fully public person. A week after her wedding, the reality of her bondage, of being cut off from the world of family and friends, was brought home to her

by her mother-in-law. Just as her own mother upheld a social-religious order based on patriarchal domination that had exerted its violence against her, so, too, her mother-in-law turned out to be as brutal as or more brutal than Julio in her reinforcement of the idea that women should be subordinate to their husbands in marriage. Even to peek out the door, Esperanza learned early on, was a transgression for her:

> I went to the door to peep out. I took it as a joke that it was the same thing to be single as to be married. I went to the door, just to look out. I'm looking out the door and my mother-in-law is in the other room selling pulque, with the men there. And a man passes by and looks at me. That seemed funny to me. I just stood there. Suddenly she grabs me by the hair, by the braids, and pushes me inside. We had been married eight days. "Why did you go out? What are you looking for?" It was the first scolding I got from her. After that I was really sorry I had gotten married. But what could I do? So, she finished pushing, shoving, and hitting me. "So that you'll know that from now on things are not the same as when you were single.". . . And she said, "Here you are done with mother. Here you are done with friends. Here you are done with *compadres.* With girlfriends. Here you are done with *comadritas.* Here, you came to know your obligation towards your husband, nothing else.". . . So I tell you. It was a very black life. During sixteen years. I held out for sixteen years.

RAGE AND REFUSAL

In 1950, a year after marrying, Esperanza had her first child, a daughter, who lived for only nine months. The child died, Esperanza said, because Esperanza had suffered a *coraje,* a very deep anger or rage, after finding Julio with another woman by the riverbanks. Julio had also begun, by this time, to beat her often for anything that offended him about her behavior. Although he was continually unfaithful—ending up in jail six times for dishonoring different young women—he suspected her, constantly, of having lovers; yet it was Esperanza's sexuality that was denied as she bore one doomed offspring after another. After her first child died, she learned from a healer that the child had sucked her anger in with the milk; the anger pent up within her had poisoned her milk, causing her child's death (with this, Esperanza is initiated into the largely female subculture of illness and healing). One after another Esperanza's children died. As she put it, she was never without *corajes,* she sufffered from one continual *coraje,* a deep welling up of rage that killed the children she gave life to.

Coraje is an emotion and illness state especially common to women that is sparked by strife between spouses or between mother and child; as in this case of "angry milk," *coraje* forms part of a feminine ontology of suffering and despair.[37] *Coraje* also bears a close resemblance to the rage that Ilongots experience at the death of close kin, moving them to want to expel grief by headhunting.[38] Even more broadly, rage is a culturally forceful state of consciousness, whether it refers to feminist rage or the diffuse anger that oppressed people feel in colonial settings.[39]

That Esperanza views her married life as the embodiment of a constant, suppressed rage expresses her sense of its disorderliness, of its spiritual and bodily wrongness. Her description of her feelings and interaction with Julio after the death of their third child provides a view of her daily rage and of its transformation in her account into a narrative of the grotesque: "She died and she died! And it was my martyrdom! It was my martyrdom as always. I would say to myself, all my children die, it isn't worth it for me to have children. . . . Then he would say to me, furious, 'Well, you swallow them.' 'Yes, I don't have anything else to eat, so I swallow them.' I would answer him like that, and he would slug me." Of the eight children Esperanza bore by Julio, only two sons, her fourth and fifth, survived to adulthood.

The years of her marriage—with its violence, its rage, its toil—are described in great detail in Esperanza's narrative. But I will skip ahead to what Esperanza focused on as a key turning point in her life and her text—the climactic moment at the end of her marriage when she found Julio in San Luis with the woman he would eventually bring to his mother's house as his wife, usurping her:

> When I had my last child with him, a boy named John, he was the last one, when he found the other woman in San Luis. For her he left me. But I grabbed her really well, *comadre.* No! I had been asleep. He had me tied up, even afraid. And he had me really humiliated . . . I was eight months pregnant, within days of giving birth, but I found them in San Luis and pounced on them both. I really beat up on that woman! . . . I grabbed her by the hair. With both hands, I pulled at her hair. . . . And I punched her. I said, "This is how I wanted to find you." And to him, "What's new? What do you say to your girl, that you're a bachelor? That you're a young man, a boy? Well, you're wrong. If before you had yours, now I have mine." I changed in that moment and I don't even know how. . . . "Here is your child . . . and we still have another, and how many dead . . . I'm sick of it." . . . I bring her to her knees with slaps . . . I pushed her against a window, grabbing her by the hair. I just kept slapping her. The

blood dripped down. . . . The woman cried like a child. . . . And I said, "Today you walk. Today you go to court." He says, "Me? Go to court? You're crazy.". . . At that moment I no longer respected him. I no longer respected him as a husband [a subtle linguistic shift takes place in her story at this point; she ceases to refer to Julio as *usted,* the formal you, and now begins to call him, *tu,* the informal you, used to speak to equals, children, and people of inferior rank.][40] "You have no shame. I respecting you as if you were more than my father. And now look how I find you." . . . I kept slapping her and pulling at her. . . . She was wearing a plaid dress, a string of pearls around her neck, and her hair had been permed. I pulled, I tore her dress. That blessed string of pearls went flying. I shook her and gave her a shove. After that I couldn't do more. I let go of her and she ran off.

Esperanza had already begun to see the tables turning before this incident, when a village man threatened to have Julio sent to a stricter jail in San Luis for molesting his daughter (he was in San Luis when Esperanza caught him because he had escaped from jail). But this incident, which allowed Esperanza finally to express her welled-up rage by inflicting pain on the body of the urban woman of pearls (an antirosary) and permed hair (symbols of her non-Indianness), the woman who had won Julio's affection, was the conversion experience that in her narrative turns her into a fighting woman, a myth of a woman, a "phallic woman,"[41] powerful enough to blind the man who betrayed and humiliated her. With this rebellion, she takes on the male role, beating up another woman as she herself was beaten by Julio. Here, in her account, another chapter of her life begins in which, forced to work and earn money to support her family, she recovers the independence and autonomy of her adolescence.

After this denouement, Esperanza briefly returned to her mother-in-law's house. She recalls: "He left in May. On the 24th of June the boy was born. . . . With my mother-in-law, I ate my bitter hours. With the *coraje,* the child, suckling with me, had vomiting spells." Shortly before the child died, Julio returned with the new woman and sent a message to his mother that she should get rid of Esperanza. But his mother never got a chance to do that. A week after her child's death, Esperanza went to court in Mexquitic demanding that she be given her husband's plot of *ejido* land. This was land that had been expropriated from a nearby *hacienda* after the Mexican Revolution and redistributed to the people of Mexquitic. The plots in the *ejido* are worked by individual families as their own, but ultimate title to the land resides in the state, which

has authority to take plots away from those who do not work them. Esperanza had legitimate rights to the land because Julio had been away from the town for two years, and, as his wife, Esperanza could lay claim to it. But few women in her position would have gotten up the nerve and the resources to actually have fought to take the land away. A court battle ensued between Esperanza and her mother-in-law and Esperanza won the land. Esperanza viewed the land as due her for her years of labor and suffering in her husband's house; having worked and earned money as a young woman and begun to work again after leaving Julio, she had a keen sense of the value of things. The land was the price of her rage. Having taken away this major source of livelihood from her husband and mother-in-law, Esperanza returned to her mother's house with her two young sons.

The mirroring of mother and daughter receives another elaboration in this part of her narrative. Esperanza remarks: "Because we took the plot away from my mother-in-law, that was when she placed the illness, the evil way, on my mother." It was Esperanza's mother who helped Esperanza to raise herself up, paying to have her plot of land cleared and then sown with corn. Out of spite and envy, Esperanza thinks, her mother-in-law ensorcelled her mother, causing her to be ill for seven years—first with stomach pains, then with pains in the head, and finally with a severe eye infection that left her right eye permanently sunken. With the pain of her own body, her mother paid for her daughter's actions, just as Esperanza suffered her mother's fate. It was through this long illness, however, and their quest for a cure that Esperanza became acquainted with Gloria, a healer and spirit medium in San Luis who subsequently became her guide and oracle in her struggle with evil.

During the long period of her mother's illness, Esperanza began to work as a peddler. She considered it embarrassing to sell in the town where people knew her and decided to sell in San Luis instead. Eventually she found her path: to be a *marchanta,* selling flowers and vegetables door to door. In the city, where no one knew her past, she could become another person. Her customers told her that she had an engaging and friendly style, and she soon acquired a set of permanent clients—housewives in working-class and middle-class neighborhoods—who expected her flowers and vegetables twice a week and gave her, in addition, gifts of used

Esperanza carrying her bucket through the city of San Luis Potosí, where she markets vegetables, fruits, and flowers door-to-door as a *marchanta*.

clothing and leftover meals. Her ability to sell and earn her own money gave her confidence, and Esperanza now makes a good living as a self-employed marketing woman, surviving independently of a husband on the margins of the capitalist economy.

SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL ECONOMIES

Esperanza had a tremendous longing for daughters and three years after leaving Julio, she began to have an affair with a man ten years younger than she. As soon as the word got out that she was pregnant, her mother-in-law began to go out with Julio's new woman, introducing her to everyone as a godchild. Then his children by the new woman began to be seen in the street. The eldest child, while out buying beans one day, announced that his father never went out anymore because he was blind. Esperanza's mother-in-law spread the rumor that Esperanza and her mother had bewitched him. Subsequent events seemed to prove the rumor true. Soon after her mother-in-law's death, Julio's new woman took all her children and packed everything in the house into her brother's pickup truck, leaving Julio.

"She left him with little more than the pants he had on," Esperanza noted, adding, "One pays for everything. Did he think he wouldn't have to pay for what he did to me?" Thus in the spiritual economy of Esperanza's narrative, which is based on the idea that "one pays for everything in this world" *(todo se paga en este mundo),* Julio pays for his evil hubris by turning into a weak, pathetic, castrated figure. She awakens to an intensified seeing, while he retreats into the darkness and dependence in which she was submerged during her years of marriage to him. Aware of the rumor that she bewitched Julio and made him blind, Esperanza does little to counter it, relishing in the power it gives her. When I asked her directly about it, however, she laughed and said that only God has such powers and that Julio's blindness was a payment exacted by the divine for the sufferings he had caused her.

When Esperanza's customers—to whom Esperanza was also in the habit of telling a compressed version of her life story—would ask her why she didn't find another man and marry again, she would reply, "'No, what do I want men for now? I just beg God to give me a daughter. Because what will I do, alone, with two sons?

Powders which hold special powers, particularly to control or win the affections of the opposite sex, are sold by the packet in city markets in Mexico. The packets describe their contents as "legitimate powder" and advertise them as having uses like "I dominate my man" and "I dominate my woman." Ideas of sexual witchcraft have a long history in Mexico, with roots in the colonial past. The rumor that Esperanza blinded her husband who mistreated her resonates with cultural myths about women's supernational powers to harm the men who wrong them.

They will grow up. Sons grow up. We'll lie there in the same place, and I distrust my sons. Because men are men and they grow up. It's fine when they're little, but they grow up. What will I do alone with them?' With your pardon, *comadre,* as the saying goes, what if the devil has horns?" Thus she was happy, she says, when God gave her two daughters, and she saw no need to form any sort of lasting relationship with the man who fathered them.

Esperanza's gender ideology, based on the idea that men are subject to animal desires for sex, including one's own sons once they come of age, is significant in light of a number of incest stories that figure prominently in her narrative. The main story concerns her eldest son, Antonio, who tried numerous times to molest her eldest daughter, his half-sister, while Esperanza was away from the house selling. Again her life became a welling up of rage: "'Who has supported you all these years? Not your father. . . . Why don't you behave properly? . . . You're a man now. If you find it so easy, grab some woman on the street, or get married. I don't want the girl to get pregnant. . . . I couldn't be here alone. Alone with the two of you. Because you grow up, and I a woman alone, I'm sure you would even try to grab me in my sleep by force. . . . Go back to your father. I don't want you like this.'"

In Esperanza's narrative, Antonio comes to seem more and more like his father: cruel, deceptive, obsessed with sex. As if taking up with his half-sister had not been ugly enough, he then moved on to a relationship with his own uncle's former mistress, Esperanza's sister-in-law. For Esperanza this was a disgusting act of animal sexuality, but she could not convince Antonio. She later learned from Gloria the healer that the woman got control of Antonio by force, the force of evil, putting magic powders in some guavas she gave him to eat. Thus Esperanza came to see her battle with her son as part of her struggle against evil, a struggle she is still waging. After leaving his mother's house, Antonio rejoined his father, taking up with the prohibited woman in spite of Esperanza's rage. Esperanza has disowned him. She neither speaks to the evil son or father anymore, although all live in the same small town. She says that she still feels rage against them both and that she has forgiven neither.

With her daughters, whom she so desired, Esperanza has a sense of profound inner struggle. She doesn't want them to go through what she has—and that is why she relentlessly pounds into their hearts and minds the story of her life—but she knows that

they will. As she puts it, again in the language of a spiritual economy, "one as a mother has to pay for what one did with one's own children. Since I had my failures with another man, one of them will have to do the same." When a woman becomes pregnant outside of marriage or a permanent relationship, she is said to *fracasar*, literally to fail or mess up. The word perfectly conveys the sense of failure, of falling, that a woman is meant to feel when her own body and sexuality betray her. Esperanza knows that she is a fallen woman, and although she realizes that one of her daughters will very likely reproduce her life as she reproduced her mother's life (her mother, too, had children out of wedlock), she still struggles to beat sense—and an awareness of being tied to her, of matrilineal bonding—into her daughters.

When her eldest daughter, Otilia, now eighteen and a domestic in San Luis, refused to support her, saying "Why should I give you money?" Esperanza decided it was necessary to teach her a lesson.

> "No, daughter. That's not the way to think. . . . Many women here have gotten pregnant and their parents have been pimps for them. If you want to follow the wrong path, go ahead, go.". . . And I grabbed a rope and hit her. And she answered back, and again I grabbed the rope. . . . I gave her a few whippings. . . . "I had you so you would help me later on in life, not pull out your nails." . . . No, the girl understood. . . . I whipped her three times. . . . She was gone for eight, fifteen days. [Then she returned]. "Mama." "Has your *coraje* passed?" "Yes, mama." "Behave properly. . . . You are too old to be hit. . . . Look, daughter, I told you, one paycheck is for you, and the other is for me, so that you will support and help me." And so she gave in.

There is a contradictory quality to the words that Esperanza chooses to accompany the violent lesson that she inscribes on her daughter's body. I read them in the light of Esperanza's notions of a spiritual and a sexual economy. Esperanza scolds her daughter for not giving her money, because part of the bargain between them is that her daughter must retain her value by not putting herself into circulation sexually. Although Esperanza knows that she must "pay" for her sexual "failing" by seeing one of her daughters repeat her experience, she still wants to fight to the last to prevent this fate, which is the common fate of women of her social class, from unfolding. Having been the provider, Esperanza also wants an economic return from her daughter. This system of exchange is part of a matrilineal economy, in which money flows through the maternal rather than the paternal line. Money has a metaphysical

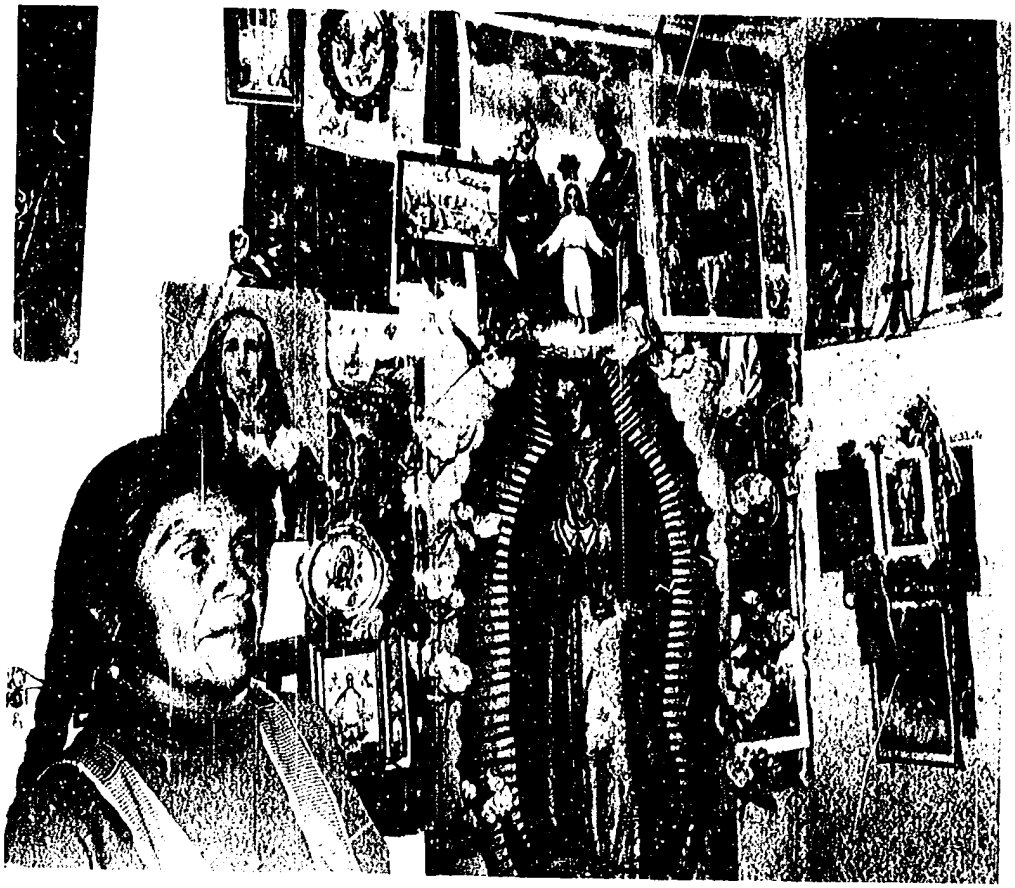
value as a way of showing that there is a bond between women from one generation to the next, a bond that exists outside, and in spite of, paternal control. When her daughter threatened to break this bond, Esperanza had to inscribe it on her body so she wouldn't forget that she, like Esperanza herself, was born of the inscription of pain on her mother's body.

A WOMAN WITH A MAN'S NAME

Esperanza's beating of her daughter also encodes her effort to carry into practice her own complex and contradictory gender identity. Esperanza has a keen sense of how she has had to be both woman and man to her children, both mother and father, economic provider and nurturer, upholder of the social-religious order and a mirror in which her daughters can read a past that threatens to become their future. "All those years I have been both man and woman to them, supporting them, helping them grow up. . . . I go to work [in the fields]. I use a hoe like a man. I plant. I irrigate. . . . How many women are there in Mexquitic who use the hoe, the pick? They have their men, their husbands who support them, suffering some rages, perhaps, but supported by their husbands. And me, what man do I have?"

One reads here both a sense of pride in an androgyny that she has managed to pull off and a sense of ambivalence in being a woman who has taken on male roles. "My name is San Benigno," she told me, "I have a man's name." (Esperanza is her middle name and the name she chose for the published version of her story.) I read in Esperanza's narrative a desire to be a *macha*—a woman who won't be beaten, won't forgive, won't give up her rage, a *macha,* too, in the sense of wanting to harness a certain male fearlessness to meet evil and danger head-on. It is this *macha* quality that fascinates her about the healer/medium, Gloria, whom she has known since her mother's illness. Gloria, as Esperanza told me, is very manly, *muy hombrona.* When Esperanza took me to meet her in 1987, I had to agree that Gloria was an extraordinarily male female, not a transvestite, but a woman who, like a chameleon, seen in one light was a woman, in another light a man, a mystery of androgyny. When Gloria goes into trance, one of the spirits that speaks through her is, indeed, the symbol of manly banditry and chaotic power, namely, Pancho Villa. Esperanza told

Esperanza turns to Pancho Villa (a contradictory hero and anti-hero in Mexican historical consciousness who symbolizes manly and chaotic power) for valor to fight the battles of her everyday life as a woman on the fringes of society and the capitalist economy. When the healer and spirit medium Gloria goes into trance one of the spirits that speaks through her is Pancho Villa, whose harsh, violent, unsanctioned power is sought out by women like Esperanza. Here Esperanza agreed to be photographed outside her house with the image of Pancho Villa from her altar. But the breeze kept blowing and we couldn't get the picture to hold still for very long. "Maybe he's not happy about this," she said, laughing. As soon as I snapped the shutter some people came to the door and Esperanza quickly hid the picture.



Beside her home altar, Esperana poses before her spiritual protectors, who include the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, the Pope, and Pancho Villa.

me that all Gloria's pregnancies ended in miscarriages because in her work battling against witchcraft she has to take on too much evil. It is as if her female body rejects its own ability to create life, because she takes on so many "male" qualities to fight evil. In much the same way, Esperanza's children did not survive infancy, because the rage they suckled with their mother's milk was so intense as to destroy them.

It is Gloria who has worked with Esperanza in her struggle against evil. On my return in 1987, Esperanza told me about a bizarre and ugly pig that had appeared suddenly one day in the stream by her plot of land where her lilies grow; the pig's feet had been chopped off and it lay in the stream, at first barely alive, and finally, dead and stenching. Esperanza was convinced that it had been deliberately placed there to ruin her land and she sought out Gloria's help to clean and heal it. Gloria told Esperanza she would have to remove the pig from the stream herself, which Esperanza did, in a story marvelously told, in which the pig virtually becomes a demon against whom Esperanza victoriously struggles. Then Gloria came and "cleaned" the field, making the land burn from within, sprinkling it with certain herbal waters, and reciting prayers over its four corners. This was an expensive cure: it cost Esperanza 240,000 pesos (about $500 at the time), all the money she had in the bank. But it was worth is to her, she says, because otherwise the land would have gone barren.[42] It was worth it, too, to learn from Gloria who had placed the evil on her land; it was her rejected son, Antonio. There is something unresolved about her relation with Antonio, and she must continue to wage a cosmological battle, with her life and her money, to push it closer to some sort of resolution.

STORYTELLING AND REDEMPTION

Toward the end of our conversations in 1985, Esperanza said to me, "I have made a confession. . . . Now I should confess with the priest. . . . Now you carry my sins . . . because it is as if I have been confessing with my *comadre,* instead of with the priest. You will carry my sins now, because you carry them in your head. Priests confess people, right? . . . Then they confess to the bishops. . . . And the bishops, with whom? With the archbishops. And the archbishops, with whom? With God! Now you, *comadre,* who are

you going to get rid of them with? You tell them somewhere ahead so someone else can carry the burden."

This very complex narrative is, ultimately, for Esperanza, an examination of the Christian soul through its inscription in the oldest form of first-person history, the confession. What does it mean that Esperanza has given me a status analogous to the priest as a redemptive listener of her confession?[43] This is a question I will need to ponder as I think about the collaboration between us that produced this text and the complex power relations it no doubt inscribes. One crucial aspect of our collaboration was that Esperanza could offer a different story about herself to me, the anthropologist, than she could tell townspeople in Mexquitic. Although they are used to viewing her as an angry woman abandoned by her husband, whose rage exploded in witchcraft, to me, a woman from "the other side," she could tell a different life story – that of a woman who was wronged and whom God, judging well and knowing her faith, has helped to find some degree of triumph and justice. Esperanza's autobiography, by her own definition, is a spiritual chronicle of her soul's journey, and her stories are therefore "sins" from which she hopes to receive atonement. Telling her story, turning her rage into a story, is part of her quest for redemption, the redemption of her past and the redemption of the present she is actively seeking to understand and forge. Her story, like Christ's body, is the currency she offers to pay for her redemption. She told her story to me and I have told it to you. Now you must tell it to someone else, so that eventually the lord and judge of all our actions will hear it, too.

NOTES

I am expanding the idea in this essay into a book, tentatively entitled "The Wrath of a Woman: A Mexican Life Story," which is under contract to Beacon Press. I have presented different, developing versions of this paper to the Ethnography, Literature, and Lunch Group, the Women's Studies Program, and the Critical Theory Colloquium, all at the University of Michigan, as well as to the departments of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and at the New School for Social Research. On all these occassions I have profited from the further readings of Esperanza's text that were suggested to me. I am especially indebted to the following people for their detailed comments and criticism: James Fernandez, David Frye, Linda Gregerson, Susan Harding, Janise Hurtig, Seong-Nae Kim, Barry Lyons, Bruce Mannheim, Sidney Mintz, Deborah Poole, and Teofilo Ruiz. I thank the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation for their support of my work.

1. The critical literature on life history is quite large, and growing, so I will only mention as key works those of Sidney Mintz, "Anthropological Interview and the Life History," *Oral History Review* (1979): 18-26; Vincent Crapanzano, "Life Histories: A Review Essay," *American Anthropologist* 86 (December 1984): 953-60; Kevin Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); L.L. Langness and Gelya Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novata, Calif.: Chandler & Sharp, 1981); Lawrence C. Watson, "Understanding a Life History As a Subjective Document: Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Perspectives," *Ethos* 4, no. 1 (1976): 95-131; Lawrence C. Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985); Roger M. Keesing, "Kwaio Women Speak: The Micropolitics of Autobiography in a Solomon Island Society," *American Anthropologist* 87 (March 1985): 27-39; and Susan N.G. Geiger, "Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," *Signs* 11 (Winter 1986): 334-51.

Recent writings in the field of life history have tended to examine closely the context of elicitation of the life history and the nature of the life history text as a literary and political enterprise, connected, on the one hand, to issues of authorship and storytelling, and on the other, to the asymmetries of power stemming from gender and colonial relations. For examples, see Laurel Kendall, *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean Shaman: Of Tales and the Telling of Tales* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988); Michael W. Young, "'Our Name Is Women; We Are Bought with Limesticks and Limepots': An Analysis of the Autobiographical Narrative of a Kalauna Woman," *Man* 18, no. 3 (1983): 478-501; Janet Alison Hoskins, "A Life History from Both Sides: The Changing Poetics of Personal Experience," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41, no. 2 (1985): 147-69; Daphne Patai, "Constructing a Self: A Brazilian Life Story," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988): 143-66.

2. James M. Freeman and David L. Krantz, "The Unfulfilled Promise of Life Histories," *Biography* 3, no. 1 (1979): 11, 1.

3. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 109.

4. George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology As Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

5. Jeff Todd Titan, "The Life Story," *Journal of American Folklore* 93 (July/September 1980): 290. Also relevant here is Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 12-134; Daphne Patai, *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 17-18.

6. Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984): 159.

7. Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 5.

8. Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

9. Arjun Appadurai, "Is Homo Hierarchichus?" *American Ethnologist* 13 (November 1986): 758.

10. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez* (New York: Random House, 1963), xxx.

11. Mary Louise Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," in *Writing Culture*, 45-46.

12. Young, 480. Also see Hoskins.

13. Gelya Frank, "Finding the Common Denominator: A Phenomenological Critique of Life History Method," *Ethos* 7 (Spring 1979): 76, 77, 72, 83.

14. Clifford, 113-19.
15. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations* (New York: Shocken Books, 1978): 89, 91.
16. Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 23-24.
17. Arjun Appadurai, "Center and Periphery in Anthropological Theory," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 2 (1986): 356-61.
18. Watson and Watson-Franke, 164.
19. In this vein, three different recent life histories of Guatemalan, Bolivian, and Honduran women follow the trajectories by which these intelligent and articulate women – who already had gained a reputation for their activism – awoke to a heightened political consciousness of gender, racial, and class domination. Their important and moving accounts are part of a growing Latin American testimonial literature in which Marxist-inspired discourses of liberation figure prominently. See Domitila Barrios de Chungara, *Let Me Speak: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (New York: Shocken Books, 1984); Medea Benjamin, *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo, A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart: The Story of Elvia Alvarado* (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1987).

Esperanza's narrative falls outside of this emerging testimonial tradition; from a Marxist perspective, she still has the wool over her eyes. Yet she, too, conceives of her testimony as being about struggle, not a Marxist class struggle, which is foreign to her rhetoric, but a personal struggle against the men who have oppressed her which is embedded within a cosmological struggle against evil. Telling her story, too, as in the case of more politicized Latin American women, is part of her struggle.
20. Inez Cardozo-Freeman, "Games Mexican Girls Play," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (January/March 1975): 14.
21. Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1981); originally published in 1950. This passage is also cited in Cardozo-Freeman, 13.
22. Lewis, xxx.
23. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12, no. 3/13, no. 1 [1982] (Spring/Fall 1984): 333-58. A related critique can be found in Marnia Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing As a Woman on Women in Algeria," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988): 81-107. Lazreg criticizes the reification of such categories as "Middle Eastern women" and "women of the Arab world." This "abstracted empiricism," as Lazreg says, makes it extremely difficult for her, as an Algerian woman, to write about women in Algeria, because "her space has already been defined, her history dissolved, her subjects objectified, her language chosen for her." As she notes, "concrete women (like men) live in concrete societies and *not* in an ideologically uniform space." We need to get beyond the Western gynocentrism that "has led to an essentialism of otherhood." See Lazreg, 95-97.
24. Mohanty, 337. Aihwa Ong, an anthropologist who has worked with Malay factory women, notes that "the non-Western woman is presented as either nonmodern or modern; she is seldom perceived as living in a situation where there is deeply felt tension between tradition and modernity. . . . Although a common past may be claimed by feminists, Third World women are often represented as mired in it, ever arriving at modernity when Western feminists are already adrift in postmodernism." See Aihwa Ong, "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies," in *Inscriptions*, Special Issue on Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse, nos. 3/4 (1988): 86-87.
25. The feminist notion of counterhegemonic or oppositional structures assumes that in a given time and setting there is a male-dominant culture that is operative, against

which a female culture of resistance can be constructed, although not without difficulty and not without being paid for by severe repression. This model of female resistance—which places women in an active rather than a passive role—has recently had wide appeal in anthropology, whether the focus in on seventeenth-century Andean women, defying colonial structures of domination by creating an oppositional set of cosmologies and rituals, or late-twentieth-century Baltimore women, forging, at times hesitantly, at time vehemently, alternative ways of talking about the experiences of the female body to resist the denigrating notions created by a male scientific establishment. See Irene Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). For a recent discussion of these issues, see Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 36, 41-55.

Esperanza's life history narrative can be read in terms of her struggle to resist male dominance and assert her independence as a "newly born woman." On the domestic level, women's alternatives to patriarchal domination in rural Mexico are few—to remain celibate and live alone; to have various men and no commitment to any; or to form a female-headed household; all these social forms (except for celibacy) are associated with lower-class standing and sometimes with the "racial" class of "Indian." Esperanza at first chooses marriage, which for her is a season in hell, and ends up escaping only to reproduce her own mother's life as a "fallen" but at least autonomous woman at the head of her own household. On a more explicitly symbolic level, her highly elaborated cosmological views and notions of witchcraft—which are centered in her continual struggle against evil and her sense that all cruelty and injustice must be paid for dearly in this life or the next—can be read, too, as forming part of a Mexican woman's culture of resistance. Although this particular feminist reading seems to offer one possible way of reading Esperanza's narrative, it gives me pause. Esperanza certainly has a sense of herself as being oppressed and of resisting, although as a person, not a category. I wonder, also, whether an analysis based on a female culture of resistance tends too much, again, toward the view of women's social action as supplementary, as reacting against a male world rather than as creatively constructing a complete social world. In this particular case, there seem to be yet other readings that have to do with Esperanza's construction of a life and a cosmology for herself out of narrative topoi.

26. Edward Said, "In the Shadow of the West," *Wedge*, Special Issue on The Imperialism of Representation, The Representation of Imperialism, no. 7/8 (Winter/Spring 1985): 4, 5.

27. Linda Brodkey, "Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1987): 74. I am indebted to Janise Hurtig for this reference.

28. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths" in *Writing Culture*, 21.

29. The literature on this subject is substantial. Elsewhere, I hope to consider it in more detail. Some recent important works include Elaine Jahner, "Woman Remembering: Life History As Exemplary Pattern" in *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*, ed. Rosan A. Jordan and Susan J. Kalcik (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," *Diacritics* 12, no. 1 (1982): 2-10; Margaret A. Lourie, Domna C. Stanton, and Martha Vicinus, eds., *Women and Memory*, Special Issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no. 1 (1987); Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do with It?" in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, eds., *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980); Cherríe Moraga, "From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*; Sidonie Smith, *A*

Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Since I began this paper in 1987, several new and exciting works have been published, creating a veritable "boom" in feminist writing about women's life stories. See Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988); Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Personal Narratives Group, eds., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). For a feminist anthropological critique of Clifford, see Deborah Gordon, "Writing Culture, Writing Feminism: The Poetics and Politics of Experimental Ethnography" (7-24); and Kamala Visweswaran, "Defining Feminist Ethnography" (27-44), both in *Inscriptions*, Special Issue on Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse. On the "awkwardness" of anthropology and feminism as divergent discourses, see Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12 (Winter 1987): 276-92.

30. Domna Stanton, ed., *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4-5, 14.

31. Geiger, 338, 348.

32. Martin, 196. For a critique based on the argument of images and tropes in culture, see James W. Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

33. Martin, 201.

34. As Carolyn Steedman notes in her account of her mother's life as a woman from the English working classes, her mother told her life story to her to teach her lessons, not to entertain, and the main lesson was about "all the strong, brave women who gave me life. . .and all of them, all the good women dissolved into the figure of my mother, who was, as she told us, a good mother." See Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 3.

35. Kendall, 13.

36. Sidney Mintz, "The Sensation of Moving, While Standing Still," *American Ethnologist* 16 (November 1989): 786-96.

37. See Kaja Finkler, *Spiritualist Healers in Mexico: Successes and Failures of Alternative Therapeutics* (New York: Praeger, 1985), 65; Paul Farmer, "Bad Blood, Spoiled Milk: Bodily Fluids As Moral Barometers in Rural Haiti," *American Ethnologist* 15 (February 1988): 62-83.

38. Renato Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage: On the Cultural Force of Emotions," in *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*, ed. Edward M. Bruner (Washington, D.C.: American Ethnological Society, 1984).

39. Emily Martin discusses the suppressed anger that women feel as second-class citizens in U.S. society, characterizing this anger as having social causes rather than biological ones. Focusing on that rage that women express premenstrually, she suggests that women seek ways of using this anger constructively. Thus she writes of the possibility of being illuminated with rage, being bright with fury. Finding the causes at the root of this anger, women can join together to turn their anger into the source of liberating change, rather than going individually to a physician for a cure. In the same context, Martin shows how rage links up with situations of racial and class oppression, citing Audre Lorde's sharp remarks: "My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has

also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapor. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in my experience and the experience of my people only new reasons for fear or guilt." See Martin, 135-36.

40. On the significance of pronouns, see Paul Friedrich, "Structural Implications of Russian Pronominal Usage," in *Language, Context, and the Imagination: Essays by Paul Friedrich*, ed. Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).

41. See Jacobus, 110-36.

42. There is much more to be said about Esperanza's relations with the money economy and her ideas about money. In her room (the walls of which are covered with pictures of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, various saints, and the pope, all forming an impressive altar), there is an image of a young child, Tomasito, an *angelito* (dead children are always called "angels" because, being sinless, they are thought to enter heaven directly). The picture of Tomasito is framed with peso bills, which have been placed there as offerings to help her with her selling. Tomasito also speaks through Gloria when she goes into trance and Esperanza says he is "very miraculous."

43. On the idea of "the redemptive power that such derealization of the self in the Other can entail," and "the possibilities for such redemptive listening," see Michael Taussig, "The Rise and Fall of Marxist Anthropology," *Social Analysis* 21, no. 1 (1987): 105-6. I have explored my relationship as confessor to Esperanza more fully in "A Story to Take across the Border: Inscribing a Mexican Woman's Life," forthcoming in *Storied Lives: Cultural Conditions of Self-Understanding*, edited by George Rosenwald and Richard Ochberg, for Yale University Press. The cultural, racial, and class contradictions of our work together, as well as our mutual expectations and frustrations, are discussed more fully in my forthcoming book on Esperanza's life story.