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CANTO, LOCURA Y POESIA

41

Olivia Castellano

I am a walking contradiction. I have no Ph.D. yet I'm a full professor of English at a state university. By all definitions and designs I should not even have made it to college. I am the second of five children of a Southern Pacific Railroad worker with a fifth-grade education and a woman who dropped out of the second grade to help raise ten siblings—while her mother worked ten hours a day cleaning houses and doing laundry for rich Texan ranchers.

In Comstock, the Tex-Mex border town about fifteen miles from the Rio Grande where I spent the first twelve years of my life, I saw the despair that

poverty and hopelessness had etched in the faces of young Chicano men who, like my father, walked back and forth on the dusty path between Comstock and the Southern Pacific Railroad station. They would set out every day on rail carts to repair the railroad. The women of Comstock fared no better. Most married early. I had seen them in their kitchens toiling at a stove, with one baby propped on one hip and two toddlers tugging at their skirts. Or they followed their working mothers' route, cleaning houses and doing laundry for rich Texan ranchers who paid them a pittance. I decided very early that this was not the future I wanted.

In 1958 my father, tired of seeing his days fade into each other without promise, moved us to California where we became farmworkers in the San Jose area (then a major agricultural center). I saw the same futile look in the faces of young Chicanos and Chicanas working beside my family. Those faces already lined so young with sadness made me deadly serious about my books and my education.

At a young age—between eleven and fourteen—I began my intellectual and spiritual rebellion against my parents and society. I fell in love with books and created space of my own where I could dare to dream. Yet in school I remained shy and introverted, terrified of my white, male professors. In my adolescence I rebelled against my mother's insistence that Mexican girls should marry young, as she did at eighteen. I told her that I didn't care if my cousins Alicia and Anita were getting married and having babies early. "I was put on this earth to make books, not babies!" I announced and ran into my room.

Books were my obsession. I wanted to read everything that I was not supposed to. By fourteen I was already getting to know the Marquis de Sade, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Whitman, Dostoyevsky, Marx. I came by these writers serendipitously. To get from home to Sacramento High School I had to walk through one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city, Oak Park. There were men hanging out with liquor in brown paper bags, playing dice, shooting craps and calling from cars: "Hey, baby, get in here with me!" I'd run into a little library called Oak Park Library, which turned out to have a little bit of everything. I would walk around and stare at the shelves, killing time till the shifty-eyed men would go away.

The librarians knew and tolerated me with skepticism: "Are you sure you're going to read the Marquis de Sade? Do your parents know you're checking out this material? What are you doing with the *Communist Manifesto*?" One librarian even forbade me to check the books out, so I'd sit reading in the library for hours on end. Later, at sixteen or seventeen, I was allowed to check anything and everything out.

So it was that I came to grapple with tough language and ideas. These books were hot! Yet I also was obsessed with wanting to be pretty, mysterious,

silent and sexy. I wanted to have long curly hair, red lips and long red nails; to wear black tight dresses and high heels. I wanted desperately to look like the sensuous femmes fatales of the Mexican cinema—María Félix, one of the most beautiful and famous of Mexico's screen goddesses, and Libertad Lamarque, the smoky-voiced, green-eyed Argentinian singer. These were the women I admired when my mother and I went to the movies together. So these were my “outward” models. My “inward” models, the voices of the intellect that spoke to me when I shut the door to my room, were, as you have gathered, a writer of erotica, two mad surrealists, a crazy Romantic, an epileptic literary genius and a radical socialist.

I needed to sabotage society in a major, intellectually radical way. I needed to be a warrior who would catch everyone off guard. But to be a warrior, you must never let your opponent figure you out. When the bullets of racism and sexism are flying at you, you must be very clever in deciding how you want to live. I knew that everything around me—school, teachers, television, friends, men, even my own parents, who in their internalized racism and self-hatred didn't really believe I'd amount to much though they hoped like hell that life would prove them wrong—everything was against me, and I understood this fully.

To protect myself I fell in love with language—all of it, poems, stories, novels, plays, songs, biographies, “cuentos” or little vignettes, movies—all manifestations of spoken and written language. I fell in love with ideas, with essays by writers like Bacon or Montaigne. I began my serious reading crusade around age eleven, when I was already convinced that books were central to my life. Only through them and through songs, I felt, would I be free to structure some kind of future for myself.

I wanted to prove to anyone who cared to ask (though by now I was convinced no one gave a damn) that I, the daughter of a laborer-farmworker, could dare to be somebody. Try to imagine what it is like to be always full of rage—rage at everything: at white teachers who could never even pronounce my name (I was often called anything from “Odilia” to “Otilia” to “Estela”); rage at those teachers who asked me point-blank, “But how did you get to be so smart? You are Mexican, aren't you?”; rage at my eleventh-grade English teacher who said to me in front of the class, “You stick to essay writing; never try to write a poem again because a poet you are not!” (This, after I had worked for two diligent weeks on an imitation of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”! Now I can laugh. Then it was pitiful.)

From age thirteen I was also angry at boys who hounded me for dates. When I'd reject them they'd yell, “So what do you plan to do for the rest of your life, fuck a book?” I was angry at my Chicana classmates in high school who, perhaps jealous of my high grades, would say, “What are you

trying to do, be like the whites?” I regret to say that I was also angry at my parents, exasperated by their docility, their limited expectations of me. Oh, I knew they were proud; but sometimes, in their own misdirected rage (maybe afraid of my little successes), they would make painful comments. “Te vas a volver loca con esos jodidos libros” (“You'll go nuts with those fucking books”) was my mother's frequent statement. Or the even more sickening, “Esta nunca se va a casar.” (“Give up on this one; she'll never get married.”) This was the tenor of my adolescent years. When nothing on either side of the two cultures, Mexican or Anglo-American, affirms your existence, that is how rage is shaped.

While I managed to escape at least from the obvious entrapments—a teen pregnancy, a destructive early marriage—I did not escape years of being told I wasn't quite right, that because of my ethnicity and gender I was somehow defective, incomplete. Those years left wounds on my self-esteem, wounds so deep that even armed with my books and stolen knowledge I could not entirely escape deep feelings of unworthiness.

By the time I graduated from high school and managed to get a little scholarship to California State University in Sacramento, where I now teach (in 1962 it was called Sacramento State College), I had become very unassertive, immensely shy. I was afraid to look unfeminine if I raised my hand in class, afraid to seem ridiculous if I asked a “bad” question and all eyes turned on me. A deeper part of me was afraid that my rage might rear its ugly head and I would be considered “an angry Mexican accusing everybody of racism.” I was painfully concerned with my physical appearance: wasn't I supposed to look beautiful like Félix and Lamarque? Yet while I wanted to look pretty for the boys, the thought of having sex terrified me. What if I got pregnant, had to quit college and couldn't read my books any more? The more I feared boys, the more I made myself attractive for them and the more they would make advances, the more I rejected them.

The constant tension sapped my energy and distracted me from my creative journeys into language. Oh, I would write little things (poems, sketches for stories, journal entries), but I was afraid to show them to anyone. Besides, no one knew I was writing them. I was so frightened by my white, male professors, especially in the English department—they looked so arrogant and were so unyielding of their knowledge—that I didn't have the nerve to major in English, though it was the major I really wanted.

Instead, I chose to major in French. The “Parisiens” and “Québécois” in the French department faculty admired my French accent: “Mademoiselle, êtes-vous certaine que vous n'êtes pas parisienne?” they would ask. In short, they cared. They engaged me in dialogue, asked why I preferred to study

French instead of Spanish. ("I already know Spanish," I'd say.) French became my adopted language. I could play with it, sing songs in it and sound exotic. It complemented my Spanish; besides, I didn't have to worry about speaking English with my heavy Spanish accent and risk being ridiculed. At one point, my spoken French was better than my oral Spanish; my written French has remained better than my written Spanish.

At 23, armed with a secondary school teaching credential and B.A. in French with an English minor, I became a high school teacher of French and English. Soon after that I began to work for a school district where the majority of the students were Chicanos and Blacks from families on welfare and/or from households run by women.

After two years of high school teaching, I returned to Cal State at Sacramento for the Master's degree. Professionally and artistically, it was the best decision I have ever made. The Master's program to which I applied was a pilot program in its second year at CSUS. Called the Mexican American Experienced Teachers' Fellowship, it was run by a team of anthropology professors, central among whom was Professor Steven Arvizu. The program was designed to turn us into "agents of cultural change." It was 1969 and the program was one of the first federally funded (Title V) ones to address Mexican American students' needs by re-educating their teachers.

My interests were literary, but all twenty of us "fellows" had to get an M.A. in social anthropology, since this experiment took the "anthropologizing education" approach. We studied social dynamics, psycholinguistics, history of Mexico, history of the American Southwest, community activism and confrontational strategies and the nature of the Chicano movement. The courses were eye-openers. I had never heard the terms Chicano, biculturalism, marginality, assimilation, Chicanismo, protest art. I had never heard of Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers nor of Luis Valdez and the Teatro Campesino. I had never studied the nature of racism and identity. The theme of the program was that culture is a powerful tool for learning, self-expression, solidarity and positive change. Exploring it can help Chicano students understand their bicultural circumstances.

The program brought me face to face with nineteen other Chicano men and women, all experienced public school teachers like myself, with backgrounds like mine. The program challenged every aspect of my life. Through group counseling, group encounter, classroom interaction, course content and community involvement I was allowed to express my rage and to examine it in the company of peers who had a similar anger. Most of our instructors, moreover, were Chicano or white professors sensitive to Chicanos. For the first time, at 25, I had found my role models. I vowed to do for other students what these people had done for me.

Eighteen years of teaching primarily white women students, Chicanos and Blacks at California State University, Sacramento, have led me to see myself less as a teacher and more as a cultural worker, struggling against society to undo the damage of years of abuse. I continue to see myself as a warrior empowered by my rage. Racism and sexism leave two clear-cut scars on my students; internalized self-hatred and fear of their own creative passion, in my view the two most serious obstacles in the classroom. Confronting this two-headed monster has made me razor-sharp. Given their tragic personal stories, the hope in my students' eyes reconfirms daily the incredible beauty, the tenacity of the human spirit.

Teaching white women students (ages 30–45) is no different from working with Chicano and Black students (both men and women): you have to bring about changes in the way they view themselves, their abilities, their right to get educated and their relation to a world that has systematically oppressed them simply for being who they are. You have to help them channel and understand the seething rage they carry deep inside, a rage which, left unexpressed, can make them turn against each other and, more sadly, against themselves.

I teach four courses per semester: English 109G, Writing for Proficiency for Bilingual/Bidialectal Students (a course taken mainly by Chicano and Black students, ages 19–24); English 115A, Pedagogy/Language Arts for Prospective Elementary School Teachers (a course taken mainly by women aged 25–45, 50 percent white, 50 percent Chicano); English 180G, Chicano Literature, an advanced studies General Education course for non-English majors (taken by excellent students, aged 24–45, about 40 percent white, 40 percent Chicano, 20 percent Black/Vietnamese/Filipino/South American). The fourth course is English 1, Basic Language Skills, a pre-freshman composition course taken primarily by Black and Chicano freshmen, male and female, aged 18–22, who score too low on the English Placement Test to be placed in "regular" Freshman Composition.

Mine is a teaching load that, in my younger days at CSUS, used to drive me close to insanity from physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion—spiritual from having internalized my students' pain. Perhaps not fully empowered myself, not fully emplumed in the feathers of my own creativity (to borrow the wonderful "emplumada" metaphor coined by Lorna Dee Cervantes, the brilliant Chicana poet), I allowed their rage to become part of mine. This kind of rage can kill you. And so through years of working with these kinds of students I have learned to make my spirit strong with "canto, locura y poesia" (song, madness, and poetry). Judging from my students' progress, the songs have worked.

Truly, it takes a conjurer, a magus with all her teaching cards up her sleeve, to deal with the fragmented souls that show up in my classes. Among

the Chicanos and Blacks I get ex-offenders (mostly men but occasionally a woman who has done time), orphans, single women heads of household, high school dropouts who took years to complete their Graduation Equivalency Diploma.

I get women who have been raped and/or who have been sexually abused either by a father figure or by male relatives—Sylvia Tracey, for example, a 30-year-old Chicana feminist, mother of two, whose parents pressured her to marry her (white) rapist and who is going through divorce after ten years of marriage. I get women who have been battered. And, of course, I get the young Chicano and Black little yuppies who don't believe the world existed before 1970, who know nothing about the sixties' history of struggle and student protest, who—in the case of the Chicanos—feel ashamed that their parents speak English with an accent or were once farmworkers. I get Chicanos, Blacks and white women, especially, who are ashamed of their writing skills, who have never once been told that they could succeed in school.

Annetta Jones is typical. A 45-year-old Black woman, who single-handedly raised three children, all college-educated and successful, she is still married to a man who served ten years in prison for being a "hit man." She visited him faithfully in prison and underwent all kinds of humiliation at the hands of correctional officers—even granting them sexual favors just to be allowed to have conjugal visits. When her husband completed his time he fell in love with a young woman from Chicago, where he now lives.

Among my white women students (ranging in age from 25 to 40, though occasionally I get a 45-year-old woman who wants to be an elementary or high school teacher and "help out young kids so they won't have to go through what I went through"—their exact words) I get women who are either divorced or divorcing; rarely do I get a "happily" married woman. This is especially true of the white women who take my Chicano literature and my credential-pedagogy classes. Take Lynne Trebeck, for instance, a white woman about 40 years old who runs a farm. When she entered the university her husband objected, so she divorced him! They continue to live in the same house (he refused to leave), "but now he has no control over me," she told me triumphantly midway through the semester. She has two sons, fifteen and eighteen years old; as a young woman she did jail time as the accomplice of a convicted drug dealer.

Every semester I get two or three white lesbian feminists. This semester there was Vivianne Rose, about 40, in my Chicano literature class. Apparently sensing too much conservatism in the students, and knowing that she wanted to be an elementary school teacher, she chose to conceal her sexual orientation.

On the first day of class she wore Levi pants, a baggy sweat shirt, white tennis shoes and a beige baseball cap. By the end of the first week she had switched to ultrafeminine dresses and skirts, brightly colored blouses, nylons and medium-heeled black shoes, not to mention lipstick and eye makeup. When she spoke in class she occasionally made references to "my husband who is Native American." She and Sylvia Tracey became very close friends. Halfway through the course they informed me that "Shit, it's about time we tell her." (This, from Sylvia.) "Oh hell, why not," Vivianne said; "my 'husband' is a woman." The woman is Native American; Vivianne Rose lived on a reservation for years and taught young Native American children to read and write. She speaks "Res" talk (reservation speech) and has adopted her "husband's" last name.

Among my white women students there are also divorced women who are raising two to four children, usually between the ages of eight and seventeen. Sometimes I get older widowed white women who are taking classes for their own enjoyment, not for a degree. These women also tell stories of torment: rapes, beatings, verbal and emotional harassment from their men. On occasion I get women who have done jail time, usually for taking the rap for drug-connected boyfriends. I rarely get a married woman, but when I do there is pain: "My husband doesn't really want me in school." "My husband doesn't really care what I do in college as long as I take care of his needs and the kids' needs." "My husband doesn't really know what I'm studying—he has never asked and I've never told him."

Most of the white women as well as the minority students come to the university under special programs. There is the "Educational Opportunity Program" for students who do not meet all university entrance requirements or whose grade point average is simply too low for regular admission. There is the "Student Affirmative Action Program" for students who need special counseling and tutoring to bring their academic skills up to par or deal with emotional trauma. There is the "College Assistance Migrant Program" for students whose parents are migrant farmworkers in the agricultural areas surrounding Sacramento. There is a wonderful program called PASAR for older women students entering the university for the first time or returning after a multiple-year absence. The Women's Resource Center also provides small grants and scholarships for re-entry women. A large number of my students (both white and minority women) come severely handicapped in their basic language, math and science skills; many have never used a computer. It is not uncommon (especially among Chicanos and Blacks) to get an incoming student who scores at the fifth- and sixth-grade reading levels.

The task is herculean, the rewards spiritually fulfilling. I would not have it any other way. Every day is a lesson in humility and audacity. That my students have endured nothing but obstacles and putdowns, yet still have the courage and strength to seek a college education, humbles me. They are, like me, walking paradoxes. They have won against all the odds (their very presence on campus attests to that). Yet really they haven't won: they carry a deeply ingrained sense of inferiority, a firm conviction that they are not worthy of success.

This is my challenge: I embrace it wholeheartedly. There is no place I'd rather be, no profession more noble. Sure, I sometimes have doubts: every day something new, sad, even tragic comes up. Just as I was typing this article, for instance, Vicky, one of the white students in my Chicano literature class, called in tears, barely able to talk. "Professor, I can't possibly turn in my paper to your mailbox by four o'clock," she cried. "Everything in my house is falling apart! My husband just fought with my oldest daughter [from a previous marriage], has thrown her out of the house. He's running up and down the street, yelling and threatening to leave us. And I'm sitting here trying to write your paper! I'm going crazy. I feel like walking away from it all!" I took an hour from writing this article to help her contain herself. By the end of our conversation, I had her laughing. I also put her in touch with a counselor friend of mine and gave her a two-day extension for her final paper. And naturally I was one more hour late with my own writing!

I teach in a totally non-traditional way. I use every trick in the book: lots of positive reinforcement, both oral and written; lots of one-on-one conferences. I network women with each other, refer them to professor friends who can help them; connect them to graduate students and/or former students who are already pursuing careers. In the classroom I force my students to come up in front of their classmates, explain concepts or read their essays aloud. I create panels representing opposing viewpoints and hold debates—lots of oral participation, role-playing, reading their own texts. Their own writing and opinions become part of the course. On exams I ask them questions about their classmates' presentations. I meet with individual students in local coffeehouses or taverns: it's much easier to talk about personal pain over coffee or a beer or a glass of wine than in my office. My students, for the most part, do not have a network of support away from the university. There are no supportive husbands, lovers (except on rare occasions, as with my lesbian students), no relatives saying, "Yes, you can do it."

Is it any wonder that when these students come to me they have a deep sense of personal shame about everything—poor skills, being older students? They are also very angry, not only at themselves but at the schools for having victimized them; at poor, uninspired teaching; at their parents for not having

had high enough expectations of them or (in the case of the women) for having allowed them to marry so young. Sylvia, my Chicana feminist student, put it best when I was pointing out incomplete sentences in her essay: "Where the hell was I when all this was being taught in high school? And why didn't anybody give a damn that I wasn't learning it?"

I never teach content for the first two weeks of any of my courses. I talk about anger, sexism, racism and the sixties—a time when people believed in something larger than themselves. We dialogue—about prisons and why so many Chicano and Black young men are behind bars in California; why people fear differences; why they are so homophobic. I give my students a chance to talk about their anger ("coraje" in Spanish). I often read them the poem by my friend and colleague Jose Montoya, called "Eslipping and Esliding," where he talks about "locura" (craziness) and says that with a little locura, a little eslipping and esliding, we can survive the madness that surrounds us. We laugh at ourselves, sharing our tragic, tattered pasts; we undo everything and let the anger out. "I know why so many of you are afraid of doing well," I say. "You've been told you can't do it, and you're so pissed off about it, you can't concentrate." Courage takes pure concentration. By the end of these initial two or three weeks we have become friends and defined our mutual respect. Only then do we enter the course content.

I am not good at endings; I prefer to celebrate beginnings. The struggle continues and the success stories abound. Students come back, year after year, to say "Thank you." Usually I pull these visitors into the classroom: "Tell my class that they can do it. Tell them how you did it!" They start talking and can't stop. "Look, Olivia, when I first came into your class," said Sylvia, "I couldn't even put a fucking sentence together. And now look at me, three years later I'm even writing poetry!"