of poles and sticks, an old Kainah woman sat, dressed in a kerchief and a long blue dress. Some strange looking pipes were being passed around, none of them were handed to me as none were quite right for me. These pipes were not holy or in any way recognizable to me as anything special. The old lady looked at me a long time, then she said, “You will return to the Indian way.”

Notes
1. The Sundance.
2. A sweat is a religious purification ceremony.

“Gee, You Don’t Seem Like An Indian From the Reservation”
Barbara Cameron

One of the very first words I learned in my Lakota language was wasicu which designates white people. At that early age, my comprehension of wasicu was gained from observing and listening to my family discussing the wasicu. My grandmother always referred to white people as the “wasicu sica” with emphasis on sica, our word for terrible or bad. By the age of five I had seen one Indian man gunned down in the back by the police and was a silent witness to a gang of white teenage boys beating up an elderly Indian man. I’d hear stories of Indian ranch hands being “accidentally” shot by white ranchers. I quickly began to understand the wasicu menace my family spoke of.

My hatred for the wasicu was solidly implanted by the time I entered first grade. Unfortunately in first grade I became teacher’s pet so my teacher had a fondness for hugging me which always repulsed me. I couldn’t stand the idea of a white person touching me. Eventually I realized that it wasn’t the white skin that I hated, but it was their culture of deceit, greed, racism, and violence.

During my first memorable visit to a white town, I was appalled that they thought of themselves as superior to my people. Their manner of living appeared devoid of life and bordered on hostility even for one another. They were separated from each other by their perfectly, politely fenced square plots of green lawn. The only lawns on my reservation were the lawns of the BIA! officials or white christians. The white people always seemed so loud, obnoxious, and vulgar. And the white parents were either screaming at their kids, threatening them with some form of punishment or hitting them. After spending a day around white people, I was always happy to go back to the reservation where people followed a relaxed yet respectful code of relating with each other. The easy teasing and joking that were inherent with the Lakota were a welcome relief after a day with the plastic faces.
I vividly remember two occasions during my childhood in which I was cognizant of being an Indian. The first time was at about three years of age when my family took me to my first pow-wow. I kept asking my grandmother, "Where are the Indians? Where are the Indians? Are they going to have bows and arrows?" I was very curious and strangely excited about the prospect of seeing real live Indians even though I myself was one. It's a memory that has remained with me through all these years because it's so full of the subtleties of my culture. There was a sweet wonderful aroma in the air from the dancers and from the traditional food booths. There were lots of grandmothers and grandfathers with young children running about. Pow-wows in the Plains usually last for three days, sometimes longer, with Indian people traveling from all parts of our country to dance, to share food and laughter, and to be with each other. I could sense the importance of our gathering times and it was the beginning of my awareness that my people are a great and different nation.

The second time in my childhood when I knew very clearly that I am Indian occurred when I was attending an all-white (except for me) elementary school. During Halloween my friends and I went trick or treating. At one of the last stops, the mother knew all of the children except for me. She asked me to remove my mask so she could see who I was. After I removed my mask, she realized I was an Indian and quite cruelly told me so, refusing to give me the treats my friends had received. It was a stingingly painful experience.

I told my mother about it the next evening after I tried to understand it. My mother was outraged and explained the realities of being an Indian in South Dakota. My mother paid a visit to the woman which resulted in their expressing a barrage of equal hatred for one another. I remember sitting in our pick-up hearing the intensity of the anger and feeling very sad that my mother had to defend her child to someone who wasn't worthy of her presence.

I spent a part of my childhood feeling great sadness and helplessness about how it seemed that Indians were open game for the white people, to kill, maim, beat up, insult, rape, cheat, or whatever atrocity the white people wanted to play with. There was also a rage and frustration that has not died. When I look back on reservation life it seems that I spent a great deal of time attending the funerals of my relatives or friends of my family. During one year I went to funerals of four murder victims. Most of my non-Indian friends have not seen a dead body or have not been to a funeral. Death was so common on the reservation that I did not understand the implications of the high death rate until after I moved away and was surprised to learn that I've seen more dead bodies than my friends will probably ever see in their lifetime.

Because of experiencing racial violence, I sometimes panic when I'm the only non-white in a roomful of whites, even if they are my closest friends; I wonder if I'll leave the room alive. The seemingly copacetic gay world of San Francisco becomes a mere dream after the panic leaves. I think to myself that it's truly insane for me to feel the panic. I want to scream out my anger and disgust with myself for feeling distrustful of my white friends and I want to banish the society that has fostered those feelings of alienation. I wonder at the amount of assimilation which has affected me and how long my "Indianness" will allow me to remain in a city that is far removed from the lives of many Native Americans.

"Alienation" and "assimilation" are two common words used to describe contemporary Indian people. I've come to despise those two words because what leads to "alienation" and "assimilation" should not be so concisely defined. And I generally mistrust words that are used to define Native Americans and Brown People. I don't like being put under a magnifying glass and having cute liberal terms describe who I am. The "alienation" or "assimilation" that I manifest is often in how I speak. There isn't necessarily a third world language but there is an Indian way of talking that is an essential part of me. I like it, I love it, yet I deny it. I "save" it for when I'm around other Indians. It is a way of talking that involves "Indian humor" which I know for sure non-Indian people would not necessarily understand.

Articulate. Articulate. I've heard that word used many times to describe third world people. White people seem so surprised to find brown people who can speak fluent English and are even perhaps educated. We then become "articulate." I think I spend a lot of time being articulate with white people. Or as one
person said to me a few years ago, “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the reservation.”

I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between the white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy balance to maintain. Sometimes some of us are not so successful with it. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate.

When I was about 20, I dreamt of myself at the age of 25-26, standing at a place on my reservation, looking to the North, watching a glorious, many-colored horse galloping toward me from the sky. My eyes were riveted and attracted to the beauty and overwhelming strength of the horse. The horse’s eyes were staring directly into mine, hypnotizing me and holding my attention. Slowly from the East, an eagle was gliding toward the horse. My attention began to be drawn toward the calm of the eagle but I still did not want to lose sight of the horse. Finally the two met with the eagle soaring into the horse causing it to disintegrate. The eagle flew gently on.

I take this prophetic dream as an analogy of my balance between the white (horse) and Indian (eagle) world. Now that I am 26, I find that I’ve gone as far into my exploration of the white world as I want. It doesn’t mean that I’m going to run off to live in a tipi. It simply means that I’m not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those who are not bastards of the Pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.

Racism is not easy for me to write about because of my own racism toward other people of color, and because of a complex set of “racisms” within the Indian community. At times animosity exists between half-breed, full-blood, light-skinned Indians, dark-skinned Indians, and non-Indians who attempt to pass as Indians. The US government has practiced for many years its divisiveness in the Indian community by instilling and perpetuating these Indian vs. Indian tactics. Native Americans are the foremost group of people who continuously fight against pre-mediated cultural genocide.

I’ve grown up with misconceptions about Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. I’m still in the process of trying to eliminate my racist pictures of other people of color. I know most of my images of other races come from television, books, movies, newspapers, and magazines. Who can pinpoint exactly where racism comes from? There are certain political dogmas that are excellent in their “analysis” of racism and how it feeds the capitalist system. To intellectually understand that it is wrong or politically incorrect to be racist leaves me cold. A lot of poor or working-class white and brown people are just as racist as the “capitalist pig.” We are all continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we all pump it out. I don’t think there are easy answers or formulas. My personal attempts at eliminating my racism have to start at the base level of those mind-sets that inhibit my relationships with people.

Racism among third world people is an area that needs to be discussed and dealt with honestly. We form alliances loosely based on the fact that we have a common oppressor, yet we do not have a commitment to talk about our own fears and misconceptions about each other. I’ve noticed that liberal, consciousness-raised white people tend to be incredibly polite to third world people at parties or other social situations. It’s almost as if they make a point to SHAKE YOUR HAND or to introduce themselves and then run down all the latest right-on third world or Native American books they’ve just read. On the other hand it’s been my experience that if there are several third world gay people at a party, we make a point of avoiding each other, and spend our time talking to the whites to show how sophisticated and intelligent we are. I’ve always wanted to introduce myself to other third world people but wondered how I would introduce myself or what would I say. There are so many things I would want to say, except sometimes I don’t want to remember I’m Third World or Native American. I don’t want to remember sometimes because it means recognizing that we’re outlaws.

At the Third World Gay Conference in October 1979, the Asian and Native American people in attendance felt the issues affecting us were not adequately included in the workshops. Or representation and leadership had minimal input which resulted in a skimpy educational process about our struggles. The conference glaringly pointed out to us the narrow definition held by some people that third world means black people only. It was a depressing experience to sit in the lobby of Harambee House with other Native Americans and Asians, feeling removed from other third world groups with whom there is supposed to be this
automatic solidarity and empathy. The Indian group sat in my motel room discussing and exchanging our experiences within the third world context. We didn't spend much time in workshops conducted by other third world people because of feeling unwelcomed at the conference and demoralized by having an invisible presence. What's worse than being invisible among your own kind?

It is of particular importance to us as third world gay people to begin a serious interchange of sharing and educating ourselves about each other. We not only must struggle with the racism and homophobia of straight white america, but must often struggle with the homophobia that exists within our third world communities. Being third world doesn't always connote a political awareness or activism. I've met a number of third world and Native American lesbians who've said they're just into "being themselves," and that politics has no meaning in their lives. I agree that everyone is entitled to "be themselves" but in a society that denies respect and basic rights to people because of their ethnic background, I feel that individuals cannot idly sit by and allow themselves to be co-opted by the dominant society. I don't know what moves a person to be politically active or to attempt to raise the quality of life in our world. I only know what motivates my political responsibility...the death of Anna Mae Aquash — Native American freedom fighter — "mysteriously" murdered by a bullet in the head; Raymond Yellow Thunder — forced to dance naked in front of a white VFW club in Nebraska — murdered; Rita Silk-Nauni — imprisoned for life for defending her child; my dear friend Mani Lucas-Papago — shot in the back of the head outside of a gay bar in Phoenix. The list could go on and on. My Native American History, recent and past, moves me to continue as a political activist.

And in the white gay community there is rampant racism which is never adequately addressed or acknowledged. My friend Chryostos from the Menominee Nation gave a poetry reading in May 1980, at a Bay Area feminist bookstore. Her reading consisted of poems and journal entries in which she wrote honestly from her heart about the many "isms" and contradictions in most of our lives. Chryostos' bluntly revealing observations on her experiences with the white-lesbian-feminist-community are similar to mine and are probably echoed by other lesbians of color.

Her honesty was courageous and should be representative of the kind of forum our community needs to openly discuss mutual racism. A few days following Chryostos' reading, a friend who was in the same bookstore overheard a white lesbian denounce Chryostos' reading as anti-lesbian and racist.

A few years ago, a white lesbian telephoned me requesting an interview, explaining that she was taking Native American courses at a local university, and that she needed data for her paper on gay Native Americans. I agreed to the interview with the idea that I would be helping a "sister" and would also be able to educate her about Native American struggles. After we completed the interview, she began a diatribe on how sexist Native Americans are, followed by a questioning session in which I was to enlighten her mind about why Native Americans are so sexist. I attempted to rationally answer her insincerely racist and insulting questions, although my inner response was to tell her to remove herself from my house. Later it became very clear how I had been manipulated as a sounding board for her ugly and distorted views about Native Americans. Her arrogance and disrespect were characteristic of the racist white people in South Dakota. If I tried to point it out, I'm sure she would have vehemently denied her racism.

During the Briggs Initiative scare, I was invited to speak at a rally to represent Native American solidarity against the initiative. The person who spoke prior to me expressed a pro-Bakke sentiment which the audience booed and hissed. His comments left the predominantly white audience angry and in disruption. A white lesbian stood up demanding that a third world person address the racist comments he had made. The MC, rather than taking responsibility for restoring order at the rally, realized that I was the next speaker and I was also T-H-I-R-D-W-O-R-L-D!! I refused to address the remarks of the previous speaker because of the attitudes of the MC and the white lesbian that only third world people are responsible for speaking out against racism. It is inappropriate for progressive or liberal white people to expect warriors in brown armor to eradicate racism. There must be co-responsibility from people of color and white people
to equally work on this issue. It is not just MY responsibility to point out and educate about racist activities and beliefs.

Redman, redskin, savage, heathen, injun, american indian, first americans, indigenous peoples, natives, amerindian, native american, nigger, negro, black, wet back, greaser, mexican, spanish, latin, hispanic, chicano, chink, oriental, asian, disadvantaged, special interest group, minority, third world, fourth world, people of color, illegal aliens – oh yes about them, will the US government recognize that the Founding Fathers (you know George Washington and all those guys) are this country’s first illegal aliens.

We are named by others and we are named by ourselves.

Epilogue...

Following writing most of this, I went to visit my home in South Dakota. It was my first visit in eight years. I kept putting off my visit year after year because I could not tolerate the white people there and the ruralness and poverty of the reservation. And because in the eight years since I left home, I came out as a lesbian. My visit home was overwhelming. Floods and floods of locked memories broke. I rediscovered myself there in the hills, on the prairies, in the sky, on the road, in the quiet nights, among the stars, listening to the distant yelps of coyotes, walking on Lakota earth, seeing Bear Butte, looking at my grandparents’ cragged faces, standing under wakiyan, smelling the Paha Sapa (Black Hills), and being with my precious circle of relatives.

My sense of time changed, my manner of speaking changed, and a certain freedom with myself returned.

I was sad to leave but recognized that a significant part of myself has never left and never will. And that part is what gives me strength – the strength of my people’s enduring history and continuing belief in the sovereignty of our lives.

Notes
1. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“...And Even Fidel Can’t Change That!”

Aurora Levins Morales

1

Cherrie, you asked me to write about internationalism, and at first it made sense... I’m a Latin woman in the United States, closely involved with Latin American movements in the rest of the continent. I should write about the connection. But when I tried, all I could think was: No, write about the separation.

2

For me the point of terror, the point of denial is the New York Puerto Rican. My mother was born in New York in 1930, raised in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. I represent the generation of return. I was born deep in the countryside of Puerto Rico and except for four years when I was very young, lived there until I was 13. For my mother, the Barrio is safety, warmth. For me, it’s the fear of racist violence that clipped her tongue of all its open vowels, into crisp, imitation British. She once told me her idea of hell was to be a single mother of two children under five in the South Bronx. I’m afraid of ever knowing what she meant.

Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with the kids who called me “Americanita,” but I stayed on the safe side of that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom, not spic – living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the dark, bad city kids in Nueva York.

3

The point of terror, of denial, the point of hatred is the tight dress stretched across my grandmother’s big breasts, the coquettish, well made-up smile: grandmother, aunt and greataunts all decked out in sex, talking about how I’m pretty, talking about how men are only good for one thing, hating sex and gloating over the hidden filthiness in everything, looking me over, in a hurry to find me a boyfriend, and in the same breath: ‘you can’t travel alone! You don’t know what men are like... they only want one thing...” Women teaching women our bodies are disgusting and dirty, our desires are obscene, men are all sick
and want only one sickening thing from us. Saying, you’ve got to learn how to hold out on ‘em just enough to get what you want. It’s the only item you can put on the market, so better make it go far, and when you have to deliver, lie down and grit your teeth and bear it, because there’s no escape.

4

And yet, I tell you, I love those women for facing up to the unction there. No romance, no roses and moonlight and pure love. You say pure love to one of these women and they short and ask you what the man has between his legs and is it pure? I love these women for the bitch sessions that pool common knowledge and tell the young wife: “Oh, yes, the first time he cheated on me I tried that, too, but he just beat me. Listen, don’t give him the satisfaction. The next time…” These women don’t believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond, the inviolable privacy of the husband-wife unit. The cattiness is mixed with the information, tips. The misery is communal.

5

Claustrophobia. A reality I can’t make a dent in...because it’s the misery that’s communal. The resistance is individual and frowned upon. It rocks the boat. How many times has a Latin woman stood up for me in private, then stabbed me in the back when the moment comes for the support that counts. How many times has a Latin woman used me to bitch to and then gone running to men for approval, leaving me in the lurch. The anger is real and deep: You have forced me to turn out of my own culture to find allies worthy of the name; you have forced me into a room full of Anglo women who nod sympathetically and say: “Latin men are sooo much worse than Anglo men... Why the last time I was in Mexico, you couldn’t walk down the streets without some guy...It must be so hard for you to be a Latin feminist...” And not to betray you in the face of their racism, I betray myself, and in the end, you, by not saying: It’s not the men who exile me...it’s the women. I don’t trust the women.

6

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. Light skinned, fine, black hair: I’m Italian, she would tell them, keeping the dark-skinned husband, keeping the daughters out of sight. I have pretended that pain, that shame, that anger never touched me, does not stain my skin. She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanless neighborhoods.

7

Piri Thomas’ book Down These Mean Streets followed me around for years, in the corner of my eye on bus terminal bookshelves. Finally, in a gritted teeth desperation I faced the damn thing and said “OK, tell me.” I sweated my way through it in two nights: Gang fights, knifings, robberies, smack, prison. It’s the standard Puerto Rican street story, except he lived. The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English, nothing but my mother marrying into the middle class, between me and that life.

8

The image stays with me of my mother’s family fleeing their puertoricananness, the first spics on the block, behind them, the neighborhoods collapsing into slums. There was a war, she told me. The enemy was only a step behind; I borrow the pictures from my other family, the nightmares of my Jewish ancestry, and imagine them fleeing through the streets. My mother never went back to look. This year she saw on television the ruins of the Tiffany Street of her childhood, unrecognizable, bombarded by poverty and urban renewal into an image of some European city: 1945. Like the Jews, like many people, the place she could have returned to has been destroyed.

9

I saw a baby once, the same age as my fat, crowning baby brother, then six months old. I was twelve, and under the
influence of our Seventh Day Adventist teacher some of the girls in the seventh grade took up a collection for two poor families in the neighborhood. We bought them each one bag of groceries. This baby was just a little bit of skin stretched over a tiny skeleton. It hardly moved. It didn't even cry. It just lay there. The woman's husband had left her. The oldest boy, he was 13 or 14, worked picking coffee to help out. When we came the younger kids hid in the mother's skirts and she just stood there, crying and crying.

I ran straight home when we left and the first thing I did was to find my brother and hug him very tightly. Then I spent the rest of the afternoon feeding him.

If something had happened to my father, the ghost over my mother's shoulder would have caught up with us. Papi was our middle class passport. I grew up a professor's daughter, on the road to college, speaking good English. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton.

Writing this I am browner than I have ever been. Spanish ripples on my tongue and I want the accent. I walk through the Mission drinking in the sounds. I go into La Borinqueña and buy yautia and plátano for dinner. Facing up to the terror, ending the denial, refusing to obey the rule "Don't talk bad about your own people in front of anyone else." I have never learned to dance salsa. My body goes rigid when the music plays. Oh yes, I tap my feet, and now and then I do a few steps, swing around the room with someone who doesn't know more than I do...but if I'm in a Latin scene I freeze. I can't make my hips fluid or keep my feet from tripping. It's the perversion of sexuality that frightens me. It's the way the women around me exude a sexiness that has nothing to do with the heart. Of course Latin Women love as well as any other women...but while the chilliest Anglo-Saxon repression of sex pretends it simply doesn't exist, Latin repression says it's a filthy fact of life, use it for what it's worth...shake it in his face, wear it as a decoy. It's all over the floor and it's cold and savage. It's the hatred of the powerless, turned crooked.

Sitting in the kitchen in oh-so-white New Hampshire with old friends, mother and daughter, Ceci says, "It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughter will have it easier, but her daughter will be raised differently. In the third generation the daughters are free." I'm not thinking then of this essay, but days later when I sit down again to work, the phrase keeps ringing: In the third generation the daughters are free.

"Don't you think I've swallowed my mouthful of blood? It's different for a man. You're too stubborn...you've always wanted your own way. It was this way for my grandmother, it was this way for my mother, it was this way for me...because this is the way it is. God made men and women different and even Fidel can't change that! Anything is better than being alone."

Older woman in Portrait of Teresa Cuban film, 1979

The relationship between mother and daughter stands in the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world.

A revolution capable of healing our wounds. If we're the ones who can imagine it, if we're the ones who dream about it, if we're the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it.

We're the ones.