

## "The Bracelet"

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The context: a small group of women from very different countries, cultural backgrounds, professional devotions and training come together in Rome, Italy, to reflect upon women in/and the Mediterranean, *Mondi di donne. Voci mediterranee*; women with diverse views of themselves as women and as feminists; women offering their learned tools to examine each other and the world around them. Women wondering how to cope with the rush of feelings that emanate from witnessing the ungraspable experiences of other women. A group of feminists trying to speak the unspeakable: the infinite dimension of emotion in the private and worldly realms, the undefinable and unstoppable force of the gender experience. The result: I cried. "Why did you cry?", someone asked me when we finished the two-day reunion in Rome--a preamble of a much larger event: **Mundos de Mujeres/Women's Worlds 2008** that will take place in Madrid, Spain (July 3-9). "I will have to write about it to explain it to you and to myself". I answered. So here is my explanation.

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**1999--Trømso, Norway.** I fly from Wisconsin, USA, to the very northern coast of Norway to attend the *7<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Women's Worlds 1999* at the University of Trømso. I give a lecture on a text written by a Spanish feminist woman from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I wonder why am I talking about history and literature; I wonder how can I tell the women who are listening that to know about my own cultural history as a Spanish feminist has awakened an indescribable ache inside

me. While I am learning about the horrors of the present I secretly ask myself why am I studying the past. I listen to a member of RAWA talk about the fierce oppression and prosecution, death and mutilation women are experiencing under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The sun never sets in Trømso in the summer solstice. The sun never rises under the violence of the Taliban regime. I never see the face of the speaker, just a shadow and an immensely powerful soft voice of a woman uttering a story of her her own survival and of her fight for the survival of other women. I wonder how I could approach such brave woman and tell her that I feel her pain, her rage, her tears. I want to scream. But crying is not enough. I am not brave like her. I would be afraid. I am ashamed of this. I wonder if there are really many different battles to be fought or if there is only one, an infinite one, as large as the number of cultural, contextual and individual disparities among women. I tell myself that my own battle is occurring: I am returning an obliterated memory to my people, a silenced history; I am raising a reference of the past to protect them and myself from the present. But the truth is that I go back home and I cannot sleep. I remember Rigoberta Menchú's words on the orchestrated murder of her people; Nawal El Saadawi's speech on freedom for women in the Arab world, a reality, a dream, she suggests, that seems impossible under fundamentalist interpretations of the Koran; I remember Rosi Braidotti's proposing of intellectual strategies to undermine sexism and patriarchy in contemporary Western societies. Back in the United States, in my bedroom, I wonder what I really want to do with my life and my work.

**2002--Kampala, Uganda.** I fly from Texas, USA, via Spain, my home country, to attend the *8<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Women's Worlds 2002* at Makerere University. I am determined to touch life, to move out of literary

history, to make my research worth it for other women; to share part of a feminist past that I have retrieved from nothingness through literary criticism; I am determined to fighting for a peaceful and a better World in my own way. I will honor what our ancestors said about war and peace so that we can all learn from the past and turn our memory into a shield. I am certain that what 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish feminists is still relevant in our contemporary World. I request that my lecture be included in panel on armed conflicts at the *Women's Worlds 2002* conference. No more literature, no more history for the sake of it, no more words removed from the flesh and dust of human beings. So be it! I give my lecture in a room full of over two hundred women, most of them from African countries. On a panel of three speakers, I am the last one to give a lecture. One panelist recounts stories of torture, rape, murder in the Kosovo war; the other one speaks of the incesant violence and destruction, abduction, of rape after rape in a refugee camp in northern Uganda. I can barely contain my tears, I feel so stupid, so pretentious. What makes me think that there is room for my words in a room already overflowed by anguish? But then it is my turn. I swallow saliva. I speak of 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish noble women and what they have to say about war. And as I speak, I find myself wondering. What on hearth did they really know about such horrors? I feel embarrassed for I am aware they knew nothing, just like me. Unlike many of the women who are listening in the room, I know nothing about forced displacement, about war, about violence. I know nothing about rape. And yet, as I talk, I hear the women in the room clapping their hands, I lift my head and I see big smiles, I see fists go up in solidarity, I see bright eyes shining in some of the faces, frowns drawn across the brows of others. I hear hand clapping and cheering and laughter but they are not for me, they are not about

me, they are for my ancestors, they are for those 17<sup>th</sup> century women whose words I am sharing with the audience; they are for our past, for a recovered memory; they are for all of us who need each other. I continue my lecture. I want to cry, of course. I am overwhelmed, perplexed, grateful. When the talk is over a young woman comes up to me and asks me where she can find the books by these Spanish women. I tell her there are no books about them and the texts are not translated into other languages besides Spanish. She tells me she will then learn Spanish.

Now I understand: history and memory are a matter of survival. People need to know of others so they can understand themselves. We, women, have been saying the same things over and over, we have been feeling similar things for so many centuries, in so many different contexts, and yet, we still cannot make sense of why there is so much disdain against us. So many of us, speaking in so many languages and still we are not enough to make universal claims. We are always starting over to be acknowledged as individuals. There is no need to be simplistic, no chance to be fair when so many of us still need to articulate the complexities of being marked by gender in specific contexts. As singular people we are permanently navigating through harsher and harsher waters, delineating circles in the ocean.

I am still in Uganda attending the *Women's Worlds 2002* congress. Lunch time. I sit next to three nationals to eat my lunch. We talk. Our lives have nothing in common, yet we talk, we laugh, we share the food and our experiences at the conference. They have been brought by an NGO to give testimonies of their lives as refugees in a camp in northern Uganda. We become friends. I want to learn more about them and the next day I listen to their communications. Margaret starts. She pulls out a folded paper from her

dress pocket; her hands are shaking; her voice, however, clear and dignified. It is me who is falling apart and can barely listen to what she is saying: she is describing the rape she and the others endured on the hands of the Ugandan soldiers, those soldiers who were supposed to protect the camp. She is disclosing the daily blackmailing by the soldiers: sex for food, sex for water, sex for protection from the rebels; sex for life; she is revealing the cruelty of those who feed their thirst for violence and power, how they take out their frustrations on the girls and the women who live in the camp. But she is also explaining how the women try to find coping mechanisms so they help each other and themselves; how the men as companions are totally absent from their lives. This is Helen's turn. She tells how women have to assist other women giving birth by using pieces of glass from Coca-Cola bottles to cut the umbilical cord. They all need help, she says. Their people need help. As internal refugees they are not protected by International Laws, nor by their own government. As I listen to these women I can't help but think of my own privileges. And how as a result of them, I know nothing of strength; I know nothing of dignity and solidarity; I know nothing of pain; I know nothing of generosity and human warmth. What kind of world have I been inhabiting all along? I start to cry. And then I cry harder because I am crying again and my tears are so utterly useless here. Crying is my utmost privilege. By the end of their talks, Helen and Margaret teach me that I need them as much as they need me. Women need each other. I am grateful to them. And I start crying all over again: there is so much love in this room, these women have suffered, so so much, and still there is so much kindness in them to give. How to tell them THANK YOU?

Back in the United States: I am depressed. I am disgusted by my surroundings: the excess, the frivolity, the power, the *ego* we are trapped in, the academic *glamour*. I am starting to understand why I always cry.

**2005--Seoul, South Korea.** I fly from Madrid, Spain, to attend the *9<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Women's Worlds 2005*. I no longer live in the United States. I voluntarily left behind a promising academic career, a run towards recognition as an Early Modern Spanish feminist literary critic. Now living back in Spain where I was born, I am a changed woman. Norway, Uganda, Seoul, nine years passed and it has taken me all this time to realize why I always cry.

I am in the office of the Vice-President for Cultural Affairs, Sports and Social Politics at the University Complutense of Madrid, I am trying to explain to her why they/we should bring the *Women's Worlds* congress to the University Complutense, to Madrid, to Spain, to my home country. I am crying, of course, as I recount my experiences in Norway and Uganda. Finally, it works, I have convinced her: in Seoul, we will present a candidacy project to organize the next Women's Worlds congress. My country is undergoing a historical moment. For the first time we have a pro-feminist government. It is perhaps the rightest time to congregate 5000 feminists from around the world right here, right now; it is about time for such large celebration of women's testimonies, achievements, challenges, intellectual disquisitions to occur in Spain, their voices to be heard by Spanish society as a whole. Gender and feminist views are finally given a front row seat by politicians who are in power positions. My country is making quick progress towards justice for all: gay rights are a reality now, as we have total equality written out for the first time in our Constitution, the same is true for women and

men in legal terms. We also have a new law against sexist violence. And my siblings are gradually accepting other cultures as the government is articulating the rights of immigrant people. As I am writing out the candidacy project, I try to capture a large scope of issues that urgently need to be addressed in 2008, I also try to imagine what the celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of *Women's Worlds* in Spain could add to the congress' already long, rich and diverse history. I try to envision a *Women's Worlds* congress that may really contribute to ameliorating the lives of other women, especially of those who need it the most. So the University Complutense sends me to Seoul to present the candidacy project that I have written. In Seoul, I receive a warm and enthusiastic welcome by the Selection Committee shadowed only by the unspoken jealousy of the woman that works and travels with me. There is no doubt about it. I am territorial with my project. I am angry. I lose perspective on things. I did it all. I am angry.

To relax a little, I take a tour to see the surrounding villages of this South Korean city. I am still angry, cloud of pettiness over my shoulder. In the bus, a young Chinese woman whose name I have forgotten now talks to me in English. We barely understand each other but we smile. We smile a lot. We visit a Buddhist temple and she explains to me some of the rituals. She is a Buddhist. I am inspired by her smile. When she looks at me, there is a connection beyond words and I am reminded, of the shining faces of those women when I gave my lecture in Uganda; I am reminded of the sharp quivering I felt in my stomach while the RAWA member spoke from the shadow. The tour is over. It is the last day of the *Women's Worlds 2005* congress. We will not see each other again. She lives in rural China, near Xian, it is about all the information that I was able to gather from our shattered conversations. I cry when I say goodbye. She smiles. She gives me a

present: she pulls out of her wrist a wooden bracelet; it is her grandmother's Buddhist rosary, a mala. She tells me: "it will give you luck and strength while you need it". I cry again, but my tears come from a different place: a gush of joy for the solidarity of this woman, a long lament for all the wasted time. My life seems to begin now.

Back in the hotel I am packing my suitcase. A rush of uncontrollable tears inundate the room. I look out the window: there is downtown Seoul from the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, the evening mist, the craze of a big city uncertain in the heat. I tell my partner: "now I understand". It is not about me. The congress that will come to Madrid is for thousands of women, even millions; it is about every one of us and how we need each other. Even though I was the one to write up that project, I realize now that I wasn't just writing it for me, it belongs to the thousands of women who are suffering, to those women who are fighting to diminish the pain of others, to those who hope for a better life, it belongs to all the feminists who are working to allow for that to happen. It is about passing on bracelets, building bridges, coming together in solidarity, our stories, our memories gluing us to each other, helping us to survive.

Some contemporary historians and philosophers say that a true history, a history faithful to what life really is, to the human experience, needs to encompass all that is most distant from reason, outside words. I wonder if for a minute they have thought of what that means for women. Our position in the World is always molded by a gendered flesh. Thus, it is especially dangerous for us to claim emotion, to claim the abyss, to claim the unknown, to remain set in ambivalence, to position ourselves in the so-called "feminine nature" of things. For we lack a concrete time, we lack a linear history, a worldly history to pass on to each other, to locate ourselves in continuance. We lack

books on our ancestors; we lack statues to touch when we travel to foreign countries, and thus, we often-loose perspective on things. We lack a position in History. But we feed each other with bodily memories of ourselves, with emotional recollections that are passed on generation after generation; like a sacred bracelet. We do have an emotional memory in our hands. Perhaps this is why I cry: I realize that it is possible to be both terribly absent and horribly present in this world. I finally understand that there is no distance between emotion and history. I finally know that our memory is our silence, our flesh, our words, our actions, our thoughts, and all that is beyond thinking. I finally know that we have emotions in common. Yes, we do. But we also have the lines we carved behind us and the ones we dream of ahead of us; we also have the scars on our bodies. Feminism is everywhere, hundreds of different countries, five continents and more, all cultures, small acts of dignity, heroic actions, clapping, laughter, unstoppable tears; unspoken words, daily secret nuances, public speeches, pettiness, misery, intellectual gains, scientific discoveries, war, family, sex. Feminism is what we have in common. A web that is not virtual, a web that can be felt on the skin and the blood of all of us, a web that can be just sensed in written texts, for it inhabits the realm of emotion in-as-much-as intellectual thinking and social action. Something is still hidden in our history, something ubiquitous, incommensurable, pervasive.

Now I understand why I always cry: I am certain that what makes me cry is something beyond words, something beyond myself, beyond political frontiers, beyond the physical body; something that belongs to an infinite realm that varies each time a woman experiences herself on this planet; an emotion that cannot be encapsulated, named, described. Instants of a lifetime, lives made of instant thoughts, feelings, acts. I

cry many times but everytime is different and in the process of crying, my tears are always shifting from one sensation to another; faster than I can describe, faster than tears themselves. Nine years have passed. I was not so blind. Crying was my certainty. It is about history. It is about survival, for memory protects us. It is about empathy. We need memory. How can we survive only in the present or projected towards an uncertain future? Emptiness surrounds personal achievements when we do not pass on the bracelet. We tear each other apart when we have lost sight of our collective our memories. We end up spinning our wheels, when we are constantly reinventing our history over and over again. How to turn pain into strength, strength into creation and into social transformation? How to tell THANK YOU to the women I met in Norway, in Uganda, in Seoul, in Rome just a few months ago? Crying is my answer; now I know.