ALSO BY SUSAN CUBAR

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True Confessions
Feminist Professors Tell Stories Out of School

Edited by Susan Gubar

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Unreconciled Lives

Neferti Tadiar

At the age of five I saw only glimpses of the worlds in which my own was enmeshed. Some were hidden; some quietly, enigmatically felt; some wholly expressed elsewhere, while here barely known. Yet some of these worlds made an occasional appearance in the intimate domicile made up of children and maids that was my early world.

They were katulong, “helpers,” as the mostly young women who enter other households as domestic workers were and continue to be called. They cooked, cleaned, laundered, and took care of the small children of the families they worked for. Often these young women did this work for a few years before they married and settled into households of their own. A few stayed with the families they worked for for the rest of their lives. Some were daughters of the helpers of one’s parents. Some were daughters of one’s own relatives who needed work. I knew the women who were my parents’ helpers as my manangs, or “older sisters,” the honorific in Ilocano for females older than oneself. In turn, they called my parents tita and tito, or “uncle” and “auntie.” They lived with my family in a newly constructed, modern concrete house on Rizal Avenue, the major cross street of the one highway that connected our small but central provincial town, San Fernando, to all the other provincial towns along the hilly northern coastline and through the provinces in the central plains south and finally to the nation’s capital, Manila.

Having plied that highway many times during their schooling, my parents appeared distinctly modern, as members of their generation of young professionals fashioned themselves in those heady years of nationalized development two decades after the harrowing devastation of World War II, a war in which all the men in my father’s family were killed. In photographs, my parents are beautiful, stylish and cosmopolitan, seemingly unencumbered by their provincial surroundings or the taint of backwardness that inevitably adheres to a formerly colonial people. In their stories, they are forward-looking and independent-minded, refusing the obligations of social custom and the collective and individual humiliations of our shared history. Even the tale of their romance bears incidents of small yet significant acts of defiance against the older generations’ hierarchical ways—my mother catching my father’s eye as she raises her voice against an elder aunt, my father impulsively asking her father for her hand without his mother’s intercession. As they pursue their own promising individual careers in law and medicine, while raising their own family, and become involved in civic-minded enterprises innovated in the first world—family planning, life insurance, and the Rotary Club—they contribute to the very modernization and development of the nation which they believe is already the most advanced among its neighbors. In those early years of their marriage, which was also the beginning of my life, they were the very image of progress.

My parents built a new house made of gleaming light-colored, painted concrete, with a galvanized, corrugated iron roof and louvered glass windows. It stood in striking contrast to the old, bamboo-thatched and wood, capiz-shell-windowpaned house of my aunt’s family, which sat right next to it on the other side of the shared family lot, the last remaining inheritance from my paternal great-grandfather. In this house my grandmother and her “playmates” played mah-jongg on the porch every afternoon, smoking thin tobacco cigars in their long skirts and embroidered sheer fiber blouses, the dress that native women had worn since Spanish colonial times.
Manang Masa, my aunt’s lifelong helper and cook, oversaw the mah-jongg game, providing merienda of sponge cake and Coca-Cola along with prizes of cans of Liberty condensed milk and boxes of Tide detergent, which she bought with the tong the old women paid with each game. This daily afternoon mah-jongg game was a business Manang Masa ran on the side of her main living, which was to cook and keep house for my aunt’s family as my aunt devoted herself to educational projects and church work, and her husband, my uncle, made alternately failed and profitable shady deals with men with glassy eyes and faces reddened with drink, who would show up in the evenings to plot, confer, debate, and drink some more.

Though it was undoubtedly my aunt’s house, Manang Masa was her steadfast right hand, and to my mind she, along with my aunt and grandmother, defined that other household, in which my older sister and brother and I spent almost as much time as in our own, playing with our older cousins, eating the food she prepared. It was a place where unsavory worldly affairs and spiritual and intellectual pursuits crossed paths, a mixed household whose economic management and daily work of provisioning were in the steady and sure hands of these women. At the back of the house, they kept various domestic animals, almost adjacent to the rooms in which they slept. Sometimes I would watch Manang Masa take a chicken from the back to butter it for dinner, the bird shrieking, its wings flapping wildly, her unflinching hand gripping its neck as she drained its blood into a bucket before she pulled its feathers off.

In our house, there were no live animals except the ubiquitous lizards on the ceiling and our pet dog, Spot. Screened windows and doors, a sealed floor of polished concrete and a picture-book imagination of home vigilantly kept non-human life, unseemly relations and activities—all that should remain outside—outside. And yet other worlds nevertheless entered and pervaded, most never after all having really been let go or left behind. From the perspective of a foretold future, we lived as much in a time of lingering pasts and outmoded practices and beliefs as in a place still at a disabling distance from the developed world, lacking the everyday conveniences of modern life—dressed chicken, prepared foods, ready-made clothes, electric irons, washing machines—and the liberation and enlightenment that modern life would bring. Old ways continued, such as the domestication of servitude and exploitation and the extension of both one’s bounty and one’s hardship through relations of kinship, the organizing principle of all social life, power, and happiness. Repeated stories brought to life unseen forces of malevolence and beneficence that permeated our landscape and mapped the vital connections across time and space between persons, living and dead. Gatherings instilled those connections and gave ceremony to the uncontrolled spilling over of lives into one another that took place on all the other days. Through these habits of making collective life, intangible kinds of inheritance, including immanent worlds, were passed on. Indeed, despite all aspiration on my behalf to the contrary, I grew as much on the strength and influence of these other worlds as on the promises and ideals of that more powerful, distant world that captivated us all.

Brought up with the liberal, egalitarian convictions of my father, whose own Mason-turned-Protestant father had gone against the wishes of his father by deciding to bury his dead nine-year-old daughter in accordance with his chosen faith without the proper blessings and sacraments of the Catholic Church, I never called my older sister and brother by the honorific manang or manong, as both my parents did with their own older siblings. A strange honor that manang should be confined to our helpers and other people and relatives outside of the nuclear home, as if this form of deferential respect was to be reserved for older ways of life that my own family was intending to leave behind, even while we were cared for and maintained by those very ways that we were supposed to transcend or eventually become estranged from.

But childhood allows a blurring of boundaries that may later be more firmly drawn. From the time of my earliest memories, my comforts, fears, and dreams of what was possible, of elsewhere and unknowns, were tied up with our manangs and the small universe I shared with them. Without doubt, from this intimate world I learned hierarchy—graduated orders of families and clans, of languages written and spoken, of villages and their relative proximity to the center of town or to the mountains, of ethnic lineages, and of opportunity
and employment—objective social orders that would also shape the proper form and propriety of our deepest sentiments and most loyal attachments. Our manangs not only exemplified these orders in relation to my family, but also came to be the very means for instilling them. From them, my siblings and I learned to speak and make authorized sense of the world in English, the valued language of reading, school, and government, at the same time that we learned to understand and relate to people in Ilocano, the commonplace language of all domestic and social life, of personal confidences as well as easy and heated exchanges in the plaza and in the market. It took me a long time to learn to keep these languages separate, to know which words belonged where, especially when I had in addition to learn the national language as everyone had to in school. But the differences, in languages as well as in the people who used them, had been established and our selves took shape around them.

Even as they helped to rear us on these differences that were already directing our divergent fates, our manangs also provided us that primordial comfort in which such differences could be dissolved. In their care and in our shared dwelling I experienced love and joy and the unspoken connections of feeling between people. In the small bedroom by the side of the kitchen and next to the carport where I sometimes slept with my manangs, I have pleasurable memories of our bouts of raucous laughter and boisterous play. I liked how my manangs combed my hair and picked my head for lice eggs with their gently rummaging fingers as I sat idly between their legs and they chatted among themselves. I always enjoyed the sensuous feeling of comfort and excitement it gave when they would use their thumbnails to split the tiny eggs on my scalp and pull the pieces down the shaft of a strand of hair. They brushed, braided, and played with my hair, the way they tickled and teased and played with us in moments of carefree indulgence. Simple bodily pleasures but also forms of tenderness and care that I knew, when I began to brush and play with my own daughter’s hair almost three decades later, had become an instinctive way of loving now mine to transmit.

As a small child, I learned from my manangs a fear of ghosts, in particular of a white lady appearing on the chico tree, beneath the roots of which my and my brother’s placentas lay buried, as well as a fear of other spirits, human and nonhuman, that inhabited and moved through the world we lived in; a fear of swallowed santol seeds growing into seedlings in one’s stomach, for despite all warnings, the sweet sour succulence of their pulpy juices, which we children sucked by passing them over and over again through our teeth, made them impossible to resist swallowing; a fear of drunks sometimes glimpsed in broad daylight silently wending their way down the road, who, we were given to understand, harbored underneath the languorous placidity of their comportment a hidden and unpredictably explosive capacity for violence. The experience of ambient threats to our safety and well-being prepared us for later fears. A few years later, after martial law had been declared, inaugurating a dictatorship that would outlast our youth, a new fear gripped us, absorbed like almost all our fears from a current of rumors and tales for which our manangs served as an important channel—a fear of soldiers on the streets forcibly cutting the fashionably long hair of young men and harassing young women for their fashionably short skirts, treatment which we were led to intuit augured only worse things that we could not yet even imagine.

There were many things to fear in the outside world, things in the shadows of our gleaming, clean, and pressed lives that it was the duty of our manangs to shield us from. But our manangs were themselves of the outside world, and they brought with them traces of the unfamiliar worlds and lives they lived elsewhere. Our laundress, Manang Aning, we knew was an alcoholic, and I at least viewed her with some trepidation. I do not remember her ever being intoxicated during the day when she worked, but I kept my distance, watching her only from behind the screened door of the kitchen. She worked quietly and did not seem to socialize much with the other manangs. She was an older woman, bone thin, with hair cut unusually and severely short. Her hands looked surprisingly smooth, the extremely taut skin on them no doubt the result of washing thousands of clothes by hand. Although my parents generally knew something of the lives of our manangs, often knowing their personal predicaments and even their families, for in a small town such as ours all relationships were per-
sonal and my parents’ role with respect to their helpers was as patrons and temporary kin, we children knew little if anything at all of our manangs’ lives outside. And so Manang Aning’s life, her unhappiness or sorrow, palpable as it was in our shared everyday life, remained mysterious to us.

One day while my parents were away in Manila, Manang Aning got hold of some liquor and drank to the point where she reached some kind of end, and she began to run amok. My siblings and I knew what to do: my older brother gathered all the kitchen knives and we locked ourselves in our grandmother’s room, huddling by her bed while we waited and listened for something to come to pass. We took comfort in the thought that our other manang, my brother’s nanny, Manang Annie, who was Igorot (the term lowland Christianized people like ourselves used for the minority tribal communities of the mountain provinces), was brave and strong like her people and would protect us. And she did. Though it is unlikely that I actually saw this, I have a distinct memory of Manang Annie chasing Manang Aning through the two houses to subdue her, her strong bare feet running across the wide wooden planks of my aunt’s house with the formidable power they impressed upon me when she once performed an Ifugao ritual dance in our home.

The night Manang Aning ran amok, Manang Annie was the hero and Manang Aning the tragic victim in a drama that we were somehow a part of but did not really grasp. For many years afterwards, I imagined Manang Annie had drawn on resources and capacities from the cultural commons of her tribe, a distant world that to me was as enigmatic and exciting as the sources of Manang Aning’s angry pain were mysterious and frightening. As in many of the dramas that would unfold in our midst, it was for me as much the other social worlds summoned by or entangled in the immediate conflict as the conflict itself that left a lasting imprint. Both Manang Annie’s and Manang Aning’s bodily enactments of the power and violence of worlds seemingly beyond yet intimately intertwined with ours stirred my senses, and the memory of this stirring is still as vivid as the trickle of blood that the knives drew from my brother’s safeguarding arms.

Those worlds were not only objects of fear and awe but also the sources of dreams. My nanny, Manang Perlita, was a tomboy who owned and rode a motorcycle in a place-time when horse-drawn carriages still plied the roads and all vehicles were driven by men. To me, she was someone who could ride away from everything at a moment’s notice. In fits of child fury and fancy, I would declare my intention of getting on that bike with my manang to ride away with her. Whatever her intent, Manang Perlita brought with her that bold possibility of flight. Perhaps all our manangs did, for were they not to some degree all testaments to such flight, to leaving home and being on one’s own?

When I was the first in the family to leave home on a lone adventure abroad, I did not think about Manang Perlita or the possibility of riding away to I knew not where, which she enabled me to imagine and which I never forgot. I ended up very far from home, though no farther than my aunt who, almost three decades earlier, one day suddenly told her husband that she was leaving for the US the very next day and that he could follow her or not. She could no longer bear her stifling parochial life in the middle-of-nowhere town where he had taken up a comfortable position as a doctor, content to while away the evenings playing poker with his friends. So she worked on her travel papers in secret until that day when she showed him her passport to announce her departure, and the very next day she left.

I only learned this story of my aunt as an adult, though I had known her since I was a child. By then the theme of women leaving home had become a national story, an official lament, as millions of Filipina women left the country every year to work as nurses, caregivers, and domestic workers elsewhere. My aunt herself was a nurse, and that is how she made her way to the US. Some of these women had been “helpers” before. Many years after she had worked for us, my mother received a Christmas card from Manang Annie. She was working in Hong Kong, now a professional domestic worker among the tens of thousands of others there on several-year contracts, which despite widespread reports of abusive treatment, most renew more than once. Others became “helpers” for the first time. As I was nearing a decade in my own prolonged sojourn away from home, I learned that my older female cousins, whom I also call manang, one married to a doctor, the other to a businessman, each with businesses, families,
and “helpers” of their own, both abandoned their lives of privilege to work as nannies in New York. They were now part of the growing statistic of overseas Filipina domestic workers, who en masse had become and remain the object of sensationalist media attention, steady scholarly interest, and urgent feminist concern. For national and transnational feminists, these women continue to serve as a prominent symbol of globalization and its symptomatic dependence on the devalued reproductive labor of disenfranchised women from the former third world.

I, too, have written on Filipina domestic workers in terms of the exploitation and devaluation of their gendered and racialized labor and the debased forms of personhood, even thinghood, that they, as the objectified embodiment of this labor, are often socialized into and sometimes forced to occupy. The feminist perspective I brought to the phenomenon of overseas Filipina domestic workers emerged out of my grappling with the violent conditions of the Philippines’ authoritarian state—promoted national prostitution economy, conditions that a vigorous movement of Filipina women activists and journalists had brought to public consciousness through years and years of relentless, courageous criticism and protest. Like me, many of these Filipina activists and journalists from whom I learned to see the world in a radically critical light were raised on the strength and power and care of other women who were our “helpers.” Few of us write about these women who helped in our making as individual persons and social subjects; whose effect on our lives may have exceeded the labor they expended to maintain us; with whom we may have shared more than the relations that defined and differentiated us or the social categories through which we might now claim and experience political identity and solidarity. As we comprehend and struggle to transform the conditions of our own making, we tend to stand apart from these women, as well as men (including transgender men, like our “manang” Jun who did “women’s work” in our home later in my childhood), who now only stand for the structures we critique, whose unaccounted part in our own lives can only appear as an irreconcilable contradiction to our politics, a contradiction that can be resolved only through radical change.

Many of us long for this radical change, for the release and flourishing of people, possibilities, and futures that have been impeded and destroyed by the unjust and rapacious forms of social life, which have become global human norms. Yet how can we realize the worlds and lives we long for if we do not reckon with the experiences to which we owe the nurturing of this longing? It is difficult to try to remember these almost forgotten times of my own making without nostalgia or disavowal, redemption or apology. Writing in the US, I face the collective habit of portraying the third world as a place of despots and their victims, humanitarian images of third world life under incorrigible regimes of violence, squalor, and elite indulgence. Such images can only render us in terms of complicit enjoyment or pathetic abjection, while the place from which we are judged is vindicated of the crimes that were the making of the third world. Our own outrage at the violent conditions of human life is viewed as the result of our exposure and assimilation to a world from which a humanitarian concern for the plight of others is understood to have originally issued, even as that same world defined the very condition of inhumanity to which it condemned others. Our narratives are limited by the direction toward a change already known or decided, their lessons and value determined by the measure of a shared political morality that we have perhaps too easily acceded to or not sufficiently questioned. We view the world outside us with critical reason, and when we look at ourselves, we see only the reflection of that world we apprehend and convict. Its truths become our truths, eclipsing all the other fictions that sustain our sensuous and feeling lifeworlds, fictions that might still be the source of our endurance, the form of our immanent strengths and hopes.

The worldly power of many Filipina women—whether as presidents or as activists fighting those presidents—depends on the hidden and exploited labor of other Filipina women. We often fail to acknowledge this contradiction, to grasp the fact that our capacities, including that of critique, depend on a world economy of such relations, i.e., on the very world that we critique. But more than this, we fail to fathom what contradiction cannot fully encapsulate. For while vast social differences divide us, it is also true that the formidable capacities
Filipina women exercise across these differences issue out of shared and entangled, as much as opposed, ways of life, ways of being in the world, of being women, that cleave but also coincide.

Like my aunt, my cousins abruptly left lives to which they had not, perhaps never, been reconciled. I think about my own leaving, a flight like so many others from a too familiar life, and I find that I, too, was and am unreconciled, both to the present and to what has become my past in the easily told stories of my departure and settlement. In those stories, lives and lifeworlds left can only appear in conflict with the life now lived or sought. Or they become merely interpretative keys to a later unfolding, a storehouse of lessons for lives that will have already surpassed them. **Just as my present life is surpassing and making fodder of these pasts.**

When I was around nine, a young girl a few years older than me whose name was Teresa became part of our household. She had run away from the house of the man to whom her parents had sold her and her siblings for a few sacks of rice. After years of regularly taking and fighting back his abusive blows to shield her younger brother and sister, she had had enough and decided to report the man to the police, who took her to the judge, my father. Fierce and indomitable, Teresa nevertheless consented to live with us, while my father looked for other families to take in her siblings. My parents put her through school, and she did some work in the house in exchange. It was an awkward relationship. Teresa was not my manang, not really a helper, not my sibling. The line dividing us was drawn, lifted, drawn again. We played together, we ate apart. I was not always kind. At nine, I felt threatened by the blurring of the differences between us and I would sometimes try to cement them. One day, while my siblings and I were playing “market” among ourselves with leaves, stones, and sticks for our wares and currency, Teresa drew us to her, showing us how to make birds, grasshoppers, bracelets, and rings out of the leaves of coconut trees, and at least for an afternoon of wondrous play, perhaps forever, I relented. I cannot say we ever became real friends, but we did share part of our childhood and perhaps something of ourselves.

After Teresa had left us, my spinster aunt decided to adopt Teresa’s younger sister, Dalisay, who appeared unscathed by the brutalities that had hardened and coarsened her older sister’s looks and ways. I occasionally saw Dalisay at family events and in visits to my aunt, but I did not meet Teresa again until more than twenty years had passed. My family had long moved to Manila, and I had long left the Philippines, having made another life for myself, including a family life, in a country I had once vowed never to settle in. I was now a scholar and teacher at a university in California, a place that was the epitome of the future-driven world from whose vantage point the world I grew up in was a cheap version of the pre-industrial stage. It seemed like several lifetimes had taken place in the great span of worlds that I had traversed. My American husband, daughter, and I were visiting with my family in Manila, and together we all made a trip to my hometown. Hearing of our visit, my aunt invited us to drop by, as Teresa and her husband were also visiting and Teresa had asked about me in particular. We approached the house, and Teresa came out to greet us, her own American husband in tow. She and I looked at each other with a mix of curiosity and recognition. When we were children, I remember such looks between us through which passed many unspoken thoughts and feelings. Now we exchanged no more than a few friendly words, constrained as we were by the awkwardness of our relationship and perhaps by the daunting immensity of life contents that filled the great breadth of time since we last saw each other. **It was I who could not speak, was embarrassed, ill at ease.**

My aunt and my mother did most of the talking, and we learned that Teresa had been a singer in a nightclub near the US military base before she got married and migrated to the US. Our elders prevailed upon her to give us a song on the piano, and she complied with an ease greater than that of simply an experienced performer. Her voice was warm and melodious, strangely out of sync with the harshness of the life I remembered her having lived and imagined her continuing to live after she left us. In between her singing, she exchanged both light and aggressive banter with her husband, whose bored, cruel amusement in taunting her seemed to me characteristic of a certain underclass of white men relishing their found power over an underclass people, examples of which I had seen plenty of in the tourism- and military-dominated areas of the country. But Teresa was unfazed and
unintimidated by this abuse. She seemed at least equal to it, able to check or send back every barb that came her way. I recalled the young girl I knew, the young girl I was.

I could see the aspects of Teresa's life that as a feminist I knew well—the conditions that disenfranchised third world women face and that we deplore, the devalued roles that are their options in a world economy in which their role is to service the lives of others. I do not know what Teresa saw about me and my life. I could certainly see what I might have seen and known of many others like her, and of many others like me. And yet, the things that I knew and could see were not the things I felt and experienced on that day we met again. While I could hardly ignore and would not want to belittle the obvious, objective chasm between our lives, I remember feeling the semblance and parallelism of our trajectories, the kindred turn of our respective fates shaped by unconscious covenants, potentials, and qualities provoked and animated in each other's witnessing company. Before her once again I felt I had somehow fallen short of an expectation I could only surmise. How was it that I was found wanting? It was not only that we both embarked on paths well-trodden by other Filipina women, paths of flight that had turned into forms of life, so familiar as to become national types. It was also that we were related—not by blood or law or even sentiment, but rather by a shared passage in a world we had together lived and made as children, a world we were still carrying forth and leaving behind long after the parting of our individual lives. We had once been companions in a world in whose survival and passing, as much as in our own, we were now also accomplices.

My cousins had become other people's helpers; our "helper" had become my cousin. More than the fungibility of our places or the social logics that make for that fungibility, more than the precariousness of the distinctions we take pains to make the ramparts of our souls, a precariousness heightened by the unmooring, wantonly ruinous consequences of machines of war and capital on the petty fates of supplemental humans—more than these facts, which figure in the rational account I reach for, are the untold ways we, in whose lives we had once been intimately involved, have made each other—ways we have swayed each other's life acts, curtailed or fostered each other's longings, cultivated and passed on intangible capacities and strengths, including the capacity to bear with the losses our own dreams might entail and the strength to remain nonetheless unresigned.

If I write only of early memories and such fleeting encounters, it is because they are what are most easily consigned to irrelevance and triviality compared to later events and friendships that would fit a proper narrative of political awakening. Yet these early experiences and the insoluble feelings they give rise to, even now, were openings through which I received the people and events that could be said to have politicized my understanding of the world, openings through which I came to those passions that continue to fuel my deepest political commitments and hopes, even commitments and hopes that I have yet to know and understand.

My daughter's name is Luna. It is easy to tell people about the famous Luna brothers to account for her name. Juan and Antonio Luna were Filipino revolutionaries who fought against the colonial power of Spain, one a painter, the other a general. Like many nationalists, their heroism was not without compromise, their valor and vision sullied by ignominious acts. It is easy to mention the first letter shared with her Jewish great-grandmother, on her father's side, who died shortly before my daughter was conceived and whose memory we wanted the letter to trace. But Luna is also the name of the town that Manang Masa was from, a town known for its stones—smooth, silvery flat disks and colored, egg-like stones on the coastal shore, like the stones that lay on the dry riverbeds, which became drier and drier for longer spells through the years, the once raging rivers of our province now mere trickles into the sea. It seems too far-fetched, this connection to a town I had only been to perhaps once or twice as a small child at a picnic by Manang Masa's childhood home. Manang Masa herself was unaware of the connection. When my partner and I brought our newborn to visit, she found the name we had chosen for our daughter strange. To name one's child is to utter a wish and a promise, to preserve a past and to will a future, and I could not say to Manang Masa, who had lived all her life not with us but with my aunt in the house beside ours, how or why this wish and promise bore the remembrance of her hometown and its stones, and her.
We cannot want to transform a world or a life to which we are reconciled. No day passes that does not offer evidence of the great and small degradations that we inflict upon others or that we suffer at the hands of others according to a grossly inequitable order of allocation of human value. We see this order reflected in the division between helpers and those whose lives they help, between supplementary actions and real deeds, between formative forces and experiences and true subjects and events, which our own stories of struggle seem destined to repeat, which this essay, with its circumspect equanimity of self shored up by experiences it cannot fully command or possess, unwillingly reproduces. Yet within this stringent domestic order, there can be found enactments of worlds that escape it, ways of living and acting, drives and capacities impossible to bind to the house rules of proper personhood, that are shared and passed on in unaccounted ways among the unreconciled.

At the age of five, I burned half my house down. No one knew how the fire had started. But I remember lighting the match in the room I shared with my manangs that set the house ablaze one Sunday morning. Weeks later, as the carpenters began rebuilding the house, my mother overheard me say, “They can build it up, but I will burn it down again!” My family and friends laugh at this story, which to them is all about me. But like all enabling fictions of the self, it is also about other people and other lives.

Feminism, Black and Blue

Ann duCille

I was not born a feminist, but I will die one. And it may be feminism that kills me. Not literally, I hope. This is not another essay about feminists stabbing each other in the back or about what white feminists have done to women of color and vice versa. Nor is it meant to be a black female rendition of Portnoy’s Complaint, although I certainly have my own set of frustrations and longings ripe for psychoanalysis. Rather, I want to use the occasion of having arrived at the age of sixty to reflect on the benefits and bruises of living gender-wise and race-conscious.

Those of us who reside at the intersection of race and gender difference have often been spoken and written of as doubly burdened. All subject positions are fraught in one way or another, but for the most part, I have refused to think of either aspect of my black female identity as a burden. I would gladly trade Michelle Obama’s svelte figure for my own, but beyond wishing away some too, too solid flesh, I would not choose to be other than who I am: a black woman of a certain age, experience, and education. I am painfully aware, however, that what I mostly think of as the great good gift of a black feminist consciousness, as well as a black female body, carries with it certain