

us becoming dutiful, liberal, colonial subjects, other parts of ourselves resisting with full force. And while we both have resisted the oppressive systems imposed on us, it is no surprise that in doing so, we have drawn many a bridge between us.

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ASIAN AMERICAN FEMINISM, LETTER WRITING, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF BREA(D)TH

LAN DUONG

This piece is dedicated to my homegirls from San José (Trang, Tam, Odine, and Linh) and in academia (erin, Isabelle, Linda, Thuy, Tram, and Yen). Thank you for letting me breathe in the many spaces we inhabit together.

I. THE VALUE OF HOME AND WORK

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American woman . . . *I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework.* Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but *today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle.*

—Merle Woo, "Letter to Ma," 147. (*my italics*)

Six years before the ground-breaking *This Bridge Called My Back* is published, I arrive from Việt Nam to a small town in Pennsylvania in 1975 as a refugee. I am almost three, with a cut to my bangs that runs across

my forehead like a bandit in an open field. Before this, I have no earlier memories of the country and the wars we left behind. We move soon after to San José, California, in 1980 to take refuge in the sun and be a part of the economic boom taking place in Silicon Valley at the time. My siblings and father are low-paid laborers in high technology for most of my life, bringing work home to assemble on the weekends—motherboards encrusted with spikes and pins—and taking side jobs at manufacturing plants on their “time off.” Their clothes always smell like industry by Friday. When I come to Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s anthology of Third World feminists and writers who sing laments and odes to community and collectivity, I am in graduate school, writing poetry part-time because, while it sustains and feeds me, I am too busy trying to tame this new language called theory.

I recount these markers of time and space in my childhood in order to, as Woo states, place the book, *This Bridge Called My Back*, “in a larger framework” and expound on the “breadth” that is possible in connecting the individual with the community, of linking the personal with the political, and back again. My refugee upbringing in San José, California, forms the spine for this short piece: here, I speak of being a refugee poet to celebrate how this foundational text was both a catalyst and a revolution for me, in recognizing how feminism speaks in many tongues, sometimes through the (maternal) body, and always heavy and dense with the braiding together of the stories and lives of others. *This Bridge Called My Back* gives me the language for the feminism I grew up with, a vocabulary to name the injuries of war and patriarchy in the making and breaking of men and masculinity. It has also helped me to appreciate the strength I share with my sisters and the women with whom I form an artistic and academic community.

THE REVOLUTION STARTS AT HOME¹

In particular, I am inspired by the writing of Asian American feminists and the ways they start their pieces talking about home and family and

1. From the title of the book *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

radiate outwards toward broader critiques of systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia embedded in U.S. society and national culture. In Merle Woo’s piece entitled “Letter to Ma,” she speaks of the history that bespoke her and called forth her identity as an Asian American, lesbian feminist. I was astonished to see the genre of epistolary writing, which I had thought was reserved mostly for white women writers of the Victorian era, serve Woo in speaking to one’s own family in a language that is at once loving toward her mother and father and rageful toward the racial and classist struggles that inhibit her place in the world.

II. STITCHING LETTERS TO MEMORY

*Dearest Mother, it's been twenty years, and this is the first time I've written.
Ever since I felt the milk on your breath and then was taken away during the
fall of Saigon, this is the first time I've written.*

Woo’s writing about home and homework, story and history, inspired me to write a poem called “A Letter to Mother,” which was born out of a desire to connect with my mother who was left behind in Việt Nam in 1975. That year, we took flight to the U.S. before the communists came to Saigon to claim victory over the country in a violent war fought across many decades and between many countries. My mother and I would not reunite for another twenty years, and even then, it was hard to reconcile the lost years between us, those years constituting a whole body of experiences and a vast breadth of memories.

My separation from her was an extension of the isolation I felt within my family in the place we called home. Though written to my mother, the poem dwelled on the separateness of our lives once we resettled in California. I wrote, “Father grows old. He adds too much salt to the fish now. He doesn’t know me / Sister 2 loves too many men / Sister 3 loves no one / Brother 2 needs to fight another war / And Father doesn’t know me.” The poem runs through stories about my mother that were told to me by my sisters. Providing stories like they were morsels of food, my sisters connected me to her, me to Việt Nam, and I devoured every curve of their words. In my poem, I noted the irony that while “I am the youngest, I am

most like her in my stout body and matronly calves," with "hips as wide as a basin," and in my "slender, jadeless fingers" that when placed together, and with the light peering through the gaps between them, foretold of our habit for spending too much money. They told me our hands held too little light, and never enough money. Even though I hold no memory of her taking care of me, it's these details that I have kept in the lining of my skin many years after.

The poem, and more broadly, my poetry, is also an homage to the other women in my life, those women who are my sisters and whose strength and rage inspire me to name what white liberal feminism doesn't see. My sisters and I spent years sleeping together, our limbs entangled, our memories seeping into our blood. For a long time, I knew no other love than this: my sisters shielding me from my father's words and blows, my sisters carrying me through the fire, my sisters teaching me what strength is and what weakness means, what joy is to be had in creating beauty, life, art. Their heartache and the way we love are stitched into the seams of my poetry. Their fury fuels mine, their stories feed me within a house ruled by a father who bruised them with military-issued hands. In our home in San José, I witness their strength and vulnerability and their fights against patriarchal rule and social norms. They forge personhoods that are too much for my father to bear years later when he is, finally, weak, and enfeebled. Western feminist theory cannot begin to describe this.

THEORY TURNED FLESH

In the home I grew up in, where I was without a mother but with many sisters, I was part of and participated in a feminist practice—of making home livable and inhabitable for us women. And when I was in graduate school, squirreled away in a carrel at the library, where it was dark and quiet, I found in the *This Bridge* a bridge between home and the world, between the work of homemaking and homeworking that we women did for our family. It is something we still do in fact. I think of my sisters and, relatedly, of the community I want to be a part of in creating and forming—a radical community of color that is committed to revolutionary thought and action. *This Bridge* compelled me then and now to think about the ways in which the home is the site of revolutionary feminist

thought, one that is as transnational and radically transformative as our lived experiences require it. The book, and the words contained in it, have provided me with a way to bridge my scholarly and personal life, my creative and critical worlds, in ways that have framed my thinking and feeling about feminism and importantly, my voice and place in it. Its bold language of assertion and anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist stance has helped me make sense of the wilderness that was the Vietnam War and my refugee childhood, enabling me to negotiate the language and class barriers that one makes in that crucial passage from student to scholar, from witness to writer. Indeed, *This Bridge Called My Back* has given me the grounding to say: I am a first-generation Vietnamese American refugee writer and scholar, and I have come to feminist language through my poetry and scholarship.