

## Prologue: A Chicana Lesbian Scholar's Tale

*There is, let us say, a mystery at the heart of the fiction we are reading. The reader — the detective — goes in search of clues. How does she know what is a clue and what is a simple object or event, innocent of significance?*

*The master detective assumes initially there is no such thing as an innocent object or event. She stops along the way interrogating lamp-posts and dead cats, incidentally making herself ridiculous to passersby. But gradually, through great patience and a little luck, she amasses enough by way of object and event that when spread out all across her bed, or her breakfast table, or even her living room carpet they begin to group themselves into little piles of similarity. Aha, says the detective at the end of much rumination, and sends out little notes inviting the well-dressed suspects into the drawing room for a scene of revelation and finally accusation.*

—SHEILA ORTIZ TAYLOR, *SOUTHBOUND*

I have spent the past ten years as a private detective, investigating the stories, the authors, the journals and anthologies, scrutinizing notes on contributors, peering through dusty photographs of authors, jotting notes in my tattered little notebooks. Ashamed, yet excited, I waded knee-deep into stories, into drama.

One detective alone does not make a case. I encountered other detectives in those means streets, those university libraries, those women's centers. Our eyes would meet over the stacks, and each would tip her hat, acknowledging the contribution of the other, but wary of letting slip any new clues.

I never meant to become a detective, an archivist, or a theorist. I only liked the stories. Sure, doll, that's what they all say: "Honest, sister, I was just reading the stories." Right. All the time, they're packing into the Book Garden, Mama Bear's, Sisterhood, Old Wyve's Tales, A Different Light,<sup>1</sup> come to hear the latest piece by the latest Chicana dyke author, waiting to hear if her fantasies match theirs, wear the same clothes, battle the same demons. Then they all run home with their heads full of stories, scribbling in their own little notebooks. I've heard it all before. All scholars are closet writers. We couldn't help it if we tried. I can spend ten years in research, but until I put it in writing, who's to know?

So this is my story. I'll tell it to you over a cup of joe. No fog, no fedoras, just another tale from another girl dick. It won't have the narrative closure you've come to expect, or begin at the beginning. In the beginning was the word, don't you know that by now? So I'll start with the word, and make flesh out of the details. If you want more than that, you'll have to go to the source.

I remember when I first started coming around here, telling people I studied Chicana lesbian writing. Might as well be up front about it, scare off the homophobes right away, deal with the crushes later. Still some white male graduate student, peering down from his superior height, responded, "Really? I shouldn't think there was a dissertation in that." Or a job. Or a future. But I stuck to my guns. Just you wait, brother, *la revolución*, she's a-coming, and you medievalists will be the first against the wall.

It was years before someone started asking the right questions. Not just who are you studying? But *what* about Chicana lesbian writing? What are you arguing? What are you finding? Where are you going with all of this? Because the stakeouts alone don't make the case, doll. You've got to write it all up, put the pieces together for the reader, the audience, the judge, the jury.

So now you be the judge, as I tell you that all stories start in the past, in the memory, in the fantasy of what once was or will be or has been or is now . . .

It all started with a story. About a Chicana on vacation in the Yucatán.<sup>2</sup>

Ah, the guilty parties begin to stir, writer and readers both. Yes, that's the one. And whether you love it or you hate it, it all comes down to the same thing: it is Chicano fantasy writ large with a lesbian pen. And it made my (heterosexual) advisor furious.

And it made my (heterosexual) (feminist) friends furious. And me, well it made me curious, about what they were finding so upsetting, about what it meant that Ixtacihuátl, the Aztec Princess, had come to life and said to esa Chicana dyke, I want you baby, I want you to want me.

And some folks say she's butch, not into roles, or "classically lesbian." I say she shows that desire is *pocha*. That what Chicana lesbians want is to be loved, to be claimed, to go back to the very beginning.

From Ixta to Maya to Gloria to Josefa to Catalina to Xochitl to Juana to Concepción to the unnamed lover, to the unnamed beloved, to Chulita, to Esmeralda, to Esperanza, to Lucha, to René, to every butch fantasy, every hot *sirena*, every *sinvergüenza* has a story.<sup>3</sup> This city's full of stories, and so is 'Burque and San Pancho and Falfurrias.

From the butch who turns straight girls o-u-t to the femme who goes to the nightclub with her favorite dildo in her handbag.<sup>4</sup>

They've all got their stories, and most of them will get you in trouble. I've got the *chisme* on all of them, written down in this little notebook. Or the one in my office, in my study, in my filing cabinet, under my mattress, on my laptop.

I've met women of history, both real and imaginary; Chicana lesbians born before there was a border, gachupine nuns, cross-dressing *conquistadoras*,<sup>5</sup> heroes to claim or problematic figures to ponder over. Women living in the shadow of the Alamo, the shadow of a man, someplace not here.<sup>6</sup> Women wielding machetes, tarot cards, black orchids, size-nines,<sup>7</sup> words.

Recently, I was disciplined in an English department, where I would tell unbelieving Victorianists that I regularly encounter the artists I study. The authors I talk about, talk back. If they react defensively, it's because they're real women (and men) who have been disrespected, scapegoated, threatened, and vilified. Who began to write fearing for their lives but who nevertheless continue to write, and to nurture young writers.

I love being a critic because it gives me the opportunity to give their work the attention it deserves. I get to be the reader who recognizes the allusions to Aztec Princesses, to corridos, to lesbian bookstores and coffee shops. I get to be the reader to whom the author doesn't have to prove she is queer enough, Chicana enough, lesbian enough, Mexican enough, feminist enough. (Enough is enough!)

My job is to link the stories with the clever remarks, to teach the significance of the work, whether in print or in the classroom. My job

is to gather lost stories and tell them to new generations of women and men who never knew what came before. Who never knew that Sheila Ortiz Taylor published *Faultline*, “the first Chicana lesbian novel,” in 1982.<sup>8</sup> My job is to remind old-school nationalist *machistas* that influence doesn’t only flow in one direction, that queer Chicana art and fiction is important not only for what it says about queer Chicanas but also for what it says about Chicano/a culture, about American society.

And so to you, my judge and jury, my teachers and my students, you artists and authors and performers, I will introduce my cases and lay before you the facts and fictions.

**With Her Machete in Her Hand**

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