

dont nobody care nothing about black folks these days. we is definitely not in vogue. this season we are not the rage. aint nobody even seriously courting our vote during this presidential election year. and you know what happens when a black woman opens her mouth to say anything other than do it to me! do it to me! do it to me daddy do! dont you? havent you had enough of that? or are you a masochist? or a fool?

see? thats why i would rather be somewhere getting my nervous breakdown over with so i can move on. cuz you know that i know that all this doubting is a trap laid out in the patripower days of long ago to keep me/us from doing what we know got to be done. but it sure would be nice that while i was finishing with the nervous breakdown someone else was writing the introduction. it would be a sensitive loving understanding piece of writing that would tell you what you need to know about me and about the stuff in this book so that you can get the most out of it. but no i cant even do that. i got to sit here and write this introduction myself and tell you that i was born into this life the child of houseniggahs and that i been struggling trying to get home ever since.

september 9, 1980

In Search of the Self As Hero: Confetti of Voices on New Year's Night A Letter to Myself Nellie Wong

You want to run away and hide now, become a breeze beneath a willow tree, a breath from the dragon's mouth, a blade of grass struggling skyward to shoot above the ground, not to be squashed like an ant, not to be forgotten perhaps like an Asian prostitute. These past few days now, that have become years of memories and dreams, of work and struggle, of becoming and living, you shiver in the fleece of your inkblue robe, wondering why you tiptoe down the stairs to write, to face your typewriter like a long, lost friend, welcoming her this New Year's Night.

You don't question the urgency to write, to express yourselves, your innocence and naivete, your conflicts and passions, your doubts and beliefs, as a woman, a writer, a feminist, a poet, an Asian American, a secretary, a thlee yip nui, a wife, trying to learn the business of life: the act of loving. You have come away from a weekend of workshops at the Modern Language Association conference, absorbed the words and thoughts of writers like yourselves, provoked by the hate and love directed at a book by Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*—for you a book of brilliance, of love and anger, becoming an art form, a testimony and vision of one Chinese American woman's world.

Ah, but you ask, *who determines Chinese American culture, Asian American sensibility?* These opponents to the art of Maxine Hong Kingston, or to the confetti of voices fluttering from the past, voices still yet to be heard, to be written down?

Who are you who has written a book of poems, who has stored away over ten years of fiction, poems and prose? Who are you who describes herself as an Asian American Feminist, who works and writes toward that identity, that affinity, that necessary self-affirming love? And you ask yourselves if you must retreat, scared rabbits, into the forests of your own imagination, your own prisons and clearings, your entanglements of words versus concepts, of dreams versus reality, of expression versus interpretation, of language versus life, knowing in all your sensibilities as a woman writer that you face the struggles head on. You know there is no retreat now, no avoiding the confrontations, the debates and disagreements between what is art and what is

not art which for you also means: what is Asian American feminist art and politics?

If you sing too often of woe, yours or your sisters', you may be charged with being "too personal," "too autobiographical," too much a woman who cries out, who acknowledges openly, shamelessly, the pain of living and the joy of becoming free. You believe, almost too simply, that you are establishing your own traditions, becoming your own role model, becoming your own best friend, your own accessible hero. In so doing you do not deny human relationships, but acknowledge them, want them and fight for them. And you are angered by the arrogance of some articles that would tell you that Virginia Woolf is your spiritual mother, your possible role model, for the work you have to do: to write. And why are you angered except for the fact that she was white and privileged, yet so ill that she walked into the sea.

And now you have discovered Ding Ling, China's most prolific woman writer, a feminist, a communist, a loving, fighting woman, whose stories gleam, bright lights in the dark of China's past. Ding Ling, imprisoned for expressing her anguish, her love and compassion for China's women, for recording the conditions of their lives. Ding Ling, attacked for her feminism, supposedly bourgeois, individualistic, impeding the movement of communism in her native land. Now there is information trickling out that she is writing again, silenced for so many years. Now you want to search for more of her work, jewels you want to hold in your own hands. Now you want to share her work, to discover the links between the women of China and the women of Chinese America, to find the grandmothers you wish to adopt.

In your search you do not deny the writings of Hisaye Yamamoto, or Wakako Yamauchi, Jade Snow Wong or Maxine Hong Kingston, Jessica Hagedorn or Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge. However, you deny these women as role models because your experiences are not theirs. Their experiences are not yours though you assimilate them because the range of human experience tickles your solitariness, your desire to become pluralistic, a free spirit soaring into the north and south poles of everywoman's existence. You respect these writers, your contemporaries, and yet you do not only hear their voices simply because you must carve out your own destiny: a woman hero, an adventurer, a doer, a singer, an actor, fearless with the length of your own body, the depth of your dark seeing eyes, the sounds of your typewriter keys. And you ask: *where have you gone and what have you done?* You don't have the time to count the poems, the stories, the outpourings of grief and joy, but they are there in your file cabinet, they are there in your mind, and they are there flowing through your bloodstream. They are

there as surely as you awaken each morning and shower and shower, happy as a hummingbird, content to let the water fall over your body, splash it and splash it, while you soap your ears and underarms, while you shampoo your hair, while you have a few moments alone to let the thoughts and impulses pour into song, rhythm, poems, life.

Could you have become a recluse, simply an observer of life, content to roam by the sea, thinking and dreaming and stopping to eat only when you had to? Could you have become a hobo, an alcoholic, a sleeping princess, content to live through the deeds and accomplishments of others? And what is this adventure, this hunger, that roars in you now, as a woman, a writer, an Asian American, a feminist? And why? And what is this satisfaction, this self-assuredness, of individuality, of spirit, of aloneness? And finally, what is this thrust toward community, toward interaction with women and men, this arrow toward creativity, toward freedom?

You have the support of friends and sister writers. You have the love of your husband and your siblings, and yet you turn from them, run with this force, this necessity, this light toward art, toward politics and writing. In the doing and expressing, in the organizing, cutting and filing, in the hours you spend in your study on a bright Sunday afternoon, you wonder why it seems simple to remove yourselves from other people. You think you could have become a minister, or a nun, judging and commenting on philosophy, on morality, on the complexities of human life, on the injustice of human beings oppressing other human beings. You have no answers. You have questions and more questions about violence against women, against children, against ethnic minorities, against gays. You only understand that you must try to answer your questions. You think at times you can answer them alone, but that is impossible because you live and work as a social being in this material, physical and economic world.

If you desire freedom, total freedom, you ask, does it mean that you must die? You are unafraid, but you think of the dead, of the dying. Of women like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, writers who killed themselves, poets you've admired; of two Asian American teenaged sisters who committed suicide because their father opposed their dating Hispanic boys. You think of your cousin who hung himself in Las Vegas, his hearing gone, his son alienated from him. You think of your father who died of cirrhosis of the liver, who brought your mother and three sisters to America. You think of your mother who died of stomach cancer, who desired her own fur coat, her own grandson; and of Bok Gung, a cook, a gentle old man, a pioneer, a grandfather, who died at home in his rented room above Hamburger Joe's in Oakland's Chinatown. And is the question that of mortality and how you desire to

become immortal, and not be a fool, a real human being? You a mortal, you a woman, who does not want to be small in any sense of the word. You a poet, you a feminist, who seeks beauty in and beyond the ordinariness of the everyday world.

You talk of children and yet you have none. You talk of writing and leaving a part of yourselves to daughters and sons, their daughters and sons, so they will discover for themselves the heart and minds of Asian Americans, particularly the women who are struggling in this fight for freedom. You don't understand why you have this vision, of leaving work, signs and clues, knowledge and art, stones, however rough or polished, for people you will never know. You realize you will be gone when the questions of the future arise like wildflowers on the plains of this earth. You want to be a part of a legacy and so you write and write, questioning and exploring, not knowing if what you write will become a part of America's freedom song, not knowing if there is a rainbow.

You believed once in your own passivity, your own powerlessness, your own spiritual malaise. You are now awakening in the beginnings of a new birth. Not born again, but born for the first time, triumphant and resolute, out of experience and struggle, out of a flowing, living memory, out of consciousness and will, facing, confronting, challenging head-on the contradictions of your lives and the lives of people around you. You believe now in the necessity and beauty of struggle: that feminism for you means working for the equality and humanity of women and men, for children, for the love that is possible.

You rub your legs in this cold room. You shiver when you recall your own self-pity when you had no date on New Year's Eve, when you regretted the family gathering because it reminded you that you stood out, a woman without a man, a woman without children. Now you are strengthened, encouraged by the range of your own experiences as a writer, a feminist, an organizer, a secretary. Now you are fired by your own needs, by the needs of your sisters and brothers in the social world, by your journey toward solidarity, against tyranny in the workplace, on the streets, in our literature and in our homes. You are fueled by the clarity of your own sight, heated by your own energy to assert yourselves as a human being, a writer, a woman, an Asian American, a feminist, a clerical worker, a student, a teacher, not in loneliness and isolation, but in a community of freedom fighters. Your poems and stories will do some of the work for you, but poems and stories alone aren't enough. Nothing for you is ever enough and so you challenge yourselves, again and again, to try something new, to help build a movement, to organize for the rights of working people, to write a novel, a play, to create a living theater that will embody your dreams and vision, energy in print, on stage, at work that will assert the will of

an independent, freedom-loving woman, that will reflect a sensibility of Asian America, of feminism, of sharing food and wealth with all the people, with all your kin.

And you will not stop working and writing because you care, because you refuse to give up, because you won't submit to the forces that will silence you, a cheong hay poa, a long steam woman, a talker, a dancer who moves with lightning. And you are propelled by your sense of fair play, by your respect for the dead and the living, by your thlee yip American laughter and language, by your desire to help order the chaotic world that you live in, knowing as the stars sparkle on this New Year's night that you will not survive the work that still needs to be done in the streets of Gold Mountain.