

# Varied VOICES

## A Conversation with Lillian Allen: Reggae Roots of Revolution

Interview by Elizabeth Min

In Celebration of International Women's Day, Redwood presented its first commissioned collaboration in March of 1991 — "Sister Hold On," with Redwood recording artist Lillian Allen, choreographer Akili Denianke and the Harambee Dance Ensemble. "Sister Hold On" was a collaboration blending dub poetry, reggae music and Afro-Caribbean dance, and was supported by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Oakland Arts Council.



Photo: Kathy Sloane

LILLIAN ALLEN WITH MEMBERS OF THE HARAMBEE DANCE ENSEMBLE

*I loved your performance last night with the Revolutionary Tea Party Band and the Harambee Dance Ensemble. And clearly so did all 1200 people who were there. They were up on their feet! Was there a central idea you and Akili built on artistically?*

Fighting and surviving. We decided to lead with "Sister Hold On", a piece I'd already written. We then pulled in other pieces that dealt with the idea of holding on and fighting back. Fighting and surviving became the central idea of the show.

*continued on page 2, column 1*

## An Interview with Emily Shihadeh

By Susan Freundlich

*Emily Shihadeh is a Palestinian actor and activist. In the Spring of 1991 she appeared in a one-woman show Grapes and Figs are in Seasons: A Palestinian Woman's Story. The play tells the story of her life growing up in Ramallah. Here are excerpts from a conversation following the opening of Grapes and Figs at the American Conservatory Theatre Playroom.*

*Emily, what do you think people in the U.S. don't understand about Palestinians?*

They don't understand our humanity, our culture, our ways of communication. They don't understand that our lands and homes were taken by force from us. They don't understand our pain, our loss and our fight for justice...

You know American movies, TV programs and movies, editorials, even cartoons have put us down, ridiculed us and humiliated us. These kind of things eat at my heart, have been repressed in my body.

We have to do political and educational work beginning in kindergarten ... i.e., you might say "See this other child? He looks different from you but he likes to play with the ball just like you. She laughs and cries just like you ... we are all citizens of the world and we can't work things out with war anymore. War is obscene ... stupid ... obsolete."

*I loved "Grapes and Figs are in Season". And you were so wonderful. What kind of role do you see for artists today?*

You know I was talking about artists in the interview. I said that if there is a battlefield, artists should be there along with sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists... we need more study of people, why things happen and more heart. So many politicians have lost touch with their heart and their humanity.

*continued on page 5, column 1*

For me, it was very clear when you were on the stage that you were a strong, grown woman who had done a lot of fighting. But it was also easy for me to imagine you growing up, building your skills and playing with words. What were you like as a girl? Did you always write?

I was always active, ever since I was five I was teaching adults to read and write — I grew up in Jamaica. My dad would have people come over at night to learn to read and write. I would go with my dad when they were changing over from pounds and pence to dollars. He would go into the countryside to tell people about that, and I would go with him and help him.

Photo: Kathy Sloane



LILLIAN ALLEN

*Was he a teacher?*

No, he was a civil servant but he was a very active person so he managed to open a lot of doors that way. He was always very much in touch with the community.

*At what point did you get into poetry?*

It wasn't so much poetry as an appreciation of words and speaking. In the community people told jokes and stories. Going to church, not when the boring preachers were there, but going when the interesting storytellers, the damn and damnation people talked. I liked the excitement.

*What church did your family go to?*

It was Methodist Baptist. Also, occasionally right beside our yard, when I was much younger, this fundamental church would set up a little stage and they would preach. More drama. That was my cultural context. I had a real understanding of communication and a real enjoyment of the festivity and drama of the language. The way to move people, the way to make people feel, to make them come over. I always had that feeling. So then you go to school and they try to kill it. Or the critics need some credential and kill the life out of it. Then you know something is going on.

*In your show, you spoke several times about courage. What is your personal source of courage and where do you get your confidence to do this unusual art form?*

I don't remember who said it. Could have been Rosa Parks who said, "When I look around me and see how things are and I look at my progress, I just get overwhelmed and immobilized. But if I get up and start to do something about it, any kind of problem for anybody, then somehow

I move on." Right? I think if you do that, then after awhile you learn and begin to trust that you do have the power to transform. That in the midst of oppression and exploitation that you can maintain your humanity. And that is one thing that they really can't take away from you. Only if they take your life. They can take everything and beat and strip you of all of that, but you yourself can go on and hold on and find a way to move. The more you move, the more you see that there are options and there are roads. Also you need to have some kind of understanding that you are not unique in the world. And that in one way, the development of the system is quite arbitrary, in terms of the cosmology of things. You could as easily have been born white. The whole system of exploitation builds around what

I consider to be free black labor. That is the basis of the system. The exploitation of the land and the resources that the native peoples have had to endure, that is the foundation of exploitation. Our cultures were not interested in building the Tower of Babel. We were interested in relating to people with life and meaning. When we came up against greed, that's where they overtook and started accumulating power. Once they had done that, we were no match. We weren't in that arena.

*Is there a particular incident for you that kicked you into actually writing poetry? Was it a growing awareness? Your pieces are so story-oriented.*

Being a poet is almost incidental. It has to do with my activism, with my political awakening. My awakening came pretty early on. My church was my major social life outside of school, but I couldn't do with rules. I thought, I'm not God but I wouldn't let anybody burn. Why does he have to be so mean? At 9 or 10, I asked the minister, why would anyone want to burn up people? If they're wrong, they can probably change. I couldn't understand. And then some people had so much. And there were others that had so little and had so hard a time making ends meet. I kept thinking, they must have 50 hours in their day. Nobody worked harder than the people I knew and they had so little. So I started thinking about those things and it made me realize that we'd been had. The system tells you all you have to do is work hard, study hard, be good, lighten up and whiten up, and you're going to make it. Right? So we all bought into that. Nobody works harder than people who are slaves. What the hell is going on? We are believing this? So very early I had that awareness and it was a big conflict at school, where I wanted to challenge the system and ask what's going on?

That became the driving force in terms of what kind of material I found meaningful and interesting to write. My life, you know. I wanted to say the things that nobody else would say were true.

*Dub poetry seems to be about truth. Can you talk about Louise Bennett? What kind of woman is she?*

Growing up in the '30s and '40s in Jamaica, you had a very formal education which taught you must do very well and maybe one or two could become a doctor or a lawyer, if they had money. She grew up in that. If you did really well and you didn't have money, you could become a teacher or bank clerk. If you had lighter skin, you did better. But there were other people in the culture who seemed quite happy to be doing what they were doing. They weren't doctors or lawyers or bank clerks and they were pissed off at not having enough. So they spent a lot of time being critical, but they didn't spend all their time trying to get. I think that opened it up for someone like me. Louise Bennett was writing at a time when the schools insisted on using the formal language and not the people's language. Not for people who couldn't quite pull together the King's English or who came from the rural areas and were called "country bumpkin." It was a real class thing. So the thing was that Louise was a beacon, because amidst all of this "culture's bad" and "people you will amount to nothing," Louise Bennett, although she had an opportunity to be a professor and was university-educated, her solidarity was squarely with the people. She came back and was patronized like hell. She was excluded from the literary culture and at most she was considered a comedian.

*So how did she get her work out?*

She took her stuff around the country. She went around the country and went to work in communities, not the literary circles or elite circles, but the music circles, community circles, and the festival circle.

*Did she use music with poetry as well?*

She didn't use music, no. Maybe occasionally. You know, I'm very drawn to culture. And also my dad was involved in the festival life. They would have festivals where you would compete in poetry, drama and so on. My father was part of that — and I would be involved too. So Louise would come and work in the community. Then she started to appear on radio. Then she had a book out. She is probably the best known in Jamaica. There, she was a house hold word. I consider the thing that she was doing in her time very revolutionary. She gave the Jamaican people permission to be themselves. She was the first to say "you are yourself — get up."

*Because she said it in words, in poetry?*

Because she said it in words that made Jamaicans feel whole, without having to be a super race. In words that

didn't talk about what the media put out as popular culture. She talked about the market lady, about mass weddings — where white folks came and organized mass weddings. She talked about the politicians. There was nothing that was sacred. She talked about the stupidity within the society. About our sadness and our joy. She talked about everything. In terms of a spirit of cultural empowerment, I think you can say she was the first. Everyone before that was practically British; they didn't come from the people's culture.

*You are coming out with a new album or two?*

I'm going to do two albums by the end of the year. One by end of spring. With music.

*Are you a musician yourself?*

No. Actually, it's a curious thing but dub poets are usually not musicians.

*You looked like a pretty good band leader the other night. I thought the connection between the bass lines and the words worked really well. The work seems very grounded to the bass.*

*You learn and begin to trust  
that you do have the power to  
transform ... that in the midst  
of oppression and exploitation  
— you can maintain your  
humanity.*

Yeah, the bass is what I feel. I think that the bass in the reggae is the heartbeat. I think that in the way it's played it has revolutionary intentions.

*What do you mean by that?*

It has certain possibilities. There is something out there that we don't know, but we're going to get there. That's how I hear it and that's the instrument I hear.

*You know, Oakland is a center for rap. What's the connection between dub poetry and rap?*

Well, I think it's reality in black culture that you have a spectrum. You have the storytellers and the preachers, comedians, politicians beyond that. Then you go over to the work songs and music, all kinds. So I don't think there's a line. I think it's a spectrum and you've got more or less on this side or that. Rap in itself, its development has been traced to Jamaican DJs. DJs went to New York

and started to DJ over rhythms. And then, New Yorkers started to do that within their own cultural context.

*You won JUNO awards for your first two albums — for very revolutionary music — it seems that would never happen here with our Grammy Awards.*

The thing with the Juno Awards was that we had a panel of experts to do it. And the panel of experts were people who were taken from the reggae community for that category, because the people in the mainstream industry don't know how to judge these forms and probably don't care. So it was a major accomplishment to have gotten a panel. They go across the country and talk to producers, radio and adjudicate. So the Juno's are taken out of the industry influence.

*That's a political act in itself.*

That's the way that happened, yeah. But the struggle for black artists, even within the arts community, is still great. I can count the Black artists who are visible on one hand. What artists don't realize is that they have to change, they have to give something up. You can't be perpetrating a racist practice and doing art that reinforces stereotypes and forms the basis for exploitation. So for me, when they talk about censorship, it's nationalism and censorship that are issues for white artists. White Canadian nationalism. I'm interested in the censorship of the society, of capitalism. The sense that our essential lives as women and people of color, are so one-dimensional and exploited — that's what I want to talk about. I think that our lives are being censored. And when you talk about stereotyping, I think that's a major form of censorship. And nationalism is very problematic. Nationalism is a strategy to reinforce and build the infrastructure with oppression. Nationalism as an ideology — I don't go for it. Nationalism is in the consciousness of white Canada and I don't want to be part of that.

*What are some of the particular challenges of being an artist and being a parent? How old is your daughter?*

She's nine. In terms of time challenges — you're a mother full-time, everything else fits around that. When you have a kid, you're well set for many years. She's my greatest work in progress and the one I'm most proud of. She's the source of a lot of inspiration, and a lot about the world. Young people make you see your own biases. Particularly in relation to kids. It seems we are very bigoted and biased about kids. A lot of people are going to be very sad when they wake up to that consciousness. Kids are full human beings.

*I know what you mean. I work with kids and I see them run over all the time. It's so widespread.*

Yeah, I'm going to start calling people on this. I've been thinking about it a lot. It's very incredible to me that with our level of consciousness that we still think kids are disposable. When we think about democratizing our work or accessibility, we don't think about young people. If we're not doing it for them, then why are we doing it? That's a problem with the feminist movement. We're out there organizing all these rallies and we hear a big speech by a politico and our kids are in the basement watching Cinderella. We have to carry on the tradition. Politically, we need to give them vision.

*Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?*

In general, I think culture is one of the most valid ways to accomplish anything. To mobilize, to communicate, a place where we give and a place where we get. It gives us an opportunity to be complete and to share.

*It was my sense that many in the audience Saturday night really loved the combination of art forms, and perhaps had not seen African dance, live reggae music or knew dub poetry. It all came across as being very fresh and also very old.*

Yeah, that's the path. 'Cause it depends on community, on a sense of belonging. You have to go way back. If you can't see in the past, you can't see in the future. ▼

**Elizabeth Min** is currently Artistic Consultant to Redwood Cultural Work. She is Artistic Director of Oakland Youth Chorus, where multicultural ensembles (ages 14 to 21) perform music from diverse global roots spanning four centuries. Elizabeth was also one of the founders of the nationally-acclaimed (Bay Area) Women's Philharmonic.

*Yes. I think people connect best heart to heart, sometimes avoiding their preconceived notions, or prejudices. Heart to heart, without a filter of fear which says "how can I protect myself from this person who I think is very different from me?"*

Yes, especially when we can see the commonality between us. When I speak about my parents, my sisters ... I have a line in the show about when I was getting married. I was 17. At the time I said, "Well, now I'm going to stop masturbating." I said this line to my stage manager, then said, "I don't think I should keep that line. I might offend Arabs who come and see the show." Her response was "I didn't know Palestinians masturbated." I said, "Good, I'm going to keep that line!" It just humanizes. Many Jewish people in my audience say to me, "Your music, your stories, they're my stories".

*Exactly! That's what I really believe — that we are so deeply connected — and that the rest of this is ...*

Garbage.

*Yes.*

You're Jewish.

*Yes.*

Ah ... bless your heart. You see, when I first came to this country I was 17. I felt so different from people here. I was a bride, not much self-confidence. I thought I was American because growing up in Ramallah, just ten miles north of Jerusalem, I wore blue jeans and I read comic books — Archie and Jughead. I was a Quaker. And the movies, Hollywood, all of that. I spoke English. So when I first came to America I was sure I was American. However, I quickly found out I wasn't. I was totally different, especially in San Francisco.

I was a small town girl — young woman. The warmth, friendliness, and knowing everybody, that I was used to, was missing. I had come to a very conservative, repressed, business-like society. I was freaked out, to be honest with you. I'd go downtown to the deli to get a sandwich. There would be all these different kinds of cold cuts and all these different kinds of bread ... in Ramallah we had one cold cut and one kind of bread! So I would stand there staring and someone would say, "Hurry up, what do you want? Move out of the way and let somebody else order!" To my soul it was so jarring, like poking a stick in my heart every time I got



EMILY SHIHADDEH

some of that! Except I wasn't aware then as I am now. On top of that, I realized with horror what people in this country thought of Arabs, Palestinians or Muslims.

The way they look at us. Oh God, it was a nightmare. The Americans in Ramallah were loving people. They came to our home, talked and ate with us. They were a different kind of Americans. Quakers — teachers in the Quaker schools. So I came to this country and I was very lonely until I met — do you know who? Jews. I could talk to Jews, I could hear them, understand them. I could share — there were feelings, emotions, passion, LIFE! Goddamn life! I began to realize what has happened to Americans. They've become dehumanized. Priorities have become what's good for your career. Going for that extra meeting, catching a plane, instead of spending intimate, healing time with people.

So this is the play. Grapes and Figs grew in the front yard of our house. My father loved fruits, and taught us how to love fruits — like all the beautiful things of Palestinian culture that have been trampled to the ground.

I realized that when I first came I didn't think I could speak. I didn't know what to say. Where do I start? I wanted to talk about Palestinians, about what had happened to us. Nobody knew about us. I remember talking to my pillow. At night, I went to bed, and I told these stories over and over again to my pillow.

*You were trying to heal the pain?*

Yes. I was trying to do something. This process developed slowly. What I started to do at first is speak — to tell our story. I didn't have much confidence in myself. I didn't think I had good enough grammar. I didn't think my stories were

important. But very slowly I started. I spoke at my child's school and got good results. I took some things from my house, some Palestinian things — some embroidery, and some olivewood, and some mother of pearl. I wrote my name in Arabic on the board, and I told them about my life. The kids were taking it all in. Slowly I spoke more and more. Today, when I speak, it's very personal, powerful. Yes, I learned in the process that I'm powerful, especially when I speak from my heart.

I spoke in synagogues and temples. I would say, "Listen. The creation of the state of Israel devastated us as Palestinians. You have to know that. But I say it not with

bitterness, I say it with love." And they feel it with love. Why am I able to get past the bitterness?

I used to be full of bitterness and misery. I would lash out at myself as if with a whip, putting myself down in every way. But with a lot of work, asking questions, doing therapy, seeking a spiritual life, the message came that my essence is beauty and love, kindness and decency, and my eyes began to see all this in other people too, in my enemy. I began to ask why do things happen? Why do people do what they do? Why do we hurt each other and ourselves? There are always reasons.

***Do you think the lashing out at yourself was the result of racism you had internalized?***

I am not sure I even like the word racism. I like to describe what happens rather than give it a name. To me, racism is ignorance that comes from people who have suffered, who are afraid, insecure, are have not been taught to go beyond.

Yesterday, this man was talking to me about racism in Israel. The word racism does not begin to describe the situation. Israelis are mostly people coming out of the Holocaust carrying a lot of unbearable suffering. They have directed their anger and bitterness towards Palestinians. We get abused, we abuse others. It is a circle we have to stop by introducing love, forgiveness, and humility. We have to say we're sorry for the hurt we have caused each other. We have all been oppressors of ourselves and each other. I was a young, angry, frustrated mother and I abused my children psychologically. I have written them one extensive letter of apology and we are still working things out.

Photo: Jan Watson



I am afraid. For the first time I believe that Israel might annex the West Bank. For the first time I believe that mass transference of Palestinians out of their homes, out of their country is a possibility. I am really afraid.

Terrible things are happening right now in the Middle East. They're doing what they want with people, treating them very badly, and getting away with it. It's almost like history repeating itself. People get away with things when no one is really watching.

On the second day of rehearsal for my show the war broke out. And for me that war represented everything oppressive that I've had to deal with. Every bomb that dropped on Iraq, felt like a stick beating on my body. I took it very personally. The unfairness of it. People were shocked ... maybe that's one of the good things about this war — that some Americans couldn't believe how such a thing could happen.

***So what is your hope for your audience? What do you want people to walk away with?***

I have a son who's very wonderful, very spiritual, very deep. He's 26 right now, but he's an old soul. He said to me, "Mom, they hear you. Whether they respond now, or whether they respond later, they are hearing every word you're saying."

I'm planting seeds. You see, I have a lot of faith in these little victories. This to me is very important. These are the kinds of things that will really bring peace. I did this show to put a human face on Palestinians. As simple as that. I just want people to know we are human beings. Not terrorists, belly dancers, ugly sheiks.

Palestinians today are suffering. I would like to be able to stop that. I can't, right now. I was talking with a dear of mine about the Passover Seder. I said to her,

"Jewish people keep repeating the story about slavery in Egypt. Well I don't think that's healing." I said, "If you want me to tell my children, and their children about what Israeli soldiers are doing to Palestinians now, is that healing? I don't think so." She said, "Yes, but we have to remember. We're working for peace here." I said, "Yes I know."

*I understand what you're saying. I went to a seder and had to get up from the table and walk away because I could not read one more time about how the Jews suffered as slaves in Egypt. I think it's time to stop saying this. It's not accomplishing anything. It helps to hold in place a kind of internalized oppression based on victimization, and shifts people's attention away from the horror that the Israeli government is perpetrating against Palestinians. Let's talk about that in our Seder.*

I've never heard anyone say that before. And you're Jewish. Never. As a matter of fact my friend got upset with me. "This is my dignity", she said.

*My dignity is about reaching out to another person. Saying let us be for each other, with each other. We don't have to compete over who has been hurt the most.*

I totally agree. I really think Israelis need to get together. To talk, and love and share. To find a higher power, or whatever you call it, God or Goddess. I believe I created my own God. And my God, my Goddess, my higher power is a combination of love, justice, decency, kindness, and beauty. And these qualities, they're not floating around out there in the world. They are inside of me, and inside of you. When I used to pray in the old days, I'd say, "Please God help me." I don't do that anymore. I say, "Please help me bring out my own qualities of beauty. Help me recognize them and express them." ▼

**Grapes and Figs** will run from August 22–September 22 at the Marsh at Cafe Beano in San Francisco, CA. Call 641-0235 for tickets.

Transcribed by Susan Mayo, Lezlie Frishman and Bea Andrade.

**Susan Freundlich** is currently the Development Director of Redwood Cultural Work, and is Editor of *Varied Voices*. She also works with *New Bridges*, a youth organization that works toward the elimination of social oppression by building alliances among people of diverse groups.

**Redwood Cultural Work is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. All contributions are tax deductible to the full extent allowable by law.**

## Our Wish List:

- ▼ Travel (frequent flyer) coupons for artist travel to concerts, and for Redwood staff use for fundraising, and conferences.  
*These are extremely helpful to us!*
- ▼ Printing donation for fall catalog, stationary
- ▼ Intern to work on Redwood Festival for 1992
- ▼ Copying machine
- ▼ Donations of food, bottled water and wine for special events
- ▼ Office furniture: computer chairs, and desk chairs
- ▼ An auto-reverse tape player to hook up to the phone system, so callers will hear Redwood music
- ▼ Video tape player (VHS)
- ▼ A video camera and playback monitor

Special thanks to Virginia King for our wonderful new CD player, to Susan Anderson for our new computers and laser printer and to Ethan Willard from People's Telecom for our modular cables!

We love our new equipment!

**Donations of goods and services to Redwood Cultural Work are tax-deductible at their current market value.**

# Intifada

by June Jordan

In detention  
in concentration camps

we trade stories  
we take turns sharing the straw mat  
or a pencil  
we watch what crawls in and out  
of the sand

*As-Salāmm 'Alaykum*

The guards do not allow the blue  
woolen blanket  
my family travelled far  
to bring  
to this crepuscular and gelid cell  
where my still breathing infant son  
and I  
defy the purgatory implications  
of a state-created hell

*Wa 'Alaikum As-Salām*

The village trembles from the heavy  
tanks that try  
to terrify the children:  
Everyday  
my little brother runs behind the rubble  
practicing the tactics of the stones  
against the rock.  
In January soldiers broke his fingers  
one by one. Time has healed  
his hands but not the fury that controls  
what used to be  
his heart.

*Insha Ā'llāh*

Close the villages  
Close the clinics  
Close the school  
Close the house  
Close the windows of the house  
Kill the vegetables languishing under the sun  
Kill the milk of the cow's left to the swelling of pain

Cut the electricity  
Cut the telephones  
Confine the people to the people

*Do Not Despair of the Mercy of Allah*

Fig trees will grow and oranges  
erupt from desert  
holdings on which plastic  
bullets (70% zinc, 20% glass, and 10%  
plastic) will prove blood  
soluble and fertilize the earth  
where sheep will graze  
and women no longer grieve and beat  
their breasts  
They will beat clean  
fine-woven rugs outside a house  
smelling of cinnamon  
and nutmeg

*Ahamdullilah*

So says *Iman*  
the teacher of peace  
the shepherd on the mountain of the lamb  
the teacher of peace  
who will subdue the howling of the lion  
so that we may kneel  
as we must  
five times beginning just after dawn  
and ending just before dusk  
in the *Ibādah*  
of prayer

*Allāhu Akbar*  
*Allāhu Akbar*  
*Allāhu Akbar*  
*Allāhu Akbar*

## Glossary:

*As-Salāmm 'Alaykum*: peace be unto you  
*Wa 'Alaikum As-Salām*: and peace be unto you  
*Insha Ā'llāh*: as/if Allah wills it  
"Do Not Despair of the Mercy of Allah": verse from  
*The Qur'ān*  
*Ahamdullilah*: praise be to Allah  
*Iman*: faith  
*Ibādah*: worship in a ritual sense  
*Allāhu Akbar*: Allah is the Greatest



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# The NEA Is the Least of It

By Barbara Smith

When I was growing up, my sister and I were so shy that family and friends inevitably commented on our “bashfulness.” I spent a lot of the first 18 years of my life seeing, thinking, and feeling, but not speaking.

Of course, my shyness, my efforts to erase myself, were not solely the result of my socioeconomic status. But looking back I'm sure that being born black, female, and working class in the mid-1940s affected my perception of how safe it was to speak, as well as made me question whether I even had the right to do so.

If it were not for political activism — the civil rights movement, black student organizing, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and particularly the feminist movement — I doubt that I ever would have learned to speak out. Fortunately, I also found a remarkable role model. I'd always loved books and writing, but almost everyone I know of who engaged in these activities was white. And then I discovered James Baldwin. Here was a black person who was simultaneously angry, sensitive, and analytical, and who wrote brilliantly about things that mattered to me.

Because of his passionate activism and command of craft, Baldwin fed my dreams of wanting to write. He proved that breaking silences, as a black gay man, can make a difference. To me, a lesbian feminist of color, silencing, censorship, and the need to challenge them have never been abstract. Long before the right wing began a focused attack upon government funding of artists who counter the status quo, it was clear to those of us who are multiply oppressed that our right to speak out, write, dissent politically, or merely exist are considered rebellious acts. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression have silenced far more people than the withdrawal of National Endowment for the Arts grants since the summer of 1989.

Of course, the campaign to place restrictions on the content of what the NEA funds has serious repercussions and potentially threatens the right of all individuals to

express themselves. In order to effectively fight these attacks, however, it should be understood that this growing repression is inherent in the capitalist political and economic system that engenders it. Attempts to suppress art are perfectly consistent in a historical period when access to legal abortion is being curtailed; hate crimes (often carried out by well-organized hate groups) against people of color, Jews, lesbians, gays, and women are skyrocketing; laws that protect basic civil rights have been weakened or overturned; the First Amendment rights

of radical, gay, Third World, and feminist teachers are under attack; the federal government engages in blatant union busting; and the United States sees fit to disrupt the governments of countries it views as threatening to its imperialist hegemony.

White middle-class artists are discovering that this system parcels out freedoms stingily and unfairly and withdraws them arbitrarily, depending upon the vagaries of the economy, foreign policy, and the electoral climate. It should surprise no one that a right-wing government would oppose the funding of work that is lesbian, gay, or sexually explicit, since art from these perspectives depicts alternatives to the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and the monogamous nuclear family, without which capitalism could not function.

But the silencing of lesbians and gay men of color takes many forms. The most galling is not being perpetrated by the NEA, but comes instead from *within* oppressed groups to which we supposedly belong.

A Euro-American lesbian and gay community up in arms about the NEA should consider how their all-white readings, exhibits, theatrical productions, conferences, and periodicals — or their token efforts to be inclusive — effectively silence lesbians and gay men of color. Tokenizing is a form of silencing too, because even if a person of color appears, it is not possible to share the range of her or his creativity when she or he is objectified and isolated.

Ironically, as this country moves further to the right, a large sector of the lesbian and gay community also becomes more conservative, focusing on electoral politics, legislative agendas, and lobbying. The upsurge in confrontation tactics and zap actions such as “outing” of apolitical

Photo: Judith McDaniel



BARBARA SMITH

Continued on next page

and reactionary public figures is not a sign of increasing radicalism, since it generally does not spring from a multileveled analysis of oppression or challenge oppression at its roots.

Racism and segregation are also alive and well in the feminist movement. There are still white women's organizations perplexed about how to do "outreach" to women of color, as well as white women who resent and obstruct efforts by women of color to organize autonomously. Although there are inspiring examples of radical women of color and radical white women working together politically, the bourgeois elements that dominate the movement are still characterized by exclusivity and tokenizing.

Even when the lesbian, gay, and feminist movements attempt to confront racism, a major obstacle is the assumption that it is feasible to address racism solely within movement contexts and to ignore its destruction of the society as a whole. When whites in these movements demonstrate a consistent commitment to speaking out and organizing offensives against racist violence, police brutality, homelessness, economic exploitation, and unequal access to quality education and health care, people of color can begin to take their anti racist actions seriously.

Sexism and heterosexism among people of color can be even more demoralizing since our racial, ethnic, and nationality communities have usually represented home, a physical and emotional place we could rely upon to help counter the effects of white domination. Since the late 1960s, despite criticism, ridicule, and ostracism, feminists of color — American Indian, Asian American, Latina, and African American — have spoken out about sexual oppression in our home communities.

In the African American community numerous controversies have focused directly upon work by black women writers. Reactionary forces have stated that we should not be allowed to address the realities of male supremacy and sexual violence in our writing, that to do so is somehow disloyal to the race. The nineties have ushered in a resurgence of black nationalism accompanied, not surprisingly, by more and more public expressions of misogyny. Shahrzad Ali's book, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman*, the lyrics of many rap songs, and the films of Spike Lee are only three popular examples. In this climate it is crucial for black women writers to continue to speak out.

Heterosexism within communities of color is undoubtedly the most volatile of the issues that lead to internal censoring and silencing. The closet itself is a form of censoring and erasure that the heterosexual majority imposes in order to maintain its privilege. The ones who

are fascist carry out crimes of violence against us, including murder. The ones who are liberal claim that they do not mind if we exist, just so we don't call attention to that fact.

As a black lesbian writer, my entire career has been affected by the reality of homophobia in my racial community, and I've devoted much of my work to challenging it. In early 1988 Joseph Beam and I drafted a statement, which was signed by 20 black lesbian and gay writers, about the silencing we experience at the hands of the black literary establishment. We presented the statement at the Second National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn. It stated in part:

"We are well aware that despite our commitment to exploring gender roles and to challenging sexual, racial, and class oppression, work that has been essential to transforming the practice of African American literature in this era, the Black literary establishment systematically chooses to exclude us from the range of its activities. These include participation in conferences, invitations to submit work to journals and anthologies, serious and non-homophobic criticism of our writing, positive depictions of Lesbians and Gay characters, inclusion in Black studies course curricula, and all levels of formal and informal mentoring and support. If we are sometimes included in token numbers, it is often amid heterosexist protest and homophobic attacks."

Despite our fears, our reading of this statement was met with widespread applause and a public invitation from the conference director to help in planning the next conference.

The final aspect of silencing I want to examine is that of the closet itself. I constantly hear about prominent and productive African American women — writers, artists, and political figures — who could share the responsibility of changing our community's attitudes, but who have instead chosen to hold onto the secrecy of their closets. There are real and sometimes dangerous sanctions against being out, and there are lesbians and gays who do not have the option: who might, for example, lose jobs, housing, or custody of their children. The individuals I am referring to, however, have secure academic positions or are successfully self-employed, yet still refuse to take a political stand.

It is ironic that those of us who have helped to build the lesbian, gay, and feminist movements have made it a lot easier for them to have their relationships with other women "in private." A handful of out lesbians of color have gone into the wilderness and hacked through the seemingly impenetrable jungle of homophobia. Our closeted sisters come upon the wilderness, which now is not nearly as frightening, and walk the path we have

cleared, even pausing at times to comment upon the beautiful view. In the meantime, we are on the other side of the continent hacking through another jungle.

At the very least, people who choose to be closeted can speak out against homophobia whenever it occurs. Like principled heterosexuals, they can protest the oppression without having to come out themselves.

The depth of this problem was brought home to me last November. I had been on a panel during a weekend of events celebrating the twentieth anniversary of co-education at Yale. The next day a black woman graduate student drove me to the airport. I meet hundreds of students each year, but I still remember Tonnia. It wasn't only because she was so bright, and planned to use her talents in the working-class African American community from which she'd come. I remember her because of the urgent questions she put to me about how she might survive as an out black lesbian artist in the decades that lay before her. Her questions reminded me of my own at her age when there were even fewer signs one could be a black lesbian and live to tell about it.

At one point I said, "You don't have many role models, do you?" Just saying the words made me furious because it struck me how the black women writers, academics, and politicians who protect their closets never think about people like Tonnia or about how their silences contribute to the silencing of others.

From my own experience I know that it is quite possible to provide support to students of all races, genders, and sexual orientations, and still be black and still be out. Young people respond positively to those who demonstrate integrity and courage and who genuinely care about them. Recent studies indicate that 30 percent of youth suicides can be attributed to turmoil about sexual orientation and the fear or actual experience of homophobia. Young lesbians and gay men of color are especially vulnerable since there are so few adults of color they can turn to for support. If I had to choose, I would rather have the respect of the generation coming up than of my own. They are the ones who will shape the next century, and who will undoubtedly be leaders in the revolutionary struggles that will ultimately make it possible for every person's voice to be heard. ▼

**Barbara Smith** is a writer and activist. She is the editor of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and is a cofounder of publisher of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*.

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## GIVE ME A HOME

by *Odilia Galvan Rodriguez*

BANTUSTANS

from living with the earth

TOWNSHIPS

they took our ancestors

GHETTOS

with guns, greed

RESERVATIONS

promises and lies

HOUSING PROJECTS

to these alien places

BARRIOS

we must now call home.



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# Our Grandmothers

by Maya Angelou

She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,  
the canebrake rustling  
with the whispers of leaves, and  
loud longing of hounds and  
the ransack of hunters crackling the near branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward freedom,  
I shall not, I shall not be moved.

She gathered her babies,  
their tears slick as oil on black faces,  
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.  
Momma, is Master going to sell you  
from us tomorrow?

Yes.

Unless you keep walking more  
and talking less.

Yes.

Unless the keeper of our lives  
releases me from all commandments.

Yes.

And your lives,  
never mine to live,  
will be executed upon the killing floor of innocents.

Unless you match my heart and words,  
saying with me,

I shall not be moved.



Photo: Jan Watson

DIANE FERLATTE WITH REDWOOD STAFF MEMBER BEA ANDRADE AT THE REDWOOD MUSIC FESTIVAL '91.

In Virginia tobacco fields,  
leaning into the curve  
on Steinway  
pianos, along Arkansas roads,  
in the red hills of Georgia,  
into the palms of her chained hands, she  
cried against calamity,  
You have tried to destroy me  
and though I perish daily,

I shall not be moved.

Her universe, often  
summarized into one black body  
made her cry each time in a new voice.  
All my past hastens to defeat,  
and strangers claim the glory of my love,  
Iniquity has bound me to his bed,

yet, I must not be moved.

She heard the names,  
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:  
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,  
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,  
whore, hot tail, thing, it.  
She said, But my description cannot  
fit your tongue, for  
I have a certain way being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

No angel stretched protecting wings  
above the heads of her children,  
fluttering and urging the winds of reason  
into the confusion of their lives.  
They sprouted like young weeds,  
but she could not shield their growth  
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor  
shape them into symbolic topiaries.  
She sent them away,  
underground, overland, in coaches and  
shoeless.

When you learn, teach.

When you get, give.

As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.  
She searched God's face.

Assured,

she placed her fire of service  
on the altar, and though  
clothed in the finery of faith,

when she appeared at the temple door,  
no sign welcomed  
Black Grandmother. Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,  
into wickedness, she cried,  
No one, no, nor no one million  
ones dare deny me God. I go forth  
alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right  
impels me to pull forever  
at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my  
feet without ceasing into the camp of the  
righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,  
honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted  
down a pyramid of years.  
She is Sheba and Sojourner,  
Harriet and Zora,  
Mary Bethune and Angela,  
Annie to Zenobia.

She stands  
before the abortion clinic,  
confounded by the lack of choices.  
In the Welfare line,  
reduced to the pity of handouts.  
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded  
by the mysteries.  
In the operating room,  
husbanding life.  
In the choir loft,  
holding God in her throat.  
On lonely street corners,  
hawking her body.  
In the classroom, loving the  
children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,  
she sings to her loves and beloveds,  
to her foes and detractors:

However I am perceived and deceived,  
however my ignorance and conceits,  
lay aside your fears that I will be undone,

for I shall not be moved.



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## Thoughts On A Diary

by Susan Griffin

Silences. Not the silences between notes of music, or the silences of a sleeping animal, or the calm of a glassy surfaced river witnessing the outstretched wings of a heron. Not the silence of an emptied mind. But this other silence. That silence which can feel like a scream, in which there is no peace. The grim silence between two lovers who are quarreling. The painful silence of the one with tears in her eyes who will not cry. The silence of the child who knows she will not be heard. The silence of a whole people who have been massacred. Of a whole sex made mute, or not educated to speech. The silence of a mind afraid to admit truth to itself. This is the silence the poet dreads.



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Photo: Jan Watson



COMIC MARGA GOMEZ WITH ASL INTERPRETER MARILYN VAN VEERSEN AT THE REDWOOD MUSIC FESTIVAL '91.

# A Letter from Amy Bank:

**Former Redwood staff member and editor of *Voices*. Amy has been living and working in Managua since 1984.**

February 25, 1991  
Managua, Nicaragua

Dear Friends:

One year ago today, the Frente Sandinista lost the elections, contrary to everyone's expectations. The ground war in the Gulf began less than thirty-six hours ago, wiping out whatever memory in the US there might have been of an event that radically changed the course of this small, underdeveloped, war-ravaged revolutionary country. Even without the horrifying developments in the Gulf, from what I hear about US news coverage over the last year, it would seem that Nicaragua had virtually dropped off the map. But just in case anyone has forgotten, Nicaragua does still exist.

It now seems like an eternity ago when we — a group of young Nicaraguans and a few "gringas" — sat stone-faced in the dead of the night, trying to convince ourselves that the election results were just a bad dream, that we could go to sleep and wake up the next morning and that the Frente Sandinista would have won.

But no one could sleep and it wasn't just a bad dream. So what's happening a year later? Are people better off now that a government friendly to the U.S. is in power? Yes and no. But in fact, it's much more complicated than that.

Obviously the main positive thing that has happened is that the war ended. But the problem is that the end of the war did not bring with it social peace. While the fear that a new civil war could break out has subsided, there is a very delicate balance both in the countryside and in the cities that continually threatens to explode. The government is under pressure from all sides — demobilized contras, demobilized members of the Popular Sandinista Army, extremist factions within its own governing coalition, a strong Sandinista opposition, unions, right-wing businessmen, the IMF and World Bank — making any kind of political and social stability, not to mention coherent economic recovery difficult, if not impossible.

On one side, there are the tens of thousands of demobilized contras who have resorted to land take-overs—many times violent—as a pressure tactic to get

Chamorro to fulfill her promises of land and services. This, coupled with former owners coming back from Miami and Costa Rica to reclaim their confiscated property, as well as the government policy of re-privatizing state farms while agricultural workers insist that they have a right to the land they work, has caused serious tensions in the countryside, undermining agricultural production, the mainstay of the Nicaraguan economy.

In the cities, unemployment has reached an all-time high of 40% as the government has laid off thousands of public employees in an attempt to reduce the fiscal deficit and comply with IMF and World Bank requirements for receiving aid. The lack of job security and demands for salary increases in the face of exorbitant prices for even the most basic goods provoked two national strikes that paralyzed the country in the first three months of the new administration.



Photo: Susan Freundlich

AMY BANK

One of the more interesting dynamics has been Chamorro's decision to retain Humberto Ortega as head of the Sandinista army, despite pressures from the United States and the extreme right-wing. In any other Latin American country, the general strike last July — which reached near-insurrectional proportions — would have resulted in dozens dead, scores wounded, and thousands arrested. That didn't happen, consequence of General Ortega's public position that while the army is loyal to the new government, it will never turn its weapons against the people.

True to his promise, Bush lifted the embargo. There is an illusion of affluence because the rich are much more visible. The "Miami boys" have come back with their new cars and latest fashions, and there are more products on the shelves.

But the reality is that the vast majority of the population can't afford to buy all the new products on the shelves. Nicaragua has gone from being the least expensive country in Central America to being the most expensive, with prices being equivalent to or higher than New York prices. Many are struggling to put two meals a day on the table, much less three, while government leaders are earning astronomical (in relative terms) salaries that one economist calculated comprises 10% of the national budget. With the budget cuts in and privatization of health and education, more people are dying of treatable diseases, illiteracy is on the rise, and more and more kids are dropping out of school earlier because they can't afford the books. But those kids can't find jobs. So, while mothers may not worry that their sons will be killed on the battlefield, they now worry that they may become juvenile delinquents, alcoholics, or drug addicts, or that they'll get killed in a knife-fight in the streets.

All of this is to say that the mood in the country is not particularly jubilant. Even people who have come back to Nicaragua with high hopes that things would be better now that the Sandinistas were out of power are disappointed. Many have decided not to stay. And many people — including friends of mine — who never would have thought of leaving Nicaragua when the Sandinistas were in power because they felt they had something to fight for are now thinking of emigrating. People are tired and burned out, and there are not a whole lot of reasons to have much hope that things will improve in the foreseeable future.

Given the urgency of creating a stable environment that will entice investors, the government is walking a tightrope, trying to accommodate all the social, economic and political forces that tug at it from all sides. Everyone blames everyone else for the country's ills. The right-wingers blame the Sandinistas for leaving the country bankrupt and causing social unrest. The Sandinistas blame the government for implementing policies that erode the rights of working people and the poor and provoke unrest. The government blames both the right-wingers and the Sandinistas. And while everyone blames everyone else, they're also making alliances with each other. Politics makes strange bedfellows.

As for the Sandinistas, there was a short-lived post-defeat euphoria. Ironically, many were relieved that they lost the elections. The defeat gave them a bit of breathing space to be able to engage in a real internal evaluation of the party, as well as the freedom to develop and carry out new strategies for organizing and defending revolutionary gains without the pressures of being the government.

But the wearing off of that euphoria very quickly turned into a rather profound collective existential crisis, as the Sandinistas began to face the larger question of what

it means to be revolutionaries in a new context, both inside Nicaragua and in the "new world order". The process of regrouping has not been easy.

In the limbo between the electoral defeat and the first party congress scheduled for July, many Sandinistas have felt disoriented and disconnected. Thousands of Sandinistas who had interrupted or postponed their studies, their careers, their families, their personal lives in order to dedicate themselves full time to the revolution were left without jobs or hope. Some high-ranking party members made off with cars, houses, and other goods in what has become known as the "Sandinista piñata".

As could have been expected, there has been considerable disaffection within the Sandinistas ranks (as well as among "internacionalistas", many of whom have left). Many began to "speak bitterness" about the abuses of power, the corruption, and the lack of internal democracy they had experienced but had been too afraid to voice for fear of party discipline. Many have decided that it was now time for them to finally dedicate themselves to their personal lives and economic survival, and there's a definite turning inward.

One of the positive side effects of the Sandinistas' defeat is that hundreds of new, independent and progressive organizations and institutions have surfaced. Whereas progressive political organizing under the Sandinistas was for the most part limited to the Sandinista-linked mass organizations that had top-down leadership, many activists are now developing new, more democratic organizations and movements, where being in the opposition is, ironically, an advantage. The women's movement, the gay movement, and the union movement, for example, are in fact better off now than they were under the Sandinistas, not because the Sandinistas didn't believe in these things, but because they too were walking a tightrope to try to keep the country together. And it's important to remember that it was the Sandinistas who opened up the political space for all of this to be possible.

The point is that the revolution is not over, although the terms have changed dramatically. Revolution is not a thing, it is a process, and as long as there are dedicated people willing to engage in that process, the revolution in Nicaragua will stay alive. It's not easy, there's no formula, and it certainly isn't romantic, but it is still worth fighting for, even when the odds are against us. ▼



SOFIA MONTENEGRO

## Sofia Montenegro

Interview by Julie Light

**Sofia Montenegro** is the irreverent, razor sharp editor of *Gente*, the *Barricada's* weekly supplement and Sandinista daily. Montenegro has been at *Barricada* for the last 11 years, and previously edited the paper's opinion page. She says *Gente's* guiding ideology is feminist, even though the magazine covers a wide range of issues and there are men on staff. Managua-based journalist **Julie Light** recently spoke with Montenegro about current efforts by Nicaraguan feminists to build an independent grassroots movement, and about the Sandinista's no-holds-barred self-criticism leading up to their first party congress set for July 19-21. Both AMNLAE (the official Sandinista women's association), and the Sandinista Frente are set to elect new leaders. But the process is one that goes far beyond internal elections. As Montenegro eloquently points out, it is part of a struggle for autonomy and identity when it is no longer clear what it means to be "revolutionary" in a rapidly shifting world order.

### THE NICARAGUAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

*How has the Sandinistas electoral defeat affected the women's movement?*

The electoral defeat affected the women's movement in the same way grassroots movements as a whole have been affected. After the initial distress we've entered into a certain paralysis and disorganization. Which doesn't mean the movement is dead, because revolution is not dead.

Since August we have been involved in reorganizing the women's movement in the new context we find ourselves in without the powerful ally of Sandinista government. We also face a new situation where progressive forces all over world are at low ebb, both in the East and West. We have begun to analyse the dilemmas and challenges facing the women's movement, and I can say with some satisfaction, that we have agreed on the basic premises so the movement can take off under these new conditions.

*What will be the difference between this new movement and the women's movement that has existed up until now?*

First we need to come to consensus on what kind of movement we want, what our common struggles are, and then each sector will define its issues according to its own priorities and needs. We hope to create something more dialectical: a consensus on a common struggle and then each group will set its own priorities within a framework of clearly articulated alliances so that the political force of all women is felt. To avoid the fragmentation that has been the experience of women's movements in the US, Europe and even elsewhere in Latin America, we need a common strategy that respects differences. That's critical. We want to be felt and heard as a movement. We also have to take on a gender perspective. We can't go around wavering on feminism. It is an analysis that has to be assimilated by everyone.

*So you think feminism will stop being a dirty word in Nicaragua?*

At least in Nicaragua feminism has a better chance than elsewhere. Maybe because here we incorporate experiences in a short period. In addition, this is an epoch of synthesis. The left all over the world is going through hard times, even more so with this damn war in the Persian Gulf.

This gives us more force now, in the face of the collapse of the East bloc countries. They were bureaucratic, geriatric societies that were above all profoundly patriarchal. This demonstrates that where women do not have the space to struggle for their equality results in an extremely conservative society that eventually disappoints the great majority of people.

*Is the AMNLAE leadership more inclined towards a top-down chain of command, taking their direction from the Sandinista Frente, or do they also accept the idea of gender consciousness within a broadbased movement?*

People don't change overnight. We Sandinistas come out of a political/military tradition that is authoritarian. In the case of AMNLAE there is a group represented by long-time Sandinista leaders who have a mentality that is difficult to change quickly. If they can't change their way

of thinking, we will have to change leaders. The times we live in demand an open mind, truly democratic ways of working, constant debate and a clear vision of what we want. One woman cannot do it alone. All women have to participate together so we all feel this project is ours. No matter what the Sandinista Frente might think, this is not their decision, it belongs to the women of Nicaragua.

We want an alliance, but not a marriage. We want an adored and well behaved lover, not a husband who wants to give orders. We don't rule out alliances with women from the right-wing parties based on a common interest as women. The broadbased movement we're trying to create cannot be subordinated ideologically or politically, much less economically. What we want as women is what we want as a movement: autonomy.

*Do you think men in this country will support a feminist movement?*

Our culture is patriarchal, and men too are its victims. We have to have mass struggle that includes men. We have to make them see that their true interests for their own happiness, their psychological, and economic well being rest in their search for the ideal of an egalitarian society. If we are incapable of sowing the aspiration for an egalitarian society in men's souls, that means we haven't done our job. We should be self-critical as feminists, if we can't make this beautiful ideal sellable to other human beings who happen to be men. I've always said that true socialism, if it exists, has to be feminist or it won't work. We have to convince all men who consider themselves revolutionaries of this essential fact.

That's why feminism has to have a political strategy for what the hell to do with men. What do we have to offer them in a world where disillusionment, intellectual and spiritual misery is on the rise, especially in face of worldwide catastrophe in the Persian Gulf.

*The perception exists that the gender gap in last year's elections favored President Chamorro. How is it that the Sandinistas lost women, or a group of women whose sons were drafted, or who could no longer stretch their family budgets?*

The reason is simple and complicated at the same time. There are several elements. One is that their sons were draft age. There are not a lot of women who want their children to go off and get killed. We have yet to see the reaction of yankee mothers when their sons come home in body bags. They will react the same as Nicaraguans, let's be clear. Feminine culture was at work: they voted for life. Women's psyches make us live for others, and before thinking of our own rights and what is at stake for us in these elections. Women voted for their sons, for their husbands, for men, but not for their own interests. The other element at play was the economic crisis. If the

Frente had been more audacious long before and if the women's association had been more daring and broadbased, women would have been much more conscious of what they had to lose in these elections.

*Are the Sandinistas in crisis?*

Obviously we are in crisis. But the crisis in the Frente is not one of decline, it's one of growth. In Nicaragua the crisis is a youthful one, we are passing through our adolescence towards adulthood in circumstances never before seen in the world. We are a single generation that in 10 years has lived through a war of liberation and a war of sovereignty. We went from the thesis of the taking of power to the antithesis of governing and if we are lucky we will move on to the synthesis while we are still a young generation. The average age of most Sandinistas is under 40.

In the worst moments of crisis the Frente has had the capacity for self-criticism that has allowed it to advance. If not we would have not survived more than 20 years as underground movement, or survived two wars.

## ON VIOLETA

*What do you think of Violeta Chamorro, as a symbol, as Nicaragua's first woman president?*

My gut reaction is that she is a poor devil. My second, perhaps more rational thought, is that as a woman I don't identify with her. She has been a lesson to all of us, especially to our male compañeros and that will be an advantage to the women's movement. This señora has shown the world that the fact that you have a woman in office doesn't guarantee your interests as a gender. That's the first lesson. I've met some unaware feminists abroad who even congratulate me because we have a woman in office. Being a feminist doesn't give me a biological identification with Violeta, the problem is that there is no political identification. As an image she's touched something. The Frente has a ton of brilliant capable women and it never gave them the place they deserved in leadership. That's the second lesson. Even many men feel that with so many great capable women we have to have the worst of the lot as President. Even Gen. Humberto Ortega has to salute her and call her Señora Presidente. It's been a magnificent blow to the machista pride in the country. In future no one will be able to say that women cannot be president or anything else. ▼

# A Just War

by Kathy Engel

A just  
and racist war  
I heard a famous writer say  
on national television  
the other night  
just and racist

yes, it is a just war  
as just as the slaying of Yusef Hawkins  
as just as the rape of Yanira Corea  
as just as watching your child tortured  
as just as no water on one side of the West Bank  
as just as Jews in ovens  
as just as anyone gassed  
as just as African people rounded up and  
numberless dead in the sea  
as just as 70% of homeless men war veterans  
as just as them living in armories  
as just as the young recruiter promising a new life  
as just as 7000 Panamanians in mass graves since  
December 20, 1989  
as just as mining harbors  
as just as Wounded Knee

as just as handsome young Ismael Cotto  
out of the forgotten, forbidden South Bronx streets  
out of the no chance for anything  
and into uniform, pressed and shining  
proud man of his proud family  
as just as his death in the Arabian Desert

as just as the girl in Tel Aviv with a gas mask  
and the girl in Ramallah without one

as just as my friend's son  
who will remain nameless  
writes poetry from the desert:  
I have only one wish to witness  
the safe return of the thousands and thousands of soldiers  
I've seen going in different directions  
convoying across this vast expanse  
of sand and sky...  
I have to grapple and yet to come to terms  
with the fact that I may have to shed  
the blood of a fellow human being...  
From the divine and spiritual perspective,,  
it is senseless and immoral.

A just war  
as just as the newly sealed homes in Jerusalem  
and the homes that have been sealed for 23 years

as just as no water

as just as the child in Baghdad  
as just as the ten year old Upstate New York  
who writes he's worried  
about kids in Iraq

as just as Americans calling other Americans  
"towel-heads," burning their stores and restaurants

as just as 9 year old Carina  
she writes: Dear Soldier why do you go to war?  
and is ostracized in school.

As just as Hiroshima

A just and racist war  
is how Hitler's people  
came up with the idea  
of a new World order.

As just as the best lie.

I call for not a moment of silence.  
Thousands of moments of silence  
will not make up for the thousands of points of pain  
centuries of blood wrenched agony  
ejected onto  
the most ancient cities in the world.

We have never needed a world order.  
What we need is something a two minute  
sound bite cannot reflect.  
Something a New York Times  
Op-Ed cannot hold.  
What we need is something even Peter Jennings  
can't talk about.  
What we need is not Nightline.  
But a line of truth.

The carpet bomb sortie  
the surgical strike capacity  
will replace humanity.  
The oil will spoil.

What we need  
is to listen.  
More than a thousand moments of silence

What we need is to listen

We need to listen.  
And scream.



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Varied Voices profiles those who work with Redwood with a look at Angela Johnson, Production Manager and Treasurer of the Board.

## Staff Profile:

# Angela L. Johnson

My identical twin sister and I were born in Los Angeles, California close to three decades ago. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley with degrees in Ethnic Studies and Mass Communications, I went to work with Redwood Records as Advertising and Publicity Director. From Redwood, I continued to work on a variety of political and cultural projects including the first Spring Mobilization for Peace, Jobs and Justice in San Francisco; SISTERFIRE in Washington, D.C.; and the Annual Women of Color Conference at U.C. Berkeley. I've worked as house manager at U.C. Berkeley's Zellerbach Auditorium, for the past few years. I've also worked in production with a number of dance and music organizations, including CitiCentre Dance Theatre, Dance Brigade, Faculty Against Apartheid, Alliance for Cultural Democracy, the Northern California Nelson Mandela Program, and most recently with the Oakland Ballet as their Director of Operations.

Currently, I work part-time at Redwood Cultural Work and continue my business as a freelance production and arts development consultant. My interests include dance, music, film, the visual arts, food and wine and catering for various events. I also love literature and animals.

I returned to Redwood as a volunteer for the 1989 Festival and member of the Production Committee. Following the Festival, I stage managed several events, and eventually was asked to join the Board in 1990. When Redwood received funding for the position of a production coordinator, Joanie Shoemaker offered me the opportunity to return to Redwood as a staff member.

It never ceases to amaze me how Redwood's work moves people. Whether it be the presentation of our annual Music Festival featuring over a dozen multicultural artists from Oakland and around the country and the world; or an afternoon of discussion with such noted authors as Isabel Allende, June Jordan, Harriet Lerner and Holly Near; or a multi-disciplinary artistic collaboration between African-derived dance group Harambee Dance Ensemble and Jamaican-born Canadian poet Lillian Allen and her musicians — people are deeply touched by Redwood productions. Having watched others and felt incredibly moved myself by the words and music that have



Photo: Jan Watson

ANGELA JOHNSON

been created during Redwood presentations is a testament to Redwood's particular vision. Redwood's direction of presenting work that inspires and rejuvenates people to work toward the development of a more just and peaceful world makes Redwood an organization for whom I choose to work.

Redwood's belief that culture has a role to play in creating social transformation matches my own sensibilities. Redwood's desire and commitment to developing and maintaining a strong multicultural institution, and my own need to work with a socially-conscious organization, was another reason why I wanted to work here.

Of course, everyone brings their own life experience to their work, but it's more than the fact that I am a Black woman that influences my work at Redwood. My experiences as a person who has continually worked on social justice issues within a cultural setting have provided me with multiple opportunities to develop a particular sensibility. This sensibility, not the least of which has to do with functioning as a Black woman in the dominant society, has created a distinctive personality; one which is fiercely loyal, dedicated, independent, forthright, opinionated, fun-loving and compassionate.

I feel very fortunate to be a part of the Redwood staff and a significant part of the important work that Redwood accomplishes. If you're ever visiting the office or at one of our events, be sure to come by and say "hello!" ▼

## New from Redwood

*The Words and Wisdom of Isabel Allende, June Jordan, Harriet Lerner and Holly Near* — audio and video tape.

"Pain and failure are taboo in this country, like death and poverty. You have the constitutional right to pursue happiness, haven't you? If I had the choice I would prefer to have the constitutional right to pursue wisdom."

— Isabel Allende

In December of 1990, Redwood hosted an extraordinary literary event entitled "In Celebration of Women Writers." We invited women who have inspired us deeply — Isabel Allende, June Jordan and Harriet Goldhor Lerner and Holly for an evening of lively discussion — about the forces that have shaped each of their lives as artists, about how each writer's personal politics appear in her work. It was a one-of-a-kind hilarious, stimulating and remarkably captivating evening.

The inspiration of these four wonderful women can be your own, to enjoy again and again with a tax-deductible contribution to Redwood Cultural Work of \$75 for the video or \$40 for the audio tape.

Write to P.O. Box 10408, Oakland, CA 94610; or phone 1-800-888-SONG; or use the enclosed envelope. ▼



ISABEL ALLENDE

Photos: Greg Day



HARRIET GOLDHOR LERNER



JUNE JORDAN AND ISABEL ALLENDE



HARRIET GOLDHOR LERNER AND HOLLY NEAR

## New Music From Redwood

Redwood Records is celebrating the release of **SOUL VIBRATIONS: BLACK HISTORY/BLACK CULTURE** on CD and cassette. This new release coincides with their 30-city tour of the U.S. and Canada. The music of **SOUL VIBRATIONS** brings together elements of the diverse cultures of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: English speaking "Creoles," Mestizo, Miskito, Sumo and Rama Amerindians, and several communities of afro-indigenous garifonas — the descendants of the "Black Caribs." This region has a different culture and history than the rest of Nicaragua. **SOUL VIBRATIONS** brings together elements of three cultures mixed with a strong dose of roots reggae. Their music video "Rock Down Central America" won a Coral Award for best music video at the Latin American Film Festival in Cuba, 1989. ▼

# Redwood Artists On the Road

## **HOLLY NEAR**

Ithaca, NY, September 28  
New York City, September 29  
Toronto, Ontario, October 4  
Croton-on-Hudson, NY, October 5  
Kitchener, Ontario, October 6  
Orono, ME October 12  
Santa Rosa, CA, October 25  
Salem, OR, October 30  
Spokane, WA, November 1  
**PBS Specials:**  
August 7 (Northern CA) "The Creative Mind"  
& "Singing for our Lives"

## **FERRON**

Edmonton, ALB, August 9–11  
Edmonton Folk Festival  
Hart, MI, August 14–18  
Michigan Womyn's Music Festival  
Cambridge, MA, August 23  
Westboro, MA, August 25  
Groveland, CA, August 30

## **RONNIE GILBERT**

Cincinnati, OH, Nov 22  
Ann Arbor, MI, Nov 24

## **FAITH NOLAN**

Rhythmfest, GA, Aug 30–Sept 2

## **SOTAVENTO**

Salt Lake City, UT, Aug 1  
Sweet Pea Festival, Aug 3, MT  
Joliet, IL, Sept 19  
DePere, WI, Sept  
Madison, WI, Sept 28  
Denver, CO, Oct 6–10  
Cleveland, OH, Oct 12  
Palatine, IL, Oct 14–15  
San Antonio, TX, Oct 16 or 17  
San Angelo, TX, Oct 18  
Austin, TX, Oct 19  
El Paso, TX, Oct 20  
Central Missouri State, MO, Oct 24  
Bowling Green, MI, Oct 26  
Weslayan Univ., Marion, IN, Feb 14

## **ALTAZOR**

Michigan Womyn's Music Festival  
Hart, MI, Aug 14–17  
Santa Barbara, CA, Sept 1

For more information please send a SASE to RCW, P.O. Box 10408,  
Oakland, CA 94610 ▼

## Thinking Out Loud: Excerpt from an Artist's Journal

By Holly Near

Guilt/self esteem and their affect on the work of social change, political growth, and creative human progress —

If I am to successfully challenge racism, then I cannot begin by hating my whiteness. I must re-image whiteness — impressing upon myself an image of whiteness that has a particular role in the journey towards a world without racism — for it is not my skin that commits the offense, it is my mind, my heart, my attitude, my "well taught" behavior.

Despite the internal process, there is privilege attached to the external qualities of dominant identities, i.e., male, white, ruling class, adult. This does not go away no matter how much we work on attitudes. In film, male characters can (and do) kill people for minor offenses all the time, and it is not noticed because it is acceptable behavior, or it is celebrated and another hero emerges. However, Thelma and Louise defend themselves, and the world is in an uproar.

Dominant culture filmmakers constantly portray women, lesbians, gay men, and people of color in offensive or stereotypical ways, and for the most part it goes unnoticed. There is no "W" rating that warns the viewer "W" = Wrong! However when Spike Lee investigates one perspective on racism in American life, he is crucified for his attack on white racism. Interestingly enough and predictably, not for his sexism or homophobia.

Networks were concerned about airing "Do the Right Thing" — but it goes unnoticed that they will air films where Arabs are always terrorists, women are helpless victims, Indians are endlessly screaming on the plains killing white pioneers, and gay men and lesbians are portrayed as rapists, child abusers and murderers. Hoping to offer another view based in reality, progressive artists, while focusing on one oppression, often times perpetuate another.

The brave work of the artist committed to building on a vision versus perpetuating an error is huge and under constant attack — a lifelong journey, a painting never finished, a song with no end.

We make a bold stroke and then pass the brush. ▼

## Varied Voices Redwood Cultural Work

*Varied Voices* has a history in the documentation of culture. *Varied Voices of Black Women* was the title of the first national tour of black women's music, organized by Roadwork, Inc., in 1978. Through this journal of art and politics, we want to follow in this tradition, bringing you the voices of women and men who are carriers of culture, toward the development of a richer, multicultural society.

The mission of Redwood Cultural Work is to produce performing arts which promote international peace, and human understanding for all people by presenting artists, primarily women, who represent a wide spectrum of cultures and artistic traditions..

We carry out our mission by

- ▼ presenting an annual season of concerts, and by recording and distributing music of significant national and international composers and performers whose work illuminates cultural and social issues of our time;
- ▼ commissioning and presenting collaborative new works involving artists of diverse cultural perspectives;
- ▼ and by undertaking cultural advocacy work locally and nationally.

Redwood Cultural Work's programs are rooted in nearly 20 years of national leadership in the field of socially relevant and culturally diverse music. This experience reflects the profound ways that music and culture empower, change and enrich people's lives.

**Volunteers:** A very special heartfelt thank you to all of you who so generously give your time, energy and resources to Redwood. We couldn't do this work without you!

*Varied Voices* is published bi-annually by Redwood Cultural Work with the help of volunteers and friends. We're grateful for the generous gifts of time, energy and expertise from Peter Klehm and Mimi Heft. Our thanks to you all.

**Susan Freundlich, Editor**

*Managing Editor:* Peter Klehm

*Production Art & Illustration:* Mimi Heft

*Printing:* Alonzo

### Board of Directors

Dulce Arguelles	Lisa Honig	Robbie Osman
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Helen Cohen	Holly Near	Jo-Lynne Worley,
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Karen Cagan	Theresa Harlan	Susan Sage
Judy Evans	Karen Hester	Joanie Shoemaker,
Cynthia Frenz	Angela Johnson	<i>Exec. Director</i>

Elizabeth Min, *Artistic Consultant*

Jeff Jones, *Development Consultant*

Chris Kovich, *Financial Consultant*

## Getting More Than One Mailing?

Redwood is trying to keep up with our friends and supporters — especially when you move or change your address. If you are getting more than one mailing or want to change your address with Redwood, please send in the mailing label(s) and tell us which one is correct. ▼



## Festival T-Shirts

We have beautiful commemorative t-shirts from our 1991 Festival! The shirts are designed by Bay Area artist Nancy Hom. The design represents music of peace and hope from Redwood artists the world over. The 3-color design (teal, red and white) on a black t-shirt is a 100% Beefy-T in a roomy size XL. Available from Redwood for \$15 (sales tax and shipping included). Use the envelope to order. ▼



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# Redwood's Annual Membership Program

Property of the Center

## **\$25 Individual Membership**

Includes: 5% discount on all catalog items for one year and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$35 Friendship Membership**

One free record/cassette or CD; 10% discount on every item in the catalog for one year; and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$50 Contributing Membership**

Two free records/cassettes or CDs; poster; 10% discount on every item in the catalog for one year; and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$100 Supporting Membership**

Four free records/cassettes or CDs; one Redwood T-Shirt; 20% discount on every item in the catalog for one year; and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$500 Sustaining Membership**

Fifteen records/cassettes or CDs; one Redwood T-Shirt; 25% discount on every item in the catalog for one year; and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$1000 Redwood Benefactor**

A complete library of Redwood music; Redwood T-Shirt; a complimentary copy of every new Redwood release that year; 25% discount on every item in the catalog; and subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$2000 Redwood Presenter**

As a Redwood Presenter you will be helping Redwood produce music on an on-going basis. You will receive complimentary tickets to Redwood concerts of your choice. You will also receive a complete library of Redwood music and a complimentary copy of each new release as it becomes available, along with your subscription to Varied Voices.

## **\$5000 Redwood Producer**

As a Redwood Producer you will be helping Redwood produce music on an on-going basis. You will receive complimentary tickets to Redwood concerts of your choice, along with backstage privileges. Special recognition of your support will be made within album projects and/or concerts you help to produce. You will also receive a complete library of Redwood music and a complimentary copy of each new release as it becomes available along with your subscription to Varied Voices and other special Redwood gifts.

Send or phone for your catalog to take advantage of your membership benefits. Write to P.O.Box 10408, Oakland, CA 94610; or phone 1-800-888-SONG; or return enclosed envelope with your membership gift contribution. ▼

## **Job opening:**

# **Artistic Director for Redwood Cultural Work**

Redwood Cultural Work is a non-profit, cultural arts organization and independent record label that promotes, presents, and distributes music with a social, progressive, political and/or feminist perspective. Redwood is seeking an Artistic Director with vision and a proven track record.

Redwood's concert and festival presentations and collaborations have entertained and challenged audiences for almost 20 years with folk, gospel, blues, reggae, rock, Latin American New Song, women's, jazz, and classical music genres.

The ideal Artistic Director will build on this foundation and energetically pursue Redwood's goal to present a wide variety of multicultural artists who make "Music that Rocks the Boat".

Until now, this position has been filled by founder Holly Near. Holly's visionary musical and collaborative work has brought many artists of national and international stature to the Redwood label. Holly will continue to be an active Board member, organizational spokesperson, and Redwood's headline artist.

The search for a new Artistic Director is in keeping with Holly's desire that, after 20 years, it's time to pass the torch, bringing in energy and new perspectives. She will play a key role in selecting the new Artistic Director, and will be available as a consultant during the transition.

For a complete job description, call 1-510-835-1445. ▼

*All memberships are  
tax-deductible less the value  
of the free items.*



BOBI CESPEDES AT THE REDWOOD  
MUSIC FESTIVAL '91.

Photos: Jan Watson



RHIANNON AND LINDA TILLERY AT THE REDWOOD MUSIC FESTIVAL '91.

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