

TO AMERICA WITH LOVE

I want to write an American poem.

—Benjamin Alire Sáenz

This book is my offering as a poet to Mexico's Indian peoples and to all those who want to think about and reimagine America. This is a set of meditations on a voyage to Nahá, a Lacandón Mayan village in Chiapas, at the outer edges of southeastern Mexico—a song of an often abandoned America, one that recently hurled itself into our consciousness with the courageous uprising of the Indian and campesino Zapatistas.

From late December 1992 to mid-January 1993, I embarked on a journey from San Francisco, California, to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. After a brief stay there, and unaware of the groundswell of an impending revolution, I wandered into the Selva Lacandona in search of an old friend, K'ayum, whom I had met on my first trek to the Mayan lowlands in 1970 when I was twenty-one. In this second cycle, more than two decades later, I return to the same towns and villages. Although my focus is largely on the Lacandón Maya, a tiny fraction of the one million Maya in Chiapas and three million who live from Guatemala to El Salvador, I call attention to the stark realities of all Maya and the 95 percent of the non-Lacandón settler population of eastern Chiapas composed mostly of forced-out and impoverished Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians. Guatemalan exiles rush into the figures. Displaced Ladino campesinos add on their suffering integers.

The seemingly simple task of revisiting K'ayum becomes problematic. Which K'ayum? In what village? What country? What borders? Another K'ayum appears, one who lives in Nahá, a small village with approximately two hundred Lacandón residents. In total, Lacandón Mayas compose an endangered group numbering about five hundred in both northern and southern villages of Nahá and Lacanjá Chan Sayab on the southeastern quadrant of Chiapas. Danger and endangerment are central to the reading of America. Danger invades the text too: Where is K'ayum? Terms and names blur, boundaries and categories collide,

landscapes reverse, and we must battle for passage: how do I go about this telling? What position do I occupy?

Irony and subterfuge gnaw at the center of this text: How can I speak of and for America if my entry is through the Na Bolom center in San Cristóbal de las Casas, a museum for research on the Lacandón Maya that has profited in many ways by the Othering of these people for almost half a century? Why the Lacandón—this tiny lowland tropical forest population, recipient of exclusive rights to timber revenues that in actuality are usually pilfered by the politicians? What of the fifty Mayan Highland municipios? I stumble for excuses: Because I want to be inside the phantasmagoria of "Indian museums," I say; because I want to dismantle the "Museum of the Americas." Smart quotations gnaw at me. I am retracing my steps, that is all—but they are not there.

The gloss of Spanish conquest and colony infiltrates the terms of place, perniciously reconnects them; even as I write this, an old project of European expedition and "discovery" frames the language that I utilize, which in turn orients my innermost self. "From San Francisco to *la selva*," I repeat with consternation. Colonial consciousness assaults my personal writing project.

Beyond the slogans in vogue, what are the exploitative relationships between the United States, Mexico, and Latin America? What are the proper terms for neocolonialism? What subterranean campesino stratum rumbles across the entire continent—from Mayas digging through famine to undocumented farm workers dodging armored helicopters in the Southwest? Chiapas serves Mexico as the Southwest serves the United States: undocumented labor and servitude. These are critical questions given the aggressive agendas in this country regarding "aliens" from the "South," whether they are perceived as Mexican, Latino, or Indian. Another angle: what are the proper terms for Indian tribute within Mexico and Latin America? The Berlin Wall is being reinvented in the United States and Mexico while everyone watches late-night comedy. As a Chicano, I am a member of a doubly alien culture and territory; I stand watch on warring turf. Could this book be a cartouche for my "alien papers"? What I say as much as "my speaking" is not easily accommodated in the traditional disciplines of social science or leisure canons of literary pleasure; what I say is *for* America.

In many ways this text is my spiritual practice where I meditate upon my own being and place in the world in relationship to the people shar-

ing the same space. History, culture, and consciousness diffract as I "descend" into the "Lowlands"—a geopolitical, cultural, and psychic cosmos of unmitigated suffering and language loss. Terms for conquest become obsolete as we contemplate the Indian and campesino on their own ground; we must search for efficient and radical perspectives. Official discourse dissolves; we must find a new "American" language. At times the call requires quests into the self and its interconnections to the landscape. Figures appear: my mother in dreams, Mayas in the last vestiges of the rain forest, a sick woman selling tortillas in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the eerie, melancholy eyes of Tzotzil-Tzeltal Indians and Ladino campesinos—all with the gaze of Zapata. I cannot document my experience without recollecting my family's trials through the similar borderlands; Juárez, El Paso, Mexico City, Chihuahua, Texas, California, Mexico, United States. The search for authentic "American" descriptions and a way of speaking is a double quest, a journey into indigenous territories and a slippery trek into myself. An odd and illusory paradigm appears: the nearer I get to *la selva*, the further I enter into the strange figure and assemblage of my self.

This book is also my own contribution to the cause of Indian and campesino justice and social change. Writing tests my faith and responsibility: as I writer, I must attack a formidable cadre of adversaries: language, historical consciousness, traditional and obsolete patronal versions of the *indio*; I must challenge the very idea of "Social Inquiry of the Native"—the canonical ethnographic S.I.N. of the social sciences. To fall back on a stolid "minority poetics" is also another possible folly—that is, to call for a universal and automatic bond among Mexican, Chicano, Latino, and Indian peoples. The text wants to negate itself, yet I must keep on; a way to speak is possible and significant.

The road is wavy, wary: writing, culture, and justice, faces, voices, and histories implode; they remain incomplete, indeterminate. This is not an attempt to carve a Chicano or Mexican monument, a grand summation of "who we are" or a totalizing exhortation on "the real America." I do not want to add another tired volume to the racks of Chicano movement literature, the roots stuff of the sixties and also of minority nationalist narratives that tunnel through history in search of an ethnic essence to be conjured in a self-induced Ouija spell. This is not another torch song pitting Mexican non-Indians against Indians, "Americanos" against Mexicanos. In a similar fashion, I am not interested in melting-pot opera and

other facile "multicultural" platitudes unaware of class relations, local interconnections, and culture history. This an affirmation of a complex set of cultural contradictions, political indictments, and personal awarenesses. I do not claim a pan-Indianist philosophy, I do not espouse an official political agenda. As a poet I am wary of these fragile platforms. Even though I support the Zapatista vision for Chiapas, Mexico, and, ultimately, for the Americas, I do not seek to build a revolutionary "character" either in the text, the reader, or in myself. Here questions of revolution must be posed by a deeper and more critical set of currents—the people themselves, across the Americas and the world. At best this is an unfinished poem of a desire; a return to America—in the present: a Möbius-shaped trek backward and forward to a shattered realm of Indian and campesino villages and bodies, to an unsettled mestizaje that at every turn aims to subvert itself. Subversion, I say to myself, then—America.

I want to reinvent the Mexican southlands as much as I want to reinvent the position that I hold as a brown man from "El Norte." One of the functions of a poem—if, indeed we can say that a poem has a function at all—is to turn things on their head or on their side: inside out or concave is the ideal. This characteristic is central to my explorations and reflections in this book as a literary project as much as a spiritual quest and cultural investigation. Do not let words like quest and search fool you. I did not begin with the thirst for discovery, a plan for personal acquisitions, an academic map for professional careership, nor even a disciplined research objective. I want to say something called me. It is not enough, unfortunately—it smells of worship, revelation, and the old sentiments of religious-conversion campaigns in Mesoamerica. I wanted to leave and possibly arrive, that is all—to leave my station in the United States and arrive at another in a demarcated limbo called Mexico. My existential motion and puzzle through and around these two wavering points provide the opening for this writing of and for America. One of the things I fear is the voice that says: "You never arrived." Another says, "You never left."

The boundaries and borders of America, as with nations and cultures everywhere, are in a state of rupture, inevitable collapse, and new design. I am also interested in the New American Figure or, better stated, the New American Dis-figure—that is, the emerging face and body of political and cultural rupture, an intensive, experimental, and revolutionary world change as it is expressed throughout the border-

lands of the Americas. Ironically, we rarely regard the United States as undergoing any deep change. We assume an impermeable cultural groundwork that is more inclined to measure how "everything falls around us" more than how "we are falling." We are the master form; that is all we know, it seems. Here, in a sense, I propose that what we may consider to be America may not match the actual phenomenon; this book is one tracer of the drift from America, one account of the fissures on this side of the globe. For the Indio, Latino, Mexicano, and especially for the Chicano, the categories of Mexico and America inhabit a poetics and metaphysics of self more than an official geopolitical location. The lesbian poet Gloria Anzaldúa has made key contributions to this debate on borderlands identity, the multilayered self, and a new feminist form of ethnopoetics. At the risk of hyperbole, I propose this work as a preliminary rough-cut contribution to the epistemology of the American self.

Hyperbole often falls short; I also fear that this text is an initiation ritual out of sync. A rite of passage into Chicano and American being cannot occur: The instructions are missing or the sacred songs or the shaman woman are absent, and the proper language and materials for the ordeal have been subverted; the full-bodied realizations cannot be accomplished. The self is severed from the community; the world is a fragment. Myth cannot marry cosmos; myth dissolves into trials and shambled shadows of separateness. Maybe this slippage is the subject, perhaps this is what I want to say—American slippage—our current experience as residents of a *fin-de-siècle* America. Can we grasp what America is? Is it too late, too splintered, too far?

Again, I cannot question the place of and for America if I do not question my own position. Therefore this is at heart an account of my internal struggle to become whole, to re-collect myself as a member of a disinherited Indian and American family, the Maya of the Lowlands, to reassign myself into a new, contradictory, fictive kinship system. Forms of language as well as cultural relationships are skewed at a metaphysical plane; ideas of ancestry and the verse of revindication are intertwined. I seek as I fight, I fight as I remember; my language, then, emerges as a possible re-cognition.

The current crises in the human sciences give me ample room for challenge and defiance. What once were seen as proper ethnographic and objective tellings of an "exotic" culture have become suspect as the

subjective constructions of the speaker with few connections to the people and places "under" investigation. The subject that speaks has taken the floor. Moreover, the radical telling may truly reside in the interplay between both worlds: investigation versus revolution. If we can find and invent the fresh terms, this Other-speaking may become a new form, no longer Other but I. Also, the mediums may switch categories: a long free-verse poem might be spliced with theater, for example. A multimedia manifesto and autobiographical ethnography can dance on the head of a scientific description of reality. Evans-Pritchard, Frida Kahlo, a shaman dream, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz can meet at last. Form mesmerizes me, displacement authenticates me; but I do not seek form or the margin: I seek America, I seek indio/india, americano/americana—in *liberación*.

I am involved in a triple vision: to rethink America, to rethink myself, and to rethink American writing. Is this another false trinity: America—Self—Writing? The debate is welcome and exponential: I want to tackle concepts of nation, symbols of ethnicity, practices for cultural knowledge, systems of literary order, questions of the margin and the center, the border work between the observer and the observed, between loss and recovery, suffering and liberation, between the language of America and for America. I offer these preliminary questions to all American writers, to all Americans.

America, I have said—poetics, writing, subversion, language; indeed, these terms are central to my concerns in this book. A major part of my task is to disassemble the reading of America and Mexico, to revolt against the lexicon of European Indianism—Gauguin-like escapes into a tropical scrim of berry-eaters and long-haired, silent, punk Quetzalcoatl incarnates. Yet, the revolt is ancient, cyclical, and at times hemispheric. This text pays homage to Chicano and Latino poetics and literature in the United States, and throughout the Americas, which in the twentieth century have taken on the mass enterprise of writing in and for America. This work also shares kinship with all "writers for the people," those with their writing eye on human and civil rights. African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, have been a beacon for me, as have the makers of the Latin American "new novel," which began its trajectory at the end of the Second World War. Miguel Angel Asturias, José María Arguedas, Mario Vargas Llosa, Joao Guimaraes Rosa, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez. Elena Garro, Rosario Castellanos, Mario Monteforte Toledo, Augusto Roa Bas-

tos, and Juan Rulfo fall into this latter category; their collective literary enterprise and focus on the displaced *indígena* and campesino wastelands have been key to my thinking on the complex relationships between authorship, history, literary form, and how power, people, and culture may be positioned with language. Although many of these postwar authors, predominantly male, wrote about contemporary Mayan Indians, it is the Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos to whom I feel closest, both as a poet and a writer who devoted much of her literary project to the life experience of the Mayan Indians in Chiapas. In Maureen Ahern's critical and literary anthology, *A Rosario Castellanos Reader*, she notes an interview where Castellanos makes a key differentiation between "indigenista" writers and herself: "I am not an indigenist writer . . . Indians do not seem mysterious or poetic to me. What happens is that they live in atrocious poverty." More than twenty years after her death, this declaration resounds through me and, I hope, through this book.

The Quiché Maya poet Rigoberta Menchú recently provided us with a model for the new American writer. In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, her harrowing autobiographical account of being Indian in the highlands and city centers of Guatemala, Rigoberta also outlines, indirectly, the role of the poet and the writer's enterprise. She seems to tell us to stare back at chaos, disaster, and death, be fearless in the face of relentless oppression, learn the languages of the marginalized as well as of the oppressor, remember to assist in organizing exploited communities, remember to break through assigned borders, always fight and always forgive—remember the secrets. Rigoberta's work inspires this text. Not long ago, at a creative writing residency, I proposed this idea—Rigoberta Menchú as a model for the poet of the twenty-first century. Most were baffled. Some hollered: "That is not poetry," or "Get serious, you don't know what you are talking about." Few smiled and agreed, "Rigoberta, the key proponent for a poetics of and for America?" As more American regions send their campesino and Indian tremors across the bordered lines of information, capitalist power, hydroelectric energy fincas, and culture warps, my workshop friends must speak louder.

As I have said earlier, the contending canons of writing, speaking, and reading are formidable opponents. In my case, I have chosen to enter into the text and battle as a poet. This book, then, is a poem. And yet even the poem must rage against itself or it will die; it must move, enlarge itself, change shapes, then dissolve. So, too, I go in this book from

personal narratives to dream journals, from internal monologues to stories told in the hard light of lowland villages; we rush into signs propped up by PEMEX that warn the intruder not to poach in the forests or interfere with the environment while the petrochemical colossus erects new refineries in the jungle. Other signs come at us, the tiny prophecies of a deaf-mute Mayan boy. "Jaguar Hotel," a play, emerges in the middle of the book. This particular section calls you to get up and act out the book, a portion of America, as it were, to recognize and physicalize that which is barely visible to us on this side of "high" America. At the end, a letter appears—to my friend from *la selva*, K'ayum Ma'ax. If you read it, are you K'ayum Ma'ax too? Look everywhere for the possibility of fire, for the possibility of a poem—this is my personal maxim.

My goals? the culture and literary critics ask. To go into America as I go into myself, I respond. I have a particular historical and psychic possibility, given my place as a Chicano. It is a life and cultural riddle that I have at hand, an American poetics of and for the twenty-first century. I am intent on elaborating on what Benjamin Alire Sáenz, the poet and novelist, states in his essay, "I Want to Write an American Poem." I say, "I want to write America." Not a Joycean, Ulyssean epic; there is another probability—a writing from Other locations, as Rigoberta Menchú suggests. My audience? All those interested in these reflections are invited to join me in a collective conversation of and for America; find more precise quandaries, finer fractures, tougher intimacies.