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Those Were the Days: An Autobiographical Essay

by Rosina Conde
Translated by Jeffrey N. Lamb

76 | *Through the generous support of Latin American Studies, Modern Languages and Literatures, Multicultural Life and the Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center, Rosina Conde came to speak at GVSU in the fall of 2003. The idea was to expose students to a cultural, literary and linguistic experience in order to enrich their lives and facilitate learning. Conde's visit afforded students invaluable insights into different ways of viewing the world. She was able to speak to different groups of students in a variety of settings, from a conference performance piece (presented here) to classroom discussions to informal conversations with students at the Foreign Language House. In the end, both faculty, staff and students agreed that Rosina Conde's visit was insightful and powerful.*

*Rosina Conde (Mexicali, Mexico, 1954) is one of the important literary figures on the border scene. She has taken an active role in literary production as a writer and editor. She has been involved in the founding of the cultural magazines *El Vaivén* (1986) and *Tercera llamada* (1990). She has also participated as editor in *La Revista de Humanidades* from 1987 to the early 1990s. She also worked on a Mexican*

The seventies had just taken off. I had just gotten out of high school and began making plans to study at the university. Because at that time the University of Baja California only had five degree programs, I had to move to Mexico City. However, my parents didn't allow it because of the student riots and the political repression during October 1968 and June 1971. The "Jueves de Corpus," when the government soldiers violently repressed a student up rise, was really fresh in the Mexican psyche. In Mexico, as a woman, it was still difficult to be on your own, it wasn't even that common for women to pursue a degree at the university, much less leave home to do it. In my family, the problem wasn't leaving home, but rather studying for a degree, because my father didn't believe in university diplomas. Because he was a businessman, he believed that, in order to make money, you had to dedicate yourself to business, and to do that he had already taught all of us everything we needed to know. I even remember that, from a very young age, he didn't want me to study cooking or sewing, because his daughters "wouldn't end up as housewives," he used to say.

Influenced, in part, by my father, by feminism, by the hippy movement, by the Blues, by Soul and Rock, and by the student movements in France and Mexico, I packed my bags and those of my six month old son, I loaded up on a few "provisions," and I said goodbye to my parents and headed off the Mecca of Knowledge: the UNAM (the largest university in all of Latin America located in Mexico City). So, in November of 1971, with a few pieces of jewelry destined for the local pawn shop and about one hundred pesos in my pocket, I entrusted myself to the god of optimism and rode

along with some of my friends from high school on a Tres Estrellas de Oro bus. Over the next 48 hours and two thousand miles we sang along with Janis Joplin all the way to the capitol:

Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
my friends all drive Porches
I must make amends
worked hard all my lifetime
no help from my friends
So lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
Oh Lord, won't you by me a color T.V.?
Dialing for Dollars
is trying to find me
I'll wait for delivery
each day until three
so Lord, won't you buy me a color T.V.?
Oh Lord, won't you by me a night on the town?
I'm counting on you Lord
please don't let me down
prove that you love me
and buy the next round
so Lord, won't you buy me a night on the town?
(Janis Joplin, M. McClurey B. Neuwirth, "Mercedes Benz")

soap opera with Televisa. Conde is also a translator, essayist, poet, short story writer and singer. She has been involved in the many cultural and literary activities that occur along the border as well as in other parts of Mexico.

That's how we arrived at Mexico City to sponge off a few friends, to look for a place to hang our hats, a job that would allow us to survive long enough to achieve our objectives. However, the city wasn't what we had hoped: it was literally besieged. The "granaderos," or army soldiers, were hanging out at every corner of the university and the "porros," or undercover student infiltrators, were all over the more politicized schools. You didn't know which to be more afraid of: the police, the thieves, the porros or army. They were times when being young and a student were two capital sins. And, when above and beyond being young and a student, you were a woman, the crime was multiplied three fold. Any "porro," soldier or fool thought he had the right to verbally abuse us in the street, fondle us or accuse us of being "on the other side."

The university became, in this way, a refuge for anyone who wanted to question the system and the Philosophy and Letters department came to be a place of liberty, creativity and reflection.

We started to go to clubs, funky hangouts, and literary cafés where we knew there would be people with similar ideas to ours; we saturated ourselves in

the political life of the times and began to gain class and gender consciousness. We decorated our spaces with posters of our idols; those from rock and Latin American politics. In the student dorms, we would see broadsides of the Rolling Stones, Janis or Hendrix and even Che Guevara. . .

We learned how to appreciate everything indigenous, Latin American and anything from outside that might reaffirm our political and cultural identity. So, together with other thinkers, Che Guevara became one of our symbols of liberty: We learned to love you/ from the heights of history/ where the sun of your audacity/ closed off death. . .

Aquí se queda la clara
la entrañable transparencia
de tu querida presencia
comandante Che Guevara
Tu mano gloriosa y fuerte
sobre la historia dispara
cuando todo Santa Clara
se despierta para verte
Vienes quemando la brisa
con soles de primavera
para plantar la bandera
con la luz de tu sonrisa
Aquí se queda la clara
la entrañable transparencia
de tu querida presencia
comandante Che Guevara
Tu amor revolucionario
te conduce a nueva empresa
donde esperan tu firmeza
de tu brazo libertario
(Carlos Puebla, Hasta siempre)

Even though many of those who just arrived didn't know each other, the social environment made us accomplices, and my new companions and I began to look for alternatives to represent the world and, in this way, transform it. We wanted to do theater, make movies, write literature; publish magazines, books, pamphlets, and some of my colleagues in the department and I began to meet to plan a magazine. But before writing, we wanted to sing, dance, act, and the meetings turned into literary workshops first and artistic seminars later, and any reason was good enough to read our poems to each other, sing our songs, listen to new music and recuperate what we could from generations gone by.

We would sing anything and everything: country, blues, rock, Latin American favorites, boleros. . . Any song that had literary or musical merit was accepted into the repertoire, regardless of genre or cultural border. Around that time in Mexico an album by Patsi Andion hit the scene. It went like this:

En Madrid, y agonizando el presente mes
me siento al fin enfrente de un papel
para escribirte justo hasta la piel
aunque no entiendas lo que te diré. . .

No one cared if we understood what we were saying! What did it matter if it was in French, English, Portuguese or Spanish! Or, if they were good or bad words. As students we had been worn out by screaming and shouting our heads off without anyone paying attention: language had lost its impact and it had to be regained. What was important was having the power of the word: to be able to say “No!” to our parents, to our friends, to a boyfriend or girlfriend, and to society in general, whenever we wanted to disagree with something or someone, whenever we didn’t want to do something. We wanted to decide for ourselves our life’s path. For the men, perhaps, this wasn’t as meaningful because they had always been able to make that decision; but for us women it was.

At that time, what impressed us a lot was a song from a movie that came to Mexico at the beginning of the seventies: the one that Mary Madelyn sang in *Jesus Christ Super Star*. What we liked best was that the object of desire was inverted. In the literary tradition, the man had always sung to the women, and she had always been ethereal, fragile, unknown and mysterious, difficult to comprehend and to understand. It was the man who addressed himself to us. What mattered here was that it was she who sang to the man and who showed that she had always had control of her emotions. The object of desire, in this case, the ethereal, incomprehensible, the impenetrable. . . is him.

I don’t know how to love him
what to do, how to move him
I’ve been changed, yes, really changed,
in these past few days, when I see myself
I seem like someone else
I don’t know how to take this

I don't see why he moves me
 He's a man, he's just a man
 And I've had so many men before, in very many
 ways,
 he's just one more!
 Don't you think it's rather funny
 I should be in this position?
 I'm the one who's always been
 so calm, so cool, no lover's fool,
 running every show: he scares me so!
 Should I bring him down?
 should I scream and shout?
 should I speak of love, let my feelings out?
 I've never thought I'd come to this
 what's it all about?
 Yet, if he said he loved me
 I'd be lost, I'd be frightened
 I couldn't cope, just couldn't cope
 I'd turn my head, I'd back away,
 I wouldn't want to know: he scares him so
 I want him so
 I love him so

Now women spoke of love to men. We didn't have
 to hide our tastes or feelings. We no longer had to wait
 for them to take the initiative. Now we were the ones
 who anguished over them; but, take note, for them. . .
 , not for any *one* of them. And we could proclaim that
 we were sexual entities just like any other human being.
 We no longer had to hide ourselves in anominity, nor
 marginalize ourselves, nor hang on the coattails of those
 who had always pushed us to the wayside: Not nuns
 . . . not whores. . .not asexual mothers. . . Now women
 could study like any nun, make love like any whore, and
 have children like any "good little Mexican mother." I
 can still remember how I was celebrated in the Depart-
 ment when I recited a poem in Hernán Lavín Cerda's
 workshop that went like this:

I.
 Soy frígida y ninfómana,
 ama de casa y prostituta.
 Y soy sátira: soy Electra.
 II.
 Mirada estéril y lasciva,
 aparta la avaricia que arrojas sobre mí
 III.
 Imagen que retienes

mi sombra tu pupila
¿cuándo entregarás mi identidad?

IV.

Soy esa señora

(Rosina Conde, "Cuarteto de presentación," Poemas de seducción)

From then on, we were average run-of-the-mill human beings, with desires, biological, intellectual and love interest needs, and we began to demand our right of eroticism and our right to decide who we would sleep with or live with for the rest of our lives, without having to worry about what our parents had driven into us for century upon century: the male infrastructure. And, by taking by assault the right of language, we also took the right to decide and to speak about our bodies, which gave reason for us to be rejected in many social arenas; however, the women of my generation decided to speak to each other and to show our role through a different language than the one that had traditionally been used when referring to us. I can still remember how some editorial houses took the liberty of mutilating and censoring some of our writings.

I.

Me seducías,
no con sólo poner tus labios
sobre mi clítoris.

Me seducías.

Con tu mirada, tus gestos, palabras.
Movimientos sencillos, cotidianos.

II.

Me sedujiste
con la serenidad de tu mirada
y la nobleza de tu tacto.

Me vine con tu olor y tu deseo
mientras hundíamos la risa en nuestros labios.

Después, el silencio acortó nuestras palabras
y caminamos por opuestos laberintos.

Creo que me has olvidado
pero sé que nunca olvidarás mi lozanía.

III.

Para seducirme
no necesitas de las sesenta y cuatro artes
ni del perfume afrodisíaco
ni de los cuentos eróticos.
Sólo basta un lecho bañado de rocío.

IV.

Te seduciré

con una pera y un racimo de uvas.

Con las uvas bañaré tu cuerpo

para beber sus gotas una a una.

La pera la comeré en cuclillas sobre tu rostro.

(Rosina Conde, "Poemas de seducción")

Because we were morally and economically self sufficient, we could fall in love with a man ten years older than us, of our same age, or, even, younger. The man's pedigree or ancestry or social class or profession or social status were no longer of any concern. He could as easily be an actor as a businessman, a rock star or an orchestra leader, a painter or an architect, a student or unemployed. Self-sufficiency gave us the ability to freely fall in love, without having to use a man as a provider. So, we could choose without restrictions. And now it was the men who were asking themselves if we would still love them after getting laid:

Tonight you're mine completely
you give your love so sweetly
tonight the light of love is in your eyes

But will you love me tomorrow?
Is this a lasting treasure
or just a moment's pleasure?
Can I believe the magic of your sighs?

Will you still love me tomorrow?
Tonight with words unspoken
you say that I'm the only one
But will my heart be broken
when the night meets the morning sun?
I'd like to know that your love
Is love I can be sure of
So tell me now, and I won't ask again,
will you still love me tomorrow?
(Carol King, Will You Love Me Tomorrow?)

In the same way that we wanted to be true to ourselves, we also wanted to be natural. We demanded our right to walk the streets without masks or "falsity"; to be accepted with our perfections and imperfections. We freed ourselves from nylons and makeup, from girdles and bras, those things that had imprisoned our bodies and impeded breathing. We freed ourselves from curlers, bobby pins and hairdryers. Those icky sprays! Down comes the hair! We demanded to be accepted with glasses, pimples and black heads, with straight or

curly hair, squeaky or low voices, fat or thin. Down with mascara, down with makeup, good by to social graces, to modesty, to frivolity! And, among other things, we took charge of laughter, that which had been prohibited in public for centuries. We began to laugh out loud, at the top of our lungs, at whatever came our way. Say hello to the frank laugh, white teeth shining, stomachs aching. It no longer mattered that our bodies doubled over, that we'd get wrinkles, that our "love handles" would bulge out of our clothes and jiggle about with the joy of our physical and emotional freedom. And anyone who made us feel good, just for who we were, was welcomed.

Looking out in the morning rain
I used to feel uninspired
And when I knew I had to face another day
Lord, it made me feel so tired
Before the day I met you,
life was so unkind
but your love was the key
to my peace of mind.
Cause you make me feel,
you make me feel,
you make me feel like a natural woman
Oh baby, what you've done to me
you make me feel so good inside
and I just want to be
close to you, you make me feel so live
you make me feel
you make me feel
you make me feel like a natural woman
(Carol King, Like a Natural Woman)

Men, too, began to change. Unlike our parent's generation and those before them, our university colleagues wanted to be free to express their emotions without hypocrisy, and they refused to live the double standard of a false society. The important thing was to be transparent and to be faithful, not what the Church or the State ordered, but with conviction. Who doesn't remember Juan Manuel Serrat's lines?:

La mujer que yo quiero no necesita
bañarse cada noche en agua bendita
tiene muchos defectos dice mi madre
y demasiados huesos dice mi padre
pero ella es más verdad que el pan y la tierra
mi amor es un amor de antes de la guerra . . . para
saberlo
la mujer que yo quiero no necesita

deshojar cada noche una margarita

Precisely because we were no longer obliged, by divine order, to live for all eternity with the same person, as I said before, one was faithful by conviction; we were there because we wanted to be there. And, women made love to men, we took pleasure in them and enjoyed them just as they took pleasure in and enjoyed us without worrying about what people would say or about marriage or about the future or about security or anything. . . Who gave a shit if the guy got married to us or not! Long live free love, life, eroticism, intellect, and personal satisfaction. And we all turned ourselves over completely and asked ourselves, if maybe, we had made them feel like our one and only man:

Didn't I make you feel
like you were the only man, yeah,
and didn't I give you everything a
woman possibly can?
honey, you know I did!
and this time I tell myself that I
well I think I had enough
and well I'm gonna show you baby,
that a woman can be taught
I want you to say come on,
come on, come on, come on,
and take it,
take another little piece of my heart,
now baby,
take another little beat of my heart,
you know you will,
take another little piece of my heart,
now baby,
well you know you got it, if it makes
you feel good,
oh, yes, you did.

(J. Ragovoy B. Berns, Piece of My Heart)

Because women began to share territory with men, they also wanted

to share theirs with us. They began to change diapers, to cook, to share with us time feeding the children, or to take them to daycare so that we could study and work. Then we built, really built, an equal relationship. Men rejected the imposed roles of patriarchal society, and wanted to liberate themselves from machismo and of the obligation of maintaining more than one household (like all “good macho men” with his official wife and then a mistress to boot!) So, they decided on monogamy, even if only serial monogamy: no more mistresses or clandestine offspring. Forget about “bastard children”! All of them were legitimate, and those who didn’t have fathers were everybody’s child precisely because they were born under the code of free love. Men and woman began to be “companions” and to despise possessive adjectives: nobody belongs to anybody. Feelings of solidarity and “unity” allowed us to see each other as equals. Being a couple no longer meant being in a dependent relationship nor under anyone’s thumb, and we all had a name of our own. They no longer said, “let me introduce you to my wife,” but rather, “this is Margarita, Juana, Valentina. . .” Men accepted that their partners had a personal life; the traditional notion “you exist only from the moment that you met me” disappeared. They recognized that we didn’t have to be a “one woman man,” and they asked us to behave and express ourselves differently. I still sing that song by Joe Josea and B.B. King that goes: “rock me, baby!” And you know what that means.

Rock me, baby, honey, rock me all night long
 rock me, baby, I say honey, rock me all night long
 I want you to rock me baby,
 like my back ain’t got no bone
 Roll me, baby, like you roll a wagon wheel.
 I want you to roll me, baby, just like you roll a wagon
 wee.
 Want you to roll me, baby,
 You don’t know how good you make me feel
 (Joe Josea B. B. King, Rock Me, Baby)

In the same way that women recuperated space, our children were treated as free and thinking spirits from the moment of conception. How many of us put headphones on our bellies so that our children could hear Bach, Beethoven, Vivaldi, Paganini, or Gershwin! When they came into the world, we made them into clear-cut individuals, thinking people, with respon-

sibilities and rights. I remember that the halls of the Philosophy and Letters department were filled with children who ran and laughed, while we entered class. These kids, just like us, would also be free to choose their destiny for themselves: some day, as Gershwin would say, “They’re gonna spread their wings” to fly in search of different paths and will have the security that they could rely on all of our support.

Summertime,
and the living is easy,
fish are jumpin’,
and the cotton is high
your daddy is rich,
and your mom is good looking
so hush, little baby, don’t you cry.
One of these mornings
you’re going to rise up singing
because you’re gonna spread your wings
and you’ll take to the sky,
but ‘till that morning,
there’s no nothing can harm you
with your daddy and mammy standing by
(Gershwin, Summertime)

Upon leaving the university, we all took different paths, and kept learning at work, in personal and love relationships, as life flowed by. . . Some went to work for the radio, others in movies, on television, in the publishing business. Others stayed in academia. Some left letters and dedicated themselves to music, painting, or journalism. Many of us got hitched and unhitched, others just stuck together and almost all of us had children—some before others, like me-- . Some of us followed the traveling pack of wolves, learning and combining experiences with arts and other disciplines, however; it was our time at the university that set the stage for our paths.

Now, with the new anti-feminism, the propagation of AIDS, globalization, the economic crisis and the privatization of education, some of our children recriminate us for not having conventional mothers and fathers, because society demands that we are different, because we opened the chasm that is for them, perhaps, too difficult to cross. But I believe that it is precisely this lack of interest that men and women showed by deciding who would be our partners, our friends, was what united

us in the struggle, and what allowed us to survive in a society that denies accepting us as free individuals; clear-cut, creative and independent. This is what has allowed us to go beyond the failures and obstacles to constantly begin again, even in spite of ourselves.

“I don’t take anything back,” Edith Piaf said, even back in the sixties, “not the good that has been done for me, nor the bad, all of this doesn’t matter to me. Everything is paid for, erased, forgotten. . . They are my memories that have lit the fire. I no longer need my sadness nor my pleasures. I have erased the love and the problems. I begin from zero.”

Non rien de rien
non je ne regrette rien
Ni le bien qu’on m’a fait,
ni le mal, tout ça m’est bien égal
Non rien de rien
non je ne regrette rien
C’est payé, balayé, oublié
je me fous du passé
Avec mes souvenirs
j’ai allumé le feu
mes chagrins, mes plaisirs
je n’ai plus besoin d’eux
balayés les amours, avec leurs tré-
molos
balayés pour toujours
je repars à zéro
Non rien de rien
non je ne regrette rien
ni le bien qu’on m’a fait,
ni le mal, tout ça m’est bien égal
Non rien de rien
non je ne regrette rien
Car ma vie, car mes joies
aujourd’hui, ça commence avec toi
(Edith Piaf, Je ne regrette rien)